

## Ben Harney: The Middlesborough Years, 1890–93

Benjamin Robertson Harney was born March 6, 1871, in or near Louisville, Kentucky. He died of heart disease in Philadelphia on March 1, 1938, after a long illness.<sup>1</sup> Harney's significance to the development of American music, specifically ragtime, is indicated by those who have praised him. Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis gave Ben Harney a place of honor, for example, in their extensive and pioneering book *They All Played Ragtime*. They wrote that "a young Kentuckian named Ben Harney, playing and singing a ragtime song in a Gotham vaudeville theatre, inaugurated a remarkable era."<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Chase also agreed that Harney was on the cutting edge of the ragtime movement and maintained that "if one took the date of copyright or of publication as the criterion, then precedence in the ragtime field would go to a white musician named Ben R. Harney."<sup>3</sup>

The abilities of Harney as a pianist are attested to by none other than the African American ragtime pianists James P. Johnson and William (Willie "the Lion") Smith. Johnson states that he "worked . . . with Ben Harney, who was one of the greatest piano players."<sup>4</sup> Although it is doubtful that Smith ever met Harney or heard him play, his remarks regarding a ragtime piano-playing contest lend credence to the mythic character that Harney enjoyed among his African American peers:

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Smith observed, for example, that "One-Leg Joseph . . . once beat out the phony Mike Bernard, . . . who copied the great Negro originator Ben Harney's style."<sup>5</sup>

Willie the Lion Smith's statement in 1964 that Harney was a Negro was repeated a few years later by Eubie Blake to Alec Wilder, although Blake, according to Edward A. Berlin, "had never actually met Harney."<sup>6</sup> Wilder then printed this information in 1972 in his book, *American Popular Music*.<sup>7</sup> Other authors have subsequently accepted this claim without question. In this article I explore Ben Harney's genealogy and reconstruct his biography in the years immediately leading up to his music career in order to document the life of this shadowy pioneer of early ragtime music.

Benjamin Harney was the scion of two distinguished Kentucky families, the Harneys of Louisville and the Draffens of Anderson County, near Frankfort, the state capital. John Hopkins Harney (1806–68), Ben's paternal grandfather, graduated with honors from Oxford College (Ohio) in 1826 and later became a professor of mathematics at Indiana University.<sup>8</sup> In 1827 he married Martha Wallace Rankin, a minister's daughter. He was appointed the president of Hanover College in 1833 and later served Louisville College in that same capacity in 1839. John Harney's family at that time included a daughter, Elizabeth Ross Harney (1827–86), and three sons: William Wallace Harney (1831–1912), who became known throughout the United States as a writer and poet;<sup>9</sup> Selby Harney (b. 1838), who became a colonel in the Union Army and was later an attorney; and Benjamin Mills Harney (1829–1900), the father of Benjamin R. Harney.<sup>10</sup> John Harney later became an owner of the *Louisville Democrat*, which he edited until he died in 1868. He was also elected to the Kentucky State Senate in 1862 on the Union ticket.<sup>11</sup>

Benjamin Mills Harney, Ben's father, enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army during the Mexican War. He traveled to Mexico City in Company A, Fourth Regiment. His unit arrived there in 1848, too late to fight in the battles, and he was mustered out of the army on July 1, 1848. He later enlisted during 1862 in the Union Army in Company A, Regiment Calvary, as a captain: this regiment defeated General John Hunt Morgan's Confederate unit in Kentucky in 1863 during the Civil War.

The connection between the Harney and Draffen families can be traced back to the history of Company A and a report dated the morning of October 8, 1862: "we got some news from a Miss Draffin [*sic*] of Anderson County, that General Kirby Smith [of the Confederate Army] was lying in wait for us with 30,000 men and 64 pieces of artillery."<sup>12</sup> The informant was Margaret Draffen (b. 1839), the future mother of Ben Harney, who was then twenty-three years old; she had probably met Captain Harney about this time, because the two were married

two years later in May 1864 at her parents' home in Anderson County, near Frankfort.<sup>13</sup> According to the Louisville *City Director* for 1864–65, Margaret and Benjamin Mills Harney lived at Guthrie Street after their marriage. Benjamin Mills worked as a bookkeeper for the publishing company co-owned by his father and William E. Hughes.<sup>14</sup> In 1873 Benjamin Mills is cited in the *Director* as an associate of Harney and Randolph Civil Engineers.

In 1875 Miss [*sic*] Maggie Harney<sup>15</sup> is listed as a teacher at the Episcopal Orphan's Home, and Ben Mills Harney, an "engineer," is mentioned as boarding at 40 Gray (Street). Margaret is not listed at that address. The omission of her name from the *Director* is significant. Five years later the 1880 U.S. census for Anderson County lists the occupants of the home of John Draffen, recording a daughter, Margaret, age forty-two and divorced, and Ben Harney, a grandson, age nine. The census reports all members of the household as being white.<sup>16</sup>

Very little is known about Benjamin R. Harney's life for the next eleven years. I see no reason to doubt Bruner Greenup's statement to Rudi Blesh that Ben "was raised . . . in Louisville in a neighborhood of good families,"<sup>17</sup> even though his remarks were made about sixty years after Bruner had known the composer. The following statement by Blesh, however, is another matter. According to Blesh, Ben Harney "was a seventeen-year-old student at a Kentucky military school when this music, to which he seemed so native, possessed him, and he began to search for someone to write out a song, later famous, that he had already created. At about this time he made a marriage [to Jessie Boyce]."<sup>18</sup>

Nearly every account of Benjamin Harney's early life has been speculative and fanciful, but Blesh's assertions have yielded a comedy of errors, and I cannot imagine where he obtained his information. Research has turned up no evidence that Ben Harney ever attended a military school in Kentucky, and other evidence suggests that he did not.<sup>19</sup> The search for a copyist to notate Ben's song "You've Been a Good Old Wagon" began when Harney was twenty-three years old and had recently returned from a three-year stay at Middlesborough, Kentucky (1890–93).<sup>20</sup> Blesh cites no evidence that Ben was married at this time or that his bride, Jessie, was from Kentucky. Although Harney did marry a Jessie Boyce, no marriage license has been found, and little was known about her until she was interviewed after Ben Harney's death in 1938.<sup>21</sup> Evidence suggests, however, that she and Ben Harney may already have been married at the time that they were living in Middlesborough in 1891.<sup>22</sup>

Blesh's statement is full of errors, but more reliable is a feature article that appeared in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in 1899, which apparently was unknown to Blesh. This article quotes an informant who must

have been Bruner Greenup: "He [Harney] was born and raised in Louisville, is twenty-seven years old, and married. His wife [Jessie] is also a 'rag' artist and stands high in the business."<sup>23</sup> Greenup was a young Louisville businessperson, a year younger than Ben Harney. Six years before the publication of this article, he had worked with Harney as the publisher of the composer's ragtime song "You've Been a Good Old Wagon." His remark that Ben's wife, Jessie Boyce Harney, was a rag artist is therefore of particular importance.

The town of Middlesborough (founded 1890), where Ben and Jessie would reside, lay near the Tennessee border in view of the Cumberland Gap. Its origins can be traced to the year 1886, when Alexander Arthur, a Canadian-born employee of the Scottish-Carolina Timber Company, rode on horseback through the Cumberland Gap into the wide Yellow Creek valley, where Middlesborough would later be constructed. Arthur noted the extensive coal and iron deposits and the virgin timber on the eastern Kentucky mountains, and he decided to raise the money needed to develop the resources of this area. He was eminently successful in this venture, and within three years he had received \$30,000,000 from the Baring Brothers Bank of London.<sup>24</sup> Additional capital was raised in the United States.

Construction of the city began in July 1898. One hundred Italian workers were imported to build a tunnel through Cumberland Mountain to connect the city with Knoxville. Additional laborers were imported to build a canal through the city to channel Yellow Creek and to construct the city proper. "Middles-borough, at the end of 1889, estimated its population at 5000, quite a climb from 25 in 1888. By 1890 there were 83 businesses with 72 additional businesses under construction; 280 residences with 169 under construction; 16 industries were running and 41 others were being rushed to completion; seven hotels were open with 9 more to open at once. There were 6 banks, 5 churches, a library, school, and an exhibition hall and a City Hall."<sup>25</sup>

We learn from a regional historian that "socially the town was a disaster. The weak county government could do nothing to police the community or to punish any but the most blatant criminal acts. Men went armed with pistols, knives, and deadly slingshots, defending themselves in frequently homicidal gun and knife duels. Whisky was nearly as common as drinking water. Whores materialized and operated in every imaginable place."<sup>26</sup>

In 1890 about one-fourth of the population of Middlesborough was African American, and most of these residents did the heavy work in nearby iron and coal mines. The *Middlesborough Daily News* of November 12, 1890, indicated that "the monotonous chant of the gang of negroes tamping down the sewer pipe on the street is a reminder of the old slave days on the Mississippi River." There were also social

notes in the newspaper about dances held by the African American population. Some events were described as cakewalks, and others as "high-toned affairs."<sup>27</sup>

Ann Matheny, a local historian at Middlesborough, provides additional insight into the cultural life and ambience in the city in the 1890s:

The English built an Opera House first thing—the first performance was held there in late 1889. All types of shows, including vaudeville and minstrels, were held there. . . . There were all types of bars and saloons during the boom days. Some were quite elegant. For example, here is a description of the fixtures in the Crescent Saloon: The back bar consists of 168 French plate mirrors, bevel edged, 2 1/2" deep, of various shapes and mounted in silver and marble. The bar consists of innumerable slabs of foreign marble whose beautifully harmonizing and contrasting grains and colors are joined much as a cabinet maker puts together pieces of wood. The rail is a solid shaft of Italian marble, and in the bar top and mammoth cooler, marble takes the places usually given to wood.<sup>28</sup>

Matheny goes on to say that this fixture alone cost \$15,000 and that the barroom was paneled in antique oak.<sup>29</sup>

The local *Daily News* for July 20, 1891, indicated that blacks and whites mixed in the boom days. The paper described a shooting at the Barrel House, a large saloon with a bowling alley and billiard room, reporting that "a crowd had gathered there as is the custom, many of them negroes. All had been drinking freely."

This was the social melting pot that young Benjamin R. Harney came to sometime before July 1, 1890, for on that date he enlisted as a private in the Kentucky State Guard at Middlesborough.<sup>30</sup> Harney gave his age as twenty years old and listed his occupation as reporter. Whether he did any reporting is unknown, but he soon found employment as a clerk in the local post office. The *Middlesborough News* of February 11, 1899, reported that "Harney will be remembered by many in this city, he having been one of the original boomers, and . . . [having been] during the early days of the city, assistant postmaster."<sup>31</sup>

A photograph exists of a Sunday gathering in front of the Middlesborough Post Office around 1890 (fig. 1). It shows a young man holding a banjo, whom I believe to be Ben R. Harney; the dapper man on the right of the banjoist might be Benjamin Mills Harney, Ben Harney's father, who arrived in Middlesborough during fall 1890 to work as a surveyor and a civil engineer.<sup>32</sup> The individual on horseback might be Alexander Arthur, then forty-four years old, who founded the city. If Ben Harney is indeed captured in this photograph, he could hardly have chosen a better way to depict himself as a musician than to have a picture taken showing him holding a banjo. The fact that the musician



Figure 1. The Middlesborough Post Office circa 1890, published in the *Middlesboro Daily News*, March 16, 1925. The person holding the banjo is presumably Benjamin Harney. The dapper man to his right is possibly his father, Benjamin Mills Harney.

picks the banjo with the left hand suggests either that he owned an instrument modified for a left-handed player or that he did not know how to play the instrument. I personally favor the first explanation. (A Middlesborough photographer who owned the picture stated that the buildings in the background indicated that the picture was not reversed in printing.) Evidence that Ben Harney knew how to play the banjo is found in his *Ragtime Instructor* (1897), the first published book designed to teach pianists how to play ragtime:

Real ragtime on the piano, played in such a manner that it cannot be put into notes, is the contribution of the graduated Negro banjo-player who cannot read music. On the banjo there is a short string that is not fretted and that consequently is played with the open thumb. . . . When he takes up the piano, the desire for the same effect dominates him, . . . and he reaches for the open banjo-string note with the little finger. Meanwhile he is keeping mechanically perfect time with his left hand. The hurdle with the right hand little finger throws the tune off stride, resulting in syncopation. He is playing two different times at once.<sup>33</sup>

A few unsavory events marred Ben Harney's life in Middlesborough. According to the local *Daily News* of May 5, 1891: "Bricks and cobblestones filled the air on Cumberland Avenue at about 5 o'clock yes-

terday. They did not injure anyone, luckily, but they made Andrews, the peanut man's tent look ever more dilapidated than before. . . . The occasion was a little fight between Ben Harney, Jr., and Charles Shuck. Harney was doing the rock throwing, and was just proving to an appreciative audience that he was a poor marksman, when Officer Bundron arrived on the scene, and took both men to headquarters. They were released on bond to appear this morning to explain matters."<sup>34</sup>

Ben Harney was also involved in a second, more sordid incident in Middlesborough. During July 1891 a group of men broke into the local jail one night and seized a white man, whom they hanged from a bridge. Twelve individuals were later indicted for the crime on August 27, 1891, including Ben R. Harney, the local chief of police, the jailer, and four patrolmen.<sup>35</sup> Harney, however, was attached to the Kentucky State Guard at Camp Buckner, near Frankfort, at the time the indictment was handed down. The *Middlesborough Daily News* of August 31, 1891, reported an article from a Frankfort newspaper: "Sheriff Colson arrived here yesterday with warrants for the arrest of some of the privates. Ben Harney was turned over to him last night by Col. Gaither, but this morning Col. Gaither found that he had no authority to do so, and reclaimed him. Harney is now under military guard. . . . Nearly everyone from commandant down signed a petition to the governor to hold Harney until his own company could escort him home. Harney claims an alibi." Alexander Arthur, the founder and mayor of Middlesborough, signed a bail bond for the twelve persons indicted. The case was never tried: it was dismissed in July 1893 for lack of evidence. By that time the boom was over, and the town's three banks had closed. Ben Harney, his father, and Jessie had returned to Louisville.<sup>36</sup>

Young Ben Harney went to Louisville in 1893 with the song "You've Been a Good Old Wagon but You've Done Broke Down" in his head and in his fingers. During that year he approached Bruner Greenup about publishing the song. Greenup was later interviewed in 1899 by Charles Hamilton Musgrove about his work with Harney on the song:

It was no trouble for Harney . . . to play this piece according to ragtime principles, but the great difficulty which beset us when we started out to publish the song was to get the "rag" in print. Harney had no more idea than a monkey how to write rag time, though he could play and sing it better, perhaps, than anyone has ever yet succeeded in doing. . . .

We called in numerous composers, more or less famous, and put them to work on the song, but after much vexatious labor they reported, one after the other, that the job was too much for them. Finally, we took the song to Mr. John Biller, then musical





You've been a good old Wagon  
but you've  
done broke down

SONG

BY  
HARNEY AND BILLER.

Price 40 cents

GREENUP MUSIC Co. 340 4<sup>th</sup> AVE.  
LOUISVILLE, KY.

Copyright 1895 by Greenup Music Co.

Figure 2. Ben Harney, "You've Been a Good Old Wagon but You've Done Broke Down" (Louisville, Ky.: Greenup, 1895), 1-5.

2

## You've Been A Good Old Wagon, But You've Done Broke Down.

*INTRODUCTION.*  
*Allegro.* HARNEY & BILLER.

PIANO. *ff*

1. I was standing in a crapgame doing no harm, Baby!  
2. The Judge asked me what had I done Baby! Said

When a Copper grabb'd me by my arm, Honey! Took me down to the  
standing in a crapgame getting my gun, Hot stuff! The Judge and Ju - ry

3

jail house door Place I nev-er had been be-fore, I was run in.  
said to me you have killd three Niggers in the first degree, no bail.

**CHORUS.**

No more will I buy my sweet thing Pork chops! And hear her

lil-ly lips go flip-flop! The rea-son I'm in trub-ple about my

sweet thing Is because this song to me she did sing.

4

Good bye, my Honey, if you call it gone, Darling!

*p* *f* *p*

This system features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano accompaniment starts with a bass clef and includes dynamic markings of *p* (piano), *f* (forte), and *p* (piano) across the measures.

Good bye, my Honey, if you call it gone, Darling! Good bye, my Honey, if you

*f* *p*

The second system continues the vocal and piano parts. The piano accompaniment features a prominent triplet in the right hand and dynamic markings of *f* (forte) and *p* (piano).

call it gone, You've been a good Wagon, but you done broke down, Bye Bye.

*f* *p*

The third system concludes the vocal line with a double bar line and repeat sign. The piano accompaniment continues with dynamic markings of *f* (forte) and *p* (piano).

**DANCE.**

*f* *p* *f*

The dance section is marked with a 2/4 time signature and begins with a treble clef. It features a piano accompaniment with dynamic markings of *f* (forte), *p* (piano), and *f* (forte).

5

The first system of musical notation consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music features a melodic line in the treble clef with eighth-note patterns and a bass line with chords and eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *p* and *f*.

The second system continues the piece with similar melodic and harmonic textures. The bass line features a prominent eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*.

The third system shows a more active bass line with eighth-note patterns. The treble clef has some rests. Dynamics include *f*.

The fourth system features a more complex melodic line in the treble clef with sixteenth-note runs. The bass line has chords. Dynamics include *fz*.

The fifth system continues with intricate melodic patterns in the treble clef and a steady bass line. Dynamics include *fz*.

The sixth system concludes the piece with a final melodic flourish in the treble clef and a bass line ending with a double bar line. Dynamics include *fz* and *ff*.

Old Wagon," he described this dance in more detail to Rudi Blesh about fifty years later: "Ben managed to sit at the piano with a cane in one hand or the other and did a sort of tap dance with one or both feet and the cane."<sup>39</sup> Harney's stick dance was performed during a 24-bar stop-time section in the piano solo, entitled "dance," which was 56-bars long and appended to the song (ex. 2). Only during the rests of

Example 2. Illustration of stop-time in Harney's "You've Been a Good Old Wagon," mm. 74-77.



Ben Harney, "You've Been a Good Old Wagon but You've Done Broke Down" (Louisville, Ky.: Greenup, 1895).

the stop-time section would Ben Harney have had the time to coordinate his cane and feet in his tap dancing. He undoubtedly amazed his audience with this kind of tour de force as a dancer, singer, and pianist. Old-time banjo players have been known to sing, play, and tap dance simultaneously. I suspect that Harney got the idea for his stick dance from a black banjoist or a white minstrel banjoist whom he saw in Middlesborough or Louisville. It is possible that Harney's stop-time stick dance served as the prototype for the foot-stamping, stop-time section in Scott Joplin's "Ragtime Dance" in 1906 (ex. 3).

Example 3. Illustration of stop-time in Joplin's *Ragtime Dance*, mm. 53-56.

NOTICE: To get the desired effect of "Stop Time," the pianist will please *Stamp* the heel of one foot heavily upon the floor at the word "Stamp." Do not raise the toe from the floor while stamping.

Scott Joplin, *The Ragtime Dance* (St. Louis, Mo.: Stark, 1906).

In creating "You've Been a Good Old Wagon" Harney took an African American folk blues that was common in the Appalachian mountains and created a ragtime version of it. The song has a number of titles

and variants, for example, "Sugar Babe," "Sweet Thing," and "Crowdad Song." John and Alan Lomax wrote that "'Sweet Thing,' originally a Negro blues . . . was adopted by white banjo and guitar pickers, . . . parodied by them in a score of ways, . . . today it can be heard wherever a hillbilly unlimbers his git-box."<sup>40</sup> A comparison of examples 4 and 5 shows the similarity between "Sweet Thing" and "You've Been a Good Old Wagon."<sup>41</sup>

Example 4. "Sweet Thing," mm. 1-8.

What you gon-na do when the li-quer gives out, sweet thing?

What you gon-na do when the li-quer gives out, sweet thing?

John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, comps., *Best Loved American Folk Songs [Folk Song: U.S.A.]*, 4th ed. (1947; reprint, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1953), 83. Reproduced with permission from Ludlow Music.

Example 5. Harney, "You've Been a Good Old Wagon," mm. 11-17.

Pentatonic. Mode 3.

I was stand-ing in a crap game do-ing no harm, Ba - by!

When a Cop-per grabb'd me by my arm, Hon - ey!

Ben Harney, "You've Been a Good Old Wagon but You've Done Broke Down" (Louisville, Ky.: Greenup, 1895).

Although I agree with John and Alan Lomax's statement, I suggest that the basic folk tune common to the many variants, both white and black, derived from the much earlier British folk song "A Frog He Went a-Courting." Cecil J. Sharp collected a variant of this song in Barbourville, Knox County, Kentucky, on May 10, 1917, from Mrs. Molly Broughton (see ex. 6).<sup>42</sup> Barbourville is about twenty-five miles from Middlesborough.

## Example 6. "A Frog He Went A-Courting," mm. 1-8.

## Pentatonic. Mode 3

A frog went a-court-ing, he did ride, Come boo, A frog went a-court-ing,  
 he did ride, Pis - tol and sword hang-ing to his side, Come boo.

Cecil J. Sharp, comp., *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, ed. Maud Karpeles (© Oxford University Press 1932 [1917]), 2:315.

Those unfamiliar with the nature of folk song performance should realize that a folk singer will seldom sing the same song the same way on different occasions. One may observe the similarity of variants of the same song, however, by examining the text, melodic shape, and mode or scale type. Although Harney very likely derived the tune and text for "You've Been a Good Wagon" from African American sources in Middlesborough, another variant of this tune, "Sugar Babe," was collected by Cecil Sharp from a white singer in Hyden, Kentucky, which is about fifty miles from Middlesborough (see ex. 7).<sup>43</sup> The dice-shooting

## Example 7. "Sugar Babe," mm. 1-8.

## Pentatonic. Mode 3.

Shoot your dice and have your fun, Su-gar babe, Shoot your dice and  
 have your fun, Run like the de-vil when the po - lice come, Su-gar babe.

Cecil J. Sharp, comp., *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, ed. Maud Karpeles (© Oxford University Press 1932), 2:357.

text in this variant relates more to the text in "You've Been a Good Old Wagon" than does the text in the African American version, "Sweet Thing."<sup>44</sup>

There are five basic pentatonic modes (or scales), and it is significant that three of these song variants are constructed in the third mode: F G A C D F. It is also interesting that Harney uses the same folk tune for the first section of "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose" (1896), his second published hit, which became a much bigger hit than "You've Been a



Good Old Wagon" (see ex. 8). In "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose," Harney changes the mode and a few notes of the tune.

Example 8. Harney, "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose," mm. 1-14.

Pentatonic. Mode 2.

T'oth-er eb-'ning eb-'ry-ting was still, Oh! babe, \_\_\_\_\_ De  
 moon was clim-in' down be-hind de hill, Oh! babe, \_\_\_\_\_  
 T'ought eb - 'ry bo - dy was a sound a - sleep, But a  
 old man a John-son was a on his beat, Oh! babe. \_\_\_\_\_

Ben Harney, "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose" (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1896).

Harney probably had both of these songs in his head and fingers when he left Middlesborough in 1893. Both songs stemmed directly from the African American folk tradition. According to Bruner Greenup:

Harney carried "Mr. Johnson" in his pocket for many a day. The publishers, as he expressed it, 'gave him a chill' wherever he attempted to get the song on the market. But . . . in the early part of 1895, Harney joined a minstrel combination, doing his stick dance specialty and singing "Mr. Johnson." In Evansville, Ind., he encountered a turning point in his career. He attracted the attention of Harry Green, a former friend, by the singing of "Mr. Johnson," and the result was Green plagiarized the song, words and music, and published it under his own name. Its success was instantaneous. The newspapers, theatrical managers, and music dealers unconsciously combined to make the fame of "rag-time" spread like wild fire. . . .

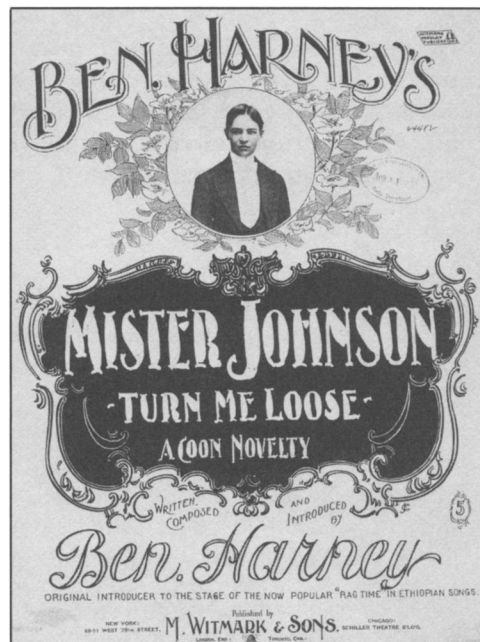
But all this time Harney was being cheated of his talents and his fame. . . . He accordingly brought suit against the publishers in Evansville and easily proved the ownership of the song. After the suit was settled he sold the copyright . . . to a New York publisher, who published it under Harney's name [see fig. 3].<sup>45</sup>

Finally Ben Harney began to get the breaks that his originality deserved. Witmark and Sons of New York City republished "You've Been



Figure 3. Title page of Ben Harney's Ethiopian song "Mister Johnson" (New York: Harding's Music House, 1896). Reproduced courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 4. Title page of Ben Harney's "Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose (A Coon Novelty)" (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1896). Reproduced courtesy of the Library of Congress.



a Good Old Wagon" in August 1896 and issued a slightly rearranged version of "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose" later that same year (fig. 4). The popular New York City singer, May Irwin (née Ada May Campbell, 1862–1938), "whose singing of *The Bully Song* had already established her as one of the first of the coon shouters, incorporated his new pieces on her program."<sup>46</sup> Eventually Harney landed a spot at one of New York City's leading vaudeville houses. The *New York Clipper* announced on February 17, 1896, for example, that "Ben Harney, another stranger at this house [Keith's Union Square Theater], jumped into immediate favor through the medium of his genuinely clever plantation Negro imitations and excellent piano playing."<sup>47</sup>

Isidore Witmark, the publisher, described Ben Harney's performances: "Harney . . . quickly became a New York fad. . . . Those who remember the sensation caused by the earliest jazz-pianists will imagine the furore created by Ben Harney's ragging of the scale. . . . Ben Harney had the huskiest voice most people had ever heard in a human being, and this quality made his voice just right for ragtime singing. . . . His performances included the ragging of such popular classics as Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*, Rubinstein's *Melody in F*, and the *Intermezzo* from Mascagni's 'Cavalleria Rusticana,' which he would first play in their orthodox form. The effect was startling."<sup>48</sup>

To my knowledge the activities of Ben and Jessie Harney from 1893 through 1896 have not been documented. Bruner Greenup mentioned minstrel show activity in 1895, and Jessie Harney, interviewed sometime in the 1940s, discussed various minstrel shows in which she and Ben had performed.<sup>49</sup> She advised Blesh, her interviewer, that "in the trio, Ben played for me to sing and dance, and the name of the song was 'I Love One Sweet Black Man'—Exit—Cartwheel. Ben opened the Act making his announcement, singing *Johnson* at the piano, Strap [a black performer associated with the Harneys in their act], answering him from the gallery, came down on the stage and did his Hoss imitations, Ben doing his stick dance and playing at the piano made his exit for the finish. I blacking up, came back on the stage, all three together singing *I Love My Little Honey*, and did [a] two-step off."<sup>50</sup>

That Jessie Harney enjoyed an independent show business career of sorts is indicated in the issue of *Variety* for March 9, 1938, which contains a short notice of Ben's death. That issue also contains a feature article about Ben Harney that closes with the following statement: "he is survived by his widow the former Jessie Haines [sic] of the Klaw & Erlanger and other musical productions." Issues of *Variety* from December 16, 1905, through January 31, 1913, make some mention of Jessie J. Haynes (both independently of Ben Harney and in association with him): the issue for June 13, 1908, for example, contains the comment that "Harney and Haynes were at Electric Park in Baltimore";

the June 20 through September 12 issues for that year give the Harney and Haynes address as General Delivery, Baltimore; on January 9, 1909, an address for Harney and Parker, O. H., was listed as Nazareth, Pennsylvania; the following month, on February 6, Jessie J. Haynes's address is listed as 21 E. Robinson, Allegheny, Pennsylvania; and subsequent issues through August 24, 1909, publish the same address for Jessie Harney. She is not mentioned again (through 1911) in *Variety*. *Variety* lists Ben Harney's address from January 21 through July 8, 1911 (twenty-four weeks) as the National in Sydney, Australia. These are the only references to the Harneys that I have found in *Variety*. It appears that by 1905, at least, Ben Harney was almost entirely forgotten in the world of show business in the United States. One explanation for waning interest in him might have been that he held fast to the minstrel format at a time when the world of entertainment had generally given it up.

A heart attack apparently caused Ben Harney's early retirement from the stage.<sup>51</sup> We fortunately have an eyewitness account of what may have been his final tour. David E. Bourne conducted a series of interviews in 1970 with George Orendorff, an African American trumpet player who had played in the vaudeville band that backed the acts of a tour that included Ben Harney. The tour, which was done by train, began in Chicago in June or July 1923 and ended in September of that year in Long Beach, California. Billings, Montana, was the first stop. Although Montana, Washington, and California were the only states Orendorff mentioned, the tour may have stopped at towns in Idaho and Oregon as well during the summer of 1923. Orendorff observed:

In 1923 I came to California with a piano player named Ben Harney. He called himself the originator of ragtime. . . . It was a show. It had five acts, and he was the star. He closed the show. The first act maybe was a comedy act, and then the last act of the five acts was him. He would come out and introduce himself. We were behind another curtain. We were dressed in overalls, and he would start playing this ragtime piano, then the other curtain would go up and then we were on stage. Then he had another fellow way up in the balcony who would come down the aisle playing the harmonica, and everybody would turn around, . . . they didn't know what was happening. . . .

He [Harney] . . . was a very nice person, but he liked to drink a lot and his wife traveled with him. Sometimes he would try to have some of the boys go out and get something for him on the sly, so she watched us as well as she watched him.<sup>52</sup>

The interviews with George Orendorff were conducted forty-seven years after the fact, when Orendorff was sixty-four years old. His

memory was unfortunately so dimmed by that time that he could remember only two of the five vaudeville acts—and only very little about one of these two acts. A positive outcome of these interviews, however, was a series of three pictures that Bourne published (figs. 5–7). The first photograph, said to be “the Harney group” (fig. 5),<sup>53</sup> is a publicity shot of a New Orleans Dixieland-type band composed of six musicians, with George Orendorff depicted as the trumpeter; Ben Harney’s face is superimposed on the picture, in the upper right-hand corner, encased within the caption, “Originator of Ragtime Ben Harney.”<sup>54</sup> The actual photo of the vaudeville band (fig. 7), the one Orendorff described in his 1970 interview,<sup>55</sup> surfaced thirteen years later in 1983, in another article written by David Bourne.<sup>56</sup>

A comparison of the band in the publicity photo with the actual vaudeville band indicates that they cannot be the same group, even though George Orendorff is listed as a member of both. Several features distinguish the two bands from each other: the drums and banjos are different, for example; a trombonist appears in figure 5, but not in figure 7; and the male pianist in figure 5 is presumably replaced by the standing female in figure 7. (It may be that George Orendorff did not care to appear in a national magazine in 1970 dressed as a country “hayseed” and that he therefore substituted the band in which he appeared to better advantage for “the Harney group.” We are indebted to David Bourne for finally clarifying this matter with the publication in 1983 of the correct photograph taken on the “last day of the [vaudeville] tour.”<sup>57</sup>)

Orendorff’s description of a person coming down from the balcony in the Harney act suggests that Ben Harney had hardly changed his routine since 1896. Perhaps this was the original Strap Hill coming down to do his Hoss imitations, which Jessie Harney had described.<sup>58</sup> (If so, Strap Hill does not appear in the photograph of this vaudeville group at the end of its tour. Missing also is Harney’s wife Jessie, who, by then in her fifties, was no longer blacking up for the show or dancing and doing cartwheels.)

How, then, does one assess the significance of Ben Harney to the development of American music in the light of all this information? Harney’s major contribution appears to have been made before the dawn of the twentieth century,<sup>59</sup> especially during the years 1890 to 1893, when he developed his skills in Middlesborough. In Middlesborough he took the opportunity to listen carefully to African American folk musicians—notably, banjoists, singers (the blues was evolving during these years), and perhaps an occasional pianist. It was in Middlesborough that he adapted the syncopated banjo playing that he heard in minstrel shows, as well as the jazzlike syncopations of black folk musicians, and brought to the attention of the public a new piano



Figure 5. A publicity photo of a band, with a picture of Ben Harney superimposed, published in Dave E. Bourne "Touring with Ben Harney," *Rag Times*, March 1983. George Orendorff (center) with trumpet. Reproduced by permission. This is not the vaudeville Harney Band, as Bourne claims in the article.

style, which would later be called "ragtime." During those years he discovered that he could translate any tune into this new syncopated style, and he realized that this style could serve as an accompaniment to a vocal lyric or stand alone as a solo piano accompaniment for a dance.

Benjamin Harney was not the first musician to discover the trick of translating the unknown African American folk musician's improvised syncopations into the ragtime piano style. That had been done as early as 1877 by the composer Charles Gimble, Jr., in measures 1–12 of his "Old Black Joe . . . Paraphrase de Concert" (ex. 9).<sup>60</sup> Once the trick of playing ragtime on the piano had been taught by Harney in his songs and *Ragtime Instructor* (1897), other musicians such as Mike Bernard and Axel Christensen quickly capitalized on Harney's discovery and made real money from it.

The publication of "You've Been a Good Old Wagon" established Ben Harney as the originator of the composed ragtime song and ragtime piano compositions. His successful debut in New York City in 1896



Figure 6. The 1923 vaudeville cast and band, with Ben Harney (in tuxedo), published in Dave E. Bourne, "Touring with Ben Harney," *Rag Times*, March 1893. Reproduced by permission.



Figure 7. "The Harney Group," photograph published in Dave E. Bourne, "The Ben Harney Years: A Continuing Interview with George Orendorff," *Rag Times*, November 1970. Reproduced by permission.

Example 9. Charles Gimble, Jr., "Old Black Joe . . . Paraphrase de Concert,"  
mm. 1-12.

*più mosso  
martell.*

*ff con impeto*

*8*

*8*

*8*

*ff*

*Tempo vivo*

*8*

*dim. et rall.*

*ff marcatiss.*

*accel.*

*cresc.*

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established his reputation as the first of the ragtime pianists. Perhaps Middlesborough, Kentucky, should therefore be considered the cradle of ragtime, in spite of the fact that no other ragtime composers or performers of note were ever associated with that city or, for that matter, the state of Kentucky.

## NOTES

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I wish to thank Linda Anderson, librarian of the Kentucky Historical Society in Frankfort, for her assistance as I researched this paper. I also wish to thank Josephine Wright for her suggestions and assistance, and I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the manuscript who suggested that I consult some additional sources that were entirely unknown to me.

1. Rudi Blesh, the first biographer of Ben Harney, apparently selected Middlesborough, Kentucky, as the birthplace of the composer on the basis of a misinterpretation of the following excerpt from an article that appeared in the *Louisville Herald*, April 23, 1916: "A Kentuckian, who hails from Middlesboro, is credited with being the father of 'Rag Time.'" Although the state of Kentucky did not keep birth records during the 1862-73 period, Louisville is cited as Harney's birthplace on his death certificate (Pennsylvania Department of Health). (The city of Middlesborough was chartered in March 1890, although its construction began a few years earlier. Around the turn of the century the U.S. Post Office Department dropped the last three letters from the names of cities ending in *-ough*, shortening this name to Middlesboro. *Middlesborough*, however, remains the official name of the city.)

2. Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak, 1971), 226.

3. Gilbert Chase, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 440.

4. Quoted in John Edward Hasse, ed., *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 177.

5. Willie the Lion Smith with George Hoefer, *Music on My Mind: The Memoirs of an American Pianist* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 54.

6. Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 31 n. 14. From the perspective of Ben Harney's biography, the paperback edition of this book is not precisely a reprint. In the 1980 edition, for example, Harney is identified as a black musician (24 and 31 n. 14). In the paperback edition Ed Berlin treats Harney's race as an "issue of debate" (24 and 31 n. 14).

7. Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 9.

8. John Harney also authored a textbook entitled *An Algebra upon the Inductive Method of Instruction* (Louisville, Ky.: Morton & Griswold, 1840).

9. William Harney published the serialized story "Who Won the Pretty Widow: A Confederate's Story of the Confederacy," *Atlantic Monthly* 29 (May-June 1872): 535-49, 697-709, and wrote *The Spirit of the South* (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1909).

10. Bruner Greenup, the Louisville publisher of Ben Harney's "You've Been a Good Old Wagon but You've Done Broke Down," told Rudi Blesh in 1947 that Ben R. had a brother named Selby who "married into the prominent Long family" (Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 229). Greenup was apparently confused, because Ben M. had no son named Selby. His brother Selby, on the other hand, did have a son named Selby

T. (b. 1861), who married Mona Long in 1888. Ludwig Pfundmayr, who owned the apartment in Philadelphia where Ben Harney and his wife, Jessie, lived, mentioned that Ben R. had a sister named Elizabeth who died in Boston several years before her brother's death (Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 228). Greenup also mentions Elizabeth and states that she married Dr. Louis Frank, "one of Louisville's finest surgeons" (Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 229).

The material on John Hopkins Harney, Ben R.'s grandfather, may be found at the Kentucky Historical Society in Frankfort, Kentucky (see J. Stoddard Johnston, ed., *Memorial History of Louisville from Its First Settlement to the Year 1896* [Chicago: American Biographical, 1896], 1:104, 2:66).

11. The state senate voted for Kentucky to remain neutral during the Civil War.

12. Thomas Speed, R. M. Kelly, and Alfred Pirtle, *The Union Regiments of Kentucky* (Louisville: Courier-Journal, 1897), 204.

13. John Draffen, Margaret's father, "qualified as a lawyer in Anderson County Court in 1832. . . . He served as County Attorney (1832-1843) and (1847-1848) . . . and served in the [Kentucky State] House of Representatives from Anderson County 1839-1840, 1862-1863, 1865-1867. He was a Major in the Union Army during the Civil War" (Lewis Witherspoon McKee, *The History of Anderson County, 1780-1936: Begun in 1884 by Lewis W. McKee; Concluded in 1936 by Lydia K. Bond* [Frankfort, Ky.: Roberts, 1936], 95-96).

14. Hughes was married to Benjamin Mills Harney's sister, Elizabeth Ross.

15. Maggie was the name listed on the marriage license.

16. The 1880 U.S. Census for Anderson County, 3d District, Kentucky.

17. Quoted in Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 228-29.

18. *Ibid.*, 211.

19. The military school that Ben would have attended, had he done so, would have been the Kentucky Military Institute (KMI) in Frankfort, near his grandfather Draffen's home. Col. James Darwin Stephens (ret.), the former president of the KMI, however, is completing a book on the graduates of this school and has found no evidence that Ben ever attended the institution. Colonel Stephens informed me in private correspondence dated Oct. 31, 1991, that "all KMI graduates automatically became commissioned officers in the Kentucky State Guard." Ben Harney entered the Kentucky State Guard on July 1, 1890, as a private, and he remained a private in that unit until he was discharged in June 1893.

20. Charles Hamilton Musgrove, "Louisville Originates Rag: Umpti-diddy-dum Music," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Feb. 7, 1899.

21. Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 212-13.

22. The local *Daily Herald* of June 6, 1891, noted that "there was a gathering of young people at the Exeter [Hotel] last evening. In the early morning the party went to Bennett's Fork where they indulged in a picnic 'neath the woods' green shade. The party spent the day then returned to the hotel for supper and social amusement." The article lists eight married couples, among them are Ben M. and "Mrs. Harney." Although Benjamin Mills certainly could have remarried after his divorce from Margaret circa 1877-80, he would have been sixty-two years old about this time; it seems doubtful that he and his wife would have been described as "young." I suspect that the paper misprinted the middle initial of Ben Harney's name. If so, this newspaper article would indicate that Jessie Boyce and Benjamin R. Harney were indeed married by this time.

23. Musgrove, "Louisville Originates Rag."

24. Today this sum would be worth about \$2 billion. Much of this information about Middlesborough is derived from the booklet *Middlesborough at One Hundred—1890-1990: A Commemorative History of Middlesborough's First One Hundred Years*, ed. Lou De Rosett and Joe Marcum (n.p., 1990). Copies available at Middlesboro's Chamber of Commerce.

25. See Earl Hobson Smith's pamphlet *The Magic City* (Middlesboro, Ky.: private printing, n.d.).

26. Harry M. Caudill, *Theirs Be the Power: The Moguls of Eastern Kentucky* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 24.

27. Ann Matheny to William Tallmadge, Oct. 7, 1991. Matheny, a local historian at Middlesborough, was the first person to discover Ben Harney's connection with this city, and she was the first person to search the files of the local newspapers for information about the composer (copies of her correspondence to me may be found in the Harney File at the Kentucky Historical Society Library, Old State House, in Frankfort). She called my attention to the Middlesborough-Harney connection, and she has graciously permitted me to use the information in her correspondence. I have also checked the papers at the Middlesborough Library and have discovered some material independently.

28. Ann Matheny to William Tallmadge, Oct. 7, 1991.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Department of Military Affairs, Frankfort, Kentucky, Military Records and Research Branch, Dec. 18, 1991. Walter Bowman, the archivist of this collection, has been most helpful in supplying me with military records.

31. The *Middlesboro Daily News*, Mar. 16, 1925, corroborates the fact that Harney had worked at the post office as a clerk.

32. The first of a series of public notices that advertised Benjamin Mills Harney's availability for work appeared in the local paper on Dec. 12. That advertisement mentioned that he "was before the war Professor of Mathematics in the Louisville High School for Boys, and the Louisville Presbyterian College" (*Middlesborough Daily News*, Dec. 12, 1890).

33. Benjamin Robertson Harney, *Ben Harney's Ragtime Instructor*, arr. Theodore H. Northrup (Chicago: Sol Bloom, 1897). Although I believe that the ideas expressed are Harney's, I strongly suspect the rather florid style of expression to be that of Theodore Northrup, the arranger of this tutor; the article "'Rag-Time King' Product of Mountains; Moonshiners First to Applaud Him," in the *Louisville Herald* for Apr. 23, 1916, contains examples of Ben Harney's rather racy, colloquial speech, which was similar to that of Jessie Boyce Harney, his wife (see Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 229).

34. The *Cumberland Republican* of May 28, 1891, advised that the rock-throwing incident had been preceded by a dispute that morning during which Schuck slapped Harney in the face. The incident resulted in each man being fined \$10.00 by the local magistrate.

35. Ann Matheny to William Tallmadge, Apr. 23, 1991.

36. The military records of the Kentucky State Guard indicate that a request was made for the release of a considerable number of guardsmen on June 10, 1893. Ben Harney's name was included in that petition. The reason given was that the guardsmen had already left the county.

37. Quoted in Musgrove, "Louisville Originates Rag."

38. Berlin, *Ragtime*, 19.

39. Quoted in Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 211.

40. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Best Loved American Folk Songs*, 4th ed. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1953 [1947]), 83.

41. *Ibid.*, 106.

42. Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, ed. Maud Karpeles (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 2:315.

43. *Ibid.*, 2:357.

44. The Lomaxes do include a third version of "Sweet Thing" (text only) entitled "Sugar Babe." This text relates to the lyrics of "You've Been a Good Old Wagon." It begins: "Shoot your dice and roll 'em in the sand, sweet thing" (John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Folk Songs*, 108).

45. Quoted in Musgrove, "Louisville Originates Rag." Green published the song through G. W. Warren of Evansville, Ind., in Jan. 1896. Harney sold the copyright to Frank Harding, Apr. 1896.

46. Isidore Witmark and Isaac Goldberg, *The Story of the House of Witmark: From Ragtime to Swingtime* (New York: Da Capo, 1976 [1939]), 154.

47. Quoted in Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 93-94; the name of the theater is bracketed in Blesh and Janis.

48. Witmark and Goldberg, *House of Witmark*, 152-55.

49. Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 212.

50. Quoted in *ibid.*, 213.

51. *Ibid.*, 228.

52. Quoted in Dave E. Bourne, "The Ben Harney Years: A Continuing Interview with George Orendorff," *Rag Times*, Nov. 1970, 11-12.

53. *Ibid.*, 11.

54. I do not think that this picture, which was supplied by George Orendorff, was the "Harney Band," as claimed; nor do I believe that it was even the vaudeville band, which, I suspect, backed all the acts on tour. Furthermore, I suspect that the face of Harney was superimposed on this photograph for the immediate purpose of the 1970 article.

55. This is not a Harney Band; Harney did not need one.

56. David E. Bourne, "Touring with Ben Harney," *Rag Times*, Mar. 1983, 3.

57. *Ibid.*

58. See Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 213.

59. Although the description of his three world tours was glowing, the account was reported by Harney himself. Moreover, his recollections of his reception by the Chinese and the Fiji Islanders seem rather farcial: "The Chinamen caught onto his quirks and were soon singing his songs, even if they did sound funny;" and the Fiji Islanders "took to his ragtime songs and jig steps like a duck takes to water. The whole island went wild over Harney's songs, and he was a little king while he remained there" (Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 225).

60. Ann Charters, *The Ragtime Songbook: Songs of the Era of Scott Joplin . . . and Others* (New York: Oak, 1965), 23. "You've Been a Good Old Wagon" and "Mr. Johnson, Turn Me Loose" (with folk dialect heavily edited) are found on pages 36-37 of this anthology.