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## Grove Music Online Minstrelsy, American

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### Minstrelsy, American.

A type of popular entertainment, principally of the 19th century, which consisted of the theatrical presentation of ostensible elements of black life in song, dance and speech; at first performed by whites impersonating blacks, minstrelsy only later was participated in by blacks. Minstrelsy took the theatrical productions of the Englishman Charles Mathews as one point of departure. Black music and dialect greatly attracted Mathews during his visit to the USA in 1822 and he incorporated the latter element in his skits, sketches, stump speeches and songs. Before Mathews, Charles Dibdin had used black material in his musical extravaganzas, which began in 1768 and were still popular well into the first decade of the 19th century. Southern plantation and frontier songs, black tunes patterned on English musical models, banjo tunes and playing styles, English plays and operas with black subjects and plots, British dance types and tunes and direct observation of blacks constituted other sources and models for early minstrelsy.

By the end of the 1820s there had evolved an indigenous and novel American, or blackface, minstrelsy. The performances of George Washington Dixon and of **DADDY RICE** represented the incipient stages of the form. The performer blackened his face with burnt cork and wore costumes that represented, to the white audience, the 'typical black' person: the uncouth, naive, devil-may-care southern plantation slave (Jim Crow) in his tattered clothing, or the urban dandy (Zip Coon or Dandy Jim). These two stereotypes persisted in minstrelsy for several decades. Rice developed the minstrel show, or 'Ethiopian opera', expanding the use of black dialect plantation songs, virtuoso dancing, banjo and fiddle music and crude humour, and providing the whole with a greater degree of organization. Nevertheless, its function continued to be primarily that of an entr'acte in the theatre or in the circus ring.

The classic age of blackface minstrelsy (c1840–70) was heralded in the late 1830s, when a modicum of dramatic continuity was introduced and performers began to join together to form duos (most frequently a banjoist and a dancer), trios and finally quartets. The instruments they used were the banjo, tambourine, violin, bones and sometimes accordion, all except the last associated with the southern plantation slave. At least one musician in the group doubled as a dancer. The Virginia Minstrels presented the first entire show of this new type at the Bowery Amphitheatre in New York on 6 February 1843; this performance was given as part of a circus but the group was soon appearing alone. The Virginia Minstrels consisted of **DAN EMMETT**, who played the fiddle, Billy Whitlock (banjo), Frank Brower (bones) and Dick Pelham (tambourine). Emmett had established his reputation as a banjo player and singer in the circus ring and was a versatile, practical musician who enjoyed a long and productive life on the minstrel stage, first as a performer, then as both performer and composer of a large number of the finest examples of classic minstrel music. Emmett's most popular contribution to minstrelsy was *I wish I was in Dixie's land* (copyright 1860), better known as *Dixie*, the melody and text of which eventually transcended boundaries of region, nation and genre. The Virginia Minstrels met with spectacular success in cities of the eastern USA in the spring of 1843 and in concerts during a brief tour of the British Isles that summer. Although the original group disbanded in July 1843, Emmett re-established it on his return to the USA, replacing Pelham and Whitlock, who had chosen to remain permanently in England.

The Virginia Minstrels provided the prototype for the instrumentation and stage action of the many troupes that were formed in the 1840s, such as the Ethiopian Serenaders, the Virginia Serenaders, Christy's Minstrels, Buckley's New Orleans Serenaders, the Kentucky Minstrels, White's Minstrels and the Kitchen Minstrels. The members of the troupe arranged themselves in a semicircle with bones and tambourine players at either end as focusses of attention. One of these players would serve as master of ceremonies, a role later assumed by an interlocutor at the centre of the band.

While minstrelsy frequently retained its connections with the theatre and circus as an entr'acte, these associations became increasingly attenuated as the minstrel show grew in scope and changed in content; more and more it stood by itself as a fully developed form of entertainment. The form and contents of the early minstrel show were flexible and versatile and could be

adapted to the audience, but a general structure for the performance was developed. During the 1840s the show was divided into two parts: the first concentrated largely upon the urban black dandy, the second on the southern plantation slave. By the 1850s, however, black elements had been gradually reduced and moved to the concluding section of a tripartite structure. Music of the 'genteel' tradition now prevailed in the first section, where popular and sentimental ballads of the day and polished minstrel songs by such composers as Stephen Foster supplanted the older and cruder dialect tunes. The middle part consisted of the 'olio', a potpourri of dancing and musical virtuosity, with parodies of Italian operas, stage plays and visiting European singing groups such as the Rainer Family. In the third section the walk-around, at once the conclusion and high point of the show, took on primary importance. This was an ensemble finale in which members of the troupe in various combinations participated in song, instrumental and choral music and dance. Although examples of the walk-around performed by a solo dancer exist from the late 1840s, the ensemble finale dates from only around 1858. *Dixie* is the best-known example of this genre, although it soon lost its original function. Emmett, whose walk-arounds enjoyed an enormous popularity, described them as an attempt to imitate 'the habits and crude ideas of the slaves of the South' whose 'knowledge of the world at large was very limited'. While Emmett probably composed more walk-arounds than any other individual (including *I ain't got time to tarry*, 1858; *Jonny Roach*, 1859; *Wide Awake*, 1860; *Ober in Jarsey*, 1863; and *Old Times Rocks*, 1865), other important contributions to the genre were made by Sam Lucas (*Hannah boil dat cabbage down*, 1878) and Ned Straight (*Old Times Roxy*, 1880).

Shows from this classic age of blackface minstrelsy were immensely popular, especially in the Northeast. Bryant's Minstrels and Christy's Minstrels were the outstanding examples of successful troupes, though other companies that remained popular throughout the 1850s were the Harmonion Troupe, White's Minstrels, the Buckeye Minstrels, the Ethiopian Serenaders, Wood's Minstrels, Buckley's New Orleans Serenaders, Campbell's Minstrels, the Sable Harmonists, Ordway's Aeolians and Sanford's Opera Troupe.

The inclusion of music from the 'genteel' tradition and the varied fare of the olio began a movement away from the primitive quality of early minstrelsy towards a more sophisticated and standardized variety show. However, from 1857 to 1866 Bryant's Minstrels, led by Dan Bryant, temporarily slowed this trend with their productions of a rejuvenated minstrel show; full of the vitality characteristic of the 1840s, their performances were unqualified financial successes even during the Civil War. But their classic type of minstrelsy gradually fell from fashion, to be replaced by a show with a wider variety of styles. By 1870 many of the smaller troupes had been driven out of business by such companies as Leavitt's Gigantean Minstrels and Cleveland's Colossals (gigantism in any field greatly impressed many Americans at the time). While men had always played 'wench' roles in the classic minstrel show and continued as female impersonators, women minstrels now began to appear; some minstrel troupes, in fact, consisted only of women. Some troupes abandoned the burnt cork make-up. There was also a change in the contents of the show. With the issue of slavery more or less resolved, and in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience than before, black subjects were supplanted by such topics as satirization of other targets of hostility and ridicule: suffragists and ethnic stereotypes reflecting new patterns of immigration and Amerindians. Minstrels began to rail against the decline in morality and warn against the evils of city life; a yearning for a return to the simpler, 'good old days' was a common theme.

An important change was the development of minstrel troupes consisting of black performers. Whereas the few that had existed in the early days had not been considered important, black companies attained true significance after the Civil War. Often under the management of whites, but occasionally led by blacks, these troupes provided a showcase for the talents of black musicians. Black troupes often concentrated on plantation scenes and incorporated African American religious music in their shows. Those that were successful in achieving extended runs included Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels, the Original Georgia Minstrels, Callender's Original Georgia Minstrels, Haverly's Colored Minstrels, Sprague's Georgia Minstrels, Richard's and Pringle's Georgia Minstrels, the Kersands Minstrels and W.S. Cleveland's Colored Minstrels. Billy Kersands, Thomas Dilward ('Japanese Tommy'), Bob Height, Charles Hicks, Horace Weston, Sam Lucas, Tom Mackintosh, Jim Grace and James Bland led the way for the participation of blacks in minstrelsy, and by 1890 African Americans were firmly established in American show business. By the turn of the century most professional troupes had turned from classic minstrelsy to burlesque, the development of the Broadway musical and musical productions connected only tenuously with the minstrel show. Nevertheless, among amateur performers and producers, minstrelsy continued as a popular form of American entertainment until the early 1950s.

Many of the tunes in the early minstrel show derived from British dance types; others seem to share a common African American heritage, with an insistence on irregular rhythmic accentuations achieved through phrasing, rests, textures, ornamentation and metrical shifts. The main emphasis in much minstrel music is a rhythmic, rather than a melodic or harmonic, one. While the rhythmic element is often highly complicated, the melodies tend to be based on brief motifs that are varied only slightly upon repetition. Melodies constructed on pentatonic or anhemitonic figures and triadic formulas, and lying within a relatively narrow compass, are commonly found. Many give no hint of any sort of harmonic progression. Diatonicism prevails in the accompaniments of later tunes, interrupted briefly on occasion by a diminished seventh or secondary dominant

chord preceding a cadence. Common to many of the songs is a verse-and-refrain design. Initially a soloist sang the verse, and was joined in unison by the entire troupe for the refrain; before long, however, it became more common for the troupe to sing the refrain in four-part harmony – a particular characteristic of the minstrel songs.

Many striking similarities exist between the traditional oral music of the southern Appalachians and early minstrel songs, but it has not yet been determined which (if either) provided the original inspiration for the other. It is certain, however, that the animated rhythmic element of the banjo tunes composed for minstrel shows between 1840 and 1890 greatly influenced American popular music.

Important collections of documents concerning minstrelsy are in the Harvard Theater Collection, the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Brown University (Harris Collection), and the State Library of Ohio in Columbus.

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