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RISD Collection:  
From classroom to runway

How Moses Brown  
won the Internet



## WHAT WOULD ROGER DO?

Why our founding father's ideals are  
more relevant than ever

## 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 objects chart the development of black musical performance and composition from the 19th to the early 20th centuries, including playbills of all-black 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](http://Library.Brown.edu/Hay)



THIS TICKET AND  
15 Cents

Will Admit any Pupil or School  
Child to the

**BLIND BOONE  
CONCERT.**

Parents who are giving their children  
musical instruction, or intend to, should

Artifacts on display at *Bamboula!* tell the  
story of African American performers in  
the late 19th and early 20th centuries