

J.R. (JOHNNY) MATLOCK

Born into slavery Johnny R. Matlock came to Australia in 1877 with C. B. Hicks Georgia Minstrels and remained for the rest of his life. During his career he was associated with Frank Smith, Frank M. Clark, J. Billin, Dan Tracey and the Cogill Brothers, and played a significant role in helping develop the skills of local artists. He operated his own troupe around Melbourne and nearby centres from the late 1890s. Following his death on 14 June 1904 his wife continued to tour the company up until at least 1915.

A highly regarded baritone and blackface comic, Johnny Matlock's involvement in the Australian variety industry between the late 1870s through until the late 1890s saw him become not only one of the country's leading minstrel artists of the era, but also one of its more influential. His professional entertainment career prior to coming to Australia was largely associated with Charles B. Hicks. In an interview with a New Zealand journalist held while he was on tour with the Georgia Minstrels, the comedian records that he had been born into slavery in 1839, becoming one of around 350 slaves on a cotton plantation in Franklin County, Tennessee. It was during that period of his life that he first came into contact with the style of entertainment that would influence the development of minstrelsy, watching as a young child the Saturday evening concerts put on by the slaves. He distinctly remembered the jubilee songs and plantation walk-rounds which were accompanied by musicians playing fiddles or banjos and assorted handmade instruments like tin cans, clappers, combs and the jawbones of mules. According to Matlock the jawbones made first class music by having the teeth loosened so that they rattled when shaken.

In 1848 Matlock was sold to a man who operated a livery stable in Tuscumbia, Alabama. When his master was appointed quarter-master of the Alabama Brigade following the outbreak of the Civil War, Matlock was forced to join him as his body servant, and at one stage was present at the Battle of Shilo. In 1862 he defected to a regiment of Illinois soldiers and two years later he made his way to Chicago where he managed to get an education. This led to him getting a job as a waiter at the city's Sherman House Hotel. In the interview he recalls what happened thereafter:

Being now very proud of my military knowledge, I resolved to form a zouave company of blacks, and I was helped by a young drummer [Taylor Brown] who had first come from Missouri, and who had been all through the war. So we set to work and soon got together a very respectable company of blacks. We had uniforms made for us, and got a good lot of musical instruments, and used to meet and drill at night in one of the local city halls. Bye and bye, when our band got on, we gave a "show" and cleared over 20 dollars the first night. We then used to show regularly once or twice a month... We used to give the old plantation scenes which were new to the Chicago people, and they patronized us liberally... We have now got along to the summer of 1864. Mr Hicks first arrived in Chicago this year in search of black talent to form a minstrel troupe... and I promised I would go with him. With the money I had made in the Zouave Company I was now able to go to a singing school, where I worked hard and tried to learn music... Mr Hicks then went along to Georgia... When Mr Hicks returned in 1865 we made a start – and that before the close of the war... Our new troupe gave its first performance, so far as I was concerned, in Chicago (Utting, "The Georgias", ctd. Bennett, 62).



Original Georgia Minstrels

Source: www.picturehistory.com

Matlock first came to Australia with Hicks' Original Georgia Minstrels in 1877. Although not the first American minstrel troupe to tour the Antipodes, the Georgia Minstrels were one of the first fully-Negro minstrel troupe to visit the region, beaten by a matter of months by another troupe which also called itself the Original Georgia Minstrels. The Hicks-led Georgia's was organised more along the lines of a traditional American minstrel troupe, however, comprising as it did more than 20 performers and musicians. The other company appears to have numbered less than a dozen members. Also in the Hicks' troupe were comedians Sam Keenan and Hosea Easton who like Matlock remained in the country after establishing themselves among the upper level of Australian-based performers. The three performers were with Hicks for only a brief period in Australia as he parted company with the troupe in 1879 in order to return to America. Richard Waterhouse surmises that Hicks' had found himself financial straits despite having established the New Georgia Minstrels as the most popular touring variety company during that two year period.¹

Some two years after ending their association with Hicks, Matlock and Keenan appeared with R. B. Lewis' Mastodon Coloured Minstrels (aka Mastodon Star Minstrels), undertaking tours throughout both Australia and New Zealand. Along with the traditional minstrel farce, the company presented a number of second half burlesques. One of the more popular subjects to spoof around that period was Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and so for their Sydney Opera House season the Mastodon company staged to much success *H.M.S. Pun-No-Fear* (21 May 1881). How long Matlock remained with Lewis' company is unclear, as are his whereabouts over the next two years. It is likely that he remained in the country for most of that time, however. In this respect he was typical of many foreign minstrels who saw better opportunities for career advancement in the smaller Australia market than might otherwise be on offer within the enormous American and British variety industries.

In 1885 Matlock appeared on the bill of Melbourne's People Concerts (beginning 5 Sept). By the end of the year he was under contract to Frank Smith at the Alhambra (Syd). Three years later joined Frank M. Clark's troupe at Sydney's Academy of Music. This engagement lasted until 1891, at which time he began a season at Melbourne's Victoria Hall under the high profile management of J. Billin. The following year Matlock accepted a contract with Dan Tracey at the Gaiety Theatre (Melb). This was followed by engagements with Cogill Brothers (1893) and Harry Barrington (1894). Among the key Australian artists he worked with during this period, and who in turn were to become leading and long-term figures in the variety industry, were: Harry Clay, Martyn Hagan and Lucy Fraser, Frank York, Ida Tauchert, Steve Adson, W. H. Speed, Edwin Shipp, W. B. Warner, Will Whitburn, Johnny Gilmore, Slade Murray and Harry and Katie Rickards.

With industrial conditions under threat from the depression, Matlock (like most of his peers) was forced to move around the country on a frequent basis around the mid-1890s, finding work with whomever and wherever it was offered. It appears, however, that by the mid-to-late 1890s he was able to base himself largely out of Melbourne. His name appears on bills with such organisations as Fred Fordham (1897), the Peoples Concerts (1897-99), Dan Barry (1898), and the St George's Hall Minstrels (1898-99). From around 1897/98 Matlock began operating his own company around the suburbs and outlying regions of Melbourne, and reportedly founded a series of concerts known as the "popular Pops" (WTC: 19 June 1909, 3). By the turn of the century, however, his health had begun to deteriorate, with reports indicating that he suffered from gout. On 14 June 1904 he passed away at his residence at 169 Park Street, South Melbourne, survived by his wife Louisa and son Ernest. A performer herself, Louisa Matlock continued to operate the company up until at least 1915. During that time it was known by various names, including the Elite and Mrs John Matlock's vaudeville Company. During her tenure as proprietor the troupe included a number of emerging performers who later went on to become industry stalwarts, including Joe Charles, Charles Whaite, Harry Legget, Grace Rooney and Tom Hedley.

¹ Richard Waterhouse provides an in-depth survey of Charles B. Hicks in "Antipodean Odyssey: Charles B. Hicks and the New Georgia Minstrels in Australia, 1877-1880." Hicks died in Surabaya in 1902.

S LOAN'S THEATRE,
DEE STREET.

LESSEE E. S. WOLFE
MANAGER R. B. LEWIS

GRAND MID-DAY PERFORMANCE,
To commence at 2.30.

NEW SONGS! NEW DANCES!

Last time of
H. M. S. P I N - A - 4.

Come and see your Sisters, Cousins, and Aunts!

HALF-PRICE ALL OVER THE HOUSE—
CHILDREN 6D.

TO-NIGHT !! TO-NIGHT!!!

The Last Appearance
OF THE
MASTODON STAR MINSTRELS
In our Last Grand Change of Programme.

Mr J. GILMORE in his character song—*Never
take the Horse Shoe from the Door.*

MORTON and CARTER in their double bones
solo.

LAST NIGHT OF THE BIG FOUR.

R. MOORE in his original farce—*WANTED A
NURSE.*

J. B. MATLOCK for the first time in his
character song—*"CRUEL SLAVERY
DAYS.*

PRICES of Admission—4s, 3s, 2s, and 1s.
Wm. Neilson, Business Manager. John
Dayton, Agent. 37

Southland Times 7 Jan. (1882), 3.

SEE ALSO

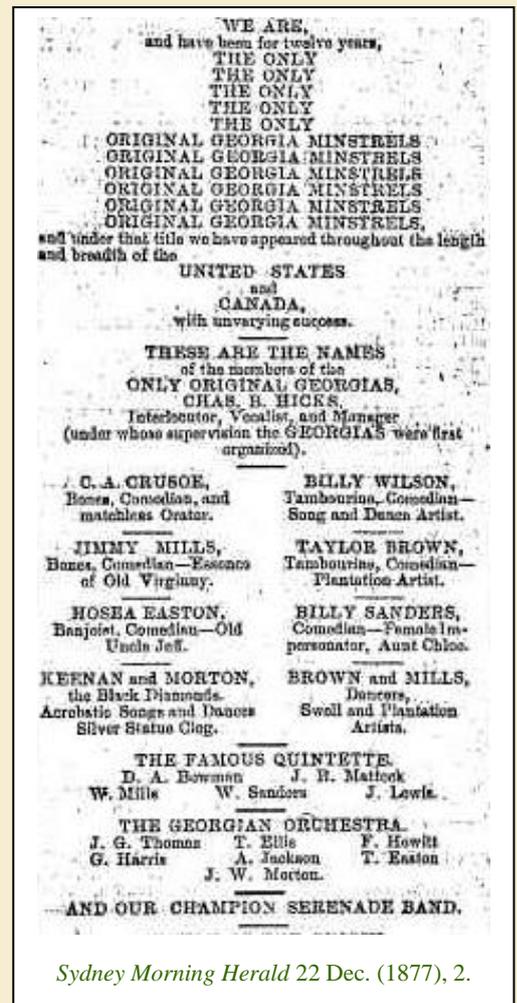
- [C. B. Hicks' Georgia Minstrels](#)
- [Sam Keenan](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. A death notice published in the Alexandra and Yea Standard, Gobur, Thornton and Acheron Express (17 June 1904, 2) records that Matlock was 57 when he died. He records in his 1877 interview with J. J. Utting, however, that he was born in 1839, making him 65 years.
2. *Australian Variety* erroneously records that Matlock was running his own suburban circuit in 1914 and does not indicate where (1 July 1914, 6). As noted above, the company was being run by his wife, Louisa.

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

- 1877:** [C. B. HICKS](#) New Zealand tour (ca. May-June * > Georgia Minstrels) • (Th Royal, Hobart; 30 July – 4 Aug. > Georgia Minstrels) • (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 10 Sept. -* > Georgia Minstrels) • (Queen's Hall, Syd; 22-31Dec.)
NB: New Zealand itinerary incl. Thames (ca. 23 May) • (Wellington (ca. June)
- 1878:** [C. B. HICKS](#) (Queen's Th, Syd; 1 Jan.-* > Georgia Minstrels) • (Princess's Th, Melb; 1 June -* > Georgia Minstrels)
- 1879:** [C. B. HICKS](#) (NZ tour; *See Richard Waterhouse (1986), 31* > Georgia Minstrels) • (Th Royal, Hobart; ca. Apr/May > Georgia Minstrels) • (Apollo Th, Melb; ca. May/June > Georgia Minstrels)
- 1881:** [R. B. LEWIS](#) (Op House, Syd; 21 May > Masterton Coloured Minstrels) • (Th Royal, Invercargill, NZ; 26-31 Dec.) •
- 1882:** [R. B. LEWIS](#) New Zealand tour (Jan. – ca. June * > Mastodon Star Minstrels).
NB: New Zealand itinerary incl. Invercargill (Sloan's Th; ca. Jan.*) • Auckland (ca. Feb.) • Dunedin (Princess Th; 31 Mar. - *) •
- 1883:** [PEOPLES' CONCERTS](#) (Temp Hall, Melb; 4 Aug.)
- 1885:** [PEOPLES' CONCERTS](#) (Temp Hall, Melb; 5 Sept.) ► [FRANK SMITH](#) (Alhambra MH, Syd; 9 Nov. / SJB Pav, Botany; 28 Nov.)
- 1886:** [FRANK SMITH](#) (SJB Pav, Botany; 2 Jan. -* / Alhambra MH, Syd; 9 Jan. - * > see also Mar. - June)
- 1888:** [F. M. CLARK](#) (A of M, Syd; ca. June - *)
- 1890:** [FRANK SMITH](#) (Alhambra MH, Syd; 15 Mar.- 9 Sept.) ► [J. S. SMITH](#) (Gaiety Th, Melb; 9 Sept. - * > Gaiety Burlesque Co and Slade Murray's Combination) ► [F. M. CLARK](#) (Gaiety Th, Melb; 22 Nov. – 31 Dec. > New Folly Co) ►
- 1891:** [F. M. CLARK](#) (Gaiety Th, Melb; 1 Jan. - * > New Folly Co) ► [J. BILLINS](#) (Vic Hall, Melb; ca. Mar.* > U.S. Minstrels) ► [F. M. CLARK](#) (Gaiety Th, Melb; ca. July, Dec. *)
- 1892:** [DAN TRACEY](#) (Gaiety Th, Melb; ca. Feb/Mar.) ► [COGILL BROS](#) (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 18 June -*)
- 1893:** [COGILL BROS](#) (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 1 Jan.-*)
- 1894:** n/e (Alhambra MH, Syd; 29 Sept. -* > Harry Barrington benefit) ► [HARRY BARRINGTON](#) (S of A Syd; 4 Aug. -*)
- 1895:** [SLADE MURRAY & PERCY ST JOHN](#) (Bijou Th, Adel; 2 Feb. - * > Empire Minstrel, Comedy & Burlesque Co)
- 1897:** [FRED FORDHAM](#) (New Empire Palace, Melb; 15 May -*)
- 1898:** [PEOPLES' CONCERTS](#) (Temp Hall, Melb; ca. Jan. – Mar.*) ► [DAN BARRY](#) (Alexandra Th, Melb; 9 Apr.- * > Dan Barry Dramatic Co) ► [PEOPLES' CONCERTS](#) (Temp Hall, Melb; ca. May - July) ► [A.T. RICHARDS & Co](#) (St Geo's Hall, Melb; 22 Oct.- ca. 12 Nov.* > St George's Minstrels) ► [AUSTRAL MINSTREL VARIETY Co](#) (Crystal Th, Broken Hill, NSW; ca. Dec.*)
- 1899:** [AUSTRAL MINSTREL VARIETY Co](#) (Crystal Th, Broken Hill; ca. Jan.*) ► [PEOPLES' CONCERTS](#) (Temp Hall, Melb; 4 Feb. - Oct, and also Dec.*)



NB: Between ca. 1897 and 1904 Matlock operated his own variety troupe on a fairly regular basis around Melbourne. More details regarding his company during this period are coming soon.

1900: PEOPLE'S CONCERTS (Temp Hall, Syd; 27 Jan. > See also Feb.-May / Aug.-Sept. / 22 Dec. "Reappearance")

1904-1915: LOUISA MATLOCK (Melbourne suburban circuit * > operates variously as the Elite Vaudeville Co and Mrs John Matlock's Vaudeville Co)

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay "J. R. Matlock." (2005), Appendix D.

Waterhouse, Richard. "Antipodean Odyssey." (1986), 19-39.

Utting, J. J. "Georgia's in Slavery, The." SAD: 14, 21, 28 July; 4 Aug. (1877), v. pags.

LOOK OUT!	LOOK OUT!!
NEW ARTISTS.	STAR ARTISTS.
Mrs. John Matlock's Vaudeville Company	
—:0:—	
MUSICAL MILLER'S, in their Instrumental Musical Sketch. JARVIS and CABELL, Comedy Jugglers and Novelty Experts. SAMUELLS SISTERS, in their famous Doll Duets. RUBY RAYMOND, Lightning Change Artist. MAY DAGMAR, Serio and Contortionist, and Others.	

Williamstown Chronicle 13 Apr. (1907), 2.

Last updated: 4/07/2013

Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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