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David Livingstone
0000-0002-3973-0620
Palacký University, Olomouc

Breaking Blackface: African Americans, Stereotypes, and Country Music

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Abstract

Country is without a doubt the whitest American genre of music, and the banjo is the most quintessential instrument used in it. Both the musical style and the instrument, however, have their roots in African-American culture. It is widely believed that the blackface minstrel tradition in the nineteenth century not only appropriated and ridiculed African Americans but also eventually alienated them from their own music. This chapter will demonstrate that African-American country music continued to thrive, if not flourish, in the twentieth century. It will also examine how contemporary Black musicians have begun to rescue and redeem their musical heritage from the racist baggage of the past, thereby beginning to break the blackface tradition and legacy. These artists have started to combat the stereotypes surrounding country music and attempt to use this genre as a medium to not only entertain but also educate and enlighten. Particular reference will be made to the old-time/country string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops and the various offshoots and solo projects of its members.

Keywords: Country music, African American culture, stereotypes, alt-country, blackface/minstrelsy tradition

The African-American actors Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele (who have both got on to further fame, especially Peele for his Oscar-nominated horror film *Get Out*) had a series of comedy sketches (*Key and Peele*) in the first half of the 2010s. Many of these sketches touch on controversial themes dealing with race, but arguably one of the most poignant ones is entitled "Is This Country Song Racist." The Peele character is new to the neighborhood and joins the Key character, who expresses his enthusiasm at having another "brother" around in his basement "man-cave." The room is lined with guitars, and the host asks his guest if he can play him a song. Key launches into a country song about a "red-headed girl with freckles" who has to be protected from "homies" from the "wrong side of town." When the Peele character protests that the song is racist, Key appears to be clueless as to the racial stereotypes being perpetuated. He defends the tradition as follows: "You hear the 'twang,' and you assume that it's racist, but that's just what country music is like" (Key and Peele 1:30–1:32). A second song gets even worse, with a list of African-American stereotypes like fried chicken and finally even a reference to "the only hood I like is pointy and white" (Key and Peele 1:55–1:57), an obvious reference to the favorite garb of the KKK. Peele cannot believe his own ears and asks Key to stop. Key once again explains that this is "traditional country music imagery, man, like a pick-up truck, or sleeping under the stars, or your dog got killed or your wife left you" (Key and Peele 2:24–2:29). When Peele is still very much unconvinced, Key accuses him of being a black nationalist extremist. His third song, with the lines "give me a rope, and find me a tree" (Key and Peele 3:09–3:11), is finally too much for Peele, who leaves the house in a rage. Key mutters to himself that this is merely a reference to a tire-swing, although it is obvious to the viewer that the reference is to a lynching. The scene ends with him singing yet another song which references a banjo strumming and a hanging, wherein it finally dawns on him what the songs are about (Key and Peele 3:32–3:33). The skit powerfully captures the visceral, gut reaction of many African-Americans to country music. Key and Peele here humor-

ously touch on an extremely sensitive subject, with there having been a long tradition of country music being associated with blackface minstrel songs and racism in general.

The term country music is clearly problematic. Music from the South, particularly from states such as Kentucky, Tennessee, the Virginias, and the Carolinas, was originally referred to as hillbilly music and was associated with the rural White population. Old-time music was a less derogatory term eventually used by recording companies, when the first commercial recordings were made in the 1920s. Jug bands, using cheap homemade instruments, were initially African-American and began to manifest early blues and jazz elements. String bands is a term used in retrospect for both White and Black groups which focused on the use of banjo and violin primarily. Roots music is a fairly recent blanket term which includes bands and musicians which are influenced by earlier "country" styles and instruments. Alternative (alt) country arose in the 1990s and consisted of performers who had a rock influence and also tended to be on the left politically. Americana is now a Grammy award category which was established in 2009 and distinguished from folk by the use of electric as opposed to acoustic instruments. Blues is equally difficult to precisely define, and many early country stars, both Black and White, such as Jimmie Rodgers, Lead Belly, and Hank Williams, exhibited features of the blues. Folk music is the broadest term of all. Suffice it to say that, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on performers singing and playing acoustic instruments such as banjos and, to a lesser extent, guitars occasionally accompanied by percussion.

African-American folk music has experienced numerous waves of assimilation, or better said appropriation, since its very beginnings. The banjo, that most American of instruments in the popular imagination, was actually of African origin and was eventually reassembled, so to speak, in the Americas by slaves. Their African rhythms and instrumentation mixed over time with the folk songs of immigrants, mostly from the British Isles. The blackface minstrel tradition in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries not only appropriated and exploited African-American music and culture but also popularized the banjo and eventually turned it into a "respectable" White, middle-class instrument. The established interpretation has been that the overt racism embodied in blackface minstrelsy eventually caused the practical complete rejection of the African-American banjo tradition, not only among African-Americans but also among liberal Whites. There has been, understandably, an ongoing discussion around the cultural value of the music of this period and genre and the question as to whether it should be condoned or condemned.[1] Critics such as Tony Thomas have begun, however, to call into question the established belief that the African-American distancing and alienation from country music, due to the blackface tradition, was all that black and white (pun intended). Thomas repeats the popular belief that "negative images of black banjo playing created by European American minstrelsy and racist propaganda led African Americans to abandon the banjo," only to argue that, paradoxically, "no one can point to a single banjoist who gave up the banjo for this reason" (Thomas 143–44).

Although the blackface/minstrel tradition was, absurdly, an initially all White business, over time, African American musicians were actually allowed to take part in it, albeit sometimes still with extensive employment of black paint to enhance the exaggerated grotesqueness of their features. The most prominent and popular African-American minstrel era composer was James Bland (1854–1911), whose song "Golden Slippers" from 1880 shares great affinities with the Black Spiritual tradition. Known as "the Prince of Negro Songwriters," he successfully shared his music in Europe, in particular in England (Jasen and Jones 10–11). His hit song from 1878 "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" displays all the usual fea-

[1] This discussion has included, among others, major artists such as Stephen Foster and Al Jolson. The arguably most comprehensive discussion of the banjo and African American culture and identity is *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* by Laurent Dubois.

tures of minstrel songs, such as a mawkish nostalgia for the "good old days" back on the plantation and the idealization of the old social order:

> Carry me back to old Virginny.
> There's where the cotton and corn and taters grow.
> There's where the birds warble sweet in the spring-time.
> There's where this old darkey's heart am long'd to go.
>
> There's where I labored so hard for old Massa,
> Day after day in the field of yellow corn;
> No place on earth do I love more sincerely
> Than old Virginny, the state where I was born.
>
> ("Carry Me Back to Old Virginny Lyrics")

The lyrics are even more disturbing when one realizes that this was written by an actual African-American. Blunt was obviously very much aware of what sells (Jasen and Jones 8–13). The song was actually the state song of Virginia from 1940 to 1997.

Claude McKay, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, wrote a novel titled *Banjo* in 1929, which documents Black people from the Americas living in Europe, like James Bland, in order to escape prejudice and oppression.[2] The main protagonist, a banjo playing musician by the name of Banjo, plies his trade in the cafés and bars of Marseilles. At one point, he gets into an argument with his friend Goosey about the symbolism and significance of the banjo as an instrument. Goosey, an African American, is aware of the racist connotations associated with the banjo and cannot understand why his friend continues to play this tainted instrument:

> No, Banjo is bondage. It's the instrument of slavery. Banjo is Dixie. The Dixie of the land of cotton and massa and missus and black mammy. We coloured folks have got to get away from all that in these enlightened progressive days. Let us play piano and violin, harp and flute. Let the white folks play the banjo if they

[2] This phenomenon continued of course with African-American jazz musicians in the 1960s, the most prominent examples being Dexter Gordon or Ben Webster.

> want to keep on remembering all the Black Joes singing and the hell they made them live in. (McKay 90)

Banjo, however, argues that the history of appropriation does not apply to him and insists on claiming it as his own. "'That ain't got nothing to do with me, nigger,' replied Banjo. 'I play that theah instrument becaz I likes it. I don't play no Black Joe hymns. I play lively tunes'" (McKay 90). This obstinate position, refusing to reject the instrument and the music associated with it due to it having been tainted by the minstrel tradition, was not, it seems, as uncommon as we have been led to believe. Elijah Wald, in his book on Robert Johnson and the development of the Blues, counters the argument about Black people being "universally sensitive to the horrors of minstrelsy as some people like to believe":

> [N]umerous writers have stated that the banjo fell out of favor with black musicians because of its racist, minstrel associations, but this makes little sense when one considers that the most sophisticated black groups of the period, the orchestras of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton, continued to use banjos until amplification made the guitar viable in a bigger band setting. (Elijah Wald 49)

Karen Linn, in her book on the banjo in popular culture, provides a more pragmatic, practical explanation for the gradual disappearance of Black banjo players and African-American country music in general, this being due to economics: "There are several reasons for the poor documentation of African-American hillbilly music. The recording companies wanted to keep their 'race' and 'hillbilly' offerings distinct for marketing purposes; they concentrated on the blues and left black string bands largely unrecorded" (Linn 139). Whatever explanation or combination of factors we give credence to, the fact remains that the banjo and country music eventually became associated, almost exclusively, with "White folks."

Borrowing a term from a short story by Joseph Conrad,[3] the following section will look at African-American musicians who served as "secret sharers" or ghost writers for more popular White musicians. In some cases, these involve mostly unknown or obscure Black musicians who tutored future White musical stars on the guitar or the harmonica, introducing them to a rich tradition which was often unrecorded and unrecognized. This was the case with, for example, Hank Williams, who met African-American Rufus "Tee-tot" Payne at the age of eight. Country, folk, and rock and roll legends from the South, such as Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash, Elvis, and Carl Perkins, all acknowledged their early indebtedness to Black singers and musicians they came across during their childhood and adolescence. Robert Cray's description of Woody Guthrie's childhood could serve as a template for almost all the country/folk/rock and roll White superstars: "He spent hours listening to the black shoeshine man at the barbershop" (Cray 49).

The legendary Carter Family is often given credit for authoring hundreds of classic country and folk standards which are still covered today. A. P. Carter was, however, initially adept at discovering and adopting songs which were popular, sung, and played in and around his home state of Virginia. When he began to run low on resources at the beginning of the 1930s, he enlisted the assistance of the African-American guitar player Lesley Riddle, who accompanied him on his song-gathering travels. Riddle would apparently learn the tune from a local source, and Carter would write down the lyrics (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 131). Not only was Riddle essential as part of the song-collecting team but he also apparently influenced Maybelle Carter's guitar playing style: "When A.P. brought Lesley Riddle around to the rehearsals, Maybelle sat and listened to him play for hours, picking out blues licks she could use" (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 184). Although not completely forgotten, Riddle's contribution to the legacy of the Carter Family has often been neglected, a fate all too

[3] The referenced story is "The Secret Sharer" (1909).

familiar for African-American musicians, particularly in the Blues. Only recently has his importance begun to be celebrated with theatre productions and even a music festival, Riddlefest, named in his honor.

One of the folk standards in the repertoire of Bob Dylan, Dave Van Ronk, Pete Seeger, and many others is "Dink's Song (Fare Thee Well)," which has a somewhat similar history as the song-gathering of Carter and Riddle. John Lomax, the legendary folklorist and musicologist, recorded the song, during his field recordings in 1909, as sung by an African-American woman washing clothes in a river in Texas. Her name lives on in the title of the song, but nothing else is known about her (Alan Lomax 144). The haunting words of "Fare Thee Well" are magical in their simplicity and pathos:

> If I had wings like Noah's dove
> I'd fly up the river to the one I love
> Fare thee well, my honey, fare thee well
>
> One of these days and it won't be long
> Call my name and I'll be gone
>
> Fare thee well, my honey, fare thee well. ("Fare Thee Well")

In contrast to Dink and numerous other nameless secret sharers, there have been a number of success stories involving African-American musicians establishing themselves in the country music business. The great Huddie William Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, was also a "discovery" of John Lomax, although the ethical nature of their relationship has become the subject of considerable debate (see Porterfield 359–61). A number of Lead Belly's songs have become standards of both folk, blues, and even country bands. Other great African-American folk country musicians only met with popular and commercial success later in life at the time of the Folk Music Revival in the early 1960s. Mississippi John Hurt, for example, became famous at the age of seventy, only three years before his death, and Elizabeth Cotten, the author of "Freight Train," was famously "discovered" by the Seeger family when in her sixties.

One of the few African-American musicians to establish himself on the legendary Grand Ole Opry in Nashville was DeFord Bailey, "the harmonica wizard." He was even inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame after his death. The most successful Black country singer of all time was without a doubt Charley Pride. Despite battling racism and prejudice throughout his career, Pride managed to persevere and maintain his fame and success. His staying power is expressed eloquently with the following quote: "They used to ask me how it feels to be the 'first colored country singer.'. . . Then it was 'first Negro country singer;' then 'first black country singer.' Now I'm the 'first African-American country singer.' That's about the only thing that's changed" (Kennedy). Bailey and Pride were, however, very much exceptions to the rule, with the country music charts and the Grand Ole Opry continuing to be "lily white" for decades on end.

Alternative country (alt-country) has met with great acclaim and popularity over the last thirty years. One of the most interesting bands is the old-time string band Carolina Chocolate Drops. Influenced by Joe Thompson, one of the last surviving African-American old-time style fiddlers, playing in the Piedmont style of North Carolina, they have blazed a new trail for Black country music or, arguably, returned the tradition to its roots. They have been committed to redeeming the minstrel tradition with their music, educating people as to the Black contribution and the origins of country music. The band members, who have changed several times, with the mainstays being Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemens, play the five-string banjo, tenor banjo, guitar, fiddle, tambourine, and the bones, all of these, apart from the guitar, being staples back in the nineteenth century minstrel tradition and in string-bands. Their critically acclaimed album *Genuine Negro Jig* from 2010 contains both instrumentals and songs with vocals and both traditional tunes and covers. One of the traditional songs from the recording, "Cornbread and Butterbeans," embodies their attempt to "cleanse" the minstrel song of its racist baggage.

The song contains many of the stock material of the blackface tradition but manages to infuse it with joy, humor, and celebration:

> Wearin' shoes and drinking booze, it goes against the Bible
> A necktie will make you die and cause you lots of trouble
> Streetcars and whiskey bars and kissing pretty women
> Women, yeah, that's the end of a terrible beginning
> Cornbread and butterbeans and you across the table
> Eatin' beans and makin' love as long as I am able
> Growin' corn and cotton too and when the day is over
> Ride the mule and cut the fool and love again all over.
>
> (Carolina Chocolate Drops)

Despite the obvious poverty experienced by the protagonists in the song, the recording manages to convey the definite dignity and beauty of the depicted lovers without resorting to hackneyed minstrel caricatures. I would argue, at the risk of simplification, that the listener/audience member is not laughing at them (as would have been the case in the minstrel tradition) but with them, and this makes all the difference.

Rhiannon Giddens has gone on to do a number of projects, both solo and in collaboration with others. Her second solo album *Freedom Highway* contains a number of her own songs, including the powerful Civil War themed "Julie," which consists of a dialogue between a White slaveowner woman (mistress) and her slave (Julie), who are awaiting the eminent arrival of the victorious Union troops. The song portrays the complicated relationship between the two women with compassion but also righteous anger. When the White woman pleads with her soon-to-be-freed slave to lie on her behalf and protect her gold, Julie puts her in her place emphatically but without vindictiveness:

> Mistress, oh mistress
> I won't lie
> If they find that trunk of gold by your side
> Mistress, oh mistress
> That trunk of gold
> Is what you got when my children you sold. (Giddens)

The protagonist of the song, Julie, is celebrated for her bravery, intelligence, and wisdom without resorting to comic book clichés but, nevertheless, entertaining stereotypes. Gayle Wald, in an article on Giddens's remarkable career, points out how the song has managed to at least in a small way begin to "redeem" the minstrel tradition:

> It's a song that conjures the sonic pleasures of the minstrel stage, which produced dozens of memorable songs that retain their allure to this day. At the same time, it gives voice to the rage and grief of an enslaved black woman—exactly the sort of black interiority the minstrel tradition erased, or hid behind the masks of comedy or parody. (Gayle Wald)

One of Giddens's most interesting collaborations thus far has been the recording *Songs of Our Native Daughters* from 2019. This was a collaboration between four African-American female banjo players (apart from other instruments): Giddens, Leyla McCalla (also a former member of Carolina Chocolate Drops), Allison Russell (originally from Canada), and Amythyst Kiah. The four women share not only songwriting duties but also lead vocals. "Polly Ann's Hammer," co-written by Kiah and Russell, is a feminist variation on the classic traditional folk song "John Henry," about a legendary African-American railroad steel-driving man who died heroically in a battle with a mechanized steam drill. The song is usually interpreted as not only a celebration of unsung Black heroes who worked anonymously to lay the railroads but also as a celebration of the human individual over the impersonal machine, along the lines of a Luddite type protest (Alan Lomax 88). The song "John Henry" ends with John Henry's death but also with a message of hope when his partner takes up his job with bravery and strength:

> He laid down his hammer and he died
> John Henry had a little woman
> Her name was Polly Ann
> John Henry took sick and went to his bed
> Polly Ann drove steel like a man. Lord. ("John Henry")

The sequel of sorts, "Polly Ann's Hammer," takes up where the traditional song left off and manages to provide a triumphant feminist ending, whereby Polly, John's widow, takes center stage and proves that she can not only do traditional man's work but also raise a child at the same time:

> When Polly had a small baby
> On her knee, on her knee
> Grabbed a hammer in her left hand
> "Ain't no one as strong as me"
> This little hammer killed John Henry
> Won't kill me, won't kill me
> This little hammer killed your daddy
> Throw it down and we'll be free
>
> (Our Native Daughters, "Polly Ann's Hammer")

One of Amythyst Kiah's contributions to the record, "Black Myself," deals with various prejudices of being Black but also of being part of the LBGTQ community. Most relevant to the present discussion is the line "I pick the banjo up and they stare at me / 'Cause I'm black myself" (Our Native Daughters, "Black Myself"). The song argues poignantly for the right of a young African-American woman to be proud not only of her skin color and sexual orientation but also of her instrument of choice, in this case the banjo, so often associated with prejudice and stereotypes.

Yet another former member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Dom Flemons, has gone on with a successful solo career. In his recordings he has, among others, explored the history and legacy of Black cowboys in history, whose contribution was almost completely ignored in the past.[4] Flemons, in the liner notes to his album *Black Cowboys* from 2018, points out the injustice of the whitewashing of the African-American contribution to cowboy culture and history: "Even though the African American roots in cowboy music had endured since the very early days of the frontier, they eventually disappeared from the contemporary narrative" (Flemons). *Black Cowboys* includes, for example, a version of the folk

[4] For an exhaustive discussion of this issue, see Glasrud and Searles.

standard "Home on the Range." The liner notes make reference to the version having been included in John Lomax's book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* from 1910, where it was apparently taken down and transcribed from a Black cowboy (Flemons). Lomax's version includes the following intriguing lines, which Flemons includes in his interpretation:

> The red man was pressed from this part of the West,
> He's likely no more to return
> To the banks of Red River where seldom if ever
> Their flickering camp-fires burn. (John Lomax 39)

This "added" verse is of interest as a Black man would understandably feel added compassion for other people of color who had been oppressed or exterminated by the White man. The song's additional lyrics also give added weight to Flemons's vision of the Black cowboy experiencing a life of relative freedom from prejudice and enslavement and finally finding a "Home on the range," "where seldom is heard a discouraging word" (John Lomax 39), which is in stark contrast to the lives of African-Americans living as slaves or later under Jim Crow.

African-American musicians, like the present and former members of Carolina Chocolate Drops, are reclaiming their cultural heritage, restoring its dignity, reviving lost and neglected voices, and using their art as an educational tool while, of course, making great music. This pioneering musical idiom has certainly encouraged yet another generation of African-American musicians to embrace not only country music but also the banjo. Kai Kater, a woman of color originally from Canada, has put out several remarkable recordings featuring the banjo. Jake Blount, another young African-American rising star, is pushing the boundaries even further with his transgressive Afrofuturist music employing both the banjo and the fiddle while still referencing traditional songs in his recordings. Jonathan Bernstein, in a review of *Songs of Our Native Daughters*, summarizes what has been accomplished over the last approximate twenty years: "It's the culmination of a movement of 21st-century singers, artists,

songwriters and instrumentalists of color who have been reclaiming the racially heterogeneous lineages of folk, country and American roots music" (Bernstein). In other words, blackface has definitively begun to break, and the old stereotypes concerning what a country musician should look like are very much being questioned and revolutionized.

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