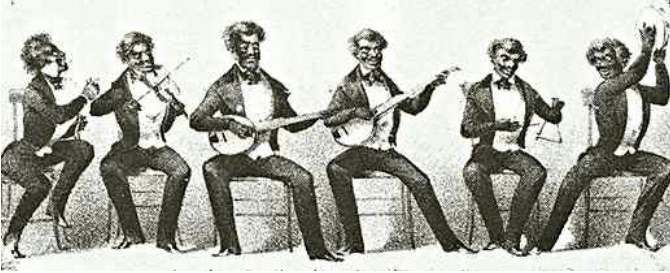


American Minstrel Shows 1840 -1920



<http://black-face.com/minstrel-shows.htm>

American Minstrel shows were a fantastic craze that swept through America. They were at the same time, a wonderful influence on the musical world of America, and a thoughtless, cruel and hateful show of racism and bigotry.

White men would gather into troops of performers and travel the country singing and dancing, telling jokes, doing skits and making audiences laugh and smile. The awful part of Minstrel Shows was the predominant use of blackface and racial humor. Performers would cover their faces with burnt cork and wear gloves and wigs to impersonate black people. They would make fun of their lifestyle, make fun of their ignorance, sing traditional black songs and generally use them as the subject of most of their jokes. The wonderful part of the Minstrel shows was the huge body of great new songs and funny jokes that came from them. The U.S.A. first came to know a repertoire of songs common throughout all the regions of the country, and the popularity of Minstrel Shows and Vaudeville had great influence in the development of the American Broadway Musical.

There were several characters found in almost all Minstrel Shows.

Mr. Interlocutor.... The M.C.

Mr. Bones..... Who would play the bones.

Mr. Tambo...Playing the tambourine (creating a crash at the end of jokes)

Zip Coon... a man dressed as a fancy black man putting on false 'airs.'

Jim Crow.... The poor ignorant black.

As years went by in America, the set of laws passed in the South that were specifically directed at blacks were come to be called, *Jim Crow laws*. Jim Crow laws are laws that are written specifically to control a race or group of people.

Instruments used in Minstrel Shows were *the banjo, the tambourine, the fiddle and the bones*. The bones were a set of cows rib bones that are played as a rhythm instrument.

As years passed, black performers slowly take over from the white performers and continue producing the Minstrel Shows. If you were a black performer during the turn of the century, there were very few opportunities to perform. A black performer would blacken his face even more and go on stage impersonating a white man playing a black man. Women eventually became part of the shows and by the end of World War I, the Minstrel show evolved into what we were to call Vaudeville, a similar variety show that had more women, and less racial hatred.

Quiz questions:

1. What is a Minstrel Show?
2. What are the main characters in the show?
3. What instruments were played in Minstrel Shows?
4. What were the hateful and disturbing things about these shows?
5. Why were they so popular during the turn of the century?
6. Can you think of things in our modern culture that are popular, but ugly?