

Sheldon Harris Collection: Sheet Music Collection, 1830s-1950s: Minstrel Songs

Disclaimer

Many of the minstrel songs contained in this digital collection are extremely offensive. However, it is impossible to adequately understand American racial attitudes of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries, without examining some blatantly racist ideas. Most of the music featured in this collection is not fringe material, but some of the most popular songs of their times.

The derogatory terms, images, and ideas that appear in some of this sheet music are not condoned by the University of Mississippi. They do represent the attitudes of a number of Americans during the era in which the songs were published. As such, it is hoped that the sheet music in this collection can aid students of music, history, and other disciplines to better understand popular American music and racial stereotypes from the 19th- and early 20th-centuries.

Parlor Songs, an online magazine on sheet music, devoted their August 1999 issue to "[Racism and Prejudice in Music](#)." Their words say it best: "The music of those times has become an important historical document and serves to remind us of the continuing need for tolerance and the elimination of prejudice, stereotypes and hatred."

Minstrel Songs

The minstrel song was a popular American musical form that lasted through much of the 19th-century and gradually declined through the first few decades of the 20th-century. These songs were sometimes performed as solo pieces, but were most often part of a minstrel show. Minstrel shows featured a wide variety of stock characters performing jokes, songs, dances, and comedy routines. The early minstrel shows predominantly featured white performers in painted black faces, parodying African American entertainment routines. This form of blackface minstrelsy was later adopted by African Americans, who would also appear in painted blackface. The tradition goes back at least to 1789, when a white comedian, Lewis Hallam Jr., put on blackface to play the role of a drunken black man. The first highly successful blackface performer was Thomas Rice, who created a song and dance routine called "Jump Jim Crow" in 1828. His performances helped usher in an American craze for blackface minstrel songs. Short blackface routines were often interjected between acts at more serious theater performances. By the 1930s, these acts developed into full fledged minstrel shows, often with entire theatre companies dedicated to their performance. By the 1860s, many minstrel shows featured all-black casts, where black performers often parodied the parody white performers had earlier created.

Minstrel songs often emphasized white stereotypes of African Americans, frequently portraying black Americans as ignorant, overly jolly, and superstitious. Minstrel songs also featured a nostalgic, romanticized vision of the south as a form of paradise; this style of minstrel song was often featured in the music of Stephen Foster.

The minstrel show had a profound influence on the creation of vaudeville, which, in many ways, is simply an extension of minstrelsy, and indirectly to musical theater. Though some scholars see minstrelsy alive today in the form of white artists performing black styles, the overt, blackface style minstrel parody really died out in the 1950s. Amos & Andy and Al Jolson were some of the last major vestiges of this blatant blackface minstrel tradition.