

Oh the Night That I Struck New York

November 12, 2007

David G. Edmundson

Oh the night that I struck New York
I went out for a quiet walk
Folks that come to the city say
Better by far that I had Broadway
But I was out to enjoy the sights
And there was the Bowery ablaze with lights
And I had one of those tough old nights
I'll never go there any more

The year was 1927. Babe Ruth was on his way to swatting 60 home runs, and Charles Lindbergh on his way across the Atlantic. The Jazz Age was in full swing and motion pictures entered the age of sound. The last Model T rolled off the assembly line at River Rouge, and the first trans-Atlantic phone call was made. Mae West was jailed for obscenity, and Stalin sent Trotsky off to Mexico to await the axe. It was a year of transitions, a powerful mixture of the modern and traditional.

It was on a day in 1927 that David Macon went to a studio in New York City and recorded his version of "The Bowery" whose first verse you have just heard. Uncle Dave Macon, billed as the Dixie Dewdrop," was a 57 year old performer of traditional southern music, a masterful banjoist and singer of songs from the minstrel tradition.

This song, however, was not a minstrel song but from the 1890s musical, "A Trip to Chinatown." Written by Charles Hoyt with music by Percy Gaunt, "A Trip to Chinatown" was the longest running Broadway show of the 19th century. And even though most of you will not recall "The Bowery," you are likely to remember its other two hits, "Reuben Reuben," and "After the Ball." This epitome of the Gay Nineties musical stage also represented transitions. It came between Steven Foster, the first American to try to make a living as a songwriter and Tin Pan Alley, a multi-million-

dollar song factory. “A Trip to Chinatown,” which was revived as “Auntie Mame” represented a step toward the Broadway musical and away from whatever came before. And what came before was the archetype of American entertainment, the minstrel show.

I went into a concert hall
I didn't have a good time at all
Just the minute that I sat down
Girls began singing, “New Coon in Town”
Got up mad and I spoke out free
“Somebody put that man out!” cried she
And a man called a bouncer attended to me
I'll never go there any more.

Here, in verse two, we get some sense of the song's humor. The country bumpkin comes to the city and runs into problems caused by his ignorance of big-city ways. In this case there is another, a more serious note. The miscommunication is there, certainly. The bumpkin sits down at the concert and hears the song, “New Coon in Town.” Only an unsophisticated newcomer would assume that he was the object of the song's title. Taken from a standard minstrel song of the 1880s, presumably Uncle Dave's audience would have recognized the reference and concluded that the man who took offense was a true rube indeed.

Curiously, in the musical it was sung “New Goon in Town,” but a search for that title yields no results, while “New Coon in Town” comes up with several versions, a year of publication and an author. I have found no reference to explain the word switch, but can speculate. By the time this musical enjoyed its record run the minstrel show was passé and on its way to being replaced by other forms of entertainment, most notably vaudeville. The first rule of vaudeville was, “Do not offend.” Clean entertainment was the hallmark of the entertainment industry created by Messrs. Keith and Albee. The standard of clean inoffensiveness was enforced by theater managers who wrote peremptory demands for changes in routines and sent them to wayward performers in blue envelopes. Anyone who persisted in using “blue language” was dismissed and

usually blacklisted, the professional kiss of death from the barons of vaudeville. If you wanted some other kind of entertainment you went to the burlesque, which was notably not clean and where disgraced or has-been vaudevillians found work.

But who, in an era of racial insensitivity, in the decade of Plessy v Ferguson, could or would object to “coon,” a comparatively mild racial epithet? Who would object, except of course those being labeled? In the spirit of cleaning up the language of the stage, the N word, common in earlier minstrel titles and lyrics, was being replaced by Coon and a series of other softer, more euphemistic terms to identify what was still America’s lowest social stratum. Racism was still plenty evident, but business required softer language.

Parenthetically, if anyone needs a reminder of the power of language, one has only to consider the two words which are now seldom spoken in polite circumstances, but are often referenced by their initials. Both the N word and the F word are considered offensive when pronounced in full, yet are considered far more permissible as initials. To speak the words produces an effect too harsh for many ears. Using the initials shows a degree of delicacy midway between the spoken word and using some other language to convey the same ideas. The idea remains unchanged, and the speaker has the use of the word without the opprobrium, and hearers understand the substitution is meant to convey a desire not to offend.

The minstrel show grew out of the circus and the craze for Negro caricature that came from the popular song “Jump Jim Crow.” Four circus entertainers, including Dan Emmett, putative composer of “Dixie,” got together in a New York hotel room and cooked up the format. They premiered in 1843, billing themselves as Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels, and by 1856 New York had 10 full-time minstrel companies, all offering a white male cast portraying black characters created out of burnt cork, grease paint, ragged clothes, and soon-to-be-outdated northern interpretations of happy slaves way down south.

The originator of the craze in Negro impersonation was another circus entertainer, T.D. “Daddy” Rice. His wildly popular song was “Jump Jim Crow,” performed under the tent for ante bellum audiences throughout the United States.

*First on de heel tap,
Den on the toe
Every time I wheel about
I jump Jim Crow.*

Daddy Rice was certainly not the only Negro impersonator. Between 1750 and 1843 over 5,000 theater and circus productions included blackface. This fascination may reflect the attraction of the exotic unfamiliar – apparently most Americans north of the Mason-Dixon Line had little or no direct experience with people of African descent. There is also the compulsion to look that causes drivers to slow down when passing an auto accident. The misfortune of others must be watched if only to reassure ourselves that the cosmic joke is not on our own worthy selves, but on someone else.

*Wheel about and turn about
En do j's so.
And every time I wheel about,
I jump Jim Crow.*

The minstrel show developed quickly into a distinct genre. In its most consistent form the show had three parts, the minstrel line, the olio, or variety show, and the afterpiece, usually a one-act musical. Of the three forms, the olio and the afterpiece survived well into the 20th century as vaudeville and the Broadway musical respectively, while the minstrel line seems to have gone the way of gas lamps and buggy whips. And while a certain nostalgia for those days exists and we see re-enactors of many things a century old, there is no movement to resurrect the minstrel line, for good and obvious reasons. For at its heart the minstrel line depended on racial stereotypes of the most demeaning sort.

The line began with a walk around; all the members of the cast circled the stage to a lively tune, showing off and strutting in a formalized version of the cakewalk. The most famous of these walk-around tunes became the battle anthem of the Confederacy, an irony made sharper by the fact that its author was probably not Dan Emmett of Mt.

Vernon, Ohio, but rather a black performer who lived near by. The players then sat in a semi-circle facing the audience, with Mr. Interlocutor in the middle and Brother Bones, clicking rib bones together like castanets, and Brother Tambo, playing tambourine, on the ends. The show consisted of verbal badinage between Mr. Interlocutor, played as a pompous, high-class fool in white face, and Bones and Tambo, Brudders Bones and Tambo in the dialect of the show, childish, ignorant, low-class fools, played in black face.

Originally unscripted improvisation, the minstrel line deployed both weapons in the comedians' arsenal. First an example:

Mr. Interlocutor: Say Bones, looks like you're feelin kinda blue

Bruder Bones: I'm a man who's in bad shape. To tell the truth I just lost my wife.

I: That sure is too bad. It must be hard to lose a wife.

B: It's almost impossible

I: Did she have her life insured?

B: Say what?

I: Did she leave you much?

B: About twice a week. She was crazy about ridin a bicycle so I bought her one, and she rode that bicycle from morning til night. Not satisfied with ridin that bicycle all day, she took to dreamin she was ridin that bicycle all night and off would go the covers.

I: That sure must be annoying

B: It was terrible! The only time I ever did get any rest was when she was coastin.

Audiences laughed at such material because they were surprised by the cleverness of the word play, and because the characters were so ridiculous, recognizable in their humanity, but so contemptible in their buffoonery that audiences laughed that slapstick laugh of relief; relief that no matter how foolish they were themselves, they weren't such big fools as the fools on stage. They laughed that laugh of schadenfreude, pleased that the gods had given more misery to someone else than had been given to the laughers in the audience. They might be fools, but at least they weren't black fools.

Here is the kernel of the idea that inspired these musings. One of the manifestations of racism, the minstrel show, helped kill the thing that had given it birth.

Once white audiences learned to laugh at black caricature, they also learned to laugh with the sly, clever, and long suffering black characters. In so doing they somehow acknowledged the shared humanity and recognized the agony of another human being, albeit a human being with a different aspect and a lowly status. From this awareness it was difficult, I believe impossible, to revert to the old view that black folk were not fully human.

I went into a barber shop
He talked 'til I thought he would never stop
I, "Cut it short." He misunderstood
Clipped down my hair just as close as he could
Shaved with a razor that scratched like a pin
Took off my whiskers and most of my chin
But that was the worst scrape I ever got in
I'll never go there any more

In the decades after the Second World War, American parents strove to create safe, secure homes for their numerous offspring. Naturally, as soon as they could, the boomers answered the call of the road and took off on a variety of adventures inspired by Kerouac, Ginsberg, Guthrie, Kesey, and a host of authors, poets, and folk singers who sneered at safe and secure and extolled the virtues of roaming over the country. And away they went, often with guitar in hand, middle-class white kids, singing hobo songs, dust bowl ballads, ballads of all sorts, seeking adventure and authentic experience, courageously demonstrating that reality was for people who weren't brave enough to face drugs. We/they were young and daring and curious and foolish.

It was all so utopian it couldn't last, and it didn't. But one of the things gained was an awareness of some of the nooks and crannies of American culture, aspects of life that seemed more authentic than suburbia and the Milton Berle Show, the sorts of things Charles Kuralt illustrated in his "On the Road" series for CBS. For me the awareness began with the folk music revival that included the Kingston Trio, the Limelighters, Peter Paul and Mary, and Pete Seeger. The repertoire of these mainstream folk acts included

songs from every available tradition – from African, Polynesian, Spanish, Irish, Scottish, Yiddish, as well as American sources. At some point I asked myself a question, “If my family had been musical, what would have been our songs?” My question led me across the Atlantic to the north of England, home of a great ballad tradition, and then back to the Appalachians, where these songs were still sung and passed along in the classic oral tradition so dear to folklorists. Although my branch of the Edmundson family had never lived in the southern mountains, we came from the same stock as those who did.

By a fortunate coincidence, the very music I sought after had been the basis of a flourishing market in country performance captured by the pioneers of the recording industry and surviving on the well-worn sides of 78 RPM discs. These were still plentifully available at the flea markets and antique stores of those days and a few dollars secured hours of excited listening. We heard little-known songs by the Carter Family, Jimmie Rogers, Bradley Kincaid, and others whose names were known but whose songs were seldom heard. We also discovered performers whose music had been ignored by the folk revival. We listened to the Skillet Lickers, the Georgia Yellow Hammers, Taylor’s Kentucky Boys, Dr. Humphrey Bates and his Champion Horse-Hair Pullers, Charlie Bowman and His Brothers, the Blue Sky Boys, and many others.

One old-time recording artist stood out from the rest by the quality of his banjo playing, the theatricality of his presentations, and by the quality of his material. That man was Uncle Dave Macon, pride of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and the first star of the Grand Ole Opry. Born in 1870, his family relocated to Nashville soon after where they operated a hotel that catered to show people. It was from his father’s clientele that Dave learned the material and delivery that were to mark his career. Dave moved back to central Tennessee, married and became a teamster, driving a mule-pulled wagon from Murfreesboro to Woodbury, and pursued his banjo playing and singing as a hobby. In the 1920s when trucks replaced mules and he thought about retiring, Dave was discovered by a talent scout for the Loew’s vaudeville circuit and became a sensation, eventually landing on the granddaddy of all country radio shows, the Grand Ole Opry.

All of this is background, and I beg your indulgence for a little more before we circle back to the main theme, if there is one, of this paper. There are many wonderful stories told about Dave and his eccentricities, and I would like to share one with you. As

was true with many show people, Dave had a bit of a drinking problem. He apparently had one before he went on the professional stage, and he must have been a bit troubling to his fundamentalist, central-Tennessee, temperance-union neighbors. But these were people whose ancestors had invented, or at least perfected, whiskey distilling, and it is perhaps not surprising that people with so much direct experience with liquor should also be the strongest supporters of prohibition. Especially in the 1920s, when liquor was illegal, Dave did his best to hide his drinking and keep his binges quiet, but at some point his family persuaded him to check in at a sanitarium and dry out.

Reluctantly he agreed and his brother Bill drove him to a facility a discreet distance away where the Macon family was unknown. As they pulled up to the front door Dave said, "Now Bill, there's no reason for you to come in. Just wait here while I sign in and I'll send somebody out to tell you when I'm all set." Dave then went in to the admissions desk and told this tale, "Hello, my name is William Macon and I'm here to check in my brother David. He's waiting out in the car and says he won't come in. I want you to get two or three of your biggest, strongest orderlies to go out and get him and carry him in if you have to. No matter what he says, he must come in and get help. He's liable to tell you the most outrageous stories to avoid drying out, but I want you to ignore everything he says and lock him up if you have to."

At this point, two or three of the biggest, strongest orderlies went out and grabbed poor Bill. He was so angry and raving so much they locked him in a padded cell to keep him from injuring himself. Dave thanked the people in charge and drove away in Bill's car to have one more epic toot. When he sobered up the next day he returned to the sanitarium and confessed, traded places with his brother and stayed until he was able to return to his family. What conversation he ever had with Bill is unrecorded.

I went into an auction store

I'd never seen any thieves before

First he showed me a pair of socks

Then he asked, "How much for the box?"

Someone said "Two dollars," I said, "Three"

He emptied the box and he gave it to me

“Told you the box not the socks,” said he
I’ll never go there any more

Dave Macon may have been a one-of-a-kind performer and a man of eccentric habits, but he was also a character of his place and time. This is demonstrated by his choice of material. He sang songs supporting the Al Smith for President, true to his Southern Democrat heritage, and songs ridiculing the idea of evolution; Dayton, Tennessee and the Scopes trial were not very far from his home. He sang songs of fundamentalist faith and songs decrying the lapses of public manners and morality that typified the Roaring Twenties. In all of these instances he showed a politician’s gift for sensing what his neighbors felt about the perplexities of modern life and he gave it to them strong.

He also recorded many songs from the minstrel tradition, sung in the character, if not of Bones or Tambo, of the rural black man, but without the transformative make-up. These were songs of humor and longing, of joys and sorrows. And while they were sung clearly in the character of a black man living down South, Dave Macon evinced that character as himself, a central-Tennessee, Bible-quoting, liquor-on-the-sly, typical-in-most-regards white man.

Ise a gwine back to Dixie
Ise a Gwine no more to wander
Ise a gwine back to Dixie
I can’t stay here no longer
I miss the old plantation
My friends and my relations
Ise a gwine back to Dixie
And I mus go.

Here, perhaps unintentionally, Dave took the transformative nature of entertainment another step. The dialect used in these songs, the subject matter, even the explicit lyrics made it clear that the voice was intended to be understood as a black voice.

Yet the cares and concerns, the feelings and foibles expressed were universal, were appropriate for people of any culture or color. It was easy for us, the boomers exploring the artifacts of a bygone place and time, to lose sight of the fact that the white singers of these black laments were representatives of a society that condoned the violent suppression of real black people, however tenderly they sung about the ones they imagined themselves to be in performance.

It isn't too far fetched to imagine white entertainers singing songs of sympathy for black men, in the character of black men, and the after the show attending a Klan rally, or worse.

The more I think about this, the odder it seems. What were southern white performers thinking about when they slipped into black identity? There are two possibilities that occur to me. One is that, like performers everywhere, they sought the best, most effective material and for their audience it remained the songs of minstrelsy. White audiences were so used to the material and its characterizations that they simply supplied the burnt cork out of their own imaginations. It became possible to hear these songs and feel their sentiments and forget the racial context. In this forgetting, it seems to me, an important seed was planted, an important step was taken.

The other possibility might be described as a sort of reverse Stockholm syndrome. In this case the jailers identified with the very people they were working so hard to keep in thrall. Perhaps this was one way the redneck South acknowledged the guilt they felt but couldn't admit to, for the horrors of segregation with its degradation and violence. And if so, they did it slyly and humorously in true minstrel tradition.

Earlier I said that the minstrel show had birthed vaudeville and the Broadway musical, but the minstrel line had disappeared with black-face makeup. The snippet of minstrel-line dialogue I offered earlier came from Emmett Miller, who billed himself as the "Minstrel Man from Georgia." He had a successful career as a vaudevillian and made many successful recordings. He was one of the few who refused to perform without blackface makeup. In part because of this, his career declined and he lived out his life in relative obscurity, but his recordings lived on and were copied by country acts, most notably Hank Williams' note-for-note cover of the "Lovesick Blues." The comic yodeling in blackface was Miller's signature piece; the same vocalization in Williams'

hands became a tour de force of lonesomeness and one of the cornerstones of the Country-Western revival of the 1950s.

Perhaps Emmett Miller did preside over the demise of blackface, yet one could say the minstrel line lives on in many aspects of American comedy. Think of Ed McMahon as Mr. Interlocutor and Johnny Carson as Brudder Bones, or any strait-man-comedian team. The American tradition of stand-up comedy also has roots with Bones and Tambo. Consider how many of our comics belonged to groups on the outside of the American mainstream and how comedy contributed to eventual acceptance and assimilation. The long line of ethnic comics has amused us all and helped smooth the path to full membership for their kin in the immigrants' club known as the United States.

I don't want to argue that comedy and comics did this work alone, or that they even had the most important role in assimilation. But I do believe humor has many uses and this is one of them. Anti-Irish and anti-Jewish prejudices certainly still exist, but just as certainly to a lesser extent than formerly, and some of the credit belongs to George M. Cohan and Groucho Marx. I would argue a similar process for black entertainers and assimilation. However vexed the question of race in America remains, we have made some progress.

And what of Uncle Dave? He continued the difficult feast-or-famine pursuit of a livelihood in country entertainment until his death at age 81 in 1951. When we think of country music now-a-days, we imagine the glittering world of Nashville, sequined Nudie suits, guitar-shaped swimming pools, and big-haired women singing songs of longing for a places and times that are no more, and like the minstrel songs of homesick blacks missing the old plantation, places that never really existed.

In more ways than this, modern country music is the descendant, legitimate or not, of the minstrel show. The performers are caricatures of southern whites who for years have traded on nostalgia for a romantic and pastoral history. Uncle Dave sang, "Ise a gwine back to Dixie," and John Denver keened, "Country Roads Take Me Home." The styles and dialects are different, but the sentiments alike.

But more to the point, the character of country entertainment relies on the notion of the rube in a world of sophistication. In the 1920s, at the beginning of the recording industry, black performers were catalogued as "race" artists and country music as

“hillbilly.” If you went to the store to buy a country record, you asked the clerk for the Hillbilly catalogue. However innocent it may seem today, the label contained and still contains some sting. Country comedians, from Minnie Pearl to Charlie Weaver to Jeff Foxworthy have relied on the same dynamic that supplied the minstrel show with its comedic leverage – the fool onstage, however sly and clever, is a bigger fool than the fools in the audience.

In some ways this rather discursive ramble through the stories of minstrelsy and country music has been a way of explaining how it was a guy such as I, a boomer child of the suburbs, spent most of 20 years performing the material that defined both of these genres. We, my comrades and I, travelled up and down the highways of America, with our fiddles and banjos, seeking authentic experiences and performing music of equal authenticity. Hidden somewhere in the byways was something about our country and our people that was worthy of our dreams, and we were determined to find it and share it with as many of our countrymen as we could induce to buy a ticket and sit in an audience. The irony of authentic country experiences expressed by romantic suburbanites was not lost on us even then. We have lived for a long time in a cynical world, but then romantic self-invention seemed just the thing. As I said earlier, we were young and didn’t know better, yet as much humility as the intervening years have taught us, some ideals remain.

For many, beauty and meaning is found in the great examples of our culture – great architecture, classical music and drama, the exquisite items that find their ways to museums. I have always been more interested in the artifacts of ordinary lives, the barns and cabins, the quilts and canes, the songs and stories that tell the extraordinary tales of ordinary lives. The great Henry Glassie, of Indiana University, could read an old barn like a gazette and tell who made it, or at least where the maker learned his craft, and what it was used for and whether the farmer who owned it was prosperous or not. Such skill is beyond all but the most able interpreters of folk artifacts, but there are many stories there for any who will learn to read.

And it seems to me that these stories ought to be told. To some extent the current trend in history to include the lives of common folk and not just the doings of the great and powerful reflects this value. And like most of the people in any room, if my family’s story is to be known and recorded, it will not be among the lives of the potentates.

There is, of course, the down side of common experience. A hundred years ago to say someone was common was to castigate him and associate him with the meanest and lowest habits of the poorest classes. Both minstrel shows and most country music performances took place in venues of questionable moral rectitude. I admit to having spent more time in bars than I wanted my parents to know about, playing for people whose moral uplift was unlikely, no matter how angelically I sang. But there it is; every pleasure has its penalty. I will leave you with one last verse from the "Bowery."

I struck a place that they called a dive
I was in luck to get out alive
When the policeman heard of my woes
Saw my black eye and my battered nose
"You've been held up," says the copper fly
"No sir but I've been knocked down," says I
Then he laughed though I couldn't see why
I'll never go there any more