

American Minstrel Show Collection (AC103)

Introduction:

The American Minstrel Show Collection contains publications of minstrel music from the late 19th century and early 20th century. It includes works that are examples of early music and some of the artwork which made it such a popular and controversial art form.

Descriptive Summary:

Creator: unknown

Title: American Minstrel Show

Date Range: 1882-1928

Size: 0.209 linear feet (1 box)

Collection Number: AC103

Donor Information:

Found in Collection

Citation Note:

American Minstrel Show Collection (AC103), Black Archives of Mid-America, Kansas City, Missouri

Administrative Information:

Reproduction Restrictions: Unrestricted

Access Restrictions: Unrestricted

Original Language Statement:

The Black Archives of Mid-America follows the widespread practice of using the language provided by speakers and writers of historical documents. Using the speaker's or writer's language can be very informative and provide pivotal contextual information about cultural and societal customs of previous time periods. As a result, researchers may encounter descriptive language, which often includes verbiage that contains obvious bias, or outdated and stereotypical

terminology, and/ or content. Contemporary readers and researchers might find this language harmful or offensive.

Historical Sketch:

The minstrel show represented one of the early types of theatrical entertainment with widespread popularity in the United States and abroad. These performances were dramatizations and imitations of African Americans (by white performers) with the dual purpose to mock as well as romanticize the social and cultural customs of the mid-19th century African Americans. They included songs, dance routines, and outlandish dialogues which usually cast as demeaning representation of African Americans, very popular with white audiences, this form of musical theatre also involved portrayals or dramatizations of African Americans either as slaves or freedmen.

The origin of minstrel shows in the United States started sometime around the 1830s. Perhaps the most famous of the minstrel performs was Thomas D. Rice, who made famous his Jim Crow song and dance routine which was based on his travels throughout the plantations of the early South. Prior to emancipation, minstrel shows were almost always done by white performers, but this slowly changed after the Civil War. To become part of minstrel “troupes” as they were known, African Americans had to accept and adopt the stereotyped characters and practice of “blackfacing”. Two of the most well known African American performers at this time were James Bland and Billy Kersands. As the postbellum years continued, the style and music of the minstrel shows became increasingly racist. New songs and acts involving pejorative terms or phrases were often incorporated into acts as minstrel companies continued to create new material for audiences.

Despite making a largely negative or derisive impression on early African Americans, minstrelsy did help early artists like W.C. Handy, Bessie Smith, and Scott Joplin in their careers as it eventually helped to produce early jazz, ragtime, and blues. As these types of music grew in popularity, older minstrel shows relying on racially based type of entertainment became obsolete.

Scope and Notes:

Book is fragile. Handle with care.

Collection Inventory:

- f. 1 *Laffalot Minstrel Book* by Arthur LeRoy Kaser
- f. 2 *The Darkey Wood-Dealer* by Charles Townsend
- f. 3 *Minstrel Songs Old and New* by Oliver Ditson & Co.

Processed by Jon Zwillenberg, Collection Library, April 2013. Updated by Laura Darnell, Archivist, July 2024.