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# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Hutchinson Singers

A handful of chilled Nevada music lovers pushed their way against a bitter Iowa wind on the first Friday evening of March, 1865. They had read in the *Story County Aegis* of a vocal and dramatic performance by the world-famous Hutchinson Family from the Old Granite State. The singers of the "tribe of Jesse" had been in Iowa since the previous December and were to remain until April. Recitals had been scheduled in over twenty-five communities, including Charles City, Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, and Independence.

"Everybody has heard of the Hutchinsons," wrote the editor of the *Cedar Valley Times* a month earlier when the troupe had sung to a crowded house in the Baptist Hall of Cedar Rapids. These were no idle words, indeed, for the Hutchinsons were known throughout the nation and in England for lifting their melodious voices in the causes of temperance, abolition,

woman suffrage, and Christianity. "To those who may not be 'posted' or have forgotten," reminded the Nevada editor, "we would explain that Asa Hutchinson is one of the original brothers of the family, who, for many years have delighted the people of the country with their songs of Patriotism, Freedom, and Fraternity."

These Hutchinsons, far more important in the musical annals of the nation than the Baker Family or the Alleghanians, were natives of New Hampshire. The father, Jesse, was a quiet farmer with much musical ability. His wife also was talented. All but one of their thirteen children were musically inclined. In 1839 they announced their first performance in Milford by posting two slips of paper, one on the Town Meeting House and the other at the bridge. The announcement modestly read:

THE ELEVEN SONS AND TWO DAUGHTERS OF THE  
"TRIBE OF JESSE" WILL SING AT THE BAPTIST  
MEETING HOUSE ON THANKSGIVING  
EVENING AT SEVEN O'CLOCK.

"It was an anxious time for all," said one of the brothers, but Squire Livermore spoke on music and the minister prayed, "so that the concert might be interspersed with speakers and not fall through." The church was packed with sym-

pathetic listeners, and the chorals, hymns, anthems, and glees were enthusiastically received.

Before long, the four younger children, Judson, John, Asa, and Abby, were singing in many a New England village. At East Wilton, a concert netted six and a quarter cents. During these first endeavors they sang from note and not by rote, but in later years, as they became more assured, they memorized all their numbers. Finally, they were persuaded by friends to attempt a program in New York City. With timid faith they arranged for their debut in the famous Tabernacle on May 11, 1842. "The immense audience", noted the *New York Tribune*, "were perfectly delighted and could scarcely be prevailed upon to release them from constant duty. We have seldom listened to sweeter melody than theirs."

The American Temperance Union, attracted by their sudden success, invited the Hutchinsons to take part in its program the following night. On May 13th they gave a recital at Concert Hall where they introduced a "variety of their most popular quartets, trios, and solos such as have not failed to please fashionable audiences in Boston and many other cities and towns in New England."

For these early concerts the Hutchinsons selected the type of music they later were to intro-

duce to Iowa. Dramatic and colorful narratives usually were first. These were followed by sentimental pieces and temperance selections. They accompanied themselves with a violin and violoncello.

For their program given at the Society Library Room in New York, on May 17th, the troupe chose the "Snow Storm", now quite forgotten, but then a favorite narrative of the sufferings of a mother who wandered with her child over the Green Mountains in search of a husband who had already perished in the storm. This was followed by the "Vulture of the Alps", described in handbills as a thrilling song "portraying the agonized feelings of a parent at the loss of an infant child, snatched suddenly from its companions by the ravenous vulture, while engaged in childish plays in the field." Then too, they offered "The Maniac", "The Grave of Bonaparte", "The Mountain Bugle", and "King Alcohol", their favorite for over forty years.

King Alcohol has many forms  
By which he catches men;  
He is a beast of many horns,  
And ever thus has been.  
There is rum and gin, and beer and wine,  
And brandy of logwood hue;  
And these, with other fiends combined,  
Will make any man look blue.

## CHORUS

He says, "Be merry, for here's your cherry,  
And Tom-and-Jerry and port and sherry,  
And spirits of every hue."  
Oh, are not these a fiendish crew,  
As ever a mortal knew?

"Don't forget the concert by those sweet native minstrels, the Hutchinson Family," admonished the *New York Evening Post*. "All who go in doubt come home enthusiastic in their praise. Let us give them a full house, aye, even to overflowing, and thus show to them that we are not behind New England cities in appreciating and encouraging American talent."

And New York did as it was bid, applauding and patronizing these unaffected songsters until their every minute was engaged. "A great charm of their singing," recalled a member of the Brook Farm experiment, "was a sort of wild freshness as if taught in their native woods and mountains, and their earnest interest in the objects that formed so much of the theme of their songs."

After their happy New York experiences they returned to New Hampshire, but in 1845 they left for a tour of England and Ireland. Charles Dickens gave a reception for them before their London premiere. Harriet Martineau reserved a concert room for them at the White Lion in the pastoral English village of Kendal. But the coun-

try folks, from Hawkshead and Grasmere, eager to hear the four American singers, overflowed the hall. Fortunately, a large lawn was found for an out-door concert.

“How is it possible to give an idea of the soul-breathing music of the Hutchinsons to those who have not heard it?” wrote Miss Martineau to the editor of *The People's Journal*. “One might as well attempt to convey in words the colours of the sky or the strain of the nightingale as such utterance of the heart as theirs. One can only observe the effects. There was now hearty laughter, and now many tears. Nothing can be said of the inner emotions which found no expression. Everybody congratulated everybody else on having come. A young servant of mine, who went all in high spirits at the prospect of an evening's pleasure, cried the whole time — as did others. At the end, when every heart was beating in response to the brotherly greeting and farewell offered in the closing piece — *The Granite State* — the parish clerk sprang up and called for three cheers for the Hutchinsons, which were given by as many as had unchoked voices.”

Upon their return to the United States, the Hutchinsons gave most of their time to the abolition movement, a cause in which they had been interested for many years. They were intimate

friends, as well as co-workers, with Garrison, Greeley, Rogers, and other leaders of the anti-slavery group. "We were inspired with the greatness of the issue," wrote John Hutchinson, "finding our hearts in sympathy with those struggling and earnest people . . . and we sang for the emancipation of the millions of slaves in bondage." The "Negro's Lament" was one of the most popular of their selections.

Forced from home and all its pleasures,  
Africa's coast I left forlorn,  
To increase a stranger's treasures,  
O'er the raging billows borne.  
Men from England bought and sold me,  
Paid my price in paltry gold;  
But though slave they have enrolled me,  
Minds are never to be sold.

This was first sung at a meeting of the Boston Anti-slavery Society in Faneuil Hall in January, 1843. "The powerful description of the singing of the wonderfully gifted Hutchinsons," wrote the *Liberator*, "does not surpass the reality of their charming melodies. The effect on the thousands who listened to them was, in fact, indescribable. They added immensely to the interest of the occasion; and the manner in which they adapted their spirited songs (nearly all of which were original and impromptu) to the subjects that were



under discussion displayed equal talent and genius."

Perhaps the most famous of all the anti-slavery songs in the Hutchinson repertoire was the stirring and dramatic, "Get Off the Track." The words were written by the Hutchinsons and adapted to an old slave melody. First introduced in 1844, it became, with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the most powerful instruments aimed at the southern slave system.

Ho! the car emancipation,  
Rides majestic through the nation,  
Bearing on its train the story,  
Liberty! a nation's glory.  
Roll it along! roll it along!  
Roll it along! through the nation,  
Freedom's car, Emancipation.

Let the ministers and churches  
Leave behind sectarian lurches.  
Jump on board the car of freedom,  
Ere it be too late to need them.  
Sound the alarm! pulpits thunder,  
Ere too late to see your blunder.

Hear the mighty car-wheels humming:  
Now, look out! the engine's coming!  
Church-and-statesmen, hear the thunder  
Clear the track, or you'll fall under.  
Get off the track! all are singing  
While the "Liberty Bell" is ringing.

N. P. Rogers first heard this song when it was introduced in 1844. "It represented the railroad," he wrote in the *Herald of Freedom*, "in characters of living light and song, with all its terrible enginery and speed and danger. And when they came to the chorus-cry that gives name to the song — when they cried to the heedless pro-slavery multitude that were stupidly lingering on the track, and the engine 'Liberator' coming hard upon them, under full steam and all speed, the Liberty Bell loud ringing, and they standing like deaf men right in its whirlwind path, the way they cried 'Get off the track,' in defiance of all time and rule, was magnificent and sublime."

When, however, slave-holders would not "get off the track", the Hutchinsons did their bit to further the conflict by popularizing "The Battle Cry of Freedom" until it was "soon shouted in camps, on the march, and on the battlefield." Nor was this enough. John Hutchinson determined to take his singers into the camps of the Army of the Potomac. Unfortunately, however, they included in their programs Whittier's stirring "Ein Feste Burg," an inflammatory abolition poem set to the music of Luther's great hymn. General McClellan thereupon expelled them from the Union lines on the ground that abolition was not the primary object of the war.

Undaunted, the troupe appealed to Lincoln. Secretary Chase, it is said, read the lines judged offensive by McClellan, in a cabinet meeting. The President listened attentively and then is reputed to have said, "It is just the character of song that I desire the soldiers to hear." By presidential order, therefore, the Hutchinsons were readmitted to Federal camps and barracks. There they delighted regulars and volunteers with the "Emancipation Song", "The Slave Mother", "The Slave's Appeal", "Little Topsy's Song", and "Uncle Sam's Farm".

The West was not unknown to them. During the roaring forties they made excursions to several of the States of the Old Northwest. In the winter of 1848 they sang in Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. Empire Hall at Cleveland, said the *Daily Herald*, was crowded and "hundreds who applied for admission found it was 'no use knocking at the door'." On their Columbus program, the Hutchinsons announced "A New Song for Ohio", and the German Protestant Evangelical Church was crowded with Buckeyes who paid fifty cents admission to see and hear the "nest of brothers with a sister in it." In Cincinnati they sang at Smith and Nixon's Hall and at the Melodeon. They offered for sale a booklet containing fifty of their most popular selections.

The quartet was a picturesque group upon any stage. Abby sometimes wore a green bouffant dress, pinched tightly at the waist. Her close fitting sleeves were ruffled above the elbow. The brothers chose white snug trousers and blue long-tailed jackets. Collars were soft and flaring, beneath which lay a large knot of wide black satin whose flowing ends were tucked under tan striped waistcoats. The Hutchinsons scorned white gloves, feeling that the wearing of them did not correspond with nature. The death of Jesse at the Carthage Water Cure Establishment in 1853 broke the intimate circle. He was the leader, and composer of several of their most popular songs. Judson was the humorist of the troupe. Asa was the basso and business manager, and Abby, the contralto.

Their songs frequently reflected the times. Westward emigration received more than usual attention in two numbers, "Westward Ho!" and "Ho! for California". Another geographical favorite in 1867 was "Away Down East", a Yankee realm described as a land of notions, a paradise of pumpkin pies, of apple-sauce and greens, and of pork and beans.

Nearly all of the Hutchinsons' Iowa programs began, as did their concerts everywhere, with their family song, "The Old Granite State".

Ho! we've come from the mountains  
 Come again from the mountains.  
 We've come from the mountains,  
     Of the old Granite State.  
 We're a band of brothers,  
 We're a band of brothers,  
 We're a band of brothers,  
     And we live among the hills;  
 With a band of music,  
 With a band of music,  
 With a band of music,  
     We are passing round the world.

The fourth stanza counted them off:

Davis, Noah, Andrew, Zepha,  
 Caleb, Joshua, and Jesse,  
 Hudson, Rhoda, John and Asa,  
 And Abby are our names.  
     We're the sons of Mary,  
     Of the tribe of Jesse,  
     And now we address ye,  
     With our native mountain song.

Iowans heard their motto in the next stanza:

Liberty is our motto,  
 And we'll sing as freemen ought to,  
 Till it rings o'er glen and grotto,  
     From the Old Granite State.  
 "Men should love each other,  
 Nor let hatred smother,  
 Every man's a brother,  
     And our country is the world!"

The Nevada audience next heard "The Southerner's Prayer", which portrayed Jefferson Davis defeated and alone. Then followed that delightfully sentimental "Hannah at the Window", and the humorous "Johnny Schmoker". War veterans listened again to the stirring "Tenting on the Old Camp Ground" and "Johnny Comes Marching Home Again". Other comic and dramatic selections completed the program.

During their 1867 tour through Iowa, the band scheduled a concert for January 24th in the Metropolitan Opera House of Iowa City. "The present troupe", wrote the *Iowa City Republican*, is composed largely of scions of the original stock, but the gift of song was born in them, and they have had superior advantages for its development. We love to hear the music of this singing tribe." The group played in other Iowa communities and then moved on to Council Bluffs where they were the guests of Mrs. Amelia Bloomer during February and early March. Then they journeyed to Dubuque where they performed without a license, were arrested just as they were entering a railroad coach, and were fined \$5.50.

On New Year's Day of 1880, the Hutchinsons left their home in New Hampshire, spent a day in New York, and on January 8th reached Des Moines. They gave frequent concerts, sometimes

riding fifty miles across frozen country in an open sleigh. In Le Mars they were introduced to the notable Masonic lecturer, Robert Morris. Jesse Harriman, an ardent anti-slavery worker of many years before, met the troupe in Independence. On March 15th, a concert was presented at Ham's Hall in Iowa City. Reserved seats, according to the *Iowa City Daily Press*, were fifty cents and general admissions only thirty-five cents. Both types were on sale at Lee and Fink's.

During their Iowa City sojourn John Hutchinson saw Robert Hutchinson with whom he had sung in the Milford choir when both were boys. With this able Iowan was Samuel Everett, a minister who had baptized the singer many years earlier.

The words and music for two songs were written by the Hutchinsons while in Iowa. The first of these, "Vote It Right Along", a political satire, was composed in Decorah on July 15, 1867. The second, conceived near Iowa City on February 15, 1880, was a musical temperance tract, "Which Way is Your Musket A-p'intin' To-Day?"

The question, my friends, is of vital importance,  
The nation is waiting in anxious suspense;  
Each voter can wield a *political musket*,  
Then wield it, I ask, in your country's defense!

The issue before us is plain and unclouded—  
Shall our nation be ruled by King Alcohol's sway?  
I candidly ask every qualified voter  
"Which way is your musket a-p'intin' today?"

From this last Iowa tour the singers went to Minnesota where Asa, Judson, and John had founded Hutchinson in 1855 as a center for anti-slavery sentiment. Settlement began in the following year, a large German contingent arrived in 1857, and the community was ravaged in the Sioux wars of the sixties.

From Hutchinson the singers returned to their New England home and continued to give concerts. They sang at the funeral of John Greenleaf Whittier and lifted their wavering voices over the body of Wendell Phillips. Abby died in 1892 and by the turn of the century the Hutchinsons had passed from the nation's musical stage. For almost fifty years they had given their talents for the enjoyment of the American people and to the causes in which they passionately believed. It is well that a chapter of Iowa's musical history was brightened by the concerts of these unaffected songsters.

PHILIP D. JORDAN