

BLACK FACE MINSTRELS

1. **MINSTREL MEMORIES** by Harry Reynolds, Alston Rivers Ltd, London 1928 The Story of Burnt Cork Minstrelsy in Great Britain from 1836 to 1927.

Jim Crow b 1754 on the estate of Squire Crow of South American parents who were executed when he was 9 for the murder of an overseer. He absconded to New York & played fiddle & did negro dancing with a peculiar jump. He was given the original Jump Jim Crow song. He made enough money that in 1787 he purchased a farm in Virginia, married an American woman and eventually owned slaves himself. Died 1809.

“Oh, Jim Crow’s come to town, as you all must know,
An’ he wheel about, he turn about, he do jis so,
An’ ebery time he wheel about, he jump Jim Crow.”

Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a tall man of 25, actor & light comedian, heard the refrain by a negro ostler when walking in Cincinnati in 1830. He could tell a story, sing a song or dance a hornpipe after a style, but he had personality and was slightly eccentric with mannerisms, but he had tact and shrewdness & was alert for ideas. He tried it in the Old Dury, Pittsburgh in the autumn of 1830, in borrowed old clothes. The novelty was a great success. He added other songs to the repertoire including “Such a Gettin’ Upstairs”. He remained in Pittsburgh for two years, went to Philadelphia, Boston, New York & then to England, the Surrey Theatre, London, July 9th 1836. He seldom worked with minstrel troupes. He did burlesques such as “The Virginian Mummy” which was a favourite with minstrel comedians for 75 years. They all depended on the inimitable acting of Rice. He came to England again in 1838 and 1843. In the later he was Julius Caesar Washington Hickory Dick in “Yankee Notes for English Circulation” and did “Jump Jim Crow” & “Sich a gittin’ Upstairs”. He was paralysed in 1858 and died in New York in 1860 aged 53. In 1843 Joe Sweeny appeared who introduced the first version of the modern banjo which he developed about 1830.

The first minstrel troupe, The Virginia Minstrels, formed in New York in Feb 1843 consisting of Dan Emmett, Frank Brower, Dick Pelham and Whitlock who conceived it, playing banjo, violin, bone castanets & tambourine and avoiding vulgarity. They came to and performed in England in May 1843 in Liverpool, Manchester and London in their “original, novel, grotesque and melodious Ethiopian Entertainment”. They disbanded in July 1843. Dan Emmett wrote “I wish I was in Dixie” in Sept 1859 as a new walk around finale for the show he was in in New York. The greatest financial and social success in the early days was the Ethiopian Serenaders in England from January 1846, the music being taken from the most popular operas of the day interspersed with Ethiopian melodies. These included Buffalo Gals, Oh Susannah, Boatman Dance and Old Joe. The Christy Minstrels started in New York in 1846 and ran till just after E P Christy retired in 1854. A company opened in London in August 1857 called the Christy Minstrels with enough performers from the original to justify the name, and included Joe Brown a champion jig dancer and the song Nelly Gray. There soon became an epidemic of “Christy Troupes” so that the name became identified with Minstrelsy. In 1882-3 there were 32 touring troupes in the USA. From April 1859 till April 1909 there were minstrels at the lesser St James’ Hall, Piccadilly

In April 1909 a newspaper said “burnt cork minstrelsy seems to have taken its departure from the list of London amusements, but up to the present nothing of any consequence seems to have arisen to take its place.” It was commented as still true 20 years later.

E W Mackney accompanied himself on a piano but in his famous topical song “The Whole Hog or None” he capered around the stage in a quaint costume. The original words were written by Chas Sloman, but it was kept up to date with endless improvisations. He also played the violin, banjo, bones, guitar and was famous for farm yard imitations on the fiddle. His dancing was so good that it led to him being asked to

judge champion dancing competitions. He started in pantomime in 1833 at the age of 9. He became the leading exponent of Burnt cork minstrelsy in England. He retired in early middle age. He died in March 1909 aged 83.

“The world’s a funny kind of place with funny people there,
It’s just the kind of steeplechase in which we all must share,
To high and low, to rich and poor, it all turns out the same,
For if the king is not secure, the knave must win the game.

Oh! law gals, sure Charleston is a pretty city, were you ever there?
If not you ought to go,
For the gals of Carolina, oh, they are so full of fun,
There’s no mistake about them, ’tis the whole hog or none!

I wish I were a volunteer that I might have a gun,
I’d exercise at Aldershot and learn to fight like fun,
I’d follow there a soldier’s life, and taste its every charm,
And perhaps when I came home, I’d have rheumatics in my arm.”

G H Chirgwin, the white eyed kaffir, with the aid of a pair of churchwarden pipes and a tea tray amusingly imitated a clog dancer.

In 1880 a minstrel quintette, the Ethiopian Troubadours opened at the Canterbury Music Hall. They did a 30 minute act with overture, ballads by tenor and baritone, quartettes, patter, comic items, banjo selections, burlesque prima donna and ended with a mini burlesque of Il Travatore. Harry Reynold’s Minstrels appeared in semi-court costume and had a back cloth representing a full troupe of 30 performers and an orchestra. The act included vocal marches, ballads with harmonised choruses, gags, laughing and whistling songs, dances and ended with unaccompanied quartette singing of old time minstrel medleys. After a time it was done in two scenes, minstrelk sit round and plantation scene without leaving the stage, all in 20 minutes. the performers were interlocutor, tambourine end man, male soprano, tenor, basso profundo, bones end man and baritone. Ran for several years and it brought a minstrel revival to the halls till WW1. The Palladium Minstrels were 100 strong with 30 banjoists and went for big effects. While in the Variety theatres the unusual costumes could be of the golliwog variety with eccentric makeup by the comedians making it look like a burlesque of a minstrel show.

The brothers Charles and Harry Raynor were a blackface musical act who introduced the Cat Duet to English audiences. At one time knockabout black face comedians were the rage, then Stump Orators, it lent itself to topical illusions and could be kept up to date. Performing develops initiative, self-reliance and readiness of wit, cultivates a thickskin, a spirit of serene optimism and a dogmatic belief in himself. Pierrots were introduced by Clifford Essex about 1892, Harry Pelisser developed the idea with his troupe “The Follies”.

The best old minstrel shows were built on a solid foundation of good vocal and instrumental music, it was not confined to old time melodies or plantation songs. There was usually 8 comedians on the corner to ensure variety. There were contrasting voices, male sopranos, male altos, light tenors, dramatic tenors, baritones and basso profundos. the songs and ballads included plantation, simple homely, romantic seranades, martial songs, rollicking sea songs, anything that allowed a final harmonised refrain. They avoided voices with vibrato, needing a firm steady tone. The comedians had a variety of songs, funny songs on many subjects, topical matter, whistling, laughing, yodelling, mimetic numbers, coon songs and dances, concerted numbers, and single and double gags.

Curtain went up to a double arc of ebony hued gentlemen, white gloves and expansive shirt fronts. Interlocutor, selected for deep voice and impressive manner said "gentlemen be seated". He introduced the Grand Introductory Overture and Opening Chorus by the whole troupe, during which the corner men gave a smart and spectacular performance with bones and tambourine. Then a programme of mixed sentiment and humour, using song, dance, story and clever specialities. Then a Stump orator with humorous comment on current local topics. The first part of a show ended with an operatic selection, a medley of plantation songs or a spectacular finale. During the first part the orchestra would be on the stage. The second part, "The Grand Olio of Varieties", includes variety acts, solo dancing, acrobatics, big comncerted song or dance acts, musical novelties, mimicry, skits on the latest crazes, illusions, pantomimes, ending with a burlesque of a well known opera or popular stage success, to send everyone away in a bright and merry mood. The key to a minstrel show compared with a variety show was a person who was the guiding spirit who ensured the variety and interest throughout.

The Fisk University Jubille Singers were the only group to get the fullest effect out of the old negro tunes.

A "Statue Dance" is as follows : a little dance then a sudden stop and a pose illustrative of say "The Dying Gladiator", another little dance and a pose of "Ajax Defying the Lightning" and so on.

The best minstrel black was obtained by burning good champagne corks to a fine powder and mixing with water to the consistency of blacking.