

Black Faced, Jazz Shaped: Race and American Popular Culture 1830-1930

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Abstract

This article will discuss race and popular culture in the United States from the early 19th century to the Jazz age of the 1920s. Rather than a historical overview, the article concentrates on specific areas of cultural expression that help to demonstrate how we should understand a rapidly changing America and how culture reflected that change. By initially considering the blackface minstrelsy craze of the 19th century and early 20th century, the article will display how racial masking played an important role in promoting an integrated musical culture in which jazz was a vital component. Therefore, while African Americans continued to endure deeply rooted racial prejudice and discrimination, by the 1920s their contribution to America's cultural identity was beyond doubt.

Keywords: blackface, minstrelsy, music, popular culture, America

ทำหน้าให้ดำ ทำรูปแบบให้แจ๊ส: เชื้อชาติและวัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยม ในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกาช่วง ค.ศ. 1830-1930

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาเกี่ยวกับกลุ่มเชื้อชาติและวัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยมในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกา ตั้งแต่ต้นศตวรรษที่ 19 จนถึงยุคสมัยเพลงแจ๊สแห่งปีทศวรรษ 1920 โดยนำเสนอแง่มุมต่าง ๆ ในการแสดงออกทางวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งช่วยให้เข้าใจประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกาในยุคที่มีการเปลี่ยนแปลงอย่างรวดเร็ว และแสดงให้เห็นว่าวัฒนธรรมได้สะท้อนการเปลี่ยนแปลงเหล่านั้นอย่างไร บทความนี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์ความนิยมแนวดนตรีและการแสดงที่คนผิวขาวทำหน้าดำให้เหมือนทาสผิวดำ (blackface minstrelsy) ในศตวรรษที่ 19 และต้นศตวรรษที่ 20 และสื่อให้เห็นว่าการอำพรางทางเชื้อชาติ มีบทบาทอย่างยิ่งในการเสริมสร้างวัฒนธรรมดนตรีแนวบูรณาการ ซึ่งเป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญของดนตรีประเภทแจ๊สและบลูส์ ดังนั้นในขณะที่ชนอเมริกันผิวดำยังคงต้องอดทนต่ออคติและการแบ่งแยกสีผิวที่ยังรากลึก ในช่วงก่อนทศวรรษที่ 19-20 บุคคลเหล่านั้นยังได้ให้มรดกที่เป็นเอกลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมแก่ประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกาอย่างแท้จริง

คำสำคัญ Blackface, Minstrelsy, ดนตรี, วัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยม, อเมริกา

1. Introduction

In the United States during the antebellum period the widely held view was that blacks were born to serve and that the slaves totally lacked the intelligence and civilization of their white masters. The bogus scientific theory of Phrenology (See Gilroy, 1999: 21), that assumed human intelligence was based upon skull size, encouraged an endemic racism that was further augmented by spurious interpretations of passages from the bible rendering slavery an institution ordained by God. Consequently, the United States as a whole was fed a racist narrative and while the North had its radical abolitionists, they were far outnumbered by those who feared that the end of slavery would result in whites being overwhelmed by an unprecedented mass of free blacks. These factors underpin the social conditions from which blackface minstrelsy emerged as the principle form of 19th century popular entertainment. Blackface's broad appeal fed into the racial sensibilities of the white northern working class audience that, by the 1850s, would include recently-arrived Irish immigrants who were themselves subjected to anti-papal hostility engendered by the first wave of American Nativism. (See Brogan, 1990: 312) For the white working class, blackface was a reassurance that there was at least one group, the black slaves, who would always remain inferior.

Despite the clear racist overtones of blackface minstrelsy, the very process of mimicry and parody suggests a great deal about how American culture developed during the 19th and 20th centuries. Minstrelsy ridiculed the southern plantation slave and reinforced existing white supremacist attitudes, yet in hindsight minstrelsy also attests to how white entertainers were, at a very early stage in American history, acknowledging the black presence in the United States. There was an unconscious racial interchange evident in various cultural genres that, from the mid 1800s onwards, began to assume distinctive American characteristics. To consider the origins of this cross-racial dynamic that pervades the history of the United States it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of minstrelsy as a form of entertainment and how minstrelsy impacted upon American life and leisure during the ante-bellum era and then after the American Civil War.

2. Literature Review

The complexities surrounding race and America's cultural identity has received considerable academic attention over the past thirty years and continues to provide a valuable source for cultural historians. This article is not definitive but continues a line of scholarship that relates to a deeper understanding of race and cultural production in the United States. Any literature review, in this sense, is bound to be limited.

Blackface Minstrelsy can be viewed as metaphor when attempting to make sense of a nation in which historical segregation has been continually counteracted by the often unconscious interaction between black and white. Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) expanded upon previous studies of minstrelsy by linking class and race to the formulation of a nineteenth-century American culture. What is fundamental to Lott's study is his focus upon how it was northern minstrels who constructed the southern racial stereotype for northern white working class audiences during the antebellum period. Nick Tosches' continues the blackface theme in *Where Dead Voices Gather* (2001) but locates the 1920s "Georgia Minstrel" Emmet Miller as pivotal figure who links the minstrelsy tradition with the racial traversing which underpins jazz, rock 'n' roll and other American popular music forms.

In the decades after the Civil War, African Americans became increasingly involved in the Blackface entertainment which immediately throws up an abundance of discussion points. The reasons for this were frequently economic and that racism ensured black American entertainers were unable to gain any meaningful employment other than what appears to be self mockery. As an African American scholar, Houston A. Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1984) discusses the notion of "form and mask" within African American minstrelsy and that entertainers like Bert Williams were actually reclaiming an identity which had been appropriated and distorted by whites. Baker would draw on ideas that date back to W. E. B. DuBois who is also cited in this article. DuBois would have deplored blackface but nonetheless his insight into the psychological trauma of "double consciousness" in his seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) relates very heavily to any consideration of American culture and black identity. DuBois's ideas had a huge influence on a number of African American intellectuals including James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke and, for the

purposes of this article, Ralph Ellison. It was Ellison who was the author of perhaps the definitive novel on race, identity and individualism *Invisible Man* (1952). However, Ellison wrote numerous non-fictional essays dealing with the African American experience and cited here is the self explanatory 'What America Would Be Like Without Blacks' (1970) which is to be found in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1995). While Ellison's integrationist approach to race would not be accepted by black essentialists, he remains a significant reference point in any discussion on American identity.

This article is dealing with history and there are a number of publications referenced that are important explorations of America's cultural past. Richard Crawford's *America's Musical Life* (2005) is a scholarly and detailed study of American music from the colonial period to the twentieth century that gives fascinating insights into the Negro spirituals, minstrelsy and importance of composers like Stephen Foster. Much more culturally specific but equally valuable is Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995) which discusses the racial interaction of blacks and whites while focusing on how African Americans influenced New York modernism during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. Lawrence W. Levine too wrote a great deal about race and culture in the United States and relevant to this article would be Levine's *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (1993) that includes chapters on African American culture from slavery to the Great Depression.

The Jewish involvement in the blackface tradition is an area of research that remains rich in possibilities. This article does contain some discussion of the cultural relationship between Jews and African Americans as well as the Jewish links to blackface, the Negro Spiritual, and jazz. Particular to the Jewish dimension is Stephen J. Whitfield's *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (1999) that details Jewish involvement in the American entertainment industry. From a more personalized Jewish perspective, jazz clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow's autobiography *Really the Blues* (1946) remains an enduring hipster classic that, as well as giving insight to the jazz scene of the 1920s, throws up a number of issues concerning race and identity. Mezzrow's affinity with "blackness" is a constant throughout *Really the Blues* and this factor suggests a great deal about the

symbiotic, if often problematic, relationship between African Americans and American Jews.

3. Blackface: Origins and development

The practice of masquerading or masking for dramatic effect existed long before the popularization of blackface minstrelsy in 19th century America and can be located within European and Asian as well as African traditions. The utility of disguise quite naturally allows the performer to assume an identity other than their own and, for this reason, promotes greater scope for drama, parody, and humour. An obvious example of this type of masking would be the clown whose employment of heavy make-up assists in exaggerating expressions of basic human emotions. Blackface inherits many features of the clown figure but with an additional racial dimension. In the United States, a form of blackface existed in the pre-revolutionary period with the “documented roots” of the minstrelsy tradition apparent in early versions of the American theatre when the English actor Lewis Hallam smeared himself with burnt cork in order to portray the black servant Mungo in Charles Dibdin’s comic opera *The Padlock* performed in New York during 1769 (See Tosches, 2001: 9). It was however, the minstrel show of the ante-bellum years that truly popularized blackface. Performers such as Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice and George Washington Dixon were, by the 1830s, presenting parodies of “plantation darkies” to audiences throughout the Northern states and territories. These parodies were usually depictions of accepted black stereotypes and would include characters such as the confrontational and “uppity” but grossly ignorant Zip Coon and the lethargic, stupid Jim Crow (Woodward, 1966: 7). These early parodies presented by Dixon and Rice would be absorbed into the performances of scores of entertainers who would traverse the United States playing in the frontier outposts and the burgeoning industrial towns outside of the South. In the South, minstrelsy was viewed as reprobate Yankee comedians disparaging southern life. Subsequently, burnt cork was prohibited in many southern cities. It was not until the Reconstruction period that Blackface would broaden its appeal within the South as whites began to yearn for a simpler era when slavery asserted absolute racial authority. Indeed, as the variety shows of Vaudeville

accelerated its decline in the North, the travelling minstrel show flourished in the South and would remain a feature of southern life at least up until the civil rights era of the early 1960s.¹

To return to the cultural specifics of blackface in relation to a broader sense of American identity, minstrelsy was the predominant branch of what passed for the American entertainment industry during the 19th century. Through minstrelsy, blacks were projected as happy, smiling, stupid and occasionally lascivious and although these nineteenth century representations can now rightly be viewed as racist and degrading, they at least illustrated that black people were beginning - however indirectly - to influence America's cultural output. For example, many of the earliest American popular songs were initially featured in the minstrel show with Stephen Foster - generally regarded as the first great American songwriter - regularly composing novel ditties that depicted the Southern plantation black stereotype. (Crawford, 2005: 210-217)

4. Racial overlapping and Jewish acculturation

At the end of the nineteenth century, many African Americans were beginning to drift to the rapidly industrializing Northern cities in search of jobs as well as to distance themselves from the racial shackles of the post-Reconstruction South. (See Fairclough, 2002: 197-198) Alas, for these migrants, racial discrimination in work and education was as debilitating in Chicago and New York as it was in Mississippi and Alabama. Even those African Americans with musical or theatrical ability confronted direct racism during a period when all spheres of American culture bore the hallmarks of white supremacy. For example, in a curious distortion of the minstrelsy craze, D. W. Griffith's 1915 cinematic historical epic of the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction *The Birth of a Nation*, introduced blacked-up white actors as devilish Negroes threatening the purity of white southern women.² For those African American actors who did appear

¹ The minstrel show would also become known in Britain where blackface entertainers would appear during the late 19th and early twentieth century. Minstrelsy was even revived in the 1960s through TV with the *Black and White Minstrel Show* a popular BBC variety show.

² Ironically, Griffith's film is generally viewed as an enormous advance within cinema while at the same time having nothing but a damaging effect upon race relations. The glorification of the South,

in Griffith's film, their roles were restricted to the popular stereotype. In Vaudeville too, African American performers could only gain regular employment through appearing in burnt cork and acting out a bizarre blackface self-parody.

There are numerous ways of determining this curious relationship between white and black minstrelsy performers. On one hand, black performers were imitating white performers imitating blacks and that this parody and counter parody are underlying components which help to explain the complexities of American cultural expression. Alternatively, the African Americans who "blacked up" during the early 1900s could be seen as merely offering observed caricatures in the same way that Irish or Jewish comedians would lampoon figures from their own communities. Another interpretation is that actually African Americans were claiming back something from white performers and that, within the racist society, blackface allowed African American performers to control and thus reconfigure the minstrel parody³. The fact is that African Americans blacked up and became part of the minstrel tradition partly because the "coon song era" (See Crawford, 2005: 487-491) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century offered an opportunity for African Americans to enter into an industry that otherwise excluded them. This period must be understood in the context of when racist attitudes were the norm and when even a preeminent African American figure such as James Weldon Johnson - novelist, poet, musician, purveyor of the Negro Spiritual, and early civil rights activist - would make a successful living by composing "coon songs" specifically for blackface vaudeville performers (See Smethurst, 2011: 17-18). The overlapping of race and class continued well into the twentieth century as segregated audiences in the North and the South laughed together at the parodies acted out by African American minstrel performers such as George Walker, Bert

the defence of slavery and the underlying narrative that Reconstruction was a disaster for the South instigated racial violence and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. While *The Birth of a Nation* did provoke civil rights protest throughout the US and was actually banned in some cities, it is still considered as a monumental artistic achievement. See Kevern Verney, *African Americans and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 17-19 and Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (London: Papermac, 1997), 42.

³ A good exploration of the complexities of African American blackface can be found in Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)

Williams, Billy Kersands and Ernest Hogan. Indeed, the most accomplished of these entertainers, Bert Williams became the prime exponent of burnt cork and his utilization of the blackface mask elevated racist mockery into a nuanced, ironic performance art that in hindsight provides a clear parallel between vaudeville artists like Williams and the thriving African American cultural expression represented through the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

Born in the Bahamas and brought up in New York and California, Williams was an educated and articulate man who, because of his skin colour, was never able to fulfill an ambition that aimed at the high cultural plateau of Shakespearean theatre. Yet Williams' impersonations and parodies of working class African Americans helped to make him one of the richest entertainers in the United States. Williams, despite an enormously successful Vaudeville career, could be accused of buttressing existing black stereotypes by accommodating the racist society and pandering to the white supremacist notion that blacks were racially and culturally inferior. (Rogin, 1992: 1075; Dimeglio, 1973: 114) At the same time, Williams connected with black audiences through his caricatures and actually ensured that white blackface performers no longer monopolized the minstrelsy genre. Like the poets and writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Williams was an artist who employed the vernacular and mannerisms of the "lowly Negro" in order to convey with innovation and irony a complex but essentially American form of cultural expression.⁴ Viewed historically, Williams established a precedent that would resonate through any future discussion of American culture during the 20th century.

As a black man born outside of the United States, Williams' mastery of performance art reflects a process of acculturation which can also be located within the sons and daughters of the immigrants who poured into the United States between 1880 and 1920. Cities such as New York and Chicago were transformed by this mass influx, most of it from Southern and Eastern Europe. For Eastern European Jewish immigrants, escaping the Russian pogroms of the late 19th century (See Hobsbawm,

⁴ Langston Hughes with his blues poetry and Zora Neale Hurston with her anthropological research into the folk tales of the black South were just two of a number of poets and writers who would draw upon the vernacular of poor Blacks to help define a distinct African American literary canon.

1987: 296), the United States represented a beacon of freedom though the reality of the immigrant experience was often one of exploitation and further hardship in the emerging industrial ghettos of America's sprawling urban centres.⁵ To begin with, integration was difficult for Jews and other Eastern and Southern Europeans. Their cultural and political traditions were different from the Nordic-American majority and many of the new arrivals were frequently associated with radical leftist ideas during an era when strikes and industrial conflict were commonplace.⁶ Jews in particular, were burdened with the weight of myth steeped in the historical stereotype of the moneylender and the common accusation that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. Eventually, the urban Jews of New York and Chicago would be assimilated into the broader American social fabric in the same way that America's image and identity began to change during the first three decades of the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, however, Jews and others of non-Nordic origins assumed a social status that, as Ralph Ellison once noted, placed them barely above African Americans:

Whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets

⁵ It should be remembered that Jewish immigration was confined to predominantly Eastern Europe and that actually there were already a number of assimilated and very rich German Jewish families based in New York and that in some cases dated back to the Revolution. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee College was actually funded by some of these families. See Louis R. Harlem, 'Booker T. Washington's Discovery of Jews', J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson (Eds.), *Region, Race, and Reconstruction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), 272.

⁶ Mass immigration prompted the xenophobic notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority and the fear of alien or non-American political idealisms filtering in from Europe (many immigrants involved in some of the most violent conflicts in American labour history). There were also instances of Italians and Jews being lynched in the South with the infamous Leo Frank case of 1915 the most noted. By 1921, the US government had introduced the Quota Act which effectively excluded immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as Asia while at the same time encouraging immigration from the Nordic countries. See Brogan, 1990: 415-416, 512.

that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term “nigger”. (Ellison [1970], 1995: 583)

Despite the enforced racial ladder of early 20th century America, Jews shared with African Americans a legacy of slavery, displacement and marginalization. Long before the mass immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, slaves in the United States had readily identified with the biblical exodus of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Many of the Negro spirituals were taken from Old Testament accounts of the Hebrew story and, for African Americans; the figure of Moses presents an enduring historical symbol that is linked to the black struggle for equality⁷. The Spirituals are significant in this context because they indicate a meeting point of African American struggle, Protestant Christianity and Jewish history. In other words, the Spiritual is indicative of a cultural intersecting that conflicted with the reality of society based upon white supremacy and racial separation.

The Negro Spirituals profoundly affected Mark Twain who, more than any other white American at that time, had, in *Huckleberry Finn*, explored the close cultural proximity between black and white. Twain would openly laud the Spiritual as a uniquely American form of folk music derived from a truly American experience (Levine, 1993: 176). In particular, Twain displayed great fondness for the Fisk Jubilee Singers a choral group that were performing a refined version of the music synonymous with the black church during and immediately after slavery. The Jubilee singers began as fund raisers for the freedmen’s college Fisk University and rose to prominence during the Reconstruction era when African Americans were temporarily

⁷ The use of “Moses” as a term to suggest leadership and/or courage has been applied to number of historically notable African Americans including Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. and, “Mama Moses”, Harriet Tubman. As well as the obvious Jewish/biblical connections to the Negro Spirituals and Jewish backing of the Harlem Renaissance, a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was Joel Spingarn one of several Jews involved in early civil rights issues. By the 1920s, there was also considerable Jewish sponsorship for the Harlem Renaissance. See Elliot Rudwick, ‘W. E. B. Du Bois: The Protagonist of the African American Protest’, John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Eds.) *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 74-75.

able to gain limited political representation and some social standing. (See Brogan, 1990: 356-384) By performing sacred Christian music, the group was able to gain a level of acceptance that would never be afforded to secular entertainers and the Fisks played a huge role in exposing African American music to a wider audience that would include American presidents and European royalty. (See Crawford, 2005: 419-420). By the end of the 19th century, these plaintive melodies that carried the Fisk Singers' harmonic Christian message were influencing the Czech composer Anton Dvorak whose popular classical *New World Symphony* (1893) emphasized the "Negro" influence upon the America's musical diversity (Crawford, 2005: 383)

While the biblical stories conveyed through the Spiritual struck a chord with the religious sensibilities of the world's greatest Christian nation, the nuanced messages of resistance from a people denied education and civil rights, were being recognized by black activists and intellectuals such as W. E. B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson. DuBois's exploration of black identity in the United States, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) introduced chapters by juxtaposing the musical scales of the "sorrow songs" with samples of European literature as if to indicate that culture has no racial borderlines. Twenty years later, as the Harlem Renaissance began to gather momentum and promote distinctive black literary styles, James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925) offered transcriptions that helped to explain the origins of black consciousness by explicating the spirituals' deeper metaphorical meanings of release from bondage. Consequently, these songs inspired a whole tradition of black protest that would be manifested through the Black Baptist church and in particular Martin Luther King Jr., whose speeches were littered with references to and quotations from African American spirituals.

It appears that the Spirituals, performed by earnest singers professing their Christian faith, should not be compared to the low brow racial parody of blackface minstrelsy. The Spirituals were though a product of the same racial environment and exhibited characteristics of cultural borrowing identified within minstrelsy. While blackface began with white northern comedians making fun of southern plantation slaves, the Spirituals would not have existed without the choral splendor of the Protestant hymns and the ante-bellum revivalist camp meetings that brought religion to

slaves and to poor whites (See Levine, 1993: 37-39). The Spiritual was much more aesthetically attractive than blackface minstrelsy but both the Spiritual and blackface testify to the mutual dependence of groups that were separated by racial difference and notions of racial superiority. Whites parodied and borrowed from blacks, but blacks also absorbed the music and the cultural practices of European Americans who themselves related to the Hebrew Old Testament of the King James Bible. In *The Souls of Black Folk* published at the dawn of the twentieth century, Du Bois made a case for the kind of integration that would encourage inclusivity in an environment that recognized diversity. Blacks “would not Africanize America”, wrote Du Bois, but if the nation is to live up to its lofty ideals then society should make “it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American”. (Du Bois (1903), 1994: 3) The Spiritual, which relied heavily on stories from Judeo-Christian scripture, reflected Du Bois’s vision of integration and demonstrated how black people were helping to create a culture that could take its place within American civilization.

As with African Americans, first and second generation Jewish Americans found few inroads into the broader society and although the Spiritual represented the historical correlation between emancipation in America and the biblical exodus of the Israelites, the actual immigrant experience was one of gradual integration that would be manifest through the American born second and third generations. Jews did play a supportive role in civil rights campaigns of the early 20th century (Rudwick, 1982: 74-75) with the famous African American educator Booker T. Washington viewing Jews as a prime example of what blacks could achieve (Harlan, 1976: 267-269). Equally, anti-Semitism was evident among African Americans who fundamentally relayed the same prejudice as many Whites – that Jews were “Christ killers” or monstrous money grabbers (Dinnerstein, 1994: 197). If assimilation was going to be achieved by Jews it would doubtless be assimilation into white America. To paraphrase the Jewish American writer Bernard Malamud, Jews were white because, in the context of early twentieth century America, they had no choice⁸. Yet, as already discussed, the minstrelsy tradition meant that whiteness was already tinged by the African American

⁸ See Bernard Malamud’s short story ‘Black is my Favorite Color’. Malamud *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 332.

presence and for Jews it was the entertainment industry - specifically blackface - that played a considerable part in their ultimate acculturation. Performers that would include Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, and Al Jolson were all second generation Jews born of lowly Eastern European parents who at various points in their careers appeared in blackface. Additionally, Irving Berlin, Howard Arlen, George and Ira Gershwin, were just some of the Jewish songwriters of the early 20th century who forged a livelihood through writing nostalgic ditties about the Old South that evoked Stephen Foster's minstrelsy style.

The culmination of this somewhat uneasy relationship between the second generation immigrant, the African American, and the underlying Anglo-Saxon heritage of the United States was Al Jolson's appearance in the first talking movie *The Jazz Singer* (1927) in which the Jewish Jolson plays the role of a Rabbi's son whose ambition is to become an entertainer. The fact that Jolson appears in blackface during the movie (most famously in his rendition of the sentimental 'Mammy') seemed to encapsulate both America's complex cultural landscape and America's technological advancement through sound cinema. The process of acculturation and the ultimate rejection of the old European world is also heavily represented through Jolson's portrayal of the "jazz singing" second generation Jewish American resisting the demands of his father to become a Synagogue cantor (See Whitfield, 1999: 139-167). *The Jazz Singer* needs to be considered within this context of the 1920s, a decade that witnessed the ascendancy of cinema and jazz as not just veritable forms of popular entertainment but as vibrant dynamics that underscored America's international image. A period "jazz" became a generic term for American popular dance music as well as an enduring signifier for America's technical, economic, and cultural surge after World War One.

5. Jazz: racial categorization and cultural integration

The history of jazz is complicated and, as previously indicated, reflects the traversing that continually informs America's cultural identity. The origins of jazz are located within the New Orleans marching band tradition which itself contains French, Spanish and British influences. During the nineteenth century, this fundamentally

European style began to be embellished with the musical rhythms that slaves imported from the Caribbean and Africa. By the post-bellum period, the work songs and the aforementioned spirituals of freed blacks in the southern interior as well as the novelty songs of minstrelsy were all being absorbed into a musical mix that was unique to New Orleans, a cosmopolitan city that was not strictly typical of the American South. With the added influences of ragtime and the blues, jazz, as it was coming to be known by the turn of the century (Crawford, 2005: 565), was a music played entirely in New Orleans with its finest exponents being either the African-European Creole or the black descendants of the slaves. The first great cornet player was an African American, Buddy Bolden, a musician who was never recorded and whose prowess is only known through the recollections of later black musicians. During the 1920s, the Creole pianist Jelly Roll Morton and the trumpeter Louis Armstrong recorded some of the most important American music of the twentieth century though, as with other great black or Creole musicians of the period, they suffered commercially because of racial categorization within the music industry⁹. The racial aspects of commercial jazz are no better illustrated than by the first ever jazz recording to gain widespread success. 'Livery Stable Blues'/'Tiger Rag' was released in 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), a group of white New Orleans musicians led by the son of an Italian immigrant, Nick La Rocca, whose own bigotry convinced him that jazz was an exclusively white invention (Hersch, 2008: 178). Thus, while black musicians provided the originality and, despite La Rocca's denial, the inspiration for many of their white counterparts, it would be those very same white musicians who would market jazz to a white audience.

Like rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, jazz of the 1920s impacted America's embryonic white youth culture through a number of different channels including vocabulary. Terms that emerged out of African American slang such became linguistically subversive tools that, during the years before World War II, entered into the vernacular lexicon of tens of thousands of white teenagers. Certainly, the prejudice displayed by La Rocca was not essentially representative of all white jazz performers and some did openly acknowledge

⁹ American popular music remains racially categorized to this day with music such as R&B and country music broadly aimed at specific black or white markets.

the contribution of African Americans. In a curious reverse of the blackface idiom, the Jewish clarinetist Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow identified entirely with black musicians to the extent he believed himself to be black in everything except skin colour¹⁰. Mezzrow was active during the 1920s, a Janus-faced decade in which the hedonism of the jazz age was counteracted by the rampant xenophobia of Nativism and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan as a powerful social force that had spread beyond the South and was now targeting Catholics and Jews. That a Jew should identify himself as black coincided with a period in America when individuals like Henry Ford were preaching an open anti-Semitism that blamed Jews for global conflict, the Russian Revolution and the promotion of this alien jazz that was poisoning the nation.

Mezzrow acts as a singular example of, what Ann Douglas referred to as, the “Negroization of American culture” (Douglas, 1995: 77) Jazz with its improvisations and its myriad of musical inflections was, in this respect, a rebuttal of a Nativism that clung to the idea that America and being American was a particular fixed entity. In the eyes of the cultural elite, civilization was not defined by the “Negro primitivism” of the Black Bottom, the Charleston, the Cakewalk (Savage, 2007: 114, 236) and the uninhibited behavior that jazz seemed to encourage. At the same time, jazz reflected the changing times of a post-war world in which America and its symbols were moving away from the log cabin to the age of automobiles, skyscrapers and mass production. Conservatives may well have seen jazz as polluting their own perspectives of what American music should be but, by the 1920s, jazz had become America’s most original contribution to global culture. Despite discrimination within the entertainment industry itself, jazz was the American music played by black and white musicians that combined elements derived from European and African influences.

6. Conclusion: Prejudice and discrimination

By the time of *The Jazz Singer*, jazz had been cleaned up and sanitized to appeal to a broader white market. This “sweetening” of jazz served to make the music

¹⁰ Mezzrow’s account of his life *Really the Blues* became a hipster classic that expresses the language and attitude of jazz musicians from the 1920s and 1930s. See Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, *Really the Blues*. 1946 (London: Payback Press, 1999)

respectable by appeasing conservative opinion and by broadening its market appeal. At the end of the 1920s, the fact was that most successful jazz artists were white and that within America's racially divided society, the recordings of white performers were specifically aimed at a white audience. As jazz became America's national music, the media repeatedly attempted to diminish the African American presence by promoting white band leaders such as the self styled "King of Jazz" Paul Whiteman. Jazz had evolved as a commercial form because white performers produced a softer version of the music which ensured a much larger consumer market for the fledgling recording industry. During the 1920s, African American entertainers remained pretty much ignored by this larger white audience. Yet the very existence of jazz and jazz's prime ingredient the blues demonstrated the pervading presence of the black influence and that African American musical forms dating back to slavery lay at the source of America's musical culture.

Whatever the advancements African Americans made during the 1920s, they continued to suffer ridicule, discrimination and brutality on a daily basis in a nation where the intellectual superiority of the Nordic European type was taken for granted by most whites¹¹. In spite of all these divisive features that permeated through political thinking and social mores, American popular music as a form of cultural expression was integrated and, while white artists enjoyed the financial benefits, the influence of black America was plain to see. The growth of technology and the mass production that technology induced, contributed greatly to the uniqueness of American popular music in that the modern preserved the antiquated and that folk and popular cultures overlapped and intertwined. At the same time, parody, borrowing, masking and the cultural theft that originated within the blackface idiom all combined to reflect the intricate and contradictory nature of America's cultural identity.

¹¹ The Jazz Age was a period of contradictions in American history. One hand there was the post-war pursuit of hedonism by the young and the popularity of jazz and cinema. Simultaneously, there was prohibition and the presence of a conservative anti-foreigner nativism that influenced the Quota Act of 1921. The Quota Act prevented mass immigration from Asia as well as Southern and Eastern Europe and encouraged immigration from the Nordic Protestant regions of Britain and Scandinavia. This period also witnessed the revival of the Ku-Klux Klan as a nationwide organization that, at its peak, boasted something like 6 million members. See Brogan, 1990, pp. 504-514.

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