

## **The blackface lumpenproletariat and American popular culture**

In a previous essay on African-American music<sup>1</sup>, I subscribed to the thesis that its study is most fruitful when it is seen as a dynamic cultural evolution resulting from the complex interaction between the black and white populations. African-American music is not a survival that erodes over time, but a generative force still active today. Looking for African retentions in for example the blues, jazz and later hip hop and rap is an amusing activity, but can only unearth anecdotal information that remains meaningless without a wider historical and social framework. Moreover, I favor an approach that focuses not on what differentiates the African American culture from the European American culture, but on the way African and European traditions blended to form a whole that eventually is neither African, nor European. In this perspective, it is possible to analyze how original African idioms and cultural traits fertilized American culture.

Music encodes a group's life at a particular place and time. It is part of the cultural capital of a group, and makes a statement about its actual and/or desired place in society in relation to other groups from which it distinguishes itself. Music is a social marker, an identity card. Its appreciation is never purely aesthetical, but also, and in the first place, ethical. It expresses the group's values and considerations about what is good and bad. These values are to be interpreted in relation to the values of other groups, since a group's identity is formed compared with the identity of other relevant groups. The self-identification always happens by building patterns of meanings, attitudes and customs with respect to the "other". Besides, the process by which we, as individuals, define who we are is largely similar to the construction of a group identity: it takes place in social interaction. Our ego does never arise in a social vacuum.

Power and authority being a cement of society, it follows from the social role of music that the latter is hardly ever neutral from the perspective of the position of a group with regard to its degree of participation in the political and economic control of society. History is replete with illustrations how music can express protest and can act as an effective instrument of rebellion. It can be a language by which a group can question and criticize authority. It can also be an expressive tool of survival. Moreover, gaining control over a group's music can be a way to suppress subversion. By integrating potentially harmful music in mainstream culture, by modeling it and smoothing its edges when allowing its access to the main cultural temples, a dominant class can prevent the bad seed from growing and threatening its position. Music becomes then an instrument for normalization and disciplining.

A musical evolution is never simple. It is hard, of not impossible to define a starting and an end point for musical idioms and styles. This is not surprising since this evolution is steered also by the way groups interact, and this interaction is by definition more than just a question of giving and taking. When we go to the baker, we exchange money for bread. The one replaces the other. A cultural exchange, on the contrary, always builds further upon an existing layer; it never replaces this layer. When one group integrates musical elements from other groups, it does so in a creative manner, interpreting the new within the framework of the existing. The future is woven from threads of the past. A group never leaves its culture behind.

This theoretical sidestep allows me to qualify my earlier thesis: when we want to understand the nature of African-American music and its evolution, we have to look beyond its "colored" origin. The skin color and what it represents are not capable of explaining it all. It is essential to take into account how the different social groups in America gradually acquired a self-definition in a particular context of power relations. This involves more than the sole color of the skin, but also asks to consider aspects of economic power and participation in the political decision making. It is impossible to make abstraction from the struggle between lower - be it white or black - and higher classes in the definition of what is American culture. Nevertheless, in this struggle for self-identification and self-comprehension, i.e. in this process of answering the question of what it is to be an American, the culture and music brought along from Africa left its indelible traces.

There is no better illustration to my theoretical gibberish - that by now certainly has started to bore you - than the blackface performance and minstrelsy. I would like you to bear with me for another few pages to elaborate somewhat on this entertainment form that has like no other contributed to the formation of American entertainment, and has helped to pave the way for a popularization of the African idiom in mainstream culture. Ragtime, blues and jazz would not have become what they are without the fertilizing ferment of blackface minstrelsy.

For those who are not familiar with blackface performance, let me first draw a rough historical sketch.

## **FROM LEWIS HALLAM TO BEYONCE**

Blackface minstrelsy as a form of theatrical entertainment reportedly emerged during the 1820's and reached its highest popularity in the decades between 1850 and 1870. In a simplified manner, it is described as an imitation of the slave's style of music and dancing by white men, who blackened their faces with burnt cork. They went on stage singing so-called "Ethiopian songs" (Negro songs), performed dances derived from those of the slaves, and told jokes based on the slave life. Roughly, two categories existed: one the one hand the caricature of the plantation slave wearing ragged clothes and speaking a thick dialect (Jim Crow), on the other hand the city slave, the dandy who dressed in the latest fashion but was not really fit to city life (Zip Coon)<sup>ii</sup>.

Usually, the blackface historical narrative starts with the white comedian and playwright Thomas D. Rice who introduced in an 1828 stage act the song "Jump Jim Crow", accompanied by a dance. A few decades before, however, Lewis Hallam Jr., an England-born American theater manager, son of Lewis Hallam, one of the pioneers of American Theater, had already brought blackface on stage as early as 1769 when he sang "*Dear Heart! What a Terrible Life I am Led*" in a comic opera at the John Street Theater in New York. Anyhow, credit goes to Rice who popularized blackface entertainment, and made it his signature act as from 1830. The song, with a syncopated rhythm, accompanied gestures and dancing imitating the dancing of a crippled, black stable groom by the name of "Jim Crow." Legend has it that Rice had encountered this man when he was on a theater tour in Louisville, Kentucky. Reportedly, this stable hand had a crooked leg and deformed shoulder, and when he was singing in a funny way about Jim Crow, he punctuated each stanza with a little jump. Thomas Rice gained huge popularity with his act, and traveled from theater to theater all over the nation performing under the pseudonym "Daddy

Jim Crow", singing "*I Turn About and Wheel About*"<sup>iii</sup>, dressed in rags and with his face blackened.

The format struck a chord with the theatre audiences.

In its first decades, blackface performances mixed sketches with comic songs and vigorous dances, mixing the ethnically and racially exotic with absurdity, and the "carnavalesque". Humor and chaos opposed the ruling assumptions of society. While initially the performances were held in venues of rather questionable reputation, gradually, as blackface gained popularity, the blackface stage act was programmed as entr'acte in theatrical venues of a higher class. In parallel with its increasing popularity, the stereotyped blackface characters, by which we now remember this theatrical style, developed. Blacks were presented as lazy, superstitious, and lascivious. They were considered as cowards, and stole, lied, and talked a ridiculous form of English.

The first full-length minstrel entertainment show was performed in New York City in 1843 by a quartet, named the Virginia Minstrels, composed by Dan Emmett, William Whitlock, Frank Bower and Dick Pelham. They emancipated blackface minstrelsy from its entr'acte status and brought the first full-blown, evening long minstrel show. The act grew into a fixed format, with the musicians sitting in a semicircle, a tambourine player on one end and a bones player on the other. The Virginia Minstrels paved the way for hundreds of other blackface minstrel groups that met wildly enthusiastic audiences, not only in theaters in the United States but also in Europe. Ethiopian minstrelsy became for more than four decades the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in the United States and abroad. To obtain materials for their shows, the minstrels visited plantations, and attempted to recreate plantation scenes on the stage. The dances witnessed on the plantations, on steamboats, river docks and tobacco factories were adapted according to the actors' needs<sup>iv</sup>.

Ironically, after the Civil War, with the formal freedom of the black population, the Ethiopian Minstrelsy stage became more and more occupied by troupes of black entertainers, who like their white counterparts, blackened their face (they were not allowed on stage as blacks). The black performed their act just as the whites did. The inversion was inverted. While the white actors blackened their face and adapted the black folk tradition to the white needs, so did black actors with blackened faces in the post bellum period adapted the minstrelsy act to their taste. The music went from folk to the popular stage, back to the folk roots in the black population.

The end of the Reconstruction period marked also the end of the popularity of the minstrel shows. Blackface returned to its novelty act roots and became part of vaudeville. It did not disappear however. Its immediate impact remained present in the popular coon songs, the direct ancestor of ragtime music. As such, blackface featured prominently in film at least into the 1930s, and the popularity of the "Amos 'n' Andy" radio show lasted well into the 1950s. Amateur blackface minstrel show companies continued to perform at least into the 1950s, in the United States and in the United Kingdom

In the twentieth century, quite a number of well-known entertainers performed in blackface. To name only a few: Al Jolson (star of the 1927 first full-length talking movie, the *Jazz Singer*, and

in the 1930's the most famous and highest paid entertainer), Eddie "Banjo Eyes" Cantor, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, and last but not least actor-comedian Bert Williams, the first Black performer in vaudeville and on Broadway.

Let me note also that United States cartoons from the 1930s and 1940s often featured characters in blackface gags or other racial and ethnic caricatures. One of the influences in the development of characters like Mickey Mouse was the blackface persona. Blackface also crossed over to television. I still vividly remember having enjoyed as a child the "Black and White Minstrel Shows", tremendously popular British musical variety broadcasts featuring blackface performers. The show, devised by the Scottish musician, George Mitchell, remained on screen until 1978. With a peak viewing audience of 16.5 million viewers in 1964, the show was a huge success, and even won in 1961 the Golden Rose of Montreux for the world's Best TV Show. The minstrel show continued to be performed on stage until 1992.

And it is not over: for her 2010 single "Freak", the British songstress-rapper Estelle recorded a video that contains segments showing her with black makeup on her face and body. It sparked outrage among many of her fans. In a 2011 photo shoot with French magazine "L'Officiel", Beyoncé appeared in blackface, causing a wave of criticism all over. It led an American journalist to comment: "Blackface is not fashion forward or edgy and, in my opinion, it is just flat-out offensive."

If this journalist would have known a bit more about the background of blackface minstrelsy, he would have qualified his statement substantially. It is too simplistic to reduce blackface to a mere racial scorn.

## **THE MULTIFACETED BLACKFACE**

As Jason Richards<sup>v</sup> has stressed, blackface minstrelsy has had tremendous effects on American racial formation, national identity, literature, music, and film. It helped lay the foundations for much of American popular culture. Minstrelsy was not only about burlesquing blacks but also about satirizing society. It fixed race, yet at the same time it made it fluid and adaptable. Ralph Ellison has, more in general, argued that "wearing the mask" is largely what it means to be American. Ellison observes for instance that the revolutionaries who attended the Boston Tea Party dressed as Indians, and that Lincoln wanted people to see him as an honest country lawyer. White rapper Eminem has gained huge success by imitating black music and dialect. The mask, whether literal or figurative, continues to be a "vital, lucrative, deceiving part of American culture".

Much more than we realize, blackface has been central to American self-creation in the post-colonial nation that was looking for an identity, independent from Europe. America, freshly freed from England, was searching for a distinct cultural form, and the African black life was a source of inspiration. Whites copied the blacks' accents, moves, and cultures, just as blacks copied idioms of the white culture. Minstrelsy, the ultimate white imitation of black culture, reflected the hybrid nature of America, simultaneously allowing whites to draw racial boundaries. It embodied this paradox, representing at the same time racial fluidity and fixity, racial freedom and regulation, everything at the same time. It played on the racial boundaries building a bridge

for the cross-over of culture, yet served too as a framework for violent and demeaning segregation between these same races.

This intense contradiction is reflected in the scholarly debate on the subject.

By some, minstrel shows are defined as a capitalist stereotyping ideology that rigidly outlined race, equating white with supremacy and black with subordination. Blackface minstrelsy is depicted as an intrinsically racist cultural form. For instance, according to Frederick Douglass, a former slave, blackface was a continued degradation of blacks on the stage; blackface performers were "*the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from blacks a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money.*" Blackface, in this approach, is a national sin.

Other scholars however highlight the subversive dimension and its vital contribution to the formation of American popular culture: "native" black cultural forms were used to shape something uniquely American. The blackface theatre was popular because it was also a parody on European theatre and was mocking aristocracy, and was thus a way of coping with feelings of cultural inferiority with respect to this European culture.

Was blackface minstrelsy intrinsically bad or good? There are arguments for both stances, but at the end of the day this debate leads to a never ending ideological discussion which will not bring any new insights. More recent investigations have unveiled the class dimension of the minstrelsy, and have demonstrated how the shows can be explained in the dynamics of the formation of the working-class whiteness. Putting on a black face allowed the white underdog and worker to both identify with and distinguish themselves from blacks and upper-class whites. Having an origin in folk theatre, blackface was a way of speaking out against the authority of the old and new upper-class. The roots of the minstrelsy are found in the streets of the urban north where black paint on the face was used to question the way the white upper-class wanted to structure society. It outwitted the powers. During the decades before the shows were allowed on the mainstream stage of culture, blackface performers were considered as "demons" who threatened the dominant culture and ideology. They were the rebels in black disguise, who through mockery and satire carved their own subversive identity, threatening the ruling class. It was a battle in the emergence of a distinct American culture.

This class dimension has been thoroughly explored, for instance, by W. T. Lhamon who in his 1998 publication "*Raising Cain*" describes how blackface theatre surfaced in the early nineteenth century in a market place in lower Manhattan, where various races, cultures and classes met. Poor immigrants from Europe met uprooted blacks coming from the country side, and looked for a common cultural language. Out of this search grew, according to Lhamon, a clear anti-racist dimension in blackface theatre. It crossed racial boundaries within the struggle by the white urban working class to define an identity for itself in opposition to the culture of the (white) upper-class. What better way to do so than by identifying itself with a group that it considered as even of lower social status? By putting on a black mask, the white working class spoke out against the white authority. Blackface was glue for collective resistance by the lower classes against the upper-classes. It was the voice of the lumpenproletariat that discovered in the black culture, whether in an authentic form or not, a cultural vehicle by which to criticize the

mainstream white ideology. It was a way of the lower class, whatever complexion, to shape itself an identity in critical opposition to the white aristocracy and new white bourgeoisie.

It is meaningful to distinguish between blackface *performance* and blackface *minstrelsy*. The former refers to the inception period during the first decades of the nineteenth century when blackface was folk theatre taking shape in the urban environment of the north. The latter covers the period when, after Thomas Rice popularized the show, blackface made its entry on the stages of the temples of the cultural mainstream. A marker is 1843 when the Virginia Minstrels premiered to a paying audience in the New York Chatham theatre. By then, the folk act had been transformed to a formulaic act cleaned and smoothed by the white entrepreneurial class in order to reach the largest possible audience and to maximize profit. The culturally subversive thorns had been cut off, and what was in its very origin a potentially harmful social movement had been made innocent in the hands of the professional entertainment business. What is more: it was turned into a major ideological construction that legitimated the existing authority structures, based on race and capital. Blackface minstrelsy had been turned inside out to become popular in the very same culture that once was the soil for its emergence as a threatening "demon." There was a metamorphosis from a street culture to mainstream culture. Jim Crow had evolved from a rebel to a popular star. He had become an instrument in an elite culture that he initially contested. Does this not sound familiar? Is popular music in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century not a constant repetition of a mainstream culture that swallows and digests street culture from the lower classes?

Anyhow, as I said in the introduction, blackface shows that music helps to define groups that relate to one another in a particular position of power. It is not a social neutral event. Moreover, music grows in a dynamic interaction of existing cultural components, based on a constant borrowing and lending from one another. What once was a cultural idiom in one group can cross over to the other group to serve as an instrument used against the other group.

## **THE CHARISMA OF CONTAGIOUS MUSIC**

Though some authors as W. J. Mahar (2000) have argued that African culture in the blackface minstrelsy has received disproportionate attention, putting in the shadow European (British, Italian and French) influences, it is widely accepted that the flow in the genesis of blackface comedy and music went foremost from black to white. I like to put it even more boldly. Blackface minstrelsy was only the first major expression of what would be a leading thread throughout later American (and Western) culture: the constant fascination of white culture with the charisma of black music.

Blackface minstrelsy was indeed, as I have described the main entry gate through which black and black-influenced music, comedy and dance for the first time reached nationwide popular American mainstream culture. It is hard to imagine now, but during decades it was this genre of theatre and music that dominated the American cultural scene. Moreover, its impact was not limited to the American audience, but spread all over the world. Quoting jazz historian Gary Giddings: "Virtually every major, new genre of popular music in the United States from the twilight of the 19th century to the dawn of the 21st century—from the tight harmonies of barbershop quartets to ragtime, to blues, to jazz and swing, to blues, rhythm and blues and rock

and roll, to funk and classic rock, to hip hop and country— is a product or byproduct of African-American innovation.” Popular western music today would sound quite differently if there had not been the influence by black culture.

It is not the place here to analyze this impact. Suffice it to refer for instance to country and bluegrass music - considered as white music by excellence - that have been influenced by blacks through the introduction of the banjo, and by the innovation of musical techniques in the playing of banjo and fiddle. Minstrelsy has left a definite legacy in many traditional hillbilly fiddle tunes. Early stars of the country music were veterans of blackface performance. The case for the black origin of jazz, blues, rock and roll, hip hop, and rap needs no further comment. What is more interesting in these cases is the striking resemblance of the way the original folk origin of these genres has eventually ended in popularized versions, all polished and cleaned. Evenly striking is how the original rebellious nature of the music was frequently a source of inspiration for a group of white youngsters, as in rock and roll and in rap, and how commercialism discovered the genres and molded them to forms suitable (i.e. profitable) for the largest possible market. Just as it did for the blackface minstrelsy, the cross-over from black to white and finally to the mainstream stage happened for 20th century black styles very much at the expense of the original stimulating style and beat. Expropriation, as some label it, cut away the rough edges that precisely granted the music its original appeal and “raison d’être”.

But, despite the cross-overs and the losses of its original functionality, black style music again and again keeps its appeal and continues to gather fans in different cultural and social settings. For me, there is no better illustration than the agency of a factor that is constant all the time: **the contagious charisma of black music**. Blackface minstrelsy, born out of both fear and fascination, was only the first example.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.myblues.eu/blog/?p=2455>

<sup>ii</sup> Eileen Southern, *The music of black Americans, a history*, 3rd edition, 1997, p.89

<sup>iii</sup> <http://blackhistory.com/content/61585/blackface>

<sup>iv</sup> Eileen Southern, *The music of black Americans, a history*, 3rd edition, 1997, p.92

<sup>v</sup> Jason Richards, *White in Blackface, Blacks in Whiteface: Racial Fluidities and national identities*, 2005

<sup>vi</sup> See also: <http://blackhistory.com/content/61585/blackface>

<sup>vii</sup> Gary Giddins : *Bing Crosby, A pocketful of dreams*, 2002