

# From Rags Through Race to Ragtime: The influence of the Jenkins Orphanage band on race relations in the Jim Crow south

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## Introduction:

New Orleans is always credited as the birthplace of Jazz music, but research into other areas in America shows that there is a lot more to the story of the development of Jazz than most people realise. This research project on the Jenkins Orphanage Band from Charleston, South Carolina, examines how a largely unknown band affected race relations in the Jim Crow south, and the impact a city outside of New Orleans could have on music in the early twentieth century. The band was formed in the 1890s in an all-black orphanage set up by Reverend Daniel Jenkins. He taught the children to play music and they performed on streets around Charleston to raise money for the upkeep of the orphanage building. They soon became world famous and toured round North America and Europe up until the 1970s when they disbanded.



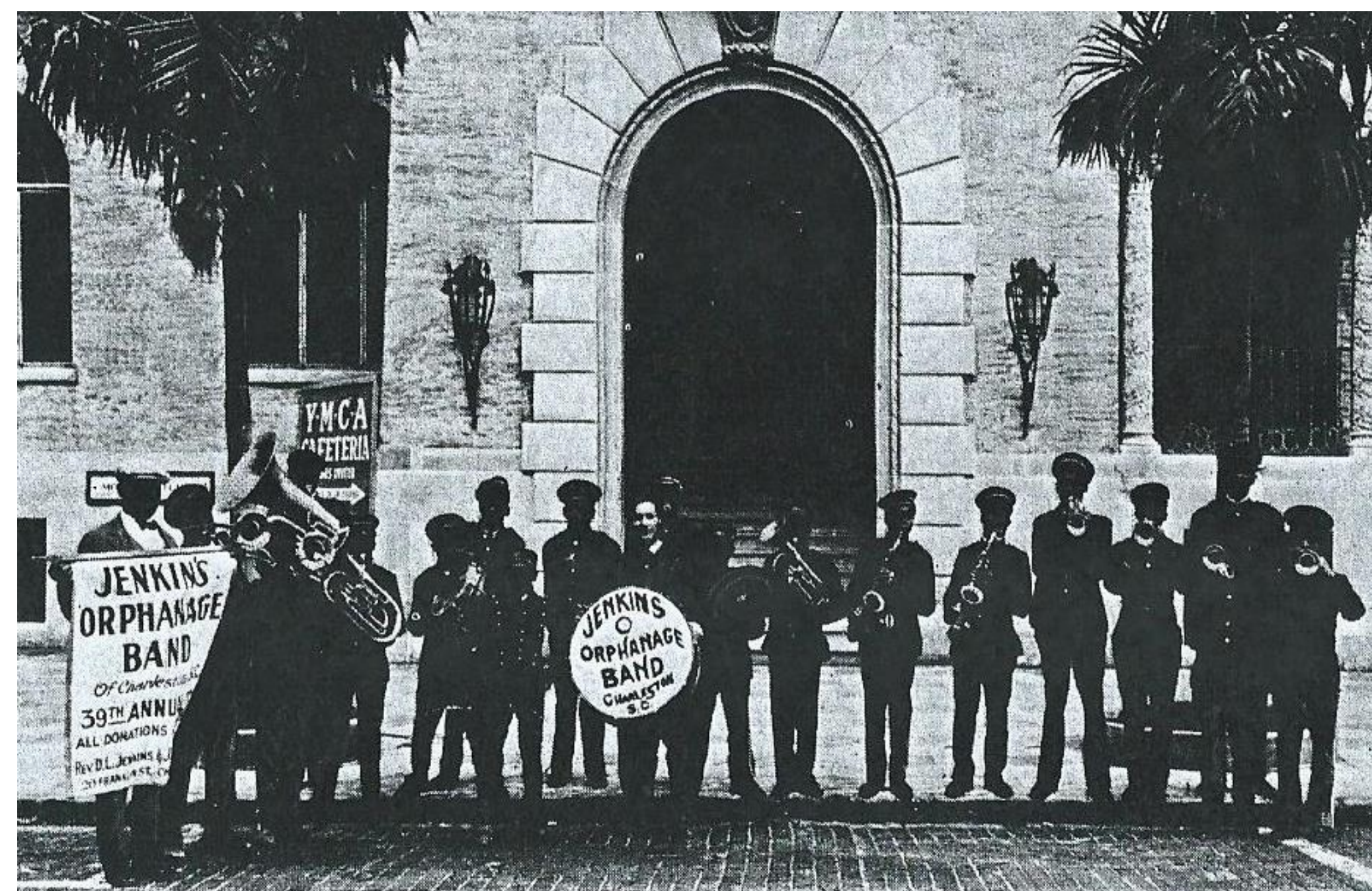
The Reverend Daniel J. Jenkins (Courtesy: Price Picture News)

## Aims:

- This project used the Jenkins Orphanage Band as a case study to examine the ethnic and economic profile of Jazz audiences and their attitudes to Jazz music, to try and assess how this musical form developed in the segregated environment of the 'Jim Crow' South, and was able to cross class and racial divisions among national audiences
- This research also looked at the influence that the band's particular syncopated rhythms had on music beyond the region of Charleston and South Carolina

## Conclusions:

- The Jenkins Orphanage band offered orphaned and destitute black children a home, an education, and the possibility of a career in music, as an alternative to prison or the chain gang which many others faced. This was at a time when many black people were unable to find work and were shunned from white society.
- The Jenkins Orphanage became renowned for the musical training of its children, and the bands' infusion of American music with African-derived techniques such as syncopation and improvisation are evidence of the emergence of swing in the 1890s: which has been rarely acknowledged as existing in western music before 1900.
- The children were presented in newspaper articles as 'little negros', 'starving' orphans, and 'black lambs', which encouraged donations, sympathy and charitable feelings in white and black readers that transcended traditional race relations.
- Many newspaper articles also promoted the idea that Reverend Jenkins prevented black children from being criminals by giving them a home and an education, and thus was helping and improving white society.



Photos (centre and above) courtesy of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

## Method:

- The research focused on primary material in archives in Charleston, South Carolina, and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.
- The sources consisted of photographic material (some of which are shown here), newspaper articles, and original files of the orphanage that include correspondences, donation receipts, bills, expenditures, and information on grants and funds, as well as files on every child who ever lived in the orphanage.

## Future research:

- This research has uncovered many previously unknown aspects of the Jenkins orphanage bands' legacy on Jazz music.
- Charleston had a very important and overlooked role in the development of Jazz music, and the city had a unique swung sound which inspired the creation of the 'Charleston' dance and other Jazz songs. There is evidence here to challenge the widely accepted notion that New Orleans is the birthplace of Jazz. This is an area that would benefit from further research.
- An article on this research aimed at History Today is planned to be written up in 2016.