

Session 2: Early Minstrelsy and the Invention of American Popular Music
History of Popular Music; Prof. Jenkins

- I. Earliest Performers of Blackface in the American Tradition
 - a. Although in one sense blackface (using burnt cork or other means to change the color of one's skin) goes back to 1603 (when Shakespeare's company performed *Othello*), the American tradition of blackface performance seems to have started in the late 1820s.
 - b. Note that the centers of early minstrelsy tended to be frontier towns or working-class neighborhoods in major cities (e.g. The Seventh Ward in NYC or the Fourth Ward—in the Bowery area) where there was relatively free mixing among lower-class whites and free blacks. Minstrelsy was NOT common in the South and was indeed outlawed in many Southern states (it was thought of as dangerous!). Many blackface performers were Irish immigrants seeking to get around their own marginalization.
 - c. George Washington Dixon (1801?-1861) may be the first actor and singer to rise to prominence as a blackface performer in a circus. He performed "Coal Black Rose" as early as 1829 at the Bowery, Chatham Garden Theatre and also made the tune and character "Zip Coon" wildly famous. By the end of 1829 he had expanded the song into a farcical play called *Love in a Cloud*.
 - i. Zip Coon as a character mock the status of free blacks. He is a dandy, haughty, dresses in fancy but ill-fitting clothes, and speaks in an illiterate manner while attempting to employ sophisticated vocabulary.
 - ii. The tune is now better known as "Turkey in the Straw," and is performed by bluegrass bands and some ice cream trucks. It is based on an Irish or Scottish folk song and demonstrates the intersection between minstrelsy and the string band tradition stemming from British immigration.
 - d. Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808-1860) performs a song-and-dance number called "Jump Jim Crow" that ignites a craze for blackface performance in the 1830s.
 - i. As a character Jim is lazy but usually sly and can generally find clever ways to get out of doing work.
 - ii. The dance (a type of athletic cakewalk) was supposedly inspired by a crippled slave named Jim Cuff. It partly derives from a folk concept of a dancing crow. When farmers left whiskey-soaked corn out in the fields, the crows would get drunk and become unable to fly. They would simply "wheel and jump" and the farmer could easily kill them.
 - iii. The song seems to have been adapted from an Irish folk song.
 - iv. The earliest performance seems to have been in 1828 (the book claims 1832) in NYC. The lyrics he used were often more daring than later minstrelsy including "An' I caution all white dandies not to come in my way/ For if dey insult me, dey'll in de gutter lay," as well as "Aldough I'm a black man, de white is call'd my broder."
 - v. Rice toured England in the later 1830s, exporting this "American" form of theater.
- II. The Emergence of the "Classic" Minstrel Show
 - a. The Panic of 1837 led to a decline in theater attendance but concerts were still profitable.
 - b. 1843: four blackface performers (Dan Emmett [1815-1904] on fiddle, Billy Whitlock [1813-1878] on banjo, Dick Pelham [1815-1876] on tambourine, and Frank Brower [1823-1874] on bones) first played at Mrs. Brooke's Boarding House at 37 Catherine Street in the Bowery and then drew crowds at Bartlett's Billiard Room in the Branch Hotel at 36 Bowery and then at the Chatham theatre on January 31 and then a run at the Bowery Amphitheater in February. They are credited with songs such as "Jimmy Crack Corn," and "Old Dan Tucker." Now the minstrel show was a complete evening's entertainment.
 - c. They sat in a semicircle, played songs, told jokes, and gave stump speeches in dialect. Also it seems they introduced the characters Tambo and Bones (or the end men).
 - d. Emmett wrote "Way Down South in Dixie" in 1859. The banjo and minstrel music, once shunned in the South and subversive, became a signifier of the white South!!

- e. Also in 1843 Edwin Pearce Christy (1815-1862) founded Christy's Minstrels. They developed the three-act template that became the basic form of the minstrel show.
 - i. First Part: Company dances onto stage, then some jokes and songs are performed. Ends with a cakewalk dance (called the "walkaround").
 - ii. Second Part (olio): variety of entertainments including stump speeches.
 - iii. Third Part (afterpiece): Slapstick musical plantation skit or a parody of a popular play.

III. Reactions to Minstrelsy

- a. Frederick Douglass, *North Star*, October 27, 1848: minstrels are "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens."
- b. *New York Tribune* (1855): "It was this epoch that Mr. T.D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled "Jim Crow," and from that moment everybody was "doing just so," and continued "doing just so" for months, even years afterward. Never was there such an excitement in the musical or dramatic world; nothing was talked of, nothing written of, and nothing dreamed of, but "Jim Crow." It seemed as though the entire population had been bitten by the tarantula; in the parlor, in the kitchen, in the shop and in the street, Jim Crow monopolized public attention. It must have been a species of insanity, though of a gentle and pleasing kind."

IV. The Social/Cultural Work of Minstrelsy

- a. What social and cultural work might minstrelsy have done from the 1830s through 1865?
- b. How did it navigate the simultaneous disdain and attraction whites felt toward blacks?