

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889–1895.* By Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002.

*Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, “Coon Songs,” and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz.* By Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

The culmination of twenty years of research, *Out of Sight* and *Ragged but Right* document underrepresented and until now little-understood worlds of African American entertainment that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. *Out of Sight* aims for comprehensiveness, surveying within its pages every domain of black popular music from 1889 to 1895 that receives mention in African American and entertainment newspapers of the time. *Ragged but Right* continues the story of one musical domain—ragtime—chronicling the heyday and its aftermath, which extended into the mid-twentieth century.

The titular phrase *Out of Sight* is both a metaphor for what had been the largely buried history of African American entertainment in the years preceding *Plessy v. Ferguson* as well as a vernacular acclamation whose currency in the 1890s may surprise those who remember its ubiquity in 1960s popular culture. The authors characterize the mini-era under study as the countdown to the commercial explosion of ragtime. Their decision to begin with 1889 is practical in that African American newspapers proliferated and enjoyed a modicum of stability in the late 1880s and 1890s, with the exception of southern ventures, which “suffered an uncommonly high mortality rate” (xiii). The decision is also logical, for 1889 reflects a transition in the jubilee singing tradition that had been initiated by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and subsequently pervaded the North in the 1870s and 1880s. Professional jubilee troupes gave way to what the authors call “vaudevillized minstrelsy” (xi), a more modern and decidedly secular entertainment shaped by a new generation that included Ernest Hogan and Billy McClain, who infused it with a greater degree of black vernacular music and humor that spoke more directly to black audiences. The ensuing years witnessed groundbreaking developments, such as the success of African American minstrel companies in the South (a region that professional jubilee groups had failed to conquer) and an unprecedented influx of black women performers. Certain performance genres enjoyed a transitory vogue, such as cakewalk extravaganzas and plantation shows (e.g., “Black America,” “South before the War”). Communities sprouted brass bands and orchestras, mandolin clubs, juvenile bands, and community quartets. Although these trends represented an eclectic mix of genres and musical styles, they were bound by at least one common denominator: ragtime—a style that would dominate popular music for the next two decades.

In *Ragged but Right* Abbott and Seroff argue that ragtime facilitated three avenues of professional opportunity for African American performers: musical comedy productions (e.g., the “big shows” of Bob Cole, Ernest Hogan, and Williams and Walker), band and minstrel companies in the circus sideshow annex, and traveling

tented minstrel shows. With the exception of the “big shows,” these performance genres have received little in-depth scrutiny.

In my opinion, the highlight of *Ragged but Right* is its unparalleled documentation of southern companies. Part II, for example, profiles the Smart Set companies, founded in 1902 by Ernest Hogan and Billy McClain. As the authors wryly note, “Smart Set” was “an oddly radical name to apply to an African American touring company” (82). The company toured the North offering new musical comedies each year until the 1909–10 season, when it split into two editions: the Northern Smart Set, headed by Sherman H. Dudley in the wake of Hogan’s death, and the Southern Smart Set, fronted by Salem Tutt Whitney and his brother, Homer Tutt (and featuring for a short time future blues singer Mamie Smith). Traveling below the Mason-Dixon line presented Whitney’s troupe with challenges distinct from those faced by northern troupes. Although received like royalty in black communities, black performers were barred from white-owned restaurants and lodgings and, as a result, frequently sat all night at train stations. In addition there was financial uncertainty, at least until Whitney started coordinating show dates with harvest schedules, ensuring an audience that had discretionary income. There was also a different pool of “native talent.” “It is really harder to please a colored audience in the South,” Whitney noted in the *Indianapolis Freeman* in 1912. “There are performers . . . that can dance rings around our best Northern dancers and sing a coon song incomparably. . . . Every other man or boy one meets on the street corner is a natural-born comedian. . . . If one is a dancer, he need not go far to find a barefoot boy who can eclipse one’s best effort” (114).

In characteristic American entrepreneurial spirit, imitators tried to cash in on Whitney’s success by appropriating the Smart Set name, most notably among them Alexander Tolliver (ca. 1914). As Abbott and Seroff observe, “Tolliver’s troupe was an unabashedly *southern* Smart Set” (122), featuring a preponderance of southern performers. Tolliver’s show ushered in the era of tented minstrelsy, casting aside the musical comedy framework of its forerunners in favor of a blues and jazz revue spiced with novelty acts. Tolliver’s tent sat 3,000 to 5,000 patrons; according to the African American press “hundreds of thousands of black southerners, and tens of thousands of whites, heard blues and jazz performed” during the company’s heyday, from 1914 to 1917 (151).

In the same way that African American minstrels undermined white minstrels in the North after the Civil War by offering audiences a taste of “genuine” plantation culture, African American minstrels around 1900 undermined their white counterparts—especially in the South—by offering unprecedented exposure to black vernacular culture. White troupes reacted by trying to “choke off access to mainstream theaters in the southern states” (210). Black troupes countered with tent shows, which rose to prominence around 1900, peaked artistically in the early 1910s, and hung on until the late 1950s. Abbott and Seroff’s Part IV narrates the rise and fall of the four most influential tent shows: Allen’s New Orleans Minstrels, the Rabbit’s Foot Company, the Florida Blossoms, and the Silas Green from New Orleans Company. These shows are probably best known today as laboratories for introducing the future classic blues singers Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith. The excellent profiles of these companies are especially significant for documenting

their excursions into back-country towns in the South and the West. Although the connection between minstrel songs and southern rural musics has long been taken for granted, the names, dates, and itineraries presented in this part should lay the groundwork for new scholarship on manners of transmission.

Perhaps the most original contribution of *Ragged but Right* has to do with circus history. Racism barred African American jugglers, acrobats, wire walkers, and other specialty artists from the big top, so they found a home as novelty acts in minstrel shows. White circuses were a major employer of black bands and minstrel companies, which they confined to the sideshow annex along with the “freaks and curiosities” (158). “The majority of published histories politely ignore patterns of racial discrimination that are a skeleton in the closet of the American circus,” write the authors (158). Fortunately, Abbott and Seroff are anything but polite, and their Part III, “Blues for the Sideshow Tent,” is a fascinating corrective. A central character in this section is P. G. Lowery, whose band appeared most notably with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey’s Combined Circus. Lowery’s “rolling conservatory” educated numerous musicians in a style so distinctive that, upon hearing them, “one can easily tell they are from the Lowery school,” according to an *Indianapolis Freeman* article (196). As Abbott and Seroff note, recordings have understandably dominated blues and jazz scholarship. I believe we have moved beyond their attendant assertion: “It seems to be accepted as a matter of faith that mainstream America was first introduced to blues through the medium of phonograph records” (207). If their assertion is true, however, that article of faith is shattered by their documentation of performances featuring the blues of W. C. Handy and other composers, which took place in street parades and in circus lots, throughout “every inhabited part of the United States and much of Canada” in the years before World War I.

Whereas *Ragged but Right* takes a narrative approach, organizing its materials into four large parts that cover different sectors of ragtime entertainment, *Out of Sight* takes a chronological approach, with each of its seven chapters titled by year. Within each chapter are six to nine subsections dedicated to specific performers; these begin with a short introductory essay, followed by a series of chronological excerpts from newspapers. Chapter 1, “1889,” for example, introduces Frederick Loudin’s Fisk Jubilee Singers, the Tennessee Jubilee Singers and Sissieretta Jones, other jubilee singers, and blackface minstrels. A subsection titled “Selected, Annotated Chronology of Music-Related Citations, 1889” serves as a catch-all for performers who did not attract consistent coverage that year in the authors’ sources (Blind Tom, the Hyers Sisters, various brass bands), anonymous choirs and quartets, and informal music-making occasions (parlor concerts, organ grinding). The chief virtue of this general approach is that it affords access to primary sources that remain rare even in this era of increasing digitization. The authors generally quote entire newspaper items, making the book an invaluable resource for a wide range of scholars. The effect, as the authors note, is one of a diary (xvii).

As with a diary, however, the reader risks losing sight of the larger picture. The authors observe that their documentation “establishes the essential connection among all categories of African American music” from this era (xv), from folk to sacred to secular, and from recreational to professional, noting that “trends and

phenomena are revealed through a preponderance of specific details” accumulated in the newspaper items (xvii). Satisfactory attainment of this goal, however, ultimately requires considerable effort on the reader’s part. Such effort could have been alleviated by a wider-ranging introduction that defined trends and phenomena in detail (instead it is confined to a discussion of the sources used), as well as a conclusion that gave some perspective on the plethora of documentation presented in the 465 pages of text.

*Ragged but Right* sidesteps this problem with a more focused approach and structure, as well as selective quotation of primary sources interpolated into the text. Although long lists of song titles and performers at times impede a forward thrust and discourage continuous reading, the narrative approach promotes a clearer understanding of trends and intersections between entertainers and entertainment forms than *Out of Sight*.

Both books are invaluable repositories of song titles, programs, traveling circuits, and names of troupes and performers along with their histories, as available. In addition, each includes a liberal dose of photographs, playbills, advertisements, sheet music covers (in *Ragged but Right*), and photographic reproductions of entire articles from various newspapers. The photographs are especially useful resources for period dress, costumes, and the use of blackface. The variety of illustrations also encourages a certain intimacy with the era that is especially valuable for readers unacquainted with the primary sources. The volumes are handsomely designed, and book designer Todd Lape has given the display matter of *Ragged but Right* a distinctive and delightful typographical treatment that mimics period circus and theatrical playbills by mixing typefaces, serif and sans serif, as well as capital and lower-case letters.

Both books are also valuable social histories; of particular interest to me were descriptions of segregated and integrated seating, reception among black versus white audiences, strategies that black performers used to mitigate Jim Crow laws, the engagement with or dismantling of minstrel stereotypes, audience indifference to older-generation minstrels (e.g., Tom McIntosh), and the back-to-Africa movement. There are numerous compelling biographies in *Ragged but Right*, among them those of Ernest Hogan (whose importance in early black musical theater needs to be reasserted, the authors argue) and Patrick Henry “Pat” Chapelle—both of whom, it seems, worked themselves to death.

The indices in both books dutifully list song titles, names, and troupes (and appendices helpfully list troupe personnel by year), but the lack of conceptual entries is inconvenient. Readers who might like to compare audience reaction to tented minstrel troupes in Texas as opposed to North Carolina, or the reception of minstrel troupes among blacks as opposed to whites, for example, must systematically cull this information from the case studies. A greater number of topical entries would also be welcome; to give one illustration, an entry for theater lighting would lead a reader to the interesting fact that the Florida Blossoms was the first show of its kind to use a Delco portable light plant, which was installed when a carbide lamp in a chandelier exploded and killed a worker in 1916.

Abbott and Seroff’s two books provide unprecedented detail about African American popular entertainment around the turn of the century and are essential and

accessible resources. The authors' descriptive prose is witty and entertaining. Readers looking for musical analysis will have to look elsewhere (*Out of Sight* includes four musical scores; *Ragged but Right* none), but the good news is that there is elsewhere to look. Recent scholarship engages with musical scores, performance practice, recordings, and performer biographies.<sup>1</sup> The broad sweep of *Out of Sight* and *Ragged but Right* anchors this newly emerging body of scholarship. Thanks to Abbott and Seroff, this corner of black popular entertainment is out of sight no longer.

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*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2011) Volume 5, Number 1, pp. 117–120.  
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*Claiming Diaspora: Music, Transnationalism, and Cultural Politics in Asian/Chinese America.* By Su Zheng. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

*Claiming Diaspora* is an important contribution to the growing body of work examining the musical activities of Asian Americans.<sup>2</sup> As one might expect from an ethnomusicological study, the book focuses on a specific cultural group within a single geographical space: Chinese Americans in New York City. Despite the broad title, the book is grounded almost entirely in New York City. However, it boldly and innovatively challenges the limitations and problems of ethnographic-based work. Chinese Americans are shown to be part of a diverse community, composed of individuals in a multitude of linguistic, social, national, and ethnic groups, which are further intersected by class and gender. This cultural diversity is reflected by a wide range of genres of music that includes several different types of Chinese opera, traditional instrumental music, folk song, Western art music, contemporary concert music by Chinese composers, Chinese pop, and Asian American jazz. This breadth of genres is exceptional in ethnomusicological studies, which Zheng

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Will Marion Cook, *The Music and Scripts of "In Dahomey,"* ed. Thomas L. Riis, *Music in the United States of America*, vol. 5 (Madison: Published for the American Musicological Society by A-R Editions, 1996); Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Marva Griffin Carter, "Swing Along": *The Musical Life of Will Marion Cook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mark Berresford, *That's Got 'em: The Life and Music of Wilbur C. Sweatman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); John Graziano, "The Early Life and Career of the 'Black Patti': The Odyssey of an African American Singer in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53/3 (Autumn 2000): 543–96.

<sup>2</sup> Zheng's bibliography includes references to most of the important scholarship on the subject. In addition, however, see Krystyn Moon, "Lee Tung Foo and the Making of a Chinese American Vaudevillian, 1900s–1920s," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8/1 (2005): 23–48; Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Mina Yang, "Orientalism and the Music of Asian Immigrant Communities in California, 1924–1945," *American Music* 19/4 (2001): 385–416.