

NO COUNTRY FOR END MEN:  
A RE-EVALUATION OF SMALL ENSEMBLE BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY,  
1843 TO 1883

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, Jacksonville University, 1977  
Master of Librarianship, Emory University, 1980

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

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This thesis, submitted by Dorothea J. Nelson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Finally, I wish to thank Walter Umla, friend and mentor of almost forty years standing. His influence is with me every day.

#### ABSTRACT

Blackface minstrelsy’s racist elements have been acknowledged and justifiably condemned, both by scholars and casual observers. However, those who dismiss minstrelsy out of hand, as a static form in which white people consistently ridiculed African Americans, themselves fall victim to adopting a simplistic, distorted, and incomplete view of the genre. In this paper I examine other aspects of nineteenth century small ensemble blackface minstrelsy from 1843 to 1883, including its

connections to African American music, dance forms, and humor; its anti-elitist and anti-intellectual elements; its reflection of the nineteenth century political climate; its uses by oppressed people, including slaves and prisoners of war; and, ironically, its possible contribution to improvement of conditions of African American amateur and professional entertainers.

I examine primary sources including texts from original minstrel songs and contemporaneous reviews of minstrel shows. Secondary sources include analyses from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, in the areas of general history, music history, theatre history, and dance history.

In Chapter One I trace the historiography of nineteenth century small ensemble blackface minstrelsy. Chapter Two deals with minstrelsy from 1843 to 1853, and shows connections between African American cultural forms and the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. I examine the development of the genre, beginning with the formation of the original Virginia Minstrels, and illustrate the ways in which American slave musicians appropriated the form as a means of improving their situations while held in bondage.

In Chapter Three I show the changes that occurred in minstrelsy in the 1850s and early 1860s, in terms of form and content. Minstrel shows derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are examined, and I explore the political content of late antebellum minstrel shows. Chapter Four covers Civil War era professional minstrel shows. I also show how amateur minstrel shows were used by both the Union and Confederate armies (including prisoners of war) as a means of improving morale.

In Chapter Five I examine the decline of white minstrelsy after the Civil War and the emergence of African American blackface minstrel troupes. I argue that many notable African American musicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began their careers and minstrelsy, and were thus able to pave the way for other African American entertainers. This chapter ends with the disbanding of the New York-based white San Francisco Minstrel troupe, which I argue signaled the end of the small ensemble blackface era.

Chapter Six, the Conclusion, briefly traces careers of some of the notable African Americans who began their careers as minstrels in the nineteenth centuries and notes the lack of recognition given them by historians of the twentieth century.

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Blackface minstrelsy’s racist elements have been acknowledged and justifiably condemned, both by scholars and casual observers. However, those who dismiss minstrelsy out of hand, as a static form in which white people consistently ridiculed African Americans, themselves fall victim to adopting a simplistic, distorted, and incomplete view of the genre. In this paper I examine other aspects of nineteenth century small ensemble blackface minstrelsy from 1843 to 1883, including its connections to African American music, dance forms, and humor; its anti-elitist and anti-intellectual elements; its reflection of the nineteenth century political climate; its uses by oppressed people, including slaves and prisoners of war; and, ironically, its possible contribution to improvement of conditions of African American amateur and professional entertainers.

I examine primary sources including texts from original minstrel songs and contemporaneous reviews of minstrel shows. Secondary sources include analyses from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, in the areas of general history, music history, theatre history, and dance history.

In Chapter One I trace the historiography of nineteenth century small ensemble blackface minstrelsy. Chapter Two deals with minstrelsy from 1843 to 1853, and shows connections between African American cultural forms and the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. I examine the development of the genre, beginning with the formation of the original Virginia Minstrels, and illustrate the ways in which American slave musicians appropriated the form as a means of improving their situations while held in bondage.

In Chapter Three I show the changes that occurred in minstrelsy in the 1850s and early 1860s, in terms of form and content. Minstrel shows derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are examined, and I explore the political content of late antebellum minstrel shows. Chapter Four covers Civil War era professional minstrel shows. I also show how amateur minstrel shows were used by both the Union and Confederate armies (including prisoners of war) as a means of improving morale.

In Chapter Five I examine the decline of white minstrelsy after the Civil War and the emergence of African American blackface minstrel troupes. I argue that many notable African American musicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began their careers and minstrels, and were thus able to pave the way for other African American entertainers. This chapter ends with the disbanding of the New York-based white San Francisco Minstrel troupe, which I argue signaled the end of the small ensemble blackface era.

Chapter Six, the Conclusion, briefly traces careers of some of the notable African Americans who began their careers as minstrels in the nineteenth centuries and notes the lack of recognition given them by historians of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In a 2007 publication, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, historians of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American music, wrote that blackface minstrelsy “has become [a] ‘forbidden’ subject, lately reduced to a metaphor for historical racism in popular culture.” Indeed, minstrelsy’s racist elements have been acknowledged and justifiably condemned, both by scholars and casual observers. Yet those who dismiss minstrelsy out of hand, as a static form in which white people consistently ridiculed African Americans, themselves fall victim to adopting a simplistic, distorted, and incomplete view of the genre.

Minstrel material was not uniformly demeaning, nor did its form and content remain unchanged throughout the nineteenth century. Many minstrel songs and sketches presented African Americans in a positive light, showing them to be talented, witty, and clever—or as objects of sympathy. Some productions, especially in the early years of ensemble minstrelsy, featured anti-slavery content.

These differed from minstrel shows of the 1850s and early 1860s, a period in which white fear of African Americans and dread of war caused a shift to more caustic humor. The war-era shows, in turn, were markedly different from post-bellum minstrelsy, which was dominated by African American troupes and thus provided opportunities for blacks to establish careers as professional entertainers and subtly to change the stage stereotypes.

The historiography of blackface minstrelsy can be divided into three phases. Historians from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took a relatively uncritical view of minstrelsy, and presented it primarily as wholesome entertainment portraying contented African Americans who fell into two categories: those who lived simple lives on the plantation (the Jim Crow model) and urban dandies (the Zip Coon model). This view may, in part, have been due to the influence of U. B. Phillips, one of the most respected academic historians of this period.

James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton write that Phillips’s works *American Negro Slavery* and *Life and Labor in the Old South* presented a picture of African Americans as “passive, inferior people,” and portrayed slavery as a beneficent system in which slaves and masters shared a genuine bond of affection. They contend that Phillips’s assertions, supported by documents written primarily by people who were sympathetic to slaveholders’ viewpoints, shaped the character of other media. Historian Carl Wittke, writing in 1930, exemplified this in his book *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*, as he reminisced fondly about the shows and noted that minstrelsy’s lasting appeal made it the preferred form of entertainment in fundraisers sponsored by various charitable groups and benevolent organizations. The general character of minstrelsy scholarship remained unchanged until an abrupt shift in the mid-twentieth century.

The beginning of the second phase of minstrelsy studies coincided with the Civil Rights era and the publication of Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, which exploded the myth of the slave system as a benign institution. John Strausbaugh writes that during this period “Historians abruptly turned about-face and condemned all blackface performance as vile racist mockery.” Few in-depth studies of minstrelsy were undertaken during the next several decades—a result, according to W.T. Lhamon Jr., of “the newly conventional embarrassment at white racism popularized in the fifties and sixties.”

Several important books were, however, written during this phase. Hans Nathan’s *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* contains primary source material, including lyrics and musical scores, and is still regarded as the definitive biography of Emmett, one of the pre-eminent composers and musicians in the early minstrel tradition. In *Blacking Up*, Robert C. Toll traces minstrelsy from its roots in the Jacksonian era through the late nineteenth century. The book is notable in that two of the eight chapters are devoted to African American minstrel troupes—groups that have been largely ignored in minstrelsy studies.

*Ethnic Notions: Black People in White Minds*, Marlon T. Riggs’ 1987 documentary on African American stereotypes, won rave reviews and an Emmy award, and almost 25 years after its production it is still described as “a mainstay of university, high school, and public library collections.” Yet its lengthy segment on blackface minstrelsy is not without factual errors which give the misleading impression that the genre was characterized, throughout its long history, by non-stop mockery of African Americans and insensitivity to slavery.

The third wave of minstrelsy scholarship dates from the 1990s. Though many scholars feel repugnance at the prospect of researching an entertainment form that seems so pernicious at first glance, others have published works which provide insights into the complexities of the genre. The most significant books are *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface*



*Minstrelsy*, edited by Annemarie Bean et al.; *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*, by Dale Cockrell; *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance From Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, by W.T. Lhamon, Jr.; *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, by social historian Eric Lott; and *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*, by William J. Mahar.

Folklore historian Roger D. Abrahams examines the role of African American cultural traditions in *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South* and argues that antebellum plantation corn-husking ceremonies were integral to the development of elements of minstrelsy—a view not examined by other scholars. His research is particularly valuable in supporting the position that aspects of minstrelsy were faithful to African American cultural practices, and were brought to the attention of white Americans through this medium. Musicologist Dale Cockrell's *Demons of Disorder* focuses primarily on pre-1843 minstrelsy, but his insights help to explain the popularity of mid-century ensemble performances and the complex cultural exchanges involved in the genre. He concentrates on the representation of the Other in blackface entertainments, and notes, significantly, that presentist views have "polluted" the debate about minstrelsy. Joseph Boskin's *Sambo: The Rise & Demise of an American Jester* is useful in understanding the "Sambo personality" in the arts, literature, and popular culture, including blackface minstrelsy.

Jason White's play, *The Dance: The History of American Minstrelsy*, which premiered in 2005, is not a scholarly work (despite claims to the contrary), and would not normally be mentioned in an historiographic survey. However, it is significant that an institution such as Pomona College, one of the most selective liberal arts schools in the United States, would promote this as an "educational play," and sponsor a performance at a time when Pomona was embroiled in a controversy that deeply divided the college community and attracted national attention. Characters in *The Dance* wear blackface makeup and grotesque costumes, and incorporate offensive stereotypical elements into their performance—but there the similarity to blackface minstrelsy ends. *The Dance* is totally devoid of the showmanship and the musical virtuosity that was touted consistently in nineteenth century reviews of minstrel shows, and which drew paying audience members night after night and year after year. Yet for many, the information they glean from a performance of *The Dance* will be what they "know" about blackface minstrelsy.

Historian Robin W. Winks, in his introduction to C. Vann Woodward's essay, "On Believing What One Reads: The Dangers of Popular Revisionism," writes that "The historian, by his nature, must speak for the historical underdog—for those who have not survived to tell their tales, as well as for the victor." Nineteenth century blackface minstrels, and their audiences, are currently historical underdogs, characterized by many twentieth and twenty-first century historians and activists as vicious racists who despised African American people and denied their culture. Indeed, if one looks no further than the garish makeup and outlandish costumes, it is impossible to draw any other conclusion. This paper examines other aspects of American small ensemble blackface minstrelsy from 1843 to 1883, including its connections to African American music, dance forms, and humor; its anti-elitist and anti-intellectual elements; its reflection of the nineteenth century political climate; its uses by oppressed people, including slaves and prisoners of war; and, ironically, its possible contribution to improvement of conditions of African American amateur and professional entertainers.

## CHAPTER II

### 1843-1853: BEGINNINGS OF ENSEMBLE MINSTRELSY

Blackface minstrelsy was the dominant form of popular entertainment in the United States during much of the nineteenth century. Solo performers such as Thomas Dartmouth Rice and George Washington Dixon attained some measure of fame during 1820s and 1830s, but the genre took on new conventions with the formation of the original Virginia Minstrels in 1843, and rose to an unprecedented level of success over the following decade. Though minstrelsy fostered racism and a dehumanizing attitude toward African Americans, it also incorporated aspects of antebellum African American music, dance, and culture, and brought them to the attention of white Americans who would otherwise have had little or no contact with them.

It is necessary to define several terms for the purposes of this paper. Although some African American musicians and dancers performed in nineteenth century minstrel shows (and in fact came to dominate the form after the Civil War), unless otherwise noted the term "blackface minstrels" will refer specifically to white minstrel entertainers who blackened their faces as an integral part of their stage makeup. The terms "Ethiopian songs," "Ethiopian music," etc. will refer

directly to blackface minstrel music, as was common terminology in nineteenth century America. The word “opera” in nineteenth century American usage did not refer specifically to the musical form we associate with composers such as Verdi and Puccini. Rather, it was a catch-all term for almost any kind of organized theatrical performance involving music of some sort. Thus, minstrel shows were often called “Ethiopian Operas,” and could be performed in theaters known as “opera houses.” In many cases these were unpretentious buildings found even in small communities, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they were also used as venues for vaudeville shows, community theatre productions, high school graduations, religious meetings, etc.

Ensemble minstrelsy can be traced to the winter of 1843, when the Virginia Minstrels premiered in New York City at the Bowery Amphitheatre. Led by fiddler Daniel Decatur Emmett, who later composed the tune “I Wish I Was in Dixie’s Land” as the finale for one of his minstrel revues, the group was wildly successful, and inspired, directly or indirectly, literally thousands of imitators throughout the mid- and late-nineteenth century.

Emmett and his bandmates—Billy Whitlock on banjo, Frank Brower on bone castanets, and Dick Pelham (stage name of Richard Ward Pell) on tambourine—had all had previous experience as solo blackface musicians in theaters and circuses. Whitlock and Pelham had performed with Welch Bartlett’s Broadway Circus as banjoist and minstrel, respectively, from November 1839 to March 1840, and all four had later had a five-week-long engagement with a troupe consisting of Welch & Mann’s National Circus combined with Rockwell & Stone’s Circus.

By 1843, Emmett, Whitlock, Brower, and Pelham were part of a large contingent of musicians and dancers struggling to find work during the depression following the Panic of 1837. The theatre season of 1842-1843 had been particularly dismal, and managers and theater owners were trying desperately to find unusual acts that would appeal to the public and hence increase box office receipts. Their solution would be small ensemble blackface minstrelsy.

Ethnically-based humor was already firmly entrenched in nineteenth century popular entertainment. Initially the African American “type” was merely one of many ethnic and racial characterizations presented on the stage from the 1820s through the 1840s. “Mose the Fireman,” created by comic actor Frank Chanfrau, was a white working-class tough with a heart of gold, who spoke with a cockney accent. At the same time that the first waves of Irish immigrants were arriving in the United States, comedians such as Tyrone Power (1797-1841), John Collins (1811-74), and John Brougham (1810-1880) were making their livings impersonating comic Irish characters. Humorous songs published as sheet music during this period often featured lyrics that parodied foreign and regional dialects.

Comedy of the old Southwest—Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama, in early nineteenth century usage—relied on “ring-tailed roarer” characters such as Davy Crockett and Mike Fink. So-called cracker-barrel/crackerbox philosophers in Yankee/“Down East” literature and theatre included comic characters such as Jonathan (with various surnames, including Slick, Jaw-Stretcher, Doubikin[s], Ploughboy, etc.), Jedediah Homebred, and Jack Downing. In both varieties of humor, underdogs typically outsmarted their social superiors, and misunderstandings, mispronunciations, and malapropisms abounded. These characteristics would carry over into blackface productions. The dialogue between white Yankee characters Sally and Obadiah, in a comic piece from the 1834 edition of *Elton’s Comic All-My-Nack*, anticipates the repartee that would be standard fare in later minstrel shows:

Sally.—Taint so indubitable cold as twas; the thenomicon has lowered up to four hundryd degrees higher than zenith ...

Obadiah.—Well, Sally we chaps are going to raise a sleigh-ride, its such inimical good sleddin to morrow.

Sally.—You are? Our folks are suspectin company all day to-morrow.

Obadiah.—I spoze they’ll hav insatiate times on’t. I should be undefinitely happy if you would disgrace me with your company; I should take it as a deropitary honer; besides, we’re calculating to treat the gals copious well with rasons and black strap.

Sally.—I should be supernatural glad to disgrace you, but our folks suspect company; I can’t go.

The same booklet features pun-based riddles of the type that would be offered again and again in blackface performances: “Why is a Drunken man like a Quaker? Because the spirit moves him.”

Out of the abundance of ethnic characterizations on stage during this period, the African American type proved to be much more popular than any of the other offerings—so much so that the other characters receded from prominence after the advent of ensemble blackface minstrelsy. Walter Meserve, in his history of American theatre in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, notes that “Perhaps no period in the history of the theatre made a more determined effort to reflect the wishes of the society it endeavored to entertain or to sell its product than did the Age of Jackson.” Though Emmett, Whitlock, Brower, and Pelham certainly took advantage of the public’s enthusiasm for ensemble minstrel shows once the form was established, there are no indications that they set out to revolutionize American popular music and theatre—nor that they felt any particular animosity toward African Americans. Their collaboration under the Virginia Minstrels banner was the result of an unplanned meeting which occurred sometime during January 1843, in Emmett’s hotel room. An article in the May 19, 1877 issue of *The New York Clipper* (a weekly entertainment periodical) described what followed:

All four were ... sitting in the North American Hotel, in the Bowery, when one of them proposed that with their instruments they should cross over to the Bowery Circus and give one of the proprietors (Uncle Nate Howes) a “charivari” ... Bringing forth his banjo for Whitlock to play on, Emmett took the violin, Pelham the tambourine, and Brower the bones. Without any rehearsal, with hardly the ghost of an idea as to what was to follow, they crossed the street and proceeded to “browbeat” Uncle Nate Howes into giving them an engagement, the calculation being that he would succumb in preference to standing the horrible noise ... they were making with their instruments. After standing it for a while, Uncle Nate said, ‘Boys, you’ve got a good thing. Can’t you sing us a song?’ ... The four minstrels were as much surprised at the result as was Uncle Nate. After singing some more songs for him, they returned to the North American, where they resumed their “horrible noise” in the reading room, which was quickly filled with spectators.

Emmett, Whitlock, Brower, and Pelham thus secured an engagement and chose a name for their ensemble. Dressed in outrageous and ill-fitting clothing and wearing makeup that was described as “frightening,” they took to the stage and transformed American popular entertainment. *The New York Herald* of February 6-11, 1843 announced the first confirmed performance of the Virginia Minstrels as “First Night of the novel, grotesque, original, and surprisingly melodious Ethiopian band, entitled the *Virginia Minstrels*, being an exclusively musical entertainment combining the banjo, violin, bone castanets, and tambourine, and entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized negro [*sic*] extravaganzas.”

The program was likely very similar to the one performed a month later at the Masonic Hall in Boston:

#### PART I

Air -- Johny [*sic*] Bowker . . . . .by the Band  
 Song -- Old Dan Tucker, a Virginian Refrain, in which is described  
 the ups and downs of Negro life . . . . . Full chorus by the Minstrels  
 Song -- Goin Ober de Mountain, or the difficulties between  
 Old Jake and his Sweet Heart [*sic*] . . . . . Full Chorus  
 Song -- Old Tar River--or the incidents attending a Coon Hunt . . . . . Full Chorus  
 A Negro Lecture on Locomotives . . . . .By Billy Whitlock  
 in which he describes his visit to the Wild Animals,  
 his scrape with his Sweetheart, and show[s] the  
 white folks how the Niggers raise Steam.

#### PART II

Song -- Uncle Gabriel--or a chapter on Tails . . . . . Full Chorus  
 Song -- Boatman Dance--a much admired Song, in imitation  
 of the Ohio Boatman . . . . . Full Chorus  
 Song -- Lucy Long--a very fashionable song which has never failed  
 to be received with unbounded applause . . . . . Full Chorus  
 Song -- Fine Old Colored Gemman--a Parody, written by Old Dan Emmett,  
 who will, on this occasion, accompany himself on the Banjo,  
 in a manner that will make all guitar players turn pale with delight.

The early Virginia Minstrels programs included elements that would be repeated for decades in subsequent minstrel shows: Instrumental pieces, nonsense songs, comic ballads, stump speeches, and satires. (Emmett's "Fine Old Colored Gemman" was a parody of Charles Dickens's satirical poem, "The Fine Old English Gentleman," which had been published two years earlier, shortly after a Tory victory in a parliamentary election. Dickens's version was itself a parody of a traditional popular song of the same name, made famous in an 1836 arrangement by Henry Russell.)

Emmett, Whitlock, Pelham, and Brower performed together only a few months. They arrived in Liverpool, England on May 21, 1843 to begin a European tour, but personal quarrels quickly led to the group's demise, and they performed together for the final time on August 19. However, by then they had already inspired a host of imitators, including the Kentucky Minstrels, the Ethiopian Serenaders, the Congo Melodists, and a particularly notable counterfeit billed as "Christy's Original Band of Virginia Minstrels." The minstrel craze soon reached all parts of the United States, and many areas of Europe.

An article from the November 1847 issue of *The United States Democratic Review* describes the appeal that minstrel shows held for Jacksonian Era Americans:

The negro melodists are the only species of national amusement that we can boast of. . . . [T]hey are indigenous and can be understood and appreciated. The conventionalities of the English stage have been wearisome and unprofitable. Our population, and our national tastes, are native born, and it is quite impossible that they should any longer be content with the dry husks of Cockney humor. The Virginia Melodists are the first indications that have been given of the possibility of a native drama. 'Tis a poor thing, it is true, but it's our own. If there had been no Morrice [*sic*] dancers in England, there would have been no Shakespeare.

The format of minstrel shows became standardized as their popularity grew. In ensemble minstrelsy's first decade the troupes typically consisted of five to nine blackfaced white musicians/comedians who sat in a semi-circle on stage and played bone castanets, fiddle, banjo, triangle, and tambourine. "Brudder Bones" and "Brudder Tambo," the end men, sat on opposite sides of the semi-circle and traded quips with "Mr. Interlocutor," the straight man (often played in whiteface), who sat in the middle of the group. The Interlocutor, according to Robert Cogswell, provided the set up for the end men's punch lines. His persistent attempts to correct the bombastic comic and to maintain his own dignity only intensified the raucous laughter of performers and audience alike when the tables were turned upon him. This formula of "half-wit trumps intellectual" was immensely appealing to the anti-elitist sentiments of the nineteenth-century audience, and the verbal defeat of the pretentious authority figure proved as amusing as the outrageous antics and distorted meanings of his ostensibly inferior antagonist.

Though minstrelsy provided a distorted picture of African American life, aspects of black culture were incorporated into the shows from the beginning. The instruments used most often in minstrel shows—fiddles, banjos, and simple percussion instruments—were well-known to slave musicians. Prior to the 1830s, banjos were played almost exclusively by African Americans who made rudimentary instruments by cutting the tops off large gourds and attaching a piece of cypress wood to form the neck. Yet by 1850 professional banjo makers were established in New York City, Philadelphia, Albany, and Worcester, Massachusetts, to meet the demand of aspiring white banjoists who had heard the instruments in minstrel shows.

The minstrels' use of tambourines and bone castanets as their percussion instruments was not accidental, and mirrored antebellum African American musicians' practice. Slaves had played drums in celebration after the 1739 Stono Insurrection in South Carolina, and state laws put in place subsequently strictly forbade black people from beating drums, lest they attempt to encourage rebellion. The 1740 South Carolina Slave Code specifically stated,

[A]s it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Province that all due care be taken to restrain the wanderings and meetings of Negroes and other slaves, at all times . . . and their using and carrying wooden swords, and other mischievous and dangerous weapons, or using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs or purposes; and that all masters, overseers and others may be enjoined, diligently and carefully to prevent the same...

Many states followed South Carolina's lead when formulating their own slave laws, and thus drums

were rarely used in African American music until after the Civil War. However, slave musicians adapted to their circumstances and found substitutes. Instead of beating drums, they used pieces of bone or scrap iron as rhythm instruments, and became adept at “patting juba,” a type of dancing in which participants used body patting and foot tapping to simulate percussion instruments. Minstrel percussionists likewise avoided drums in favor of tambourines and objects made of bones.

Fiddles were also part of African American musical culture, and accomplished musicians were highly valued in the antebellum slave trade. As early as 1753, an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* listed for sale “an orderly Negro or mulatto who can play well the violin.” Robert B. Winans, in his analysis of ex-slave narratives, writes that fiddle-playing was very common among mid-nineteenth-century African Americans and adds that many plantation owners maintained resident bands comprised of slaves bought specifically for their musical talent. Solomon Northup, a freeborn black fiddler who was kidnapped in 1841 and enslaved for twelve years in a remote area of western Louisiana, found that his ability to provide music for plantation entertainments made it possible for him to enjoy privileges that other slaves could not hope for. He wrote,

Alas! Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage ... [Music] introduced me to great houses—relieved me of many days’ labor in the field; supplied me ... with pipes and tobacco, and extra pairs of shoes, and often times led me away from the presence of a hard master. [The fiddle] heralded my name around the country--made me friends, who, otherwise, would not have noticed me.

Northup’s experience was not unique: Many well-to-do plantation owners encouraged slave musicians to provide music and entertainment of their own choosing at celebrations and events such as corn-shuckings, and provided rewards for them. Former slave Jacob Stroyer describe the elaborate Christmastide festivities for slaves on a South Carolina plantation, noting the handsome remuneration offered to the musicians: “[The slaves] would spend half a day in dancing in some large cotton house or on a scaffold, the master providing fiddlers who came from other plantations if there were none on the place, and who received from fifteen to twenty dollars on these occasions.” American poet and journalist William Cullen Bryant described a corn-shucking dance he observed in South Carolina, and the roles of slave musicians and dancers:

One of [the slaves] took his place as musician, whistling, and beating time with two sticks upon the floor. Several of the men came forward and executed various dances, capering, prancing, and drumming with heel and toe upon the floor, with astonishing agility and perseverance, though all of them had performed their daily tasks and had worked all the evening, and some had walked from four to seven miles to attend the corn-shucking. From the dances a transition was made to a mock military parade, a sort of burlesque of our militia trainings, in which the words of command and the evolutions were extremely ludicrous.

As minstrelsy’s popularity increased, so did the inherent value of slaves who could imitate the minstrels who were imitating African Americans. Slaves who were accomplished musicians and dancers were routinely required to perform for the plantation owners’ families and friends at the Great House. James Weldon Johnson writes,

Negro minstrelsy, everyone ought to know, had its origin among the slaves of the old south. Every plantation had its talented band that could crack Negro jokes, and sing and dance to the accompaniment of the banjo and the bones—the bones being the actual bones of a sheep or some other small animal, cut to the proper length and scraped clean and bleached in the sun. When the wealthy plantation owner wished to entertain and amuse his guests, he needed only to call for his troupe of black minstrels.

Roger D. Abrahams argues that minstrelsy’s imitation process actually began with slaves imitating their owners and upper-class whites, and defines minstrelsy as “an ardent effort to bring to the stage studied imitations of slave styles of singing and dancing and celebrating.” Eileen Southern, a historian of African American music, explains the complex relationship between authentic black music and minstrelsy, and notes, significantly, African Americans’ participation in the phenomenon:

Black folk sang the minstrel songs, just as did the whites. Here was a curious kind of interaction. The minstrel songs, originally inspired by genuine slave songs, were altered and adapted by white minstrels to the taste of white America in the nineteenth century, and then were taken back again by black folk for further adaptation to their musical taste. Thus the songs passed back into the folk tradition from which they had come.

Robert B. Winans substantiated this claim, in his research on antebellum slave music. He found that the majority of songs mentioned as instrumental tunes in the ex-slave narratives were also minstrel pieces. Further, in a 1928 study of black secular folk-song, Newman I. White found 104 songs with direct connections to standard minstrel songs. He explains that it was expedient for antebellum African Americans to perform minstrel music: "The Negro learned [minstrel songs] from the white man and on request sang them back to the white man because the Negro knew it was what the white man wanted."

The exchange process was an integral part of minstrelsy. Many of the most prominent and innovative white minstrels were well aware of African American musical traditions and speech patterns, and quite consciously incorporated these elements into their stage performances. Ralph Ellison, in an interview with Mark Twain scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin, allowed that even though minstrels were advancing their own interests by observing antebellum African Americans and imitating their manners and dialects, the minstrels still "had to go and listen, they had to open their ears to [black] speech." In doing so, and in bringing black culture to the attention of white Americans via the minstrel stage, blackface musicians and comedians took a first step toward enabling recognition of a people whom Eric Foner writes had been "rendered...all but invisible to those imagining the American community."

Even in the comedy routines minstrelsy's presentations of African Americans were by no means completely negative. Though blackface comedians certainly employed the clown figure as an integral part of the genre, it is important to understand the dynamics involved in the interactions of the characters. William Mahar writes,

What is often surprising (because revisionist studies would not lead readers to expect it) is how often the blackface servant, employee, or dandy outwits his antagonist. The humorous effect of that comic reversal was apparently one of the major reasons for blackface comedy's success among the working-class audiences.

This theme is echoed by dance historians Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, who note that minstrels played African American characters "with an air of comic triumph, irreverent wisdom, and an underlying note of rebellion, which had a special appeal to citizens of a young country." W.T. Lhamon adds, "The blackface character boots the behind of authority every chance he finds—which is frequently."

Historians Carl Wittke and Gary Engle both make a connection between the interchanges among the blackface end men (Tambo and Bones) and the whiteface Interlocutor with those of the clowns and ringmaster in the European circus tradition, where the clowns' primary role was to harass and make a fool of the stately Master of Ceremonies. Since many of the minstrel performers had had considerable experience in circuses themselves, the form came naturally to them.

Minstrels have been criticized for using this type of comedy to downplay the brutality of slavery and for promoting the myth of the happy plantation slave. Yet Lhamon insists that despite a persistent and nearly universal misunderstanding on this point, blackface minstrel characters were virtually never portrayed as plantation slaves. (Lhamon apparently makes a distinction between comic characters who appear in minstrel skits, and those who are featured in minstrel ballads, many of which reference "Massa," and employ other allusive terms.) Further, Lhamon states that minstrelsy's anti-racist elements are largely ignored, adding "Many of the workers in minstrelsy, most often early but also late, took the racism that was the given of their days and raised it against its original wielders. People work with what they have."

Racism was virulent and pervasive in the mid-nineteenth-century, and very few white Americans of that day entertained the notion that African Americans were in any way equal to whites. The elite and educated took great pains to emphasize the differences between white and black races, and to warn of the dangers that African Americans represented. Louis Agassiz, a respected and widely-read Swiss scientist who emigrated to the United States in 1846, believed that "Social equality [between black and white races] I deem at all times impracticable—a natural impossibility, from the very character of the negro race." Henry Clay, in a speech to the Kentucky Colonization Society, asserted that "The free people of colour are, by far, as a class, the most corrupt, depraved, and abandoned ... If the vicious habits of this class were not known to every man of attentive observation, they would be demonstrated by the unerring test of the census." Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, though generally sympathetic to African Americans, wrote that "it would be absurd to pretend that, as a class, they maintain a high character; it would be equally foolish to deny that intemperance, indolence, and crime prevail among them to a mournful extent."

Such examples are endless; and against this backdrop, the early ensemble minstrels

presented not only the comic skits which had the effect of helping to defuse fear of and anger toward African Americans, but also offered, as part of their repertoire, songs which portrayed African Americans with sympathy and a measure of sensitivity. Robert B. Winans's study of playbills from the early years of small ensemble minstrelsy shows that "Miss Lucy Neal," a song lamenting the fate of a black wife sold away from her husband, appeared in 34% of the performances from 1843-1847. "Old Folks At Home," a sentimental Stephen Foster song also known as "Swanee River," was performed in 10% of the shows from 1843-1852. "Nelly Was a Lady," another Foster lament for the death of an African American woman, also is featured in 10% of the 1843-1852 programs.

At a time when slavery's influence caused some whites to doubt whether blacks were even fully human, minstrel songs and skits featured African American characters who experienced the same emotions as whites, and felt the same pain when mistreated. Foster's "Nelly Was a Lady" (written in 1849) was viewed as particularly significant, in that "Nelly" is a black woman. In nineteenth century American usage, the term "lady" had been reserved strictly for white women.

Foster's songs continued to be sung on the minstrel stage throughout the rest of the century, and were used by both white and black minstrel ensembles. An article in the September 8, 1894 edition of *New York Clipper* notes that the August 24, 1894 opening of the Primrose & West's Minstrels at the Opera House in Utica, New York featured the thirty African American performers of the troupe singing Foster songs "Nellie [sic] Was a Lady," "Suwanee River," and "Kentucky Home."

As a result of the broad appeal of minstrel shows, audiences included all levels of society, and were racially mixed—a fact which has been largely ignored in recent minstrel scholarship. Louis Gerteis writes,

Blacks, whether one liked it or not, participated in blackface representations of cultural exchange. Blackface, whether one approved of it or not, provided a theatrical forum within which blacks could, to a degree and never free of the scientific construction of race, talk back and participate in the social representation of an African American self.

Playbills from the Bowery Theater, one of the most prominent venues for antebellum minstrel performances, list prices for "private boxes at \$3.00 and \$5.00, the dress circle and upper boxes at \$0.25, the pit at \$0.12, the gallery at \$0.10 and 'Colored boxes' at \$0.25." In nineteenth century theater practice, the gallery was reserved for patrons of the lowest social classes, and in some theaters it was subdivided further into a "colored gallery."

African Americans also participated in minstrel shows as performers. Though the vast majority of antebellum blackface minstrels were white, some were African American. The most famous black minstrel of the early era, William Henry Lane, performed under various stage names, including Juba, Master Juba, and Boz's Juba. He was an accomplished dancer, and by 1845 was earning top billing over white blackface performers.

Born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1825, Lane first achieved fame as a dancer in the Five Points area of New York City—a slum populated primarily by freed slaves and poor Irish. Charles Dickens saw Lane dance in a Five Points saloon during his 1842 tour of America, and described the performance in the first volume of his *American Notes*:

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 sort of legs and no legs—what is this to him?

By 1846 Lane was the star attraction at the Melodeon theater in the Bowery, dancing as part of Charles White's minstrel troupe, White's Serenaders. Two years later he travelled to London with Pell's Ethiopian Serenaders, a minstrel troupe formed by Gilbert Ward Pell, brother of former Virginia Minstrel Dick Pelham. A poster for a performance at the Royal Vauxhall Gardens in August 1848 advertises an extravaganza including lions, tigers, horses, and fireworks, featuring Pell's Serenaders with Boz's Juba (Lane) performing "Lucy Long," a well-known minstrel show finale. The song had been introduced by the original Virginia Minstrels in 1843, and was appropriated by George Christy of Christy's Virginia Minstrels for "wench pieces"—minstrel show skits in which performers cross-dressed.

Lane died in London in 1852 at age 27, and although at the height of his career he was one of the most famous dancers in the world, he quickly faded from memory. Dance historians Marshall and Jean Stearns offered the possible explanation that "Negro historians have ignored him, perhaps because, unlike the Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, he did not excel at an art which had

prestige.”

Even Lane’s African American contemporaries did not generally acknowledge his artistic genius. Except for a few reviews in the *New York Globe* and the *Indianapolis Freeman*, minstrel shows received almost no attention in antebellum African American newspapers and journals—a circumstance that would change after the Civil War, when African American minstrel troupes came to prominence. Frederick Douglass, one of the few African Americans from this period who was speaking publicly or writing for publication, initially viewed minstrelsy as an immense evil, and wrote scathing denunciations in *The North Star*, based on second-hand descriptions of the shows. In an 1848 column he described white minstrel troupes as “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,” and sarcastically labeled standard minstrel songs “Ole Zip Coon,” “Jim Crow,” “Ole Dan Tucker,” and “Jim Along Josey,” as “specimens of American musical genius.”

However, the following year Douglass himself attended a performance by African American minstrel troupe Gavitt’s Original Ethiopian Serenaders—“partly from a love of music, and partly from curiosity to see persons of color exaggerating the peculiarities of their race...” His review in the June 29, 1849 issue of *The North Star* was mostly negative, in terms of his assessment of the show’s performance quality: he writes that “Their singing generally was ... not even a tolerable representation of the character of colored people,” and “Their attempts at wit showed them to possess a plentiful lack of it, and gave their audience a very low idea of the shrewdness and sharpness of the race to which they belong.” Yet, he goes on to praise the bones player (identified only as “Davis”) as “a master player,” and adds that B. Richardson’s Virginia Breakdown “excelled anything which we have ever seen of that description of dancing.” Douglass’s ambivalence about African American minstrelsy is apparent:

We are not sure that our readers will approve of our mention of those persons, so strong must be their dislike of everything that seems to feed the flame of American prejudice against colored people; and in this they may be right, but we think otherwise. It is something gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience; and we think that even this company, with industry, application, and a proper cultivation of their taste, may yet be instrumental in removing the prejudice against our race. But they must cease to exaggerate the exaggerations of our enemies; and represent the colored man rather as he is, than as Ethiopian Minstrels usually represent him to be. They will *then* command the respect of both races (emphasis in original).

Douglass gradually came to admit that certain aspects of minstrelsy could further the cause of abolition. Speaking to the Rochester (New York) Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society in 1855, he said, It would seem almost absurd to say it, considering the use that has been made of them, that we have allies in the Ethiopian songs; those songs that constitute our national music, and without which we have no national music. They are heart songs and the finest feelings of human nature are expressed in them. “Lucy Neal,” “Old Kentucky Home,” and “Uncle Ned” can make the heart sad as well as merry, and can call forth a tear as well as a smile. They awaken the sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root, grow up, and flourish.

Antebellum Americans from both the North and the South had ample opportunity to see minstrel shows. Although the most famous minstrel troupes were still concentrated in the Northeast in the late 1840s, approximately forty touring groups were active by that time, visiting Southern cities including Baltimore, Charleston, Mobile, Memphis, and New Orleans on a regular basis. Others, including some professional juvenile entertainers, were also performing in the Midwest and California.

Minstrelsy’s character changed in the mid-1850s, following the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852—a change which signaled the end of the “classical” era of small ensemble minstrelsy.

### CHAPTER III

#### 1853-1861: MINSTRELSY OF THE LATE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD

Beginning in the mid-1850s blackface minstrels gave greater prominence to the type of



material that was so offensive to later generations. Yet, ironically, this was also a period in which professional minstrel troupes advertised their shows as theatricals that were appropriate for families, and shaped the content to make the shows appealing to a wider audience. Anti-slavery elements that were found in shows from the 1840s had mostly disappeared by the early 1850s, and many of the less-derogatory character types from the performances of the previous decade had been displaced by the ridiculous Northern black dandy and the happy Southern plantation character. Robert Toll writes, “This change helped the Northern public to overlook the brutal aspects of slavery and to rationalize racial caste rather than face the prospect of fundamental social and political change.” Before exploring the content of mid-century minstrel shows, it is appropriate to consider their form, and the atmosphere in which they flourished. Societal tensions that existed between races and classes were also manifest in art forms, and representatives of various ethnic and social groups continued to be treated with savage humor in American theatre. David Grimsted, in his study of popular culture at this time, notes that in the 1850s low-comedy characters such as “Barney O’Boozle, from Kilmunymacman” and “Alfred Shallowpate, one of the Hairystockracy” shared the stage with low-class heroes with names like Bill Chisel. Unmarried middle-aged or elderly women came in for particularly vicious treatment:

Whether she was speaking or others were describing her, she was clearly ugly, gossipy, silly, affectedly prudish, and anxious to grab at any available man. Her ugliness was the subject for endless mirth: every feature from hair (false) to feet (large) was ridiculed.

“When she opened her mouth,” one Yankee observed, “if it didn’t look like a country grave yard with a few mouldy old tombstones in it.”

The minstrel shows’ condescending portrayal of African American characters, though clearly offensive, was predictable given the contemporaneous stage presentations of these other groups.

Ensemble minstrel troupes had initially pitched their performances toward working-class men, but a decade after its inception minstrelsy had evolved into an entertainment form that was enjoyed by diverse groups. The changes were in response to popular demand. Music historian Karen Ahlquist writes of mid-nineteenth century audiences,

[T]he customer was always right. Audience members had the option—many would have said the responsibility—of responding immediately and decisively to each part of the performance. Individual acts came and went, sometimes in a single evening, because management catered to audience response. These ultimate critics determined whether a novelty became the tried-and-true. . . . Distinctions between “art” and “entertainment,” so obvious today, mattered little.

*Musical World & Times*, a weekly newspaper that featured, among other things, opera reviews and scholarly articles on music theory and music history, first took note of minstrelsy in its Oct. 8, 1853 issue. A short item in the “Musical News from Everywhere” column with the dateline New York read as follows: “Ethiopian Minstrelsy is on the increase. We now have, in New York, six companies of Minstrels in full blast.” A few weeks later the paper printed its first full article on minstrelsy. The piece described the genre’s appeal:

No one can doubt, we think, that this entertainment has got a strong hold of some secret chord in the popular heart. People who turn their faces against the theater and the opera, go to hear the “minstrels.” Some families have their regular minstrel night: and it is a curious fact, that the most staid and sober-minded persons often frequent these performances.

In accounting for so paradoxical a taste, with earnest, sober-minded people particularly [*sic*], it has been suggested that it is the hidden *sarcasm* and *irony* beneath the burlesque of Negro Minstrelsy, which lend a certain dignity to it, and justify, to the person’s own mind, the strong interest entertained.

For our own part, we think it is nothing more or less than genuine *love of fun*—a latent feeling, after all, in most world-worn heart[s]—which crowds the hard benches of Negro Minstrelsy . . . A marked characteristic also of the music generally, is its great *vitality*. Whatever sentiment is to be expressed is given with the whole heart and soul. The merriment, the pathos, the mock-pathos—bathos—the joke and banter, are gone into with perfect abandonment (emphasis in original).

Other reviewers were just as enthusiastic in their praise. An unsigned article from the September 10, 1853 edition of New York’s *The Spirit of the Times* proclaimed,

*Wood's Minstrels* are doing a flourishing business; their selection of songs are [*sic*] of the most pleasing character, provoking mirth and laughter and also touching the most tender strings of nature. This company is well managed, and as a body of chorus singers are unsurpassed in the country, being also true and perfect delineators of the funny and sentimental "darkies" . . . Strangers are recommended by us to see all the Ethiopians in town, they are among the most laughable entertainments we have, and a good laugh is worth something now-a-days.

Theater managers now made a concerted effort to attract all types of audience members. Bowery minstrel hall owner Charles White set a precedent at his Melodeon theater by allowing women free admission on Friday evenings, provided they were accompanied by escorts who paid full price. Front row seats in some theaters were set aside for women and families, and security guards hired to patrol the area and maintain order. An 1861 advertisement for Christy's Minstrels in the *Charleston Daily Courier* proclaimed that the large number of women who attended the minstrel shows on a regular basis was "sufficient proof that nothing is offered to offend the purest hearer." Some touring companies of the time included extra entertainment at the end of the regular show: for an additional charge the locals could attend an elegant dance, while the minstrels, in formal attire, provided music. However, not all touring minstrel companies had the luxury of performing in refined environments. Ralph Keeler, a journalist who spent three years as a blackface minstrel with a company based on a Mississippi riverboat, noted that,

In some places on the Mississippi, especially in Arkansas, men would come in with pistols sticking out of their coat pockets or with long Bowie knives protruding from the legs of their boots.

The manager had provided for these savage people, for every member of the company was armed and, at a given signal, stood on the defensive. We had a giant for a doorkeeper, who was known in one evening to kick down stairs as many as five of these bushwhackers with drawn knives in their hands. There were two other persons, ostensibly employed as ushers; but really to fight the wild men of the rivers.

In an effort to make minstrel shows affordable for entire families, troupes often listed children's admission tickets at half price in playbills and newspaper advertisements. Significantly, when troupes played in Southern cities they offered half price tickets for "servants"—an antebellum Southern euphemism for "slave." Many minstrel groups held Saturday matinees specifically for "Families and children," and some offered door prizes for ladies. Children who attended the Sanford Minstrel's Christmas morning 1855 performance at the Twelfth Street Opera House in Philadelphia were treated to free toys.

Stephen Foster recognized that minstrel shows had begun to attract more refined audiences, and took advantage of this development. At the beginning of his composing career he published his minstrel songs under E. P. Christy's name, although he copyrighted his parlor songs under his own. But by 1852 he had determined that he could profit by being recognized as the composer of work which he had previously felt might injure his reputation as a serious composer. On May 25 he wrote to Christy:

I have concluded to reinstate my name on my songs and to pursue the Ethiopian business without fear or shame. . . . I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order.

Minstrel show patrons found abundant venues for their favorite entertainment. There were established minstrel troupes in many major cities, as well as numerous touring companies. In New York in the 1850s there were ten minstrel theaters on one block of Broadway alone. Beverly J. Robinson notes that "Minstrelsy performances were common in large theatres such as Old Park, Bowery, and Chatham, in Barnum's Museum, in converted churches and synagogues, in a showboat that toured the New York vicinity, and in their own newly built theatres, often christened 'Ethiopian Opera Houses.'" Ordway's Aeolians of Boston, Hooley's Minstrels of Brooklyn, and Sanford's Minstrels of Philadelphia all performed in their respective cities throughout the 1850s. The craze also spread to the West: In 1857 four of the most famous theaters in San Francisco offered minstrel shows to the exclusion of almost everything else. Some troupes played three shows a day—a pattern that would continue in burlesque and vaudeville shows.

In contrast to earlier minstrel shows, which had been loosely structured, mid-century minstrel shows settled into a standardized format, based largely on the model of E. P. Christy's productions. (Christy's Minstrels had been resident at Mechanic's Hall in New York City continuously for seven years, from 1847 to 1854.) Jean H. Baker writes,

Like a religious service appreciated for its traditional litanies, [minstrel] performances became mimetic affairs, differing little no matter where, when, or by whom performed, and Americans who never attended a show soon knew minstrelsy from its advance parades, unchanging routines, free concerts, rememberable puns, and hummable tunes.

The shows typically consisted of three acts. The first, sometimes played in whiteface, began with a "walkaround" (or "walkround"), an ensemble piece which in the early 1850s was performed by instrumentalists and dancers. Dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes that the minstrel walkaround was "a throwback to Africanist plantation dances in which individuals stepped forth out of a moving, walking, or dancing circle in order to improvise several bars of solo dancing." (After about 1858 it consisted of both singing and dancing, in a form popularized by Bryant's Minstrels.) This was followed by the Interlocutor's famous command, "Gentlemen, be seated!"—the cue for the minstrels to form their chairs into a semi-circle and sit down. The rest of the act featured comic banter between Tambo and Bones and the Interlocutor, interspersed with solos, choral ensembles, and dance numbers.

The first part of the show was highly improvisational, and troupes would often use topical humor. (Touring companies usually sent advance men ahead of the group, to get local news and gossip, which would then be incorporated into the minstrels' jokes and skits.) Sentimental ballads, typically sung by a tenor, were the musical highlight of the first act. Nineteenth-century actress Olive Logan wrote of the character of these songs, in an article published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*:

Lugubriousness is always a very marked feature of Part I. of the programme at the minstrels'. The untimely death of his unusually attractive sweetheart is the customary burden of the "genteel" minstrel's song. Willows or cypress incessantly wave their melancholy boughs over the lone, dank grave, by the rippling river's side, of Cynthia Sue or Lily [*sic*] Dale"

Richard Butsch, in his study of nineteenth century theater audiences, writes that sentimental songs of this type struck a chord with young men who had left their loved ones to find work in the city, or forty-niners who had headed west to seek their fortunes, as evidenced by a line from an 1855 *New York Tribune* article: "Who has not often observed the tears of sensibility moistening the cheek of youth, while listening to the primitive strains of *Uncle Ned*?"

An article in an 1858 issue of the *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig* echoed Olive Logan's bemused assessment of the musical quality of mid-century minstrel ballads, and noted their transmission into popular culture as parlor songs:

The burden of the song is generally about some maiden, who lives near some river, (Sewanee, for example), who did nor didn't do something, who died somehow, and is supposed to be loved by the singer to the last pitch of distraction. . . . [T]he appearance of a new piece of this kind is hailed with great joy by all the young ladies of the Hum-Drum Africanus school, and their name is legion. They steal a couple of hours from their morning slumbers to practice it secretly. They get it first by note, then by ear, then by heart.

The role of the Interlocutor was expanded and became more well-defined by the mid-1850s. He functioned as the symbol of white elite society, with his ostentatiously correct grammar and his condescending attitude toward the other stage characters, and Jacksonian Era audiences relished the discomfiture he experienced as the butt of the end men's jokes. The Interlocutor also became the troupe member responsible for shaping performances, by determining, on the fly, which elements of the show were proving most popular with each unique audience. Robert Toll writes, "Although unnoticed by the audience, his talent for knowing when to draw out or cut off comedians, when to change to a different type of humor, and whether to vary the prearranged musical selections largely determined the difference between a good and bad first part." Interlocutors, along with the end men, typically received the highest salaries in a minstrel troupe.

After an intermission, the second act, known as the "olio," began. John Strausbaugh describes the olio as "a direct precursor to vaudeville, not to mention *The Ed Sullivan Show*." It consisted of a conglomeration of performances that took place in front of the curtain, so as to enable stage hands to reset the stage for the third act. Singers, dancers, jugglers, acrobats, animal imitators, magicians, and others could appear in this segment, but the showpiece of the olio was the stump

speech.

This device had been featured prominently in the European clowning tradition from the Middle Ages onward, and had been included occasionally in early minstrel shows (--See the "Locomotive" lecture listed on the 1843 Virginia Minstrels program in Chapter 1--), but by the mid-1850s it was a standard feature of the olio. These pieces relied on puns and malapropisms, combined with slapstick humor. Toll writes, "If the stump speaker did not fall off the podium onto the floor to punctuate his oration, one fan reminisced, the audience felt cheated. They were rarely disappointed."

The malapropisms used in minstrel stump speeches may in fact have been an intentional imitation of slaves' use of language to advance their own interests. Mel Watkins argues, [A]s slaves began to develop rudimentary facility with the language, naïve malapropism was slowly but stealthily transformed into double-entendre and self-conscious or willful ambiguity, assuming the more consciously manipulative, goal-directed, and sophisticated cast typical of European and indigenous African wordplay. This *deliberate* linguistic misdirection allowed slaves both to communicate surreptitiously with one another and, without detection, express humorously some of the pent-up outrage resulting from their treatment as bondsmen ... At the same time, maintaining the *appearance* of the naïve was crucial as a survival technique, providing the perfect guise for aggressive humor and wit (emphasis in original).

In addition, other linguistic elements found in stump speeches may have accurately represented speech patterns used by certain African American groups of the time. Carl Bryan Holmberg and Gilbert D. Schneider insist that the large number of hand-written copies of Dan Emmett's stump speeches archived at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus provide proof that "the bulk of the words demonstrates studied attention to black English, attention which did not have to be incorporated in [Emmett's] sermon texts if they were merely whimsical vehicles for entertainment." They note the instances of West African Pidgin English in Emmett's minstrel writings, and conclude that "The genuine African culture and phonology which followed Emmett throughout his career also certifies his sensitivity to black reality."

Though minstrels often used the mock sermon premise, they also deployed parodies of political speeches, lyceum lectures, and commemorative addresses. They lampooned revivalist meetings, women's rights, abolition, temperance, magnetism, spiritualism (specifically, the Fox sisters), Millerites, miscegenation, phrenology ("free-knowledgey"), etc., often moving rapidly from one topic to another in the course of the same speech. During this phase of minstrelsy class, gender, and race were equally significant in parodies presented by the most famous minstrel troupes. Barbara Glass adds that the minstrels' targets were any groups that "desire[d] to imitate classes or cultures that [were] perceived as more intellectual, well to do, or respected than oneself and one's neighbors."

The minstrels' sermon parodies may in part have been a response to the condemnation that nineteenth century clergymen themselves often reserved for theatrical performers. But beyond that, the satirical pieces were a commentary on charlatans and hucksters of all sorts, who would manipulate and deceive their audiences through emotional rhetoric. Listeners were addressed as "brothers and sisters" (or, more often, "brethren and cistern") in the style of evangelical Baptists and Methodists.

The following excerpt is an example of a minstrel stump speech on phrenology, published in 1855 in *Black Diamonds; A Series of Burlesque Lectures, Darkly Colored*, under the pseudonym "Professor Julius Caesar Hannibal":

SUSPECTED WOOLLY HEADS: I SHALL dis ebenin' rebound on de great siance of FREENOLOGY.

Freenology am one ob de moss anshent and beutiful siances in de hole catalog ob learnin, and am twin sister to Mesmerism. Freenology consists in gittin 'nolage free, like you am dis ebening; it was fust discubered in de free schools, and was always looked 'pon by de larned as bein closely connected wid "E pluribus Unum."

In order to fully 'splain my seff on dis 'portant siance, I went to de slawghter house, up in

Christy street, and got dis skull. It was emposable for me to get de hed ob de human body at the Horsepital, so I hab to use dis sheep's head, which no doubt will answer de same purpos, 'kase it hab got de wool on.

De fust bump in a cullered man's hed—and it taint no use bodderin 'bout enny odder man's hed—am siterated on de top, and called by de siantifick de cokanut bump; dis bump lays in a triangular form ober de bump of don't-care-a-d—n-ativeness, which ebery black man's hed am fully blessed wid; some ob de lower order ob cullered men hab got de bump of ori-gin-ality, which renders dem 'septable ob drinkin bad gin made up into slings and toddies. But, my slinging frens, I warn you to stop dis sling bizness, or else you will sling youseffs into de place whar de brimstone matches am made.

George F. Rehin writes, “The minstrel show was like the museum, only with laughter; it purveyed knowledge of new technology and new situations . . . The pretensions of science, education and professionalism were common targets for burnt-cork ridicule.”

The third part of the minstrel show typically consisted of a one-act play, featuring individual song and dance numbers and concluding with another walkaround. In the early years of ensemble minstrelsy the skit was usually set on a Southern plantation. But by the mid-1850s many troupes had begun to incorporate parodies—of current events, books, operas, Shakespearean plays, or other popular entertainment forms.

The content of minstrelsy parodies of the 1850s was affected profoundly by the publication of one book: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Life Among the Lowly*. Sarah Meer writes, “For a large part of 1852 and 1853, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seemed inescapable: it was bought, discussed, imitated, and invoked on a scale hitherto unseen and previously unimaginable for a novel by an American woman, let alone a novel about slavery.” The phrase “Tom-Mania,” first used in the December 4, 1852 edition of the London newspaper *Spectator*, referred to popular preoccupation with Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and the consumption of related merchandise, including board games, utensils, bric-a-brac, snuff boxes, Limoges vases, Staffordshire pitchers, etc. Many of these were produced in Europe, and became known as “Uncle Tomitudes.”

Many scenes from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in fact exemplified conventions from minstrelsy. For example, interchanges between Topsy and Miss Ophelia echo dialogues between the end men and the Interlocutor. The exchanges functioned as a means for making Stowe's purpose acceptable to those who might otherwise have turned a deaf ear. Meer writes, “[B]y turning the end man-interlocutor dialogues into conduits for disguised and ambivalent sympathy for slave characters, they may have made its antislavery message palatable for the cautious and scarcely noticeable for the indifferent.”

Although it is highly unlikely that Stowe ever attended a minstrel show, she would certainly have been exposed to minstrelsy's conventions, as they were assimilated into nineteenth century society. A *Putnam's Monthly* article from 1855 described the extent to which minstrel music had become part of everyday life: “The school-boy whistled the melody . . . The ploughman checked his oxen in mid furrow, as he reached its chorus . . . Merchants and staid professional men . . . unbend their dignity to that weird and wonderful posture . . . it is sung in the parlor, hummed in the kitchen, and whistled in the stable.” Meer makes a direct connection between minstrelsy and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

Minstrelsy was as pervasive in popular culture and as readily adapted to nontheatrical purposes as *Uncle Tom* would come to be. In fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a symptom of the extent to which blackface imagery and humor were available to Americans outside the minstrel hall, and it would demonstrate how the ambiguities and ironies minstrelsy applied to racial politics could be equally useful off the stage.

Stowe's location also lends support to the idea that she was familiar with minstrelsy. She lived in Cincinnati from 1832 to 1851, a period during which the city hosted some of the most famous travelling minstrels: Christy's Minstrels, the Sable Harmonists, the Sable Troubadours, Kneass's Great Original Sable Harmonists, Campbell's Minstrels, and solo minstrel Thomas Dartmouth Rice, of “Jim Crow” fame.

Shortly after publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe received requests to permit stage productions of the book, but she declined. She was adamantly opposed to theatre in general and her refusal was based on the fear that any adaptation of her novel might lend an air of respectability to the objectionable genre. However, Stowe's prohibition meant little, as she had no protection under copyright laws. Nor did she receive any monetary advantage from the dramatic presentations: Her

publisher, Jewitt and Company of Boston, had specifically denied Stowe royalties on foreign adaptations and stage productions. Thus, theater professionals effectively had free rein in adapting the novel as they saw fit. Meer writes that various playwrights “hijack[ed] Stowe’s creation for their own purposes,” producing “*Uncle Toms* not only adapted to British and French readerships but also designed for children, for various shades of pro- and antislavery opinion or to further the designs of everyone from radical women to misogynists.”

Not surprisingly, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a standard feature of many minstrel shows, appearing in jokes, stump speeches, farces, songs, and sometimes in elaborate musical adaptations of the entire novel. Meers notes that “In their *Uncle Tom* references ... where [minstrels] took a position on slavery it was neither uniform nor predictable.” The goal was to entertain, and faithfulness to Stowe’s text was not a priority.

Though some early *Uncle Tom* minstrel acts had antislavery content, escapist versions dominated as the Civil War approached. Several minstrels became famous playing the title role in farces which promoted the myth of happy plantation life. Frank Brower, one of the original Virginia Minstrels, performed with Wood’s Minstrels in New York from 1854 to 1865, dancing his “Happy Uncle Tom” jig and singing the lyrics:

We wur cakes.  
What kind of cakes wur we?  
Just black cakes.  
What kind ob cake is Little Eva?  
Angel Cake!  
An Massa St. Clair?  
An éclair.

However, even this production included material which evoked sympathy for slaves, thus exemplifying the inconsistencies present in many minstrel versions of *Uncle Tom*. “Poor Uncle Tom,” with lyrics written by Wood’s Minstrels founder Henry Wood, provided a counterpoint to the comic elements of the show, with its description of Tom’s noble self-sacrifice:

Hark, what a cry to heaven ascends  
Eva, the planter’s little daughter  
Whose life on some swift aid depends  
Now struggles in the water  
A bound—a splash—and old Tom leaping  
Ahead of ev’ry other  
Rescues the child, and brings her weeping  
To her distracted mother

[Chorus]  
Poor Tom is now at rest  
In the dark grave,  
And those who knew him best  
Mourn for the slave.

The performances, with their mixture of comedy and pathos, were deemed wholesome family entertainment: A playbill for one of Brower’s *Uncle Tom* performances lists reduced prices for children, and notes “Front Seats invariably reserved for ladies.”

Stephen Foster was deeply impressed by Stowe’s novel, and his music was used extensively in minstrel productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The sketchbook he kept during the 1850s shows that his original lyrics for “Old Kentucky Home” contained the lines,

Oh good night, good night, good night  
Poor Uncle Tom  
Grieve not for your old Kentucky home  
You’r [*sic*] bound for a better land, Old Uncle Tom.

The lines were later replaced with:  
Weep no more, my lady,  
Oh! Weep no more today!  
We will sing one song  
For the Old Kentucky Home,  
For the old Kentucky Home, far away.

As noted earlier, not all minstrel productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* promoted a pro-slavery view, nor did all contain comedic elements. The Ordway Aeolians of Boston produced a decidedly antislavery dramatization, which incorporated a specific political position not adopted by other minstrel troupes. Their version employed magic-lantern projections, and advertised "beautiful scenery and new music," in Wednesday and Saturday afternoon showings geared toward family audiences. A variant of a quotation from the novel appeared across the top of the playbill, leaving little doubt as to the character of the show that was to follow: "Men do not know what Slavery is and from this arose my desire to exhibit it in living Dramatic reality."

What made the Ordway Aeolians' production unique, however, was its approbation of the American Colonization Society's proposal to relocate emancipated slaves to Liberia—a notable departure from Stowe's book. Meer draws attention to the fact that although the character George Harris moves to Africa with his family, Stowe was clearly opposed to this scheme as a remedy for the injustices of slavery. In her "Concluding Remarks," Stowe writes, "To fill up Liberia with an ignorant, inexperienced, half-barbarized race, just escaped from the chains of slavery, would be only to prolong, for ages, the period of struggle on conflict which attends the inception of new enterprises."

Meer provides evidence that African Americans attended minstrel versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, noting that Bowery Theater playbills listed seats in the "Colored Person's [*sic*] gallery" for twelve cents. She adds, significantly, that black patrons were smuggled into the Baltimore-based Kunkel's Nightingale Serenaders' minstrel performances in Charleston, in defiance of a city council ordinance, "for exorbitant sums between five and ten dollars."

Since many commentators have insisted that minstrel shows were attended only by white audiences, it is appropriate to consider Meer's tentative explanation for African Americans' presence at the Charleston show:

One can only speculate about why black audiences in Charleston were so eager to see a proslavery *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Perhaps, like the thousands who read the novel and attended the play elsewhere, they were just curious to see this popular phenomenon. Yet it is suggestive that the city council placed it out of bounds to them. Could the *idea* of Stowe's creation have retained its emancipatory connotations, both for the city council and for the black audience, despite Kunkel's best efforts to spin it another way? Could these observers have identified with blackface subversion or even with the unfortunate runaways by reading the plays against their plots? Just as we must acknowledge the determination with which proslavery minstrel troupes re-wrote Stowe's work to suit their purposes, so we should perhaps imagine their audiences reading the shows, equally deliberately, to suit theirs.

A broadside from the November 21, 1853 production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at Philadelphia's Chesnut Street Theatre provides further proof that African Americans attended shows with minstrel elements. It announces the inclusion of minstrel standards "Nelly Bly," "Lily Dale," and "Mary Blane," as well as a "New Ethiopian Overture," and "a regular African breakdown." The "Prices of Admission" section notes, significantly, that "The colored tier has been enlarged," to accommodate the large number of black patrons expected to attend.

African Americans not only attended minstrel shows as audience members—some also performed in the productions. Though still a small minority, African American minstrels who followed in William Henry Lane's steps were appearing on stage during the 1850s and 1860s. Most performed for only a short time, but they paved the way for the troupes that would dominate minstrelsy after the Civil War. Black minstrel Ike Simond (1847-?) published a pamphlet of his reminiscences, which has proved valuable to scholars studying African American participation in American entertainment in the last half of the nineteenth century. He notes the following antebellum African American minstrel groups with their primary location(s) and the year in which they were formed:

- 1855: The Mocking Bird Minstrels, Philadelphia.
- 1857: The Alabama Slave Minstrels, Brooklyn and some cities in Massachusetts;  
Apollo Minstrels, Columbus, Ohio.
- 1858: Unnamed black minstrel troupe, New Hampshire.
- 1862: Unnamed black troupe led by banjoist Sam Pride, San Francisco.
- 1863: Unnamed black troupe, St. Louis.

Simond's entry for 1865 lists the appearance of five new black minstrel troupes, including the Georgia Minstrels. He adds, significantly, "Hereafter too many Black minstrel troupes appeared to name them all."

One African American minstrel who appeared on the scene in 1853 deserves special mention. Thomas Dilworth (or Dilward), a black dwarf, adopted the stage name Japanese Tommy, and began his career as a fiddler, singer, and dancer with Christy's Minstrels. He went on to perform with other famous minstrel troupes such as Bryant's Minstrels, Sam Hague's Georgia Slave Troupe, and Charles Hicks's Georgia Minstrels, in the 1850s and 1860s. Like William Henry Lane, Dilworth apparently was accepted by audience members and his fellow minstrels, with little or no concern about his race. Theater historian Thomas L. Riis writes, "To promoters in those days, the value of such a 'curiosity' who danced and played the fiddle seems to have overcome any qualms they might have had about racial mixing in public entertainments." Though most professional minstrel troupes of this era were comprised of Northerners, some companies included musicians from the South. M. B. Leavitt, who later became famous as a show business manager and producer, performed as a minstrel with several troupes before and during the war. He wrote of his association with the New York-based Bishop & Florence's Minstrels, which for a time included members whose sympathies lay with the Confederacy:

Among the musicians in this minstrel company were the two Harding brothers, red-hot Southerners, who rarely failed when opportunity served to proclaim their sectional sentiments. In Wilkesbarre [*sic*], Pa., these brothers got into a violent argument with some young bloods of the town, who were so angered that they reported our company consisted of Secessionists. A mob formed, and although the entertainment passed off quietly, except for a few unpleasant remarks from the audience, an attack was made upon the performers in their dressing-rooms after the show, and many of them, to escape assault, jumped out of windows. The Hardings were promptly discharged for having caused the trouble. Distorted tales of what had happened spread across the State, and ruined our business through the great prejudice against us that it had excited.

Minstrelsy's appeal extended across the political spectrum, as well. Advertisements for minstrel shows appeared on a regular basis in both Republican and Democratic newspapers during the antebellum and Civil War years. Mark E. Neely Jr. writes, "The best and most consistent proof of the generally nonpartisan appeal of minstrelsy lies in the eager embrace of advertising for minstrel shows by the nineteenth-century party press—a sign, surely, that audiences contained people of all political parties."

Neely cites several striking examples of what he terms the "peaceful coexistence" between minstrelsy and the anti-slavery press. The *Chicago Tribune*, which took a firm anti-slavery stance during the 1850s and 1860s, ran an advertisement for a show by Phelps's Burlesque Ethiopian Opera Troupe directly next to an article praising anti-slavery forces in Lawrence during the turmoil following passage of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Even more significant are promotional pieces for Buckley's Serenaders from Civil War era issues of *The Commonwealth*, a Boston daily newspaper which had been associated with the Free Soil movement and which, in the words of abolitionist Julia Ward Howe, "did good service in the battle of opinion which unexpectedly proved a prelude to the most important event in our history as a nation." The December 11, 1863 issue contains an advertisement for the Serenaders' appearance at the New Minstrel Hall and Aquarial Gardens, and the January 22, 1864 edition features a favorable review of the performance. Neely adds,

The troupes offered a wide range of entertainments, but there is no mistaking the nature of the show commented on by the *Commonwealth* in this instance. The program included the revival of the risqué minstrel show staple "Sally Come Up" along with "Three Contrabands ... Esseva [*sic*] of Old Virginny ... [and] Black Yer Boots." The same issue of the paper contained an editorial in favor of land distribution to the freedmen of the South.

Many editors chose to ignore minstrelsy completely. William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, printed almost no articles relating to minstrelsy. One exception is found in the June 11, 1847 issue, under the heading, "Black Orators and Minstrels." The article, reprinted without comment from slavery supporter Mordecai M. Noah's newspaper *The Sunday Times and Noah's Weekly Messenger*, reads as follows:

Negro oratory, like negro minstrelsy, is getting to be an indispensable amusement. One Mr. [Henry] Bibb, a runaway slave, is brought forward as a rival of Fred Douglass, and has been "enlightenin de folks ob Brooklyn." However, it is said that Douglass' association with European ladies and gentlemen has rendered him entirely too clever to be easily outdone. He still remains "the great nigger of them all"—[Thomas Dartmouth] Rice excepted.



Antebellum black newspapers likewise contained almost no mention of minstrel shows. As has been shown, some African Americans did attend minstrel shows. However, historian Frankie Hutton, in her study of the black press from 1827 to 1860, writes that “The humble buffoonery and stereo-types of the laughing, lazy, sensual, and ignorant darcy depicted by the minstrels would have been out of place in elitist black newspapers.” She further explains that minstrel performances were “considered taboo among many of the black bourgeoisie—too frivolous, a waste of time, and too impolitic to consume the time of the vigilant and the respectable.”

*Pacific Appeal*, a short-lived California newspaper, was one of the few African American publications to address minstrel shows. In its May 24, 1862 issue it described minstrelsy as “a moral ulcer,” and made the curious claim that “In the City of Boston these Negro delineators cannot obtain permission of the city authorities to exhibit.” However, there is ample evidence to the contrary. The Boston-based Ordway Aeolians, founded in 1845, are mentioned in an article by famed minstrel Charles White (founder of White’s Serenaders) in the April 28, 1860 issue of the *New York Clipper*. Further, a *Clipper* article titled “The Golden Days of Minstrelsy,” from the December 19, 1914 issue, also references the Ordway troupe in complimentary terms, noting that it “had created a furor throughout the country and especially in Boston.” As mentioned earlier, Boston newspaper *The Commonwealth* ran advertisements and complimentary reviews for minstrel troupes during the Civil War.

Minstrel troupes’ rosters changed as new members were added and old ones left to join other groups or to form their own competing ensembles. By 1858 Dan Emmett, founder of the original Virginia Minstrels, had joined Bryant’s Minstrels, one of the most successful New York troupes. That year a Minneapolis newspaper praised the group for its superiority to less-refined entertainers: “Minstrels too often (and too justly) associated with noise, vulgarity and low aims... This troupe is just the opposite.” Five years later they had achieved such fame that a *New York Herald* journalist facetiously suggested that Bryant’s Minstrels should either move to a larger hall or make their shows less appealing, as four hundred to five hundred would-be spectators were turned away nightly. A later column described the conditions at Mechanics’ Hall on Broadway, where the troupe performed continuously from 1857 to 1866: “The ceiling is low, the ventilation bad, and the seats are often narrow and uncomfortable. Yet the performances are so attractive that the room is crowded every night.”

Political developments had long provided the inspiration for many elements of the minstrels’ repertoires, and Bryant’s Minstrels used such satires liberally. As early as 1853 Emmett had included topical allusions in his songs, such as “Jordan is a Hard Road to Travel.” This piece referenced the 1840s boundary disputes between the United States and the North American British colonies (present-day Canada), which were resolved by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1842) and the Oregon Treaty (1846), and celebrated Franklin Pierce’s recent presidential inauguration:

If I was de legislator ob dese United States,  
I’d settle de fish question accordin’;  
I’d give de British all de bones and de Yankees all de meat,  
And stretch de boundary line to de oder side ob Jordan.

Der’s been excitin’ times for de last year or two  
About de great Presidential election;  
Frank Pierce got elected and sent a hasty plate ob soup,  
To his opponent on de oder side ob Jordan.

Louis Napoleon after all is Emperor of France,  
And all Europe begins to tremble accordin’  
But the Yankees don’t care for if with us he wants to fight,  
He’ll wish he’d staid [*sic*] on de oder side ob Jordan.

Bryant’s Minstrels are most famous for introducing the iconic minstrel song, “I Wish I Was in Dixie’s Land,” (hereafter referred to simply as “Dixie”). Though an in-depth exploration of the influence of “Dixie” on American life and culture is outside the scope of this paper, any work on mid-nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy would be incomplete without some discussion of this tune. Dan Emmett is generally acknowledged to have written it as a concluding walkaround for an April 1859 Bryant’s Minstrels show in New York City. However, its authorship is a matter of some debate.

Howard L. Sacks and Judith Rose Sacks argue, in their 1993 book *Way Up North in Dixie: A Black Family's Claim to the Confederate Anthem*, that Emmett appropriated the tune after hearing it performed by black musicians in the Snowden Band in Emmett's native Ohio. The book received generally favorable reviews, including one by renowned historian Drew Gilpin Faust in the *New York Times Book Review*. Yet the book contains errors which should cause readers to question the authors' attention to detail. Sacks and Sacks assert that "black performers . . . were excluded from professional theatrical venues until well after the Civil War . . ."—thus ignoring Juba, Japanese Tommy, and the African American minstrel troupes in existence during or immediately following the Civil War. Even stranger, they claim that slaves in 1850 sang "chestnuts" from African American minstrel composer James Bland, including "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny." (Bland was born in 1854, and the song referenced was first published in 1878.) In short, the Sacks's assertions rely on circumstantial evidence which leaves considerable doubt that the Snowdens were the composers of "Dixie."

Hans Nathan suggests that Emmett's composition of "Dixie," with its images of happy plantation life, may have been an attempt to divert attention from the deteriorating political situation in the late 1850s, and the fear it engendered in Northern whites. He notes that the Bryant's Minstrels' first performance of "Dixie," on April 4, 1859, occurred a few days after publication of a *New York Herald* editorial which presaged the looming conflict:

When we find the African slave traders in the South securely protected by public opinion against the federal authorities, and southern [*sic*] public meetings deliberately resolving that "all laws of the federal government interdicting the right of the Southern people to bring and import slaves from Africa are unconstitutional, null, and void," there is every reason to fear that there is mischief in this thing, which, in 1860, will shake the Union to its foundations.

Nathan writes of "Dixie," "Coming at the height of public concern over the Negro issue, its text and tune sharply focused the main cause of the political turmoil while affording relief in laughter from its tensions."

Minstrelsy's treatment of African Americans during this period reflected the abuse that they, as a group, had received in myriad ways in the years immediately preceding the Civil War. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which had prompted Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, allowed no protection for runaway slaves who reached free states. In the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision the Supreme Court ruled that African Americans were not, and could not become, citizens of the United States, and had no rights that white people would be required to honor. Frankie Hutton writes, "[T]he race was under siege during this period. . . . Even white abolitionists, those northern men of influence and means who agitated so gallantly against slavery, generally preferred not to socialize with fellow black abolitionists, a number of whom were editors and the upper crust of their race."

This trend would continue as the Civil War began, and the minstrels were forced to confront dramatic changes in American society.

#### CHAPTER IV 1861-1865: MINSTRELSY DURING THE CIVIL WAR

The Civil War was at the forefront of the material presented on the minstrel stage from 1861 to 1865. Though minstrels had initially shared the public's optimism that the war would end quickly, their material became darker and more cynical as the conflict wore on and the death toll mounted. Minstrelsy was adopted by amateur musicians, including soldiers from both the Union and Confederate armies. Journal entries and memoirs by men who experienced the military minstrel shows, either as participants or spectators, reveal that for them, performance of minstrel music and comedy was not primarily an expression of racial animosity. Rather, it was a means of providing relief from their oppressive surroundings and, in some cases, generating revenue for charitable causes.

Most studies of Civil War era politics *vis a vis* minstrelsy make the case that blackface minstrels were virtually all Democrats. However, there is evidence that Christy's Minstrels—arguably the most famous minstrel group—consisted of Lincoln supporters who presented pro-Republican material on stage. Christy agent Louis Zwisler, a former Springfield resident who apparently had been personally acquainted with the Lincoln family, claimed that the troupe supported Lincoln publicly. In a letter written from Providence, Rhode Island shortly after Lincoln received

the 1860 Republican presidential nomination, Zwisler writes, “Our company are all Lincoln men ... Our funny men are giving you good hits from the stage—all the time which of course before an audience of 1000 People in a strange place every night does no harm.”

Even minstrels who were not supportive of Lincoln rarely criticized him openly—a result, apparently, of their nationalism and dedication to preservation of the Union. Aside from references to “abe-o-lition” and the occasional allusions to “Father Abraham” in songs, Lincoln was generally ignored on the minstrel stage. Many minstrels chose instead to trumpet their support for Lincoln’s political opponent, Gen. George B. McClellan, rather than disparage Lincoln on stage.

The minstrels’ animosity toward abolitionists reflected the social and political climate of the mid-nineteenth century, in both the North and South. John Hutchinson, in his history of the abolitionist Hutchinson Family Singers, describes the hostility that he and his family members faced countless times, in response to what Hutchinson himself terms the “radical” nature of the music they presented in performances. On one occasion in early 1862 they were prevented from singing for soldiers from Gen. Philip Kearny’s New Jersey division, despite possessing written permission from Secretary of War Simon Cameron. Kearny’s response to Hutchinson’s appeal was, “I rule supreme here ... You are Abolitionists; I think as much of a Rebel as I do of an Abolitionist.” Hutchinson relates that Kearny later told an army chaplain, “[I]f these people are allowed to go on, they will demoralize the army.”

Robert Toll defines *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley as “the minstrels’ principal villain” during the war, noting that they charged Greeley with favoritism toward African Americans, yet also claimed that he used blacks to advance his own interests. (Hans Nathan cites yet another reason for minstrels to feel animosity toward Greeley: He abhorred African American parodies and refused to allow his newspapers to run advertisements for minstrel shows or reviews of their performances.) Interestingly, Frederick Douglass, in an 1852 article, had also severely criticized Greeley (in this case for his support of the colonization movement), describing him as “a queer and incomprehensible man,” and writing that, although Greeley had done much good work for the abolition of slavery, “by his present position he is, practically, among our deadliest enemies.”

Developments in the 1860s furnished the minstrels with more material for their shows. In July 1862 Congress passed the Militia Act, which made provision for the army to employ “persons of African descent” for any type of military service which they could perform competently—an event which added grist to the minstrels’ mill. During the first year of the war, there had been considerable white resistance to the idea of African Americans of either type—freeborn or former slave—serving in the military. The Bryant’s Minstrels’ song “Raw Recruits, or Abraham’s Daughter,” published in 1861 without attribution, had ridiculed the idea of African Americans who, in the song, are going off to join the “Fire Zou Zous”—a reference to the 11<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers (also known as the First Fire Zouaves), a regiment comprised of volunteer firemen. Yet by 1862 public opinion in the North generally favored inclusion of black soldiers, primarily due to the growing number of white casualties. The expectation at that time was that the army would use African Americans primarily as laborers, and initially they were assigned fatigue duty. However, soon they were allowed to fight in combat units.

Despite the fact that in many cases black soldiers’ training was minimal and the equipment they were issued was substandard, they performed admirably in engagements at Port Hudson and Milliken’s Bend in 1863, and won the respect of their commanding officers, who reported favorably to their superiors. The fact that these men had the characteristics to make good soldiers was “established beyond a doubt,” and they were described as “men of almost unequalled bravery.” At the attack on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in July 1863, a skeptical commanding officer placed black troops of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry in the front of the assault, so that they would be disposed of as quickly as possible. Contrary to the general’s expectations, the regiment fought valiantly, despite the loss of its colonel, Robert Gould Shaw. Though the engagement was ultimately a defeat for Union forces, it gave proof that black soldiers were willing and able to fight as well as their white counterparts.

Blackface minstrels generally opposed the recruitment of African American soldiers, as most were committed to maintaining the status quo. Many incorporated into their shows sketches and songs that lampooned black soldiers—arguably some of minstrelsy’s most unfair and cruel characterizations of African Americans. Robert Toll writes,

Minstrelsy’s military ‘komical koons’ could not perform even the most basic maneuver or obey the simplest military command. When the black troops received the order to ‘Fall in,’ several of them jumped into a nearby lake. When ‘Eyes right’ was given, a black soldier replied, ‘I’se right too,’ and ‘At Trail Arms!’ produced a group raggedly walking off

dragging their guns in the dirt.

News of African American regiments' successes had little or no impact on minstrel presentations of black soldiers, and the "Raw Recruits"-themed farces were standard elements of minstrel shows throughout the 1860s and 1870s. Dan Emmett's "The Black Brigade," published in 1863 and used extensively in Bryant's Minstrels shows, is typical of the form:

We're gwine to fight the South, O,  
All by word ub mouth, O;  
To fight for death and glory,  
Am quite annudder story ...

In his "Jack On the Green" (1863), Emmett appropriated the Celtic "Green Man" figure and re-cast him as a grotesque African American giant recruited for military service:

Dar's Uncle Sam dey say, hab spoken to his dad,  
To buy Jack's cow hyde boots, to make an iron clad.  
But fadder Abram says: "I knows what I'm about,"  
"I'm gwine to charter Jack, to tread de rebels out!"

Emmett's 1863 composition "High Daddy," another Bryant's Minstrels standard, described the unsuccessful efforts of a black man to change his skin color, and carried the implication that African Americans' social status was likewise immutable:

He drank skimm'd milk from morn 'till night  
Somebody said that it would make him white:  
But let him drink until he gets his fill,  
He's always bound to be a darkie still

His color will stick, but that's not a sin,  
To wash it off, you're compelled to rub it in:  
For darkie will be darkie as I've said before.  
To the end of the world and for two days more!

Other Bryant's Minstrels' songs from the era covered political topics not directly related to race. Dan Emmett's song "How Are You, Greenbacks?" (later published simply as "Greenbacks!") parodied "We Are Coming, Father Abraham, Three Hundred Thousand More" a popular song whose lyrics had first appeared as a poem by Quaker abolitionist James Sloan Gibbons in the July 16, 1862 issue of the New York *Evening Post*. The words, which were later set to music by Stephen Foster, the Hutchinson Family Singers, and former Ordway Aeolian Patrick S. Gilmore (who was then serving with the Massachusetts 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment), were a response to Lincoln's July 1, 1862 call for 300,000 additional volunteers to join the Union Army.

"How Are You, Greenbacks?" premiered in Bryant's Minstrels' March 2, 1863 show, and dealt with the financial crisis which had begun the previous year. Capitol was needed to finance the war, and on February 25, 1862 Lincoln had signed the Legal Tender Act, thus authorizing the printing of paper money. Emmett's line "We're a-coming, Three hundred million more!" which ends each chorus, is an allusion to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase's decision to print millions of additional dollars in paper money, resulting in inflation and a discrepancy between the value of paper dollars and gold dollars. Prices rose sharply, and by January 1863 the government was unable to pay even members of the military, some of whom had gone without pay for many months.

This representative sampling of verses from Bryant's Minstrels' two versions of "Greenbacks!" (both published in 1863) expresses the public's cynicism about government policies in terms of issuance of paper money, corruption in the allocation of government contracts, the minstrels' support for George McClellan's presidential campaign, their anger over the Union defeat at Fredericksburg (on the Rappahannock River) the previous December, and finally the 1863

Conscription Act, which allowed wealthy draftees to pay a \$300 commutation fee:

Government wheels scream out, while turning,  
“More soap! to keep the ‘Ex’ from burning!”  
Now Chase he is a clever laddy,  
But Father Abram is his daddy.

We’re coming, Father Abram, one hundred thousand more,  
And cash was ne’er so easily evok’d from rags before;  
To line the fat contractors’ purse, or purchase transport craft  
Whose rotten hulks shall sink before the winds begin to waft.

We’re willing, Father Abram, ten hundred thousand more  
Should help our Uncle Samuel to prosecute the war;  
But then we want a chieftain true, one who can lead the van,  
George B. McClellan you all know, he is the very man.

We’re coming, Father Abram, one hundred thousand more;  
I hope a present blessing, though perhaps a future foe;  
The simple terms on which we come, are hardly worth a fuss,  
Now, Abe, as we may father you, I hope you’ll Father us,  
With your promise to pay, “How are you Cousin Postage Stamps?”  
Promise to pay—No more Rappahannocks.

Three hundred dollars is a “clean” tax,  
When one has pockets lined with Greenbacks;  
But when this war comes to an ending,  
Some characters will need some mending!!

Bryant’s Minstrels’ popularity—and the fact that they published and sold their written music—ensured that they would have a host of imitators. Minstrelsy by the 1860s had extended beyond the professional entertainment world, and was being performed by amateurs as well, including those who were serving in the military. Though Robert Toll’s *Blacking Up* is generally regarded as the definitive work on blackface minstrelsy, it does not address uses of minstrelsy in the military during the nineteenth century. Brief references do, however, occur in other sources. It is not surprising that amateur minstrel shows were popular with Confederate troops. However, they were also a significant form of entertainment for Union troops, as well as for prisoners of war.

As early as the Mexican-American War (1846-48), amateur minstrel performances were being staged by members of army regiments. Richard Smith Elliott, who served as a lieutenant in Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny’s Army of the West, and also wrote for the St. Louis *Reveille* under the pen-name “John Brown,” described a minstrel troupe comprised of St. Louis soldiers “led by [John T.] Neal, one of the [Laclede] Rangers, their songs being interspersed by negro lectures conundrums &c., all in a style of broad extravaganza.” Elliott notes in his Dec. 5, 1846 dispatch that the group, billed as “The Virginia Minstrels,” was scheduled to perform as the closing act in the regiment’s Christmas evening theatrical: “[A] grand performance ... which, no doubt, will attract ‘a full and fashionable audience.’” Musical selections, as listed on a hand-written “poster” Elliott included with his letter, included “The old colored gentleman,” “Get along home, you Spanish gals,” “Blue Tail Fly,” and “You ain’t good looking and you can’t come in.”

Maj. Luther Giddings, from an Ohio unit that also served in the Mexican War, likewise reminisced fondly about an amateur minstrel group. He writes that “There is no situation that so severely tries

the discipline of the soldier as a life of inaction in the enemy's country," and adds that, by way of remedy, his regiment devised off-duty nighttime entertainments. "The camp often presented a scene quite as enchanting as any the imagination could portray," including "those ... in the ranks who delighted in the Ethiopian style of minstrelsy, long popular in the United States, and who awoke the echoes of the grove with the untutored but not unpleasing, music of the banjo and the bones."

By the time of the Civil War, minstrel troupes were even more common in army units. E. Lawrence Abel, in his book on music's role in the Confederacy, notes the morale-enhancing effect of amateur minstrel productions in military camps. He adds that the minstrel shows' tradition of lampooning authority figures proved popular with enlisted men, and provided opportunities for them to socialize, along with their officers, in an informal atmosphere.

Ezra Hoyt Ripple, whose reminiscences of his time in Confederate prisons were published after the war, wrote that "[The rebel soldiers] were great lovers of music, and many of them told me that they had never heard much music in their lives, except banjo music." Southern army minstrel groups included the Confederate Minstrels, from Gen. George Pickett's division, and the Washington Light Infantry Minstrels, who hailed from a Charleston, South Carolina unit. The "Ethiopian Minstrels" of Brown's Battalion, a South Carolina infantry reserve unit, toured extensively, and are known to have performed in Houston on July 4, 1862, in a benefit to raise funds for the battalion's hospital.

The most famous troupe was the Texas contingent known as Hood's Minstrels, a group which included men who had earned their living as professional musicians before enlisting in the army. The troupe apparently had the full support of their commander. A correspondent embedded (as we would now say) with Hood's Brigade wrote that Gen. John Bell Hood actively encouraged the musical venture:

General Hood, who is much beloved by his men, knows that listlessness and want of interest and occupation in camp are fatal obstacles, when the day for action comes, to efficiency in the field. He has been at the pains, therefore, to encourage the organization, among his men, of a band of Ethiopian minstrels, ten or twelve in number, who, on Saturday night, discoursed very eloquent music, and elicited rapturous applause. The long preparation which such performances exact, the interest of the discussions which they subsequently awaken, are great incidents in the monotony of camp life, and very healthy stimulants to men so disposed to listless apathy as the Southern soldier. It cannot be questioned that the banjo, the national musical instrument of the Southern Confederacy, is a great addition to the amusement of soldiers on a campaign, and that music has no slight influence in elevating the spirits of the dejected, tatterdemalion, lack-lustre, half-starved scarecrows who are nobly conducting this brilliant struggle for independence.

Hood clearly believed that his support of the minstrel shows was not inconsistent with adherence to a strict code of proper behavior—a sign of minstrelsy's widespread acceptance among respectable people in mid-nineteenth century America. Biographer Angelina Virginia (Smith) Winkler (widow of Lt. Col. Clinton M. Winkler, who served in the Fourth Texas Regiment of Hood's Brigade) writes that Hood "instill[ed] a high sense of honor among his soldiers" so that "the world would cast no slur upon their conduct as gentlemen."

Hood's Minstrels performed in open-air theatricals as early as the summer of 1861. In anticipation of winter they constructed a log building, dubbed the "Lone Star Theater," which ultimately served as the camp church on Sundays and as a minstrel theater on the other six nights. The admission charge for Hood's Minstrels shows was twenty-five cents in Confederate money, and shows were well-attended. Val C. Giles, who served with Hood's Brigade, wrote in his memoirs that the minstrels' stage curtain was adorned with paintings of "devils, jinn, sea monsters, with green eyes and red tongues, all engaged in mortal combat—a pretty good show in itself."

Guest artists at the Lone Star Theater included Gen. J. E. B. Stuart's personal banjo player, Sam Sweeney (brother of early minstrel Joel Sweeney), and Harry Macarthy, composer of "Bonnie Blue Flag." Harold B. Simpson, in his history of Hood's Brigade, writes that Hood's Minstrels were special favorites of Confederate army troops, and entertained them during the first three winters of the Civil War.

At least three Confederate army minstrel groups were among the Southern troops engaged at the Battle of Fredericksburg, in December 1862. It was a significant victory for Confederate forces, and the musicians performed at subsequent celebrations. The author of a letter written after the battle and published in the *Savannah Republican* on January 13, 1863 notes,

An enterprising number of young men from Gen. Hood's old Texas brigade formed a very fine company and have some very diverting amusement for camp. Their efforts to relieve the tediousness of the soldier's life has [*sic*] been kindly encouraged by the Generals, who are often seen mingling with the soldiers and laughing over the obsequious negro delineations. A few nights ago the Minstrels contributed by their performance over three hundred dollars to the sufferers in the city of Fredericksburg. There fun has been turned to charity, and Humor made mistress of Philanthropy.

A soldier stationed near Fredericksburg wrote of the Washington Light Infantry Minstrels' show, in a letter dated Feb. 23, 1863:

You have heard, I presume, of the second performance of the "Washington Artillery Varieties" company. It was a complete success; even better than the one we had just prior to the battle of Fredericksburg. In fact, the army has declared the "Varieties" an institution. It was attended by a score of ladies from the surrounding country, a special railroad train having been run for their accommodation. Gen. Longstreet and staff were present. Gen. Lee was prevented by business from being present, but sent his regrets in an autograph note, thanking the managers for their kind invitation, and wishing them success in their efforts to introduce these entertainments into the army.

Representatives from all the divisions of the army were present, some of [Gen. Thomas "Stonewall"] Jackson's men walking twenty miles, so great was their desire to see the show.

Our theatre being out of doors, we could, of course, accommodate the largest kind of audiences. There was no danger of crowding the house and announcing to the public that "standing-room only" could be furnished at the box-office.

Royall W. Figg also described the Washington Artillery Minstrels' performances:

Soldier life was not without its bright side. Our neighbors, the Washington Artillery (of New Orleans) gave a series of theatrical entertainments soon after the battle of Fredericksburg. . . . Though during wintry weather, they played several nights to large audiences, which included some ladies from the adjacent country.

In addition, a dispatch from Fredericksburg dated Feb. 18, 1863 and published in the February 24<sup>th</sup> edition of *The New York Times* notes the performance that evening of McLaw's Minstrels, from Gen. Lafayette McLaw's division.

J. E. B. Stuart was well-known for promoting musical entertainments in his regiment, and for arranging the transfer of notable musicians from other units into his own. George Cary Eggleston, who served under Stuart's command and later published his reminiscences of the war, wrote,

Almost at the beginning of the war [Stuart] managed to surround himself with a number of

persons whose principal qualification for membership of his military household was their ability to make fun. One of these was a noted banjo-player and ex-negro minstrel. He played the banjo and sang comic songs to perfection, and *therefore* Stuart wanted him. I have known him to ride with his banjo, playing and singing, even on a march which might be changed at any moment into a battle; and Stuart's laughter on such occasions was sure to be heard as an accompaniment as far as the minstrel's voice could reach (emphasis in original).

Another of Stuart's officers, Colonel W. W. Blackford, observed that in the autumn of 1861 Stuart assembled a troupe of string players and singers, ... which afterwards became so well known and so associated with him. Sween[e]y, a brother of the celebrated Joe Sween[e]y, the banjo player who had brought the banjo into European notice by his skill upon it, was one of the band; he played the banjo and sang. Bob, the General's mulatto servant, worked the bones, and then there was a violin player and a guitar player and quite a number of singers among the staff and couriers ... Whenever [Stuart] would hear of a man who had any amusing specialty and was willing to come, he would have him detailed as a courier at headquarters ... In this way he collected around him a number of experts, not only in music, but in theatricals and tricks of various kinds, and they added much to the pleasure of camp life. Sween[e]y and his banjo and his negro melodies were the favorites; and Sween[e]y always carried his instrument slung at his back on marches, and often in long night marches the life of the men was restored by its tinkle.

In another passage Blackford writes,

I have often seen [Stuart] busy arranging for some of his most brilliant cavalry movements, and after all was prepared, come out of his tent, call for Sween[e]y and the banjo and perhaps for some of the men to dance for him, and then, to our amazement, order everybody to mount and be off after the troops who were already on the march."

John Overton Casler, who served with the Stonewall Brigade, recalled his unit forming a minstrel troupe in cooperation with a brigade from Louisiana, when stationed in their winter quarters. Together they constructed a theater, comprised of a log house covered with clapboards, built a stage, and performed nightly to packed houses. They charged one dollar for admission, and donated all proceeds to widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers. Casler writes,

Noble T. Johnson, of the 5<sup>th</sup> Virginia, was one of the end men, handled the bones, and was one of the most comical characters I ever saw. He could keep the house in a roar of applause all the time. Miller, of the 1<sup>st</sup> Louisiana, was banjoist, and a splendid performer. They would write some of their own plays, suitable to the times and occasion. One splendid piece was called "The Medical Board"—a burlesque on the surgeons ... Taking it all together we had splendid performances. I have never seen better since the war, as we had amongst us professional actors and musicians; and the theatre became a great place of resort to while away the dull winter nights.

The Union army was also enlivened by minstrelsy. Military minstrel ensembles' role in furnishing musical entertainment for the troops took on added importance after July 1862, when the War Department's General Order No. 91 abolished regimental bands, in an effort to cut costs. There is at least one recorded case of a military minstrel troupe taking part in an official Army celebration, in the absence of a formally-trained regimental brass band. A dispatch from occupied



Port Royal, South Carolina, dated January 2, 1863 and published in the January 9 edition of *The New York Times*, gives a description of the previous day's festivities, which had been arranged to celebrate both New Year's Day and the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation. The reporter writes that evening concerts by the Provost Guard Minstrels and the Third Rhode Island Minstrels were attended by large crowds, and adds that the dancing was comparable to that which might be expected of a Metropolitan troupe.

Professional banjoist Albert Baur wrote a series of articles for *S.S. Stewart's Banjo and Guitar Journal* in the early 1890s in which he described his early career, including reminiscences of his time as a soldier in Sherman's army and the role that amateur minstrel shows played in entertainment for and by the troops. He writes that despite orders to carry only the barest essentials, soldiers often managed, with the help of sympathetic teamsters, to smuggle banjos and accordions into camp wagons, to be retrieved later and used in their shows. The musicians were able to improvise percussion instruments—mess pans could serve as tambourines, and beef bones were not difficult to come by—but damaged banjo heads would pose a significant problem which could usually be solved only by devious means. Baur writes,

[S]ometimes it would be weeks before we could get a string and if the banjo head was broken it took much time and manoeuvring [*sic*] for one of our party to steal into the tent of a drummer and punch a hole in the head of a drum near the shell after which we would watch that drummer's tent with eagle eyes until he took off the damaged head and threw it out, when "one of the gang" would pounce upon and bring it to camp in a round about way. Owing to their thickness the drum heads did not make very good banjo heads but they "beat nothing clear out of sight."

Baur notes that as the Atlanta campaign progressed, the fighting was so intense that the soldier-minstrels lost track of their instruments. However, after he was wounded on June 27, 1864 and sent to Chattanooga, Baur was pleased to find that the army hospital there also boasted a talented minstrel troupe which performed nightly for the benefit of the patients:

After the tent became so full that no more could be admitted a large crowd would congregate on the outside and listen to the performance, apparently taking as much interest, and certainly applauding as loudly as the fortunate ones who had succeeded in gaining admission.

Perhaps the most remarkable use of minstrelsy by Civil War soldiers occurred in 1863, when officers from the Sixth Cavalry were captured and taken to Libby Prison, in Richmond. As they waited for transportation at the train station in Staunton, the prisoners were confronted by local citizens who had seen their share of war, and were not favorably disposed toward the enemy. In response, the Union officers spontaneously performed two minstrel pieces, in an effort to defuse the situation and establish common ground with the onlookers. One of the Union officers, Lt. Tattall Pauling, later wrote, "Quite a crowd gathered to see the live Yankees and were much amused at the 'Lemcum Gunboats' and 'Three Black Crows' with which we favored them, the Adjut. of the 4[th] Michigan being principal musician. He has enlivened the journey much by his wit & music." At the conclusion of the impromptu performance, the prisoners, unharmed, were allowed to proceed under guard to Libby Prison.

The soldier-minstrels' choice of "Lincoln's Gunboats," more properly known as "Kingdom Coming" or "The Year of Jubilo," as an entertainment vehicle for a hostile—in fact, potentially murderous—Southern audience seems counterintuitive, to say the least. The lyrics, written by abolitionist Henry Clay Work, are as follows:

Say, darkies, hab you seen de massa, wid de muffstash on his face,  
Go long de road some time dis mornin', like he gwine to leab de place?  
He seen a smoke way up de ribber, whar de Linkum gunboats lay;

He took his hat, and lef' berry sudden, and I spec' he's run away!

De massa run, ha, ha! De darkey stay, ho, ho!  
It mus' be now de kingdom coming, an' de year ob Jubilo!

He six foot one way, two foot tudder, and he weigh tree hundred pound,  
His coat so big, he couldn't pay the tailor, an' it won't go halfway round.  
He drill so much dey call him Cap'n, an' he got so drefful tanned,  
I spec' he try an' fool dem Yankees for to tink he's contraband.

De darkeys feel so lonesome libbing in de loghouse on de lawn,  
Dey move dar tings into massa's parlor for to keep it while he's gone.  
Dar's wine an' cider in de kitchen, an' de darkeys dey'll have some;  
I s'pose dey'll all be cornfiscated when de Linkum sojers come.  
De obserseer he make us trouble, an' he dribe us round a spell;  
We lock him up in de smokehouse cellar, wid de key trown in de well.  
De whip is lost, de han'cuff broken, but de massa'll hab his pay;  
He's ole enough, big enough, ought to known better dan to went an' run away.

Clearly, the captured soldiers felt confident that their audience would respond favorably to the comic aspects of the song, and to the upbeat music. One could also argue that their listeners—presumably not upper-class plantation owners—would appreciate the less-than-subtle pokes at the aristocracy, which were so typical of minstrel songs. Inspired by the success of their impromptu performance at the Staunton train station, the prisoners continued to produce amateur theatricals at the prison throughout 1863, under the name “The Libby Prison Minstrels.”

There was precedent for musical performances at Libby Prison, by at least one professional minstrel. Marshall S. Pike had a long and colorful career in minstrelsy, which was interrupted when he enlisted in the Union army, where he served with distinction. He began his professional work as a member of the Albino Family (a short-lived minstrel group that performed in whiteface and blond wigs), and by June 1846 was singing soprano in “wench roles” with the Harmonions. When they presented a minstrel show at the White House for President Polk and his family, Pike was part of the troupe.

At the beginning of the Civil War Pike left the group to join Republican senator Henry Wilson’s regiment, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Volunteers, where he served as drum-major. Pike was among the twenty officers captured at Gaines’s Mill on June 27, 1862, a battle in which his regiment suffered substantial losses, and was sent to Libby Prison in Richmond. Writing later of his experiences, Pike described conditions at the prison:

Our drink was a horrible mixture of James-river water and red mud, mostly mud, which was nasty and nauseating, and caused much of the sickness and many of the deaths during my stay there. Our mattresses and beds were the hard compound of floor-boards and trodden-down dirt, visibly feathered with a tremendous overgrowth of rabidly-inclined gray-backed vermin of monstrous proportions, which proved our closest friends, and stuck to us through all our prison adversities.

Pike’s arrival at Libby pre-dated the formation of the Libby Prison Minstrels by a year—but he formed his own music society to help his fellow prisoners cope with the misery they experienced there:

. . . I became demoralized, but felt determined to do something for our own amusement, and therefore organized a quartet of selected voices, and prepared ourselves for rehearsal. In a few days, with considerable practice, we were well up in some twenty-five or thirty old favorite, familiar quartets and glees, and had also formed an excellent choir, offering to furnish music for religious services if our civilian prisoner, Rev. Mr. Reed of Washington, would preach to us on Sundays. He gladly accepted the call, and our meetings were interesting, and were listened to by all of our prisoners with pleasure and profit. On pleasant evenings we often gathered about our iron-barred window-openings, where, by repeated requests from the citizens outside, we entertained them with music for hours, as well as the prisoners and ourselves inside.

In July 1862 Union and Confederate officials had agreed to a prisoner of war exchange, based on

the cartel model used during the War of 1812, and for almost a year it was typical for captured Union officers to remain at Libby Prison for only a few weeks, while waiting for release. However, Pike and the members of his singing group continued to be confined at Libby, while other prisoners who had arrived after them were given their freedom. Eventually he learned the reason: “[I]t was wholly caused by the cunning of Doctor Bonham and Coggins, the prison-officers, and some sympathetic citizens, who desired to keep us for their general amusement, and to soften the sorrows of the sick in prison.” Upon appealing to a sympathetic major, Pike and the other musicians were finally promised that they would be granted their freedom. However, on the morning of his scheduled release, Pike was visited by a contingent of Confederate officers, doctors, and Richmond citizens, who had learned that his name was on a list of inmates who were to be exchanged for Confederate prisoners:

They had hoped I would remain with them, and trusted they could hold out inducements to keep me; that on the following morning I should have a paper signed by Gen. [John Henry] Winder, allowing me the full freedom of all the Confederate states; that I should not be drafted into their service; that my friends in Richmond would build me a pretty little opera-house, and furnish me with the money necessary to commence business with to make it a success. For all of which generous and friendly intentions I most truly thanked them, but courteously declined.

Pike was finally released in December 1862, and resumed his career as a minstrel with the Pike & Glunn’s troupe after the war. He also achieved fame as a song-writer, often collaborating with James Pierpont (best known as the composer of “Jingle Bells).

The musical performances, first by Marshall Pike’s quartet and later by the Libby Prison Minstrels, provided diversion for the prisoners, under conditions that have been described as worse than in any Civil War prison except Andersonville. Even when the prisoner exchange system was working efficiently, accommodations in Southern prisons were poor in general. On March 21, 1863, Richmond Agent of Exchange Robert Ould, faced with food shortages, had written, “I would rather [Union prisoners of war] should starve than our own people suffer.” When prisoner exchanges were halted on May 25, 1863, due to Northern outrage at the Confederacy’s refusal to release African American soldiers and their white officers, conditions deteriorated rapidly. This was the atmosphere in which the Libby Prison Minstrels staged their theatricals.

In *Libby Prison Breakout*, an account of the February 1864 escape attempt by Union officers, Joseph Wheelan writes of conditions in Libby Prison by autumn of 1863:

[T]welve hundred captives lived in densely packed rooms, bumping into one another at every turn. When nighttime came, they lay on the bare wooden floor “spoon fashion,” turning over on command when the ache in their bony hips and ribs became unbearable. Lacking blankets, they shivered as wind, rain, and snow blew through the barred but paneless windows. As their numbers grew, their rations shrank to tiny portions of corn bread, rancid bacon, and bug-ridden bean soup . . . But for all their discomfort and gnawing hunger, a worse enemy was despair. They fought it with all the energy, cunning, and imagination that they possessed in this great crisis of their lives.

The creation of the Libby Prison Minstrel troupe was a significant element in the prisoners’ attempts to cope with their miserable condition. The northern end of the prison kitchen served as the venue for weekly performances, which, as a former prisoner noted, were “largely attended and warmly applauded.” A stage was improvised by pushing together four long tables, and the curtain consisted of several army blankets which had been sewn together and attached by rings to a wire hung over the heads of the orchestra members. In an effort to add a “professional” touch to the productions, prisoners allotted space for dressing rooms and a green room.

In a journal entry from December 1863, prisoner Lt. Col. F.F. Cavada, writes,

The passion for music is quite general in the prison; a tolerable orchestra has been organized,

consisting of a violin, banjo, guitar, tambourine, and the bones. They have done much to enliven the gloom of the prison, and invariably attract a large crowd of listeners. They have given several performances imitative of the Ethiopian Minstrels, in the cook-room; these performances are quite creditable to the musical taste of the performers, and are attended by large and enthusiastic audiences ... The performers have a grand and exciting time preparing their performances—and the spectators while pleasantly away, in listening to their humorous jokes, the tedium of the long evenings.

Memories of the Libby Prison Minstrels figure prominently in an article written by former prisoner Frank E. Moran and published in the December 10, 1881 *Philadelphia Weekly Times*. Moran had been wounded and captured by Confederate troops on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, and was imprisoned at Libby for ten months, beginning July 18, 1863. Recognizing that “every prisoner has a personal experience that materially differs from that of his comrade,” Moran chose to focus on aspects of prison life which accentuated the prisoners’ creative response to their situation:

It will not seem strange ... that men of such varied talents, tastes and dispositions, shipwrecked by fortune in this peculiar manner, should begin to devise ways and means to turn the tedious hours of prison life to some account ... A minstrel troupe was organized and it could boast of talent that would compare favorably with some of the professional companies of to-day. By a generous contribution of money a number of musical instruments were purchased, forming a very respectable orchestra, and soon the refreshing and welcome sound of music enlivened the place and often when the weary-souled prisoner had lain down for the night there would steal over the dark and dismal place the familiar strains of “Home, Sweet, home,” and if there was ever a time and place when that old melody touched the tenderest chords of the soldier’s heart it was on Christmas Eve behind the barred windows of Libby Prison.

He noted, with relish, that military rank was irrelevant within the minstrel group:

Nothing, indeed, but the positive possession and display of musical or dramatic acquirements could command prominence, and as a natural though droll consequence it was common to see a second lieutenant carrying off the honors of the play as the “leading man” and the colonel of his regiment carrying off the chairs as a “supe.” Indeed, I knew a gallant major and most estimable gentleman who in the first season of his engagement did not deem it beneath his dignity night after night to personate the hind leg of a stage elephant.

In staging their theatricals, the Civil War soldier-minstrels were able to remove themselves and their comrades, however briefly, from both the boredom and the horrors of war. The December 24, 1863 performance was the crowning achievement of the Libby Prison Minstrels. The program, a printed copy of which is reproduced below, featured familiar elements found in professional minstrel shows, including renditions of opera arias and choruses, sentimental songs, instrumental solos, dances, and comedy skits. Frank Moran noted that the show “caused unbounded enthusiasm” among the “men who away down in their hearts felt a homesickness that needed some mental physic.”

#### THE LIBBY PRISON MINSTRELS

Manager	Lieut. G. W. Chandler
Treasurer	Capt. H. W. Sawyer
Costumer	Lieut. J. P. Jones
Scenic Artist	Lieut. Fentress
Captain Of The Supers	Lieut. Bristow

Thursday Evening, December 24, 1863.

PROGRAMME.

Part First

Overture — "Norma" Troupe  
Opening Chorus — "Ernani" Troupe  
Song— "Who Will Care for Mother Now ?" Capt. Schell  
Song — "Grafted in the Army" Lieut. Kendall  
Song — "When the Bloom is on the Rye" Adj. Lombard  
Song — "Barnyard Imitations" Capt. Mass  
Song — "Do They Think of Me at Home?" Adj. Jones  
Chorus — "Phantom" Troupe

Part Second

Duet—Violin and Flute — Serenade from "Lucia" Lieuts. Chandler and Rockwell  
Song And Dance — "Root Hog or Die" Capt Mass  
Banjo Solo Lieut. Thomas  
Duet — "Dying Girl's Last Request" Adjts. Lombard and Jones  
Magic Violin Capts. Mass, Chandler, and Kendall  
Song— "My Father's Custom" Lieut. McCaulley  
Clog Dance Lieut. Ryan

Rival Lovers

Joe Skimmerhorn Capt. Mass  
George Iverson Lieut. Randolph

Part Third

Countryman In A Photograph Gallery

Proprietor Capt. Mass  
Boy Lieut. Randolph  
Countryman Maj. Neiper

Masquerade Ball.

Manager Adj. Jones  
Doorkeeper Capt. Mass  
Musician Capt. Chandler  
Member Of The Press Lieut. Ryan  
Mose Lieut. Welsh  
Black Swan Lieut. Moran  
Broadway Swell Lieut. Bennett  
Richard III Capt. McWilliams

The Whole To Conclude With A Grand Walk-round.

Performance to commence at 6 o'clock.

Admission Free. Children in Arms not Admitted.

Adj. R. C. Knaggs, Business Agent

The end of the Civil War brought sweeping societal changes, which would be reflected in the content and character of minstrelsy. Women would appear in minstrel shows. And African Americans, whose role in entertainment circles had been severely circumscribed in the antebellum years, would take to the stage in far greater numbers. Some adopted minstrelsy conventions, and by changing the content of the shows in subtle ways, would pave the way for other black entertainers of the late nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER V

### 1865-1883: THE DECLINE OF WHITE MINSTRELSY AND THE RISE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MINTRELSY

The popularity of small ensemble blackface minstrelsy as performed by white men began to decline soon after the end of the Civil War. As of December 1865 there were five halls in New York City devoted exclusively to minstrelsy; by the following autumn there were only three. In response to the sweeping societal changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Civil War, minstrels gradually changed the content of their shows. They moved the spotlight away from African American subjects, and emphasized, instead, parodies of operas, Shakespearean plays, and other upper-class entertainments. Frank Dumont, a former member of the New York-based San Francisco Minstrels, later wrote of this time, “We saw the Negro in a new light and important innovations were made in the way of special acts or more attention paid to the singing and instrumentations.” The change in emphasis was not solely a reflection of increased sensitivity to the condition of African Americans, but also a pragmatic response to audience preferences. In Dumont’s words, “[T]he Negro [character] was no longer a trump card as in former years.” Minstrels sought to retain their audiences by incorporating elements of variety shows into performances, and, eventually, by drastically expanding the size of their troupes and including spectacular costumes and highly choreographed routines. However, by effecting these changes, the white minstrels altered the fundamental character of the small ensemble form, and helped to bring about its demise. African American entertainers, seeing an opportunity to display their talents and to gain respect, adopted the minstrelsy format and became the pre-eminent minstrel performers of the late nineteenth century.

Their increased involvement in popular entertainment occurred at the same time that anti-African American organizations were working for the repression of freedpeople. Slavery was abolished by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, enacted on December 6, 1865. However, Reconstruction-era African Americans continued to experience mistreatment by individuals or small groups on the spur of the moment, as well as pre-meditated oppressive acts arising from the objectives of racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Founding members in Pulaski, Tennessee often employed blackface as a masking device, and sometimes infiltrated communities by using their theatrical skills in an imitation of minstrelsy, an entertainment form that was welcomed in many towns. Elaine Frantz Parsons, in her study of costume and performance elements in early Ku Klux Klan activities, argues that many Klansmen of the day were accomplished musicians and actors, and quotes one anti-Klan freedman commenting, unexpectedly, that Klansmen’s music was “the prettiest music you ever saw [*sic*].” She writes,

[A]s the North Carolina Republican judge Albion Tourgée perceptively noted in his historical novel, some of the northern press at first presented the Klan as “farcical” and “a piece of the broadest and most ridiculous fun.” The northerner generally responded to early accounts of “terrified darkies” as he (or she) had been trained to do by the minstrel stage, by “laugh[ing] himself into tears and spasms.”

Just as the Klan imitated minstrels, some professional minstrel groups incorporated Klan-related material into their shows. In the same way that various minstrel troupes had produced markedly different versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, minstrels’ treatment of the Klan was not uniform, and varied from troupe to troupe. Some used the topic as a basis for comedy routines: Parsons cites a Reconstruction-era performance of “Dr. Hemlock’s Trials! Or Secrets of the Ku-Klux Klan Exposed,” billed as “a mirth-provoking, side-splitting Afterpiece,” by the Whitney Family minstrels. Others referenced the Klan in a manner that showed recognition of the threat it posed for African Americans. “Pass Down de Centre,” a San Francisco Minstrels song described by Sharon D. McCoy as “an ambiguous and ambivalent mixture of hope, anger, agency, burlesque, possibility, and despair,” included topical references to the greenback/specie problem and the Freedman’s Banks (which operated between 1865 and 1874), and featured the lyrics,

Times are hard for de darkie  
Way down in Tennessee  
Mister Ku-klux cant [*sic*] you let me be.

The minstrelsy-related activities of such disparate groups bespeaks the form's popularity. One of the San Francisco Minstrels' most prominent admirers, Mark Twain, gives us an idea of the place that minstrelsy held in the lives of early post-bellum Americans, and the affection that many felt for it. His own enthusiasm for minstrel shows was evident early in his career. In what is believed to be his first article for the San Francisco *Dramatic Chronicle*, Twain wrote, in June of 1865, of his love of banjo music, an instrumental form that was associated almost exclusively with minstrel shows until the early 1880s. In the article, Twain compares noted San Francisco minstrel Tommy Bree, whom Twain had heard at the Olympic theater two days prior, with Louis Moreau Gottschalk, a virtuoso pianist who had performed in concert in San Francisco a month earlier. He writes in colorful language of the visceral effect minstrel banjo music could be expected to have on mid-century audiences, and specifically praises African American minstrel Sam Pride and white minstrel Charley Rhoades:

I have modified my musical creed a little since I have enjoyed the opportunity of comparing Tommy Bree, the banjoist of the Olympic, with Gottschalk. I like Gottschalk well enough. He probably gets as much out of the piano as there is in it. The piano may do for love-sick girls who lace themselves to skeletons, and lunch on chalk, pickles, and slate pencils. But give me the banjo. Gottschalk compared to Sam Pride or Charley Rhoades, is as a Dashaway cocktail to a hot whisky punch. When you want *genuine* music—music that will come right home to you like a bad quarter, suffuse your system like strychnine whisky, go right through you like Brandreth's pills, ramify your whole constitution like the measles, and break out on your hide like the pin-feather pimples on a picked goose,—when you want all this, just smash your piano, and invoke the glory-beaming banjo! (emphasis in original)

Chapter 12 of Twain's autobiography, written in the early years of the twentieth century, provides evidence that by the 1860s minstrelsy was beginning to lose its appeal for audiences which had seen the same routines and heard the same music for too many years. He begins, "Where now is Billy Rice?" and lists San Francisco Minstrels Billy Birch, Dave Wambold, Charley Backus, "and a delightful dozen of their brethren who made life a pleasure to me forty years ago and later."

Twain relates an anecdote which demonstrates the reticence some post-bellum Americans still felt about attending minstrel shows, long after the performances had become an accepted institution in most parts of the country. It also illustrates the entertainment power the shows held. As the story goes, Twain's mother and an elderly friend, known familiarly as "Aunt Betsey Smith," arrived in St. Louis for a visit, and asked his help in finding local attractions whose character and content would not conflict with their long-established conservative beliefs:

They were always up early to see the circus procession enter the town and to grieve because their principles did not allow them to follow it into the tent; they were always ready for Fourth of July processions, Sunday-school processions, lectures, and every kind of dissipation that could not be proven to have anything irreligious about it—and they never missed a funeral.

Twain recommended for their consideration "an exhibition and illustration of native African music by fourteen missionaries who had just returned from that dark continent"—in fact, a performance by Christy's Minstrels. "When the grotesque negroes came filing out on the stage in their extravagant costumes, the old ladies were almost speechless with astonishment. I explained to them that the missionaries always dressed like that in Africa."

Mrs. Clemens and her friend had lingering doubts about the propriety of the gathering; but Twain reassured them by drawing their attention to the fact that the audience contained members of upper-crust St. Louis society, adding that surely these people would not be in attendance if the performance were not entirely respectable:

They were comforted and also quite shamelessly glad to be there. They were happy now and enchanted with the novelty of the situation; all that they had needed was a pretext of some kind or other to quiet their consciences, and their consciences were quiet now, quiet enough to be dead.

As was typical in minstrel shows of the early post-bellum era, that night's performance included stale jokes which had been presented on the minstrel stage for decades, and which no longer elicited laughter from regular patrons. The setup for one such joke was received with something less than enthusiasm: "Everybody in the house except my novices had heard it a hundred times; a frozen and solemn and indignant silence settled down upon the sixteen hundred [audience members] . . ." But it

was brand new to the two initiates, and upon hearing the punch line, [T]hey threw their heads back and went off into heart-whole cackles and convulsions of laughter that so astonished and delighted that great audience that it rose in a solid body to look and see who it might be that had not heard that joke before. The laughter of my novices went on and on till their hilarity became contagious and the whole sixteen hundred joined in and shook the place with the thunders of their joy.

Aunt Betsey and my mother achieved a brilliant success for the Christy minstrels that night, for all the jokes were as new to them as they were old to the rest of the house. They received them with screams of laughter and passed the hilarity on, and the audience left the place sore and weary with laughter and full of gratitude to the innocent pair that had furnished to their jaded souls that rare and precious pleasure.

Twain's approval of minstrel shows has caused many commentators to point to this as an indication of blatant racism. But biographer Ron Powers argues that Twain's unabashed affection for the form was simply an expression of his appreciation of "the hilarity, the delight, the silly punning of the performers; the convulsions and hysterics they invoked; the sweetness of the singing." He writes, "[Twain] never called it the 'minstrel show,' however, and the word he used in its place serves, for a great many people, as final proof of his racial iniquity." However, Powers adds that Twain's acquaintance, Frederick Douglass, never claimed that Twain exhibited hostility toward African Americans, and quotes Twain's friend and biographer, William Dean Howells, writing, "I never saw a man more respectful of negroes." In short, Powers concludes that Twain's embrace of minstrelsy "derived from the universal absurdities of human strut and vanity that it evoked, and not from its inescapable undertone of cruelty." The same may be said of many others who enjoyed post-bellum minstrel shows.

Sharon D. McCoy also argues that Mark Twain's enthusiasm for minstrel shows must be understood in terms of the specific type he favored: "old-time" mid-century small ensemble minstrelsy performed by accomplished singers, dancers, and comedians who relied on topical humor. She writes,

Twain found the old-time minstrel show "genuine" in comparison to the blackface performances of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, productions that largely avoided controversial social commentary. While racial "delineation" or stereotypes formed a part of the "old-time" style of minstrel shows, their humor and popularity did not depend primarily on the parody or ridicule of black character. Rather, their focus was on using the racialized mask to deflate pretension and comment on issues of general or local significance, such as the economy, local or national politics, high culture vs. low culture, social class tensions or grievances, temperance, education, social reform, women's rights, or the franchise. Their satire and burlesque was punctuated by general buffoonery, while seriously performed songs of love, longing, and sentiment provided a cathartic counterpoint. For Twain—and his assessment is echoed by historians of the period—the San Francisco Minstrels were the last and greatest innovators in this tradition.

In an effort to renew the appeal that minstrel shows had once had for the American public, minstrels developed and expanded the roles of non-African American stage characters. Jerry Cohan (father of George M. Cohan) performed in Boston with the Morris Brothers Minstrels during the 1867-68 season, using Irish dialect in skits with titles like "The Irish Dancing Master" and "Paddy Miles's Boy." Billy Emerson, a well-known minstrel of the era, portrayed "The Old Clothes Dealer" in a June 30, 1868 show, and is thought to have been the first minstrel to do imitations of Jewish characters. Newcomb's Minstrels featured "Chang the Chinese Giant" in their 1868 shows. The "female impersonator," a type that had been used sporadically in early shows, became a recognized and important member of professional blackface minstrel troupes after the war, in response to popular demand. In the 1840s and 1850s the characterization was known as the "wench role," and later the term "prima donna" came into standard usage. George Christy (stage name of George Harrington) had pioneered this type as "Lucy Long" in the 1840s, when he performed as "Bones" with E. P. Christy's company, but some later minstrels chose to specialize, thus making this a featured role.

By the 1860s every major minstrel troupe included at least one performer who considered this his specialty. Annemarie Bean notes that during this era prima donnas were as important to the minstrel shows as end men and Interlocutors, and in fact "eclipsed the minstrel companies with which they were associated." Olive Logan commented that the minstrel female imitators were "marvelously well fitted by nature for it, having well-defined soprano voices, plump shoulders, beardless faces,



and tiny hands and feet.”

Many of the most prominent female impersonators performed under a single name. “Eugene” (D’Ameli) began his career in 1853 with Wood’s Minstrels, and retired thirty years later as Leon and Cushman Company’s prima donna. “Ricardo” (Foley McKeever) was a native Irishman who worked with Kelly and Leon’s Minstrels and the San Francisco Minstrels, among others. “The Only Leon” (Patrick Francis Glassey, later known as Francis Leon) was the best known and highest paid prima donna of the post-bellum era. He joined Wood’s Minstrels in 1854 at age fourteen, formed Kelly and Leon’s Minstrels with Edwin Kelly in 1862, and eventually joined the San Francisco Minstrels in the 1880s. Marshall S. Pike, who had organized the Libby Prison singers, was an exception, and performed as a female impersonator under his own full name. The minstrels’ decision to place greater emphasis on the female impersonator character in the years following the Civil War may have paralleled the country’s recognition of the increased importance of women in society at this time. Mary Chesnut’s complaints about the double standard which existed for southern men and women, in a journal entry written near the end of the war, anticipate post-bellum women’s rebellion against repression:

So we whimper and whine, do we? Always we speak in a deprecating voice, do we? And sigh gently at the end of every sentence—why? Plain enough. Does a man ever speak to his wife and children except to find fault? Does a woman ever address any remark to her husband that does not begin with an excuse? When a man does wrong, does not his wife have to excuse herself if he finds out she knows it? . . . Do you wonder that we are afraid to raise our voices above a mendicant’s moan? . . . The base submission of our tone must be music in our master’s ears.

Northern women, for their part, had been urged to contribute to the war effort, but in strictly proscribed ways. Though a *New York Times* article from October 12, 1862 had praised women for aiding soldiers “in every way conceivable,” women’s value in this respect lay primarily in volunteering for hospital work, knitting socks, sewing underclothes, and preparing food for the sick and injured. An earlier article, from the June 8, 1862 *New York Times* noted that “Any woman, any lady, with a little leisure, a needle, and a kind heart, can make herself of service.”

Post-bellum women were represented in minstrelsy not only by female impersonators: some took to the stage as performers in all-female troupes. M.B. Leavitt, writing in his history of show business in the late nineteenth century, notes that in the early 1860s Frank Forrest (stage name of Noah D. Payne) managed one New England touring company of female minstrels, billed as “Forrest’s Amazons.” However, the genre did not attain widespread popularity until after 1868, when Lydia Thompson and her “British Blondes,” a touring burlesque company, became overnight sensations at the recently-renamed Wood’s Museum and Metropolitan Theater (formerly Wood’s Minstrel Hall) in New York, with their production of “Ixion! or, The Man at the Wheel.” (In an effort to attract business, owner George Woods had combined his minstrel theater with a menagerie which included curiosities such as live conjoined twins, giants, dwarves, a stuffed whale, and a twenty-five foot long waxwork replica of Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*.) Bob Moulder, writing in a 2006 cover story for the house organ of Kensal Green, the West London cemetery where Lydia Thompson’s remains are interred, described the troupe:

The British Blondes (later to become the Mammoth Burlesque Company) were a troupe of dancing actresses, all (allegedly) natural blondes, voluptuous—and built on somewhat more than ample lines, “250-lb. Beauties” being by no means a derogatory description of their charms—displaying an assertive femininity which was quite unknown to American theatregoers.

In response to the success of the Thompson company, Leavitt formed his own female minstrel troupe in the summer of 1870, combining minstrelsy with elements of burlesque and what would later be vaudeville:

I departed from the old-style minstrel show, then composed exclusively of males, and substituted a bevy of the most talented and beautiful women then known to the stage. A title for the entertainment perplexed me for a while, but for public attraction I adopted the title of “Madame Rentz’s Female Minstrels.” It was, in part, a foreign title, suggested by the world-wide reputation of a tent show of Europe called “Rentz’s Circus.” My company, in their varied lines, was immeasurably superior to any organization then travelling, and proved its artistic and financial value during the many years of its existence, greatly diminishing the importance of male minstrelsy at that time.

Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels proved so successful that by the following year eleven other female troupes had been created. However, unlike Lydia Thompson, whom biographer Kurt Gänzl describes as "one of the most technically skilled and effective dancers of her generation, a dazzling comedienne . . . and the possessor of . . . a pretty, if unambitious soprano," the imitative female minstrels were not noted primarily for their talents in the areas of comedy or musicianship. Robert Toll writes, "The promise of a revealing glimpse at scantily clad women was the principal appeal of female minstrels. . . . Although nominally minstrels and actually performing many features of the standard show, these female minstrel troupes were really the forerunners of the 'girlie show.'"

Initially, "female" minstrel troupes typically included three men, as Tambo, Bones, and the Interlocutor, and though the men were in blackface, the women remained whitefaced, and wore blonde wigs. However, soon the women took over the roles of end men and Interlocutor, and men appeared only occasionally in the *olios* and farces.

In the fall of 1870 the *New York Clipper* began listing news of female minstrel troupes' performances in their regular column for conventional (i.e., white male) minstrel shows. But by 1872 the *Clipper* had suspended publication of articles about female minstrels' shows in this section of the newspaper, in recognition of the fact that it was, at best, a hybrid genre that owed more to burlesque than minstrelsy.

White male minstrels lost no time in developing parodies of both the British Blondes and the female minstrels who imitated them. Many of the skits were based on the premise that the authenticity of the blondes' hair color was questionable. Thompson's troupe had their opening at Wood's Museum on September 28, 1868, and by early December Leon and Kelly's Minstrels, though a small ensemble, facetiously advertised that their new show would feature "100 new artists, five with golden hair all their own." The San Francisco Minstrels' March 1869 show included "The Siege of the Blondes, or 'Tis Sweet for Our Country to Dye," performed by "six healthy blondes and four Persian youths with tiny feet." Tony Pastor's minstrel group's March 1869 show also featured two blonde farces: "The Beautiful Blonde Who Dyed For Love" and "Six Native American Blondes."

Though women's participation in minstrel productions was notable for a time, the most significant change that took place in late nineteenth century minstrelsy was the inclusion of African Americans in significant numbers. As Ike Simond noted in *Old Slack's Reminiscence*, the end of the Civil War marked the beginning of this phase. Booker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels were established in 1865, and proved to be so successful that many other groups adopted "Georgia Minstrels" as part or all of their name. (The term, in fact, soon came into usage as a descriptor for any black minstrels, irrespective of their state of origin.) In 1866 Sam Hague's Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels was formed, under the management of a white English dancer, and soon relocated to England.

Charles "Barney" Hicks, a black minstrel from Indianapolis, established several African American troupes in the 1860s, the most famous of which was also called the Georgia Minstrels. It was this troupe to which black music historian James Monroe Trotter referred in his book *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1881). Trotter, himself a veteran of the renowned Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, reflected the ambivalence Frederick Douglass had expressed about minstrelsy some thirty years earlier. Chapter 20 of Trotter's book is titled "The Georgia Minstrels," and he writes not only of this troupe, but of the state of late-nineteenth century American minstrelsy in general:

... American minstrelsy has of late been divested of much of its former coarseness . . . its entertainments have become so much diversified and elevated in character—the musical portions of which at times so nearly approach the classical—as to render the same entirely different from the minstrel performances so common a few years ago. . . Compelled to recognize this change of sentiment and taste, the best troupes now frequently give, instead of the [plantation act], some other one, which, while comical enough, is yet free from features distasteful to people of refinement.

Writing of himself in the third person, Trotter explained that in his desire to "trace the footsteps of the remarkable colored musician wherever they might lead," he felt bound to attend a Georgia Minstrels show, despite an aversion of long-standing, so that he could address the genre in his book:

He resolved as he entered, however, that he would give his particular attention to the *musical* part of the programme, and try to discover in that such evidences of talent and fine attainments as would justify him in sketching the troupe. He was not pleased, of course,

with that part of the performance (a part of which he was compelled to witness) devoted to burlesque. Nevertheless, he found in the vocal and instrumental part much that was in the highest degree gratifying; for during the evening he listened to some of the most pleasing music of the time, sung and played in a manner evincing on the part of the troupe not only fine natural talent, but much of high musical culture. And so he came away, thinking, on the whole, that there were, to say the least, two sides to the minstrel question; feeling that the Georgia Minstrels had presented so much that was really charming in a musical way as to almost compensate the sensitive auditor for what he was ready to confess he suffered while witnessing that part of the performance devoted to caricature. (emphasis in original)

Charles Hicks sold the rights to his Georgia Minstrels to white manager Charles Callender, and in 1872 the group became known as Callender's Minstrels. Music historian Eileen Southern writes, "It is hardly an exaggeration to observe that most of the leading black minstrels of the era were associated at one time or another in their careers with this popular troupe." Soon after Callender's acquisition of the troupe, several of its best performers left, in a dispute over pay. This act was significant, in that the black performers were publicly declaring that they had rights, and were willing to fight for the respect they knew they deserved.

By the mid-1870s at least twenty-eight African American minstrel troupes existed in the United States. Many of the touring groups were large, and featured brass bands that would perform in parades announcing the group's arrival in town. Of necessity, they travelled by train in Pullman cars with sleeping accommodations, as it was unlikely they would be allowed to stay in local hotels. Eileen Southern describes the entry of a black minstrel troupe into town:

The day of a minstrel company typically began at 11:45 a.m. with the conventional parade through the principal streets of the town or city. . . . The procession started off with the managers in their carriages. Then, also in carriages, followed the stars of the show in their tall silk hats and scarlet or plum-colored long-tailed coats. Next in line was the "walking company" dressed in brilliant coats with brass buttons—the singers, comedians, acrobats and dancers, and instrumentalists—accompanied by local boys who had begged for the opportunity to carry the banners that advertised special features of the show. The bandsmen marched in pairs, maintaining a distance of from ten or twelve feet between pairs so that the parade might stretch out as long as possible.

The African American presence in minstrel shows was a source of pride for black people in general. Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes that "on stage and off, African American minstrel stars were respected by the grassroots black community." She notes that "Minstrelsy was a decent, legal means of employment in a world of few options. . . . [T]he black male regularly employed in minstrelsy could gain the respect of the black community and even become a part of the middle class."

Blues composer and musician W. C. Handy, who himself began his career as a minstrel in the 1890s, wrote that minstrel shows provided excellent opportunities for black musicians in the late nineteenth century. In his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, Handy's enthusiasm for minstrel shows is hardly less than that expressed by Mark Twain. He writes, "The minstrel show at that time was one of the greatest outlets for talented [African American] musicians and artists. Some of them were paying for education for brothers and sisters, some taking care of aged parents, others supporting their own families, but all contributing to a greater degree of happiness in the entertainment world."

Black minstrel Tom Fletcher saw minstrelsy's potential for freedmen, and explained in his autobiography that late nineteenth century African American performers made conscious decisions to embrace the established format, and did so with specific goals in mind:

All of us who were recruited to enter show business went into it with our eyes wide open. The objectives were, first, to make money to help educate our younger ones, and second, to try to break down the ill feeling that existed toward the colored people.

R. W. Thompson, writing in the *Indianapolis Freeman* in 1896, likewise applauded African Americans' appropriation of blackface minstrelsy:

The Negro's chance for survival comes from his talent for versatility, to his ready adaption [*sic*] to the duty required. The legitimate outcome of this rise in the profession will be better salaries for the deserving, a higher personal esteem, and an increased dignity to the calling itself.

Thomas Riis argues that, ironically, African American musicians and dancers who adopted blackface conventions did so in part as a corrective to the stereotypes which had been put in place earlier by their white counterparts:

[W]hat seems to us a monolithic and repulsive racist format, especially in its requirement of blackface makeup, may have appeared to free Blacks who aspired to the stage more like an opportunity to subvert or amend the message of minstrelsy by substituting a new messenger.

Minstrel shows, in fact, functioned as the top level that black dancers of the era could expect to reach. Twentieth century African American comedian/dancer Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham described the progression that late-nineteenth century black dancers could expect in their careers, and the levels of proficiency required:

“[S]how business for a colored dancer was like going through school. You started in a medicine show—that was kindergarten—where they could use a few steps if you could cut them, but almost anything would do. Then you went on up to the gilly show, which was like grade school—they wanted dancers. If you had something on the ball, you graduated to a carnival—that was high school—and you sure had to be able to dance. College level was a colored minstrel show...”

Early African American minstrels’ work was largely ignored by the white press of their day. Likewise, writers who chronicled the early history of minstrelsy (such as T. Allston Brown, Arthur Gillespie, and LeRoy Rice) concentrated almost exclusively on white male minstrels. However, recent scholarship has explored the impact that African American minstrelsy made on nineteenth century black culture. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff explain in the introduction of their book *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* that the short title is a *double entendre*: A nod to the 1960s slang phrase and also “a metaphor for the vast, hidden pools of contemporaneous literature which document African American musical practices and developments” of the late nineteenth century.

In their later book, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz*, Abbott and Seroff write that nineteenth century African American minstrel troupes “reached deep into the rural districts to provide irresistible fun, entertainment that black southerners identified with and took pride in. After all, black minstrels were professional stage performers who gathered coin and gained admiration from both blacks and whites.”

Abbott’s and Seroff’s research relied mainly on primary sources including the entertainment sections of African American newspapers such as the *Indianapolis Freeman* and the *Chicago Defender*, and they write that “Representatives of dozens of [African American] musical comedy companies, circus annex troupes, and tented minstrel shows filed reports to the *Freeman*.” Sylvester Russell, known in the early twentieth century as the “Dean of black entertainment critics,” had been a member of Hicks and Sawyer’s Georgia Minstrels before embarking on a concert career and later becoming head dramatic critic and Chicago entertainment reporter for the *Freeman*.

African American minstrel companies, according to Abbott and Seroff, managed to broadcast the latest trends in racial music, dance, and humor throughout the South. The parade bands, with their “street flash” and open-air concerts, and the canvas theaters, with their blues singers, jazz orchestras, vernacular dancers, and blackface comedians, brightened the lives of the entertainment-hungry southern masses. The fact that the minstrel heritage in the South carried into the post-World War II era reflects not only regional resistance to change but the great fun delivered by these shows.

While African American minstrel troupes grew in popularity, white small ensembles continued to lose their audiences to other forms of entertainment, despite the acclaim accorded to a few outstanding performers. By the season of 1875-1876 the San Francisco Minstrels were the only resident minstrel company in New York. Their success was attributable both to the decades of experience its individual members had had on the minstrel stage, and the group’s distinctive satiric style, which became known as the “Birch-Backus tradition” of minstrelsy.

The group originated in San Francisco in 1864 but four members relocated a year later, arriving in New York on April 5, a few days before the end of the Civil War. (Lawrence Estavan, in his history of minstrelsy in San Francisco, notes that this group was unrelated to another minstrel troupe known as the San Francisco Minstrels, which was active in the early 1850s and sometimes performed under the name Donnelly’s Minstrels. In addition, when Bryant’s Minstrels performed in the San Francisco Minstrel Hall in the 1850s, some contemporaneous newspaper accounts

dubbed this group the “San Francisco Minstrels,” thus causing further confusion for future historians.) They began performing on Broadway on May 8, and remained a fixture of the New York theatre scene for the next eighteen years. Mark Twain, writing from New York in 1867 noted that,

Our old San Francisco Minstrels have made their mark here, most unquestionably ... Every night of their lives they play to packed houses—every single seat full and dozens of people standing up. I have good reason to know, because I have been there pretty often, have always paid my way but once, and I had to buy a box the last time I went.

Billy Birch and Charley Backus were the end men, Bones and Tambo, respectively, and became famous for their manic improvisations and biting social commentaries. Birch’s career in minstrelsy had begun in 1844 with a troupe in New Hartford, New York, and over the following two decades he performed with some of the most famous groups in the country, including Wood’s Minstrels, Wood & Christy’s Minstrels, Bryant’s Minstrels, and Hooley & Campbell’s Minstrels. Charley Backus had been active in California minstrelsy since the early 1850s, particularly in mining towns, and had managed his own troupe, Backus’s Minstrels, prior to the formation of the San Francisco Minstrels. An article from the July 26, 1856 edition of the Sonoma, California newspaper *The Union Democrat* notes that “Charley Backus, with his troupe of minstrels, is now making the tour of the mines, and will doubtless visit our city in the course of a few days. He will be greeted, of course, by a host of friends.”

Both Birch and Backus were adroit mimics, whose imitations of prominent public figures formed the basis of many of their comedy routines. Sharon D. McCoy writes that although there is no direct evidence that Mark Twain was impersonated by Birch or Backus, “It seems almost inconceivable that such a flamboyant celebrity as Mark Twain could live in the same area as Backus and attend performances in the San Francisco Minstrels’ theatre without seeing himself honored and lampooned on their stage.” Not all notables considered it an honor to be imitated by the San Francisco minstrel troupe. An article from the July 7, 1885 issue of the San Francisco newspaper *The Argonaut* notes that a man who had been the subject of one of Backus’s parodies during his California days took offense and announced his intention to shoot Backus. On learning of this, the minstrel sent the would-be assassin a brief message: “Kill Birch. He has no child. I have.”

Theatre historian T. Allston Brown, writing in a 1912 *New York Clipper* article, noted that,

Nothing could remain heavy or be stale when handled by such men as Birch and Backus. The merest commonplace, under their grotesque touch, became at once imbued with their overflowing fun and every thought received a form so ludicrous that it could not fail to electrify an audience.

Brown describes Birch’s and Backus’s creativity with the phrase “animal wit,”

...not because it is groveling and low, but because, instead of depending upon idea or upon verbal turn, it consists mainly of a certain indescribable magnetism of manner, which is usually involuntary with the actor, but which surprises and irresistibly captures the risible [*sic*] of every looker on. A dull story, which in ordinary hands would send every listener yawning to his bed, would, when told by one of those comedians, fairly split the sides of the gravest of his audience.

The third principal member and managing partner of the San Francisco Minstrels, Dave Wambold, was a gifted tenor and versatile entertainer who was equally comfortable performing in raucous minstrel shows and in more refined venues. He began his career in 1849 as part of a travelling minstrel troupe, but by 1853 had established himself as a professional soloist in New York. Four years later he accepted an engagement at St. James Hall in London, but by 1859 was back in New York, performing with Bryant’s Minstrels, whose roster at that time included former Virginia Minstrel Dan Emmett. In the years between 1861 and 1864 Wambold completed a European tour, singing in the major cities of England, France, Belgium, Prussia, Austria, Hungary, and Italy, returned to New York to join Wood’s Minstrels, and finally moved to California, where he became a member of the San Francisco Minstrels. Lawrence Estavan reports that Wambold was in such demand as a singer that he was paid as much as \$600 per night for performing just one song. He remained with the San Francisco Minstrels until 1880, when he left the troupe because of severe health problems.

A fourth member of the San Francisco Minstrels deserves mention, though he performed with the group only until 1872, when they relocated to a different theater in New York. William Bernard, who had been educated as an attorney, served as the troupe’s Interlocutor for the first eight

years of its existence. The vocabulary and demeanor he acquired as part of his training made him a natural as the pompous, pretentious middle man, and T. Allston Brown, writing forty years after Bernard's retirement from the stage, offered the opinion that Bernard "had no living equal" in the role.

The San Francisco Minstrels prospered during the tumultuous years of Reconstruction, and incorporated the attendant controversies, tensions, and political scandals into their stage material. As the group relied on improvisation to an even greater extent than most other professional minstrel troupes, it is impossible to know exactly what material they used and in what way it was presented. However, published copies of acting editions of some of their most notable routines are still extant, and provide a general idea of the manner in which they engaged these topics.

A good example is the San Francisco Minstrels' 1876 production of *Julius the Snoozer*, a parody of the Shakespearean play *Julius Caesar*, which was performed during the 1875-76 season at Booth's Theatre to great acclaim. The *Snoozer* cast featured Billy Birch in the title role, Charley Backus as Marc Antony, female impersonator Ricardo as "Camphorina, the Snoozer's wife," and several other characters, including "Brutus, the working man's friend," "Cassius, a skeleton lobbyist," and "Pinchback, an outsider imported expressly for this piece." The company's assessment of politicians is made clear in the script's notation concerning extras: "Senators" are lumped together with "Chicken Thieves, Keno Sharps, and Tramps."

New Yorkers of the 1870s would have immediately recognized the *Snoozer*, despite Birch's blackface makeup, as a caricature of William M. "Boss" Tweed, whose Tammany Hall Democratic Party political machine was responsible for the theft of millions of dollars from New York City public works projects in the 1860s and 1870s. (Eric Foner writes that the Tweed Ring's "depredations dwarfed anything in the Reconstruction South"—a remarkable claim, given the well-documented corruption associated with the latter.) In 1874 Tweed was convicted of two hundred and four counts of criminal activity, for which the maximum sentence was one hundred and two years, yet ultimately he served slightly more than a year of his term, and paid a fine of only \$250. Upon his release he was remanded to debtor's prison, from which he escaped on December 4, 1875, and for months afterward the popular press was full of speculation as to his whereabouts. It was in this atmosphere that the San Francisco Minstrels performed *Julius the Snoozer*.

The skit's dialogue is completely free of African American dialect, and instead mimics Shakespearean verse. The setting is the part of lower Manhattan which had been under the control of Tweed and his cronies, and the script references various issues addressed by post-bellum reform movements:

Brutus:           Cassius, I'll do this act with the excuse all politicians make—  
                          That 'tis not for office, but for my country's sake.

Cassius:          Would it not be policy to expose your platform?  
                          We live, you know, in the age of reform.

Brutus:          Say I favor Hard Money, the School Question, Whisky Rings,  
                          Canal Frauds and Inflation,  
                          Or any other little snap to enrich the nation.  
                          Take this dollar and lay it out for beer,  
                          And, as they drink, let them for Brutus cheer.  
                          Away! Be quick! The time has almost come  
                          When bloody blood through Thompson street must run.

Though the San Francisco Minstrels continued to receive rave reviews from New York newspapers and theatrical journals throughout the 1870s and early 1880s, they faced competition from minstrel groups which abandoned the improvisational small ensemble form in favor of highly choreographed routines executed by large numbers of singers and dancers in flashy attire. The creation of Haverly's Mastodon Minstrels in 1877, with their slogan, "Forty—Count 'em—Forty," contributed to the decline of the small ensemble form. As Frank Dumont wrote, "All the other troupes had to expand or be wiped out."

Kit Clarke, writing for the *New York Clipper* in 1912, noted that the Haverly ensemble was in fact comprised of up to sixty or seventy minstrels, "exhibiting mammoth songs and dances, huge squads of electrically lighted acrobats in gaily caparisoned drills and marches, sumptuous silken draperies, gorgeous transformation scenes and daily parades, that rivaled an Oriental Durbar in clamor and display." (In contrast, the San Francisco Minstrels invested little in props and costumes, and relied instead on their wit and musical ability for audience appeal. Lawrence Estavan relates an incident in

which Charley Backus was visited by an insurance agent who offered to sell Backus a policy that would cover what the agent assumed would be a vast array of valuable stage equipment. The minstrel pretended to agree, and then showed the agent his holdings: Some wigs, a few pair of trousers and cotton aprons, and stubs of burnt cork.)

The Mastodon Minstrels' success inspired the creation of a host of other large ensembles. Clarke notes that opportunistic promoters, upon realizing that fortunes were to be made, "promptly adopted the advanced spectacular proposition, and zoological dictionaries were searched with microscopes in digging up long and hard names to bestow upon new and big bunches of burnt cork crusaders."

Billy Emerson and R. M. Hooley formed the Megetharian Minstrels. M. B. Leavitt, the entrepreneur who had organized Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels in the late 1860s, created the Gigantean Minstrels—a venture which eventually lost close to one hundred thousand dollars. These minstrel troupes bore little similarity to the small ensembles; but for a time they attracted large audiences. Clarke writes that these spectacles "[were] not negro minstrelsy by some sixty thousand miles [but] it appeared to be exactly what the public wanted and was willing to pay for, and this public got it and a lot more of it in copious doses."

Though the Mastodon Minstrels enjoyed prosperity for several years, the troupe eventually succumbed to in-fighting, and split into six groups which, in turn, experienced difficulties and dissolved. Frank Dumont wrote, "For such results there were, of course, many reasons; but I think the principal cause was an overdose of sudden, brain-affecting prosperity, something that few men, even ordinary men in other walks of life, find it difficult to assimilate with equanimity."

In George Odell's account of the 1877-1878 theater season, he wrote that despite the popularity of variety shows, this genre "could not quite kill negro minstrelsy, so long as the San Francisco coterie existed, in possession of its great original powers." However, by 1883 the troupe was nearly at its end. They brought their 1882-1883 season to an early close—an inauspicious sign—and a survey of *New York Times* articles from 1883 traces the demise of the group. The June 22 issue contains a lengthy article announcing Charlie Backus's death the previous morning, and chronicling highlights of his career. The following day, the paper carried a detailed description of Backus's funeral, which had taken place the evening prior. The article notes that members of Callender's Georgia Minstrels attended the funeral and offered "a pillow of white roses, surmounted by a dove." Sharon D. McCoy references this newspaper account, and argues the significance of the Callender Minstrels' act:

If the reader is not familiar with minstrelsy, the article gives no explicit indication that these men are African Americans and that actual black men felt the need to offer a tribute to the fallen blackface actor. Apparently, their presence was neither a surprise nor was it unwelcome, which indicates that Backus and the San Francisco Minstrels were known and respected by at least some African Americans (their fellow performers) and that their performances were not regarded overall as utterly offensive or derogatory. It also suggests that though black and white performers were barred from appearing on the same stage at this time, there may have been more interaction between the performers of different races than has been acknowledged—and this also seems borne out by African American composers who dedicated songs to the San Francisco Minstrels and by white composers who wrote for and dedicated songs to various African American performers.

The August 28 edition of *The New York Times* covers the opening of the San Francisco Minstrels' season, noting that "Poor Charlie Backus's round figure and capacious mouth were missing," and "Many flowers were sent to the stage" in his memory; yet the reviewer praises the remaining troupe members' performance: "The entertainment concluded with a musical cyclone that nearly took the roof off." On November 2 the paper published an obituary for San Francisco Minstrel prima donna "Ricardo" (Foley McKeever), noting that he had been taken seriously ill the day following his October 25<sup>th</sup> performance, and succumbed to Bright's Disease—the same ailment that had claimed Charlie Backus four months prior and which would be listed as a contributing cause for Dave Wambold's death in 1889.

Three weeks later, the November 23 "Among the Play-Houses" column spelled the death knell for the San Francisco Minstrels. Titled "Managers Generally Complaining of a Dull Season: Mr. Stetson tired of New-York, Mr. Birch to Go Away," the article's first paragraph notes that, "The San Francisco Minstrels, who are now one of the oldest fixtures of New-York amusement life, will abandon the City altogether within a very few weeks now—as soon, in fact, as Mr. Birch can succeed in leasing the house to some other manager."

Small ensemble blackface minstrelsy was responsible for the propagation of many cruel stereotypes of African Americans, and is remembered today primarily for this. However, it was a part of

nineteenth century American culture, and as such cannot be ignored. Its contribution to African American musical culture was also significant, and it is appropriate to recognize the black minstrels who were appreciated by their contemporaries, at a time when all black people in the country, in their various ways, were fighting to prove their worth.

## CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION

As nineteenth century African American music historian James Trotter observed, there are “two sides, to say the least, to the minstrel question.” Small ensemble blackface minstrelsy was a complex art form, which encompassed a wide variety of performance elements and presented a broad spectrum of political and social commentary. It evolved over the course of the forty years in which it dominated American popular entertainment, and its practitioners gradually changed their representations of African Americans—just as members of American society were forced to confront their attitudes toward black Americans and adjust to the reality of a new social order, in which people who had previously been held in bondage were granted the rights of citizenship. Racist elements are undeniably present in nineteenth century minstrel shows; but the apparent insensitivity of individual minstrels becomes less inexcusable when viewed in light of the prevailing social mores of the time: an age in which authority figures in various fields—politics, religion, science, theatre, etc.—were almost uniformly united in the belief that African Americans were inferior to white Americans.

After the San Francisco Minstrels disbanded, professional blackface minstrelsy became almost exclusively the province of black entertainers, who saw opportunities to advance their own interests and to gain recognition for other African Americans. George Rawick wrote, “If the ability of people to survive requires creative change adequate to the task at hand, then there is no more creative and innovative people in the New World than black Americans.”

Frederick Douglass had correctly predicted, in 1849, that if black minstrel troupes were to provide an accurate representation of African Americans, they would be respected by both black and white races. Post-bellum African American minstrels were able to accomplish this by using the basic format of the minstrel show but altering the content to de-emphasize the derogatory material that was present in earlier minstrelsy. James Bland, who established a career performing with Callender’s Minstrels, among other groups, emerged as the pre-eminent composer of music used by African American minstrel troupes. Though Bland died in obscurity in 1911 (his unmarked grave was later found, and landscaped by admirers from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers in 1939), he wrote approximately seven hundred songs during his lifetime, and was often imitated by other minstrel composers of the late nineteenth century.

Images of the “Zip Coon” and “Jim Crow” types, once common in minstrel songs, are absent in Bland’s compositions. Instead, he used religious imagery to convey the idea that blacks, so long oppressed, will enjoy finery and prosperity that was previously unobtainable to them. Music historian William R. Hullfish argues that Bland’s frequent references to fine footwear would have had special meaning to former slaves who had been denied shoes during their time of bondage. “O! Dem Golden Slippers,” one of Bland’s best known compositions (and the unofficial theme song of the Philadelphia Mummers Parade to this day), is a notable example.

Though many African Americans rose to fame in blackface minstrelsy and reaped the attendant benefits, not all could accept their situation with the equanimity expressed by African American blackface minstrels such as Ike Simond, Tom Fletcher, and W. C. Handy. Bert Williams, who began his show business career as a member of the Mastodon Minstrels, later teamed with straight man George Walker to form vaudeville blackface act Williams & Walker, billed as “Two Real Coons,” in an effort to distinguish themselves from white minstrels. The act was successful and provided both Williams and Walker with substantial financial rewards throughout the years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, Williams, an educated man who had originally hoped to have a career as a civil engineer, was never fully able to justify to himself his stage role as a “shiftless ducky” (Williams’s term). Vaudeville comedian W. C. Fields, who sometimes shared the stage with Williams, poignantly described him as “the funniest man I ever saw—and the saddest man I ever knew.”

Just as Juba was quickly forgotten by mid-nineteenth century Americans after his death, so the late-nineteenth century African American minstrels were, for many years, neglected by



historians. Significantly, as late as 1955, the standard music reference source *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, then in its fifth edition (encompassing nine volumes), omitted any mention of James Bland, Bert Williams, Billy Kersands, Sam Lucas, and other luminaries of the African American minstrel stage. Ironically, in keeping with *Grove's* reputation as the pre-eminent authority for even esoteric musical research, the same edition includes entries for obscure figures such as Charles Bland, an English tenor who achieved "moderate" success on the London stage between 1826 and 1834, and John Bland, a music seller and publisher who was active from 1778 until 1795. Despite the fact that the late nineteenth century African American minstrels had achieved both professional and financial success, it was not until much later that their artistic contributions were given any significant recognition by historians of American music and theatre.

Music from the heyday of minstrelsy is still performed in concert venues, though it is rarely identified as such. Instead, it is usually billed under the equally accurate, though less controversial, designation of "American music." The music's lasting appeal, in an era in which recognition of African Americans' contributions to American life and culture has probably never been greater, is testimony to the fact that the songs are not inextricably linked to racist mockery. Despite its beginnings in an atmosphere of racial inequality and injustice, small ensemble blackface minstrelsy has a place in American musical, cultural, and social history.

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