

This 19th century Philadelphia band leader was the first American musician to tour Europe. What was his name?

Answer: Francis "Frank" Johnson

Francis Johnson was a prolific music composer of the early 1800s in Philadelphia. Though little is known about his early life (early scholarship suggests he was born in Martinique, West Indies, though today it is believed he was born in Philadelphia), he was living in Philadelphia by the 1810s. In 1818, Johnson's *Collection of New Cotillions* was published and he was well-known in the city as the leader of a dance band/orchestra. Johnson performed at most major dance functions in Philadelphia in the 1820s and 1830s, and he organized a military band in 1824. He became famous for his skills on the violin and keyed bugle and for his dramatic performance style. Johnson's band was not the only group of successful African-American musicians in the city at that time, as bands led by Isaac Hazzard and James Hemmenway were also in demand.

Johnson achieved success not only as a band leader but he was also a prolific publisher of sheet music, having penned over two hundred pieces. Some of his compositions remained popular throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Additionally, he was one of the first African American musicians to tour Europe with a band and perform in integrated concerts. He also served as trumpeter of the 1st Troop, City Cavalry and as bandmaster of the 128th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry.

Johnson's performances were noted in the diary of Sidney George Fisher (Collection 1462) and the notebooks/diaries of [Samuel Breck \(Collection 1887\)](#) ^[1]. On February 15, 1828, Breck wrote of attending a ball at the Rush house on Chestnut Street, "Johnson, with five of his band, was there... The Black musician is a man of taste and even science in his vocation. He has organized a large Band, and gives lessons upon various instruments; and what is still more useful and certainly more singular, is the talent he has of turning every lively tune in the new operas to his purposes by adapting to it a Quadrille or Cotillion of his own composing."

Links

[1] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/findingaid1887breck.pdf