# The Famed Distin Family

*The New York Times 1881 and 1882*

After the close of the regular evening concert in a certain up-town ”garden” a few nights since, a couple of weary reporters, who were indemnifying themselves with rest and beer for the beat and burden of their busy day, heard with some surprise the breaking forth of a new burst of music from a single instrument - a ”melody horn”- from which flowed a rapid succession of full, round, and beautiful tones, instantaneously followed by an echo effect repeating these tones seemingly at a great distance, but as clearly and purely as if from nature’s own mysterious answering voice.

The numerous visitors still lingering in the fast darkening hall or on their way to the door, broke forth into hearty applause. Again, and again were sounded out with charming skill runs, flourishes, signal-calls, and snatches of familiar melodies, each followed by that exquisitely delicate and perfect echo. The only persons present who were not delighted were the sleepy waiters, and even they were almost charmed into amiability. Enquiry developed the fact that the maker of the music was the famous Henry Distin, who was taking that opportunity to exhibit to a couple of professional friends the capabilities of a new attachment for cornets and horns which he has just invented, the first completed model of which was that he was trying on the ”melody horn.”

And that reminded one of the reporters that Henry Distin is one of the last surviving members of one of the most talented and famous musical families upon record-a family the name of which three-quarters of a century ago was a household word throughout Europe, the members of which were, for their art, favourites with a fine-assorted lot of sovereigns, and who were intimately connected with the progress of musical art in this country more than 30 years ago.

There is a gentleman up in Westchester County who possesses a blue and white Nottingham ware mug for which Col. Kane has vainly offered $50. By and by it will be worth ten times that amount in the valuation of antiquarian collectors of pottery. Its five faces represent in alto-relievo excellent portraits of John Distin and his four sons, the famous horn quintet. Already those mugs, once very common in England, have begun to be marked down by collectors as ”curious and rare,” and, so far as is known, there are only two of them in this country-one in the hands of the gentleman who values it at more than $50, and the other in the hands of Henry Distin, to whom it is beyond price.

Henry Distin is now 62 years old, but as active, energetic, and purposeful as most men of 40, with a memory of details, dates, and names through all his long public career which is simply overwhelming. Hunting him up the next day after that supplemental concert, and getting him started talking, the reporter obtained the following interesting story.

“My father, John Distin, was born in 1798, in Plympton, Devonshire, England. At 11 years of age, he, accompanied by a brother two years younger, appeared in public in a flute duet at a concert given by the band of the South Devon Militia, and not only achieved a great popular success, but so impressed the band-master of the regiment that he obtained their enlistment as band-boys under his instruction. Two years later, John’s ability as a performer on the chromatic trumpet was already a matter of public fame, and at the age of 14 he played first trumpet in a performance of the Dettingen Te Deum at a grand musical festival in Exeter so successfully that he was presented with £10 as a reward. That sum, which was a fortune for a boy of his age, indirectly cheated him out of the honour of being the inventor of the keyed bugle and came near losing his life.

Just about that time the regimental band with which he was connected was supplied with new bugles and, in the work of testing them, to which John Distin was assigned by the Band-master, he found one through which a hole had been punched by the careless driving

of a nail in the box inclosing them. That hole gave another note. Stopping it with his finger, he made the instrument sound like all the others. That accidentally discovered note suggested to him an idea.

The old bugles of the band were auctioned off, and he, purchasing one of them, set to work cutting holes in it, and fitting them with corks to find new notes. Only one member of the band, named John Tucker, was taken into his confidence. Guy Fawkes day, an anniversary then celebrated with much explosive demonstration, was drawing near, and some of the band-boys who had picked up a lot of blank cartridges after a review, appealed to John as a capitalist-in virtue of that gift of £10-to buy two pounds of powder and join them in getting up a quantity of squibs and other fire-works for the celebration. He did so. While they were all at work making their squibs, a mischievous boy touched off a cartridge, which exploded all the rest of the powder almost under Distin's nose, and injured him so severely that he was laid up for three months in the hospital.

When he was convalescing, John Tucker came to him and said "Ah, I am so sorry, John, but an Irishman named Halliday, has got ahead of you on your invention while you have been laid up. He has produced a three-keyed bugle, which has been highly approved of by the Duke of Kent, and it is already making a great effect as the 'Kent bugle.'"

The boy's disappointment was very keen, but he subsequently earned some distinction for himself by adding two more key to the Kent bugle, making a new instrument as far ahead of Halliday's as that, when invented, was an improvement upon the common field bugle, and this perfected instrument was christened the 'Royal Kent bugle.'

"After the completion of his term of seven years' apprenticeship to the South Devon Band-master, John Distin went up to London and enlisted for a term of seven years in the Grenadier Guards band, and there achieved much fame as a performer on his improved bugle, which was still an unknown instrument upon the Continent.

When the allied armies entered Paris after the battle of Waterloo, the band of the British Grenadier Guards was in the great column of soldiers that marched in review before the grand stand where the Duke of Wellington, the Grand Duke Constantine of Russia, and several members of the French royal family were.

The Grand Duke Constantine, who had a keen ear for music, appreciated highly the fine playing of the Guards band, but was especially impressed with, and had his most lively curiosity awakened by, the keyed bugle played by John Distin and caused the player and his instrument to be brought before him.

Distin could talk neither Russian nor French, so, to act as interpreter for him, took along to the august presence one of two colored time-beaters, dressed in gorgeous Oriental costume, who were a novel feature of the band.

The colored man was quite an intelligent fellow, who spoke French well, and through him the Grand Duke carried on an animated and protracted talk with Distin about the new instrument, at the close of which he desired that one should be procured for him.

This Distin was fortunately able to effect, and the Grand Duke ordered one of his attendants to pay for it and also to make the bugler a handsome present.

Then, taxing his English, his Highness said: "I go tomorrow to Russia." Shaking hands warmly with Distin, and afterward shaking the colored man's hand also.

Free at length of military duty after the expiration of the seven years of his enlistment, John Distin settled down in London, playing in concerts, teaching the trumpet and bugle, and assuming new cares as a family man, when, by special invitation of the Duke of Kent, at the

instance of his Majesty George IV., he became a member of the private band of the King at the Court at Windsor as trumpet-player and solo bugle-player, a position which he held, enjoying especial favour of the King, until the Monarch's death.

But when William IV ascended the throne-although it is affirmed that upon his death-bed the old King said to him, "Take care always of my old servants, especially of my band," and he faithfully promised to so do-an order was issued for the immediate discharge of the band, which numbered 60 men.

That was in 1829. So mean was the new regime that the members of the band were called upon to give up their uniforms, which were very gorgeous and costly. The coats were heavy with solid gold lace in such quantity that they had cost 75 guineas each. John Distin rebelled against that order and counselled his comrades to resist it. 'We have been shamefully treated,' said he, 'for not only hath the King, in violation of his word caused our sudden discharge, but he hath made no provision for us by pension or otherwise, and, to some of us at least, this is a great hardship. Let us stand together and refuse to give up the coats. If they tear them from us we will appeal to the justice and sympathy of the people of England, which will be worth to us more than many golden coats.'

The Lord Chamberlain not only withdrew the demand for the coats, but, in lieu of a pension, caused the members of the band to be paid from £250 to £500 each, according to their years of service, and so stopped the scandal which John Distin was already organizing of public concerts by the ex-royal band, (which the old King had never allowed to be heard in public.)

Distin sold the gold from his coat for 25 guineas.

Having embarked his second and third sons, Henry and William, in a musical career under the best auspices-Lord Westmoreland having assumed all the expenses of their education in the Royal Academy of Music-and put his eldest son, George, upon trial to the jeweller's trade, John Distin thought to settle down in London, but in six months became weary of the fatigues of London life, accepted the position of Band-master for the Marquis of Breadalbane, at Loch Tay, in the Highlands of Scotland, and proposed to his boys that they should all accompany him there, a proposition which they gladly accepted.

While in that position, at Taymouth Castle, he organized the famous horn quintet of himself and sons, which was destined to in a short time achieve a world-wide fame. The first public appearance of the quintet was at the Adelphi Theatre, Edinburgh, where they went for one night, and so took the public by storm that they were retained, by successive engagements for six weeks, becoming finally the recipients of a complimentary banquet tendered them by the press and leading public men of the city.

Thence they travelled through all the principal towns of Scotland, giving concerts, down to Liverpool, and thence to Birmingham, where Mr Distin met with an accident so severe as to disable him for two months. Then they resumed their concert tour, going to Bath, and finally back to London. That was in 1837. While giving concerts in Willis's rooms Mr Distin was called upon to perform the duties of principal trumpeter at the coronation of Queen Victoria, a duty which he had discharged when William IV ascended the throne.

"In 1844, after seven years of highly successful concert-giving throughout the United Kingdom, the Distin quintet went to Paris. As a little illustration of the difference between the prices musical artists commanded then on the Continent and what they get now, it is worthy of mention that the Distins were glad to get an engagement at a Paris theatre, for one month, seven performances per week, for 3,000 f., equivalent to about $25 per week each.

Henry Distin was by that time desirous of settling down in London as a manufacturer of brass musical instruments, and with a view to that and employed all his spare time going about with an interpreter among all the makers of Paris, seeing their instruments and

learning all he could about their manufacture.

After the engagement at the theatres was over the quintet played one night at a grand concert given by a famous singer, upon which occasion they heard for the first time a new instrument called the 'saxophone,' played by a French artist.

'What is that?' demanded Henry, struck at once by the remarkable purity and sweetness of tone of the new instrument. 'Oh, that don't amount to anything,' replied the interpreter. 'It is some new-fangled thing gotten up by a little manufacturer whom I have not thought worthy of introduction to your notice.' 'Yes! Well we will go to him early tomorrow morning; the first thing,' ordered Distin.

When he saw Mr. Sax he found that that 'little manufacturer,' who has since achieved such world-wide celebrity as to overshadow all who were then his rivals, had only completed three instruments as models-a soprano E, contralto B flat, and alto Eb-and had not yet any for sale.

Henry Distin made an arrangement for the loan of the three a sort of enthusiasm. Mr. Sax readily agreed to complete the necessary instruments, on the same principle, for the quintet, and as soon as sufficient practice in their use had been attained they were brought out in public. The first time they were so performed upon was in a grand concert at the Opera Comique, given by Mr. Berlioz, the famous composer. The quintet then played a selection from 'Robert le Diable,' upon saxophones in such style that they were engaged to perform at the Conservatoire, and by the committee of that institution were awarded a silver medal.

From that time the Continental tour of the Distins was a succession of triumphs. The press lauded them; the public were enthusiastic in their plaudits; Louis Philippe, presented them with a set of solid silver saxophones; the Société des Beaux Arts awarded them a silver medal; they had an engagement of three months at Baden-Baden; the Grand Duke had them give private concerts at Carlsruhe, and supplied them with an autograph letter of recommendation to Queen Victoria.

When they returned to England they had a huge volume of letters of compliment, endorsements, and commendation from the most prominent men of that day.

That volume Mr. Henry Distin still retains and even the chirography upon its pages is interesting. What an abominable hand the great composer Meyebeer wrote on April 3, 1846. He used a broad-nibbed pen, bore down hard on it, never allowed a curve where he could work in an angle and in a general way seemed to add new terrors to the awful German language. Looking at the signature, we find why he saved out all the curves from the body of the letter. He needed them all to put into the preposterous spiral spring of a flourish which surrounds his name. J. Strauss, Kapellmeister of the Grand Duke of Baden, made almost as bad a looking page. Almost every letter was made to stand separate from its fellows and those on the ends of words had to support the weight of big, ridiculous flourishes every here and there. The signature is open to grave suspicions that it is written in Greek.

Lord Westmoreland, the English Ambassador at Berlin in 1846, wrote a rapid, but exceedingly accurate, hand, rather dainty for a statesman without any shading, very small letters, and finished off his signature with a straight little dash under the name, as if he had been marking it up for italics. Herr Weiprecht, conductor of the military music of Prussia, wrote a round, flowing hand, with many flourishes, upon which he bore down earnestly as if with some vague idea of originality in emphasis. George Muller, one of the most famous of Germany's players of brass, wrote a hand that looked like copper-plate in the accuracy of its formation of letters and perfection of shading. J. B. Arban, the celebrated composer, though his letter is of a much later date, no further back than 1864, is represented in this book, and appears to have turned out the most lady-like bit of chirography in the lot.

To continue the story: the Continental reputation of the Distin quintet preceded them to England, and upon their return to their native country they were engaged to play repeatedly before the Queen at Windsor Castle, the Duke of Norfolk at Arundel Castle, the Duke of Buckingham at Stow Palace, the Duchess of Kent &c. Upon one of those occasions they performed a piece especially composed for them by Prince Albert, whom they represent as a skilful musician and most courteous gentleman.

After another triumphant tour through the United Kingdom they re-crossed to the Continent, renewed their successes there, and arranged with Mr. Sax for their sale of his instruments in London, where they returned in 1846.

In April 1848, George Distin, the eldest of the brothers, died. For several months they did not perform in public, and never again did the Distins appear as a quintet. They could not bear to replace the lost brother by a stranger, and to suit their altered conditions reconstructed all their music for a quartet.

In 1848 they accepted an offer of $12,500, for 40 concerts in the old Park Theatre, New-York, took a farewell benefit concert at the Theatre Royal, Drury-Lane, which netted them £500- a splendid result to a single performance in those days – and after a tempestuous ocean voyage arrived in New-York on Jan. 1st 1849, only to learn that the Park Theatre had been destroyed by fire, and that they were out of an engagement.

That was but the beginning of a series of misfortunes which seemed to cling to them as long as they were in this country, not to the injury of their great artistic reputation, but to the exceeding damage of their anticipated financial success.

They made arrangements for a concert tour of the United States, and had give one concert in Boston, for which they received $500, when all further proceedings were stopped by Henry Distin contracting a violent quinsy, which laid him up at the Astor House for three months and came near to taking his life.

In April, he had so far recovered that they could set out upon the projected concert tour, but the time lost had carried them onto Spring; their route, which had been made up for Winter, was toward the South, and day after day found them advancing to more and more tropical heats, quite beyond anything in their experience or anticipation, and in the face of a great, and to them novel , terror – the cholera.

They played in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Norfolk, Richmond and Petersburg. But by that time they had reached where the cholera prevailed to such an alarming extent that people had no thought of public amusements; reports met them constantly that the dreadful epidemic was worse yet further southward, and they determined to give up their purpose of visiting New-Orleans and return to New-York.

Messrs. French and Heiser had just then fitted up Castle Garden as a grand concert hall and engaged the Distins for a series of concerts there. Their first one, given to an audience of several thousand people, was an unqualified success. The public accepted them enthusiastically, and the press gave them the highest praise. One paper said: “They do not play upon the old horns, but upon a lovely instrument invented by an M. Sax, and called after the inventor. The tone is exquisite, and when the different qualities are combined, they produce the most delicious and ravishing harmony.”

From that it would seem that the Distins were the first to introduce the Saxophone to American knowledge, and such is, indeed, said to be the fact.

The critic continued: “The Distins are perfect masters of the instruments; they have sought and learned the very heart of their mystery and they manage them with the most admirable tact. It is impossible to find fault with their performance, but we might fill a column in their

praise. They exhibit in all they do the most refined taste; they throw into their playing deep feeling and beautiful expression, and they never fail in any passage whatsoever, as is the case with most brass instrument players. In short, they exhibit the greatest possible perfection in their art, and the instruments which are the vehicles of their expression are of a character to delight and fascinate all who listen to them."

The welcome accorded to the Distins by the professional musicians prominent here in those days was as cordial as that given by the press and people. Allen and Harvey B. Dodworth, George Loder, Maretzek, Bochsa, and many others, proved themselves warm friends. Genial old John Brougham, then in his prime, was also one of their most enthusiastic admirers and supporters. All looked flourishing for them, when suddenly, before they could give their second concert at Castle Garden, the Forrest-Macready riot broke forth and all public amusements were for a time suspended.

Canada was the next field in which the Distins tried their fortunes and there, too, fate seemed against them at the outset, for immediately after they had scored one grand success in Montreal the concert hall was burned down before they could appear a second time, and there was no other place there in which they could give a concert. At Kingston, Toronto, Hamilton, and other Canadian towns, however, they were very successful, and then they again turned their faces towards the United States, in the early part of the month of September.

The breaking down of a stage-coach in which they were journeying to the little village of Port Stanley, where they expected to take steam-boat for Buffalo, landing them in that unpromising place at 10 o'clock at night, four hours after the boat had gone. The only inn in the place had no more beds than were required for the accommodation of the proprietor and his family, so that the travelers had to sleep as they best could upon chairs in the parlor.

Under such circumstances, it is not strange that Henry Distin was up and out very early the next morning, almost with the dawn, but, early as it was, he found a cheery blacksmith already at work shoeing a horse. The farrier said that he was an Englishman, from Worcester, and was very glad he had come to America, as he could make more money in a day in this country than in a month in England. When he learned that the person with whom he was talking was one of the famous Distin family whom he had heard play in England, he insisted that they should abandon their intention of going to Buffalo that night, and give a concert in Port Stanley instead. Distin protested that the town did not look as if it had 40 inhabitants; that even if it had there was no time to print and publish announcements; that there was no place to give a concert in, &c. But the music-loving farrier had an answer for everything. They could play in a big empty barn near at hand, which would be fitted up with benches during the day by the half-dozen men he had at work making wagons; he would answer for making the event known in good time without any printing, and, finally, he would guarantee $50, enough, at least, to pay their expenses, if they would stop and play. The Distins consented to do so.

In a little while they were surprised at hearing criers starting out through the town and on all the country roads round about, ringing hand-bells and proclaiming: "Oyez! Oyez! Hear ye! Hear ye! There will be a concert to-night at the big barn by the celebrated Distin family."

By 6 o'clock that evening the farmers and their families began flocking in. The barn was packed to its utmost capacity, the auditors wild with delight, the performers pleased with their reception and disposed to do their best, and when the house was counted the net profits were found to be $75.

After giving a number of concerts in Albany, Boston, and New-York, the Distins returned to Liverpool at the end of November, and early in the year following Henry Distin set himself up in London as a manufacturer of brass musical instruments. In a few months he had 20 workmen employed, a force which not long afterwards to 85. The growth of his business was

phenomenal.

At first he only made mouthpieces, and Levy relates that when a boy he learnt to form his lip for cornet playing by practicing on a mouthpiece which another boy in Dustin's employ stole and gave to him.

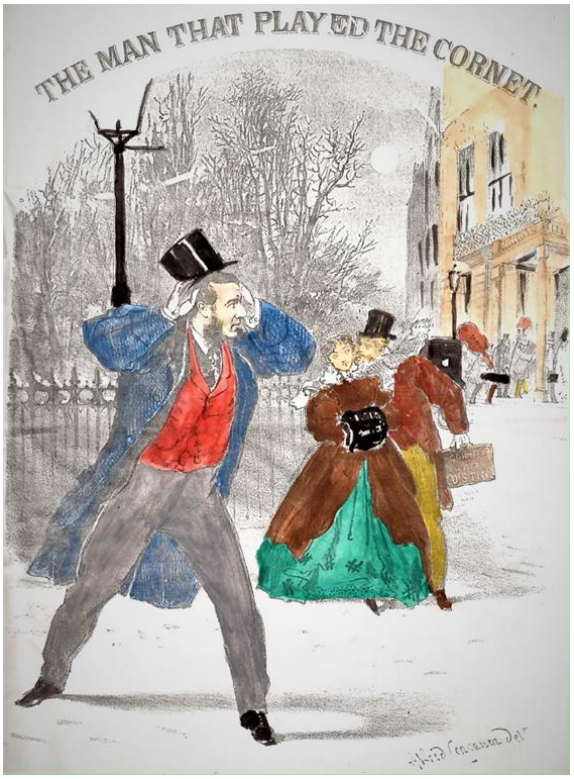
In 1862, at the World's Exposition in Paris, Henry Distin was awarded the prize medal over all his English competitors for the perfection of his instruments.

In 1868 he sold out his manufacturing business for £9,700, and imagined that he could retire from business, settle down, and rest. That, however, was just what a man of his active temperament could not do.

In a short time he lost $1,000 by an unsuccessful concert speculation on a gigantic scale at the great Agricultural Hall, London, and shortly after, by indorsement for a friend, lost $33,000, so that he found himself when past middle age muleted of the savings of his long years of hard work, almost as poor as he had been 30 years before, compelled to commence life over again, and handicapped with an agreement, entered into in the sale of his business, not to engage in manufacturing again within 100 miles of London. In this emergency an evil fate tempted him to try keeping a hotel in Antwerp, Belgium, and that finished his resources so completely that he had to borrow money from one of his own waiters to get back to London.

From that time on for a number of years Mr. Distin had a lively succession of varied experiences familiarly known as "ups and downs" of fortune, at one time the salaried employee of a manufacturer, at another clearing £1,000 in a few months by a patented improvement on an American invention, now sick and penniless in a hospital, and again getting up successfully a grand military musical festival at the Alexandra Palace, at which 10 military bands were assigned to assist by personal favor of his Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge.

Finally, he came over to this country, having fully resolved to make this his home for the remainder of his days, and went to work here in New York manufacturing his famous light-valve cornets, which are universally conceded to be the best in the world.




"But is there enough demand for brass musical instruments in this country to make much of a business in their manufacture here?" Mr. Distin was asked by the writer. "Why, do you know," he replied, "there are no less than 15,000 bands in this country, brass bands, averaging 10 or 12 members each. Accept the lower number as a basis of calculation, and you have 150,000 performers. That is a great body to supply." "But can we compete in points of quality and cheapness here with the European makers?" "Why not? The best brass in the world, that which first-class instrument makers use, all comes from this country. The perfection of mechanical appliances here is an offset to the greater cheapness of manual labour on the other side of the water. As for quality, the best evidence about that is that I am called upon to supply the finest class of instruments which is used by the first players in Europe. And the taste for brass band music is constantly growing in this country. Do you know that more music for brass bands is now published in this country than in France,

Germany, and England together?  Well, it is a fact, I assure you."

# HISTORY OF THE DISTIN FAMILY SINCE 1798.

*Geo. F. Distin.* *Henry Distin.* *John Distin.* *Theo. Distin.* *William Distin.*

## THE CELEBRATED DISTIN SAX-HORN QUINTETTE.

**Performed before the great Composer, MEYERBEER, who wrote the following letter:**

I never heard such a pure, sure, tender touch with the treatment of the Sax-Horn, which is so difficult, like that of the Messrs. Distin. ıut I also mention, with the highest acknowledgment, the noble style of their delivery, and the ensemble in their playing together. The xtraordinary applause with which they were met everywhere is perfectly justified by the great mastership of their production.

BERLIN, April 3d, 1846. G. MEYERBEER.

**ınd performed on six different occasions before QUEEN VICTORIA, who ordered the following Letter to be given to Mr. Distin:**

Colonel Sir George Cowper is commanded by Her Highness, the Duchess of Kent, to transmit the inclosed letters of recommendation ɔf Mr. Distin, to Louis Philippe, to the King of the Belgians, to the King of Hanover, to the Grand Duke of Saxe Coburg, to the Grand ɔuke of Saxe Meiningen, and the Grand Duke of Baden.

FROGMORE HOUSE, November 10th, 1845.

Henry Distin

**CELEBRATED Performer on the Melody Horn and Inventor of the New Solo Cornet.**

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*Henry Distin*

the Celebrated Performer on the Melody Horn and Inventor of the New Solo Bb Cornet.

*Wm. A. Distin,*

the famous Cornet Soloist and Foreman of the Manufactory.

Extract from the Philadelphia "Press," Monday, February 25th, 1884, the Journalists' "*Club Night.*"

One of the events of the evening was the introduction of a horn by Henry Distin, the celebrated Cornet manufacturer. It was the Melody Horn with an echo attachment. This he has invented to take the place of the French Horn, or to be used in addition to it. It is rightly named, for if there ever came a soft, mellow note from Brass, surely the Melody Horn produces it.

All Letters and Inquiries to be sent to

## Henry Distin, 819 Tasker Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

John C. Hess, Printer, 420 Library St., Philadelphia, Pa.


The Distin Family.