

BLACK DANCE

From 1619 to Today

Second, Revised Edition

LYNNE FAULEY EMERY

New Chapter by Dr. Brenda Dixon-Stowell

Foreword by Katherine Dunham



A Dance Horizons Book

PRINCETON BOOK COMPANY, PUBLISHERS

PRINCETON, NJ

Copyright © 1972 by Lynne Fauley Emery
Copyright © 1988 by Princeton Book Company, Publishers

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

A Dance Horizons Book
Princeton Book Company, Publishers
POB 57
Pennington, NJ 08534

LC# 88-61031
ISBN 0-916622-61-4

Cover Design by Design and Illustration

Cover Photograph: "Revelations" by the Alvin Ailey Dance Company; Photo by Bill Hilton

Editorial Supervisor: Richard Carlin

Printed in the United States of America

MINSTREL MAN

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long?

Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
You do not hear
My inner cry?
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing,
You do not know
I die?

—LANGSTON HUGHES
The Dream Keeper

From THE DREAM KEEPER AND OTHER POEMS, by Langston Hughes.
Copyright 1932 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and renewed 1960 by Langston Hughes.
Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

5

JIM CROW & JUBA

My old misses long time ago,
She took me down de hill side to jump Jim Crow;
Fus 'pon de heel tap, den 'pon de toe,
Eb'ry Monday morning I jump Jim Crow.

Oh lord, ladies, don't you know
You nebber get to Heben till you jump Jim Crow.¹

§:§:§:§ By the time Thomas Dartmouth Rice made his appearance as Jim Crow in 1828, the American public had been well prepared to accept him. In some cases his forerunners had been authentic Negroes, but in general they had been whites in blackface. The stereotypes which were to be fully developed by minstrelsy were begun long before, at the time when this nation was born.

In 1767 an announcement appeared in the *New-York Journal* for a performance by Mr. Bayly, a “sleight of hand artist,” to be held on April 14, 1767. At the end of each of the three parts of the program there was an interlude of dancing by Bayly and a Mr. Tea. Ending the third part, Tea presented a *Negro*

public was not the authentic Negro but rather "the Negro as a stage character . . . as a caricature rather than as a human being."

JIM CROW

In the plays mentioned, Negro roles had been incidental, and the dances had been performed as entr'acte stunts. The first performer of a song and dance, that is, of a sketch in which the darky performer was sufficient unto himself and was deprived of any support from persons of another complexion, seems to have been "Jim Crow"⁸ Rice.⁸

The story of Rice, a white actor, seeing a lame Negro groom singing and dancing, has been told and retold in many different versions. Supposedly copying the exact posture, movements, and song of the old Negro, T. D. Rice performed Jim Crow in black-face in the late 1820's with resounding success. Rice performed his dance to a slightly modified version of "Jump Jim Crow":

Wheel about, turn about,
Do jus' so:
An' ebery time I turn about,
I jump Jim Crow.⁹

Hans Nathan imagined the scene as follows:

How strained, sprawling, and distorted his posture was, and yet how nonchalant—how unusually grotesque with its numerous sharp angles, and yet how natural . . . Rice, according to his own words, wheeled, turned, and jumped. In windmill fashion he rolled his body lazily from one side to the other, throwing his weight alternately on the heel of one foot and on the toes of the other. Gradually, he must have turned away from his left hand in a half-seductive, half-waggingly admonishing manner. Imaginative though he was, he was undoubtedly inspired by the real Negro.¹⁰

Americans were being entertained by impersonations of Negroes, and particularly of Negro dancing.

Before 1800 several plays were presented with Negro characters (usually played by whites), but the performance by Tea is the first found which specifies dance. The second extant reference to Negro dance does not appear until 1796, but the addition of one word, "comic," seems to indicate the beginning of one important and typical aspect. On November 25, 1796, a Madame Gardie appeared on the Boston stage in *A Comic Dance, In Character of a Female Negro*.³ Again the performer was white impersonating a Negro.

The legitimate theatre was also aiding the development of Negro stereotypes before 1800. According to Lohen Mitchell, a play presented in 1795 entitled *The Triumph of Love* introduced

. . . a shuffling, cackling, allegedly comic Negro servant. The *Politicians* in 1797 continued this stereotype. The course was therefore established—the course that was to lead the black man to be represented on the American stage as something to be ridiculed and a creature to be denied human status.⁴

The first reference to a Negro performing a dance did not come until 1808, and then he was billed as an "exotic." Included in the Pepin and Breschard Circus, which played in New York City, a performer was billed as the "Young African," who, among other things, "will exhibit many steps of Hornpipe, on Horse-back, in full speed, without losing the measure of the music."⁵ From 1821 to 1823, a company composed of Negro actors and actresses called The African Company seems to be known about The New York City. Not a great deal seems to be known about The African Company other than the fact that it provided the inspiration for the career of the great Negro tragedian, Ira Aldridge. A member of the company, Mr. Bates, performed a hornpipe. The theatre was apparently harassed continuously by the police and groups of white rowdies, who finally destroyed the building. The African Company appears to have been dissolved in 1823 following this incident.

It is obvious that there was an interest in Negro dancing even at this early period. However, since most of the dancers and actors were whites impersonating Negroes, what was seen by the

public was not the authentic Negro but rather "the Negro as a stage character . . . as a caricature rather than as a human being."⁷

■■■■ JIM CROW

In the plays mentioned, Negro roles had been incidental, and the dances had been performed as entr'acte stunts. The first performer of a song and dance, that is, of a sketch in which the darky performer was sufficient unto himself and deprived of any support from persons of another complexion, seems to have been "Jim Crow" Rice.⁸

The story of Rice, a white actor, seeing a lame Negro groom singing and dancing, has been told and retold in many different versions. Supposedly copying the exact posture, movements, and song of the old Negro, T. D. Rice performed Jim Crow in black-face in the late 1820's with resounding success. Rice performed his dance to a slightly modified version of "Jump Jim Crow":

Wheel about, turn about,
Do jus' so:
An' eb'ry time I turn about,
I jump Jim Crow.⁹

Hans Nathan imagined the scene as follows:

How strained, sprawling, and distorted his posture was, and yet how nonchalant—how unusually grotesque with its numerous sharp angles, wheeled, turned, and jumped. In windmill fashion, he rolled his body lazily from one side to the other, throwing his weight alternately on the heel of one foot and on the toes of the other. Gradually, he must have turned away from his left hand in a half-seductive, half-waggingly admonishing manner. Imaginative though he was, he was undoubtedly inspired by the real Negro.¹⁰

Dance, In Character? Even before the Revolutionary War, Americans were being entertained by impersonations of Negroes, and particularly of Negro dancing.

Before 1800 several plays were presented with Negro characters (usually played by whites), but the performance by Tea is the first found which specifies dance. The second extant reference to Negro dance does not appear until 1796, but the addition of one word, "comic," seems to indicate the beginning of one important and typical aspect. On November 25, 1796, a Madame Gardie appeared on the Boston stage in *A Comic Dance, In Character of a Female Negro*.³ Again the performer was white impersonating a Negro.

The legitimate theatre was also aiding the development of Negro stereotypes before 1800. According to Loftin Mitchell, a play presented in 1795 entitled *The Triumph of Love* introduced . . . a shuffling, cackling, allegedly comic Negro servant *The Politicians* in 1797 continued this stereotype. The course was therefore established—the course that was to lead the black man to be represented on the American stage as something to be ridiculed and a creature to be denied human status.⁴

The first reference to a Negro performing a dance did not come until 1808, and then he was billed as an "exotic." Included in the Pepin and Breschard Circus, which played in New York City, a performer was billed as the "Young African," who, among other things, "will exhibit many steps of Hornpipe, on Horse-back, in full speed, without losing the measure of the music."⁵ From 1821 to 1823, a company composed of Negro actors and actresses called *The African Company* performed at a theatre in New York City. Not a great deal seems to be known about *The African Company* other than the fact that it provided the inspiration for the career of the great Negro tragedian, Ira Aldridge. A member of the company, Mr. Bates, performed a hornpipe. The theatre was apparently harrassed continuously by the police and groups of white rowdies, who finally destroyed the building. The African Company appears to have been dissolved in 1823 following this incident.

It is obvious that there was an interest in Negro dancing even at this early period. However, since most of the dancers and actors were whites impersonating Negroes, what was seen by the

Marshall and Jean Stearns, however, felt that Nathan's description was slightly inaccurate. The jump accompanied the words "I jump Jim Crow."

The earliest phrase "jis so" simply calls attention to the all-important style—the cramped yet rhythmic circling before the jump, which is a syncretized hop in the flat-footed Shuffle manner rather than a jump 'high up' as Nathan suggests.¹¹

The Stearns wrote that the dance performed by Rice was perhaps "a blend of jig and Shuffle, with the jump coming from a jig, and the arm and shoulder movements from a shuffle."¹²

Was this dance of "Daddy" Rice indeed a Negro dance? Was the Jim Crow seen by so many millions of people authentically Afro-American? The Stearns seemed to think that Rice copied the dance of the old Negro exactly; that here, in fact, was one of the earliest examples of a professional white dancer borrowing from the Negro. "The first of many Afro-American dances to become a world wide success, Jump Jim Crow's appeal was universal. . . ."¹³

Nearly as much controversy raged over the authenticity of the performance of Jim Crow as it did over the actual beginnings of this dance on the stage. Fanny Kemble, the English actress who lived on a Georgia plantation in 1838-1839, said:

I have seen Jim Crow—the veritable James: all the contortions, and springs, and flings, and kicks, and capers you have been beguiled into accepting as indicative of him are spurious,

of that ineffable black conception. It is impossible for words to describe the things these people did with their bodies, and, above all, with their faces, the whites of their eyes, and the whites of their teeth, and certain outlines which either naturally and by the grace of heaven, or by the practice of some peculiar artistic dexterity, they bring into prominent and most ludicrous display.¹⁴

Charles Haywood considered all minstrel characters nothing more than variations of the original "rigid stereotype" created by Rice. What Rice did . . . was to highlight, exaggerate, and distort the Negro's movements. . . . This white showman, inspired

In *Dahomey*, from *Theatre Arts Monthly* (August, 1942). From left are Hattie McIntosh, George Walker, Ada Overton Walker, Bert Williams and Lottie Williams.



by a *unique* Negro, transformed him, through his dramatic skill into a theatrical comic personality.¹⁵

Constance Rourke, on the other hand, felt that Rice's portrait was developed on the American stage, wrote Rourke, . . . in a series of sketches which attempted a close portrait. These were boldly continued in the early thirties by Jim Crow Rice, who was white. His songs, dances, and lingo followed those of Negroes on the plantations and rivers of the Southwest.¹⁶

While Rice may have faithfully reproduced the postures and dance of one old lame Negro named Jim Crow, two things make us question whether the dance was representatively Negro. First, the old man observed by Rice was crippled, resulting in a distortion of the dance movements; and second, Rice (who was, above all, a showman) may have exaggerated the funnier movements to retain audience appeal through his hundreds of performances.

About the first performance of the Jim Crow dance there is a touching, if perhaps apocryphal, story. Rice decided to premier the dance in Pittsburgh and, being without a costume, borrowed the clothes of a handyman named Cuff. Since Cuff had but one set of clothes, he was forced to wait backstage in a state of undress while Rice performed Jim Crow. In the midst of the performance, the steamboat which Cuff always helped to unload approached, and a small voice was suddenly heard on stage saying, "Massa Rice, Massa Rice, gi' me niggas' hat, -niggas' coat, -niggas' shoes, -gi' me niggas' t'ings! . . ." ¹⁷

The "small voice" has recently been compared to that of the modern Negro critic, Sterling Brown.

To a culture with a chronic itch to impersonate the Negro, he [Brown] has been saying for nearly forty years: Give us back our clothes. Restore to us the meaning of our own experience. For our lives have been robbed of their significance by malicious portrayals and slanderous misrepresentations, called stereotypes. And not only on the minstrel stage, but in fiction, poetry, and drama, in cinema, radio, and advertising; wherever false images of us have been projected by a hostile white society.¹⁸

BBB: JUBA

Rice, then, rather than giving audiences a true picture of Negro dance, may have created the first clear-cut, long-lasting caricature of that dance: that grotesque, shuffling, peculiar, eccentric, jumping, loose-limbed, awkward, funny and, of course, rhythmic dance. The effect of Rice's stereotype was so strong that Isaac Goldberg later wrote, "Rice's 'Jim Crow' gave to our stage a type and to our language a striking phrase that ever after was to stigmatize our physical and psychic segregation of the Negro."¹⁹ Only one other dancer had anywhere near the effect of Rice on minstrelsy. That dancer, a Negro, was known as Master Juba.

Master Juba, the stage name adopted by William Henry Lane, was born a free man and came to the fore on the American stage in the 1840's. The dance named Juba, it will be remembered, came from Africa to the West Indies and eventually to the United States, where it evolved into a rhythmic, stamping, clapping, patting type of dance.

Master Juba was noted for his jig dancing; Marian Winter reported that by 1845, "it was flatly stated by members of the profession that Juba was 'beyond question the very greatest of all dancers.'" ²⁰ Living at that same time was Master John Diamond, a white dancer (considerably older than Juba) who "prided himself on his skill at negro dancing."²¹ This was the same Master Diamond of whom Thomas Nichols wrote:

In New York, some years ago, Mr. P. T. Barnum had a clever boy who brought him lots of money as a dancer of negro break-downs; made up, of course, as a negro minstrel, with his face well blackened, and a woolly wig. One day Master Diamond, thinking he might better himself, danced away into the infinite distance.²²

To determine once and for all the best dancer—the white Diamond or the black Juba—a series of challenge dances was initiated in 1844. The first match was held at John Tryon's Amphitheatre.²³ The outcome was uncertain. However, two more matches were held at the Chatham and Bowery Theatres,

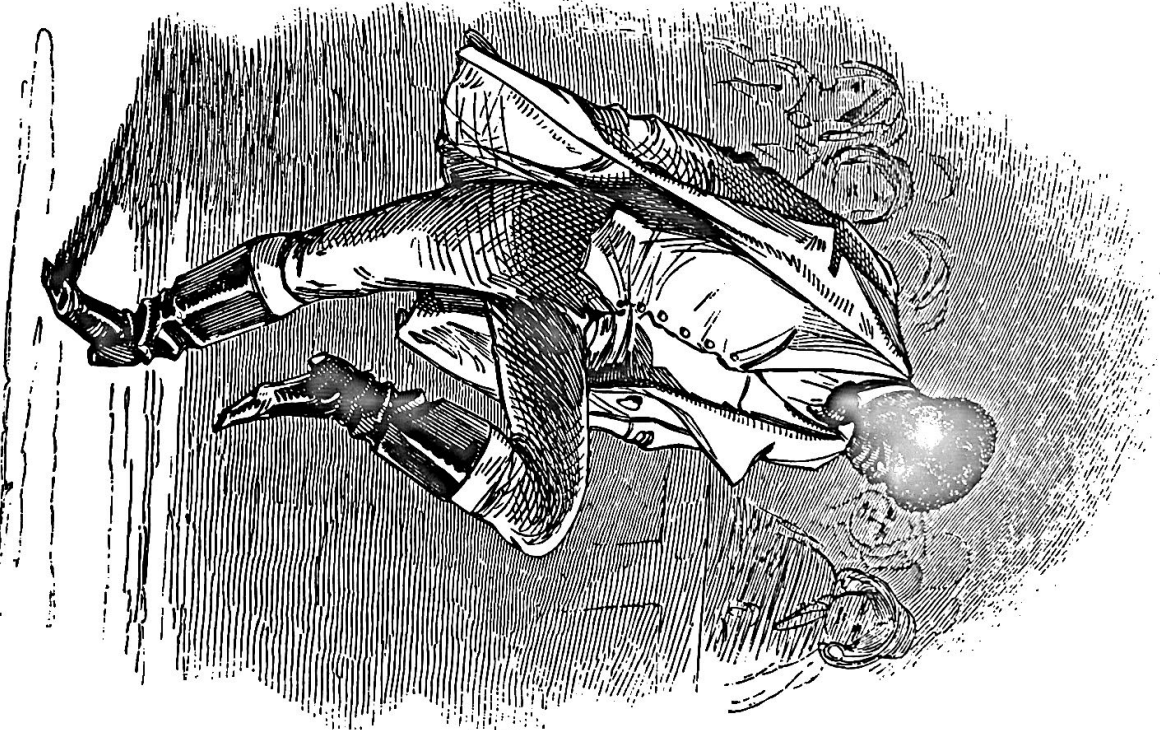
with Master Juba finally winning the distinctive title, "King of All Dancers."²⁴ Soon after the contests Juba joined a minstrel troupe and in 1845, touring with three white minstrels, received what Winter called the "unprecedented distinction of minstrel *ing*"²⁵ on the program.

In 1846 Juba joined the recently organized minstrels, White's Serenaders,²⁶ and in 1848 traveled to London to join Pell's Ethiopian Serenaders, another minstrel group. In an engagement of Pell's group was reported and further, in an description of Juba fully confirmed by Public Opinion and the Press.²⁷ On July 1, 1848, the *News* stated that, "Boz's brilliant assemblage of rank and fashion have honoured the Gardens to witness the unparalleled PERFORMANCES of JUBA, immortalised by Boz in his *American Notes*. . . ."²⁸

"Boz's description" was, of course, that of Charles Dickens in his book, *American Notes*, written shortly after his visit to the United States in 1842. While Dickens did not name the young Negro dancer he saw at Five Points in New York City, his description closely resembles later observations of Juba's dancing and is therefore included here. Dickens advised his readers that the dance he saw was a regular Breakdown, which began with five or six couples moving onto the floor and

. . . marshalled by a lively young negro, who is the wit of the assembly, and the greatest dancer known.

But the dance commences. Every gentleman sets as long as he likes to the opposite lady, and the opposite lady to him, and all are so long about it that the sport begins to languish, when suddenly the lively hero dashes in to the rescue. Instantly the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine. . . . Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and crosscut: snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs—what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him, when, having danced his partner off her feet and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the



Juba at Vauxhall Gardens, London, from *Illustrated London News* (August 5, 1848)

barcounter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound^{22e}

A critic who viewed Master Juba's London performance wrote a similar description. Never, wrote the critic, had there been such

. . . mobility of muscles, such flexibility of joints, such boundings, such slidings, such gyrations, such toes and heelings, such backwardings and forwardings, such posturings, such firmness of foot, such elasticity of tendon, such mutation of movement, such vigor, such variety, such natural grace, such powers of endurance, such potency of pattern.³⁰

Another critic appeared amazed that such dancing could exist.

But the Nigger Dance is a reality. The "Virginny Breakdown," or the "Alabama kick-up," the "Tennessee Double-shuffle," or the "Louisiana Toe-and-Heel," we know to exist. If they did not, how could Juba enter into their wonderful complications so naturally? How could he tie his legs into such knots, and fling them about so recklessly, or make his feet twinkle until you lose sight of them altogether in his energy. The great Boz immortalised him; and he deserved the glory thus conferred.³¹

Unfortunately Master Juba did not live long enough to return to the United States and dance again upon the stages of this country. He died in 1852, aged about twenty-seven, while still in London. Had he lived, his influence on American dance might have been more profound. According to Winter:

In America it was Juba's influence primarily which kept the minstrel show dance, in contrast to the body of the minstrel show music, in touch with the integrity of Negro source material. There was almost a "school after Juba."³²

Winter asserted it was due to the influence of Master Juba that "the minstrel show dance retained more integrity as a Negro art form than any other theatrical derivative of Negro culture."³³ Did the minstrel show dance, in fact, remain closer to the original Negro art form than any other theatrical derivative? It probably did; but this was not to say that authentic Negro dances were presented on the minstrel stage. The music, appearance

and speech of the blackfaced minstrel had veered so sharply from the original that in no way could these elements be considered representative of the real Negro. It was only when dance was compared with the other elements of minstrelsy that it appeared to be authentic.

This may have been due, in part, to the dancing of Master Juba, but other factors were also involved. First, there were innumerable opportunities for viewing the dance of the Negroes, and many visitors to the South commented publicly on the slave dances they had seen. Sometimes the slaves were called to the "Big House" to perform for guests, as in the case of Robert Moton. Frequently guests were entertained by a trip to the slave quarters to watch a dance in progress. Of course, there was always Congo Square with its authentic dances and innumerable observers. There were also opportunities to see Negro dancing in the North. Opportunities for observing and copying Negro dances were abundant.

Second, many of the Negro dances seemed both grotesque and amusing to whites, so that few changes were needed before presenting them on the stage. Describing a slave ball in honor of her arrival on the plantation, Fanny Kemble wrote:

The languishing elegance of some—the painstaking laboriousness of others— . . . at last so utterly overcame any attempt at decorous gravity on my part that I was obliged to succed. . . . it is only wonderful to me that we were not made ill by the . . . effort not to laugh. . . .³⁴

In the case of Jim Crow, however, Rice was copying a dance already distorted by the fact that the Negro model was crippled.

One question remains regarding the supposedly genuine Negro dances of minstrelsy. Since Juba reputedly exerted a profound influence on the retention of authentic Negro dance on the stage, how authentic were the dances of Juba himself? The jig is certainly not attributed to any Afro-American influence but rather is considered of Irish and English derivation. Did the fact that Juba happened to be black lead people to assume that he was performing real Negro dances—or was he, in truth, a Negro dancer performing an Irish dance?

Jig and Clog dancing have a common element: the sound produced by the shoes tapping on the floor. On the other hand,

Rice, who has been called the father of blackface minstrelsy, first performed Jim Crow in 1828, yet it was not until sometime in the 1840's that the first formal minstrel troupe was organized. The first group were the Virginia Minstrels, composed of Dan Emmett (who later composed the song "Dixie"), Frank Brower, Billy Whitlock, and Dick Pelham.³⁸ All four were white, as were nearly all minstrels until after the Civil War.

As more companies were organized, a standard program

THE MINSTREL STAGE

■■■■ DANCES OF

... because it is danced on the naked earth with bare feet, African dance tends to modify or eliminate such European styles as the jig and the Clog. . . . the African style is often flat-footed and favors gliding, dragging, or shuffling steps.³⁵ One of the characteristics of American tap dancing is that the dancer acts somewhat as a musical instrument. The dancing of Juba was compared, by one critic, to the bones and banjo,³⁶ indicating that sound must have been an important factor. No writer discussing Juba's dancing mentioned any movement of the upper body (the jig and Clog both call for a stiff, erect upper body). Yet, there is still mention of typically Afro-American steps in the dance of Juba: the single shuffle, the double shuffle, "such slings," and "such gyrations."

It appears that while Juba's dancing was not what is commonly thought of as Afro-American dance, it did contain many of the characteristics of the dance. Apparently Master Juba had produced something new: a blending of Irish and Afro-American dance tied together by rhythm. The Stearnses believed that the unique element in Juba's dance was rhythm, and that "he was apparently *swinging*—relatively speaking—naturally and effortlessly."³⁷

Influenced by both Rice and Juba (Rice creating the character of the stereotyped "darky" and Juba fusing two styles of dance into a new form), the dances of the minstrel stage were, to say the least, eclectic.

Tom Fletcher, on the other hand, attributed the format of Part One of the minstrel show to a Negro family of entertainers named Luca. John Luca, his wife and four sons appeared during the 1840's, and according to Fletcher:

Their act was something like this. After singing their opening song, all six would sit down in chairs which had been set in a semi-circle on the stage. The father would sit near the center, and he was the one who gave the word when to sit down. The presentation of the John Luca family, according to all in many of his primitive African ceremonies.⁴⁰

These shows were basically a development of the primitive tradition of circle and hand clapping dances. For theatrical purposes, the entertainers were seated in a semi-circular line of chairs on the stage. Here the ringleader of the dance became, in transition, the "interlocutor" or master of ceremonies. Those who sang the melody for the dance were transposed into the Chorus, some becoming "end" men, one at either "end" or side of the circle. The rest of the chorus performed the same functions as did the line in Africa—they clapped their hands or shook tambourines. Every man in the chorus had the opportunity for a solo bit of some sort, just as had the Negro or shook tambourines. Every man in the chorus had the opportunity for a solo bit of some sort, just as had the Negro in many of his primitive African ceremonies.⁴⁰

Tom Fletcher, on the other hand, attributed the format of Part One of the minstrel show to a Negro family of entertainers named Luca. John Luca, his wife and four sons appeared during the 1840's, and according to Fletcher:

Their act was something like this. After singing their opening song, all six would sit down in chairs which had been set in a semi-circle on the stage. The father would sit near the center, and he was the one who gave the word when to sit down. The presentation of the John Luca family, according to all in many of his primitive African ceremonies.⁴⁰

The walk-around was always made the finale of the first part, and was usually repeated at the end of the show as a spectacle on which to drop the curtain. It was intended to be written in march-time, and to its spirited strains the whole company would

While Gilbert suggested that only the dancers participated in the Walk-Around, eventually it grew to include the entire cast. Probably the first Walk-Around to be presented was one written by Dan Emmett for the Virginia Minstrels. The song was "Lucy Long" and others followed in rapid succession including "Old Dan Tucker" and "Dixie." Charles Sherlock described the format of the Walk-Around and continued with a description of a Breakdown which sounds similar to that of the Juba.

At a chord from the orchestra, the company rose to their feet. As the orchestra began a lively tune in 2/4 time, one of the company would step down stage from the semi-circle, walk around for sixteen bars of the music and do one step of a reel, finish with a break, then resume his place in the semi-circle as another stepped out and repeated the performance, varying, though, with a different step. This would continue until six or more dancers had appeared. Then all the dancers came down stage and danced together while the rest of the company

Part One in the traditional minstrel show always ended with a dance, called the Walk-Around, done by the entire cast. Some times this was repeated as the finale of Part Three also. Discussing the Walk-Around, Nathan said in 1943 that this dance was still well remembered. "Its square, heavy, nonchalant, troll movements—borrowed from and modelled after the dance of the Southern Negroes . . . anticipated the popular dances of the present day."⁴² The Walk-Around was mentioned usually in connection with the Breakdown or old fashioned Hoe-Down. The Walk-Around was derived from the Ring-Shout and the Breakdown from the old challenge dances such as the Juba. Douglas Gilbert described the Walk-Around:

The climax of the minstrel performance, the walkaround, with its competitive dancing in the mazes of a circle, was clearly patterned on Negro dances in the compounds of the great plantations, which in turn went back to the communal dancing of the African. The ancestry was hardly remote. . . . Often the walkarounds of minstrelsy were composed only of bold pantomime and matched dancing, accompanied by strident cries and the simplest binding of words, the words gaining their color from slave life. . . .⁴⁵ It appears that the early minstrel Walk-Around could have had its basis in genuine Negro dance. The challenge dances accompanied by patting and clapping were probably of Afro-American origin, as was the Ring-Shout. However, the only similarity which has been pointed out between the Walk-Around and the Ring-Shout was the fact that both forms traveled in a circle.

Another famous minstrel dance was the Essence Dance. Sherlock said this "most resembled the dancing of the real negro."⁴⁶ The Stearnses believed that "the Essence was the first popular dance—for professionals—from the Afro-American vernacular."⁴⁷ The Stearnses continued by saying that, "minstrelsy's most famous dance, The Essence of Old Virginia, came from the Shuffe and led to the early Soft Shoe."⁴⁸ The leading exponent of the dance was Dan Bryant, a blackface minstrel who perfected it in the 1850's. Originally performed by Billy Newcomb, the Essence was done in fast time, but as Bryant perfected the dance, it was per-

formed quite slowly. The main feature of the Essence dance appeared to be the movement of the heels and toes without changing the position of the legs so that the performer appeared to glide across the floor. Sherlock called this the "rocking heel, which is an element of pedal motion in every negro dance."⁴⁹ Along with this foot motion was an intricate series of shuffles. While parts of the Walk-Around may be authentically Afro-American, it seems that the Essence was wholly authentic. Negro dance, as previously stated, makes great use of shuffling, gliding, and dragging movements and so did the Essence. The toe-heel motion by Ravenel, who observed it at a slave dance held shown by Ravenel, an element in Afro-American dance, as at Christmas. Ravenel described the same step as "a slow shuffling gait . . . edging along by some unseen exertion of the feet . . ."⁵⁰

Many other dances have been described as popular in black-face minstrelsy. Some are of doubtful Afro-American origin, while others are unrelated to Negro dance. The Jig and Clog, two of the most popular minstrel dances, were probably not of Negro origin. However, Ralph Keeler, who was instituted as a "troupe's jig-dancer" auditioned for the position by dancing of his two hands and one foot, and which is technically called 'pating."⁵¹ Perhaps some dances called Jigs were in reality the Juba dance. Matthews said that as minstrelsy progressed the "clog-dances became more intricate and more mechanical—and thereby still more remote from the buck-and-wing dancing of the real Negro."⁵²

Other dances mentioned in connection with minstrelsy included the Chicken Flutter and the following, all in the repertoire of the Bryant minstrels: the "Sugar Cane Reel, Congo Coton Dance, Burlesque African Polka, Corn Shucking Jig, Miss Issippi Fling, Zouave Clog Reel, Smoke House Reel, Union Breakdown . . . and Fling D'Ethiopia."⁵³ These dances were developed for minstrelsy and had probably little relation to real Negro dance. Rourke stated that the minstrels also performed the Walking Jaw-Bone, Dubble Trubble, and Grapevine Twist,⁵⁴ all definitely of Negro origin. However, she did not document her statement.

Of all dances performed by the blackface minstrels, the ones

■■■■ BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY AND ITS EFFECTS

which appear most definitely related to the Afro-American heritage are the challenge or competitive section of the Walk-Around and the Essence Dance. All others seem to have been choreographed for minstrel performance, and have little relation to the actual Negro dance. It seems unfortunate that with all the opportunities for seeing the real thing that so little authentic Negro dance was actually used. Perhaps these burnt-cork performers got caught up in the very stereotypes they were creating and began believing them.

According to Winter it was Juba's influence which kept minstrel show dance closer to the original Negro art form than other theatrical derivatives of Negro culture. Yet the similarity was only relative. By the period of the decline of minstrelsy, any resemblance between the blackface stereotype and the real Negro was quite remote. Yet in the minds of many of the minstrel audience, the real Negro was exactly that caricature, that stereotype, which minstrelsy so carefully created and cultivated. Blackface minstrels danced and sang; therefore all Negroes danced and sang. Blackface performers were funny; therefore all Negroes were comedians. Blackface minstrels wore very dark make-up with grotesquely painted lips and tight wigs; therefore all Negroes must resemble this image. This latter stereotype was so strongly held that when genuine Negroes formed minstrel troupes after the Civil War, they also blackened their already black faces, painted on grotesque lips and wore tight wigs. The effects of minstrelsy have lasted even to the present day.

By the time real black minstrels began performing, in the 1860's, the stereotypes previously developed by the blackface performers were so set they could not be broken. The first company formed was Lew Johnson's Plantation Minstrel Company, begun in the early 1860's. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer said of this group that "although many of this troupe's members

Even though minstrelsy paved the way, in how many instances has the genuine Negro appeared on the popular stage? Hasn't the Negro comedian, singer, musician or dancer been infinitely more successful than the serious black actor on our stages and screens? Has Hollywood yet produced the life story

... did provide stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of coloured men. They provided an essential training and theatrical experience which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source. Many of these men, as the vogue of minstrelsy waned, passed on into the second phase, or middle period, of the Negro on the theatrical stage in America; and it was mainly upon the training they had gained that this second phase rested.⁵⁸

Johnson stated that the minstrel companies the way for the appearance on the stage of genuine Negroes. One of the effects of blackface minstrelsy, then, was to pave

... as a large group of Negroes performing for the first time on the American stage, they brought with them their indigenous qualities and the genuine basic beat. They revealed new dances, songs and comedy routines that the whites had not yet appropriated. The stop-time taps, the sand [dance] and the Virginia essence were introduced.⁵⁷

dances."⁵⁶ Hughes and Meltzer believed that the function the jig, the buck and wing, and the tantalizing stop-time and originality. James Weldon Johnson stated that "they brought white audiences the Negro brought a certain vitality, a freshness To the traditional minstrel routines performed primarily for

tioned in a later chapter. many great Negro artists became prominent. They will be mentioned in a later chapter. Whites and Thirty Blacks was formed in 1893. During this period successful integrated group called Primrose and West's Forty Haverly's Mastodon Genuine Coloured Minstrels. A highly successful integrated group called Primrose and West's Forty Haverly's Mastodon Genuine Coloured Minstrels, the Great Non-organized, among them the Georgia Minstrels, the Great Non-organized, among them the Georgia Minstrels, the Great Non-twice normal size."⁵⁵ Many other all-black companies were and circled their lips with red or white to make their faces custom of the white minstrel troupes and blackened their faces were quite dark—being Negro—they nevertheless followed the

Blackface minstrelsy was probably responsible for creating the image of the happy, contented slave. In its early days when the Afterpiece still purported to portray plantation life realistically, minstrelsy was obviously pro-slavery. There was little reference to dog-pack hunts for runaway slaves or to whippings; instead the Frolics, the Breakdowns, and the singing were depicted. A glance at any of the old minstrel programs will show once the distortion which occurred. For example, for one grand finale, billed as Mr. William Welch's original afterpiece and entitled *The Old Plantation, Or, Away Down South in Dixie*, the following description was given:

Great harm has been done by the "contented slave" stereotype. It has fixed in the minds of the whites the image of a docile creature, happiest when taken care of; and it has made them unable to think of the Negro as having the same urge as a white man to make something of himself.⁶¹

Overstreet continued with one of the other images created by minstrelsy, the myth of the contented slave:

The image of the Negro as a kind of clown, with comic turns of speech and ludicrous behavior, has robbed him of dignity. The images of him as lazy, childishly dependent, and dishonest have excused us from having confidence in him; while the images of him as vicious and sexually irresponsible have put him outside the pale.⁶⁰

Harry Overstreet has said that the image is more powerful than the reality. According to Overstreet:

Negro expression, when flattering and obsequiously entertaining to the majority ego, is readily accepted, and becomes extremely popular in a vulgarized, stereotyped form. When more deeply and fully represented, with undiluted idioms, it has invariably been confronted with apathy and indifference and has been faced with a long struggle for acceptance and appreciative recognition. In the minstrel role, for instance, where at best the Negro was only half himself, at the worst a rough caricature, he was instantly popular and acceptable.⁶⁰

of a black hero: Toussaint l'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, As Margaret Butcher stated:

of a black hero: Toussaint l'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, or Muhammad Ali? As Margaret Butcher stated:

Negro expression, when flattering and obsequiously entertaining to the majority ego, is readily accepted, and becomes extremely popular in a vulgarized, stereotyped form. When more deeply and fully representative, with undiluted idiom, it has invariably been confronted with apathy and indifference and has been faced with a long struggle for acceptance and appreciative recognition. In the minstrel role, for instance, where at best the Negro was only half himself, at the worst a rough caricature, he was instantly popular and acceptable.⁵⁹

Harry Overstreet has said that the image is more powerful than the reality. According to Overstreet:

The image of the Negro as a kind of clown, with comic turns of speech and ludicrous behavior, has robbed him of dignity. The images of him as lazy, childishly dependent, and dishonest have excused us from having confidence in him; while the images of him as vicious and sexually irresponsible have put him outside the pale.⁶⁰

Overstreet continued with one of the other images created by minstrelsy, the myth of the contented slave:

Great harm has been done by the "contented slave" stereotype. It has fixed in the minds of the whites the image of a docile creature, happiest when taken care of; and it has made them unable to think of the Negro as having the same urge as a white man to make something of himself.⁶¹

Blackface minstrelsy was probably responsible for creating the image of the happy, contented slave. In its early days when the afterpiece still purported to portray plantation life realistically, minstrelsy was obviously pro-slavery. There was little reference to dog-pack hunts for runaway slaves or to whippings; instead the Frolics, the Breakdowns, and the singing were depicted. A glance at any of the old minstrel programs will show once the distortion which occurred. For example, for one grand finale, billed as Mr. William Welch's original afterpiece and entitled *The Old Plantation, Or, Away Down South in Dixie*, the following description was given:

were quite dark—being Negro—they nevertheless followed the custom of the white minstrel troupes and blackened their faces and circled their lips with red or white to make their mouths twice normal size.⁵⁵ Many other all-black companies were organized, among them the Georgia Minstrels, the Great Non-pareil Coloured Troupe, the Colored Hamtown Singers, and Haverly's Mastodon Genuine Coloured Minstrels. A highly successful integrated group called Primrose and West's Forty Whites and Thirty Blacks was formed in 1893. During this period many great Negro artists became prominent. They will be mentioned in a later chapter.

To the traditional minstrel routines performed primarily for white audiences the Negro brought a certain vitality, a freshness and originality. James Weldon Johnson stated that "they brought a great deal that was new in dancing, by exhibiting in their performance the jig, the buck and wing, and the tantalizing stop-time dances."⁵⁶ Hughes and Meltzer believed that

... as a large group of Negroes performing for the first time on the American stage, they brought with them their indigenous qualities and the genuine basic beat. They revealed new dances, songs and comedy routines that the whites had not yet appropriated. The stop-time taps, the sand [dance] and the Virginia essence were introduced.⁵⁷

One of the effects of blackface minstrelsy, then, was to pave the way for the appearance on the stage of genuine Negroes. Johnson stated that the minstrel companies

... did provide stage training and theatrical experience for a large number of coloured men. They provided an essential training and theatrical experience which, at the time, could not have been acquired from any other source. Many of these men, as the vogue of minstrelsy waned, passed on into the second phase, or middle period, of the Negro on the theatrical stage in America; and it was mainly upon the training they had gained that this second phase rested.⁵⁸

Even though minstrelsy paved the way, in how many instances has the genuine Negro appeared on the popular stage? Hasn't the Negro comedian, singer, musician or dancer been infinitely more successful than the serious black actor on our stages and screens? Has Hollywood yet produced the life story

Field hands, cotton pickers, the neighbors and their children, and the colored folks in general will unite and endeavor to present the most realistic sketch of Negro life in the South before the war, ever produced in minstrelsy, introducing solos, duets, choruses, moonlight pastimes, cotton field follies, and terminate the scene with the exciting VIRGINIA REEL.⁶²

Minstrel songs also reflected this contented slave stereotype. Verses of a typical minstrel song, "We'll All Make a Laugh," from *Christy and Wood's New Song Book*, illustrate this:

Now darkies, sing and play, and make a little fun;
 We'll dance upon de green, and beat de Congo drum
 We're a happy set ob darkies, and we're 'sembled here to play,
 So strike de bones and tambourine, and drive dull care away.
 Some masses [masters] love dar darkies well, and gib 'em what dey want—
 Except it is dar freedom—and dat I know, dey won't.
 However, we am happy, and contented whar we am,
 As a serenading party, and a scientific band.
 Old massa feeds us berry well, and makes us work all day;
 But after sun is set at night he lets us hab our way.
 He often comes to see our sports—a fine segar he quaffs—
 Case de meritment ob niggers often make him laugh.⁶³

Minstrelsy created many stereotypes, not all of which depict the Negro as inferior. Some of these are quite favorable and actually admit Negro superiority in certain areas. For example: the Negro is more gifted in certain types of music, dancing, and acting than white people; he has greater emotional warmth; he is more religious; he can take sorrows and disappointments more easily; and he can handle animals better. However, according to Gunnar Myrdal:

All such favorable beliefs seem to have this in common, that they do not raise the question concerning the advisability or righteousness of keeping the Negro in his place in the caste order. They do not react against the major need for justification. They rather make it natural that he shall remain subordinate.⁶⁴

Robert Moton had a vivid impression of a minstrel show seen when he was a boy. His words seem to summarize the effects of blackface minstrelsy on both white and black Americans:

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 5

1. *Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett, of West Tennessee* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1833), p. 41.
 2. "Sleigh of Hand Artist," *New-York Journal or the General Advertiser*, No. 1266, Thursday, April 9, 1767, n.p.
 3. L. A. Hall, "Some Early Black-Face Performers and the First Minstrel Troop," *Harvard Library Notes*, I, No. 2 (October, 1920), 41.
 4. Loften Mitchell, *Black Drama; the Story of the American Negro in the Theatre* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1967), p. 18.
 5. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (15 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), II, 305-06.
 6. *Ibid.*, III, 71.
 7. Arthur Todd, "Four Centuries of American Dance: Dance Before the American Revolution—1734-1775," *Dance Magazine*, XXIV (March, 1950), 21.
 8. Brander Matthews, "The Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy," *Scribner's Magazine*, LVII (June, 1915), 755.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 52.
 11. Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance. The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 41.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- Some twenty or thirty men with faces blackened appeared in a semicircle with banjos, tambourines, and the like. The stories they told and the performances they gave were indeed most interesting to me, but I remember how shocked I was when they sang, "Wear dem Golden Shippers to Walk dem Golden Streets," two men dancing to the tune exactly as it was sung by the people in the Negro churches of my community. . . . I felt that these white men were making fun, not only of our colour and of our songs, but also of our religion. . . . White minstrels with black faces have done more than any other single agency to lower the tone of Negro music and cause the Negro to despise his own songs. Indeed, the feeling of the average Negro to-day [1920] is that the average white man expects him to "jump jim-crow" or do the buffoon act, whether in music or in other things.⁶⁵

- tion in 1830-1839 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1863), pp. 96-97.
15. Charles Haywood, *Negro Minstrelsy and Shakespearean Burlesque*. A Reprint from *Folklore and Society, Essays in Honor of B. A. Botkin* (Hathorn, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1966), p. 77.
16. Constance Rourke, *The Roots of American Culture and Other Essays*, ed. by Van Wyck Brooks, Harvest Books (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1942), p. 263.
17. Robert Nevin, "Stephen Foster and Negro Minstrelsy," *Atlantic Monthly*, XX (November, 1867), 610.
18. Robert Bone, "Preface to the Athenaeum Edition," in Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction* (New York: Athenaeum, 1969 [originally published 1937]), n.p.
19. Isaac Goldberg, "How Minstrelsy Really Began: Part II," *The Afro-American* (Baltimore), January 13, 1934, n.p.
20. Marian Hannah Winter, "Juba and American Minstrelsy," *Dance Index*, VI, No. 2 (February, 1947), 31.
21. Nathan, *Dan Emmett*, p. 61.
22. Thomas Low Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life* (2d ed., London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1874), pp. 369-70.
23. Winter, "Juba," 33.
24. *Ibid.*, 34.
25. *Ibid.*, 32.
26. T. Allston Brown, "The Origin of Negro Minstrelsy," in Charles H. Day, *Fun in Black: or, Sketches of Minstrel Life, with the Origin of Minstrelsy, by Col. T. Allston Brown, Giving a History of Ethiopian Minstrelsy from 1799* (New York: Robert M. DeWitt, 1874), p. 9.
27. "Vauxhall Gardens—Boz's Description of Juba," *Illustrated London News*, June 24, 1848, p. 404.
28. "Vauxhall Gardens—Unprecedented Success," *Illustrated London News*, July 1, 1848, p. 420.
29. Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1892), p. 43.
30. Winter, "Juba," 35.
31. "Juba at Vauxhall," *Illustrated London News*, August 5, 1848, p. 77.
32. Winter, "Juba," 38.
33. *Ibid.*, 31.
34. Kemble, *Journal*, p. 97.
35. Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, pp. 14-15.
36. Winter, "Juba," 36.
37. Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, p. 47.
38. There are several studies tracing the development of minstrelsy, including the previously mentioned works by Brander Matthews, Hans Nathan,
- and Robert Nevin and the following works: Laurence Hutton, "The Negro on the Stage," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June, 1889, pp. 131-45; Laurence Hutton, *Curiosities of the American Stage* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891); Hans Nathan, "The First Negro Minstrel Band and Its Origin," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XVI, No. 2 (1952), 132-44; Daley Parkman and Sigmond Spach, "Gentlemen, Be Seated!" *A Parade of Old-Time Minstrels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1928); and Carl Witke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1930).
39. Brander Matthews, "Banjo and Bones," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (London), June 7, 1884, pp. 739-740.
40. Arthur Todd, "Four Centuries of American Dance: Negro American Theatre Dance, 1840-1900," *Dance Magazine*, XXIV (November, 1950), 21.
41. Tom Fletcher, *The Tom Fletcher Story—100 Years of the Negro in Show Business* (New York: Burdige and Company, Ltd., 1954), pp. 37, 39.
42. Hans Nathan, "Two Inflation Songs of the Civil War," *Musical Quarterly*, April, 1943, p. 248.
43. Douglas Gilbert, *Lost Chords* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1942), pp. 13-14.
44. Charles Sherlock, "From Breakdown to Ragtime," *Cosmopolitan*, October, 1901, p. 635.
45. Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), pp. 88-89.
46. Sherlock, "From Breakdown to Ragtime," p. 633.
47. Stearns and Stearns, *Jazz Dance*, p. 50.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Sherlock, "From Breakdown to Ragtime," p. 634.
50. Henry William Ravenel, "Recollections of Southern Plantation Life," *Yale Review*, XXV, No. 4 (June, 1936), 768.
51. Ralph Keeler, "Three Years a Negro Minstrel," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXIV (July, 1869), 74.
52. Matthews, "Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy," p. 758.
53. Nathan, "Two Inflation Songs," pp. 248-49.
54. Rourke, *Roots of American Culture*, p. 270.
55. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic. A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 26.
56. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 89.
57. Hughes and Meltzer, *Black Magic*, p. 26.
58. Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, p. 93.
59. Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 27.

60. Harry A. Overstreet, "Images and the Negro," *Saturday Review*, August 26, 1944, p. 5.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Playbill, "The Great Callender Colossal Consolidated Colored Minstrel Festival," Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts, New York.

63. *Christy's and White's Ethiopian Melodies. Containing Two Hundred and Ninety-One of the Best and Most Popular and Approved Ethiopian Melodies Ever Written. Being the Largest and Most Complete Collection Ever Published. Comprising The Melodeon Song Book; Plantation Melodies; Ethiopian Song Book; Serenader's Song Book, and Christy and Wood's New Song Book. Published under the Authority of George Christy and Charles White, the Original Delinators of the Popular Ludicrous Negro Character* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1857?), p. 43.

64. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Harper Torchbooks (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Row, 1962 [originally published 1944]), I, 108.

65. Robert Russa Moton, *Finding a Way Out. An Autobiography* (College Park, Md.: McGrath Publishing Co., 1969 [originally published by Doubleday, Page and Co., 1920]), p. 59.

6

FROM MINSTRELSY TO "DARKTOWN FOLLIES"

From its beginnings in 1843, black-face minstrelsy was to have an effect lasting well over one hundred years. It reached the height of popularity in the late 1850's and 1860's and remained the most popular form of entertainment in America for a fifty-year period. Even in decline the minstrel show lasted well into the present century.

The stereotypes developed by minstrelsy were many: the happy, funny, shuffling, lazy Jim Crow character; the childish and irresponsible but loyal and contented singing and dancing slave; and the freed Negro whose prototype was a character by the name of Zip Coon. This third character was the town Negro; the gaudily dressed, shifty, smart-talking dandy of the streets, with ruffled shirt, gold watch chain, and patent leather shoes. Minstrelsy left us, then, with two main Negro caricatures: the clown and the dandy.