

ARTHUR KNIGHT

DISINTEGRATING THE MUSICAL

BLACK PERFORMANCE AND AMERICAN MUSICAL FILM



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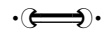
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The poem “Downtown Vaudeville”
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IN MEMORY OF

GERALD MAST AND

MARK TUCKER



DEDICATED TO

MARTHA HOWARD

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ix

INTRODUCTION: Disintegrating the Musical 1

1 CHAPTER ONE Wearing and Tearing the Mask:
Blacks on and in Blackface, Live 29

CHAPTER TWO “Fool Acts”: Cinematic Conjunctions
of White Blackface and Black Performance 49

CHAPTER THREE Indefinite Talk: Blacks in Blackface,
Filmed 92

2 CHAPTER FOUR Black Folk Sold: Hollywood’s
Black-Cast Musicals 123

CHAPTER FIVE “Aping” Hollywood: Deformation
and Mastery in *The Duke is Tops* and *Swing!* 169

CHAPTER SIX *Jammin’ the Blues*: The Sight of
Jazz, 1944 195

CODA Bamboozled? 231

NOTES 249

BIBLIOGRAPHY 301

INDEX 327

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Introduction

DISINTEGRATING THE MUSICAL

“What’s your work?” the negro asked Stahr.

“I work for the pictures.”

“Oh.” After a moment he added, “I never go to movies.”

“Why not?” asked Stahr sharply.

“There’s no profit. I never let my children go.”

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD (1941)

I loved the tough guys, the action, Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, and I loved all that dancing and carrying on in such films as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*.

—MALCOLM X (1964)

I asked the stranger . . . , “Mister, that paper [the *Chicago Defender*] got musicianers in it?” . . . [He] flipped the page to a picture of Jimmie Lunceford’s entire band. Facing it . . . was a picture story of Ethel Waters, whose movie *Cabin in the Sky* we’d seen the week before from the “colored section” in the balcony of the Ritz picture show on Third Street. That did it! I said, “Gimme one.” —WILLIE RUFF (1991)

Beginning with the popularization of synchronized sound, Hollywood movies have emphatically linked African Americans with music and musical performance. This link does not have a necessary or direct relation to film genre. Black musicians turn up, play a song or two, and disappear in comedies, melodramas, and *films noir* or, to note some familiar nonmusical classics, in *Jezebel* (1938), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and

Casablanca (1942). Nonetheless, during the “classical” or “studio” era of American sound filmmaking (1927–1959), when Hollywood movies linked blacks with musical performance, they were most likely to make that link in the context of works that producers, critics, and audiences labeled “musical.” The first widely distributed synchronized sound feature, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), was a musical that linked blackness to musical performance through Al Jolson’s blackface performance, leading one early historian of blacks in American film to exclaim sarcastically, “The Negro had arrived in talking pictures—as a black-face comedian!”¹ Even before *The Jazz Singer*, however, sound-film pioneer Lee de Forest had made short films of black musicians like Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake performing, and soon after *The Jazz Singer*, Hollywood studios supplemented blackface musical performances like Jolson’s with “specialty numbers” by black musicians in otherwise white musicals and with many black-cast musical shorts.

By itself this profusion of black musical performance in Hollywood films demands critical, scholarly attention that it has yet to receive. This lack of attention is made more remarkable by the fact that these fugitive performances, which nestle in the nooks and crannies of the musical, are anchored by an unprecedented and unparalleled cycle of eight all or predominantly black-cast Hollywood musicals: *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), *Hallelujah!* (1929), *The Green Pastures* (1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), *Carmen Jones* (1954), *St Louis Blues* (1958), and *Porgy and Bess* (1959). Not until the brief flurry of interracial social-problem films in the late forties did Hollywood focus so intently on African Americans using another genre, and not until the 1950s would Hollywood produce a black-cast drama or comedy.² Simply put, compared with the musical, whether broadly or narrowly construed, no other genre of Hollywood film provided similar quantity of or focused with similar intensity on representations of black Americans.

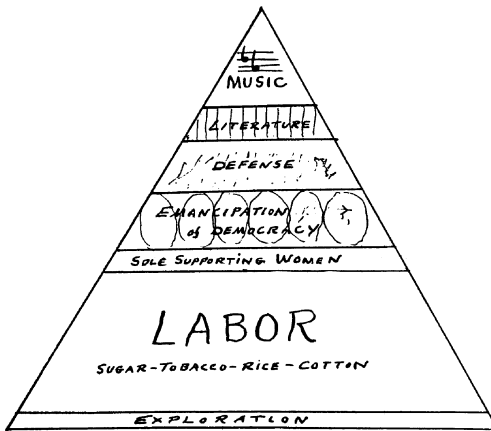
My project was initially prompted by the impulse to explore Hollywood’s propensity for representing African Americans with and through musical performance. It has been complicated by discovering that, like Hollywood films, sound-era “race” films—black-cast films intended for black audiences and made outside the Hollywood system by both black and white filmmakers—also emphatically link blackness and music. Often the link comes in isolated musical numbers in otherwise nonmusical films such as gangster or boxing stories. In some instances, however,

the interest of race films lies predominantly in their use of music, which is sometimes quite like and other times very different from that of a Hollywood musical. These “musical” race films have been as underexamined and even less acknowledged than Hollywood’s black-cast musicals, specialty numbers, and shorts. They also demand study.

This book capitalizes on the expanding body of scholarship dedicated to African Americans in American cinema but focuses its examination on what seems to be the most widely and enduringly accepted, enjoyed, and even *loved* black cinematic figure, the musical performer.³ Why were—and are—African Americans so emphatically linked with music and musical performance in the American cinematic imagination, and why was this link so strongly, generically formalized in the black-cast musicals from 1929 to 1959? Why did race-film producers ever pick such a difficult, expensive, and so clearly *Hollywood* genre as the musical? What and how did race musicals mean, and to what audiences? How did race-film musicals interplay, or not, with their Hollywood counterparts? What and how did these varying representations of black musical performance in the most iconic and revered and most frivolous and dismissed of American film genres—“That’s entertainment!”—mean and to whom? What and how do they continue to mean, and to whom, today? These are the overarching questions this book will address as it describes and analyzes the black-musical link and seeks to understand the aesthetic, cultural, and social meanings and effects of that link for various—but especially black—American audiences.

“The Gift of Black Folk” Meets Mass Reproducibility

Neither Hollywood nor race-film producers invented the representational link between African Americans and musical performance. From early contacts between Europeans and Africans, through the transport of Africans to the Americas, during more than two centuries of enslavement, and on through decades of de jure and de facto oppression, both white and black chroniclers commented on the importance of music to West African and then African American cultures. Many mechanisms, ranging from slave purchasing to harvest festivals to stage performances, brought African American “folk” music and musical performance into the domain of the commercial marketplace.⁴ In the late-nineteenth and



1. W. E. B. Du Bois, outline for *The Gift of Black Folk* (detail). 1924. Used with the permission of David Graham Du Bois and The W. E. B. Du Bois Foundation.

early twentieth centuries, mechanical and electronic recording media—sound recording and broadcasting, photography, film, and then synchronized sound film—added apparently indexical, verisimilar documents to the chronicle of the important place of music in African American culture. As mass reproducible, mass marketable, and particularly in the case of film, mass audience media, these recording media took on special importance in their relation to—and of—African Americans, their “minority” culture, and that culture’s marketable music.

W. E. B. Du Bois is a writer well situated both to represent music’s importance in Afro-America and to supply us with tools for analyzing that circumstance and its stakes at the threshold of mass mediation. Du Bois—ardent activist, sociologist and historian, aesthete, and champion of folk and high art—might seem an unlikely companion of the musical film, but he is not. Du Bois wrote only two film reviews in his prolific career. One was of *Birth of a Nation* (1915); not surprisingly, it was negative.⁵ The other, just over a decade later, was of *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!*, Hollywood’s first two black-cast musicals; Du Bois’s review was positive—especially about the films’ use of “Negro folk music.”⁶ I have more to say about Du Bois’s particular response to these early black-cast musicals and to other forms of black musical performance in later chapters. Because they stand behind his thinking on the black-cast musicals and because they have informed so much subsequent thinking about African Americans and music, I concentrate here on his broader ideas about music.

For Du Bois, at least during the first half of his long career, music was at the pinnacle of the “gifts of black folk,” the gifts “we” — black folk — had brought to America and “mingled . . . with yours.” The black gift of music, “a gift of story and song,” occupied this crucial position for two reasons. First, it emblemized the other crucial black gifts of “Spirit” and of “sweat and brawn.” In the form of “sorrow songs” or spirituals, black music stood as both testament to and matrix for black belief and endurance, and in the form of work songs, it served the same functions for black labor. Second, black music provided “soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land.”⁷ This gift of music, through contrast, both criticized and reimagined the dominant, profoundly unequal order of the United States.

Du Bois’s choice of the word *gift* is a complex one that, for ends both polemical and analytic, bears several meanings. Gift carries the sense of some thing given beyond compulsion and outside the marketplace, a thing valued both for its intrinsic properties and for the manner in which it is acquired. In this sense, gift suggests an alternative moral and ethical economy of mutuality, reciprocity, and acknowledgment; one gift calls forth another, and gifts become ties of communication and community. However, gift also carries with it the sense of a unique talent or skill, something “god given,” a quality possessed. In this sense, gift suggests a kind of property. So “the gift of black folk” is both a possession of African Americans and something they have shared — “mingled” — with white Americans; it is something that cannot be taken from African Americans and something that must be acknowledged, and should be reciprocated, as already “given” by blacks to whites.

Du Bois insisted that the black gift of music was both passive and active. The gift is something very nearly “essential” to blacks, a crucial part of black cultural identity, something that “black folk” *have*, and, at the same time, the gift must be maintained through giving, through use, through sending it out into the nonblack, nonfolk world. So for Du Bois the emblematic black gift of music was at once black and not black. Du Bois chose music as his emblematic black gift because it so clearly arose from the material, social circumstances of the people who made it — in the United States, socially and legally defined “colored” bodies — and because it seemed uncontained by those circumstances, because it could seemingly float free of those circumstances and bodies.

These complexities suggest that control of the black gift is crucial.

With *the* black gift being music, control has as much—perhaps more—to do with the sight of music and the stories that are told about it than it does with the sound of music. What musical performance looks like and the narratives that explain those looks matter crucially to how music sounds and what it can mean.

Mass mediation such as print notation, sound recording, broadcasting, and film throws the black gift into crisis. By materializing the split between giver/producer of music and its receiver/consumer, mass mediation makes acutely problematic the control of the gift through its affiliated look and story. Under mass mediation, music does not simply float as sound carried through air away from its giving, producing, social bodies; rather, it is captured and carried away, to be re-presented under circumstances whose relation to the sound's "original" affiliated sight and story may be very different. As a consequence, music can seem to become wholly invisible, disembodied, and *sui generis*. In the combination of mass media and mass market commodity capitalism, this differential distance between giver and receiver comes to be almost ensured and to mimic the very social and legal hierarchies it promises to transcend, escape, or collapse. The potential moral circuit of the gift that Du Bois desired becomes, at best, the abstraction of selling and, at worst, "property" theft. The capital-intensive mass media are beyond ordinary black control and access, and the gift of music can slip away through alienation or be stolen away through appropriation. Langston Hughes succinctly expressed the problem of Du Bois's "gift" in the era of mass-market mass reproducibility this way: "You've done taken my blues and gone."⁸

Here is where musical film enters. Like any other mass medium, synchronized sound film separates producer and consumer, but unlike print, sound recording, and broadcast, synchronized sound film may reproduce the (re)union of recorded sound and sight moving emphatically together in time. Though synchronized sound film offers many possible uses, its dominant use quickly became a way of restoring sound to sight. When musical performance was the object of reproduction, however, sound film became a way of restoring sight to sound. In sound film, the reproduced, synchronized sight of African Americans performing could be (re)attached to the sound of (black) recorded music. And when sound film conjoined with already established patterns of Hollywood feature-length narrative filmmaking, one important generic result was

the musical, a type of movie that used the qualities of sound film both by embedding musical performance in a story and by developing a story that would account for musical performance. The musical, then, could not only represent African Americans performing; it could also present stories that purported, more or less explicitly, to “explain” why African Americans would (or should) perform music, stories that would evaluate, even as they commercially conveyed across mass-mediated spatial and temporal distances, Du Bois’s “gift of black folk.”

Sound film not only *could* rejoin “colored” sight to “colored” sound and tell stories to explain the joining—as I’ve already suggested, *it did so*, and quite often, in the musical. Because of its properties as a medium and a mode of commerce, musical film became an especially important site of contention over the meaning of African American music and musical performance as the gift of black folk, in all the senses of Du Bois’s phrase. Emerging from a web of other media (e.g., sound recordings) and modes (e.g., all kinds of live performances, including stage musicals), the musical film became a locus around which crucial debates about the sound, sight, and stories of black music—and, thus, symbolic debates about African Americans and their culture(s) in America—could play out.

It was because the musical could be such a locus that both Hollywood and race filmmakers used black musicians so often and, at the same time, in such constricted ways. This is why blackface mattered and why it wasn’t simply rejected out of hand by many black performers, critics, and audiences. This is why Du Bois and other black intellectuals and critics felt compelled to comment on *Hearts in Dixie*, *Hallelujah!*, and the other black-cast musicals; why Walter White, director of the NAACP, helped Lena Horne get a Hollywood contract; and why Horne, Paul Robeson, and Dorothy Dandridge left Hollywood while other black stars like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway continued to return. And the intricacies of the musical account for why cultural producers of radical “racial” political intent—whether “race” filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux, the left-liberal makers of *Jammin’ the Blues* (1944) or, more recently, African American filmmakers like Michael Schultz in *Car Wash* (1974), Julie Dash in *Illusions* (1984), or Spike Lee in *School Daze* (1989), *Girl 6* (1996) or *Bamboozled* (2000)—have so often used, revised, expanded, and dis/integrated the musical.

Integration: Industrial and Sociocultural

The word *integration* has three important senses for this book. The first of these, which in its specifics concerns me least, names efforts of the Hollywood film studios to rationalize, control, and expand the production and consumption of movies. These efforts at vertically integrating the businesses of film had as their aim creating and maintaining the largest possible audience. Consequently, these efforts not only affected economic decisions (e.g., decisions to invest in all the layers of production, distribution, and exhibition as well as in ancillary industries like music publishing) but also influenced the forms film would take and, crucially, the types of spectators these forms imagined and tried to posit for themselves.⁹

Of course, film industry efforts to create a mass audience that would be homogenous enough, or at least consume homogeneously enough, to be an efficient market for its integrated business structure would at least in theory run afoul of the fact that across the classical era of filmmaking much of the United States was legally segregated and virtually all of it was informally segregated by race. Congruent, then, with the rationalist, capitalist business impulse to create homogenized markets arose the civil rights impulse and language of racial-social “integration.” This is the second sense of the word *integration* that is important to my analysis, and once more W. E. B. Du Bois both represents the term’s importance and supplies tools for analyzing it.

In 1934, the Board of Directors of the NAACP fired Du Bois as the editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*, over a dispute about the meaning of the word *integration* and the potential socioeconomic consequences of pursuing integration as a strategy for black civil rights. In his April 1933 *Crisis* editorial, “Right to Work,” Du Bois had analyzed the “American industrial system” as one that organized production and disorganized consumption—or, more accurately, made consumption purely an act of “cooperation” between the individual consumer and the (often oligopolistic) producers of goods. Under such a system, a socially “despised minority” becomes nearly infinitely exploitable, at once needing or wanting the products of the system and being uninvited—by law, custom, and economic rationale—into it as anything more than a consumer and expendable low-wage worker. Sounding surprisingly like Booker T. Wash-

ington, but with an explicit socialist bent, Du Bois wrote: “What can we do? We can work for ourselves. We can consume mainly what we ourselves produce, and produce as large a proportion as possible of that which we consume.” Without using the phrase, Du Bois proposed—in contradiction of NAACP policy and his own policy in the past—racial self-segregation. Du Bois proposed the purposeful construction of a legal but alternative “black market.”¹⁰

“Right to Work” did not get Du Bois fired, but it started the process. What precipitated it was his April 1934 editorial, “Segregation in the North.” Du Bois repeated his analysis and argument, but this time he used direct language of imposed segregation, self-segregation, cooperation, and boycott. The concluding section of Du Bois’s essay is titled “Integration.” He agrees with “extreme opponents of segregation” that “complete integration of the black race with the white race in America, with no distinction of color in political, civil or social life . . . is the great end toward which humanity is tending.” “So long,” writes Du Bois, “as there are artificially emphasized differences of nationality, race and color, not to mention the fundamental discriminations of economic class, there will be no real Humanity.” These are long-term goals, however, to which contemporary social and economic practices and organization are, in Du Bois’s estimation, inimical. Consequently, Du Bois argues, “it will sometimes be necessary to our survival and an ultimate step toward the ultimate breaking down of barriers, to increase by voluntary action our separation from our fellowmen.”¹¹

The NAACP board disagreed vehemently, condemning all forms of “enforced” segregation, whether the enforcement was legal or social and informal. Du Bois’s May 1934 editorial first outlined his colleagues’ disagreement with him and then responded with a list of questions aimed at the NAACP’s official resolutions on segregation. Du Bois wondered what the NAACP “believed” when it confronted the reality of the segregated American world and all the social, economic, and cultural results. His final, freighted question returned, at what Du Bois clearly believed a moment of profound crisis, to a familiar Du Boisian subject and symbol, one that from another writer and in a different, less charged era might seem a non sequitur: If the NAACP board does not “believe” in or “approve” of any kind of segregation, Du Bois asked, “does it believe in the Negro spirituals?”¹² For Du Bois the question is rhetorical. The spirituals, which in his view would never have come into being had

black slaves and freedmen only aimed to integrate with white society and culture, prove to Du Bois that unthinking integration is bad and that specific instances of segregation can be good—or yield good, critical results.

Throughout this debate Du Bois never mentioned the movies, but they may well have presented the knottiest version of what he envisioned as a racialized crisis of confluence between mass industrial integration and racial-social segregation. Comparatively, the hiring of “Negro clerks” by the stores in metropolitan “black belts,” an example Du Bois does mention, is easy and straightforward. By and large, for blacks in 1934 (but also 1944 and 1954) the movies meant attending segregated but white-owned and managed theaters that played films employing mostly white performers and made by companies owned and controlled by whites.¹³ Under the circumstances, not going to the movies, like the “negro” who appears briefly at the center of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon*, would seem easy: “There’s no profit.”¹⁴ Boycott, which Du Bois defined as “the use of mass action by Negroes who take advantage of segregation in order to strengthen their economic foundation,” would seem automatic and beyond the necessity of consumer “co-operation” and “organization.”¹⁵

However, not going to the movies would be harder if the theater were comfortable, convenient, away from family control (“I never let my children go,” says Fitzgerald’s negro, almost ensuring that they will want to), modestly priced, staffed at least partly by African Americans, and often featured black live performers. Not going to the movies would be harder if there were not many alternative “equivalent” goods available and if an alternative “equivalent” industry of the sort Du Bois envisioned arising through self-segregation was unlikely because of the special intricacy and capital intensiveness of the movies’ dominant form, not to mention the anticompetitive measures of the dominant industry.¹⁶ Not going to the movies would be harder if the films shown did also sometimes employ African American performers, especially musicians—perhaps even respectfully, or in a way interpretable as an apparent gesture of respect and recognition. For the politically engaged, not going to the movies would be harder when one knew African Americans would be represented. After all, such representations might influence how whites were thinking of blacks (and how blacks might think of themselves) and might demand informed, critical response. In differing degrees, all of these reasons prob-

ably contributed to the “love” young Malcolm X/Detroit Red/Malcolm Little felt for *Casablanca* (music supplied by Dooley Wilson as Sam, well and respectfully “integrated,” in relative terms, into Rick’s), *Cabin in the Sky*, and *Stormy Weather*.¹⁷

In such circumstances—in an economically integrated industry deploying some social-racial integration in a dispersed field where the public sites of consumption need not be racially integrated—what was there to boycott? Where was the economic foundation, especially when the form, the product, at the putative center—the movies—could seem to give back the black gift of sighted, storied song? When Langston Hughes wrote his “Note on Commercial Art,” his references tended toward media of mass reproduction, but in fact they denoted live performance:

You’ve done taken my blues and gone—
 You sing ’em in Paris
 And you sing ’em in the Hollywood Bowl,
 And you mixed ’em up with symphonies
 And you fixed ’em
 So they don’t sound like me.

Implicit here is that “my blues” no longer look “like me” either and, additionally, that their look is no longer easily available to “me.” Indeed, a compensating virtue of the movies compared with theater might be that they are also relatively available, making it easier for “me” to gauge the misappropriation and (mis)representation of “my blues.” At the same time, movies make the problems of misappropriation and (mis)representation different and potentially more severe, since with overdubbing, for example, “my blues” might no longer “sound like me” yet might still look “like me.”

As the processes of giving and taking the black gift of music became entangled with mass media and culture, many Americans found it easy to identify black performers visually and to assume, bearing in mind certain broad restrictions, that the music they performed was “theirs,” was “black.” In other words, whatever was “black” about the music an African American performer made became a superficial (though far from inconsequential) visual quality. The connection was revocable under certain circumstances—a black pianist playing Chopin, for example, didn’t make Chopin black music, although the sighted sound might disquiet racist auditors—but stuck tenaciously under others—a black chorus

singing, for example, the “folk” music of Stephen Foster or “Dixie” or any variety of what Hughes saw as pseudo-blues.

Adding poignancy to this (mis)representational dilemma, and to my attempts to analyze it, is that even well informed, passionate critics who felt an imperative to limn a complex sense of the link(s) between Afro-America, music, and American socioculture could not and still cannot fully agree about what, besides black performers, makes black music “black” or about what music(s) earn the label. For instance, though both Du Bois and Hughes would agree that something beyond skin color made some music black, they did not fully agree on the blackness of the blues and jazz. Du Bois found both these forms impoverished compared to the authentic (for him) black music of spirituals, music that represented the social and cultural ideals of Afro-America, but Hughes found them, especially in relation to twentieth-century, urban black experience, more compelling than the old sorrow songs. This overlapping of informed agreements and disagreements about what counts as black music is poignant because, in its nuance and complexity, it often failed in the face of a common sound-image and its frequent associational chain, which went (and goes) like this: “There is a synchronized sound motion picture of a black person (or black people) making music. That music is black. Black people are musical (more so than white people and to the exclusion of other qualities).”¹⁸ A distilled instance of this problematic, with a slight shift in register, might be perceived in the film critic and historian Donald Bogle’s conflicted feelings about the black musical performers in classical era musicals. On the one hand, they give him immense pleasure; he claims seeing Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* inspired his career choice, and he has spent much of his career chronicling and examining these performers. On the other hand, his categorization of their efforts, controlled as they were by Hollywood and the musical, is despairing; they all contribute to the “Negro Entertainer Syndrome.” On a third hand (an awkward figure for an awkward situation), Bogle reprieves these performers from the scathing litany of stereotype, “toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks,” that provides the title of his widely known and influential history of blacks in film.¹⁹

One early reader of my manuscript asked me with some dismay, “Are you proposing that we know black music when we see it?” Yes and no, depending always on who (and when and where) the “we” doing the seeing and hearing are. Throughout this book, with Du Bois’s concerns about

the sociocultural and economic mechanisms of integration(s) resonating in the background, I will outline varying, often competing and contradictory but less often interacting positions on black music, black musical authenticity, and the value of different black musical performances.²⁰ In the musical and its use of black performers, final judgements of the (in)authenticity or (im)purity of the music they perform are less at stake, in my view, than are the circumstances under which, the mechanisms through which, and the debates around how African Americans and blackness can be seen, heard, and understood at all—particularly in relation to the American mainstream that film, especially in its economically integrated Hollywood mode, aims to penetrate.

Integration: Formal, Aesthetic, and Ideological

The third, and last, sense of integration important to this book refers to a formal quality specific to the musical, defined in the strict sense as a feature-length, narrative stage and film genre. The earliest uses of this sense of “integration” that I have discovered were in 1943. The first was in a highly favorable review of the stage premiere of Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers’s *Oklahoma!*: “Mr. Rodgers’ scores never lack grace, but seldom have they been so well integrated as this.”²¹ The second was eight months later in an equally favorable review of Hammerstein’s *Carmen Jones*: “The stage direction by Hassard Short, the musical direction of Joseph Littau and the orchestral arrangements by Russell Bennett are completely integrated.”²² When these two reviewers refer to “integration,” they are referring to a pattern of commensurability, coherence, and appropriateness between the story or drama and the music. Since *Oklahoma!* contains no black characters and *Carmen Jones* contains no white characters, these reviewers clearly do not mean to invoke the idea of racial-social integration, even though this sense of the term was common by 1943.²³ Across the forties, this formal sense of integration rose steadily into journalistic, industrial, and finally scholarly usage, and *Oklahoma!* came to be known generally as the first “integrated” American musical. About the same time, critics began, retrospectively, to see signs of musical integration in Hammerstein and Jerome Kern’s *Show Boat* (staged 1927, filmed 1936, revived 1946, filmed 1951), which in contrast to *Oklahoma!* and *Carmen Jones* was also self-reflexively racially

integrated. Gershwin and Heyward's all-black cast *Porgy and Bess* (staged 1934, revived 1942, filmed 1959) also receives frequent mention in accounts of musical integration, and when critics later began their search for the earliest formally integrated film musical, they often turned to the all-black cast *Hallelujah!*

I suggest below why it is not just an ironic coincidence that "integration" should rise at nearly the same time into common usage in reference to both race relations and the musical genre, but first it is important to understand more fully what musical genre critics and scholars have meant when they use the term. While not fully apparent in the context of the quotations already cited, in formal musical-genre terms integration describes the relationship between the narrative and the musical numbers in a film or play. One source for the idea is opera, where the form aspires to—and institutionalizes in the recitative of grand opera—a fusion of music and narrative;²⁴ hence the logical, though overlooked, place of Hammerstein's adaptation of *Carmen* in the history of the integrated musical. A more frequently explicated source for the idea, perhaps because it is more apparently "native" to America, develops out of "folk" music. Here the sense is that different cultures, regions, and communities have a music, that this music or an imitation or approximation of it should be assigned to characters appropriately, and that, in consequence, music and story will seem to have a "natural" or "realistic" relation. Affiliated with this source for the idea of musical integration is the sense, often applied more directly to lyric than music, that the music should advance the story, thus creating a musical drama, a work of serious intent and design if not of tone and plot.²⁵

What none of these definitions captures is why integration should be so highly prized—for after *Oklahoma!* integration rapidly became the critical, if not practical, sine qua non of the musical and, especially for the stage musical, it remains so—or what its potential meanings and effects are. The four contemporary historians and theoreticians of the musical, Gerald Mast, Rick Altman, Jane Feuer, and Richard Dyer, who suggest answers to this question, do not do so in specific terms of "integration," although Mast, Altman, and Feuer do all use the term. What all four writers agree on is that the successful musical suggests the utopian feelings that would result if genuine problems of "social tension, inadequacy, and absence" were resolved.²⁶ The musical does this at the level of plot by symbolically joining opposing forces in a wedding or romance.

More specific to the genre, the musical amplifies the dual plot at the level of form by conjoining—in Altman’s terms, “dissolving” between—narrative and number, visually dominated and aurally dominated passages. The cleverness, novelty, and apparent ease with which such difficult conjunctions or dissolves are created fuel the utopian feelings the musical conveys and provide the analogue for how life would feel if all more “serious” conflicts and contradictions could be similarly resolved.²⁷

Integration would seem, then, to be an amplified or extended instance of what Mast, Altman, Feuer, and Dyer see as a more general quality of the musical. Indeed, returning to the reviews of *Oklahoma!* and *Carmen Jones*, it seems that integration can make a spectator feel good enough to forget some very bad, nonutopian events in the plot, for example, the tragic ending of *Carmen Jones* and the killing of Jud Fry in *Oklahoma!*, both of which go virtually unmentioned in the reviews. Altman argues that such plot events are best seen as ritual sacrifices that serve, through contrast, to secure the utopian feeling inspired by the musical.²⁸ Put differently, the key reason the integrated musical became so highly prized critically and popularly is that through the drama its audience *earns* its utopian feelings, comes to deserve its entertainment—though, crucially (at least if the reviewers are at all representative), the audience also gets to forget, as part of the integrated musical experience, the costs of that earning or deserving.

For these scholars, the integrated musical is a response to the alienating, disorienting, and violently contradictory aspects of mass industrial integration and social integration.²⁹ As my analysis of Du Bois showed, industrial integration, with its simultaneous needs to create all subjects as predictable consumers and to maintain a newly hierarchized labor pool, and social integration, with its desire to overthrow traditional hierarchies, both do and do not fit with one another. The integrated musical shifts and aestheticizes the terms and the stakes of this crisis under the rubric of entertainment, and this shift allowed the integrated musical to “resolve”—or erase—the contradictions between industrial and social integrations.³⁰

What Mast, Altman, Feuer, and Dyer do not agree on is the cultural, social, and political values of the musical and its characteristic aesthetic, textual effect. Ultimately, Feuer finds the genre conservative, and Altman sees it, finally, as deleterious because it discourages individuals’ attempts to create moments of utopian feeling through their own ordinary musical

performances.³¹ Mast and Dyer, however, are more optimistic because they also take into account live as well as filmed musical performance, the social and cultural identities of key performers and producers of the musical, and the “excesses” and extensions (through, for example, popular songs) of the genre as much as the coherence of its individual narrative texts. Mast sees the American musical’s “refus[al] to know and keep its place” in U.S. sociocultural hierarchies as proof of the genre’s liberal and liberating potential.³² Dyer is more circumspect, but also sees the potential for the musical, perhaps uniquely among entertainment forms, to “organize the possibility of changing reality.”³³

But Dyer, Mast, Altman, and Feuer all assess the genre assuming a general audience “drawn . . . from the widest possible spectrum of the public” and “all but coterminous with the American public as a whole.”³⁴ So no matter how differently they evaluate the musical’s narrative/number conjunction, dissolve, or integration, these critics see the genre’s audience in the abstract — as socially and racially — *because* industrially — integrated. This probably was the case, in aggregate, for the audience for Hollywood musicals and Hollywood film in general, though that varied significantly by region, and it certainly was not true for Broadway musicals, but it is important to remember what such an assumption hides. From an African American perspective the so-called integrated musical — whatever its powers and pleasures — was manifestly *not* integrated. In fact, as the originating texts of *Oklahoma!* and *Carmen Jones* along with *Show Boat*, *Hallelujah!*, and *Porgy and Bess* suggest, the creation of the ultimate utopian feeling in the integrated musical relied on an explicit social-racial segregation, and no quantity of formal invention could hide that.

In a perverse way, through its specifically circumscribed “utopian” aspirations the “integrated” musical clarified in narration, song, and dance an important and for African Americans painful American circumstance of long standing. For African American performers and spectators, however, the starkness of the contradiction between a formally expressed desire for integrated wholeness and its manifestation in such critically applauded, even idealized, segregation also offered liberating — or, more accurately, persistently illuminating — possibilities. In the face of the integrated musical, African American performers, spectators, and critics developed methods of dis/integration, sometimes taking Du Boisian advantage of segregation always watching and listening for — and often

seeking to create—failures of utopian form and feeling out of which new forms and feeling might emerge, and seldom giving up on the complex possibilities of the “gift”—sometimes refashioned as a joke, assault, or evasion—of African American music. Recently, Rick Altman has argued that “genres must be seen as a site of struggle among users,” a contest among variously interested producers, critics, and audiences.³⁵ However reluctantly, musicals—perhaps especially in their “more randomized, more fragmentary forms” like specialty numbers, shorts, and marginal productions³⁶—offered African Americans access to these processes and remain as evidence of struggle, evidence that we should not allow the overdetermined appeals of overlapping idea(l)s of integration to conceal.³⁷

**Dis/integrations in Practice: *Hooray for Love*,
“Old Man River,” and “Singin’ in the Rain”**

This book is divided into two parts of three chapters each. Both parts are synoptic, considering from different angles the period from 1927 to 1959—the entire classical sound era and an era that begins with a flourishing black cultural renaissance and ends with increasingly visible and insistent black struggles for political, civil rights. While each part begins broadly, each also moves to chapters that attend closely to individual films made in the charged moment near the end of World War II, when new possibilities for African American aesthetic, social, and political representation—all of which were often distilled into or symbolized by music—seemed to open and then close. This organization is meant at once to convey an historical narrative of the currents of production and reception of black film-musical performances; to capture the fissures, ruptures, and struggles in that narrative; and to complicate the lures of both cockeyed optimism and the (pseudo)blues.

Part one aims squarely at the dilemmas of black musical (mis)representation by taking seriously the quip I cited earlier, “The Negro . . . arrived in talking pictures—as a black-face comedian!” I examine first the use of blackface by black stage performers in the first forty years of the twentieth century and suggest that black performers, critics, and audiences took blackface quite seriously and that, while opinions varied widely regarding blackface’s viability and value for African American cul-

ture, none saw it as simply inauthentic. Next, focusing primarily on the films of Al Jolson, I track the many instances in which Hollywood musicals conjoined black performers with blackfaced white performers and analyze these instances in relation to black press coverage in order to trace shifting African American understandings of the potential meanings and effects of such unions. The first part closes with analyses of four films that feature blacks in blackface: Oscar Micheaux's race films *The Darktown Revue* (1931) and *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932), the Shirley Temple vehicle *Dimples* (1936), and the Hollywood black-cast monument *Stormy Weather*. These films suggest ways in which black blackface could be wielded as a critique of repressive racial categories in general and whiteness in particular, but I also explore how this critical potential was blunted by mass mediation, which took black blackface out of the control of the improvising performer, by sociogeneric constraints like the all-black cast, by the naturalization of whiteface (i.e., a constructed white racial identity that comes to be transparent), and by the impossibility of black whiteface.

If part one focuses on what, from our contemporary perspective, are the improbabilities of blacks in blackface, part two focuses on the obvious—on musical films cast entirely or predominantly with black performers and on the ways in which black musicality is made generic. The most obvious of the obvious are the eight Hollywood black-cast musicals, and I explore these both through the lens of their shifting and often conflicting African American critical receptions over time and through their remarkably consistent and ultimately constraining use of the “folk” (as opposed to “show” or “fairy tale”) musical genre conventions.³⁸ Much less obvious, in the sense of being less known, are race-film musicals, and two examples of this subgenre—Oscar Micheaux's *Swing!* and Million Dollar Productions's *The Duke is Tops* (Lena Horne's first film), both made in 1938 near the peak of race film production—are the focus of my next chapter. Placing these films in their sociohistorical context and reading them in light of one African American critic's attempt to develop black mass cultural critical standards, I examine them for their comments on problems of black cultural authority. Both at the time and since, critics have agreed that the short film *Jammin' the Blues* (Warner Bros., 1944), which is provocatively cagey about whether its cast is all black, succeeded impressively in representing the mood and mechan-

ics of a great jazz jam session. My last chapter anatomizes this carefully crafted and singular success and explores the possibilities and limits of “artistic,” musical crossover as a model for racial-social integration.

A coda expands from the book’s core period to limn the continuing life and resonating presence of the black musical performer in American film and culture. Since 1960, Hollywood has not made black musicals—or any musicals, really—in quite the same way that it did from 1927 to 1959. Nonetheless, a bit like Porgy at the end of *Porgy and Bess*, the last classical-era black musical, the musicalized black figure in American film seems ever on the brink of departing for the “Heav’nly Lan’”—which for Porgy might mean either death or New York City—but is never quite either comfortably here or gone.

Since key components of my subject are “randomized . . . fragmentary forms” and the tracing over time of the evanescent responses of their shifting audiences, this book is, despite any synoptic impulse, incomplete and open. To clarify what I’ve left out, to illuminate some of my methods and assumptions, and to point to my topic’s continuing significance, I end by touching here on some of the gaps in *Disintegrating the Musical*.

Despite its abiding interests in the “specialty number” and in issues of reception, this is not a comprehensive study of specialty numbers or of black reception of musical film. Yoking these topics together may seem odd, but they are joined thematically—if not logically—by their ubiquitous elusiveness. I long ago had to give up trying to catalogue and account for the myriad instances in which a black person plays a song in a film; even restricting attention just to obviously musical film forms does not help much.³⁹ Beyond their plethora is the fact that specialty numbers wander. As excisable, free standing units, they have fueled many film shorts (chapter six touches on this), “jazz on film” festivals, documentaries, late-night TV intervals, and compilation videos, and as a consequence provenance is often murky. In the face of these circumstances, I have chosen the relatively derandomizing, defragmenting strategy of attending to only a few specialties and always in the context of a larger film (most often feature-length) and a larger issue (either blackface or the black cast). While this choice aids the coherence of the analysis, it also downplays an important mode for (re)presenting black musical performance in film and, perhaps even more, on TV.

As importantly, downplaying the specialty number may downplay a key mode of black reception. The circumstances in which African Americans saw movies and what African American writers said about them are recurring concerns here, and my sense of alternative, African American modes of reading cinema informs my interpretations throughout. Miriam Hansen has argued, in relation to silent-era female spectatorship, that alternative modes of reception “cannot be measured in any empirical sense” but that their “conditions of possibility can be reconstructed.”⁴⁰ I have aimed for such a reconstruction, but as musician Willie Ruff’s recollection of his youthful enthusiasm for the *Chicago Defender* suggests,⁴¹ one important condition of possibility for alternative black receptions may be the association of fragments, a condition that is difficult to draw with certainty out of the archive of black public commentary and its sporadic attention to movies.

To bolster my claims for the existence of alternative, African American receptions and their ties to the fragment and to underline the elusiveness of the archive, consider the most complete account of a historical instance of African American reception I have ever found, from the entertainment page of the 17 August 1935 *Defender*:

The picture, *Hooray for Love*, with the one and only Bill “Bojangles” Robinson . . . was shown this week at the local theatre where standing room was at a premium.

This picture was an added feature at the Main Street [a movie palace in downtown Kansas City] when Cab Calloway played that house recently and this correspondent heard the praise then for Bill Robinson, that grand trouper. Bill has tapped lightly on this same stage many times and his name is synonymous with genuine entertainment, but it was at the local theatre that the “lines” heard comments to the effect that without Bill Robinson there was no *Hooray For Love*. . . .

A restless audience sat through the newsreels, the shorts, and a few wholesome laughs were heard in the unreeling of the film, but when Bill’s Harlem scene flashed, the applause was deafening. It was as if Bill was on the stage in person, smiling in response to the welcome, as if he knew and understood that he was the asset necessary to the happiness of the audience.

I believe the manager of the Lincoln Theatre felt an additional admission was due because so many sat through the picture twice. . . . Many grumbled because there wasn’t more to see, but the manager smiled in understanding. He knows how Kansas City feels about Bill Robinson.⁴²

Even allowing for some journalistic hyperbole, this account is remarkable. Several things stand out. This moment of reception depends on a complicated array of relations—intertextual, social, geographic, and economic—that extend well beyond the confines of *Hooray for Love* and the walls of the local theater. It also contains an emphatic component of identification; the audience feels recognized and recognizes itself in this musical moment. But this identification does not rely on narrative or character; Robinson plays “himself” and has no connection with the rest of the film’s characters or backstage plot. Neither does it rely in any clear way on the “blackness” of the music, which is a song, “Livin’ In a Great Big Way,” by the white songwriting team of Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh. Rather, this sense of identification relies on Bill Robinson’s stardom, on his performance style (which, with its constant manipulations of time, rapid shifts of register from, for example, virtuosity to silliness, and call and response with pianist and co-star Fats Waller, is arguably a classic instance of black performance), and on the sense that Robinson is both recognized by and *better than* the rest of the movie, that he is deservedly *in* but at the same time not *of* the movie. And finally, this enthusiastic moment of reception is also critical; members of the audience recognize that their access to and Robinson’s presence in *Hooray for Love* are limited, and they qualify the signs of their satisfaction through grumbling and overconsuming (i.e., underpaying). Was this complexly expressive Kansas City audience representative? My analysis does not assume so, but it does assume that such an audience was always possible.⁴³

Bill Robinson’s looming presence in *Hooray for Love* suggests another potential axis of organization for this book and, more importantly, a way in which African American audiences may have organized their attention to the random, fragmented film musical forms that so often represented them, namely, the star. My choice to privilege struggles around genre over the study of black stars and stardom was spurred by the fact that genre—blacks as musical and hence in musical films—crossed over more emphatically to white audiences than did individual black stars, who never crossed over unless they were musical performers. Indeed, the rise of Sidney Poitier, the first crossover black star who tried explicitly to disavow musical performance as part of his star persona, marks the end of the period I am considering—and Poitier did do a film musical, *Porgy and Bess*.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, following genre rather than stars leads to some

lacunae. The most serious of these is Paul Robeson, who shows just how seriously the musical could be taken by various audiences and how dangerous attempts to make political use of the genre and attendant stardom could be.

Show Boat both made Robeson a star and contained him. At the moment of its first production in 1927—and in important ways still—*Show Boat* was astonishingly political. It uses an interracial cast, the members of which interact with one another; it makes several opportunities to comment directly on racist inequities, particularly of opportunity and labor; and it uses the malevolent social construction of racialized and miscegenated identity to drive its secondary plot. At the same time, several aspects of *Show Boat*'s structure undermine its progressive features. Most obviously, the black characters disappear as the main plot proceeds. We follow the romantic lead couple of Magnolia and Gaylord Ravenal, and in the face of the need for their story to resolve satisfactorily, the black characters become problems. Julie, the mulatto who sacrifices her own singing career so Magnolia can have an opportunity, is an explicit social, as well as a plot problem; Queenie and Joe ("Old Man River"), who have supported Magnolia and provided her with distinctive musical materials, are excess plot, but also perhaps social baggage. All three are absent at the end, though different versions of *Show Boat* display their guilty consciences about this by gesturing toward "black" music at their finales—for example, a number that employs some black chorines in the 1936 film version (in which Robeson played Joe) or a reprise of "Old Man River" (offscreen for Robeson in 1936, onscreen for William Warfield's Joe in the 1951 film). More subtly, *Show Boat* gives its black characters only Jerome Kern's music and Oscar Hammerstein's and P. G. Wodehouse's lyrics as "theirs." What makes this erasure of black musical material—for instance, say, the spirituals or work songs that "Old Man River" has in its background—particularly powerful is that Kern and Hammerstein did freely interpolate white music they had not composed (e.g. "After the Ball"). Thus, black resilience or protest has only one compositional voice, that of Kern and Hammerstein, while white resilience is given more texture.

The voice that Kern and Hammerstein provided Paul Robeson, in the combined form of the song "Old Man River" and Joe's stage and film image as enduring and long-suffering, is one Robeson struggled through-



2. Paul Robeson shown in jail during “Old Man River” in *Show Boat* (1936).

out his career to turn to his own radically critical but broadly integrationist ends. Many African American critics were disappointed by Robeson’s decision to portray Joe in *Show Boat* on stage and even more sorely disappointed when he reprised the role in the 1936 film, and I have discovered no countervailing black critical celebration of Robeson in either instance. Partly in response, and partly due to a paucity of roles, Robeson absented himself from Hollywood and Broadway to concentrate on concertizing and his British films. When he returned to Hollywood in the black musical episode of *Tales of Manhattan* (1942), Robeson’s disappointment matched that of his earlier critics (he famously picketed his own film), and he swore off movies altogether because he could not control the medium. Meantime, he attempted to contain the damage by constantly refiguring “Old Man River.” He set it in his repertoire of world folk and protest music, including black spirituals and work songs, and he manipulated Hammerstein’s lyric to make it more aggressive, revising, for example, “You gets a little drunk and you land in jail” to “You show a little grit and you land in jail” and “I’m tired of livin’ and scared of dyin’” to “I keep on fighting until I’m dyin’.” But Robeson couldn’t escape the refrain, “he just keeps rollin’ along”; he couldn’t escape the song’s isolating solo-voice structure; and ultimately, he couldn’t escape the song, which he sang until the end of his career. And his legacy can’t escape the film musical version of “Old Man River,” which replays more frequently and widely than anything else Robeson ever recorded, symbolizing him—and Africans Americans more generally—as musical, of