
Good Medicine and Good Music:

The Virtual Life of Mrs. Joe Person at East Carolina University

by *David Hursh*

Alice Person, known during her life as Mrs. Joe Person, was a woman ahead of her time. Professional musician, patent medicine entrepreneur, women's rights advocate — all are appropriate titles for this colorful North Carolinian. The convergence of several occurrences in Alice's life led her to earn these titles at a time when such activities on the part of a woman were looked at askance. Today, however, Alice's unique life is being celebrated through a digital exhibit hosted by East Carolina University's Joyner Library.

A Life Out of the Ordinary

Born and raised in Petersburg, Virginia, Alice relocated to Franklin County, North Carolina, after her December 1857 marriage to Joseph Arrington Person, a member of a wealthy central North Carolina family. A few years later, the couple's happy life was abruptly interrupted when Joseph's debilitating stroke and the Civil War surrender of the South to the North left them with no way to support their young family. For several years, the couple provided for their growing family by selling the land that Joseph was unable to farm. During this time, one of their young daughters became ill with scrofula, a type of tuberculosis that was common before milk was pasteurized. On the night that the local physician gave up hope for the child's survival, a neighbor woman came by to offer help in the form of a remedy that was given to her father by an old Indian. Alice was skeptical, but could see no harm in trying the medicine if it offered any hope at all of saving her child. Alice and her neighbor gathered the ingredients from the woods, prepared a batch of the concoction, and gave it to the child throughout the night. By morning, the child's condition had improved, and in three weeks she was cured. As her family's land and money slowly dwindled, Alice continued to prepare the remedy and share it with friends who were ill, never ceasing to be amazed by its ability to cure any number of health problems.¹

Alice's faith in the remedy soon became a calling; one which also offered a cure for her family's ailing financial situation. With this in mind she began her mission by marketing the remedy in the nearby city of Raleigh. Though she met with some resistance from the Raleigh medical community, Alice persisted and headed for Charlotte, Tarboro, and other North Carolina cities. With time, the remedy proved itself and attracted a faithful following of satisfied customers. The promise of quick profits also attracted several unscrupulous investors and partners. Though it was not easy, Alice was always

able to pull herself out of these situations and maintain the remedy's solid reputation.²

As with her remedy, Alice felt a strong devotion to the power of music.



Photograph of Alice Person which appears on the cover of Louise Stephenson's 1971 typescript of Alice's unpublished book.

She initially viewed her piano playing as something for the enjoyment of her family and friends. However, a visit to the Raleigh Exposition, predecessor to the North Carolina State Fair, transformed it into much more. While there, some of Alice's friends asked her to play a few of her infectious southern tunes on one of the pianos on display at a piano dealer's exhibit. She did, and soon attracted a large gathering of fair-goers. The piano dealer was so delighted by the attention she brought to his display that he hired her to play at future exhibits. This opportunity led to similar engagements in cities like Atlanta and Dallas, to name but a few. Eventually people asked Alice to publish her arrangements so they could play them at home. She did, and delighted in the fact that she now had three friends that brought her near to the people while adding to her income — her remedy, her playing, and her music.³ Alice continued to produce and market the remedy along with her piano playing and sheet music until the age of 70, thus becoming known for her "good medicine and good music" throughout the South.⁴

The Exhibit's Genesis

The concept for a digital exhibit on Alice's life had its origins in the September 2000 donation of two pieces of Alice's published music to the ECU Music Library by ECU alumnus and great, great grandson of Alice Person, Harry Stubbs. As I examined the well-used, century-old sheets, Stubbs related to me snippets of the composer's colorful life. My curiosity was peaked, so in the days that followed Stubbs' visit I did some research on Alice. I was delighted to find that she had been given some attention in the published literature, and that her papers were part of the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I could not, however, find any indication of efforts to preserve the tangible results of Alice's musical activity — the pieces donated by Stubbs. I hoped to fill that gap by preserving and cataloging these pieces for the benefit of future generations.

My interest in his grandmother's music spurred Stubbs to arrange dinner with his cousin and Alice's great granddaughter, Mrs. Louise Scott Stephenson. At our dinner I learned that Stephenson had donated Alice's papers to the Southern Historical Collection, and also that she had in 1971 produced a typescript of the handwritten manuscript of Alice's unpublished book, a copy of which she presented to me for addition to the music library's collection. Stephenson verified my findings with regard to the lack of attention to Alice's published music, and was pleased to learn of my desire to preserve her cousin's donation. We also discussed the possibility of a lecture recital featuring Alice's music on the ECU campus. She was certain there were more pieces that should be included in such an event, and set about to locate them. Before she could complete the task of rounding up the stray pieces of music, Stephenson passed away. When Stubbs informed me of her death, he apologized for the fact that our plans with regard to a recital had been for naught. I suggested that perhaps they were not. What better tribute to a great lady and champion of Alice Person's memory than to dedicate an Alice Person digital exhibit and opening lecture recital to Louise?

Serendipity played a role in the development of the exhibit. Just a few months after my dinner with Stephenson, I mentioned Stubbs's donation to the Friends of Joyner Library board at one of their monthly luncheon meetings. After the meeting, board member Franceine Perry Reese shared with me

the fact that not only was she a native of Franklin County, the county in which Alice Person resided for the better part of her life, she was by marriage a distant relative of Alice's. Several weeks later, Reese brought me a folder full of invaluable information about Alice, her home, and her family. This information was used either directly in the creation of the exhibit, or it led to the discovery of other important facts, articles, and pictures that added much to the exhibit's quality.

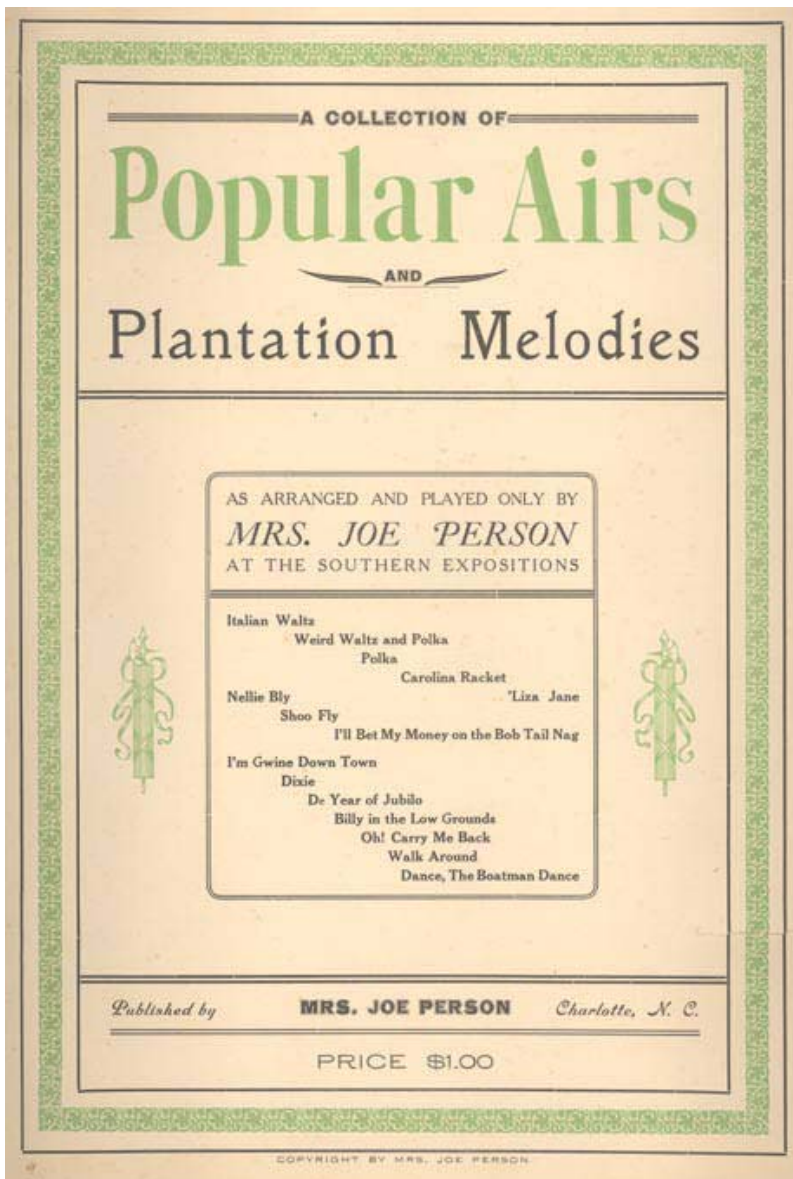
The Exhibit

The exhibit, titled *Alice Person: Good Medicine and Good Music* and located at <http://www.lib.ecu.edu/digital/music/person/>, is the first musical digital exhibit to be hosted by Joyner Library. While the exhibit focuses on Alice's music, it includes information on all aspects of her life because her musical endeavors were closely tied to her other activities. The exhibit is divided into three parts: (1) Music, (2) Medicine, and (3) More.

The "Music" portion features the digitized versions of the two sheet music compositions donated by Alice's great, great grandson. The first is titled *A Collection of Popular Airs and Plantation Melodies* and consists of Alice's piano arrangements of fifteen folk tunes, both popular and rare. The second is titled *A Transcription of the Beautiful Song "The Blue Alsatian Mountains"* and contains two other folk tune piano arrangements in addition to the title song. Links from the digitized version of each piece allow the exhibit visitor to hear the music they see in front of them as interpreted by Dr. Charles Bath, Chair of the Keyboard Department at the ECU School of Music. This section also includes a scholarly article on the first collection of pieces, press releases from the cities in which Alice performed, and her ponderings on the value of music.

The three subsections of the "Medicine" portion of the exhibit provide information on the birthplace of the remedy, the story of the remedy, and the marketing of the remedy. The house in which Alice first produced her remedy still stands in Franklin County, and because Alice married into a prominent family, it is historically significant. The exhibit contains several articles about the structure. The story of the remedy could only be told by the one who lived it. For this reason, this part of the exhibit contains the digitized version of Alice's unpublished book *The Chivalry of Man, as Exemplified in the Life of Mrs. Joe Person*. Though Alice planned to publish it, she never did. Fortunately, her great granddaughter created a typescript of

the handwritten manuscript titled "Banny's Book." Banny, a British term of endearment for a grandmother, was the family name for Alice. The last subsection of the "Medicine" portion of the exhibit features several digitized advertisements illustrating Alice's creative marketing techniques. The final part of the exhibit contains Alice's lengthy obituary as well as several articles about her life.



ECU's digitized version of the cover of the sheet music for Alice's Collection of Popular Airs and Plantation Melodies.

The Opening of the Exhibit

The digital exhibit opened on March 12, 2004, at 7:00 p.m. with a lecture recital in Fletcher Recital Hall on the ECU campus. The guest lecturer was Dr. Chris Goertzen, Ethnomusicologist and Associate Professor of Music History at the University of Southern Mississippi. Goertzen shared his published research on Alice's adaptations of early blackface minstrel and southern folk tunes. Dr. Charles Bath, Professor of Piano at ECU, assisted Goertzen by playing excerpts of Alice's music to demonstrate the concepts on which Goertzen lectured. The event concluded with a reception at which guests had the opportunity to view a "live" exhibit of the original documents featured in the digital exhibit, as well as some of the antique bottles that at one time held Alice's remedy.



From left to right: Joanne and Charles Bath, the author, and Chris Goertzen pause during the reception for a picture with what could be the last unopened bottle of Alice's remedy.

In her unpublished book, Alice wrote fondly of one of her "knights," a Mr. John Baseler, for the kindness he showed her by

transcribing the musical notes in her head to paper free of charge, while she repeatedly played them for more than two days straight.⁵ With the assistance of modern technology, ECU's Joyner Library has picked up Baseler's gauntlet and once again "transcribed" Alice's music into a format that will allow it to live on long after its printed pages have crumbled.

References

¹ Alice Person, "Banny's Book," ed. by Louise Stephenson (Raleigh, 1971), 1-4.

² *Ibid.*, 5-46.

³ *Ibid.*, 48-51.

⁴ N.G. Terry, Jr., "Mrs. Person, Medicine Maker, Recalled Here," *Halifax (VA) Record-Advertiser*, 30 Mar. 1972; "Spring Blossoms," *Greenville (NC) Daily Reflector*, 21 Mar. 1898. The phrase "good medicine and good music" was chosen for the title of the exhibit because it was coined in the local newspaper of Greenville, home of ECU, where the exhibit is located.

⁵ Person, "Banny's Book," 51.

Selected Bibliography

Goertzen, Chris. "Mrs. Joe Person's Popular Airs: Early Blackface Minstrel Tunes in Oral Tradition." *Ethnomusicology* 35 (Winter 1991): 31-53.

Pearce, T.H. *Early Architecture of Franklin County II*. Freeman, SD: Pine Hill Press, 1988.

_____. "The Persistence of Mrs. Joe Person." *The State* 54 (Oct. 1986): 22-24.

Person, Alice. "Banny's Book." Ed. by Louise Stephenson. Raleigh, 1971.

_____. *A Collection of Popular Airs and Plantation Melodies*. Kittrell, NC: Alice Person, 1889.

_____. *A Transcription of the Beautiful Song "The Blue Alsatian Mountains," Also "Down Town Girls" and "Boatman Dance."* Kittrell, NC: Alice Person, 1889.