The Black-Faced Minstrels

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Minstrel shows represent a special chapter in the history of American humour, drama and music. The term was inspired by European minstrels[1], 'a medieval class of entertainers who traveled from place to place', but the content is specifically American. Minstrel shows originated in the south of the USA in the early 1830s. In spite of the fact that the first entertainers were white, the roots, topics and themes of the shows were of 'black' origin. Minstrel shows represent an interesting mixture of influences of African American and Euro-American cultures.

Minstrel shows presented by white men with blackened faces in the saloons of rich plantation homes copied the way slaves entertained themselves: their dances, songs, movements, and behaviour. The sense of music of the African slaves became notable for many reasons; one of them was the need to communicate in the strange environment with people from other African tribes. Music, dance and imitation served as a perfect means of communication. Also, people want to enjoy the time after work. According to African American comic Redd Foxx[2], sometimes the slaves dressed up in old garments of their masters and imitated them in a humorous way.

As to musical instruments, plantations provided simple rhythmical instrument such as wooden sticks and small hand drums. Huge African drums were banned in the early years of slavery; they were believed to allow communication among slaves. A simple string instrument of African origin developed into the banjo on the American continent. It was seen even before the abolition of slavery for instance in the hands of black minstrels and traders in the streets of New Orleans (see Foxx, R. &

1) *Webster's New World Dictionary of American English.* (1991). Prentice Hall.
2) Redd Foxx (1922–1991), born John Elroy Sanford. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redd_Foxx.

Miller, N., 1977, 7). The fiddle and other instruments were added to the line-up of minstrel shows later on.

The way black music entered white stages has become a legend (see for instance Foxx, R. & Miller, N.,1977, 13; Southern, E., 1983, 90; Wilson, C. R., & Ferris, W. 1989, 1019). Entertainer and actor Theodore Dartmouth Rice, later known as the father of minstrel shows, observed a black stableman, dancing and singing a song about Jim Crow; Rice was inspired by the comic dance and catchy song and after them created a character and an act. He blackened his face by burnt cork, put on ragged clothes, polished details and a new stage act was born. It was 1829, and the American theatre depended on European travelling troupes of low quality. The audience accepted the new, original American rural show warmly. Over the years, many minstrel show groups were established. Originally from the American south, they soon started to operate in the densely populated East coast, in cities like New York and Boston.

Already in the 1840s, the first American minstrel show troupes visited Europe. The Virginia Minstrels and The Christy Minstrels were among the most popular ones. In the period posters, these and other similar white groups were presented as 'Ethiopians', with original African shows. By approximately the 1880s, minstrel shows reached the peak of popularity; then they were replaced by fascinating travelling shows which presented life in the Old West, the Wild West Shows. But let's move back to the years before the Civil War. White talent hunters started to visit plantations, encouraging the blacks to sing and dance, and so they collected material for further commercial use.

Acted by white men with blackened faces, two major typical characters were featured on minstrel show stages: Jim Crow and Zip Coon. The first one was presented as a simple uncle from a plantation, the other one as his opposite, a town slicker. African American historian Eileen Southern says that for actors such a character was "a comic figure to be ridiculed" (Southern, 1983, 90). American journalist Bart Bull explains that such figures answered the expectations of the whites: "Zip and Jim show white folks that black men are harmless, simpleminded

fools, easily distracted and easily tricked." (Bull, n. d., 20). Generally, there is a stereotypical figure of a ridiculed neighbour of a different ethnicity or confession in all cultures of the world.

As soon as minstrel shows became successful in business, agencies extended the troupes from four actors to several dozen entertainers, dancers and musicians. The original white cast was sometimes changed to a black one. Southern says (1983, 232) that the structure of Ethiopian shows had three parts. In the first part, visitors enjoyed songs and dances from plantations presented by Jim Crow and Zip Coon, sometimes also a male disguised as Aunt Jemina. A white master of ceremony was addressed in the old-time way as Mister Interlocutor. Other figures on the stage were musicians: Mister Tambo who played the tambourine, Mister Bones who played the bones, plus a fiddle player and a banjo player.

After an introduction, the show started off with an *olio* (a mixture, or, fantasy), a variety show with artists and speciality acts. It concluded with a grand finale, with dance, songs and a parade of all those presented.

Eileen Southern works with period materials, such as posters and newspapers, as well as diaries of white travellers, male and female. Comedian Redd Foxx provides no references, it seems like he draws on oral tradition. He says that minstrel shows were composed of music acts, anecdotes and riddles, speciality acts and plantation skits. Featured characters were Mr. Interlocutor, Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo. Mr. Interlocutor, well dressed, sat in the middle of minstrels. Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, flamboyantly dressed, closed the semi-circle. They were musicians and comedians; they reacted wittily to the comments of Mr. Interlocutor. Some of their anecdotes have been in use ever since. One of the less spicy ended up in the otherwise sharp repertoire of Redd Foxx (Foxx, R. & Miller, N., 1977, 18-19):

MR. BONES: Mr. Interlocutor, sir!

INTERLOCUTOR: Yes, Mr. Bones?

MR. BONES: Mr. Interlocutor, sir. Does us black folks go to hebbin? Does we go through dem golden gates?

INTERLOCUTOR: Mr. Bones, you know the golden gates is for white folks.

MR. BONES: Well, who's gonna be dere to open de gates for the white folks?

While not speaking, Mr. Bones, Mr. Tambo and Mr. Interlocutor were in an instant movement. Without them and without their jokes the show would not work. Other minstrels played the banjo and other instruments. In the group there were usually at least two singers: the tenor with his ballads was supposed to move people to tears, the bass had specialty numbers, and the comedians sang comic songs (Southern, 1983, 232).

In the second part of the show, minstrels played all kinds of instruments from combs to spoons; they also juggled and did cartwheels and jumps. Then a speaker gave a lecture on some hot topic, such as temperance, politics, and women's rights, he tried to make impression, but of course, he confused everything, which was the aim of the show. In the end, the whole cast danced again.

Before the Civil War (1861-1865), the third part of a minstrel show presented a plantation skit. Here a fat man came with a turban on his head, in the role of Aunt Jemina. During the war the jokes were aimed at some topic of the day. When the war was over and slavery abolished, all parts in minstrel shows remained but the plantation skits.

Various sources inform us about a paradox in the line-up which occurred already in the 1840s: a black cast started to perform in the shows as well. Black minstrels tried to be better than the white performers in all aspects: in clowning, dancing, and telling jokes. They wanted to be a real competition for the whites and as Redd Foxx says (Foxx, R. & Miller, N., 1977, 22), "They were the real thing". They enjoyed their stage career; they did not discuss political correctness and race stereotypes.

In 1842, during his American travels, British writer Charles Dickens was so enchanted by the black singer and dancer Master Juba, that he called him the best dancer in the world. In his *American Notes*[3] Dickens describes a show in a bar somewhere in New York City:

3) The Project Gutenberg Etext of American Notes, by Charles Dickens, chapter 6.

> The corpulent black fiddler, and his friend who plays the tambourine, stamp upon the boarding of the small raised orchestra in which they sit, and play a lively measure. Five or six couples come upon the floor, marshalled by a lively young negro, who is the wit of the assembly, and the greatest dancer known. He never leaves off making queer faces, and is the delight of all the rest, who grin from ear to ear incessantly. [...] Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs - all sorts of legs and no legs - what is this to him?

In *American Notes* Dickens also refers to Jim Crowe. African American music and race stereotypes which should entertain onlookers are mentioned in the bestselling novel by the American abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1850), *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,[4] in the opening chapter:

> Here the door opened, and a small quadroon boy, between four and five years of age, entered the room. [...] The child scampered, with all his little strength, after the prize, while his master laughed.
>
> "Come here, Jim Crow," said he. The child came up, and the master patted the curly head, and chucked him under the chin.
>
> "Now, Jim, show this gentleman how you can dance and sing." The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body, all in perfect time to the music.

While many blacks were employed in minstrel shows with the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, their managers were white men. According to Southern (1983, 229) the first all-black professional

4) The Project Gutenberg EBook of Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, chapter 1.

minstrel group, The Georgia Minstrels, originated in 1865. Nevertheless, the groups changed their names and line-up, their managers and owners, several groups would use the same name, so it is not easy to trace exact data now.

As was already mentioned, the post-Civil War minstrel show troupes were large. This also included a brass band, which we can see as a remainder of the former army bands. A parade of the whole minstrel show cast through the city in the afternoon before the evening show had remained in some fields of American popular music even by the 1940s.[5]

In the evening show, the travelling troupe offered music of all genres, from ballads, sentimental songs, spirituals, to opera numbers. After the 1840s, there was demand for new songs, and more space for composers. They were both white and black men, not always from the South, but they could capture and create Southern atmosphere perfectly, raising laughter and tears. Their songs have survived not only the creators, but also the golden age of minstrel shows. Even today and far away from the American South, people are familiar with songs like "Dixie", "Carry Me Back to the Old Virginny", or "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" which were alternatively attributed to two composers: African American James Bland, and white man Stephen Foster. A comical song "Blue Tail Fly" has been usually linked with the name of a white composer Dan Emmett, but it can also easily be of an African American origin. Its lyrics are about a black servant who has to "brush away the blue tail fly" from the master, but in the end he strikes so hard that the master falls asleep forever.[6]

Many artists of the 20th century started their careers in minstrel shows; among them the father of blues W. C. Handy (1873–1958), who worked as a singer there. The minstrel banjo and humour remained in the hands of white men in the 20th century. They found their place in the early country music and broadcasting. Comedian and banjo player Uncle Dave Macon (1870–1952) became the first star of the Nashville's WSM

5) See for instance Rosenberg, N. V. (1985). *Bluegrass. A History.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 58-59, for Bill Monroe's tent show and his baseball team.

6) The Czech version by the banjo player Honza Bican is called "Pán je rád".

Leroy Troy performs at the IBMA Festival in Owensboro, Kentucky, USA, 1995. Photo by Irena Přibylová.

regular radio show the Grand Ole Opry in 1925. On the live show, he was able to entertain listeners with his songs and jokes for several hours. He performed in the show almost all his life.

The position of a banjo player was reserved for a comedian in the white old-time music and early bluegrass music till the 1940s. It ended with the coming of Earl Scruggs (born 1924) to Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in 1945. Bluegrass fans know well the archive pictures of comedian and banjo player Stringbean (in his striped costume) who served with Monroe for a while. While hiring the young Scruggs, Monroe questioned him first about his knowledge of jokes, only then he was interested in his ability to play the banjo. The era of a banjo man-comedian ended with the coming of the marvellous instrumentalist Scruggs, and the role of joke-teller was left to the lead singer or Monroe himself.[7]

7) I did research on Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys with the help of Fulbright scholarship in the 1990s.

One of the many followers of Uncle Dave Macon and minstrel show tradition is a native of Nashville, TN, Leroy Troy (born 1966).[8] He sings sentimental and comic Southern songs, and with his banjo he is able to perform funny tricks. Minstrel tradition reached the Czech lands as well. Most notably, the banjo player Honza Bican from České Budějovice wrote Czech lyrics to many Southern songs, and in the 1980s he even performed with a blackened face at open-air festivals.

Minstrel stereotypes of a black uncle or a dandy have entered many forms of entertainment, from vaudeville, to music comedy and film, radio and television. Music and show generally need no translations, even comedy songs can be translated so that foreigners can understand jokes. Anyway, there are some fields which cannot be transferred and translated, so they are virtually unknown in non-English speaking countries: radio sitcoms and books which are based on humour in African American variety of English.

The 1930s radio sitcom *Amos 'n' Andy* has a unique position in the history of American broadcasting. Two white protagonists developed the roles of two black men of a small taxicab company, using a ghetto English, and they also dabbed the whole extended family and customers. "Traffic stopped on the main streets of towns across the country and movies halted in midreel at 7:00 PM so that people would not miss their nightly 15 minutes of chuckles over antics of Amos and Andy," say the authors of *Broadcasting in America* (Head, S. W., Sterling C. H., & Schofield, L. B. ,1994, 47). Already in 1931 one progressive newspaper wanted to ban the show as racist, but "its defenders had a convincing argument: most black seemed to enjoy the program just as much as whites," say the authors (47). Black comedian Redd Foxx notes that in 1948 *Amos and Andy* entered television. There, of course, white performers with blackened faces could not play them, which provided an opportunity for black performers. The series ended in 1966.

8) Among the others: John Hartford (1937–2001) was a versatile personality; comedy, banjo and variety show practices were just part of his large repertoire. David Holt (born 1946) is a storyteller and a banjo player, he also excells in the African American Juba dancing.

The atmosphere of minstrel shows was captured uniquely in the existentional and postmodern novel by the young (white) writer John Barth (born 1930). *The Floating Opera* is set on the east coast of the USA in the 20th century. In the 27th chapter, the one before last, we follow the main character to a showboat, with real Southern entertainment and seven hundred other visitors. The band starts off with a Stephen Foster medley, and after "The Star-Spangled Banner" they play "a *potpourri* of martial airs, ragtime, a touch of some sentimental love ballad, a flourish of buck-and-wing, and a military finale". (Barth, 1956, 251). There follow "Oh Dem Golden Slippers", a lady singer with *laryngitis*, the tenor singer, and a confused presentation of examples from Shakespeare. Then minstrels enter the stage: "Those knights of the burnt cork, the U.S.A.'s greatest sable humorists, the chaste and inimitable Ethiopian Tidewater Minstrels!" (Barth, 1956, 257). Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones missed their chairs, and there followed a flood of jokes in a southern dialect:

"Good evening, Mr. Tambo; you look a little down in the mouth tonight."

"Mist' Interlocutor, ah ain't down in de mouf; ah's down in de pocketbook. New hat fo' de wife, new shoes fo' de baby. Now dat no-good boy ob mine is done pesterin' me to buy him a 'cyclopedia. Say he needs 'em fo' de school."

"An encyclopedia! Ah, there's a wise lad, Tambo! No schoolboy should be without a good encyclopedia. I trust you'll purchase one for the lad?"

"No, sah!"

"No!"

"No, sah! Ah say to dat boy, ah say, "Cyclopedia nuffin'! Y'all gwine walk like de other chillun!".

(Barth, 1956, 257).

"Mr. Bones, I spoke with your wife today, and she tells me your mammy's been living with you all for three years now."

"Mah mammy!" Ah been thinkin' all dis time dat was her mammy!"

"No!" How can you be so consistently stupid, Mr. Bones?"

"Well, Mist' Interlocutor, dat ain't easy fo' a dahkie like me dat's neber been to one ob dem fancy colleges!"
(Barth, 1956, 259).

Finally, after two hours, there comes a grand finale with smoke and explosion, parade of performers, and laughter and applause of the audience. One would like to know what the young writers' resources for this magnificent description were.

The American whites have been borrowing from black culture regularly; transforming black culture so that it fits white tastes has been uninterrupted. Today, the heritage of minstrel shows can be observed in at least two streams in the U.S.A.: first in the humour of black comedians and entertainers, second in 'white' rural, old-time music with the banjo. Indications of a further development can be observed for instance in music. The Carolina Chocolate Drops is a black old-time band, established in the 21st century. Its members play the banjo, guitar and the fiddle, and their music is both Southern, 'white' and 'black'.

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