

THE
HUTCHINSON
FAMILY
SINGERS
1841-1849

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THEIR EARLY LIFE IN
MILFORD, NH
AND
THEIR EXTRAORDINARY INFLUENCE
ON AMERICAN MUSIC
AND
THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

In 1800, Jesse Hutchinson of Milford married Mary Leavitt of Mont Vernon. They lived in a farmhouse on Richardson Rd. in Mont Vernon. By 1829, 16 children had been born, 13 lived to adulthood. Because of the size of the family, in 1824 Jesse decided to purchase a second farm 3/4 of a mile away on No. River Rd. that had 160 acres of farmable land. The older boys were left to manage the first farm while the parents and younger children moved into the new farm where the last two daughters were born.

Jesse had a very good singing voice and Mary was descended from a long line of above average singers. All of their children learned to sing at a very early age and possessed fine voices. Their lives were full of music, in the home, out in the fields, and in the choir of the Baptist Church. Many of the sons were content to farm, some opted to pursue other careers and the three youngest boys, Judson, John and Asa dreamed of making a living with their singing.

In 1841, they moved to Lynn, MA, where older brother Jesse Jr. was a successful businessman. Jesse was the chorister at the First Universalist Church. John and Asa joined the choir and accompanied it with their violin and cello. Jesse also arranged a concert that included John, Asa, Joshua and Judson that proved to be successful, but also made them aware that they needed to improve their skills.

While in Lynn, they attended a Washingtonian meeting that promoted the Temperance message. Although the Hutchinsons were teetotalers, the young brothers signed the Temperance pledge. The singers attended temperance meetings and sang for the cause. Jesse wrote a song called "King Alcohol" that was at once humorous and full of meaning. This song became part of their early concert repertoire and remained one of their most popular numbers.

The first tour taken by John, Asa and Judson brought them back to NH. They called themselves the Aeolian Vocalists and their first stop was in East Wilton. Though the concert was sparsely attended and netted only 6 1/4 cents profit, the music was well received. They continued the tour through NH and ended with a \$15 profit.

After returning to Lynn, they went into business with their brothers and continued to study, hold concerts and practice their singing. It was in Lynn that they met Frederick Douglass and became aware of the abolition movement. Douglass and the Hutchinsons remained friends for the rest of their lives, but there was little known Hutchinson commitment to the abolitionist cause at that time.

In January of 1842 Jesse arranged a concert in Lynn that included 11 year old Abby. The brothers immediately recognized that Abby was the missing and necessary ingredient. In addition to her "angelic" voice, her youth and sweet personality drew the audience to her. A tour of eastern New England was arranged and the 4 set off in a carry all wagon drawn by 2 horses. After the tour they returned to Milford to help the parents with farm maintenance but the pull of music was very strong and concerts were staged from the Milford home-front.

On June 6, 1842, in Concord NH, the editor of the abolitionist newspaper Herald of Freedom, was in the audience. Nathaniel Rogers was a musician himself and recognized something in the Hutchinson group that he felt would be of service to the Abolitionist movement. In a departure from his usual writing, he wrote 3 articles describing the group and suggesting that they compose and sing songs of freedom and abolition. He would have to wait several months before his wish was granted.

When finished with the farm duties, the brothers returned to Lynn and planned a tour that would take them as far west as New York state. They promised their parents that Abby would be returned to them in 3 weeks, but they were not able to keep that promise.

The NY tour produced only lackluster attendance at concerts and dwindling profits. The quartet was in Albany, nearly penniless and facing the bleak prospect of calling it quits when fate stepped in and turned their lives around. An Albany music store owner named Luke Newland had attended at least one of their concerts and was very pleased with what he heard. He asked the quartet to remain in Albany a few more days and guaranteed them a then substantial payment of \$100.

Luke arranged for the quartet to attend 3 local church services and sing with the choirs. He and other businessmen arranged a public concert to be held at the Albany Female Academy. The businessmen published a signed newspaper notice extolling both the talent and the respectability of the Hutchinsons. They also sent invitations to many of Albany's families of good standing. As a result, the concert was attended and appreciated by hundreds of people who would have otherwise considered such entertainment to be coarse and uncultured. The Hutchinsons learned lessons in both proper planning and good advertising. From then on, they utilized both methods of announcing their concerts. Several family members acted as agents and rode ahead of the quartet arranging publicity and securing venues and lodgings. The Hutchinsons sang in church choirs prior to a concert, thereby advertising themselves and proving their respectability at the same time.

The quartet finished out the year with ever increasing popularity, holding family concerts and singing at Temperance meetings and very unaware of how their lives were about to change.

The Massachusetts Anti-slavery Society held their annual 3 day meeting at Faneuil Hall from January 25-27, 1843. Nathaniel Rogers advocated for the Hutchinsons to appear at the meeting. The attendance increased every day as word of the Hutchinsons talent spread. In writing about the event Rogers said "They made the vast multitudes toss and heave and clamor like the roaring ocean. The Hutchinsons made the thousands of Faneuil Hall spring to their feet simultaneously as if in dance and echo the anti-slavery appeal with cheering that almost moved the old revolutionists from their stations on the wall." His most quoted statement from that article is "Slavery would have died of that music".

It was at this meeting, Jesse Jr. framed the initial abolitionist stanzas of what would become their signature song "The Old Granite State". The brothers rushed up on the stage to perform it and with the simple repetitious lyrics and catchy known melody the singers brought the audience to it's feet as one man....Roger's described the reaction as "Humanity's Jubilee Cry".

At the close of the Society's meeting, it was resolved to have the Hutchinsons sing at as many meetings as possible.

During 1843, the family's career was developing in two ways. They were singing at Temperance and Anti-Slavery meetings throughout the northeast. Word of the singers appearance was sure to draw large crowds. There are many vivid accounts of the singers ability to quell disruption at Anti-slavery meetings. If there was a determined effort by rowdies to prevent speeches from being heard, the Hutchinsons would rush up on the stage and begin singing. The usual result was the hissing and shouting stopped and the meeting could continue. They sang with such conviction that Rogers wrote "They did not adorn, but participated in the argument."

At the same time, the family continued to give their own concerts. For decades, European singers had been touring the US to the delight of Americans, and the Hutchinsons arrival coincided with the realization that Americans really had no style of music to call their own. They wanted more than to listen to music sung in foreign languages, by artists they enjoyed but couldn't really relate to. Americans wanted to hear and enjoy songs that were dramatic, amusing, thoughtful and that reflected their lives.

Enter the Hutchinsons....billing themselves as "native American singers" and encouraging audiences to welcome "native singers" as they had the foreigners. They closed every concert with "The Old Granite State". The song introduced the singers and told of their lives on the farm in Milford and mentioned every family member by name, insuring that the audience knew they were indeed "native Americans".

The appeal of the quartet was due to many factors:

1. They were unquestionably talented, and pleasant to look at.
2. They were respectable, church-going people guided by high moral principles.
3. They were down to earth and made no secret of the fact that when the concert season ended, they would head home to bring in the crops and help with farm duties.
4. Their stage appearance was appealingly plain and simple with no fancy dress or posturing.
5. The concert programs included such a variety of numbers that every attendee was sure to be pleased by something, whether it was humor, sentimentality, morality, or a specific cause.
6. They were very conscientious about keeping the ticket prices affordable for all. They even offered a money back guarantee.

7. The musical numbers were often set to catchy familiar tunes, easily remembered and sung.
8. They worked extremely hard on enunciation and audiences were able to understand every word they sang,
9. They sang only for causes they embraced in their private lives. Among these causes were Temperance, peace, health reform, equality for all, women's rights, prison, moral and social reform and most importantly, abolitionism.
10. They were one of the first groups to introduce harmony in their concert numbers. Many articles describe the way their voices blended so perfectly. John writes of the group practicing numbers for hours, each taking a different part and trying out different approaches to the song.

Reporters admitted to being at a loss for words to accurately describe the music and often resorted to "indescribable" "sweet" and "sublime". A quote from Walt Whitman may paint an accurate picture of their singing...."The music of feeling....heart music as distinguished from art music....is well exemplified in such singing as the Hutchinsons..." and....."whatever touches the heart is better than what touches the ear."

Music scholars and historians credit the quartet with creating a concert format that has been followed by musicians ever since. They are also responsible for making public and protest singing acceptable to the public.

As they became more sophisticated in producing their own concerts they also became proficient in marketing themselves. Sheet music from the programs was available for sale at both the concert venue and in stores in the area. Various family members wrote and produced small booklets of poetry and songs and stories about the Hutchinson family, which were sold during concerts. But as they were becoming popular on these two fronts, people began to question their degree of commitment to the abolitionist movement. The family concerts contained some anti-slavery messages but the focus was on a program designed for the audiences enjoyment.

Towards the end of 1843 Asa made entries into the family journal wondering if they were doing enough, and what could be done better.

In February 1844, Jesse Jr.'s most famous Anti-Slavery song, "Get Off The Track" was performed in Lowell for the first time with little fanfare. It was sung by other members of the Hutchinson family, not the quartet.

A March 31 journal entry by Asa states that Jesse Jr. was the family's anti-slavery zealot and the whole family was discussing giving concerts that would make known their strong anti-slavery sentiments.

The April 3 entry contains the simple sentence "Anti-Slavery is our theme now."

On April 11, the quartet performed "Get Off The Track" in Salem MA and according to Asa it "went like wildfire".

The song is dedicated to Nathaniel Rogers and the sheet music cover is full of symbolism. The lyrics were set to the tune of "Old Dan Tucker". As the quartet performed it, they would abandon singing and start shouting "Get off the track" so the car "Emancipation" could roll through. Performing the song would cause audiences to rise to their feet as one and cheer wildly. The genius of Jesse Jr.'s lyrics and the pairing with a popular melody made it at once memorable and singable.

Of course the reception to this song or the family beliefs was not always so agreeable and it could be downright dangerous. In NYC the quartet was threatened with mob action if they chose to perform it during a concert. With the support of many friends, they went ahead with the planned program and no violence ensued.

In Philadelphia, they performed at a concert given to a mixed race audience. The next day they were lambasted by a newspaper for not warning the public of that fact. The mayor even went so far as to prohibit them from giving more concerts. They refused to sing anywhere that African Americans were not allowed.

In pro-slavery Baltimore, they were refused admittance to already reserved lodgings, and were not able to secure other suitable rooms. They were also threatened with such a degree of bodily harm that they chose to cancel the concerts and return to safer territory.

The family's conviction to cause and their bravery when faced with dangerous situations worked in their favor and brought more and more people to concerts. Historians credit the Hutchinsons with bringing the antislavery message to more people than the most impassioned speeches ever would have done.

In 1845, Frederick Douglass published "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave". Fearing that he might be captured and returned to slavery, friends advised him to leave the country for his own safety. He asked the Hutchinsons to accompany him as he sailed to England. They agreed and Douglass, Jesse, Jr. and the quartet set sail in August. Upon arrival, Douglass began a speaking tour and the Hutchinsons set out on a singing tour. The tour was very difficult at first. They were unknown Americans and their style of singing was foreign to the British. But after weeks of hard work, word began to spread about the group and audiences increased by leaps and bounds. Before they sailed home in June of 1846, they had sung in Ireland, Wales, Scotland and many locations in England and achieved the same level of popularity they enjoyed at home. The biggest triumphs were singing in the Hanover Square Rooms, then the most popular venue for entertainment, and at Covent Garden before audiences that numbered in the thousands.

In 1849 Abby married Ludlow Patton, a NY stockbroker and left the quartet. The brothers continued to sing as a trio but were never as successful without their sister. They eventually formed tribes of their own and performed with wives, children and various members of the entire family. Amazingly, not only did all of the original quartet marry above average singers, the children born to those couples were fantastic singers also.

Judson performed with his daughter Kate. John with his wife Fanny and children Henry and Viola. Asa performed with his wife Lizzie and children, Freddy, Oliver and Abby.

It is estimated that the Hutchinson family in its entirety performed between 10,000 and 11,000 concerts.

In 1855 Judson, John and Asa toured the midwest and established the town of Hutchinson, Minnesota. Though they would all visit the area occasionally, Asa and his family are the only ones who took up permanent residence.

John and his family resided in Lynn, MA at High Rock. They toured through most of the US as the Tribe of John. He was the last surviving member of the family and sang well into his 80s, never losing his love of the limelight and his flair for drama.

Jesse Jr. parted with the quartet and managed a group called the Alleghenies. While returning from California he became ill with Isthmus Fever and died in Ohio. He is buried in Lynn, MA.

Throughout his life Judson was beset with mental instability and what he called "The Horrors". He eventually took his own life.

Abby and Ludlow traveled the world, would occasionally perform with family members and were frequent visitors to Milford. They are responsible for making much needed improvements to the homestead on No. River Rd. Ludlow is credited with creating the wonderful scrapbook the Wadleigh Library owns.

This small history was written by Charlie Annand for a talk about the singers and their influence on both American music and the abolitionist movement.

The information is taken from the following references:

"The Story of the Hutchinsons" part I and part II by John W. Hutchinson

"Harps in The Wind" by Carol Brink

"Memories of a Busy Life" by Viola Hutchinson Campbell (John's daughter)

"A Brief Narrative of The Hutchinsons" by Joshua Hutchinson (John's brother)

"Excelsior" by Dale Cockrell (this book contains the entries of the family journal mostly recorded by Asa Hutchinson)

"Singing For Freedom" by Scott Gac

Hutchinson scrapbooks at the Wadleigh Library

Internet resources by Alan Lewis

