



INTERNATIONAL

TROMBONE

ASSOCIATION JOURNAL
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Our 2023 ITA Award Recipients

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PLUS... **Lassus Trombone**
Now that you know, what do you do?

Farewell to the Beard
An interview with Gerry Pagano

Trombone Pedagogy in China
Yesterday and today

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ON THE COVER

Cover photo: 2023 ITA Award recipient Jörgen van Rijen

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The International Trombone Association,
PO Box 26147, Richmond, VA 23260 USA
Phone: 1-888-236-6241, Fax: 1-888-236-6242

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Lassus Trombone: Now That You Know, What Do You Do?

A conversation about music, marketing, hurt, and healing

By Douglas Yeo

This article contains offensive images and commentary.

The intersection of music and race is a complex subject, one that is part of a broader conversation that is taking place with increased urgency in the United States and around the world.

Cultural commentators point to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 as the impetus for heightened awareness and discussion of issues of social and racial justice. This includes protests regarding the appropriateness and placement of certain historical monuments, as well as controversies about the naming of military bases, buildings, and sports teams.

Although these discussions are often fraught with political overtones, they are being addressed by individuals, institutions, and governments that grapple with ways to address destructive and hurtful inequalities. This reckoning has led musical organizations, educational institutions, conductors, and performers to look at concert programming to better engage with audiences and affirm the value of positive, inclusive messaging.

Part of this reckoning is the realization that the history of the trombone has its share of racially insensitive and uncomfortable skeletons in the closet. In June and July 2020, I wrote two articles for my blog, *The Last Trombone*, in which I discussed the racist marketing that surrounds one of the most famous compositions in the trombone repertoire, Henry Fillmore's "Lassus Trombone."¹ Composed in 1915, "Lassus Trombone" is one of 15 works for trombone solo in a collection Fillmore titled *The Trombone Family*.² These pieces were marketed using reprehensibly racist images, racial stereotypes, the N-word, and offensive dialect. My articles about Fillmore's pieces have been read, re-blogged, and reprinted nearly one million times since they were published. The vigorous conversation they stimulated continues today.

Advertisement for Henry Fillmore's *The Trombone Family*. *Fillmore Musical Messenger*, February 1919

MORE HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

The problem runs deeper than one collection of pieces. In 1899, Arthur Pryor—the great trombone soloist and conductor of the John Philip Sousa Band and his own band—composed a popular song, “A Coon Band Contest or The Tune that Won the Ham for That Coon Band.”³

The cover of the song features racist, stereotypical images of African Americans. The lyrics refer to Blacks with demeaning language, including the N-word.⁴ The song was frequently performed by Sousa’s Band, including a command performance for England’s King Edward VII in January 1903. It was recorded by Pryor and many others for Berliner, Victor, and other labels.⁵

Arthur Pryor’s “Canhanibalmo Rag” (1911) was marketed in 1921 by publisher Carl Fischer with a play on the word, “cannibal,” along with offensive marketing copy: “Chow time in darkest Africa. Wow!”⁶ More recent editions treat the title as a play on words in reference to the city of Hannibal, Missouri.⁷

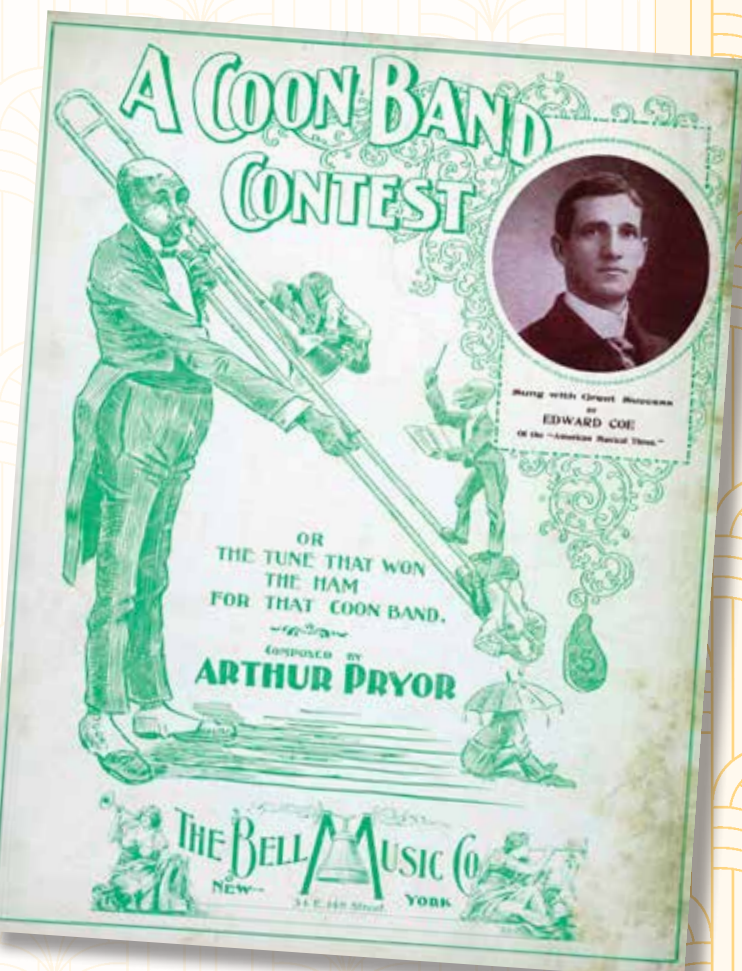
ETHICAL QUESTIONS

Trombonists—and all musicians—grapple with ways to deal with an uncomfortable past in order to make positive impacts on our complicated present. We seek to understand the historical context of racially and otherwise insensitive musical compositions and how these messages are perceived by diverse audiences when we perform the pieces today.

In our cultural moment, sound bites, 280-character tweets, and political disagreements often make it difficult to have thoughtful and meaningful conversations. As we contend with important issues, there are questions that honest individuals must address. By conducting careful research, we *ask* so we can *learn*: Was a given incident actually acceptable in the past? What if our assumptions about the past are incorrect? Who decided something was acceptable in the past? Who should decide if something is not acceptable today?

By conducting careful research, we *ask* so we can *learn*: Was a given incident actually acceptable in the past? What if our assumptions about the past are incorrect? Who decided something was acceptable in the past? Who should decide if something is not acceptable today?

If we ask these questions of Arthur Pryor’s “A Coon Band Contest” and Henry Fillmore’s “Lassus Trombone” (and the rest of his *The Trombone Family*), we immediately see that these composers were white men who engaged in



Arthur Pryor, *A Coon Band Contest*.
Vocal and piano, 1899

stereotyping of Blacks. In the music’s titles, subtitles, lyrics, and marketing, Pryor and Fillmore promoted outrageous caricatures of Blacks.

Their compositions fit squarely in the musical and cultural performance genre called “minstrelsy,” a form of entertainment performed primarily by whites for white audiences. Minstrelsy took the form of theatrical shows with performers in blackface (the use of burnt cork or makeup to change the color of an actor’s skin, usually applied in

such a way as to exaggerate certain physical characteristics such as lips and eyes) and a genre of musical compositions loosely referred to as “coon songs.” These songs used dialect language and disparaging descriptive terms that often

framed Blacks and the Black experience in deeply offensive ways. Still, some people today continue to justify minstrelsy, arguing that “it was acceptable at the time.”

But was it?

MUSICAL RACISM IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While working on a book project,⁸ I spent several years unpacking the minstrel/Jim Crow era in the United States. In the process, I learned that blackface and the propagation of racist tropes is not only disturbing and upsetting to many people today—it was also controversial in its own era. Using the phrase, “It was acceptable at the time,” is a gross generalization that has only partial basis in truth.

It was while researching minstrelsy I discovered that the loudest voices in the camp that argues “it was acceptable at the time, so we shouldn’t be bothered by it today” have been, and are, white. Meanwhile, many Blacks of the era objected to the portrayal of their people and culture in stereotypical and hurtful ways, but their voices were often marginalized or not given agency to be heard at all.

The minstrel era began in the United States in the early nineteenth century, and minstrel shows and songs were popular among white audiences before and after slavery was abolished in 1863.⁹ Minstrel characters such as Zip Coon and Jim Crow entertained white audiences.

Despite the popularity of minstrelsy and its racial stereotypes among a large segment of the white population, many Black writers—whose work regularly appeared in the Black press and not so much in the mainstream press that was controlled by whites—spoke out strongly against minstrelsy. Writing in his abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star* (1848), Frederick Douglass thundered:

We believe he [one who favors slavery] does not object to the “Virginia Minstrels,” “Christy’s Minstrels,” the “Ethiopian Serenaders,” or any of the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens.¹⁰

Frederick Douglass was not alone in his condemnation of minstrelsy and its stereotypes. Writing about Black spirituals—a subject of increasing interest to many whites at the time—in *Lippincott’s Magazine* (1868), John Mason Brown began an essay with an assessment of the popular form of entertainment from which many whites drew their opinion of Blacks and Black culture:

A very erroneous idea has long prevailed which accepts “negro minstrelsy” as a mirror of the musical taste and feeling of the negro race in the United States. Nothing could be farther from truth. Beyond the external resemblance, due to

burnt cork, there is in negro minstrelsy scarcely a feature of a person, music, dialect, or action that recalls, with any dramatic accuracy, the genuine negro slave of former years.¹¹

When the Fisk Jubilee Singers—a group of Black students from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee—began a series of concert tours in order to raise money for the university, they noted that many whites would not come to their concerts because of the stereotypes of Black entertainers that were promoted by minstrelsy. In his landmark book about the Fisk Jubilee Singers, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (1873), Gustavus D. Pike wrote:

Was there not so much odium attached to negro concerts, as represented in burnt cork minstrels, that people of taste and character did not think it becoming to rush in crowds to a paid concert given by negroes?¹²

Black commentators continued their withering criticism of racist portrayals of Blacks throughout the twentieth century. Writing in *Abbott’s Monthly* (1930), William J. Walls said:

The affairs of our lives that have made the greatest appeal to white audiences have been those that have furnished basis for ridicule as exhibited in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, minstrel shows, Octavius Roy Cohen’s Alabama caricatures, and Amos ’n’ Andy. The whites of America have not succeeded in capitalizing our affairs universally where it has exhibited us in the best light of civilization. The great American white audience is only interested in having us appear to them in the capacity of fools.¹³

As we examine the historical record more deeply and engage with the issue of minstrelsy through eyes of these and other Black writers, the racial stereotyping found in Arthur Pryor’s “That Coon Band Contest” and Henry Fillmore’s *The Trombone Family* cannot be seen as having been “acceptable at the time.” The offensive nature of these kinds of pieces and their marketing was always there; it has been hiding in plain sight. When we learn this, some people may say, “But I didn’t know!”

The remaining question is, “*Now that you know, what do you do?*”

THREE RESPONSES

Increased societal awareness of racial and social issues necessarily leads us to consider actions we can take to ensure that our recital and concert programming will speak to all members of our audiences. Part of this is working to avoid programming compositions that contain

hurtful stereotyping which, even if presented with the best intentions, can have harmful, unintended consequences. Going forward, we can consider these concrete actions:

1. Engage with others. We can only imagine what might have happened if Arthur Pryor and Henry Fillmore had talked with some of their Black friends before publishing “That Coon Band Contest” and “Lassus Trombone.” Did they *really* have to promote these pieces with titles and marketing that diminished Blacks? Of course not. They must have thought that doing so would increase sales to their intended markets. But what if they had talked with Black friends who told them that their titles, lyrics, and marketing plans were offensive to Blacks? What if the members of *The Trombone Family* were named John and Eliza rather than Lassus and Mose; what if they didn’t have dialect, racially stereotypical subtitles; what if a cartoon of a smiling trombonist was used on the covers of the music rather than a blackface character with floppy shoes and outrageously large lips? What if the marketing strategies and lyrics didn’t use the N-word? Would this music have sold just as well on its musical merits without employing racist tropes? And if it wouldn’t have sold as well, would Pryor and Fillmore been seen as doing the right thing by staying away from using racial stereotyping in order to make a buck?

There needs to be a continuum so that all voices are heard and considered. Perhaps everyone should look at the images prior to speaking.

—Wycliffe Gordon

Michael Dease, professor of jazz trombone at Michigan State University, laments that some people “equate education and empathy with censorship.” In public comments he made in 2020, he wrote, “As a Black American musician, I would ask defenders of ‘Lassus’ to show and discuss Yeo’s article with a Black friend or colleague and listen to their reaction.”¹⁴

Likewise, jazz trombonist Wycliffe Gordon addressed some of the issues surrounding “Lassus Trombone” in an article on his website:

My desire here is to share this (re)discovered bit of history brought to light by my brother Yeo so we can do what I feel needs to be done to address

all racists and racism issues. Let us all sit and talk about it. I already know there will be mixed feelings and reviews about history and the importance of preserving it. I have already had some of those conversations, but there needs to be a continuum so that all voices are heard and considered.

And for anyone who still defended “Lassus,” Wycliffe added a final thought: “Perhaps everyone should look at the images prior to speaking.”¹⁵

Before deciding on concert repertoire, engaging with others who share a variety of life experiences will help us gain a better understanding of how the performance of music with a complicated origin story may be perceived by our increasingly diverse audiences.

2. Promote alternative works and underrepresented composers. Henry Fillmore was not the only person to compose ragtime-style pieces with trombone *glissandi*. If we want to play that style of music, why not consider works that don’t carry with them the offensive themes of pieces that were birthed in a crucible of racial stereotyping? There are plenty of such pieces. Consider, for instance, Mayhew Lake’s “Slidus Trombonus: A Trombone Comedy” (1905) that was performed frequently by Gardell Simons, trombone soloist with Patrick Conway’s Band from 1911 to 1918.¹⁶ Likewise, Chris Sorensen Jr.’s “Serio Comique: Trombone Sneeze” (1902) is another work in the same ragtime style, full of trombone *glissandi*.¹⁷

While researching this genre of music, I also came across another “trombone family,” composed by Nathaniel Cleophas (“N.C.”) Davis (1888–1972). An African American composer, trombonist, educator, and publisher based in Nashville, Davis also served in France during World War I as both a musician and an infantryman. Davis’ five trombone features with band—“Oh Slip It Man,” “Mr. Trombonology,” “Miss Trombonism,” “Master Trombone,” and “Trombone Français”—have all of the charm of Fillmore’s *The Trombone Family* without the racially charged baggage. These pieces have recently been arranged for trombone and piano by Aaron Hettinga—“Mr. Trombonology” has also been arranged for trombone solo with brass quintet by Joshua Hauser—and published by Cherry Classics.¹⁸

The International Trombone Association’s Advisory Council on Diversity has recently launched an important resource—The Diversity Composer Database—to help trombonists identify excellent works written for trombone solo by underrepresented composers.¹⁹ Natalie Mannix, chair of the Advisory Council, has identified many works for trombone by women.²⁰

When we include high-quality works by composers who have not typically been represented on recital and

Mr. Trombonology

1st & 2d Trombones

A Characteristic Trombone Smear
The Son of "Oh Slip It Man!"

N. C. DAVIS

The musical score is written for 1st and 2nd Trombones. It begins with the tempo marking 'Allegro' and the dynamic 'ff'. The piece features a main section with various slurs and fingerings (e.g., 1 4 8, 1 6 1 8). A 'TRIO' section begins with a dynamic of 'p' and includes a 'D.S. al Fine' instruction. The score concludes with a 'Fine' marking. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 2/4.

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Nathaniel C. Davis, *Mr. Trombonology*. N.C. Davis Music, 1917

concert programs, we help our audiences relate to music in new ways, as individuals hear music written “by someone like me.” Doing so recognizes that the music world includes diverse composers who infuse their music with their own life experiences in order to make an impact on the lives of listeners. Performing their music—and hearing their voices—can make a powerful difference in our recital and concert programming, if only they are given the chance.


3. Make careful and thoughtful decisions. Henry Fillmore profited from an offensive marketing campaign for *The Trombone Family*. The same can be said for Arthur Pryor and his “That Coon Band Contest.” The hurt these actions have caused over more than 100 years is incalculable, but these men are no longer with us to either defend or apologize for their actions.

Do Fillmore’s and Pryor’s missteps mean we can’t enjoy their other music that lacks offensive, racial stereotyping?

Can we balance this tension in ways that allow us as a society to recognize wrongdoing, learn the lessons of history, create teachable moments, make changes, and do better going forward?

The exposure of false, hurtful narratives and actions of the past compels us to a commitment to do better today in a spirit of honesty, fair play, caring, and healing. Sometimes, we learn of a troubling incident—even a beloved piece of music that is based on reprehensible themes that some thought to be funny at the expense of others—and we decide, as I have, “We don’t think that way today. That was wrong. Here’s what I will do: I will not play that piece again. I will play something else.”

For the lessons of history to have a chance to inform and lead us down better paths now and in the future, we do well to learn and remember why things were once done and why we don’t do them anymore.

Thus, the question remains: *Now that you know, what do you do?* 

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Douglas Yeo (yeodoug.com and TheLastTrombone.com) is the author of five books and a frequent contributor to the *International Trombone Association Journal*. His recent

research subjects include articles about Native American jazz trombonist Russell Moore (*ITA Journal*, July 2017), trombonists Lillian Briggs (*ITA Journal*, October 2022) and Dorothy Ziegler (*ITA Journal*, January 2023), and an article in progress about Native American sousaphone player and tubist, John Kuhn (*ITEA Journal*). From 1985 to 2012, Yeo was bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and since then, he has served as a faculty member at Arizona State University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and Wheaton College (Illinois). He was recipient of the 2014 ITA Award.

Endnotes

- 1 Douglas Yeo, "Trombone Players: It's time to bury Henry Fillmore's 'Lassus Trombone,'" *The Last Trombone*, June 28, 2020, thelasttrombone.com/2020/06/28/trombone-players-its-time-to-bury-henry-fillmores-lassus-trombone. Douglas Yeo, "A path forward from Henry Fillmore's 'Lassus Trombone,'" *The Last Trombone*, July 6, 2020, thelasttrombone.com/2020/07/06/a-path-forward-from-henry-fillmores-lassus-trombone.
- 2 The compositions that make up Henry Fillmore's *The Trombone Family* were originally published between 1908 and 1929 as 15 individual trombone solos with piano accompaniment (also released for band and orchestra). The earliest editions were under the imprint of the Fillmore Brothers Co. The company name changed in 1912 to Fillmore Music House, and the firm was subsequently sold to Carl Fischer Co. in 1952.
- 3 Arthur Pryor, "A Coon Band Contest or The Tune That Won the Ham for That Coon Band." New York: The Bell Music Company, 1899, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-ec9b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.
- 4 The third verse reads, "That great big coon who invented that fierce tune, went out one night to serenade his best girl. He found her out but the old man was at home, and he laid for Mister Coon with that trombone. There was just one shot and it must of hit the spot, for Mister Ni*** never played no more. And they buried him like they do all sporty coons, but not so with that tune."
- 5 Arthur Pryor recorded "A Coon Band Contest" with Sousa's Band on several occasions, including Berliner O1170, April 12, 1900; Victor 312/4069, April 26, 1904; Victor 4069/16079, March 26, 1906; Victor 16079, June 10, 1914.
- 6 Carl Fischer, "Wickedest—Meanest Trombone Agony!" *The Musical Messenger* XV, no. 2, February 1919, 24.
- 7 Arthur Pryor, "Canhanibalmo Rag," *Virgo Music Publishers*, virgomusicpublishers.com/shop/canhanibalmo-rag-arthur-pryor-vo107.
- 8 Kevin Mungons and Douglas Yeo. *Homer Rodeheaver and the Rise of the Gospel Music Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).
- 9 President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation and executive order that freed all slaves in the United States—known as "The Emancipation Proclamation"—was announced on September 22, 1862, and went into effect on January 1, 1863. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which abolished slavery in the United States, was ratified on December 6, 1865, after the end of the Civil War.
- 10 Frederick Douglass, "The Hutchinson Family—Hunkerism," *North Star* (Rochester, NY), October 27, 1848.
- 11 John Mason Brown, "Songs of the Slave," *Lippincott's Magazine*, December 1868, 618.
- 12 Gustavus D. Pike. *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1873), 107.
- 13 William J. Walls, "What about Amos 'n' Andy?," *Abbott's Monthly*, December 1930, 72.
- 14 Douglas Yeo, "A path forward from Henry Fillmore's 'Lassus Trombone,'" *The Last Trombone*, July 6, 2020, thelasttrombone.com/2020/07/06/a-path-forward-from-henry-fillmores-lassus-trombone.
- 15 Wycliffe Gordon, "Will Things Change THIS Time?" *wycliffegordon.com*, July 2, 2020, wycliffegordon.com/2020/07/we-are-ready-for-change/.
- 16 Douglas Yeo, "Gardell Howard Simons," *An Illustrated Dictionary for the Modern Trombone, Tuba, and Euphonium Player* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 134. The trombone/piano music to "Slidus Trombonus" is available at no cost at yeodoug.com/Mayhew_L_Lake_Slidus_Trombonus_trombone_piano.pdf.
- 17 Chris Sorensen Jr., "Serio Comique: A Trombone Sneeze." The trombone/piano/band music is available at no cost at yeodoug.com/Sorensen_Trombone_Sneeze_parts.pdf.
- 18 "Works by Nathaniel C. Davis, published by Cherry Classics," *cherryclassics.com*, cherryclassics.com/search?type=product&q=nathaniel+davis.
- 19 "Diversity Composer Database, trombone.net, trombone.net/repertoire/, 2021.
- 20 Natalie Mannix, "A Bibliography of Solo Compositions Written by Women Composers," *International Trombone Association Journal*, 47, no. 4 (October 2019), 22–27. Also see nataliemannix.com.