Music of the Common Tongue

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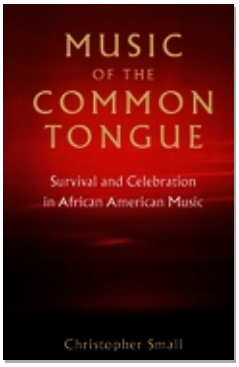

Chapter 5

STYLES OF ENCOUNTER I: A NEED IN WHITE CULTURE

We have seen something of the ways in which the black people who were thrust so abruptly into slavery in North America responded creatively to the new environment in which they found themselves. We have also seen that a response occurred in turn from those white people who encountered the musicking of the blacks at the great camp meetings of the early nineteenth century and took from them elements not only of their musicking but also of their style of worship, making them a part of their own rituals down to the present day. The discussion in the previous chapter suggests that before that response could occur the white people must have felt a kind of empathy which transcended the formidable barriers of slavery and of the presumed genetic inferiority of black people on which slavery was posited. It suggests, too, that those who were able in this way to absorb elements of black culture must have been sufficiently uncommitted to the values of European culture to make such absorption possible. The history of the American south suggests that there was, and still is, a considerable number of such people who, despite the pervasive racism and the continuing inferior position of blacks, have been able to respond directly to black culture, and in particular musicking, in ways that other Americans — and, indeed, Europeans — have not.

That history rests on both the ecology of the southern coastal regions of North America and on the manner of their settlement by British colonists from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Unlike the New England colonies from the time of the *Mayflower* voyage of 1620, with their

individualistic Puritan communities based on the family smallholding, the southern colonies were aristocratic and commercial in origin; large tracts of land were granted by King James I and his successors, either to loyal subjects or to joint-stock companies, and those tracts were subdivided on more or less feudal principles.

To overcome the desperate shortage of labour on those large estates, indentured servants and labourers were first brought from Britain; English investors would underwrite the immigrant's fare in return for his or her labour for a set period, after which the immigrant was free. Fifty acres was the standard reward for each immigrant thus sponsored, a device which did enable some people of modest means to acquire land but which meant that the majority went to wealthy people who had put up the money for a large number of fares. In this way ownership of land in the new colonies became concentrated in large units — and still there was a shortage of labour.

Nearly half of those who came to North America from the British Isles during the colonial period came as indentured servants. If they had come in the hope of bettering themselves, few succeeded in doing so; the majority, after working out their time in conditions that often amounted to slavery, remained as servants, labourers, tenant farmers, many of them jobless and rootless. Some acquired land, mostly on poor hill country, and as time went on many moved westward into the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains, and thence into the valleys of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers; these were the so-called frontiersmen.

The ecology of the region did not favour the growth of towns. By contrast to the large and growing cities of Boston, Philadelphia and New York, the towns of the south were small and insignificant even at the end of the colonial period. In 1782 Thomas Jefferson was able to write about Virginia: 'We have no townships. Our country being much intersected with navigable waters, and trade brought generally to our doors, instead of being obliged to go in quest of it, has probably been one of the causes why we have no towns of any consequence. Williamsburg, which until the year 1780 was the seat of our government, never contained above 1,800 inhabitants; and

Norfolk, the most populous town we ever had, contained but 6,000.'[1] Albert Stoutamire, who quotes this excerpt from Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, tells us also that Richmond, at about the time when it became the capital of Virginia in 1780, 'consisted of about 300 houses, most of them crude, wooden structures on streets that were muddy in the rainy season and dusty in the dry season.'[2] It was not the towns but the great estates that formed the centres of life and of culture in those southern colonies which later became states; for those with no access to great houses there was only isolation, or at best the life of small, scattered settlements.

It was into this physical and social environment that Africans were brought from 1619 onwards in an attempt to alleviate the continuing shortage of labour. The poor whites formed a permanent underclass in what became by the late seventeenth century a well-established pattern of class, and there is a good deal of evidence which suggests not only that many of them were little better off than the black slaves but also that they saw themselves as sharing with them much of the same predicament. There was a good deal of association, if not fraternization; not only did black slaves and white indentured servants often work alongside one another in the fields but there were also several uprisings, notably Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, in which frontiersmen, servants and slaves joined together in a hopeless revolt against their exploitation by the landed aristocracy of Virginia. It was not the first, or the last; as Howard Zinn puts it: 'Only one fear was greater than the fear of black rebellion in the new American colonies. That was the fear that discontented whites would join blacks to overthrow the existing order.'[3] The suggestion that, at least in the colonial period, the southern poor whites viewed blacks as being something like fellow-sufferers is reinforced by the quantity of legislation enacted in the colonial assemblies which was designed to prevent association between whites and blacks.

By the time of the Revolution it seemed as if slavery was in decline, as the value of tobacco, the staple crop of the slave plantations, declined; Jefferson and other founders of the Republic were of the opinion that it would quietly wither away as it became less and less competitive with free labour. And,

indeed, that is what happened in the north, where it had never in any case been a major institution; humanitarian sentiment coincided with economic interest to bring about its virtual extinction there by 1800. What gave slavery new life in the south was the growing demand for cotton to feed the British mills. It was from the last years of the eighteenth century that the 'Peculiar Institution' took on the form which we recognize from abolitionist literature such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and from the memoirs of escaped slaves like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. What was remarkable was the way in which slavery took over the entire society and culture of the south; as Carl N. Degler says: 'Through the possession of black labour, the small class of slaveholders actually dominated the economic, political and intellectual institutions of the whole white South. And by virtue of this fact the South's civilization was increasingly shaped to fit the needs of the slave system.'[4]

The transformation which wiped out any residual sympathy for the slaves and replaced it, even — or, rather, especially — in the minds of those who were best placed to sympathize with their plight, with hatred and fear is a complex matter. It seems only partly explicable by the deliberate policy adopted by the planters and aristocrats of driving the two groups apart by the constant reiteration, first of the idea that whites were inherently superior to blacks (an attractive idea to those who were despised by everyone else) and secondly of the fear that an end to slavery would release on to the labour market some four million unskilled workers who would depress wages even further than they already were. In both the north and the south the white working class were led to believe that abolitionism was nothing but a plot by the northern industrialists against working people; hence the anti-abolitionist riots which occurred in northern cities before and even during the Civil War, the worst of which, in New York during July 1863, left dead some four hundred blacks. Nevertheless, as Winthrop Jordan says: 'To say, as many have, that racism is merely the rationalizing ideology of the oppressor is to advance a grievous error. To rest the analysis there is to close one's eyes to the complexity of human oppression.'[5] Jordan, however, in his study of the roots of racism in America, does not appeal to

any notion of inborn or biological racism but rather suggests a complex network of historical factors which affected in quite specific ways the modes in which the British, as opposed to the Spanish and Portuguese, encountered Africans and led them to view them as inherently, genetically inferior to themselves. This is not the place for an extended discussion, which involves the whole rationale of black American slavery; we need note only that those people of British descent were only too ready to accept the poison which was dripped into their ears, and to give free rein to their fears and fantasies about the blacks.

Not surprisingly, little is known of the early history of the white underdog class in the American south, and we have no way of knowing how they and the first black slaves responded to one another. Could they have witnessed the introduction of the Africans into America, or seen the faces the latter presented to their own people rather than to the masters? The first results of their mutual acculturation did not surface until the camp meetings of the early nineteenth century, and then under highly specific conditions and just at the time when slavery was entering that final, dominant phase which ended in 1865, just a few weeks before the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. What is remarkable is the continuing way in which poor whites and poor blacks, right down to the present day, have continued to interact musically, directly and without the whites' seeming to feel any need to distance themselves from the 'inferior' culture. The continuing existence of this two-way traffic shows clearly enough that they have found enough overlap in their apparently antagonistic senses of who they are, enough in one another's community and values, to admire and even to identify with, to impel them to open themselves to one another's musicking.

White people have always viewed black culture with a mixture of fascination, fear and even envy. Behind the fascination and the envy (and the fear) lies a great deal of misunderstanding and wishful thinking; the perceived irresponsibility, irrepressibility and sexual potency of the blacks are all a source of envy (an ambivalent emotion at best, as many blacks have discovered to their pain) for the white American or Englishman caught up in his own work ethic

and industrial discipline. But there is as well a great and genuine subversive and liberating power there, which has enabled black people to endure the generations of oppression and not be sucked up completely into the industrial system of which they were the first victims. And that same subversive power can frighten those whose commitment to the values of the industrial system is such that they cannot admit the validity of any others.

It was probably the slaveowners who were the first Americans to experience that combined fascination and fear which the blacks inspired. We have seen how shocked visitors found, quite early in the history of slavery, that the language of the Great House was taking in much of the vocabulary and general style of the slaves' speech (it is generally agreed today that the southern U.S. accent and idiom derive as much as from black speech as anything else); some of those visitors were even more shocked to find members of the master's household, even his own family, stealing away to take part in the slaves' religious ceremonies in preference to the staider observances of the white churches. The presence of blacks in close proximity, in fact, presented the planter class with two particular problems: first, that of maintaining, if not the reality, at least the appearance of genetic purity, and, secondly, that of preserving the superiority of their culture from what was seen as contamination by the secretly fascinating culture of the blacks.

It was well known, if not publicly admitted, that a good deal of sexual coupling took place on the plantations between whites and blacks, mostly, for obvious reasons, between white men and black women and girls; this presented the problem of what to do about the inevitable offspring of such unions. In theory, their solution was simple (Latin America found other solutions): all those with any visible or otherwise detectable trace of African ancestry were classed as Negro and consigned to the subordinate class. No exceptions were made; any child born of black-white unions was to be a slave unless his or her begetter decreed otherwise — and even to manumit one's own child was hedged with legal difficulties. If the child were freed there was no question of entering the society of the whites (the case of the more free-and-easy society of New Orleans I shall discuss later); the child was black, even if free black, and that

was the end of the matter. By this sleight of hand not only was the genetic purity of the whites preserved but also a racial taxonomy established which muddles our thinking to the present day.

The other problem was more difficult. There was no question of acknowledging the equality or even perhaps the validity of black culture; to do so would destroy the very rationale of slavery. And yet the danger of 'pollution' was a very real one, even within the slavemaster's mansion itself. Children were traditionally looked after by slave nurses and spent a good deal of time in the company of black house-servants, so that a certain absorption of black culture was inevitable; Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus was drawn from life. Here again the factor of empathy was vital; it might be simple envy for the supposed irresponsibility and sexual freedom of blacks (the blacks themselves were under pressure to conform to these stereotypes, at least in the presence of the master) or it might be the beginnings of genuine understanding and affection between people, however skewed and distorted by the gross inequality of status and power — but somehow it all had to be channelled off into socially acceptable forms which did not compromise white superiority.

It was, however, not in the south but in the burgeoning cities of the north that such a form was to develop, in the third decade of the nineteenth century. This was a time when the north itself was undergoing an unprecedentedly violent transformation from a mainly agrarian to an urban-industrial society. Not only the older cities of the north-east but also towns which a generation before had been frontier settlements — Pittsburgh, Bethlehem, Gary, Chicago — grew explosively, resulting in the wholesale uprooting of rural communities, the enriching of the rich and the impoverishment of the poor on a scale never before seen, not even in the British industrial revolution of fifty years earlier. Labour for the new industries came pouring into the towns and cities not only as immigrants from Europe but also from the rural areas of the United States. For the new proletariat survival was difficult, and there was not much sympathy to spare for those worse off than themselves; in any case the idea that there was someone worse off, less able to cope, gave a kind of comfort.

Despite the existence of a vocal anti-slavery movement, people in the north generally shared the feeling that blacks were genetically inferior to whites, and racist feelings were as rife there as in the south, as many free and escaped blacks found to their cost. Those feelings were, as we have seen, worked on by the pro-slavery factions, as were the fears that four million blacks would be dumped on to the labour market. It was the need to make sense of this complex of feelings which lay behind the popularity of an extraordinary form of entertainment that flourished during the nineteenth century, known at the time as the Nigger Minstrel Show, or, more pretentiously, Ethiopian Opera, but today generally known as blackface minstrelsy.

This was a farrago in which white actor-singers blacked their faces with burnt cork, dressed outrageously in exaggerated versions of Negro costume and presented in songs and dances, jokes and theatrical sketches a caricature of blacks for the entertainment of white audiences. Just as the music was black music heard and reinterpreted through the ears of white musicians, so the show itself as a whole was a picture of black people as seen and portrayed by whites, and it was therefore a sensitive barometer of white attitudes towards blacks over the course of the nineteenth century. It was enormously popular; indeed, it can claim to have been the dominant theatrical form of nineteenth-century America, and it was virtually the only indigenous form in the first half of the century.

Blacks were not the only figures of fun to be presented on the American stage; practically every immigrant group — Irish, German, Italian, Russian Jewish — at one time or another served its turn as a butt for the humour of those who had arrived earlier and were more versed in the ways of America. But the black was a natural permanent butt; not only was he set apart by the colour of his skin and destined to remain apparently forever on the lowest levels of society, but he was also the bearer of a load of unacknowledged guilt on the part of white people. And, as we have seen, black culture, in particular black music, aroused mingled feelings of attraction and fear which needed to be defused. The strangeness of the blacks to northerners, most of whom had never been near a southern plantation, added to the

general appeal of the minstrel show.

The portrayal of blacks by white actors in blackface was not new; it had already had a long history in the theatre on both sides of the Atlantic, in stock parts such as comic servants, and, occasionally, as the Noble Savage, generally sacrificing his life in the last act for the beautiful white girl or for his white master. What was new, in the 1820s, was that performers began to specialize in blackface roles, and to build whole shows around them. The acts, consisting generally of comic patter in dialect, or what passed for dialect, and jokes, with songs and dances, were at first only isolated acts in other forms of entertainment, perhaps between the acts of a play or in a circus. The songs were claimed to be adaptations of Negro melodies picked up by the singers; the most famous of them, Thomas Rice's *Jump Jim Crow*, which for later generations of blacks was to become a synonym for white oppression, was, according to Rice, sung and danced in Louisville in 1828 by an old black stablehand, whose shuffling, crippled step and hunched shoulders he imitated on stage to make a fortune.

The minstrel show as a theatrical form in its own right originated in New York, in February 1843, when four performers who called themselves The Virginia Minstrels presented an entire evening of blackface songs, patter, jokes, dances and sketches, all at a pace which, as Robert Toll says, was 'something new, unusual and compelling'. He goes on to give a vivid description of the performance:

> 'They burst on stage in makeup which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths. They dressed in ill-fitting clothes and spoke in heavy "nigger" dialects. Once on stage, they could not stay still for an instant. Even while sitting, they contorted their bodies, cocked their heads, rolled their eyes and twisted their outstretched legs. When the music began, they exploded in a frenzy of grotesque and eccentric movements. Whether singing, dancing or joking, whether in a featured role or accompanying a comrade, or just listening, their wild hollering and their bobbing, seeming compulsive movements charged their entire performance with excitement. They sang and danced rousing numbers and cracked earthy jokes.'[6]

It was the Virginia Minstrels who evolved the definitive

form of the minstrel show. In the first part the performers (a minimum of four, though later there were more) sat in a semicircle on stage and exchanged songs, dances, jokes and repartee. The basic musical instruments were fiddle, banjo, bone castanets and tambourine, and each performer's role was clearly defined. The tambourine and bones were played by the two comedians, ('Mr Tambo' and 'Mr Bones') who sat at the ends of the semicircle and became known as the endmen; they had at their disposal a stock of puns, riddles and one-line jokes. There was a singer who could deliver the obligatory sentimental songs of parting and farewell, and the master of ceremonies ('Mister Interlocutor') whose task it was to announce, in fruity and high-flown terms, the various acts. His was a crucial role, and unusual in the theatre of the time; the simplicity and openness of the minstrel-show format meant that the proceedings could be adapted in the course of the performance as the audience's response evolved (it was in fact an improvised performance) and a good interlocutor would be able to sense this development and respond to it in his choice from the troupe's repertoire. The second part, or olio, consisted of a succession of speciality acts played in front of a drop curtain, and might include juggling and acrobatics, as well as novelty musical performances such as musical glasses or musical saw. This was the routine stuff of the variety show, but it climaxed in one of the features of the evening, the 'stump speech', a cod political address delivered in broad dialect, or a caricature of it, abounding in non-sequiturs, malapropisms and comic stumblings, creating and exploiting the image of the stupid incompetent black. The final act was generally a plantation scene, displaying slaves at home, happily singing and dancing under the benevolent eye of the beloved master and his family, without a care in the world; this would conclude with a song-and-dance number, the 'walk-around'.

Much of the material was no doubt culled from first-hand observation of black musicking, dancing and folklore. Many of the minstrels were widely travelled in the south and would have had some opportunity to pick up songs and dances, but we should not imagine that what was presented even aspired to be a true picture of black life, on the plantation or off it. The

minstrels were not anthropologists or ethnomusicologists, but entertainers, and they were prepared to present any picture that pleased their audiences. Besides, we have no reason to suppose that the minstrels' view of blacks differed much from that of their audiences, or that they had any greater insight into the social situation that made those audiences flock to see the minstrel shows. The blacks portrayed on the minstrel stage were those which accorded best with the audiences' expectations, and served in turn to reinforce those expectations. The stereotypes changed somewhat over the years, but the message remained essentially the same: that blacks were like children and were happiest and best off on the southern plantations, and that when they were given their freedom and called upon to make their way in the 'adult' world of white America, they were invariably inadequate and unable to cope, often longing to be back in the safe world of the slave plantation where all their needs would be taken care of. True, in the early days of minstrel shows, there were black heroes of a kind: the Brer Rabbit figure who was able through natural wit to outwit a more pretentious opponent; the hunter or frontiersman, strong and autonomous; happy married couples, even sometimes brokenhearted husbands, wives or sweethearts whose partners had been sold away, but characters of this kind disappeared in the 1850s as the United States drifted with increasing speed towards civil war. Favourite characters were the would-be dandy, probably dressed in his 'long-tail blue', believing himself to be cutting a fine figure in his elegant clothes, which were in fact ill-fitting and misshapen, ridiculous, even pathetic, with his endlessly rolling eyes and jerky limbs; or the ancient faithful darkie, patient and enduring on the plantation, loved by master and fellow-slaves alike, dispensing folk wisdom and counselling the young hotheads into acceptance of their lot.

The latter image is of course a deeply sentimental one, and sentimentality is a powerful defence against the recognition of reality. It was an important part of the stock in trade of the minstrel company; prominent among the many composers who provided musical material was Stephen Foster. Foster, having made his reputation as a composer of genteel salon songs, superb of their kind, entered the minstrel business in

1852 with *Old Folks at Home*, an archetypal 'homesick darkie' song; not at the time wishing to be associated publicly with minstrelsy, he sold it to E.P. Christy, of Christy's Minstrels, who published it under his own name — and collected the considerable royalties. Later Foster overcame his scruples (he needed the money) and wrote defiantly to Christy that he was determined 'to pursue the Ethiopian business without fear or shame . . .' His contributions to the minstrel stage are among its most enduring, and many have passed into folksong, so that many today think that they are genuine Negro songs; *Oh Susanna*, *Camptown Races*, *Nelly Bly* and *Old Black Joe* are just a few of them. Between them, Foster and other creators of minstrel songs conjured up a folklore and an image of black people that survives to this day, and continues to bedevil the minds of whites — that of the happy-go-lucky feckless 'darkie' singing and dancing his way through life but by no means to be taken seriously.

It is of course easy to condemn the racial attitudes underlying the minstrel show. But they were no more than a reflection of the prevailing attitudes of the day — and of course minstrelsy was the principal channel through which the majority of white Americans became aware of black musicking and dancing, even if it was filtered through the perceptions of the minstrels. In its very popularity it showed at one and the same time, as Ben Sidran has said, that 'there was a *need* in white culture for what the black culture had to offer,'[7] and that, equally, the majority of white people dared not confront that culture directly but needed to defuse the challenge it posed to their own culture and values by portraying its bearers as ridiculous, or sentimental, or both.

As might be expected, the music of the minstrel show also evaded the challenge posed by black musicking. The actual style of performance has not, of course, come down to us other than in descriptions, but most successful songs were published; they range in style from the entirely European with hardly a trace of black inflection, such as Foster's *Old Folks at Home*, to verse-and-chorus songs, generally in a major key, with a few proto-ragtime inflections (Daniel Kingman draws attention to one of Daniel Emmett's songs, *Nigger on the Wood Pile*, of 1845, which has many rhythmic patterns resembling

those in Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* of some fifty years later).[8] Some were adaptations of Irish and Scottish fiddle tunes, such as *Turkey in the Straw*; none can actually be traced back directly to black sources, though some do bear traces of black influence, not only in the syncopations of the melodic line but also in those pentatonic shapes, flatted sevenths and verbal repetitions that are favoured in black musicking.

After the Civil War and Emancipation, the nature of the minstrel show changed drastically, owing to two new factors. The first was that white minstrels largely lost interest in the portrayal of black people, and broadened the show to include a high proportion of conventional variety material. Troupes became larger, forty or more, production and costumes lavish and spectacular. Bearing grandiose titles such as 'Haverley's United Mastodon Minstrels' 'Cleveland's Colossals' and 'Keavitt's Giganteans', they toured the country in extravagant pageants, dressed no longer as caricatured blacks but in evening dress or eighteenth-century pantaloons, stockings and wigs, whatever took the director's fancy, and even, from around 1880 onwards, abandoning blackface and with it all the dialogue and business that had been their stock in trade. Eventually, around the turn of the century, white minstrelsy merged with vaudeville and variety, leaving only occasional blackface performers such as Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, and degenerate revivals, such as could be seen on British television screens in the 1960s (white British viewers mostly could not for the life of them imagine what there was about it that their black compatriots found so offensive).

But the other, more interesting, development which followed Emancipation was the entry of black artists into the minstrel show. There had been a sprinkling of professional black musicians and entertainers on the stage before the Civil War, even whole bands like that of Francis Johnson, which toured northern cities in the 1830s and was also extremely successful in Europe. But the minstrel show was something else, for there we find black artists 'blacking up' and projecting to audiences the same stereotypes as those which white artists had been giving for three decades. Equally surprising perhaps is the fact that they were extremely popular with black and white audiences alike. Black minstrel troupes had begun to

appear in northern cities in the mid-1850s, but, naturally enough, they did not venture into the south until after the Civil War; they inherited the form and the content of the white show along with the audiences' expectations, and they were obliged to continue it, burnt cork, 'long tail blue' and all. They did of course have one major advantage over the white artists: their authenticity, having actually lived the life of the plantation and not just observed it. They thus had access to material that was inaccessible to whites, not only songs and dances but also folklore and folkways, and they used this material freely alongside the traditional minstrel material. This authenticity did extract its price, since it added credibility to the stereotypes, in which audiences would accept only very minor modifications. A major innovation was the introduction of the religious music and even the religious rituals of the black community, which were portrayed vividly on stage, initiating a tradition that survives in black dance and folklore companies to this day (Alvin Ailey's *Celebration*, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem's *Dougla* are two that come to mind).

The problem, then as now, for black artists in presenting their culture on stage before white audiences lay in the fact that the more flamboyant, the more vivid and colourful the presentation the more it would be enjoyed by white audiences, unable as they are to enjoy such outlets in their own culture in socially acceptable form — and the more the performances would serve to confirm white assumptions about blacks. The black companies' presentation of, for example, revival meetings, with the gaudily-dressed performers singing, dancing, shouting and laughing apparently without inhibition served once again to introduce the minstrel image, the only image in which it seemed that white people, especially in the south, were prepared to tolerate black people being visible at all. W.C. Handy reported in his autobiography that when black troupes visited small southern towns in the early years of this century they could escape molestation, and possibly worse, when they went into the streets only when dressed in their minstrel costume; those who had the temerity to appear, smartly dressed, as themselves could expect trouble.

Travel was difficult for black artists, finding somewhere to

stay a nightmare, for hotels would not have them and the local black population were often too poor to offer anywhere to sleep; better-off black people found the shows anathema, as they did the blues in a later period, representing too closely for comfort the culture from which they had with such difficulty escaped. The larger and more successful companies, usually white-owned, would often provide a railroad car, equipped with food and water and sometimes a hiding-hole for the use of those who offended against the ways of the south (it was on occasion needed, as Handy testifies from his own experience).

It would be easy but fruitless to condemn those often greatly gifted and skilled artists who went on the stage to present these caricatures of their race before white audiences (and, we should not forget, before black audiences also, who apparently enjoyed the jokes no less). Rather, we should look for the reason why they would have done so. First among these of course would have been sheer economics; the minstrel stage was one of the few ways in which a black performance artist could gain employment and earn a living in the theatre. And second, there was the ancient strategy of the downtrodden and abused: to take the abusive label to oneself and wear it as a badge of pride. And, thirdly, there was the chance to define one's culture, to display one's theatrical and musical skills before a white audience, to make them watch and listen. And in their turn, black audiences, who seem to have been mostly lower-class (members of the minute black middle class would mostly not have been seen dead at a minstrel show) were not really much concerned at the kind of figure they were cutting before whites — that was a middle-class worry — but came to laugh at recognizable caricatures of themselves and their foibles, much as English audiences laugh at Tony Hancock and Scottish at Billy Connelly. And, no doubt, the performances of artists like Billy Kersands, a singer, comedian and fine dancer who specialized in outrageous portrayals of stupid black characters (he made great capital out of his very large mouth) and whose popularity forced even southern theatre managers to abandon segregation while he was in the show, must have had a great deal more to say to black than to white audiences — after all, they were descendants of slaves who had been communicating clandestinely for generations.

And so it was that minstrelsy, which had been a way of affirming the inferiority of black people, became for those same people an avenue of advancement and helped in the creation of a language of self-presentation which was not without its importance in the struggle for recognition as people. But, as I have suggested, there was a price; the minstrel image has haunted blacks ever since. We find, in the 1920s, Joe 'King' Oliver, a serious musician if ever there was one, issuing publicity photographs of his band, immaculate in tuxedos, but posturing with their instruments like 'plantation darkies', while his one-time protege Louis Armstrong, one of the greatest musicians ever to have come out of the United States, to his death accepted, at least outwardly, the role of minstrel and entertainer, even clown, often to the embarrassment and even irritation of black colleagues. Of course, jazz would not be jazz without a strong element of playfulness and humour, and self-mockery has always been a strong element of black humour; it is an open question to what extent it was himself and to what extent it was his audiences' expectations Louis was really sending up (calling him 'Louis' feels to me like presumption, but to call him 'Armstrong' feels even more like an insult to his warmth and humanity, so I shall settle for the former).

By the turn of the century the popularity of the black minstrel show was waning, and black minstrelsy becoming restricted to the rural south. It was replaced in the towns and cities by musical comedy, vaudeville and burlesque, all of which had at best limited use for black artists; in each generation only a few 'made it' to more than a local or regional reputation, and most were confined until the 1950s to playing to black audiences. There were vaudeville circuits which flourished more or less invisible to the larger and richer white audience — many of the classic blues artists such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey worked on them — and which acted, all unrecognized and unrewarded, as sources of energy and of new styles of musicking and dancing (in the 1920s, for example, the Charleston, in the 1930s, tap dancing, in the 1940s the lindy hop or jitterbug, not to mention blues and various jazz styles) on which many white artists were to become rich and famous.

At the same time, in the early years of this century, blacks were making their presence felt, if to a limited extent, on the musical stage apart from the minstrel show or even vaudeville, not only through the injection of black styles such as ragtime into the popular music of the day, but also through the creative work of writers and musicians such as J. Rosamund Johnson and his brother, the poet James Weldon Johnson, and Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, as well as through the appearance of black performing artists, at first as speciality acts in otherwise white productions, then later in all-black musical shows, on the Broadway stage itself. The first of these was a mere one-act sketch, *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk*, written by the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and the composer Will Marion Cook; it was presented in New York on a roof garden at midnight, in the summer of 1898, and was an immediate success. Cook's own account of the production, given in Eileen Southern's *Readings in Black American Music*, can still lift the soul:

> 'The Darktown finale was of complicated rhythm and bold harmonies, and very taxing on the voice. My chorus sang like Russians, dancing meanwhile like Negroes, and cakewalking like angels, black angels! When the last note was sounded, the audience stood and cheered for at least ten minutes . . . maybe, when the pearly gates open wide and a multitude of hosts march in, shouting, laughing, singing, emoting, there will be a happiness which slightly resembles that of *Clorindy's* twenty-six participants . . . Gone was the uff-dah of the minstrel! Gone the Massa Linkum stuff! We were artists and we were going a long, long way. We had the world on a string tied to a runnin' red-geared wagon on a down-hill pull. Nothing could stop us, and nothing did for a decade'.[8]

Over that decade Cook wrote the music for three musical shows for the gifted comedy team of Williams and Walker: *In Dahomey*, *In Abyssinia* and *In Bandanaland*, all satirizing for the first time white concepts of black people, while the Johnson brothers and Robert Cole wrote *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*, *The Red Moon* and *Mr Lode of Koal*. This was a new generation of black poets and musicians, whose sophistication was both streetwise and college-educated — a formidable combination. What did

stop the 'red-geared wagon', however, was Broadway fashion. There have been successful all-black musical shows in the ensuing years: Blake and Sissle's *Shuffle Along*, of 1921, which brought Josephine Baker, Florence Mills and Paul Robeson to the Broadway stage for the first time, up to *The Wiz* and *The Black Mikado* in the 1970s and *One Mo' Time* in the 1980s, all of which bear witness to the continuing power of black creativity in this medium, but to the average theatregoer the last three remained as much curiosities as had been the earlier shows. Things do not seem to change much.

In the nineteenth century, Irish, Jews, Germans, Italians, all had their turn as comic stereotypes and objects of ridicule; only the blacks retain their continuing fascination for white audiences on the American and British stage. That this should be so is due, in part at least, to the musical and theatrical skills of black performers themselves, but very much more to the unchanging ambivalent attitudes of whites towards their black compatriots who continue today to live lives that are partially hidden from them. The minstrel show articulated with precision these attitudes, being a vehicle for caricature which served to render innocuous the fascinating but dangerous culture of the blacks. It is not just the envy of the white, caught up in the work ethic and puritanism, for the black who is perceived as irresponsible, sexually potent and devoted to the pleasures of the moment, and thus able to enjoy life in a way denied to him or herself — a way, in fact, of indulging fantasies and blaming it on the blacks — though that is certainly a factor. There is also a genuine admiration, even longing, not fully conscious and *never* quite admitted or even articulated, for certain qualities in the black community, of communality, of what one might call emotional honesty — those qualities which blacks themselves call 'soul'. This admiration and longing runs like a thread through the history of black-white relations in America; such feelings must, I am certain, be present before one culture can find it in itself to draw, as white America has drawn on black, on the resources of another.

That they must be present, even in what became the heartland of racial oppression in the deep south, is evidenced by the strong component of black idioms that exists within the indigenous white musical style of that region, what is known

today as country or country-and-western. We have seen how the poor white majority, themselves despised and kept in subjugation by the big estate owners, were drawn into a kind of conspiracy to keep the blacks in a position that was even lower than their own. These people were poor, politically and socially conservative, committed to rural values and committed, too, to a brand of fundamentalist Christianity that enforced, and still enforces, a code of conduct of uncompromising straitness. The first Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian circuit-riding preachers came to the region in the early days of independence, and found a people living mostly in small isolated communities who welcomed them for their emotional brand of religion, for their lack of formality and for their music making. The people gathered together in the great camp meetings, at which the presence of blacks came to be taken for granted, and at which, as we have seen, much musical interaction took place, and they sang the simple songs, memorizing them either from the few songbooks passed from hand to hand or from the preachers' lining-out. In the wake of the evangelists came the Yankee singing-masters, with their shape-note songbooks and their Fasola method of solmization; ousted from the northeastern regions by the growth of 'scientific music' and the tendency towards 'refinement' and to European taste, these remarkable men travelled the frontier regions, teaching their unsophisticated but appropriate, and above all usable, musical skills and establishing a strong tradition of harmonized choral singing that is still very much alive there today. The strained, nasal, vibratoless style of voice production which can be heard from 'Sacred Harp' choirs (so named from one of the most famous songbooks, first published in 1844 and still in print) is also a feature of the style of modern country singers.

The secular music of this isolated people was founded on British folksong brought to America by their forebears, in particular the ballad, with its strong, often bloodthirsty, narrative thread, its melodic and rhythmic simplicity, its intimacy and its impersonal and deliberately non-expressive style of delivery. Of the two most characteristic musical instruments, one, the fiddle, came with the British settlers, while the other, the banjo, shows the mark of the other major

influence on this music, the musicking of the blacks. In its original form the banjo had four strings but early in the nineteenth century white musicians who had adopted it added a fifth, a drone, to give it its characteristic melancholy sound.

Poor, rural and deeply conservative as these southern whites may have been, they were by no means isolated completely from outside influences. In the first place, and most importantly, there was the musicking of the blacks, with whom they lived and worked side by side. And regardless of racial discrimination and other factors which kept them apart, there existed a considerable 'common stock' of material — songs and dance tunes — which were the property of both groups impartially, and which needed only a different style of performance to place them in one group or the other. Songs such as *John Henry*, *Frankie and Johnny*, *Staggerlee*, *Moma Don't Allow*, *Careless Love*, and banjo-and-fiddle tunes used for dancing, such as *Turkey in the Straw*, *Sourwood Mountain*, *Old Dan Tucker*, were sung and played by black and white musicians to black and white audiences alike. Many of these tunes were taken into the minstrel shows, whence they gained wide popularity among Americans both black and white.

Apart from this direct contact, there were other ways in which outside influences reached the rural areas of the south. There were the travelling vaudeville shows, often housed in tents, that travelled the length and breadth of the rural south with a wide variety of acts — minstrel singers, dancing girls, conjurers and magicians, circus-style acrobats, Swiss yodellers, Hawaiian string bands, anything that the management reckoned would please an unsophisticated audience. These brought a number of diverse musical styles — Tin Pan Alley tunes as well as yodelling and steel guitars, all of which became important in country music as it developed. More modest but very common, in this area where there were few doctors and few who could afford their fees, were the medicine shows, in which a 'doctor' or 'professor' with his cargo of patent medicines drew a crowd by means of one or two entertainers, often in blackface, who sang, told jokes, played and danced. Since black people were just as likely to be prospective customers as were white, the performers had to be able to

appeal on both sides of the colour line simultaneously, a fact which must have been not without significance in the assimilation of black and white styles into each other. Musicians as famous as Jimmie Rodgers, Gene Autry, Bob Wills and Roy Acuff began their professional lives in medicine shows, which thus served the dual function of bringing music to remote areas and of providing employment for musicians and giving them training in the difficult art of engaging a mobile audience and making them good-humoured and receptive to the 'professor's' sales pitch.

But of all the influences which have overlain the original forms of Anglo-Celtic folk music, none has proved more pervasive or more long-lasting than the direct contact which occurred between the races in the south. As Tony Russell points out:

> 'A musician would be open to sounds from every direction: from family and friends, from field and railroad yard, lumber camp and mine; from street singers and travelling-show musicians; from phonograph records and radio; from dances and suppers and camp meetings and carnivals; from fellow prisoners in jails, from fellow workers everywhere. A white youngster could learn a song or a tune not only in the bosom of his family but from their black employees — nanny, Uncle Remus or anyone else. Racial antipathy, of course, hampered the free exchange of musical ideas . . . [but] . . . there were always musicians to whom musical values were more important than racist ones, men who would not care a jot if they, as whites, happened to like black pieces, or vice versa.'[10]

What has in fact taken place here is in fact the opposite of minstrelsy; white people in the American south have been able to respond directly to the musicking of the blacks without seemingly feeling the need to defuse it by ridicule or any other device, and to incorporate elements of it in their own performances. It is a phenomenon that would suggest a greater degree of mutual identification, a more complex intimacy, than the brute facts of southern racism would seem to allow, an admission rather than a denial of the 'need in white culture for what black culture has to offer'. That the admission is made in musical rather than in verbal terms, and

is accordingly in all probability not fully conscious, does not lessen its force; certainly it shows a more fully human response than does the distancing imposed by the process of minstrelization, a process which has by no means ended with the demise of minstrelsy itself.

The black influence on white country music has been many-sided; in the first place, it lies in instrumental technique, especially the elaborate finger-picking style of guitar playing, unknown in European folk styles but to be found in West African players of string instruments (and still known to many country guitarists as 'nigger-picking'), while black rhythms permeate the music. Even the blues has passed into the mouths and fingers of white musicians, sharing with the black blues a good deal of poetic and musical material as well as its non-narrative sequence of stanzas, but delivered in the characteristic 'country' vocal style, high, strained and nasal, with much less pitch bending or blue notes, and featuring sometimes a yodelling refrain. The white blues has proved a durable element in country music from its earliest days and has even, especially when sung by the great Jimmie Rogers, proved popular with black audiences.

One curious thing about country music is the low esteem in which it is commonly held by large numbers of musicians and listeners of all kinds — a reflection, it seems, not only of the low social status of the people among whom it originated (after all, poor blacks are even lower in the social scale, and yet black country blues is greatly admired by sophisticated urbanites and intellectuals, but then poor blacks are 'picturesque' while poor whites are just 'sordid' and 'ignorant') but also of the historical position of this group as scapegoats (the *Li'l Abner* cartoon strip says much about the attitude of educated white Americans to their rural southern compatriots). Even today, with its audience numbered in millions, including not only southern migrants to cities trying to hang on to their rural and small-town values, but also long-time city dwellers all over the world who have never ventured south of the Mason-Dixon line, the 'redneck' image remains potent.

The subject matter of country songs reflects the attitudes of white rural southerners and is suffused with nostalgia for the old southern ways. The songs tend to possess a strong

narrative thread, a legacy no doubt of the Anglo-Celtic ballad tradition, which is concisely and often eloquently told, frequently pointing a moral, on themes such as loss of love, betrayal and revenge, crime and retribution, the temptations of liquor and evil women, of accidents, disasters and murders, as well as with work. In general they reflect the tensions of people brought up in a strict, not to say severe, moral code and trying to come to terms with the temptations of the flesh and the blandishments of affluent American society; rarely if ever, however, does one come across any real spirit of revolt or even rebellion against either one or the other opposing forces. Not that the songs are necessarily solemn; there are frequent flashes of dry humour and of wild uninhibited fantasy. Some songs deal with current events, usually from a politically conservative point of view (many a populist right-wing candidate for office has found in country music a useful medium of identification with his supporters). But if they reflect the world view of poor, white, rural southern Americans, this does not mean that the performers or the songwriters are poor (many, like Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton, are quite rich, even though they retain the 'country' lifestyle), rural (much of it is today produced in efficient song-factories in and around Nashville) or even white (the black country artist, though rare, is not unknown). It is obvious, too, that the audience is by no means drawn exclusively from that social group; with a devoted and knowledgeable audience of millions in the United States alone (where there were in 1970 over six hundred radio stations playing country music full time) not to mention the rest of the world, country music is a tremendous success story, and one which cannot be unconnected with the revival of 'folk' values in the United States itself in the persona of two recent presidents, Carter and Reagan, and the swing towards right-wing political views which has taken place in the 1980s.

In making this association I do not, of course, attribute any causal force to country music; rather, it is that the music, whose lyrics tend to see situations in terms of 'traditional' simple American values — those of the frontier, in which men were men and women waited at home for them, a myth which has probably no more basis in fact than has that of pastoral

England — which, while it has not hesitated to draw on black musical idioms, has virtually excluded blacks, and which adopts a resolutely demotic and artless stance (an artlessness which, it must be said, conceals these days a good deal of very sophisticated art), seems to articulate a desire for simple solutions to increasingly complex and intractable problems, solutions which are offered more seductively by right-wing populist parties than by their political opponents.

We have to remind ourselves that music is not a thing but an activity, and that meaning is to be found not in 'the music' but in the act of taking part in a musical performance. It is the sense of identity that is affirmed and celebrated in the act of musicking that is significant, and for this reason it does not make sense either to praise or to blame a musical style in itself. One may dislike many of the attitudes that are articulated in a country-music performance, but there is also much to respect and to admire: the weatherbeaten survivorship of a Loretta Lynn or a Jerry Lee Lewis, the warm, intelligent femininity of Dolly Parton, whose sexiness goes to the edge (but never beyond it) of Dogpatch-style self-caricature. Such qualities of these, and many other, performers are to me often moving and memorable, and a reminder that identity, especially as celebrated through musicking, is not a simple matter but is shot through with contradiction and paradox, and that even the apparently simplest of musical performances may evoke the most complex of responses.

It is Elvis Presley who best sums up the contradictions and the paradoxes that are inherent in the white country style of performance — contradictions between the rigidities of old-time fundamentalist religion and the attractions of the world, the flesh and the devil, between the expansive promise of America and the cramped realities of small-town or city life, between the holding-on to the superiority of being white and the attractions of black culture. Before Elvis, country (more commonly called in those days 'hillbilly') singers sang more or less exclusively for a public that was almost as segregated as that for 'race' records; only a small number of artists, mostly 'singing cowboys' such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, were known to the wider public, mainly through their films. Elvis was the first singer from that background to make the

transition to a mass public, to seize the moment in the early 1950s when black music was breaking out of the ghetto, to add the rebellious tone of rhythm-and-blues to the more passive strains of country music and to make a unique contribution to American vernacular music.

Elvis did *not* sound like a black, of course, but the black influence was clear in his singing, which came from a variety of sources.

> 'We were a religious family,' he said in an interview, 'going around together to sing at camp meetings and revivals. Since I was two years old, all I knew was gospel music, that was music to me. We borrowed the style of our psalm singing from the early Negroes. We used to go to these religious singings all the time. The preachers cut up all over the place, jumping on the piano, moving every which way. The audience liked them. I guess I learned from them. I loved the music. It became such a part of my life it was as natural as dancing, a way to escape from the problems and my way of release' .[11]

Besides, he had grown up in Memphis, a city in its own way as unique as New Orleans, 'where there had long been a relaxed social, as well as musical, interchange between black and white . . . White kids were picking up on black styles — of music, dance, speech and dress.'[12] It was not just that the sounds he made were black-influenced, but his entire manner of stage presentation, with the famous hip swivel that scared Ed Sullivan into showing him on his TV show from the waist upwards only, was derived from black dance. Derived from, but not the same as — his performances were shot through with tensions and restraints to which black singers and dancers are not subject — but enough to thrill or to scandalize his various publics, most of whom did not know where they came from in the first place.

The actual career of Elvis Presley belongs to a later chapter; we note here that his musical roots were, and remained, firmly in the soil of the rural south. As this chapter has tried to show, the synthesis of black and white traditions that one hears in his performances was by no means unique, even if his personal performance style was; it is only an outstanding example of

the way in which the two traditions have met, crossed, fused, broken free and fused again, over and over in the American south. That this interaction occurred on the lowest social levels is significant; despite the well-publicized racism of the south there is no hint of condescension, of minstrelization, but a direct encounter between musicians who have recognized in one another's experience and values something that they themselves can value and put to use. At the very least, it should give us cause to wonder.

NOTES

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