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978-0-521-56074-0 - Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World

Dale Cockrell

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## Demons of Disorder

Carnival, charivari, mumming plays, peasant festivals, and even early versions of the Santa Claus myth – all of these forms of entertainment influenced and shaped blackface minstrelsy in the first half of the nineteenth century. In his fascinating study *Demons of Disorder*, musicologist Dale Cockrell studies issues of race and class by analyzing their cultural expressions, and investigates the roots of still-remembered songs such as “Jim Crow,” “Zip Coon,” and “Dan Tucker.” Flaming his way across nearly all the worlds uncovered here is George Washington Dixon, the man most deserving of the title “father of blackface minstrelsy” and surely one of celebrity’s all-time heavyweight eccentrics – a bonafide “demon of disorder.”

The first book on the blackface tradition written by a leading musicologist, *Demons of Disorder* is an important achievement in music history and culture.

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*Vanderbilt University*



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521560740](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521560740)

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First published 1997

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Demons of disorder: early blackface minstrels and their world / Dale Cockrell

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in American theatre and drama)

Includes bibliographical references (p.)

ISBN 0-521-56074-8 (hardback). – ISBN 0-521-56828-5 (paperback)

1. Minstrel shows – History.

2. Minstrel music – United States – History and criticism.

3. Blackface entertainers – United States. 4. Dixon, George Washington, 1808–1861.

5. United States – Social conditions – 19th century.

6. United States – Race relations. I. Title. II. Series

ML1711.C63 1997

791'.12'0973 – dc21 96-45566

CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-56074-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-56828-9 Paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2010

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the accuracy of such information thereafter.

Publication of this book was supported by a grant from the  
Sonneck Society for American Music.

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*For Lucinda and Sam*

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## *Preface*

**W**ORLDS ARE THREE-DIMENSIONAL, stretching forever into an infinitude of directions. They are very unlike narratives, which try to line up the points and progress inexorably, step by step toward conclusion and closure. This is a book about a world – urban, brotherhood-based, American, from the time of Jackson through 1843 – in which popular musical and theatrical entertainments by men in blackface first found nurture and meaning. I attempt here to map some of the directions taken by blackface minstrelsy but not necessarily to connect them, although I do notice some of the intersections. All of which is to say that this is not a history of early blackface minstrelsy; it is not a rigidly chronological narrative that documents the significant moments when nineteenth-century white men put on black makeup and more or less mocked black people through song, dance, and speech. I believe that to extrapolate such a linear story from lives that fought against the whole idea of a logical, reasonable, contiguous statement of quasi-scientific facts would be to indulge in a form of misrepresentation and leave me in the awkward position I explore and deplore toward the end of this study, where perspective dictates the “facts,” and intrusive real-world concerns be damned!

Nevertheless, there are some basic, “real-world” issues with which I deal in this study. For instance, one can reconstruct a world of vapors only in theory; historicizing demands something more. This presented me with a problem: Most of those who supported the develop-



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ment of blackface minstrelsy lived their lives below “the horizon of record.” My subjects tended not to leave diaries, letters, novels, newspapers, paintings, busts, or monuments (although, when they did, I rushed to examine the trail). However, fortunately for me if not for them, those at the bottom were constantly subjected to ridicule, derision, and patronization. The “better sorts” found common people instructive exemplars of depravity, criminality, and lustful behavior. One of the best ways for those up the higher rungs of the ladder to indulge those on the lower was through the reports of court proceedings filed daily in some of the larger metropolitan newspapers. Here one can read about the manifestly debauched, unsocial behavior of those dragged in by the watch. Unintentionally, these columns become a kind of gloss on many of the things that make urban lower-class life different from that of the urban middle class.<sup>1</sup> Luckily for my project, music and dancing play much more extensive parts in “Police Court” proceedings than I would have expected. Reading day by day, column by column through multiple titles for New York and Boston, and in selected runs for other cities, I have collected stories, facts, trials, and data of a magnitude such that this book represents only the tip. With these files I am thus able to arrive at conclusions that I believe, somewhat immodestly, have not been supportable previously. With such a focus, I was freed to concentrate on the contexts out of which minstrelsy developed and spread, and to buttress (not construct) my findings with the texts of minstrelsy: songs, songsters, playlets, handbills, posters, and articles.

Other forms of “suspicious” evidence I use here are the symbolic and the anecdotal. Of the former, if images, sounds, or icons are manipulated in certain ways in certain situations, which can then be shown to resemble behaviors in other contexts, then one can state something about relationships (although not as directly as one could in the presence of clear intentions and explicit connections). For example, it is now clear to me that bells meant something quite different to the early nineteenth century than they mean today; context glosses meaning, and by the end of this book I hope these bells (which are to be found throughout this book in surprising places) peel out to readers in a different way. Brooms, too, play a surprising part in my story. They and their function are, of course, common symbols of pollution and depollution. (They can also be used as weapons, as one instance will show.) Sometimes the function of a broom can be inverted, allowing it to dir-

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ty, as we shall also see; and sometimes the whores of Boston (who are, of course, “unclean”) arrive with brooms to freshen an area for dancing. These images resonate in a way similar to folk theatricals and early blackface minstrelsy. Although scholarly standards of evidence would compel a disregard of much of this, it seems to me little different than accepting autobiography as an accurate, objective chronicle of a necessarily subjective life. The symbols and metaphors that make up social rites and traditions swim around in the collective imagination and join and reappear in places and times often ungraspable by the disciplined methodologies of history, which is precisely why the history of ritual is generally delegated to the anthropologist and folklorist.

In somewhat like ways can anecdotes be useful. Much of the most interesting information I present here is probably inaccurate – as in, it never actually happened! Often I flag these occurrences, but at other times I let the story stand by itself, for anecdotal evidence can be a form of social myth and thus at least as powerful as fact. It is for this reason, for example, that I begin this study around 1829. Not that this is when blackface minstrelsy actually commenced, for one could probably build an equally strong case for ca. 1815<sup>2</sup> or for 1832, when T. D. Rice first jumped “Jim Crow” in New York City. For that matter, as Robert Winans has pointed out, most of the components that came to make up minstrelsy were “evident in American popular culture of the 1780s and 1790s, . . .”<sup>3</sup> However, the mythmakers of the Jacksonian era (generally, newspaper editors) believed that “Coal Black Rose” was the beginning, a song of around 1829, first heard at the time of the inauguration of the president who gave name to the epoch. Blackface minstrelsy began in myth, and the myth must be treated with great courtesy.

By letting the mythmakers tell me what to study I hope to avoid certain presentist views about minstrelsy that have, I believe, polluted our understanding of the early period. Especially problematic was much writing on minstrelsy before the past decade or so. Carl Wittke (1930), Robert Toll (1974), and Sam Dennison (1982) have all to some extent stretched their era’s understanding of minstrelsy back over the whole thing, to 1829 and before, representing attitudes and meanings to be monolithic, particularly in regards to race. Robert Cantwell (1984), Sean Wilentz (1984), Eric Lott (1993a), and a few others have helped us re-complicate that period, especially in how those who lived then related to matters of race. Lott in particular has shown convincingly that the

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racist content of antebellum minstrel shows was never so absolute as the hideous blackface mask would seem to indicate, but was slippery and problematic. Even the writers of this distinguished latter group, however, have not been careful with race and minstrelsy in the earlier period, and have tended to treat 1832 and 1845 as subject to the same laws and contracts (although they would never do so politically, socially, or economically). This book affirms that those who told the stories back then, and made a big deal about 1843 being different from 1832, did so for very good reasons. The time span covered in this book thus embodies much more than just fifteen years of 365 days each: it is of attitudes and worlds, histories and myths, rituals and methods, words and acts. I confess that it is with considerable trepidation that I approach the world of ambiguity, and hope that my mediation makes for greater understanding.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE MOST PROBLEMATIC WORD for me in this whole study is “minstrel.” It is a word first applied to blackface entertainment in late 1842 for good self-conscious reasons that must have resonated broadly, for it was quickly picked up by others and became a popular convention within months of its initial employment. The reasons, as I show in Chapter 5, have to do with economics, politics, status, and music. It is a word of its time, and is appropriately transforming in its impact. I try to make the case that 1842–3 was a substantially different time from 1829. What word do I then use to characterize the music, dance, and theatre treated in this book before late 1842, which does, after all, make up the bulk of my study? Would I not, by using the word “minstrel,” project anachronistically a context of understanding onto something (often) quite different? I am afraid, alas, the answer is yes; but there seems no ready alternative to the word, and after trying “blackface dialect,” “blackface entertainment,” and just “blackface,” I rejected each for various reasons, and have resorted to the convention. Forbearance is begged.

*Demons of Disorder* is, in part (for worlds can never be a single thing), an attempt to comprehend the role of music in cultural history. This study embraces a range of music made by common Jacksonians, holds music’s antonym – noise – to be a legitimate form of cultural expres-

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sion, and asks questions of meaning following analysis of sound's place in society. My approach to the study of music bridges between those who would decontextualize music in a search for an autonomous, aesthetic-based musical canon, and those who would ignore musical sound altogether, opting only for text and context. This book is also a number in the growing literature on the ways in which theatre reflects and instills social values. My topic is especially apt in this regard, for minstrelsy was a highly popular enterprise powerfully expressive of the common person's politics. This, then, is a study of class and race. Here I attempt to take the long view, which sees class relations in urban Jacksonian America as connected to a premodern set of strictures and mores, and to define the frame, which sets off relations between common people and the middle class through the image and reality of race. In the end of this revisionist work, the inevitable question confronted is "How is it that our received view of early blackface minstrelsy was so widely off the mark?" By setting the historiography of minstrelsy within its own social context, which was generally white, northern, liberal, middle class, and academic, I bring my story into the present and ponder, "Did any one group or class benefit from the fabrication?" Could it be that the powerful misrepresented traditions and meanings special to the powerless in a wild search for scapegoats?

\*\*\*\*\*

ALL SIX WORDS of my subtitle make up a form of tribute to Mikhail Bakhtin and his *Rabelais and His World*. I have found his study to be a primary source of insight, method, and support. Bakhtin's contributions are many, but primary among them was his situating of Rabelais in the light of folk humor and outside that of the official culture of power. He discovered that Rabelais had tapped into an incredibly rich world of humorous, grotesque metaphors employed and lustily enjoyed by the common people of that period, a language that was intentionally obscure to those in power. Rabelais wrote for readers newly emerged from an "ear culture" (about which, more later), who carried with them in their collective memories the symbols that defined and enriched heritage. Not surprisingly, given the brilliance of the work, Bakhtin anticipated my line of reasoning, which argues for the continued existence of ancient European folk theatricals well into nineteenth-century Amer-

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ica and for a tradition of modes of behavior and knowing that infected contemporary means of expression. “[Folk humor] continues to live and to struggle for its existence in the lower canonical genres (comedy, satire, fable) and especially in non-canonical genres (in the novel, in a special form of popular dialogue, in burlesque). . . . [and] on the popular stage . . .”<sup>4</sup> Not content, however, just to point to source and lineage, Bakhtin lays bare process and significance:

[T]he system of popular-festive images was developed and went on living over thousands of years. This long development had its own scoria, its own dead deposits in manners, beliefs, prejudices. But in its basic line this system grew and was enriched; it acquired a new meaning, absorbed the new hopes and thoughts of the people. It was transformed in the crucible of the people’s new experience. The language of images developed new and more refined nuances.

Thanks to this process, popular-festive images became a powerful means of grasping reality; they served as a basis for an authentic and deep realism. Popular imagery did not reflect the naturalistic, fleeting, meaningless, and scattered aspect of reality but the very process of becoming, its meaning and direction. Hence the universality and sober optimism of this system.<sup>5</sup>

Far from being disappointed that my primary point and the shape of my conclusion has received previous articulation, I am comforted and somewhat relieved; for, like Bakhtin’s, my research flies in the face of some parts of our canon. I would be honored to see this work stand as a buttress to the monument that is his.

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## *Acknowledgments*

**H**OW CAN I EVER HONOR all those who have helped me toward my measure of understanding? Well, truth be known, I cannot; undaunted, though, I shoulder the effort. Let me begin appropriately by expressing my gratitude to the Sonneck Society for American Music. The first tentative public presentations of my findings were at the Society's conferences. The colleagues and friends that constitute this body of believers in American music supported me then and at many turns since, both formally and informally. I am especially thankful for the display of confidence in my work shown by the award to Cambridge University Press of an H. Earle Johnson Book Publication Grant.

Many institutions have opened their files to me, and without their cooperation this would be a much lesser book. Wayne Everard, archivist at the Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library; Jessica Travis, reference librarian, Historic New Orleans Collection; and the Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections at Louisiana State University Libraries all devoted critical time and services. Kenneth R. Cobb, Director of the Municipal Archives, City of New York, provided me with everything I needed to work there. Rosemary Cullen, Curator of the Harris Collection, The John Hay Library, Brown University, treated me as if I were the only person in the library. Michael Dumas, Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard College Library, on sev-

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eral occasions made me feel welcome in that splendid collection. The Wisconsin Historical Society made available to me issues of newspapers that I would not have been able to consult otherwise. Virginia Smith at the Massachusetts Historical Society enthusiastically helped me find what I needed from their collection. Elizabeth C. Bouvier at the Massachusetts Archives helped me through the Massachusetts court records. The New York Public Library allowed me access to vital and unique documents.

Four institutions, though, stand out. One is the Commonwealth Center for the Study of American Culture, which provided me with a quiet place to work, resources, and stimulating colleagues during the formative stages of this work. (Alas, my encomium has a bittersweet knell about it, for politicians in their infinite wisdom regarding matters intellectual have determined that the Center is expendable, and it is at this writing no more.) I wish also to thank the College of William and Mary, which supported my work at several turns by making available time and resources. It was my academic home during most of this work and nurtured me in untold ways. Vanderbilt University was my haven during the final push to publication, and has also provided financial support and intellectual nourishment. Regarding the American Antiquarian Society, I fear that I might be accused of exaggeration. The granting of an AAS–National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship quite simply made this work possible – “simply” because I could not have done this work anywhere else. What a truly great place to live and work, and what a wonderful, rich collection of resources – the most valuable of these being not the seemingly endless collections of primary source material, but the people. I suspect they too have trouble conceiving of themselves as “employees.” Staffers seem to like working there, and stay for a good long spell, often a lifetime. Accordingly, they have a depth of knowledge about the collection that surpasses extraordinary, and all are perfectly willing to share what they know! Many aided me in some way, from the maintenance guys, to the business office, to cataloguing, to Nancy Burkett, librarian, and Ellen Dunlap, the president. However, to limit myself to those those who helped put the materials I needed into my hands (or the ideas I stole into my head), I would like to express my thanks to Georgia Barnhill, Joanne Chaison, Sarah Heinser, John Hench, Tom Knoles, Marie Lamoureux, Dennis

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Laurie, Jim Moran, Caroline Sloat, Joyce Tracy, Laura Wasowicz, and Caroline Wood. Extra special thanks go to Gigi, Caroline, Susan, and Lee for conferring upon me “honorary girl” status, and, as a result, coming to put up with my “most recent discovery” at the coffee hour.

As for individuals, and with the certainty that I have overlooked at least one friend or colleague who contributed a key piece of understanding, let me intone the names of those who can lay claim to a part of this work (assuming they would wish to do so). They are Karen Ahlquist, Joyce Appleby, Chris Ballantine, Jay Blair, Bill Brooks, Chandos Brown, Steve Bullock, Martha Burns, Betty Ch’maj, Chris Clark, Dan Cohen, Pat Cohen, Mary Jane Corry, Richard Crawford, Barbara Cutter, Bill DeFotis, John Dougan, Ken Emerson, Dena Epstein, Wayne Franklin, Bob Gross, Grey Gundaker, Dan Gutwein, Lee Heller, David Horn, Phyllis Hunter, Carol Karlsen, Bill Kearns, Virginia Kearns, Kitty Keller, Arthur Knight, Bruce Laurie, Rip Lhamon, Eric Lott, Bill Mahar, David Napier, Ron Pen, Dan Preston, Kitty Preston, Anne Rasmussen, John Reilly, Carol Rifelj, Tom Riis, Brenda Romero, Deane Root, Howard Sacks, Kirk Savage, Art Schrader, Regina Sweeney, Jeff Titon, George A. Thompson, Jr., Mark Tucker, Alden Vaughan, Rob Walser, Paul Wells, Glenn Wilcox, Edgar Williams, Kit Wilson, and Bob Winans.

Let me single out a few colleagues for special thanks. Bruce McConachie has provided me with warm, friendly support and encouragement throughout this project. Stephen Nissenbaum is responsible for the seed idea from which it all sprang and for tending what grew from it. George Harris has been both a good friend and a good critic, and has dragged me away for a day of fellowship and fishing at the most appropriate times. Finally, to my mentor (if he will claim me) Charles Hamm, I express unending gratitude for his advice, insight, encouragement, criticism, and, most important, for his being perhaps the finest person ever to write an intelligent word on popular music. Let me also thank the students in my 1996 seminar on “Blackface Minstrelsy,” for they endured in good humor the forced reading of my draft manuscript, and offered me a semester’s worth of dialogue, insight, and constructive criticism.

Cambridge University Press has given me much support. My series editor, Don Wilmeth, believed in this research when it was still in its



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infancy, and has guided and advised me at many turns. My senior editors, first Susan Chang, later Anne Sanow, provided steady, encouraging editorial support. Michael Gnat has been much more than production editor *extraordinaire*; he is to be credited with much of the sense in my syntax and a great deal of the sensibility. I hope they all take pride in our work.

On a softer note, my parents, Elliott and Jo Ann Cockrell, nurtured and instructed me through so many formative moments, a debt that I now see (as a parent, myself) I can never repay. Finally, there's Lucinda and Sam, who overwhelm me daily with the meaning, beauty, and love of living. They have endured much at the hands of this project. (At the moment I write this I could – and probably should – be playing catch with a promising five-year-old right-hander.) My dedication of this book to them is a start toward making up for lost joint time.

As for failings and errors, I've always admired how my colleague Bruce McConachie handled them in his *Melodramatic Formations*: "Of course, the blame for any mistakes in the book rests entirely with them, not me" (1992: viii). So, since Bruce was my friend, critic, and guide through much of this work, and since he is by now surely wanting of correction, let me pass on any mistakes or failings in this book to him, for they were surely of *his* making! . . . However, having momentarily slipped the harness of responsibility that attends to a right, I must again crib from Bruce: "having written such a sentence myself, I am no more able to endorse its wise crack than any other scribbling pedant. My mistakes, alas, are my own."

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## *Dictionariana*<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT REASONING – Reasoning from principles, as distinguished from the ratiocination of weak minds, who can only reason directly from matters of fact.

ACCOMPLISHMENT – Any acquisition that improves the manners without necessarily strengthening the mind, which renders one more agreeable without increasing his intelligence.

BIGOTRY – The veneration of ones opinions.

DANCING – An active employment of the understanding.

DEVIL – A word used, in comparison, as a climax for every extreme.

EYES – The windows and mirrors of the soul.

FABLES – Fictions invented for the illustration of truths – or, lies in fact, and truths in principle.

FACTS – Lies, well supported by testimony.

FINE – A means by which the wealthy may atone for a crime, for which the poor must suffer punishment, from their inability to pay it.

FREEMAN – An individual who cannot discern the limits of his imprisonment, or the fetters of his bondage.

HARMONY (IN MUSIC) – Scientific discord.

HISTORY – Well authenticated fiction; a catalogue of hypocrisy, crimes and misfortunes.

HOLIDAYS – Those seasons of pastime which the puritanical selfishness of the Americans has nearly banished from the calendar.

- HOPE – A mistress whom we still love and still believe, though she has often deceived us, because we cannot be happy without her.
- HORRIBLE – Exceedingly interesting.
- ILLOGICAL – Contrary to the decisions of the schools.
- INFERIORS – Those who possess less wealth than ourselves.
- LEARNED – Ignorant of common things.
- LIFE – A monotonous repetition of eating and drinking, sleeping and waking, occasionally relieved by the perusal of the daily papers.
- MANNERS – The language of action.
- MISREPRESENTATION – The art of falsifying, without lying.
- MUSIC – The most social of all the arts, which has the misfortune to be ridiculed by Mammon-worshippers, because it sometimes leads to unthriftiness, and by the unmusical, because they cannot appreciate its value.
- PARADOX – A startling truth.
- PEN – The chief implement of modern warfare.
- POETRY – Literary vomit.
- PREFACE – An introductory essay by which the author endeavors to recommend or apologize for the nonsense which follows.
- PROFOUND – Unintelligible.
- REASON – A faculty used by men when they wish to apologize for their errors and to defend their prejudices.
- RESPECTABILITY – Conformity to all the customs both good and bad that are sanctioned by public opinion.
- SELF – An individual who is of the greatest consequence to each, and of the least consequence to all of the human race.