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Source: *The History Teacher*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Nov., 2006), pp. 27-43

Published by: [Society for History Education](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036937>

Accessed: 21/10/2013 12:12

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## Minstrel Music: The Sounds and Images of Race in Antebellum America

Never was there such an excitement in the musical or dramatic world; nothing was talked of, nothing written of, and nothing dreamed of, but “Jim Crow.” The most sober citizens began to wheel about, and turn about, and jump Jim Crow.

— *New York Tribune*, 1855

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IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY, Mark Twain lamented the passing of what he referred to as the “real Negro show” that he had first seen in Hannibal, Missouri in the 1840s. Recalling how he had once tricked his mother, who was an avid churchgoer and would not have ordinarily attended a minstrel show, to attend a performance by the Christy Minstrels by claiming that it was a group of missionaries back from Africa, Twain described the event with affection. He and countless other Americans during the period enjoyed watching white men, wearing burnt cork or grease paint, portray African Americans singing, dancing, and telling jokes on stage. Twain remembered the audience “shrieking with laughter” as the performers, dressed in outlandish costumes and wearing makeup that made their mouths resemble “slices cut in a ripe watermelon,” portrayed blacks in short sketches and sang “rudely comic songs.” Songs such as Stephen Foster’s, “Massa’s In De Cold Cold Ground” in which a slave grieves for his deceased master, shaped and reflected dominant ideas about race and slavery and, together with performers and their sizeable audiences, put minstrelsy at the center of antebellum efforts to socially construct race.<sup>1</sup>

While Twain's mother may have considered blackface minstrel performances inappropriate and many Americans today find the language and images racially offensive, such performances were the *most popular form of entertainment* in antebellum America. A group called the Ethiopian Serenaders began a tradition of minstrel performances at the White House in 1844, and minstrel songs were common from New York City to the western frontier. Songs about idyllic plantation life in the South resonated with Americans adjusting to the new industrial cities of the North. Moreover, the more popular performers received large salaries because of their ability to address forbidden topics of race, class, and gender in Victorian America. Escaping the conformity of the period, audience members were usually northern working class men who enjoyed performances that celebrated folk heroes at the expense of the upper classes. In contrast to more genteel theater audiences, minstrel shows drew crowds willing to encourage—through mob behavior and rocks if need be—the kind of songs, jokes, characters, and encores that they enjoyed. Finally, minstrel entertainment also coincided with the rise of the women's rights movement. Minstrel performers, who were exclusively male yet often played female characters even at a time in which women actors were not rare, mocked the movement and any challenge to gender norms.

Of course, race, the most explosive issue of the antebellum period, lay at the center of minstrelsy. Although black minstrel performers existed before and after the Civil War, most of the composers, performers, and members of the audience were white. The characters, and supposedly their dialect, appearance, and behavior, were black. Sometimes, especially in the early years, white audience members believed that they were watching black performers. As a result, playbills for minstrel shows began to include illustrations of performers with and without blackface. (see document #7) More common was the perception that white performers portraying blacks were "accurate" and that songs were "full of real Negro atmosphere."<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that most performers and many composers had little if any experience with either the South or slavery, minstrelsy centered on a romantic portrait of southern plantation life. The surviving images and lyrics from the thriving minstrel business reveal demeaning caricatures that reduced African Americans to childish (or inhuman) figures contented with slavery and an opportunity to, according to one song, "Sing for the White Folks, Sing!" Lyrics such as "Oh happy

are we Darkies so Gay, Come let us sing and laugh while we play,” certainly did not capture the horrors of American slavery. Peaking in popularity as the abolitionist movement in the North gained momentum; minstrel shows mirrored the image of blacks used increasingly by defenders of slavery in the decades before the Civil War, and shows rarely failed to ridicule abolitionists along with both free and enslaved blacks.<sup>3</sup> Minstrel caricatures of slaves served not only to define African-Americans in the minds of the dominant culture, but their performances also contributed to the growing sense of “whiteness” among an ethnically diverse population in the urban North and, in the decades after the American Revolution, to a sense of a unique, albeit problematic, American national identity. In short, the minstrel tradition not only demeaned blacks, it helped define what was white and, consequently, what was American.

### Using Minstrel Music in the Classroom

Although minstrel music survived the era of the Civil War, the music, lyrics, and images associated with minstrelsy provide a valuable way to explore numerous issues of the antebellum period such as race, slavery, abolitionism, and secession, urbanization and immigration in the North, and class and gender. The study of minstrel music therefore can most effectively be introduced when students are exploring American society on the eve of the Civil War. Involving race and northern society as it does, minstrel music is also useful in aiding students to understand the limitations of Reconstruction.

Before using minstrel music teachers should warn students that many of the images and lyrics associated with minstrelsy are offensive by today’s standards. Instructors must also be sensitive in using historical evidence such as this and realize that it has the potential of deepening racial prejudice. Nevertheless, ignoring the role of minstrel music in shaping and reflecting dominant ideas of race would rob the American past (and present) of its cultural complexity and overlook a provocative opportunity for students to explore the social construction of race in a seminal period of American history. Understanding the ways in which Americans in the past used both subtle and blatant cultural messages to construct race allows students to deconstruct and expose racist hierarchies and, in turn, create an American culture committed to racial equality. Ultimately, the willingness of Americans to confront, rather than ignore, the ideas embedded in minstrel music lay at the center of historical efforts at racial justice. In addition to demonstrating historical change, using this controversial historical material can reinforce a more positive

concept: the rich and multiracial nature of American culture.

While the reaction of students to the activities I offer for use below is often to focus on racism, the primary sources included in Set B underscore the complexity of issues that can be explored. They do this by also using recent popular music and its varied connections to generate discussion of larger issues. Minstrel music is available in both CDs and video documentaries and there are obviously more contemporary examples of cultural appropriation such as the career of Elvis Presley or the rise of rap music (see discussion questions) which can offer useful opportunities to either introduce or extend the lesson.

### Lesson Plans

**Time Frame:** two 50 minute class periods

**Student Objectives:**

1. To understand how the production and consumption of nineteenth-century popular culture reflected the diverse perspectives on matters such as region and race.
2. To interpret primary documents associated with minstrel music and antebellum American culture.
3. To identify and understand the multiple meanings embedded in popular culture and the relationship to larger historical issues.

**Procedure**

*Day One:* After explaining the nature of minstrel performances and their popularity, the instructor should play a few minstrel songs and provide lyrics. Divide the class into 5 groups. The assignment for the first four groups is to evaluate the primary sources associated with minstrel music (Set A) and write a short newspaper review of a minstrel performance based on the perspective of their assigned antebellum identity. The reviews should comment on both the content and meaning of the performance as well as the role of the audience.

- Group 1: A recent Irish immigrant living in the North
- Group 2: A free African-American living in the North
- Group 3: A southern white supporter of slavery
- Group 4: A northern white abolitionist

The assignment for Group 5 is, in addition to analyzing the documents in Set A, to use the primary documents in Set B to prepare a class discussion/debate on the meaning of minstrel music regarding race in nineteenth-century American culture.

**Day Two:** Group 5 uses the previous activity and the primary sources included in Set B to lead a discussion with the entire class. While students are encouraged to refer to earlier documents, the students in Group 5 should focus the discussion on the documents in Set B to answer the questions: *What does minstrel music say about race in nineteenth-century America? Was the music racist or a subversive challenge to the racial hierarchy? How might the production and consumption of minstrelsy help us understand other larger issues of the period such as slavery, abolitionism, class, gender, and region? How might the varied newspaper reviews from the first class help us explore these questions?*

### Suggestions for Further Reading

- Emerson, Ken. *Doo-dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Mahar, William J. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- Roediger, David and Martin H. Blatt, eds. *The Meaning of Slavery in the North*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Saxton, Alexander. "Blackface Minstrelsy, Vernacular Comics, and the Politics of Slavery in the North" in David Roediger and Martin H. Blatt, eds. *The Meaning of Slavery in the North*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998, 157-175.
- Toll, Robert C. *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

### Videorecordings

- Riggs, Marlon T. *Ethnic Notions: Black People In White Minds*. Berkeley, CA: California Newsreel, 1987.
- "Stephen Foster: America's First Great Composer." The American Experience. PBS Video, 2001.

### Discography

- VanKeersbilck, David, et al. "The Early Minstrel Show." New World Records #803382.

## Document Set A

Documents 1, 2, and 5: Although Stephen Foster composed and sold more reputable parlor songs of the antebellum period such as "Open Thy

Lattice Love,” much of his unprecedented success as a composer came from minstrel songs. As a boy in Pittsburgh in the 1830s, he and his friends played blackface songs such as “Zip Coon” and much of Foster’s brief career involved reconciling his fame as a minstrel composer with his desire to write other music.

**Document 1:** Dean L. Root and Steven Saunders, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster: A Critical Edition Vol. I* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 216-18.

*Stephen Foster, “Massa’s In De Cold, Cold Ground” (1852)*

*Down in de cornfield  
Hear dat mournful sound:  
All de darkeys am a-weeping,  
Massa’s in de cold, cold ground.*

*Massa make de darkeys love him,  
Cayse he was so kind;  
Now, dey sadly weep above him,  
Mourning cayse he leave dem behind.*

**Document 2:** Dean L. Root and Steven Saunders, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster: A Critical Edition Vol. I* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 28-31.

*Stephen Foster, “Old Uncle Ned” (1848)*

*Dere was an old Nigga  
Dey call’d him Uncle Ned  
He’s dead long ago, long ago  
He had no wool on top of de head  
De place wha da wool ought to grow  
And hang up de fiddle and de bow,  
No more hard work for old Ned  
He gone wha de good niggas go.*

**Document 3:** <<http://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/>>, Lester Levy Collections, Johns Hopkins University.

*Benjamin Hanby “Darling Nelly Gray” (1856)*

*There’s a low green valley  
On the old Kentucky shore,  
There I’ve whiled many happy hours away,*

*A-sitting and a-singing  
By the little cottage door,  
Where lived my Darling Nelly Gray.*

*Oh! my poor Nelly Gray,  
They have taken you away,  
And I'll never see my darling anymore,  
I'm sitting by the river  
And I'm weeping all the day,  
For you've gone from the old Kentucky shore.  
One night I went to see her,  
But "She's gone!" the neighbors say,  
The white man bound her with his chain,  
They have taken her to Georgia  
For to wear her life away,  
As she toils in the cotton and the cane.*

**Document 4:** Song from novel written by African-American writer Martin Delaney in 1862. (Martin Robinson Delaney, *Blake; or The Huts of America, a novel*, 1862, reprint edition, with an introduction by Floyd J. Miller, [Boston: Beacon Press, 1970] 105-6.)

*Come all my brethren, let us take a rest,  
While the moon shines bright and clear;  
Old master died and left us all at last,  
And has gone at the bar to appear!  
Old master's dead and lying in his grave;  
And our blood will now cease to flow;  
He will no more tramp on the neck of the slave,  
For he's gone where slaveholder go!  
Hang Up the shovel and the hoe-o-o-o!  
I don't care whether I work or no!  
Old master's gone to the slaveholders rest-  
He's gone where they ought to go!*

**Document 5:** Dean L. Root and Steven Saunders, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster: A Critical Edition Vol. I* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 40-43.

*Stephen Foster, "Susanna" (1847)*

*I come from Alabama  
With my banjo on my knee  
I'se gwine to Lou'siana  
My true lub for to see.*



*It rain'd all night de day I left,  
De wedder it was dry;  
The sun so hot I froze to def  
Susanna, don't you cry.*

*Oh! Susanna, do not cry for me;  
I come from Alabama,  
Wid my Banjo on my knee.*

*I jump'd aboard the telegraph  
And trabbled down de ribber,  
De lectrick fluid magnified,  
And kill'd five hundred Nigga.  
De bulgine bust and de hoss ran off,  
I really thought I'd die;  
I shut my eyes to hold my bref  
Susanna don't you cry.*

**Document 6:**

*(Image Courtesy of the Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh Library System.)*

**Document 7:**

*(Image courtesy of The Lester Levy Collection of Sheet Music, The Sheridan Libraries of The Johns Hopkins University.)*

**Document 8:**

*(Image Courtesy of the Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh Library System.)*

**Document 9:**

## Document Set B

**Document 1:** Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, edited by Philip Foner (New York: International Publishers) 356-7.

“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 and flourish.”

**Document 2:** Dean L. Root and Steven Saunders, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster: A Critical Edition Vol. I* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) 164-67.

*Stephen Foster, “Ring, Ring de Banjo” (1851)*

*Once I was so lucky,  
My massa set me free,  
I went to old Kentucky  
To see what I could see:  
I could not go no farder,  
I turn to massa’s door,  
I lub him all de harder,  
I’ll go away no more.*

*Early in de morning  
Ob a lubly summer day,  
My massa send me warning  
He’d like to hear me play.  
On de banjo tapping,  
I come wid dulcem strain;  
Massa fall a napping-  
He’ll nebber wake again.*

**Document 3:** *Anonymous, “Zip Coon”* (New York: J.L. Hewitt and Co., c. 1829)

*O ole Zip Coon he is a larned skoler  
O ole Zip Coon he is a larned skoler*

*O ole Zip Coon he is a larned skoler  
Sings possum up a gum tree an' coony in a holler*

*Possum up a gum tree, coony on a stump,  
Possum up a gum tree, coony on a stump,  
Possum up a gum tree, coony on a stump,  
Den over dubble trubble, Zip Coon will jump.*

*O its old Suky blue skin, she is in lub wid me  
I went the udder arter noon to take a dish ob tea;  
What did you tink now, Suky had for supper,  
Why chicken foot an possum heel widout any butter.*

*I went down to Sandy Hollar t'other arternoon  
And the first man I chanced to meet war old Zip Coon;  
Old Zip Coon he is a natty scholar,  
For he plays upon de Banjo "Cooney in de holler."*

**Document 4:** Lott, 15.

In 1848, abolitionist Frederick Douglass described minstrel performers 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 tastes of their fellow white citizens."

**Document 5:** W.E.B. Du Bois, *Writings*, edited by Nathan Irvin Huggins. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 540.

"...the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated wholes phrases of Negro melody, as 'Swanee River' and 'Old Black Joe.' Side by side, too, with the growth has gone the debasements and imitations- the Negro 'minstrel' songs, many of the 'gospel' hymns, and some of the contemporary 'coon' songs,- a mass of music in which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the real Negro melodies."

**Document 6:** Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 48.

"...it is almost impossible for many whites to consider questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice...without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness."

— *African American author  
Ralph Ellison (1964)*

**Document 7:** Controversial Statue of Stephen Foster (1826-1864) created in 1900 in Pittsburgh, PA (Authors Personal Photograph, 2002).



## Discussion Points

1. The premise that music and other forms of popular culture reflect important aspects of the larger society during the period is central to this lesson. How can historians “read” the songs and images associated with minstrelsy? What are the messages about such topics as race, slavery, social class, and gender? In what ways was the minstrel music—both its production and consumption—a product of the antebellum period? Instructors should encourage students to explore the connections between blackface minstrelsy and other historical issues of antebellum period such as immigration, urbanization, and abolitionism. The result is that the history of minstrel music moves beyond simply another topic in the American survey to a valuable window through which to explore traditional historical issues.

2. Although students often focus on the offensive language included in minstrel songs, such terms were common during the period. Instructors should encourage students to identify other aspects of the lyrics and images associated with minstrel music that one could argue were far more dangerous. For example, many minstrel songs, regardless of specific terms, portrayed African Americans as happy, childish slaves content with their status. Such depictions mirrored southern defenses of slavery and obscure the historical evidence of slave resistance.

3. Contemporary popular culture can be an effective way to introduce the complexity of blackface minstrelsy. How can music and other forms of popular culture, both past and present, reflect dominant attitudes toward issues such as race or gender? A *Newsweek* article (May 5, 2003) entitled, “Minstrels in Baggy Jeans?” described the mixed responses to popular white rap artists such as Eminem and recent films such as “Malibu’s Most Wanted” and “Bringing Down the House.” While one commentator simply pointed to the tremendous popularity of rap, historian Kevin Powell argued “all this fascination with hip-hop is just a cultural safari for white people.”

4. It is important to evaluate minstrel music within its historical context. Just as some have described minstrel music as a uniquely American form of entertainment, many students have also read Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, a classic novel with a reputation for insight into the nineteenth-century American character. How would students compare the novel’s slave character Jim with the images of African Americans in minstrel music? Is it possible that Twain’s famous novel was both critical of slavery and guilty of perpetuating racist stereotypes?

5. There is little doubt that blackface minstrelsy was important to many composers, performers, and countless audience members (or con-

sumers) in American society before the Civil War. Why did so many Americans participate? Is it possible for music to contain multiple meanings? Is the perspective and intent of the composer or performer always the same as the audience? Instructors might want to encourage students to think about the provocative title of historian Eric Lott's excellent work on minstrelsy, *Love and Theft* (1995). Unlike many earlier scholars, Lott sees *both* cultural admiration and exploitation in a form of music that reveals a great deal about northern whites in the decades before the Civil War. Is it possible for cultural imitation to be both flattering and a form of control or exploitation? Another possibility for discussion is the statue of Stephen Foster (Document #7, Set B). How might the statue reflect the numerous, and perhaps conflicting, interpretations of both race and minstrelsy in antebellum America? What does its creation in Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century or recent controversies over the statue reveal about the issue of race throughout American history?

6. How does minstrel music demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of popular culture as evidence for historians? What understandings can historians gain by looking at minstrel shows and other forms of popular culture that might be more difficult, if not impossible, to gain from historical research that emphasizes political elections, laws, and military campaigns? Are there any problems or limitations inherent in such a strategy?

## Notes

1. Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1959) 58-63.

2. Dailey Paskman, "Gentlemen Be Seated:" A Parade of the American Minstrels (Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. New York, revised edition, 1976, originally published in 1928) 184.

3. *Christy's Negro Songster: Containing the Most Popular Melodies as sung by Christy, Wood, White, Buckley and other Negro Minstrels* (New York: Richard Walsh) undated, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, 17; Stephen Foster, *Massa's In the Cold, Cold Ground: illustrated* (Boston, Ticknor and Company, 1889).