

Mattie Belding - cornet soloist and cowgirl

Gavin Holman, 4 April 2026

Mattie (Martha M.) Belding was born around 1862. It is assumed that her family was of German origin, as her father was said to be Edward Belding, who had been at the Conservatory of Music, in Berlin, Germany.

On 14th October 1880, Mattie was presented with a C.G. Conn “Full Bore Vocal” model cornet, at Kohl & Middleton's West Side Museum, Chicago, Illinois. It is not known what prompted this, but it was probably related to her progress as a cornet soloist under the direction of her father.

Mattie first appeared on the theatre circuit with her “*Lady Brass Band*”, touring from autumn 1884 to January 1885. The band consisted of Mattie Belding, Cora Goodwin, Mollie Wells, Lillie Irwin, Maud St Clair, Jennie Martindale, Lula Weston, and Professor Edward Belding (Mattie’s father).



Mattie with her many medals, c. 1885

In April 1885, she was performing alone as a cornet soloist and a “*character change artist*”. By May 1885 she had put together a new group, “*Mattie Belding’s Lady Minstrels*”. She was also advertising, in the Buffalo press, for young ladies with good voices.

Her next appearance is in February 1886, at the Adelphi Theatre, Buffalo, NY, with “*Mattie Belding’s Female Brass Band*.” She toured with the band to many other locations, including Nashville, Tennessee. In May 1886, she appeared as a solo cornet artist at the Apollo Theatre in Evansville, Indiana. She returned to perform in Nashville in October 1886, and at the Bijou Theatre in Zanesville, Ohio, in January 1887.

During the autumn touring season Mattie met and worked with A.O. (Alexander Oscar) Babel, the “*Famous Cowboy Pianist*”. In early 1887 Mattie and Alexander married. Mattie started to perform as a duo with Babel.

On 13 March 1887, at Austin & Stone’s Theatre, Boston, the Babel’s performed as part of a large cowboy-themed spectacular. Which culminated in an actual wedding on 15 March - that of of Buckskin Bill (William B. Grover) and Bertie Gray, for which Mattie served as a bridesmaid. It was noted that she was recently married to A.O. Babel. The report of the wedding gave details of their outfits:

“She [Mattie] was dressed in cream satin with red satin front, adorned with white passementerie silk lace. She also wore a number of diamond ornaments, and had on her bosom a dainty bouquet of natural flowers. Mr Babel was himself dressed in the usual cowboy fashion, with blue satin hand-embroidered shirt and leather leggings. The medals which Mrs Babel wore were numerous, and were rewards for excellent cornet playing received in Memphis, Elkhart, Ind., Buffalo, N.Y., and other places, while her husband also wore some medals, two of which had been received in Boston, one in New York, one in Providence, and some in other cities, all for excellence, as a cowboy, in piano playing.”¹

At the Eden Musee, in Indianapolis, Indiana, with the opening of its new attraction, the ‘New Theatrum’, in April 1887, Mattie appeared on the bill as a cornet soloist with A.O. Babel, as part of his ‘comedy company’.



Mattie and A.O. Babel

In May 1887, appearing at Springfield, Ohio, Mattie was described as:

“the most famous cornetist in the country, perhaps in the world. Don’t fail to see her \$1,000 cornet, presented to her by the Prince of Wales. Her triple tonguing echo effects are revelations.”²

The troupe continued their touring, reaching Cleveland, Ohio in late June 1887. Mattie continued to use her Belding name during the first half of 1887, reverting to

¹ The Boston Globe, 16 March 1887

² Springfield News, 18 May 1887

Babel thereafter, working as a double act with her husband as well as performing separate acts.



Mattie was presented with a gold cornet, valued at \$850, by G.C. Conn of Elkhart, Indiana, in October 1887.

A.O. Babel, himself, was born in 1858, at Seguin, Texas, to Amandus and Amalia Babel, both immigrants from Prussia. In 1880 he was playing piano at the Solo Saloon on Congress Street, Houston, Texas. By 1885 he had re-invented himself as the ‘*Cowboy Pianist*’ and his performances created a sensation in Chicago, where he was heralded as a “*musical prodigy*.” He was hailed as a piano master who played more than 1,200 songs and even performed at times with a cloth over the keys. After appearing at the Steinway Hall in New York, it was reported:

“His wrists are of spring-steel, and his fingers like unto the comb of a musical box. His octave playing is beyond all doubt the most extraordinary we have ever heard. His chromatic scale playing is like the rippling waters, and his staccato like the dropping of crystals.”³

The pair continued to tour across the eastern and mid-western states, Canada, and also undertook a tour to Europe.

³ New York Mirror, 11 March 1886

They made their home in Randolph, New York, where Alexander joined several local fraternal organizations. The pair were listed in the 1892 census there as Alexander O. Babel, and Martha M. Babel - both musicians.



Their last known appearance as a duo was on Monday 18 November 1895, at Elizabethtown, Kentucky. Alexander became ill shortly after this and died in Randolph on January 19, 1896.

A 'dime novel' was published around 1890 - *Life of A. O. Babel, The Famous Original Texas Cowboy and Pianist* - Dick Publishing House, New York – which sensationalised many of the details of his life.

Mattie's life after Babel's death is not known. She does not appear to have continued her cornet solo performances – or at least not under any recognisable name.



A.O. Babel playing on an organ

A. O. BABEL,

THE FAMOUS TEXAS COWBOY PIANIST.

His execution is marvelous, he is a perfect master of the piano; he composes and improvises; his repertoire contains over 3,000 selections; his execution has never been excelled; his playing is entirely by instinct and sound; he has never received any instruction in music; words fail to do him justice.

MATTIE BABEL,

THE CHAMPION LADY CORNET SOLOIST.

She is a thorough musician; her education has all been self-acquired; she produces softer, sweeter tones than any other player; Mattie Babel uses a gold cornet costing \$3,300. Mr. Babel wears the American medal for piano.



LIFE OF A. O. BABEL



THE ORIGINAL AND FAMOUS TEXAS COWBOY PIANIST.

DICK PUBLISHING HOUSE
12 EAST WINGARDINE ST.

This is a vintage advertisement for a book. At the top, the title "LIFE OF A. O. BABEL" is written in a large, stylized, serif font. Below the title is a framed portrait of a man with a thick mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white bow tie. Underneath the portrait, the text "THE ORIGINAL AND FAMOUS TEXAS COWBOY PIANIST." is written in a bold, blocky font. At the bottom of the advertisement, the publisher's name "DICK PUBLISHING HOUSE" and address "12 EAST WINGARDINE ST." are printed in a smaller font.

