

The Three Vagrants

The Three Vagrants were a musical group performing on the vaudeville circuit in the US from approximately 1908-1928. During that period, they performed under other names such as the "Bergamasco Trio" and "Three Bohemians" and with different personnel. Beginning in about 1920, there may have been a hiatus with the group. At about that time, the principal of the group, John Bergamasco, was apparently performing with his daughters, Lena and Josephine, both of whom played the accordion. The sisters may have had their own act as well.

John Bergamasco was born on January 15, 1879 in Vercelli, Italy. He died in 1931, apparently due to the effects of hypertension. His father and mother are unknown but records indicate that there were many Bergamascos residing in Vercelli at that time. John was married to Maddalena Conti, who was born May 24, 1880, whereabouts unknown and died June 14, 1962. Maddalena's mother and father were Gaetano Conti and Rose Bracchi. John and Maddalena had at least two children, Pierina (Lena) born July 1, 1903 in Vercelli and died October 18, 1995 and Giuseppina (Josephine) who was born March 27, 1905 and died December 15, 1966. A third child is rumored but there is no information to verify her existence other than an obscure photograph evidently taken in Italy.



This picture, apparently taken in Italy, is supposedly of Maddalena Bergamasco and a young girl thought to be a third daughter of the family who died. No information exists to verify that assumption. The girl appears in no other photographs.

Photographs taken of the family in Italy indicate that they were able to afford expensive clothing and professional photography. John was trained as a musician, perhaps in the operatic tradition but also as a guitar player. There is no information available about his early performing career.



Photograph taken in Vercelli in 1906 showing John, Maddalena, Pierina and Giuseppina. There are other photographs of the family and the girls from that time period.



Photograph showing John in costume playing the guitar. The date of the photograph is unknown but it probably was taken in Italy sometime before 1905.

The first evidence of the existence of a group that would become the Three Vagrants is a picture with a notation on the back listing "John Bergamasco, baritone, Johh Oddone, accordion and Angelo Mignella, clarinet." The picture was taken in New York City on October 27, 1908.



è stata questa fotografia
il New York City.
il Ottobre 22. 1908.
Dai Signori
John. Bergamasco
Baritono
John. Oddone, armonidista
e Angelo Mignella
Prof. di Clarinetto

First picture (top) and documented reference (back of photograph) describing the members of the group that would be known as "The Three Vagrants".

There is a note about the group appearing on the vaudeville stage in "The Evening News" (city unknown, but in California) on October 20, 1909. A picture of the group accompanied the note. On October 31, 1909, the following article appeared in the San Francisco Call:



On April 25, 1910, a newspaper review indicated that the group played at the Keith's Theater in Boston.

These dates are of some historical interest. Guido Deiro claimed to be the first person to introduce the piano-accordion to the vaudeville stage in February 1909 (<http://guidodeiro.com/>). He is acknowledged as one of the most renowned musicians of that era. There is no information available to determine whether or not he and the Three Vagrants had a dispute about who first introduced the instrument to the stage. His website acknowledges the existence of the Three Vagrants and notes that they had made records.

John played a "harp guitar" made for him by Gaetano Puntolillo, a well-known guitar maker of the time. Harp guitar aficionados have identified it as "Majestic" guitar. The harp guitar was probably an unusual instrument for the vaudeville stage. John also played the banjo, six-string classical guitar and possibly the mandolin.



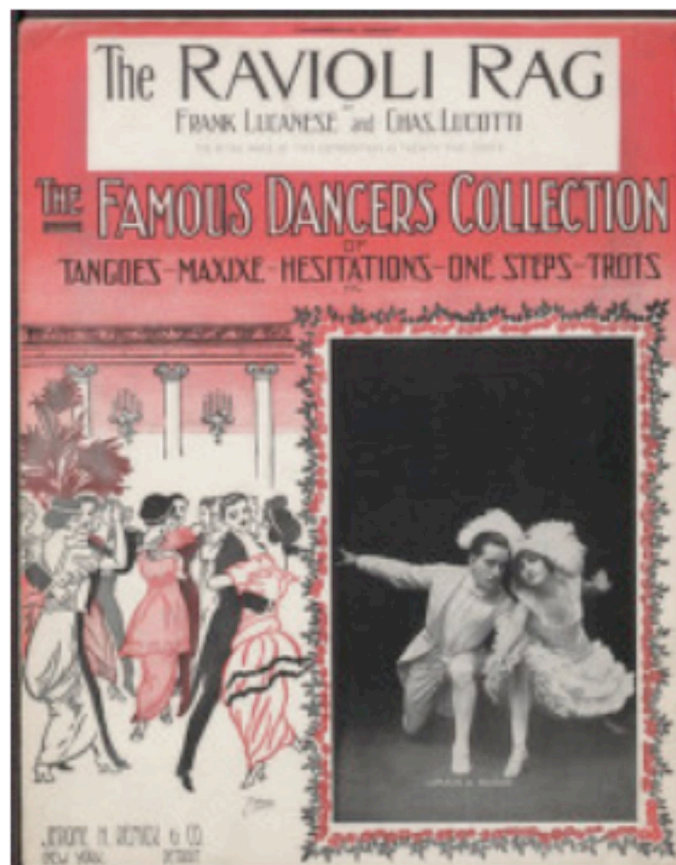
John pictured with his Majestic harp guitar and with Frank Lucanese and his piano accordion. Date of photograph is unknown but prior to 1921.

During the early years of the group's touring in the US, Maddalena, Lena and Josephine were still in Italy, although Ellis Island records indicate that at least Maddalena made at least one trip to the US in 1911. The three immigrated to the US on May 17, 1913, arriving at Ellis Island from Le Havre on the ship the La Provence. Immigration records indicate that their US residence was Silver Lake, N.Y., a resort town. Records further indicate that Maddalena left behind at least a brother named Ferdinando who lived in Vercelli.

There are no records of John Bergamasco ever arriving at Ellis Island.

John kept a clipping file of newspaper reviews of the group for the period of 1912 to 1917. The file is fairly complete for 1912-1914, has no entries from 1914-1915, only one entry for 1916 and several entries for the period of September-October 1917. Other than these clippings, the only readily accessible newspaper reviews of the group were from 1909, 1910, 1926 and 1927. There is a picture of the group in the Yearbook of Vaudeville Musicians in 1928 that shows Josephine on the accordion dressed as a man. Josephine also appeared on a piece of sheet music titled "Are You Making a Fool of Me", published in 1927. On it, her name is given as "Josephine Masco with the Three Vagrants".

The composition of the group after 1908 is uncertain. As of 1912, it apparently consisted of John, Charley Lucotti on violin and Frank Lucanese (Nick Lucas' brother) on accordion. It is unknown how long John Oddone was with the group or when he left it. Angelo Mignella apparently re-joined the group at some time because he is listed as a member on recording sessions that were held after 1916. Frank Lucanese was responsible for at least some of the group's repertoire. In 1914, he and Charley Lucotti published sheet music for a song called the "Ravioli Rag".





The Three Vagrants photographed sometime around 1913.

Newspaper reviews indicate that the group played the Keith Vaudeville Circuit. From 1912-1914 they toured throughout the US, playing as headliners in some venues. Reviews were generally favorable:

January 1912 Garrick Theater, Wilmington, SC, The Evening Journal

“The Bergamasco Trio came near proving the hit of the bill with a musical number of genuine interest. One of the trio made quite a hit with some of the popular airs.”

“The Bergamasco Trio offers a musical number that came very near proving the hit of the bill at the opening matinee and again last evening. It is an Italian sketch and the harmony of the trio is very, very pleasing.”

January 30, 1912 Opera House, Bayonne, NJ, The Evening Review

"The Three Bohemians open the bill and are eccentric vocalists and instrumentalists. Their work is artistic and an excellent rendition of the intermezzo from "Cavaleria Rusticana" won a deserved recall."

October 1912, Colonial Theater, Richmond, VA, The Times Dispatch

"The Three Bohemians, all men, present one of the cleverest and most entertaining musical acts of the season. One whistles in birdlike tones, sings pleasingly, and plays a double-barreled guitar (Bergamasco); another plays the violin instead of scraping it and the third is a mad genius with an accordion equipped with the keyboard of a piano. Together, they make music as musicians do whether they play "Il Trovatore" or "That Mellow Melody".

October 15, 1912, Colonial Theater, Richmond, VA, The News Leader

"Three Bohemians, appearing as three Italian strolling players, showed what good music well rendered will do. There is a remarkable robust tenor soloist in the trio (Bergamasco), singing operatic beauties. There is also a violinist whose tonal effects are entrancing, and also one fellow playing a piano-accordion in such a masterful manner and covering such a wide field that he scored a tremendous hit. All in all, this is one of the best musical acts ever offered here.

November 15, 1912, Grand Theater, Macon, GA, The Macon Daily Telegraph

"All Macon will flock to Grand today-last chance to hear Three Bohemians"

"The Three Bohemians "The Strolling Musicians", voted as best musical act ever seen in Macon, in addition to their regular act as heard yesterday and Thursday will put on a couple of extra numbers, both rag and classic, for the benefit of the ladies and children at the matinee this afternoon."

"There is no other act at the Grand Theater in Keith vaudeville this week that alone is worth seeing. Even if you do not care for the other acts, this particular number will please. The act is the Strolling Bohemians, three musicians who can certainly play. One handles a guitar, another performs classically on the violin and the third makes a new-fangled accordion do all kinds of musical stunts. This accordion playing alone is a headliner but the other two performers are artists themselves. And the man with the guitar can also sing; there's no doubt about that. His tenor voice was heard to superb advantage in the "Misere" from "Il Trovatore" and he also rendered "When I Get You Alone Tonight" acceptably."

January 21, 1913, The Majestic, Elmira, NY, Elmira Star-Gazette

“The Three Bohemians, extraordinarily talented in a musical way, present a finished act, introduced in the guise of street musicians. The instrumentalists play the guitar, violin and piano-accordion, the latter instrument costing \$400. Mr. Bergamasco’s voice of power and quality is heard to advantage in several numbers.

“The latest airs, including “Dramatic Rag”, “You’re My Baby”, “Uncle Joe”, “Bumble Bee” and “Mello Melody” are played on the piano-accordion so delightfully that the audience can scarcely keep from joining in the songs and the applause last evening was the greatest heard in the Majestic in many weeks.”

August 25, 1913, Orpheum Theater, Duluth, MN, The Duluth News Tribune

“If applause is a proper basis of criticism, the Three Bohemians, street musicians and singers, are the feature of the Orpheum offering this week. Their repertoire of swinging melodies played on a guitar, violin and accordion, took complete possession of the audience last night, applause was deafening and persistent and numerous encores were necessary. Listening to the trio imposes no nervous strain or intellectual hypocrisy on their hearers, who abandon themselves to “ The Trail of the Lonesome Pine,” and “When that Midnight Choo Choo leaves for Alabam.” The violinist understands just how to coax strains from his instrument, and the accordion makes one want to come back again.”

April 14, 1914, Colonial Theater, Erie, PA, The Erie Daily Times

“Three Bohemians have a fine act.”

“The act given by the Three Bohemians was liked so well that they completely stopped the show and goes to show that Erie theater patrons like good music with a dash of high class comedy. These strolling musicians who play violin, guitar and harmonica are harmony experts, and not only play the popular music but also the classics.”



RKO Keith's Palace vaudeville theater, city and date unknown. Undoubtedly taken when vaudeville was in its declining years.


Reviews indicate that the group's repertoire included both classical and popular songs, instrumental and vocal.



The Three Vagrants photographed sometime around 1917 with Angelo Mignella re-joining the group on clarinet. He was a member of the group during their recording sessions between 1916-1920.

A review of Variety issues for the period of 1906-1928 disclosed numerous references to both the Three Vagrants and the Three Bohemians. During those years, Variety provided listings of vaudeville acts occurring throughout the country often accompanied by terse comments such as “good”, “adequate”, etc. Consequently, although there are many references to the group, there are very few substantive comments about their performances. The first record of them was on March 14, 1908 performing at Paster’s Theater, presumably in New York. Another notable mention was a reference to the group playing the Palace in New York as an opening act in March 1927. On October 1, 1920, the Three Bohemians played the Palace in New Orleans. The group consisted of “two pretty girls (Josephine and Lena) and their father”. This was the only reference found to the girls. In 1913 an advertisement placed by John Oddone indicated that he was soloing and had “formerly been with the Three Vagrants”.

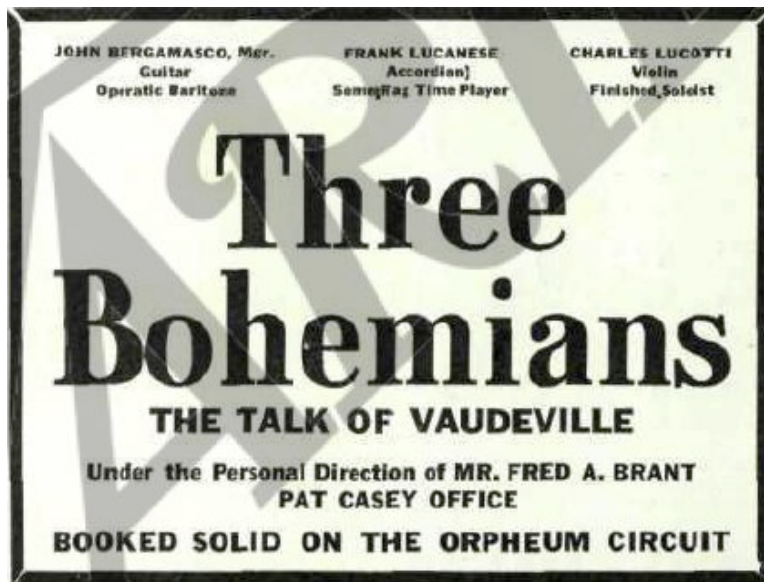
There were a couple of advertisements for the group in Variety, including the two clips below.



THE THREE VAGRANTS
 The Merry Singers and Musicians A Unique Musical Novelty The Act That Has Been Making Good Everywhere
JO PAIGE SMITH Did It

1911
 Booked Solid on the Orpheum Circuit

Apr. 16, Orpheum, Fargo, N. D.	12, Orpheum, Portland, Or.	Aug. 7, Travel	Oct. 2, Orpheum, Memphis.
24, Orpheum, Minneapolis	19, Travel	13, Orpheum, Salt Lake City	9, Orpheum, New Orleans.
30, Orpheum, St. Paul	26, Orpheum, San Francisco	21, Orpheum, Denver	17, Travel
May 7, Orpheum, Duluth	2, Orpheum, San Francisco	28, Travel	24, Majestic, Chicago
14, Orpheum, Winstieg	9, Orpheum, Oakland	Sept. 3, Orpheum, Des Moines	31, Columbia, St. Louis
21, Travel	16, Orpheum, Oakland	10, Orpheum, Sioux City	Nov. 6, Grand O. H., Indianapolis
28, Orpheum, Spokane	23, Orpheum, Los Angeles	17, Orpheum, Omaha	13, Columbia, Cincinnati
June 5, Orpheum, Seattle	31, Orpheum, Los Angeles	24, Orpheum, Kansas City	20, Masonic, Milwaukee



JOHN BERGAMASCO, Mgr.
Guitar
Operatic Baritone

FRANK LUCANESE
Accordion
Semi-frag Time Player

CHARLES LUCOTTI
Violin
Finished Soloist

Three Bohemians
 THE TALK OF VAUDEVILLE
 Under the Personal Direction of MR. FRED A. BRANT
 PAT CASEY OFFICE
 BOOKED SOLID ON THE ORPHEUM CIRCUIT

Most references to the group in Variety were very brief noting that the group was “good”, “fair”, etc. Generally, the group received little acclaim in the trade journal as

opposed to the reviews it received in local newspapers. No feature articles on the group or its members were found. Favorable comments were made about John's "operatic baritone" voice and Frank Lucanese's "rag-time" accordion playing.

The Three Vagrants recorded for Columbia, Edison and Victor in the period 1916-1920. They may have also recorded for Pathe in the 1910's. Some of these recordings are pretty readily available. It is not known if many others exist. Spottswood's catalog of ethnic music contains a discography for the group. Additional documentation of their records is available from the University of California, Santa Barbara. In September 1916, the group recorded for Columbia under the names "I Tre Vagabundi" and "Murga Criolla". In March-April 1917 the group recorded at four sessions for Victor as the Three Vagrants, Trzech Szubrawcow and I Tre Vagabondi. The Victor records were released in Sweden, Poland and US, possibly in Italy as well. Later in 1917, the group recorded for Columbia again as the Three Vagabunds. The final known recording sessions were for Edison in July-August 1920. There are no accounts of recordings after 1920, either by the group named as Three Vagrants or under other names.



Edison disk recorded in 1920. The star on the label indicated that it was considered to be of relatively limited commercial interest. Tarantella Siciliana was also recorded for Columbia in 1916 and Victor in 1917. It was composed by Frank Lucanese.

The group's early recordings were in the genre of "Italian music" and classified by Spottswood as "ethnic music". In the period after 1920, it is likely that the group and its successors played more popular music of the era for vaudeville audiences.

Around 1920, Frank Lucanese left the group and it is uncertain if he was replaced or if the group continued to perform. At that same time, John's daughters Lena (17 years old) and Josephine (15 years old) began to perform. In addition to the mention in Variety noted above there is a postcard with a photograph of John, Josephine and Lena taken at the Keith Theater in Toledo, OH in 1921. It is possible that John and his daughters became the Three Vagrants or the Three Bohemians. The number of promotional pictures of the two girls indicates that they probably had their own act as well. No information was found to verify that the girls had a career performing together.



John, Lena (on right) and Josephine
photographed outside the Keith's Theater in
Toledo in 1921.



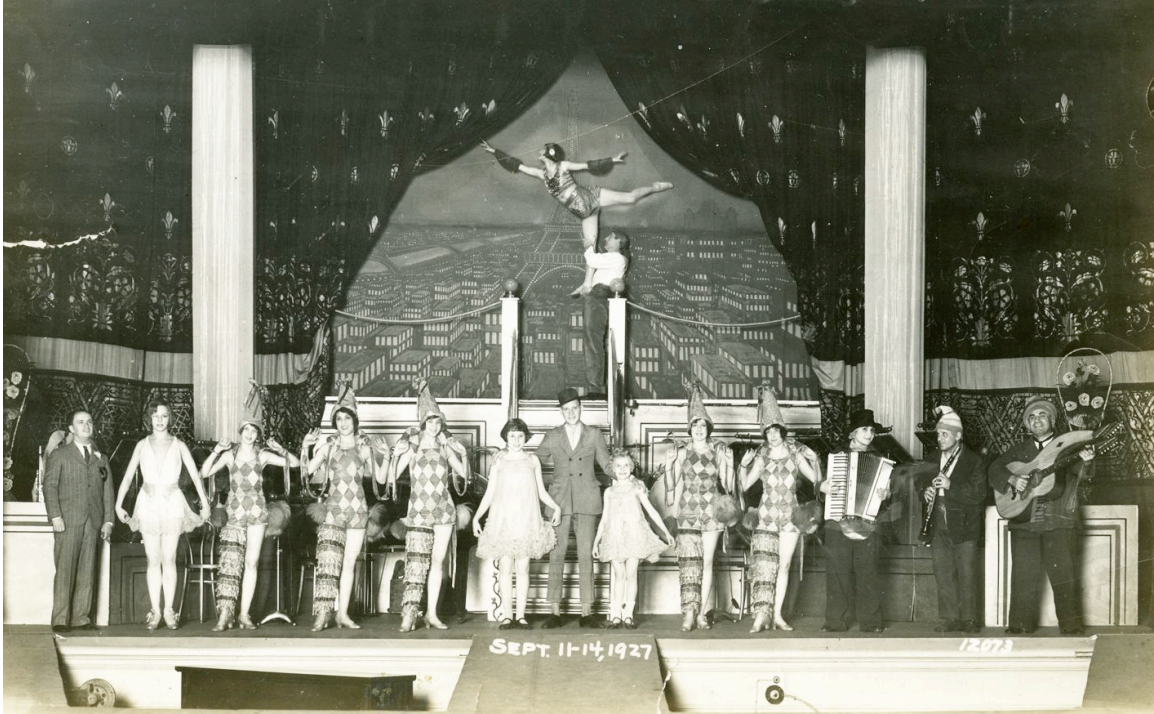
Josephine and Lena, photographed sometime around 1920.

At sometime after 1924 when Lena married and left the stage, the Three Vagrants was re-created in its final form. The group consisted of John, Gino Tirelli on clarinet and Josephine on accordion. The group played together at least until 1928, as evidenced by photographs, one newspaper review and by their portrait in the 1928 Yearbook of Vaudeville Musicians.



The Three Vagrants in 1927 or 1928 with John, Gino Tirelli on clarinet and Josephine on accordion.

Gino kept a journal of the group's itinerary in 1926. They were booked solid the entire year with three-day stints. Gino's journal indicated that he was paid about \$150 or more per booking so the group was probably paid about \$500 per booking. During December 1925 through 1926 they played in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, New Jersey, Massachusetts, West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, Connecticut, Maine and Ontario.



On stage with the vaudeville revue in 1927. The Three Vagrants are at the right of the photograph.



John, Josephine and Gino in Gino's backyard, Brooklyn, NY around 1928.

Loew Act on the Air



A musical act that has been acclaimed all down the Loew circuit of theaters will provide an entertainment treat for local as well as out-of-town radio listeners Wednesday night at 7:30 o'clock, when the Three Vagrants go before the microphone of Station WDSU, on the Uhalt Radio hour.

The act is regarded as a musical gem in theatrical circles and will be broadcast for the first time. The Three Vagrants are musicians and artists of note and are among the week's feature attractions at Loew's State theater. The personnel of the act is John Nasco, who plays the guitar and sings beautifully; Gino Tirelli, clarinetist and Miss Joseph-

ine Nasco, one of the stage's greatest accordionists.

While a beautiful and charming miss bubbling over with personality, Miss Nasco appears in the act of the Three Vagabonds clad in masculine attire and almost gets away with it until a second glance at her reveals that her features are too pretty to be those of a boy.

This trio of artists are touring the Loew circuit for the first time and everywhere they have appeared the critics have placed their offering among the finest of its kind anywhere. It was announced that listeners will hear a program of a diversified nature that is unlike anything of its kind ever broadcast from a local station.

Newspaper review of the group, September 1927. Note misspelling of "Masco" as "Nasco".

Josephine probably left the group in early 1929 after she met her husband to be Harvey Harris. Her daughter Elizabeth was born September 26, 1929. According to Gino Tirelli's great-niece, he left the group in either 1928 or 1929.



Photograph of Josephine with beloved Pekinese, taken in 1928 about the time she met Harvey.

The Three Vagrants, as many other vaudeville acts, vanished with the end of the 1920's. John Bergamasco may have continued to perform until his death in 1932.

The fame of the Three Vagrants seems to have been very modest indeed. Although they had a long successful run, they are not mentioned in any of the standard references on vaudeville. The group may have headlined in small markets but there is no evidence that they "made the big time". They did play the Palace in New York in 1927 that that alone was an achievement attained by few of the thousands of vaudeville performers.

