Wiki: Historical Overview of Blackface

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[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Minstrel_PosterBillyVanWare_edit.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Minstrel_PosterBillyVanWare_edit.jpg)

This reproduction of a 1900 [William H. West](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_H._West_%28entertainer%29) [minstrel show](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show) poster, originally published by the Strobridge [Litho](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lithography) Co., shows the transformation from white to "black".

**Blackface** is [theatrical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre) [makeup](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makeup) used in [minstrel shows](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show), and later [vaudeville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudeville). The practice gained popularity during the 19th century and propagated [American racist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racism_in_the_United_States) [stereotypes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotypes_of_African_Americans) such as the "happy-go-lucky [*darky*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs#D) on the [plantation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantation#Slavery.2C_para-slavery_and_plantations)" or the "[dandified](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dandy) [*coon*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs#C) ".[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-0) In 1848, blackface minstrel shows were the national art of the time, translating formal art such as opera into popular terms for a general audience.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-1) Early in the 20th century, blackface branched off from the minstrel show and became a form in its own right, until it ended in the United States with the [U.S. Civil Rights Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Civil_Rights_Movement_%281955%E2%80%931968%29) of the 1960s.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-2)

Blackface was an important performance tradition in the [American theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theater_in_the_United_States) for roughly 100 years beginning around 1830. It quickly became popular overseas, particularly so in [Britain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom), where the tradition lasted longer than in the US, occurring on primetime TV as late as [1978](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_and_white_minstrel)[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Black_and_white_minstrel-3) and 1981.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-4) In both the United States and Britain, blackface was most commonly used in the [minstrel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show) performance tradition, but it predates that tradition, and it survived long past the heyday of the minstrel show. [White](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_%28people%29) blackface performers in the past used burnt [cork](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cork_%28material%29) and later greasepaint or shoe polish to blacken their skin and exaggerate their lips, often wearing woolly [wigs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wig_%28hair%29), gloves, [tailcoats](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tailcoat), or ragged clothes to complete the transformation. Later, [black](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_%28people%29) artists also performed in blackface.

Stereotypes embodied in the stock characters of blackface [minstrels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show) played a significant role in cementing and proliferating racist images, attitudes and perceptions worldwide, and also in popularizing and mainstreaming black culture. In some quarters, the [caricatures](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caricature) that were the legacy of blackface persist to the present day and are a cause of ongoing controversy. One view is that blackface is a form of [cross-dressing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross-dressing).[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-5)

By the mid-20th century, changing attitudes about race and racism effectively ended the prominence of blackface makeup used in performance in the U.S. and elsewhere. It remains in relatively limited use as a theatrical device, mostly outside the U.S., and is more commonly used today as social commentary or [satire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire). Perhaps the most enduring effect of blackface is the precedent it established in the introduction of [African American culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American_culture) to an international audience, albeit through a distorted lens.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Lott-17-18-6)[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Watkins_82-7) Blackface's groundbreaking [appropriation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_appropriation),[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Lott-17-18-6)[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Watkins_82-7)[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-8) [exploitation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exploitation), and [assimilation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_assimilation)[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Lott-17-18-6) of African-American culture—as well as the inter-ethnic artistic collaborations that stemmed from it—were but a prologue to the lucrative packaging, marketing, and dissemination of African-American cultural expression and its myriad derivative forms in today's world popular culture.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Watkins_82-7)[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-9)[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-10)

There is no consensus about a single moment that constitutes the origin of blackface. [John Strausbaugh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Strausbaugh) places it as part of a tradition of "displaying Blackness for the enjoyment and edification of white viewers" that dates back at least to 1441, when captive West Africans were displayed in [Portugal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portugal).[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated2-11) Whites routinely portrayed the black characters in the [Elizabethan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethan_era) and [Jacobean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacobean_era) theater (see [English Renaissance theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Renaissance_theatre)), most famously in [*Othello*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Othello) (1604).[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Black_and_white_minstrel-3) However, *Othello* and other plays of this era did not involve the emulation and caricature of "such supposed innate qualities of Blackness as inherent musicality, natural athleticism," etc. that Strausbaugh sees as crucial to blackface.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated2-11) [Lewis Hallam, Jr.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Hallam,_Jr.), a white actor using blackface makeup of [American Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Company) fame, brought blackface in this more specific sense to prominence as a theatrical device in the United States when playing the role of "Mungo", an inebriated black man in [*The Padlock*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Padlock), a British play that premiered in [New York City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City) at the John Street Theatre on May 29, 1769.[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-12) The play attracted notice, and other performers adopted the style. From at least the 1810s, blackface [clowns](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clown) were popular in the United States.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-13) British actor [Charles Mathews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Mathews) toured the U.S. in 1822–1823, and as a result added a "black" characterization to his repertoire of British regional types for his next show, *A Trip to America*, which included Mathews singing "Possum up a Gum Tree", a popular slave freedom song.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-gotham-14) [Edwin Forrest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Forrest) played a plantation black in 1823,[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-gotham-14) and [George Washington Dixon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Dixon) was already building his stage career around blackface in 1828,[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-15) but it was another white comic actor, [Thomas D. Rice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_D._Rice), who truly popularized blackface. Rice introduced the song "[Jump Jim Crow](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jump_Jim_Crow)" accompanied by a dance in his stage act in 1828[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-16) and scored stardom with it by 1832.[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-17)

First on de heel tap, den on the toe  
Every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.  
I wheel about and turn about an do just so,  
And every time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.[[19]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-18)

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:BlackfaceMinstrelsPostcard.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:BlackfaceMinstrelsPostcard.jpg)

This postcard, published circa 1908, shows a white minstrel team. While both are wearing wigs, the man on the left is in blackface and [drag](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drag_%28clothing%29).

Rice traveled the U.S., performing under the [stage name](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stage_name) "Daddy Jim Crow". The name *Jim Crow* later became attached to [statutes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_law) that codified the reinstitution of [segregation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racial_segregation_in_the_United_States) and [discrimination](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racial_discrimination) after [Reconstruction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconstruction_era_of_the_United_States).[[20]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-19)

In the 1830s and early 1840s, blackface performances mixed skits with comic songs and vigorous dances. Initially, Rice and his peers performed only in relatively disreputable venues, but as blackface gained popularity they gained opportunities to perform as [*entr'actes*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entr%27acte) in theatrical venues of a higher class. Stereotyped blackface characters developed: buffoonish, lazy, superstitious, cowardly, and lascivious characters, who stole, lied pathologically, and mangled the English language. Early blackface minstrels were all male, so cross-dressing white men also played black women who were often portrayed either as unappealingly and grotesquely mannish; in the matronly, [mammy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mammy_archetype) mold; or highly sexually provocative. The 1830s American stage, where blackface first rose to prominence featured similarly comic [stereotypes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotype) of the clever Yankee and the larger-than-life Frontiersman;[[21]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-20) the late 19th- and early 20th-century American and British stage where it last prospered[[22]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated1-21) featured many other, mostly [ethnically](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnicity)-based, comic stereotypes: conniving, venal [Jews](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jew);[[23]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-22)[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-131-23) drunken brawling [Irishmen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ireland) with [blarney](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/blarney) at the ready;[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-131-23)[[25]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-24)[[26]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-25) oily Italians;[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-131-23) stodgy Germans;[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-131-23) and gullible rural rubes.[[24]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-131-23)

1830s and early 1840s blackface performers performed solo or as duos, with the occasional trio; the traveling troupes that would later characterize blackface minstrelsy arise only with the minstrel show.[[27]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-26) In New York City in 1843, [Dan Emmett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_Emmett) and his [Virginia Minstrels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Minstrels) broke blackface minstrelsy loose from its novelty act and *entr'acte* status and performed the first full-blown [minstrel show](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minstrel_show): an evening's entertainment composed entirely of blackface performance. ([E. P. Christy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._P._Christy) did more or less the same, apparently independently, earlier the same year in [Buffalo, New York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo,_New_York).)[[28]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-27) Their loosely structured show with the musicians sitting in a semicircle, a [tambourine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tambourine) player on one end and a [bones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bones_%28instrument%29) player on the other, set the precedent for what would soon become the first act of a standard three-act minstrel show.[[29]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-28) By 1852, the skits that had been part of blackface performance for decades expanded to one-act farces, often used as the show's third act.[[30]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-29)

The songs of [northern](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_United_States) composer [Stephen Foster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Foster) figured prominently in blackface minstrel shows of the period. Though written in dialect and certainly politically incorrect by today's standards, his later songs were free of the ridicule and blatantly racist caricatures that typified other songs of the genre. Foster's works treated [slaves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_United_States) and the [South](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_United_States) in general with an often cloying sentimentality that appealed to audiences of the day.[[31]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-30)

White minstrel shows featured white performers pretending to be blacks, playing their versions of black music and speaking [ersatz](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ersatz) [black dialects](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American_Vernacular_English). Minstrel shows dominated popular show business in the U.S. from that time through into the 1890s, also enjoying massive popularity in the [UK](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom) and in other parts of [Europe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europe).[[32]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-31) As the minstrel show went into decline, blackface returned to its novelty act roots and became part of [vaudeville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudeville).[[22]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated1-21) Blackface featured prominently in [film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film) at least into the 1930s, and the "aural blackface"[[33]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-225-32) of the [*Amos 'n' Andy*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amos_%27n%27_Andy) radio show lasted into the 1950s.[[33]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Strausbaugh-225-32) Meanwhile, amateur blackface minstrel shows continued to be common at least into the 1950s.[[34]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-33)

As a result, the genre played an important role in shaping perceptions of and prejudices about blacks generally and [African Americans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American) in particular. Some social commentators have stated that blackface provided an outlet for whites' fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar, and a socially acceptable way of expressing their feelings and fears about race and control. Writes Eric Lott in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, "The black mask offered a way to play with the collective fears of a degraded and threatening—and male—Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them."[[35]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-34)

**Film:**

Through the 1930s, many well-known entertainers of stage and screen [also performed in blackface](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_entertainers_known_to_have_performed_in_blackface).[[36]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-35) Whites who performed in blackface in film included [Al Jolson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Jolson),[[37]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-RJ-Smith-36) [Eddie Cantor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Cantor),[[38]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Kenrick-37) [Bing Crosby](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bing_Crosby),[[37]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-RJ-Smith-36) [Fred Astaire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Astaire), [Mickey Rooney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mickey_Rooney), [Shirley Temple](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirley_Temple) and [Judy Garland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judy_Garland).[[38]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Kenrick-37)

In the early years of film, black characters were routinely played by whites in blackface. In the [first known film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Tom%27s_Cabin_%28film_adaptations%29) of [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Tom%27s_Cabin) (1903) all of the major black roles were whites in blackface.[[39]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-38) Even the 1914 *Uncle Tom* starring African American actor [Sam Lucas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Lucas) in the title role had a white male in blackface as Topsy.[[40]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-39) [D. W. Griffith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D._W._Griffith)'s [*The Birth of a Nation*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_a_Nation) (1915) used whites in blackface to represent all of its major black characters,[[41]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface" \l "cite_note-40) but reaction against the film's racism largely put an end to this practice in dramatic film roles. Thereafter, whites in blackface would appear almost exclusively in broad comedies or "ventriloquizing" blackness [[42]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-41) in the context of a vaudeville or minstrel performance within a film.[[43]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-42) This stands in contrast to made-up whites routinely playing Native Americans, Asians, Arabs, and so forth, for several more decades.[[44]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-43)

Blackface makeup was largely eliminated even from live film comedy in the U.S. after the end of the 1930s, when public sensibilities regarding [race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_%28classification_of_human_beings%29) began to change and blackface became increasingly associated with racism and [bigotry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bigotry).[[38]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Kenrick-37) Still, the tradition did not end all at once. The radio program [*Amos 'n' Andy*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amos_%27n%27_Andy) (1928–1960) constituted a type of "aural blackface", in that the black characters were portrayed by whites and conformed to stage blackface stereotypes.[[45]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-44) The conventions of blackface also lived on unmodified at least into the 1950s in animated theatrical cartoons. Strausbaugh estimates that roughly one-third of late 1940s [MGM](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MGM) cartoons "included a blackface, coon, or mammy figure."[[46]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-45) [Bugs Bunny](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bugs_Bunny) appeared in blackface at least as late as *Southern Fried Rabbit* in 1953.[[47]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-46)

**Black Minstrel Shows**

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bert_Williams_blackface_2.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bert_Williams_blackface_2.jpg)

[Bert Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bert_Williams) was the only black member of the [Ziegfeld Follies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziegfeld_Follies) when he joined them in 1910. Shown here in blackface, he was the highest-paid [African American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American) entertainer of his day.[[48]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated3-47)

By 1840, African-American performers also were performing in blackface makeup. [Frederick Douglass](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass) generally abhorred blackface and was one of the first people to write against the institution of blackface minstrelsy, condemning it as racist in nature, with inauthentic, northern, white origins.[[49]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-48) Douglass did, however, maintain that, "It is something to be gained when the colored man in any form can appear before a white audience."[[50]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-49)

When all-black minstrel shows began to proliferate in the 1860s, they often were billed as "authentic" and "the real thing". These "colored minstrels"[[51]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-50) always claimed to be recently-freed slaves (doubtlessly many were, but most were not)[[52]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface" \l "cite_note-51) and were widely seen as authentic. This presumption of authenticity could be a bit of a trap, with white audiences seeing them more like "animals in a zoo"[[53]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-52) than skilled performers. Despite often smaller budgets and smaller venues, their public appeal sometimes rivalled that of white minstrel troupes. In March 1866, Booker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels may have been the country's most popular troupe, and were certainly among the most critically acclaimed.[[54]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated4-53)

These "colored" troupes—many using the name "Georgia Minstrels"[[55]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-54)—focused on "plantation" material, rather than the more explicit social commentary (and more nastily racist stereotyping) found in portrayals of northern blacks.[[56]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-55) In the execution of authentic black music and the [percussive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Percussion_instrument), [polyrhythmic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyrhythm) tradition of [*pattin' Juba*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juba_dance), when the only [instruments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_instrument) performers used were their hands and feet, clapping and slapping their bodies and shuffling and stomping their feet, black troupes particularly excelled. One of the most successful black minstrel companies was [Sam Hague's Slave Troupe of Georgia Minstrels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Hague), managed by [Charles Hicks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Hicks). This company eventually was taken over by [Charles Callendar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Callendar). The Georgia Minstrels toured the United States and abroad and later became [Haverly's Colored Minstrels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._H._Haverly).[[54]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated4-53)

From the mid-1870s, as white blackface minstrelsy became increasingly lavish and moved away from "Negro subjects", black troupes took the opposite tack.[[57]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-56) The popularity of the [Fisk Jubilee Singers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisk_Jubilee_Singers) and other [*jubilee singers*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jubilee_singers&action=edit&redlink=1) had demonstrated northern white interest in white religious music as sung by blacks, especially [spirituals](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_%28music%29). Some jubilee troupes pitched themselves as quasi-minstrels and even incorporated minstrel songs; meanwhile, blackface troupes began to adopt first jubilee material and then a broader range of southern black religious material. Within a few years, the word "jubilee", originally used by the Fisk Jubilee Singers to set themselves apart from blackface minstrels and to emphasize the religious character of their music, became little more than a synonym for "plantation" material.[[58]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-57) Where the jubilee singers tried to "clean up" Southern black religion for white consumption, blackface performers exaggerated its more exotic aspects.[[59]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-58)

African-American blackface productions also contained buffoonery and comedy, by way of self-parody. In the early days of African-American involvement in theatrical performance, blacks could not perform without blackface makeup, regardless of how dark-skinned they were. The 1860s "colored" troupes violated this convention for a time: the comedy-oriented endmen "corked up", but the other performers "astonished" commentators by the diversity of their hues.[[60]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-59) Still, their performances were largely in accord with established blackface stereotypes.[[61]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-60)

These black performers became stars within the broad African-American community, but were largely ignored or condemned by the black bourgeoisie. [James Monroe Trotter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Monroe_Trotter)—a middle class African American who had contempt for their "disgusting caricaturing" but admired their "highly musical culture"—wrote in 1882 that "few… who condemned black minstrels for giving 'aid and comfort to the enemy'" had ever seen them perform.[[62]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-61) Unlike white audiences, black audiences presumably always recognized blackface performance as caricature, and took pleasure in seeing their own culture observed and reflected, much as they would half a century later in the performances of [Moms Mabley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moms_Mabley).[[63]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-62)

Despite reinforcing racist stereotypes, blackface minstrelsy was a practical and often relatively lucrative livelihood when compared to the menial labor to which most blacks were relegated. Owing to the discrimination of the day, "corking (or "blacking") up" provided an often singular opportunity for African-American musicians, actors, and dancers to practice their crafts.[[64]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-63) Some minstrel shows, particularly when performing outside the South, also managed subtly to poke fun at the racist attitudes and double standards of white society or champion the [abolitionist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism) cause. It was through blackface performers, white and black, that the richness and exuberance of [African-American music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_music), humor, and dance first reached mainstream, white audiences in the U.S. and abroad.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-Watkins_82-7) It was through blackface minstrelsy that African American performers first entered the mainstream of American show business.[[65]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-64) Black performers used blackface performance to satirize white behavior. It was also a forum for the sexual double-entendre gags that were frowned upon by white moralists. There was often a subtle message behind the outrageous [vaudeville](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudeville) routines:

The laughter that cascaded out of the seats was directed parenthetically toward those in America who allowed themselves to imagine that such 'nigger' showtime was in any way respective of the way we live or thought about ourselves in the real world.[[66]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-fox-65)

With the rise of vaudeville, [Antiguan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antigua)-born actor and comedian [Bert Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bert_Williams) became [Florenz Ziegfeld](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florenz_Ziegfeld)'s highest-paid star and only African American star.[[48]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated3-47)[[67]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-66)

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hotmikado.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hotmikado.jpg)

A poster for the 1939 [Broadway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broadway_theatre) show [*The Hot Mikado*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hot_Mikado_%281939_production%29) using blackface imagery

In the [Theater Owners Booking Association](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theater_Owners_Booking_Association) (TOBA), an all-black vaudeville circuit organized in 1909, blackface acts were a popular staple. Called "Toby" for short, performers also nicknamed it "Tough on Black Actors" (or, variously, "Artists" or "Asses"), because earnings were so meager. Still, TOBA headliners like Tim Moore and Johnny Hudgins could make a very good living, and even for lesser players, TOBA provided fairly steady, more desirable work than generally was available elsewhere. Blackface served as a springboard for hundreds of artists and entertainers—black and white—many of whom later would go on to find work in other performance traditions. For example, one of the most famous stars of Haverly's European Minstrels was [Sam Lucas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Lucas), who became known as the "Grand Old Man of the [Negro](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negro) Stage".[[68]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-67) Lucas later played the title role in the 1914 cinematic production of [Harriet Beecher Stowe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Beecher_Stowe)'s [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Tom%27s_Cabin).[[69]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-68) From the early 1930s to the late 1940s, [New York City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City)'s famous [Apollo Theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_Theater) in [Harlem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem) featured skits in which almost all black male performers wore the blackface makeup and huge white painted lips, despite protests that it was degrading from the NAACP. The comics said they felt "naked" without it.[[70]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-autogenerated7-69)

The minstrel show was appropriated by the black performer from the original white shows, but only in its general form. Blacks took over the form and made it their own. The professionalism of performance came from black theater. The black minstrels gave the shows vitality and humor that the white shows never had. As the black social critic, [LeRoi Jones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amiri_Baraka) has written:

It is essential to realize that...the idea of white men imitating, or caricaturing, what they consider certain generic characteristics of the black man's life in American is important if only because of the Negro's reaction to it. (And it is the Negro's *reaction* to America, first white and then black and white America, that I consider to have made him such a unique member of this society.)[[71]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-leroy-70)

The black minstrel performer was not only poking fun at himself but in a more profound way, he was poking fun at the white man. The [cakewalk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cakewalk) is caricaturing white customs, while white theater companies attempted to satirize the cakewalk as a black dance. Again, as LeRoi Jones notes:

If the cakewalk is a Negro dance caricaturing certain white customs, what is that dance when, say, a white theater company attempts to satirize it as a Negro dance? I find the idea of white minstrels in blackface satirizing a dance satirizing themselves a remarkable king of irony—which, I suppose is the whole point of minstrel shows.[[71]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackface#cite_note-leroy-70)