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"Jim Along Josey": Play-Parties and the Survival of a Blackface Minstrel Song

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Abstract

The play-party was a social activity once practiced in rural America amongst Protestants in the latter half of the nineteenth century. With a desire to circumvent the church's strict no dancing rules, as well as avoid reprimand, play-party adolescents adapted the lyrics and instrumentation of blackface minstrel songs to create a vocal music to accompany their play-party games. The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate that play-parties offered the space for the continuation and reinterpretation of minstrel practices, particularly song repertoire. In this paper, the children's song "Jim Along Josey" is used as a case study, first to reveal the role of songs in play-parties, and secondly to demonstrate the process of musical reinterpretation that characterized this social event. The study also reveals that minstrel songs such as this have survived within the genre of children's music due to the reinterpretation conducted by play-party adolescents.

Introduction

Although American blackface minstrelsy is no longer a socially acceptable form of entertainment in the United States, remnants of its musical characteristics linger in the songs frequently taught to children.¹ Some of the most nostalgic songs in children's music repertoire—i.e. "Jimmy Crack Corn," "The Little Brown Jug," "Camptown Races," "Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me," "Oh, Susanna," and "Do Your Ears Hang Low?"—were at one time sung in blackface performance.² All too often, American children encounter former minstrel songs in elementary schools, summer camps, children's television shows and music albums rarely with the opportunity to know that these songs were once performed on the minstrel stage.

The minstrel show was a popular nineteenth century stage performance, which entertained audiences by exploiting African American stereotypes. These productions contained overtly prejudice themes that were, and continue to be, detrimental to the black individual. The minstrel song was particularly dehumanizing for its derogatory lyrics that aided in the creation of fictitious African American caricatures.

Interestingly, it seems contemporary children's songs based on this genre have omitted these offenses. Upon comparing the lyrics of the two genres, it is observed that an adaptation, perhaps even an expurgation occurred to render the song appropriate for a child. By tracing the history of the children's song "Jim Along Josey," this paper hopes to reveal how the former minstrel song has managed to survive into the modern day.

Children's Songs

American children's song scholarship began in the late 1800s with the publications of William Wells Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children* (1884) and Lady Alice Gomme's *Traditional Games* (1894-1898). However, it was not until the 1930s when children's

¹ American blackface minstrelsy is also referred to as minstrelsy or blackface.

² While not all of the songs listed above were used as play-party songs, this particular list of tunes are often sung to American children without mention of their association with blackface minstrelsy. For more a more detailed list of minstrel songs that were adapted into play-party songs, see Benjamin Albert Botkin, *The American Play-Party Song: With a Collection of Oklahoma Texts and Tunes* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1937), 72.

music research gained its momentum.³ As this was the era of the Great Depression, federal agencies under the New Deal—such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—were set up by the American government to offer jobs for the unemployed. These agencies also created projects out of Washington D. C. that financially supported new research in American arts and culture. A few of these projects included the Federal Music Project, Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Theater Project. Within the Federal Theater Project was the Folksong and Folklore Department of the Music Division of the National Service Bureau, which focused on collecting, analyzing, and disseminating American folk songs and folklore.⁴

For the first time in American history, federal programs were being created to encourage researchers to collect and preserve American folk life. As a result, prominent scholars such as Charles Seeger, Herbert Halpert, Benjamin A. Botkin, John A. Lomax—as well as his son, Alan Lomax—made significant contributions to the academic disciplines of musicology and anthropology. These scholars laid the groundwork for the up-and-coming academic fields of ethnomusicology and American folklore.

Amid the folk genres collected throughout America was the children's song. According to ethnomusicologists Patricia Shehan Campbell and Trevor Wiggins, children's songs appeared to be of great interest to scholars from the end of the nineteenth century to the last years of the twentieth century, and folklorists valued children's song as a source of social expression and cultural material much like folk songs.⁵

Benjamin A. Botkin and Play-Party Songs

One such folklorist was Benjamin A. Botkin, who in 1937 published his doctoral dissertation about the American play-party.⁶ In this work, Botkin collected over 1,000 variations of 128 play-party songs from students at the University of Oklahoma. Botkin began his research in the early 1930s with the focus of collecting and preserving an oral tradition that was on the verge of dying. After conducting his research, however, it became apparent to him that the play-party was a unique form of social behavior; one that would intrigue scholars for years to come. He wrote

this anomalous, hybrid, eclectic character of the play-party, which is thus dance, game, and song all in one and yet no one of them in particular makes a fascinating study for the folklorist intent on tracing origins and development through all the changes and corruptions of oral tradition.

³ Patricia Shehan Campbell and Trevor Wiggins, "Giving Voice to Children," in *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Music Cultures*, ed. Patricia Shehan Campbell and Trevor Wiggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

⁴ Judith Tick, "Twistification": Work and Friendship between Two Pioneers of the Folk Revival Benjamin A. Botkin and Ruth Crawford Seeger," in *American Folklorist B. A. Botkin and American Culture*, ed. Lawrence Rodgers and Jarrold Hirsch (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 96-97.

⁵ Shehan Campbell and Wiggins, 3.

⁶ See Botkin, *Play-Party Song*.

Be the significance of the play-party extends beyond its mere antiquarian or research interest to the collector and the scholar. Its value to the future social historian is inestimable.⁷

Botkin identified the value of collecting play-party songs and believed they provided the key to understanding American rural cultures and communities. As he described in the quote above, play-parties were multilayered social events that included dance-like movements, songs and games. They were exclusive to America, but known to thrive in the frontier and midwestern regions.⁸ It was in these isolated settings where Protestant sects prohibited dancing, yet encouraged play-party activity.⁹

Play-parties are often compared to nineteenth century singing schools or literary societies because they offered families who lived throughout the countryside a sense of community and entertainment. According to Botkin, play-parties would occur in "the front room or yard of the farm or ranch house, though sometimes the school-house or school-yard was used."¹⁰ Participants would play-party as an activity; this phrase describes the act of playing party games (i.e., singing, marching, and dancing games). Those who engaged in the play-party games included the "young people of high school and marriageable age and young married couples," while older people and young children served as spectators.¹¹ Individuals of courting age were particularly interested in the games because they wanted to partake in social activities involving physical and social interactions with the opposite sex.

Like many children's songs of this era, play-party songs were disseminated through oral tradition. Lyrics of the same song were varied depending on where the lyrics were collected. According to former play-party participant Edwin F. Piper,

they require no organization, no management, no dancing-floor, no musician. At any gathering, and without plan or forethought, the game may be started, provided some one knows the formula and the song. If no game-song is remembered, one may be borrowed or improvised. Any voice is good enough to help with the chorus.¹²

Using Botkin's terms, play-partiers either based their game songs on *older traditional pieces* (English and Scottish songs) or *newer indigenous pieces* (American songs).¹³ Participants often used melodies of the most popular vocal tunes of the era, including blackface minstrel tunes, and change the lyrics to describe the games they were playing.¹⁴ Botkin theorized that play-party teens specifically chose minstrel songs to create their game songs for three reasons: (1) most of them were jovial banjo or fiddle tunes, whose airs were used for dancing, (2) their

⁷ Nancy Cassell McEntire, "Benjamin Botkin and Play-Party Scholarship in America," in *American Folklorist B. A. Botkin and American Culture*, ed. Lawrence Rodgers and Jarrold Hirsch (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 121.

⁸ According to Botkin, Kentucky, Tennessee, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas had the most contributions of play-party material. For more information about the play-party in the American frontier, see preface to Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, v.

⁹ See page 7 for more on the subject.

¹⁰ Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² Edwin F. Piper, "Some Play-Party Games of the Middle West," *The Journal of American Folklore* 28, no. 109 (July-September 1915): 262.

¹³ Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

jesting and clowning had an irresistible appeal for the play-party in its mood of rambling nonsense, with its double taste for silly jingle and burlesque banter, and (3) they had the advantage of wide diffusion by travelling minstrel-troupes [in addition to minstrel song sheet music sales].¹⁵ Once adapted, minstrel songs survived as fragments of choruses and verses, "or crossed and amalgamated with one another with other songs."¹⁶ The most notable minstrel songs that were modified into the American play-party songs were "Old Dan Tucker," "The Little Brown Jug," "Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me," "Turkey in the Straw," "Jump Jim Crow," and "Jim Along Josey."¹⁷

American Blackface Minstrel Songs

American blackface minstrelsy was a form of comedic theatrical performance most recognized today for its use of burnt cork make-up, a type of black body paint that white men and women used on their skin to portray demeaning African American stereotypes.¹⁸ This stage tradition was first performed in the United States as early as 1822, when British comedian Charles Mathews created a solo act that parodied his experience in the South by combining skits, stump speeches and black songs.¹⁹ By the end of the decade, the American performer Thomas "Daddy" Rice was portraying the character Jim Crow; an uncouth yet happy-go-lucky southern plantation slave. Rice organized the solo act by adding black dialect plantation songs, virtuosic dancing, banjo and fiddle music and crude humor. Another character who appeared on stage during this time an urban freed slave by the name of Zip Coon. The creation of blackface characters such as these, along with Mammy and the picanny, formed pervasive stereotypes often associated with black imagery and behavior.²⁰

The classic age of minstrelsy in the United States lasted from the 1840s to the 1870s. The solo act had evolved into duos, trios and eventually quartets that performed during the interludes of theater performances and circus acts. In 1843, The Virginia Minstrels performed the first organized minstrel show and created the standard instrumentation for the quartet ensemble: the fiddle, banjo, bones (castanets constructed from cow bone) and tambourine. Minstrelsy had developed into a full variety show incorporating plantation ballads, instrumental interludes, dance breaks and full chorus numbers.

The music performed on the minstrel stage was catchy to sing, easy to play and fun to dance to. Minstrel songs derived from British dance tunes and resembled songs from the African American tradition. The song form displayed a verse/refrain design where a soloist would sing the verses and a chorus joined in for the refrain. Eventually, the refrain was sung in four party harmony.

The fiddle and banjo eventually became synonymous with the most popular dance crazes of the era; i.e. the Cakewalk, the Walk-Around, the Breakdown, the Buck-And-Wing, the

¹⁵ Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 72.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 72.

¹⁸ For a useful history, see Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹⁹ Stump speeches were comedic monologues spoken to the audience as if standing on a tree stump.

²⁰ Minstrel characters still exist in American mass media today including the mammy character as Aunt Jemima, who is the face of the Aunt Jemima brand of pancake mix, syrup, and other breakfast foods.

Essence Dance, and Jumping Jim Crow.²¹ The irregular rhythms beloved by audiences were created by the animated strumming of the banjo. They enjoyed them so much that minstrel songs often inserted dance breaks at the end of every chorus.²² By the mid-1800s, the minstrel entertainment industry noticed a market for selling the minstrel song through music scores. Instrumental parts written for banjo, fiddle and the piano became accessible to people who wanted to sing and dance to their favorite minstrel tune.

For more than a century, numerous minstrel troupes traveled all over the world from the largest cities to the most remote towns. Despite their overwhelming acceptance and popularity, every show displayed themes explicitly distorting the reality of the African American experience. With no exposure to social interactions with actual African Americans, many in the rural white audience across the United States was influenced to believe that these fictitious stereotypes were true. As mediums of entertainment evolved with technology, blackface minstrelsy was incorporated in radio, film, television, and even animation. It was not until the early 1950s at the onset of the Civil Rights Movement when blackface minstrel performance became a socially unacceptable form of entertainment in the United States.

Case Study

By comparing the original lyrics of "Jim Along Josey" with the play-party versions, one can begin to understand why the song adaptation had occurred. The song was originally written in 1838 by the minstrel performer Edward Harper, and became a hit as a popular fiddle and dance tune. In his book *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music*, Sam Dennison suggests the first performance of "Jim Along Josey" was sung by Harper in a blackface drama called *The Free Nigger of New York*.²³

The first music score of the song—written for piano—was published in the same year. As shown in Figure 1, the cover reveals that the song was once sung by the "Eminent Professor" John M. Smith, who marketed himself to his audiences as "the celebrated delineator of Etheopean character."²⁴ Blackface minstrelsy was also commonly referred to as Ethiopian (or in this case spelled *Etheopean*)



Figure 1. "Jim Along Josey" music score cover. *Source:* Edward Harper, *Jim Along Josey*, (New York: Frith & Hall, 1840).

²¹ For more information on minstrel dances, see Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today*, 2nd ed. (Pennington, NJ: Princeton Book Company, 1988), 179-219.

²² Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 77.

²³ Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 77.

²⁴ Edward Harper, *Jim Along Josey*, (New York: Frith & Hall, 1840).

minstrelsy throughout the course of the nineteenth century. The sheet music publication distributed the song to a wider audience.²⁵

It can be assumed as to why "Jim Along Josey" was such a popular song with a brief analysis of the music itself. The melody is predictable and the phrasing is repetitive, which makes the tune memorable. Additionally, the song was written for everyone to be able to sing because its pitches fall within one octave. The dance break at the end, simply marked at *Dance* on the score, is the moment in the song when one would engage in dancing the signature movements of "Jim Along Josey."²⁶ Lastly, the final measure of each verse's phrase is marked by *Ad Lib* granted performers the freedom to change up the lyrics. Oral tradition gave rise to the many interpretations of the lyrics over time.²⁷

The original lyrics of "Jim Along Josey" contain racial slurs and allusions that are inappropriate for a child today. These African American stereotypes and themes were commonly applied in minstrel songs and sung in what was perceived as an African American dialect:

I'se from Lucianna as you all know,
 Dar where Jim along Josey's all de go,
 Dem niggars all rise when de bell does ring,
 And dis is de song da dey do sing.
 Hey get along, get along Josey,
 Hey get along, get along Jo!²⁸

The minstrel character, Jim Along Josey, was always represented as a *dandy*; a Northern freed slave who pretentiously attempted to dress in the latest aristocratic fashion. Additionally, this caricature often attempted to self-identify as *whiter* than other black individuals.²⁹ The second verse describes this character:

Oh! When I gets dat new coat which I expects to hab soon,
 Likewise a new pair tight-kneed trousaloon,
 Den I walks up and down Broadway wid my Susanna,
 And de white folks will take me to be Santa Anna.
 Hey get along, get along Josey,
 Hey get along, Jim along Joe!³⁰

According to Botkin, the chorus is using the American slang phrase *hey get along* which is an instruction for one to move out of the way. This phrase is also synonymous with the expression to *move along*.³¹ In addition to the provided dance break at the end of the piece, the chorus lyrics instructs the dancer to move. This dance was a form of breakdown which was associated with the African American folk dances that often occurred on plantations.³²

²⁵ Harper, *Jim Along Josey*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Dennison, *Scandalize My Name*, 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Emery, *Black Dance*, 138.

Of course, minstrel dances were never to be participated in by the play-party youth because dance was forbidden amongst rural American Protestants.³³ One former play-partier, Vance Randolph, recalled the church's condemnation for all dance related activities:

Less than a dozen years ago the people of my own village refused to allow a children's dancing-class in the town, and I myself heard one of our leading citizens declare that he would rather see his daughter dead than to have her dance, even in her own home. But the play-party, it appears, is a different matter altogether, and even the most fanatical religionists see no particular harm in it. The party-games are really dances, of course, but there is no orchestra; the players furnish their own simple music by singing lustily as they go through the intricate figures.³⁴

Any actions alluding to dance were viewed as sins that created sexual desires. The play-partiers were not ones to overtly participate in these activities because they respected the authorities of the church. However, they were still interested in creating flirtatious physical contact with the opposite sex. Not being allowed to use the minstrel instrumentation associated with the dance music of this time, the teens were subjected to use vocal song to organize their play-party game activities instead. This enabled them to create lyrics that instructed movements, which resembled forbidden dances.³⁵ Within the context of the play-party, these movements were not regarded as sin. This is further highlighted by former play-party participant Mrs. L. D. Ames:

These play-parties were really dances. The players did not dance, however, to the music of instruments, but kept time with various steps to their own singing. But they were not called dances: they were called simply parties. The better class of people in the country did not believe in dancing. Regular dances, where the music was furnished by a "fiddler," were held, for the most part, only in the homes of the rough element.³⁶

The preference for vocal accompaniment at play parties arose from the European and North American history or folklore that associated particular instruments with the Devil and evil spirits. Thus, aside dances, instrumentation in play-party contexts also had negative connotations. In his chapter entitled, "The Devil, the Fiddle, and Dancing," folklorist Herbert Halpert describes this ideology:

The Devil is known for his skill in playing the fiddle, an instrument which some reports say he invented. Sometimes he has contests with human fiddlers. If he teaches people to

³³ Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 21.

³⁴ Vance Randolph, "The Ozark Play-Party," *The Journal of American Folklore* 42, no. 165 (July-September 1929): 201.

³⁵ Children often create music to fulfill their desires. John Blacking realized Venda children were creating music that not only reflected experiences particular to a child's everyday life, but also did so in a manner that sounded unlike the music of the Venda adults. He suggested that this distinction in music proves that children live as a marginalized minority within their society's culture. As minorities, children have a music repertoire which involves both the songs bestowed upon them by the adult majority, as well as the songs they create themselves. For more information, see John Blacking, *Venda Children's Songs: A Study in Ethnomusicological Analysis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 29.

³⁶ Piper, "Some Play-Party Games," 262.

play, they become superlative performers. When he or his pupils are invited to play at dances, their music may be compulsive; people who hear it are forced to dance. Sometimes they cannot stop dancing until they die—unless the spell is broken, frequently by religious mean. Instruments he or his pupils have played may continue to play themselves after the pupil's death.³⁷

Even the Italian violinist and composer Nicolò Paganini, was subject to scrutiny for his virtuosity.³⁸ The 1935 edition of *The New Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* describes that Paganini's dexterity, unusual tunings, experiments with harmonics, and bizarre appearance "tended to create an uncanny impression, so that he was often alleged to be in league with the Evil One."³⁹

The fear of the fiddle's evil connotations engendered a creative space, the play-party, where vocal accompaniment could replace the fiddle's function. On the performance of dance movements, one play-party version of "Jim Along Josey," found in Iowa, describes physical movement and the embrace of another participant. Also, notice the use of the spelling "Josie" as opposed to "Josey" and the use of the phrase "Get along," instead of "Jim along." This illustrates how this song was orally transmitted and therefore required no universal spelling of the song lyrics:

Hey, come a get along,
 Get along, Josie.
 Hey, come a get along.
 Get along Jo.
 If I was single and wanted a beau,
 I'd fly to the arms of Jim along Jo.⁴⁰

A very similar version of the song was collected by Botkin in his dissertation. As mentioned before, these lyrics were collected in Oklahoma:

Hey, come a get along,
 Get along, Josie.
 Hey, come a get along.
 Get along Jo.
 All you girls that want a beau,
 Fall in the arms of the calico.⁴¹

³⁷ Herbert Halpert, "The Devil, The Fiddle, and Dancing." in *Fields of Folklore: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Goldstein*, ed. Roger D. Abrahams (Bloomington, IN: Trickster Press, 1995), 44.

³⁸ Paganini was musician of the Romantic period and is regarded today as the most famous violin virtuoso. See also, Edward Neill, "'Paganini, Nicolò,'" *Grove Music Online*, ed. by Deane Root, accessed July 26, 2017, <http://oxfordmusiconline.com>.

³⁹ Herbert Halpert, "The Devil and the Fiddle." *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (December 1943): 40.

⁴⁰ Bruce E. Mahan, "Play-Party Games," *The Palimpsest* 10, no. 2 (1929): 61.

⁴¹ The word *calico*, used in this American phrase refers to a young girl or dancer. See Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 215.

The movements of this next version of "Jim Along Josey," found in Eastern Illinois, reflect a tag game that results in the male and female hugging as a prize. Also, these lyrics have added reference to animals and nonsense scenarios, which reflect the children's song aesthetic:

Cat's in the cream jar,
Run, girls, run!
Fire in the mountains,
Fun, boys, fun!
Hey, Jim along, Jim along Josie!
Hey, Jim along, Jim Along, Jo.⁴²

For this version, participants form a circle of couples with the boy standing to the right side of the girl. Once the singing commenced a girl leaves her spot in the circle to run to the other side. As she attempts to return to her original spot, a boy across the circle tries to catch her. If he accomplishes this, he wins the embrace with the girl. This could also be described as a tag game, so therefore the movements in this song could be applied to other play-party tag game games too.⁴³

This next set of lyrics is from Western Nebraska and while the song is not titled "Jim Along Josey" it shares a similar chorus with the previous versions. Instead, this song is called "Hi, Come Along!":

Hitch my oxen to the cart
And go down the hill to get a load of bark
Hi, come along, Jim along Josie,
Fetch him along, Jim along Jo;
Take him along, Jim along Josie,
Fetch him along, Jim along Jo.⁴⁴

The numerous versions of "Jim Along Josey" were collected at the turn of the twentieth century from different locations across the United States, however, they share similar lyrics.⁴⁵ Whether the lyrics were instructing dance-like movements or expressing nonsense words, the phrase "Jim Along Josey" persisted. Because play-party songs used oral tradition, they served as an effective medium for minstrel songs to survive into the modern day.

Conclusion

The lyrical analysis of "Jim Along Josey" is just one example of how nineteenth century adolescents in the United States adapted minstrel songs into play-party songs. Play-party participants no longer used the minstrel song in its musical context and did so by stripping away the definable elements that made a song minstrel: the references to African American

⁴² Mahan, "Play-Party Games," 61.

⁴³ Alan L. Spurgeon, *Waltz the Hall: The American Play Party* (Jackson University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 117.

⁴⁴ Piper, "Some Play-Party Games," 268.

⁴⁵ As Botkin's dissertation proves, many more versions of "Jim Along Josey" exist. See Botkin, *Play-Party Song*, 214-216.

stereotypes, the minstrel instrumentation and the dance. They replaced the chorus with instructional lyrics to ignite movement in their games, and used voice accompaniment as a substitute for the fiddle. As a result, play-party adolescents created music to achieve interaction between the sexes without becoming ostracized by their religious communities. Play-party songs therefore, were essential to the survival of blackface minstrel characteristics due to their adaptive nature and camouflaging function.

Contemporary manifestations of minstrelsy such as this remind us of the minstrel show's irreversible effect on American culture. The preceding investigation thus calls attention to other manifestations from our current multimedia society and urges further scholarship in the emergence of blackface today. Such an endeavor is bound to shed more light on the precarious position of minstrelsy in American culture and ultimately contribute to the complicated discourse regarding race in the United States.

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