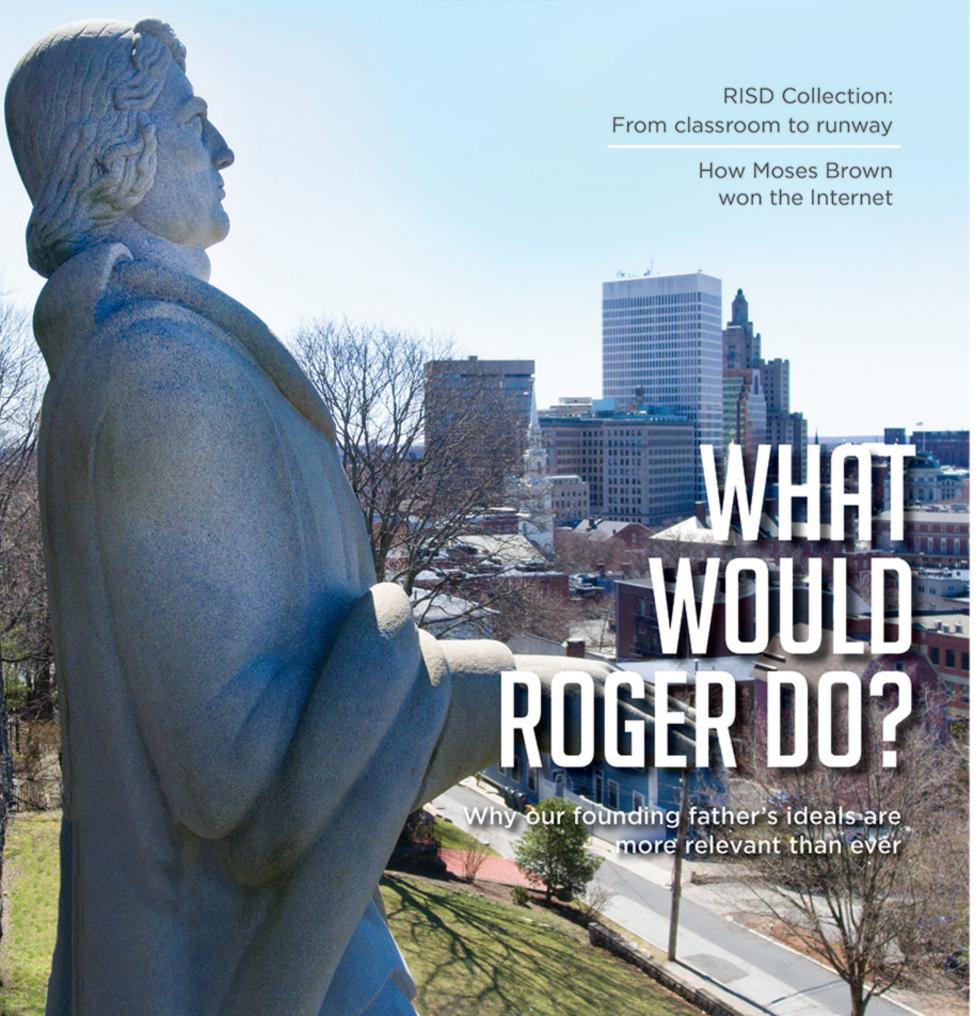
MAY 2017 EastSideMonthly.com

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It's Time for the Bamboula!

A new Brown exhibit explores American black music before the blues

By Sophie Hagen

Before the blues, before jazz and ragtime, before the popular music streaming through our earbuds today took shape, enslaved and newly freed black people were pioneering new musical forms and performance styles. An exhibit at Brown's John Hay Library - Bamboula! Black Music Before the Blues - runs through May 5 and charts how African and European musical traditions intertwined in colonial America in ways that continue to influence modern-day music (the "bamboula" is an African dance). Brown alumnus, concert pianist and Bamboula's curator John Davis pulled from his extensive collection of 19th-century African Americana for the exhibit. He dedicated the show to his father, Robert Davis, a professor emeritus of medical science at Brown who first introduced his son to a love of rare books.

Brown, a university that has begun to investigate its history of profit from the slave trade, struck

Davis as an appropriate place for an exhibit like this one. The school's investigation began in 2003 with the creation of a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice by then president Ruth Simmons. In addition to researching Brown's ties to slavery, the committee was charged with organizing public programs that examined the marks of history and its injustices on the present. Davis sees this exhibit as part of that initiative.

Sheet music, books and other historical chart the obiects development of black musical performance and composition from the 19th to the early 20th centuries, including playbills of allblack Broadway plays and posters of prominent performers such as Sissieretta Jones and Thomas "Blind Tom" Wiggins. Davis hopes visitors to the library will come away struck by the "whole world of music before ragtime and the blues" that existed before recording equipment

did. Theatrical tropes of the period were equally significant: characters from early minstrel performances, Davis points out, can be traced to contemporary show business. The common pairing at the time of the country bumpkin with the well-dressed urban dandy, for example, paved the way for Abbot and Costello, and for Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.

These little-known black pioneers of theatre and music rarely receive their due for their significant influence on American popular culture, due to the dearth of recordings and, of course, racism. Bamboula! helps us fill this gap in common knowledge: African American composers and musicians, and the Europeans influenced by them, created colonial America's flourishing musical culture, starting the minute that enslaved people entered the colonies against their will. 20 Prospect Street. 863-2146, Library.Brown.edu/Hay

