

INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS: B

CHARLES BACKUS

[1855-1856, 1859-1860] During his lifetime Charlie Backus (1831-1883) achieved widespread fame as a minstrel comic, specializing in impersonations of prominent actors, and as the leader of several minstrel companies. Born in Rochester, New York, he moved to San Francisco in 1852 and after establishing himself there founded the first of his troupes, the Backus Original Minstrels. Backus took a re-organised company to Australia for six months (1855-56), and after returning home established another troupe, the Horn and Backus Minstrels. In 1859 Backus travelled back to Australia for a second tour, this time touring with his wife Julia H. Backus (aka Cleo Hudson, 1839-1873) and son (Master Backus). Their first known engagement was as headliners at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne in August 1859. By the end of the year the trio was touring with Professor Risley (Risley Troupe).¹ Interestingly, during an engagement in Eaglehawk (Victoria) in September, Backus was arrested by and charged with riding through the township in a dangerous manner. Backus admitted to the offence but pleaded his innocence, claiming that he had been unable to control the horse and was also unaware that it was an offence. The Police Court Bench was satisfied with his excuse and the charges were dropped.²

American Minstrel Show Collection, 1823-1947
Houghton Library, Harvard University



By 1861 Backus was back in San Francisco. In 1864 he co-founded the Birch, Wambold and Backus Minstrels, thereby beginning a professional association with Billy Birch that continued up until his death. Backus's marriage to Leo Hudson, also a noted equestrienne, ended in 1866. He subsequently married actress Kate Newton and later Tizzie Mason (1876). Backus died in New York City on 21 June 1883.

See also: **Backus Minstrels** [below]

Further Reference:

- Allson Brown, Col T. "Early History of Negro Minstrelsy," *The Clipper* (1912-1914). Also published as *Burnt Cork and Tambourines: A Source Book of Negro Minstrelsy* (2007) Available via *Circus Historical Society*. See "Backus (Charlie) Original Minstrels." [sighted 24/05/2014]
- Edward Le Roy Rice. *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date*. New York: Kenny, 1911, 70.
- Wittmann, Mathew. "Empire of Culture: U.S. Entertainers and the Making of the Pacific Circuit, 1850-1890." Ph D thesis, University of Michigan, 2010, 62-69. [sighted 10/9/2015]

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BACKUS MINSTRELS

aka **Bachus Minstrels**

[1855-1856] Although the Backus Minstrels' stay in the country was relatively brief, only six months, the troupe is nevertheless considered one of the most influential of the early minstrel companies to tour Australia. The nine member troupe was not only immensely popular with audiences and critics alike, and reportedly helped to create the "mania" for blackface entertainment, but also set the bar for the international and local minstrel companies that followed. Indeed, the Backus Minstrels are mentioned on numerous occasions in various Australian newspapers for upwards of a decade after the tour concluded.

Organized in San Francisco (USA) as the Backus Original Minstrels, the troupe appeared at the San Francisco Hall, Washington Street (between Montgomery and Kearney Streets) with C.D. Abbott (musical director); O.N. Burbank

¹ Edward Le Roy Rice records, too, that Charles Backus also appeared with Burton's Circus as a Negro clown around this same period (70). This is yet to be confirmed.

² "Bad Cast, A." *Bendigo Advertiser* 30 Sept. 1859, 2.

(stage manager), H. Donnelly, D.F. Boley, Charles Backus, J. N. White, and A. Morgan. In August the following year Backus re-organised the troupe in preparation for a tour of Australia. The company was subsequently given a benefit on 3 August by the San Francisco Minstrels (Metropolitan Theatre).

ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRE.
OPEN EVERY NIGHT.

THIS EVENING, 24TH JANUARY,
BENEFIT OF CHARLES BACKUS,
ALIAS OLD EPHRAIM.
GREAT ATTRACTION.
FIRST NIGHT OF MINSTRELS IN WHITE
FACES.

Nineteenth Appearance of the World-Renowned
BACKUS MINSTRELS,
The Largest and most Versatile Company in the
World! Consisting of the following talented and
experienced Performers: —

CHARLES BACKUS, JERRY BRYANT, D. F. BOLEY, O. N. BURBANK, NEIL BRYANT	S. C. CAMPBELL, W. M. BARKER, W. A. PORTER, A. MORGAN, C. D. ABBOTT,
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AND

Who have had the honour of appearing before the
élite and fashion in the principal cities throughout
the United States, South America, Mexico, Sandwich
Islands, the Colonies of New South Wales and Vic-
toria, respectfully announce to the Citizens of Hobart
Town and its vicinity that they will give a Series of
their unique and FASHIONABLE ENTERTAIN-
MENTS, introducing at each representation a variety
of NEW SONGS, DUETS, CHORUSES, DANCES,
BURLESQUES, &c. &c.

Courier (Hobart) 24 Jan. (1956), 2.

En route to Australia, the company received additional and unexpected publicity courtesy of fellow passenger Isaiah C. Woods, who departed America following the collapse of his company Adams and Co. Several reports relating to Woods also named the Backus Minstrels as fellow passengers.³ So much gossip had been reported about the affair that the ship's Captain, A.E. Arthur wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* to give his side of the story. In relation to the Backus Minstrels he writes: "It was also asserted that [Woods] was indebted to the Backus Minstrels to a large amount and that they would probably skin him. It is true that they suffered some by the house of Adams and Co's failure but whilst on board my ship they treated Mr Woods as a gentleman, as did everyone else on board."⁴

The Backus Minstrels opened at Sydney's Royal Victoria Theatre (then being leased by [Andrew Torning](#)) on 29 October 1855. The nine-member company comprised Charles Backus, C.A. Bryant⁵ (late of Rainer's Serenaders), W.M. Barker, A. Morgan, O.N. Burbank, S.C. Campbell, D.F. Boley, C.D. Abbott, W.A. Porter. Publicity for the season claimed that the "world-renowned" troupe had previously played engagements in the "principal cities of the United States, Mexico, South America and the Sandwich Islands," and that these had been attended by "the heads of government, Kings, Princes and principal families whose admiration of their talents were shown by the most flattering tokens of gratitude and affection." The advertisement goes on to record: "They bring with them all the new songs, dances, duets and burlesque

operas now in vogue. Also burlesques on the tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Damon and Pythias*, *Macbeth*, *The Stranger* and several others which have been written by one of their members and will be produced during their stay here."⁶ The company presented blackface minstrelsy, including a repertoire of farces, too. An *Empire* critic wrote of the company's debut Australian season:

The performances... excelled all that had been expected. Indeed it is impossible to speak too highly of their abilities in the delineation of negro character. Every member of the company was completely master of his particular part, which gave to the concerted pieces a harmony that greatly enhanced their individual merit, so much so that at the close it was impossible to say which portion of the programme yielded most amusement... The Minstrels are par excellence musicians, vocally and instrumentally.⁷

After concluding its Sydney season the Backus Minstrels opened in Melbourne [Olympic Theatre](#) (3 Dec.) for [George Coppin](#), followed by Hobart (2 Jan.), Launceston (1 Feb.) and then selected towns in regional Victoria, and brief return engagements in Melbourne and Sydney.

The company left Sydney for the USA on 5 April 1856, but not with its entire line-up. D.F. Boley and W.A. Porter remained behind, joining forces with former members of Rainer's Minstrels and the [New York Serenaders](#). The new troupe, which made its debut at a benefit in Sydney on 17 April became known as the [Ethiopian Serenaders](#). Several members of the Backus Minstrels also returned to Australia in 1860 as members of the [San Francisco Minstrels](#), while Charles Backus also returned in 1859.

See also: [Charles Backus](#) [above]

Further Reference:

Wittmann, Mathew. "[Empire of Culture: U.S. Entertainers and the Making of the Pacific Circuit, 1850-1890.](#)" Ph D thesis, University of Michigan, 2010, 62-69. [sighted 10/9/2015]

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³ "Departure of Isaiah C. Woods for Australia in the Ship Audubon." *Sydney Morning Herald* 26 Oct. 1855, 3.
⁴ Arthur, A. E. "To the Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*." *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 Oct. 1855, 5.
⁵ After returning to the US, Cornelius Bryant (aka Neil Bryant) co-founded Bryant's Minstrels with his brothers Dan and Jerry.
⁶ "Royal Victoria Theatre." *Empire* (Sydney) 5 Nov. 1855, 1. Advert.
⁷ "Victoria Theatre." *Empire* (Sydney) 31 Oct. 1855, 5.

WILKIE BARD

[1921] Eccentric British comedian and songwriter Wilkie Bard was born in Manchester, England on 19 March 1870. He began performing in his teens, making his professional debut in 1895 singing the cockney song "Never 'ave a Lodger for a Pal," and later developed an act that featured various comic representations. Arguably the best of these was the woman whose catchphrase was "I want to sing in the opera." Bard's usual stage make-up, a bald forehead and with large black posts painted over eye eyebrow, was also highly distinctive, and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century he had established himself as one Britain's favourite pantomime dames.

Bard recorded numerous songs during his career, with the earliest known release being in 1908. Among the numbers he is most associated with are: "I Want to Sing in Opera" and "The Night Watchman."

Bard's career was mostly carried out in Britain, but he nevertheless toured internationally on a number of occasions, including several visits to America. The first occurred in 1913, with later tours being undertaken in 1919 and 1923. His association with Australia began in the early 1900s when some of his songs, including "The German Bandsman,"⁸ started being performed by local and touring artists. Reports of his career also began to appear with increasing frequency over the course of the next two decades, with correspondence published in the *Australasian* in 1909 recording, for example: "The prime attraction [of *Dick Whittington*]... seems to be the advent of a new comedian, Mr Wilkie Bard. Mr Bard bids fair to step into the shoes of the ever lamented Dan Leno. The comedian's greatest effort is made in his song 'Sea-Shells.' Doubtless, its haunting melody and quaint fun will soon lead to its introduction into your hemisphere. It is an up-to-date version of the famous 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppercorns'."⁹



Source: Trav S.D. Travelanche



Harry Rickards tried to entice Bard to Australia in 1909 but was unsuccessful. Later attempts by other firms and entrepreneurs similarly failed until he finally relented in 1921, making his debut in the country at the Tivoli Theatre on 23 July under the direction of Harry G. Musgrove (Harry Rickards Tivoli Theatres Ltd). Not surprisingly the long delay in coming to Australia helped generate a huge amount of publicity throughout the country both leading up to and during the tour.

As the Widow Twanky in *Aladdin*
(1906 postcard)

Bard concluded his Sydney season of 72 consecutive appearances (each approximately an hour in length) on 2 September. He opened in Melbourne Tivoli eight days later, after first spending some time seeing the country. Although his Melbourne season appears to have been equally popular, continuing through until 20 October, Bard was quoted in several newspapers as saying that "Melbourne audiences [were] not spontaneous enough in applauding."¹⁰ The actual quotation came from one of Bard's final Melbourne performances, as Hobart's *Mercury* reports:

After the popular English comedian had given two numbers, "On Sentry Go" and "I Want to Sing in Opera," at the Tivoli matinee the other day, there was an insistent demand for more, and the longer Mr Wilkie Brad refrained from coming back, the more vigorously did the audience applaud. For some minutes there was a trial of persistence between the audience and Mr Wilkie Bard returned - not, however, to give another item, but to offer advice. "Look here Melbourne," he said, "you have got one fault, and as I am leaving for England in about a week's time I can tell you about it. You allow performers to retire to their rooms before you decide that you want extra items. When I walk off the stage it is with the feeling that you have had enough. You allow me to return to my room before you demonstrate that I am wrong in that belief." He asked to be excused from giving another item, and the audience, taken aback by the mild rebuke, had not recovered until the next turn was on (25 Oct. 1921, 3).¹¹

⁸ Mabel Batchelor sang the song at a Champion Band Contest and Art Union concert at the Sydney Town Hall on 25 January 1902.

⁹ "A Lady's Letter from London, 1 Jan." *Australasian* (Melbourne) 6 Feb. 1909, 48.

¹⁰ See for example "Dramatic Notes." *Australasian* (Melbourne) 22 Oct. 1921, 3.

¹¹ See also a response in "Editorial." *Argus* (Melbourne) 22 Oct. 1921, 7.

RICKARDS' TIVOLI THEATRE.
 Lenses, Harry Richards' Tivoli Theatre, Ltd.
 Gov. Director, Hugh D. McIntosh.
 DIRECTION HARRY G. MUSGROVE.

TO-DAY, TO-DAY, TO-DAY,
 AT THE MATINEE, AT 2,
 AT THE MATINEE, AT 2,
 AT THE MATINEE, AT 2,
 AND EVERY AFTERNOON AND NIGHT,
 AND EVERY AFTERNOON AND NIGHT,
 2 and 8.
 2 and 8.

THIS AFTERNOON! TO-NIGHT!
 THIS AFTERNOON! TO-NIGHT!
 HARRY G. MUSGROVE

presents
 WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD,

THE WORLD'S MASTER
 OF INSPIRED CHARACTER SONG.
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,

The Great!

He has prominence of place among the three or four unquestionably greatest character comedians in the world. He is the admitted peer of artists like Sir Harry Lauder and the amazing Mr. George Robey. He is an incomparable master of expression, an unique adept of humanity. It is only once or twice in a generation that one of these supreme artists in character song can be persuaded to leave London. Wilkie Bard comes to Australia in his prime, at the height of his powers. He can stay in Australia for a very short season, and it is well to book soon.

WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,

The Only!

He is famous in Australia before his opening. His name has been brought to us by thousands of enthusiastic Diggers. It has been familiar for years to all students of the theatre and readers of the critical European Press. It has been carried wherever the democratic gramophone has lifted its voice in town or wilderness. Wilkie Bard is a name familiar in remote wilds and frozen fastnesses thousands of miles from any theatre or newspaper. And the man himself is a vivid and compelling personality. He is a jester, a persifleur, a general philosopher, a wit, an unconscionable wag, a dexterous juggler with words; but with it all he is first and always a consummate artist.

WILKIE BARD, WILKIE BARD,
 TO-DAY AND EVERY DAY, AT 2 AND 8.

WILKIE BARD,
 WILKIE BARD,

Sydney Morning Herald 23 July (1921), 2.

Bard left Melbourne immediately after the close the season, arriving in Sydney on 22 October and sailed that same day for New Zealand, again under the management of Harry Musgrove. As with Australia the comedian was accorded much publicity and sold-out shows. The *Referee* (Sydney) records one New Zealand newspaper has suggesting that his Auckland engagement was the most important and interesting vaudeville season ever played in the city.¹²



MR. WILKIE BARD ON HIS ARRIVAL IN SYDNEY. ON HIS RIGHT IS MRS. WILKIE BARD AND ON THE LEFT HIS NIECE. INSET: MR. WILKIE BARD IN CHARACTER.

Sunday Times (Sydney) 24 July (1921), 3.

¹² "Ubique." "The Theatres: Reflections and Anticipations." *Referee* (Sydney) 9 Nov. 1921, 12.

Although Bard had not planned to return to Australia following the New Zealand tour he announced in late-November that arrangements with his agent for engagements back in England had recently concluded and he now found he had time to make a brief return visit. His first season was played in Sydney between 24 December and 13 January 1922. He then proceeded to Adelaide, playing the Theatre Royal from 21 January to 1 February, before making a tentative return to Melbourne. Despite their being some ill-will towards the comedian within certain quarters the engagement nevertheless lasted from 4 to 17 February, after which time he returned home. Later reports indicate that during his Australian tour Bard was paid some £400 a week, almost twice what he could command in England.

While Bard indicated in both British and Australian newspapers that he planned to come back to Australia at a later date, this never eventuated. He continued performing (mostly in England) up until his death from a coronary thrombosis in Buckinghamshire on 5 May 1944.

NB: Bard was married to fellow music hall artist Nellie Stratton (born Ellen Smith).

Further Reference:

"Came Triumphed: Wilkie Bard at Tivoli." *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 24 July 1921, 5.

"Talk with Wilkie Bard: Some Opinions and Some Memoires, A." *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 24 July 1921, 23.

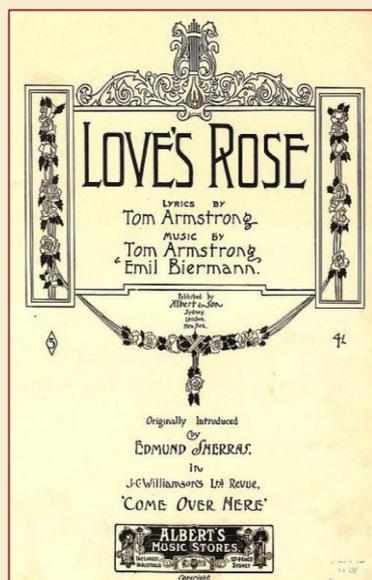
"Wilkie Bard. Famous English Comedian Here." *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 July 1921, 11.

"Wilkie Bard. Quiet Humorist Hits Hard." [sic] *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 July 1921, 4.

"Wilkie Bard Stories." *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 17 July 1921, 19.

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EMIL BIERMANN



[1913-1914] American composer and music director Emil Biermann was brought to Australia in 1913 by J.C. Williamson's to oversee the musical direction of *Come Over Here*, the first revue to be staged in the country. Prior to his engagement Biermann had reportedly written more than 500 songs and dirges.¹³ During his time in Australia he collaborated with several local writers and performers, including Tom Armstrong (Love's Rose") and Frank Dix ("Little Australia").

Biermann is believed to have remained in the country until late 1914, with one of his last engagements being as music director for Williamson's *Forty Thieves* pantomime (including its Australian interstate tour).

Source: National Library of Australia

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BLYTHE WATERLAND'S SERENADERS

[1850] The first minstrel troupe to come to Australia, Blythe Waterland's Serenaders gave their debut performance on 1 April 1850 at Sydney's Royal Hotel. Led by Henry Burton (aka Blythe Waterland) the line-up included Charles V. Howard, B. Howard, W. Reading, and Messrs George and James. After the Sydney season the troupe toured regional New South Wales through until ca. October, with the itinerary including Newcastle, Maitland, Singleton Windsor and Parramatta. After disbanding, some of the members remained in the country, performing in local troupes and providing lessons in minstrel entertainment and music.

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¹³ [no title] *Punch* (Melbourne) 5 Feb. 1914, 33.

ANNA BISHOP

[1856, 1868, 1875] Anna Bishop, often referred to as Madame Bishop or Madame Anna Bishop, was an operatic soprano who found much success touring the world, and became in the process one of the most widely travelled singers of the nineteenth century. She was born Anna Rivière in London on 9 January 1810, the daughter of a singing master and later studied piano under Ignaz Moscheles. She continued her studies at the Royal Academy of Music under Henry Bishop (1786-1855), making her professional London debut on 20 April 1831. She and Bishop, who was 23 year years her senior, married in July that same year, barely a month after his wife had died. Although they had three children the marriage was an unhappy one, and she eventually left him for a French harpist named Nicolas-Charles Bochsa (1789-1856). The affair was sensationally scandalous and forced Bishop to tour overseas for many years.

Bishop came to Australia three times, and in 1856 (her first tour) starred in a musical entertainment written especially for her. Titled *Anna Bishop in Australia: Or, A Soprano Sfogato*, the piece was likely a localised version of *Madam Anna Bishop in California*. The Australia version premiered at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Sydney on 5 February under the direction of [Andrew Torning](#). Bishop returned to Australia in 1868 and again in 1875, as part of her final world tour (1874-76).



Source: Wikipedia

Anna Bishop was highly regarded for her voice (often compared to a flute), for her beauty and for her elaborate costumes. In terms of her musical legacy she was very much at the forefront of popularising Italian opera around the world. She died in New York City in 1884 and is buried beside her son Augustus in St Paul's Lutheran Cemetery.

NB: Bishop and Nicholas-Charles Boschsa are said to have been George du Maurier's inspiration for Trilby and Svengali in his 1894 novel *Trilby*. They never married because Henry Bishop refused to divorce his wife. Bochsa died in Sydney in 1856, shortly after the couple arrived in the country. Bishop later married diamond merchant Martin Schulz.

Further Reference:

"Biography of Anna Bishop, the Celebrated Cantatrice." *Courier* (Hobart) 14 Jan. 1857, 3.

Davis, Richard. *Anna Bishop: The Adventures of an Intrepid Prima Donna*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1996.

"Madame Anna Bishop." *Argus* (Melbourne) 3 May 1884, 10.

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