Blackface Minstrel Tradition

Sheet music cover for "Dandy Jim from Caroline", featuring Dan Emmett (center) and the other Virginia Minstrels, c. 1844

The **minstrel show**, or **minstrelsy**, was an American form of entertainment developed in the 19th century of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music, performed by white people in blackface or, especially after the U.S. Civil War, by black people.

Minstrel shows lampooned (parodied) black people as dim-witted, lazy, buffoonish, superstitious, happy-go-lucky, and musical. The minstrel show began with brief burlesques and comic entr'actes in the early 1830s and emerged as a full-fledged form in the next decade. By 1848, blackface minstrel shows were the national artform, translating formal art such as opera into popular terms for a general audience.

By the turn of the 20th century, the minstrel show enjoyed but a shadow of its former popularity, having been replaced for the most part by vaudeville. It survived as professional entertainment until about 1910; amateur performances continued until the 1960s in high schools and local theaters. As the civil rights movement progressed and gained acceptance, minstrels lost popularity.

The typical minstrel performance followed a three-act structure. The troupe first danced onto stage then exchanged wisecracks and sang songs. The second part featured a variety of entertainments, including the pun-filled stump speech. The final act consisted of a slapstick musical plantation skit or a send-up of a popular play. Minstrel songs and sketches featured several stock characters, most popularly the slave and the dandy. These were further divided into sub-archetypes such as the mammy, her counterpart the old darky, the provocative mulatto wench, and the black soldier. Minstrels claimed that their songs and dances were authentically black although the extent of the black influence remains debated. Spirituals (known as *jubilees*) entered the repertoire in the 1870s, marking the first undeniably black music to be used in minstrelsy.

Blackface minstrelsy was the first theatrical form that was distinctly American. During the 1830s and 1840s at the height of its popularity, it was at the epicenter of the American music industry. For several decades it provided the means through which American whites viewed black people. On the one hand, it had strong racist aspects; on the other, it afforded white Americans a singular and broad awareness of what some whites considered significant aspects of black culture in America.

Although the minstrel shows were extremely popular, being "consistently packed with families from all walks of life and every ethnic group", they were also controversial. Racial integrationists decried them as falsely showing happy slaves while at the same time making fun of them; segregationists thought such shows were "disrespectful" of social norms, portrayed runaway slaves with sympathy and would undermine the southerners' "peculiar institution".

Early development

Minstrel shows were popular before slavery was abolished, sufficiently so that Frederick Douglass described blackface performers as "...the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens." Although white theatrical portrayals of black characters date back to as early as 1604, the minstrel show as such has later origins. By the late 18th century, blackface characters began appearing on the American stage, usually as "servant" types whose roles did little more than provide some element of comic relief. Thomas Dartmouth Rice's successful song-and-dance number, "Jump Jim Crow", brought blackface performance to a new level of prominence in the early 1830s. At the height of Rice's success, *The Boston Post* wrote, "The two most popular characters in the world at the present are [Queen] Victoria and Jim Crow." As early as the 1820s, blackface performers called themselves "Ethiopian delineators"; then into the early 1840s, unlike the later heyday of minstrelsy, they performed either solo or in small teams.

Height

With the Panic of 1837, theater attendance suffered, and concerts were one of the few attractions that could still make money. In 1843, four blackface performers led by Dan Emmett combined to stage just such a concert at the New York Bowery Amphitheatre, calling themselves the Virginia Minstrels. The minstrel show as a complete evening's entertainment was born. The show had little structure. The four sat in a semicircle, played songs, and traded wisecracks. One gave a stump speech in dialect, and they ended with a lively plantation song. The term *minstrel* had previously been reserved for traveling white singing groups, but Emmett and company made it synonymous with blackface performance, and by using it, signalled that they were reaching out to a new, middle-class audience.

The rise of the minstrel show coincided with the growth of the abolitionist movement. Many Northerners were concerned for the oppressed blacks of the South, but most had no idea how these slaves lived day-to-day. Blackface performance had been inconsistent on this subject; some slaves were happy, others victims of a cruel and inhuman institution. However, in the 1850s minstrelsy became decidedly mean-spirited and pro-slavery as race replaced class as its main focus. Most minstrels projected a greatly romanticized and exaggerated image of black life with cheerful, simple slaves always ready to sing and dance and to please their masters. (Less frequently, the masters cruelly split up black lovers or sexually assaulted black women.)The lyrics and dialogue were generally racist, satiric, and largely white in origin. Songs about slaves yearning to return to their masters were plentiful. The message was clear:

do not worry about the slaves; they are happy with their lot in life. Figures like the Northern dandy and the homesick ex-slave reinforced the idea that blacks did not belong, nor did they want to belong, in Northern society.

On the other hand, the fact that the minstrel show broached the subjects of slavery and race at all is perhaps more significant than the racist manner in which it did so. Despite these pro-plantation attitudes, minstrelsy was banned in many Southern cities. Its association with the North was such that as secessionist attitudes grew stronger, minstrels on Southern tours became convenient targets of anti-Yankee sentiment.

Non-race-related humor came from lampoons of other subjects, including aristocratic whites such as politicians, doctors, and lawyers. Women's rights was another serious subject that appeared with some regularity in antebellum minstrelsy, almost always to ridicule the notion. The women's rights lecture became common in stump speeches. When one character joked, "Jim, I tink de ladies oughter vote", another replied, "No, Mr. Johnson, ladies am supposed to care berry little about polytick, and yet de majority ob em am strongly tached to parties." Minstrel humor was simple and relied heavily on slapstick and wordplay. Performers told nonsense riddles: "The difference between a schoolmaster and an engineer is that one trains the mind and the other minds the train."

With the advent of the American Civil War, minstrels remained mostly neutral and satirized both sides. However, as the war reached Northern soil, troupes turned their loyalties to the Union. Sad songs and sketches came to dominate in reflection of the mood of a bereaved nation. Troupes performed skits about dying soldiers and their weeping widows, and about mourning white mothers. "When this cruel war is over" became the hit of the period, selling over a million copies of sheet music. To balance the somber mood, minstrels put on patriotic numbers like "The Star Spangled Banner", accompanied by depictions of scenes from American history that lionized figures like George Washington and Andrew Jackson. Social commentary grew increasingly important to the show. Performers criticized Northern society and those they felt responsible for the breakup of the country, who opposed reunification, or who profited from a nation at war. Emancipation was either opposed through happy plantation material or mildy supported with pieces that depicted slavery in a negative light. Eventually, direct criticism of the South became more biting.

Decline

Poster for Haverly's United Mastodon Minstrels

Minstrelsy lost popularity during the war. New entertainments such as variety shows, musical comedies and vaudeville appeared in the North, backed by master promoters like P. T. Barnum who wooed audiences away. Blackface troupes responded by traveling

farther and farther afield, with their primary base now in the South and Midwest.

Those minstrels who stayed in New York and similar cities followed Barnum's lead by advertising relentlessly and emphasizing the spectacle of minstrelsy. Troupes ballooned; as many as 19 performers could be on stage at once, and J. H. Haverly's United Mastodon Minstrels had over 100 members.Scenery grew lavish and expensive, and specialty acts like Japanese acrobats or circus freaks sometimes appeared. These changes made minstrelsy unprofitable for smaller troupes.

Other minstrel troupes tried to satisfy outlying tastes. Female acts had made a stir in variety shows, and Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels ran with the idea, first performing in 1870 in skimpy costumes and tights. Their success gave rise to at least 11 all-female troupes by 1871, one of which did away with blackface altogether. Ultimately, the girlie show emerged as a form in its own right. Mainstream minstrelsy continued to emphasize its propriety, but traditional troupes adopted some of these elements in the guise of the female impersonator. A well-played wench character became critical to success in the postwar period.[52]

Black minstrels

In the 1840s and '50s, William Henry Lane and Thomas Dilward became the first African Americans to perform on the minstrel stage.All-black troupes followed as early as 1855.] These companies emphasized that their ethnicity made them the only true delineators of black song and dance, with one advertisement describing a troupe as "SEVEN SLAVES just from Alabama, who are EARNING THEIR FREEDOM by giving concerts under the guidance of their Northern friends. "White curiosity proved a powerful motivator, and the shows were patronized by people who wanted to see blacks acting "spontaneously" and "naturally." Promoters seized on this, one billing his troupe as "THE DARKY AS HE IS AT HOME, DARKY LIFE IN THE CORNFIELD, CANEBRAKE, BARNYARD, AND ON THE LEVEE AND FLATBOAT. "Keeping with convention, black minstrels still corked the faces of at least the endmen. One commentator described a mostly uncorked black troupe as "mulattoes of a medium shade except two, who were light... The end men were each rendered thoroughly black by burnt cork." The minstrels themselves promoted their performing abilities, quoting reviews that favorably compared them to popular white troupes. These black companies often featured female minstrels.

Plantation scenarios were common in black minstrelsy, as shown here in this post-1875 poster for Callender's Colored Minstrels

One or two African-American troupes dominated the scene for much of the late 1860s and 1870s. The first of these was Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels, who played the Northeast around 1865. Sam Hague's Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels formed shortly thereafter and toured England to great success beginning in 1866. In the 1870s, white entrepreneurs bought most of the successful black companies. Charles Callender obtained Sam Hague's troupe in 1872 and renamed it Callender's Georgia Minstrels. They became the most popular black troupe in America, and the words *Callender* and *Georgia* came to be synonymous with the institution of black minstrelsy. J. H. Haverly in turn purchased Callender's troupe in 1878 and applied his strategy of enlarging troupe size and embellishing sets. When this company went to Europe, Gustave and Charles Frohman took the opportunity to promote their Callender's Consolidated Colored Minstrels. Their success was such that the Frohmans bought Haverly's group and merged it with theirs, creating a virtual monopoly on the market. The company split in three to better canvas the nation and dominated black minstrelsy throughout the 1880s.[65] Individual black performers like Billy Kersands, James A. Bland, Sam Lucas, Martin Francis and Wallace King grew as famous as any featured white performer.

Racism made black minstrelsy a difficult profession. When playing Southern towns, performers had to stay in character off stage, dressed in ragged "slave clothes" and perpetually smiling. Troupes left town quickly after each performance, and some had so much trouble securing lodging that they hired whole trains or had custom sleeping cars built, complete with hidden compartments to hide in should things turn ugly. Even these were no haven, as whites sometimes used the cars for target practice. Their salaries, though higher than those of most blacks of the period, failed to reach levels earned by white performers; even superstars like Kersands earned slightly less than featured white minstrels. Most black troupes did not last long.

In content, early black minstrelsy differed little from its white counterpart. As the white troupes drifted from plantation subjects in the mid-1870s however, black troupes placed a new emphasis on it. The addition of jubilee singing gave black minstrelsy a popularity boost as the black troupes were rightly believed to be the most authentic performers of such material.Other significant differences were that the black minstrels added religious themes to their shows while whites shied from them, and that the black companies commonly ended the first act of the show with a military high-stepping, brass band burlesque, a practice adopted after Callender's Minstrels used it in 1875 or 1876. Although black minstrelsy lent credence to racist ideals of blackness, many African-American minstrels worked to subtly alter these stereotypes and to poke fun at white society. One jubilee described heaven as a place "where de white folks must let the darkeys be" and they could not be "bought and sold".In plantation material, aged black characters were rarely reunited with long-lost masters like they were in white minstrelsy.

African Americans formed a large part of the black minstrels' audience, especially for smaller troupes. In fact, their numbers were so great that many theater owners had to relax

rules relegating black patrons to certain areas. Theories as to why blacks would look favorably upon negative images of themselves vary. Perhaps they felt in on the joke, laughing at the over-the-top characters from a sense of "in-group recognition".Maybe they even implicitly endorsed the racist antics, or they felt some connection to elements of an African culture that had been suppressed but was visible, albeit in racist, exaggerated form, in minstrel personages. They certainly got many jokes that flew over whites' heads or registered as only quaint distractions. Another draw for black audiences was simply seeing fellow African Americans on stage; black minstrels were largely viewed as celebrities.Formally educated African Americans, on the other hand, either disregarded black minstrelsy or openly disdained it. Still, black minstrelsy was the first large-scale opportunity for African Americans to enter American show business.

Structure

The Christy Minstrels established the basic structure of the minstrel show in the 1840s. A crowd-gathering parade to the theater often preceded the performance. The show itself was divided into three major sections. During the first, the entire troupe danced onto stage singing a popular song. Upon the instruction of the *interlocutor*, a sort of host, they sat in a semicircle. Various stock characters always took the same positions: the genteel interlocutor in the middle, flanked by *Tambo* and *Bones*, who served as the *endmen* or *cornermen*. The interlocutor acted as a master of ceremonies and as a dignified, if pompous, straight man while the endmen exchanged jokes and performed a variety of humorous songs. Over time, the first act came to include maudlin numbers not always in dialect. One minstrel, usually a tenor, came to specialize in this part; such singers often became celebrities, especially with women. Initially, an upbeat plantation song and dance ended the act; later it was more common for the first act to end with a *walkaround*, including dances in the style of a cakewalk.

The second portion of the show, called the *olio*, was historically the last to evolve, as its real purpose was to allow for the setting of the stage for act three behind the curtain. It had more of a variety show structure. Performers danced, played instruments, did acrobatics, and demonstrated other amusing talents. Troupes offered parodies of European-style entertainments, and European troupes themselves sometimes performed. The highlight was when one actor, typically one of the endmen, delivered a faux-black-dialect *stump speech*, a long oration about anything from nonsense to science, society, or politics, during which the dim-witted character tried to speak eloquently, only to deliver countless malapropisms, jokes, and unintentional puns. All the while, the speaker moved about like a clown, standing on his head and almost always falling off his stump at some point. With blackface makeup serving as fool's mask, these stump speakers could deliver biting social criticism without offending the audience, although the focus was usually on sending up unpopular issues and making fun of blacks' ability to make sense of them. Many troupes employed a stump specialist with a trademark style and material.

The *afterpiece* rounded out the production. In the early days of the minstrel show, this was often a skit set on a Southern plantation that usually included song-and-dance numbers and featured Sambo- and Mammy-type characters in slapstick situations. The emphasis lay on an idealized plantation life and the happy slaves who lived there. Nevertheless, antislavery viewpoints sometimes surfaced in the guise of family members separated by slavery, runaways, or even slave uprisings.A few stories highlighted black trickster figures who managed to get the better of their masters. Beginning in the mid-1850s, performers did burlesque renditions of other plays; both Shakespeare and contemporary playwrights were common targets. The humor of these came from the inept black characters trying to perform some element of high white culture. Slapstick humor pervaded the afterpiece, including cream pies to the face, inflated bladders, and on-stage fireworks.

Music and dance

"Minstrelsy evolved from several different American entertainment traditions; the traveling circus, medicine shows, shivaree, Irish dance and music with African syncopated rhythms, musical halls and traveling theatre."Music and dance were the heart of the minstrel show and a large reason for its popularity. Around the time of the 1830s there was a lot of national conflict as to how people viewed African Americans. Because of that interest in the Negro people, these songs granted the listener new knowledge about African Americans, who were different from themselves, even if the information was prejudiced.

Legacy

The minstrel show played a powerful role in shaping assumptions about blacks. However, unlike vehemently anti-black propaganda from the time, minstrelsy made this attitude palatable to a wide audience by couching it in the guise of well-intentioned paternalism.

Popular entertainment perpetuated the racist stereotype of the uneducated, ever-cheerful, and highly musical black well into the 1950s. Likewise, when the sound era of cartoons began in the late 1920s, early animators such as Walt Disney gave characters such as Mickey Mouse (who already resembled blackface performers) a minstrel-show personality; the early Mickey is constantly singing and dancing and smiling. As late as 1942, as demonstrated in the Warner Bros. cartoon *Fresh Hare*, minstrel shows could be used as a gag (in this case, Elmer Fudd and Bugs Bunny leading a chorus of "Camptown Races") with the expectation, presumably, that audiences would get the reference.

The 2000 Spike Lee movie *Bamboozled* alleges that modern black entertainment exploits African-American culture much as the minstrel shows did a century ago, for example.

Meanwhile, African-American actors were limited to the same old minstrel-defined roles for years to come and by playing them, made them more believable to white audiences. On the other hand, these parts opened the entertainment industry to African-American performers and gave them their first opportunity to alter those stereotypes. The Rabbit's Foot Company was a variety troupe, originally founded in 1900 by an African American, Pat Chappelle,which drew on and developed the minstrel tradition while updating it and helping to develop and spread black musical styles. Besides Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, later musicians working

for "the Foots" included Louis Jordan, Brownie McGhee and Rufus Thomas, and the company was still touring as late as 1950. The very structure of American entertainment bears minstrelsy's imprint. The endless barrage of gags and puns appears in the work of the Marx Brothers and David and Jerry Zucker. The varied structure of songs, gags, "hokum" and dramatic pieces continued into vaudeville, variety shows, and to modern sketch comedy shows such as *Hee Haw* or, more distantly, *Saturday Night Live* and *In Living Color*. Jokes once delivered by endmen are still told today: "Why did the chicken cross the road?" "Why does a fireman wear red suspenders?" Other jokes form part of the repertoire of modern comedians: "Who was that lady I saw you with last night? That was no lady—that was my wife!" The stump speech is an important precursor to modern stand-up comedy.

Another important legacy of minstrelsy is its music. The hokum blues genre carried over the dandy, the wench, the simple-minded slave characters (sometimes rendered as the rustic white "rube") and even the interlocutor into early blues and country music incarnations through the medium of "race music" and "hillbilly" recordings. Many minstrel tunes are now popular folk songs. Most have been expunged of the exaggerated black dialect and the overt references to blacks. "Dixie", for example, was adopted by the Confederacy as its unofficial national anthem and is still popular, and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" was sanitized and made the state song of Virginia until 1997. "My Old Kentucky Home" remains the state song of Kentucky. The instruments of the minstrel show were largely kept on, especially in the South. Minstrel performers from the last days of the shows, such as Uncle Dave Macon, helped popularize the banjo and fiddle in modern country music. And by introducing America to black dance and musical style, minstrels opened the nation to black cultural forms for the first time on a large scale.

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