Blackbirds in Britain: Florence Mills, Johnny Mercer, and British Imaginings of the American South Between the Two World Wars
(Revised version submitted February 2010)

By
Dr. Brian Ward
University of Manchester
Manchester, UK

In July 1923 "Jingle", the theatre critic of London's fashionable Bystander magazine, reviewed a new show at the Pavilion Theatre called *Dover Street to Dixie*. Produced by Britain's leading theatrical impresario C.B. Cochran, the "Dixie" segment of this two-part show featured an African American cast headed by Florence Mills, who at the time was widely regarded as "the world's greatest colored entertainer."[1] The show was based on her extraordinary Broadway success the previous year in Lew Leslie's *Plantation Revue*. As Jingle explained, this was hardly the first time that British audiences had been exposed to, or become enamoured with, southern-themed entertainment. "We have come to look on Dixie as practically a suburb of London," he wrote, noting how Mills opened the show by singing "first of Tennessee, then of Dixie, both of which spots we have been taught to love."[2]

Two years later, the Guardian confirmed how southern themes had become virtually indispensable to successful imported musical revues. *Night Light*, the paper reported, "left nothing out that a slick, well-oiled revue is supposed to have in. There are songs about "Dixieland" and Tennessee and Plantation Days."[3] And in 1936, when Lew Leslie's *Black Birds* arrived in England – another revue with an all-black cast for which Johnny Mercer wrote many of the lyrics – the British vogue for southern-themed entertainment showed little sign of abating. However, as we shall see, by 1936, British attitudes towards white-penned songs and shows that purported to capture the essence of black life, be they set in Dixie or Harlem, had changed in ways that reflected a growing concern for "authenticity" in black musical performance that was difficult to square with white authorship.

Focusing on the Lew Leslie revues that toured Britain between the wars, my main aim today is to recover the southern aspects of shows whose success is usually explained exclusively in terms of the negrophilia of "the Jazz Age" and the vogue for African American culture evident among sections of the white population on both sides of the Atlantic. My intention is not to deny the centrality of that racial dimension; rather it is to deepen our understanding of the transatlantic appeal of these revues by situating them in a broader history of British fascination with southern, as well as African American, music and culture.

The messily entwined appeal of southern and black elements in many of the songs, plays, radio shows, and films popular in Britain between the wars tapped into and accentuated a longstanding British interest in such entertainments. Minstrel shows, with a repertoire based largely on southern plantation stories and broad caricatures of slave life, were hugely popular in Britain during the nineteenth century and exerted a stylistic influence on British music hall well into the twentieth century. The book and stage versions of Uncle Tom's Cabin, and plays like Dion Boucicault's "The Octoroon," a tale of miscegenation in Louisiana which was serialized by

Mary Elizabeth Bradden for the working-class Halfpenny Journal, also brought images of the South to the British, offering stylized and sentimentalized critiques of slavery and southern race relations. In particular, such works alerted British audiences to the complex interplay of blood lines and skin colour in defining southern racial identities.

In a rather different vein, the tours undertaken after the Civil War by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other southern black vocal groups, sacred and secular, helped to complicate British understandings of the region, providing alternative, more dignified images of African Americans to the caricatures which dominated black-faced minstrelsy and "coon songs." They were certainly very different from the images projected in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith's epic was very successful in Britain in 1915 and 1916. Most British reviewers ignored the racism and claimed a kind of WASP-ish solidarity with the white heroes of the film. One even commended Griffith for his "dramatic pictures of that wonderful secret society which, when the Southern States were passing through their troublous (sic) times after the war, delivered the white people from the tyranny of the blacks."[4]

This offers an important – if here necessarily brief -- reminder that the widespread white British enthusiasm for black and black-derived music and dance took place against a backdrop of equally widespread racial prejudice and discrimination. As historian Martin Pugh has summarized, between the wars "on the whole the English found it hard to accept black people as human beings on the same level as whites."[5]

By and large, however, the southern-themed popular entertainment successful in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries avoided the viciously racist stereotypes of *Birth of a Nation*, preferring affectionate, if frequently condescending representations of the region's African American population. These depictions were leavened by genuine admiration for black musical and dancing skills, though praise for these qualities often descended into clichéd representations of "natural" black athleticism, rhythm and musicality. More generally, the images of the South that dominated popular culture were overwhelmingly of the "moonlight and magnolia" variety, with lots of romantic invocations of the region's seductive natural beauty and climate; of the gentility and hospitality of its white folks; of their veneration for the land and their respect for ties of kinship and community: the South here was overwhelmingly a place of tradition, stability, hierarchy, and order; a place of certainties and refuge from the chaotic uncertainties of modernity.

Sometimes, however, that nostalgic, pastoral idyll was ruptured -- excitingly, dangerously – by other stock southern images: that of the rebel, the white man or woman of quick temper or violent disposition, who flaunted authority, mocked respectability, and lived a life of reckless abandon and enviable hedonism; or the African American whose "natural" disposition was also to escape the claustrophobic bonds of polite society and indulge the sensual imperatives of the body. The South in these formulations was, then, perceived paradoxically as both a place of peace, tranquility, and calm, and as the site of multiple rowdy challenges to the dominant values and practices of respectable society.

It was this potent mix of fantasy, fable and furtive fact that explained much about the appeal to British audiences of the black and the southern components in popular music and

musical theatre, especially in the years around World War One. By September 1914, for example, 400,000 Londoners had seen the revue *Come Over Here* at the London Opera, relishing a slew of Irving Berlin songs that included "Carolina Jane", "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" and "On the Mississippi."[6] Herman Darewski Music – the British outlet for Leo Feist publishing in New York – did a roaring trade with this kind of fare, often dubbed "coon songs" irrespective of whether African Americans were depicted. In 1918, it scored with "Carolina", "Mother Dixie and You" and "Goodbye Dixie."[7] The following year, it hit big with "Anything is Nice if it Comes from Dixieland," a Grant Clarke, George Meyer, Milton Ager collaboration which portrayed Dixie as a "garden far away from snow and ice,/It's a perfect paradise." The same team also wrote "Everything's Peaches (Down in Georgia)" – hailed as the "Rage of two hemispheres" and the major hit from the revue *U.S.* which ran for 312 performances at the Ambassadors Theatre in London.[8]

Darewski's arch publishing rival, the Lawrence Wright Music Company, also did well with songs of the South. In Spring 1918 it was pushing "They're Calling Me in Tennessee," a Gene McCarthy song made popular in the UK by The Versatile Three and Dainty Doris, which was itself a response to the international hit, "My Tennessee, Is That You Calling," written by Fred Godfrey, Arthur Mills, and Bennett Scott.[9] Several new recordings of "My Tennessee" appeared in 1918 and 1919 including one by the quintessentially English duo [Thomas] Courtland and [James] Jeffries. The Courtland and James version was released the same month that their record label, His Master's Voice, put out "I'm All 'Bound Round With the Mason Dixon Line" by the Savoy Quartet.[10] Daisy Dormer, a Portsmouth-born music hall artist, also did well on British stages with "My Tennessee" and with other Fred Godfrey tunes "Down Texas Way" and "Down in Virginia" – the last a very popular song in the UK recorded by Fred Douglas, The Two Filberts, and The Unity Quartette.[11]

Fred Godfrey was one of the most successful writers of these sentimental musical evocations of the South – no mean achievement as he was a jobbing Welsh songwriter born Llewellyn Williams. Recognizing the enormous British appeal of songs about Dixie, he had started writing "coon songs" based entirely on successful American templates without ever having actually been to the US. His other "southern" credits included "Hey Ho! Can't You Hear the Steamer", "Anywhere on Louisiana Bay", "Mammy's Mississippi Home", "Mississippi", and "Rio Grande".[12] Godfrey exemplified the ways in which a set of shared assumptions and misassumptions about what the South was really like had come to dominate British imaginations. Notwithstanding the importance of journalistic reports from and personal visits to the South, British understandings and misunderstandings of the region were largely generated and sustained via commercial transatlantic cultural networks: fiction, plays, songs, touring actors, dancers and musicians, films, radio broadcasts and, of course, musical theatre.

Florence Mills was crucial to the commercial success of all the Lew Leslie revues in which she appeared; in Britain she was also partially responsible for the fact that they were widely perceived as southern, as well as black. Although she had initially found major stardom in the black-produced Broadway hit *Shuffle Along*, and was feted as part of the Harlem Renaissance, she was a southerner: the granddaughter of slaves, born in Washington DC in January 1896 to parents recently migrated from Lynchburg, Virginia. Moreover, the shows in which she appeared were saturated with stereotypical southern imagery. *Dover Street to Dixie*

featured plantation scenes a-plenty, while a huge Mississippi paddle steamer – predictably called the Robert E. Lee -- provided the backdrop to much of the action, which included a frantic dance routine involving Willie Covan and Ulysses "Slow Kid" Thompson dressed as a couple of refugees from either jail or a chain-gang. Mills herself opened the Dixie portion of the show with the wistful ballad "Down Among the Sleepy Hills of Ten-Ten-Ten-Tennessee."[13] Other songs in the show included "A Southern Hobby", "Swanee River" and the regionally schizophrenic "Hawaiian Night in Dixie Land." It was not surprising, then, that the British public should associate the revue and Mills with the South. One besotted fan, responding to a publicity photograph signed off his letter to Mills, "I'll dream of you my 'Photo Dixie'."[14]

When Florence Mills returned to England with Lew Leslie's *Black Birds of 1926*, both she and the revue enjoyed even greater adulation. The show ran for 276 packed performances at London's Pavilion Theatre and became a cult among the "Bright Young Things" of Bloomsbury, while also enjoying huge popularity with the general public. So great was the interest that the show was taken out of London for a tour of the provinces – a tour cut short when Mills' health failed and she was forced to return to Harlem, where she died of tuberculosis, aged just 31, in November 1927.

Once more the South dominated the *Black Birds of 1926*. One of the biggest hits was "Dixie Dreams", a piece of saccharine sentimentality which pined for a reassuringly stable and secure South rooted in traditional cotton production ("fields of white") and racial patterns ("Mammy's songs and stories"): "I remember all those happy, happy evenings,/everything is oh so different now from then,/ I wish I could relive those happy evenings,/ and go back to my Dixie home again." Clearly moved by these depictions of a bucolic South, one British fan, Charles Goody, sent Florence Mills a copy of his lyric "Down by the River" asking if she would consider having it put to music. Goody lived in Stockton, a good deal closer to the River Tees in northeast England than to the Mississippi. And yet, like Fred Godfrey, he had composed an earnest homage to the restorative powers of the mighty Mississippi: When "I'm feelin' so tired, I'm feelin' so blue…From the plantation, through the murmuring trees/comes stealin' the sound of the birds and the bees."[15]

By the time the *Black Birds* vogue was in full flight, the British public could buy numerous version of "Bye Bye Blackbird" and Mill's own signature song "I'm a Little Blackbird, Looking for a Bluebird". And there was a new spate of southern-themed material available on record or sheet music. Record releases included The Merrymakers' "Down on the Banks of the Old Yazoo", Bert Firman's Dance Band "Hello, Swanee, Hello," and Jay Whidden's remake of "Everything's Peaches (Down in Georgia)." The Lawrence Wright Music Company's list of "Most popular dance orchestrations" that spring had included "Headin' for Louisville" and "I Want to See My Tennessee."[16]

But as the British cult for things black and southern approached its zenith, a kind of purism crept into the discussions of those critics who fancied themselves experts on African American culture. There was great concern that the quest for mass popularity had led to a dilution, literally a whitening, of black music and dance, compromising their original exotic appeal. Once review of the *Black Birds* exemplified this trend. The Observer noted the escapist appeal of a show that presented a world of "primitive rhythm" drawn from "a whole hemisphere

away…" Yet, the reviewer regretted that the revue was not even more "primitive" and suggested that some of the "less exotic birds" on stage were less appealing because they strove for a sophistication that was inappropriate and distracting among black performers.[17]

In this racialized critique of the show's authenticity, ideas regarding skin colour and racial identity fused with conceptions of realism, integrity and artistic merit. According to the reviewer, this incarnation of the *Black Birds* had "whitewashed features, so to speak, which seemed to me less interesting than those which were frankly coloured." In other words, the best bits of the show were the bits he deemed to be the "blackest"; the reviewer had special praise for one dancer described in dehumanized terms as "some piece of animated ebony with a genuine watermelon smile."[18] In fact, the British public had difficulty accepting the 1926 *Black Birds* as truly black: an uncertainty which destabilized critical expectations and fractured the conventional framework for evaluating the quality of black music and dance.

Taken together, British accounts of the *Black Birds of 1926* suggest there may have been some effort to de-racialize at least the chorus line using lighting and cosmetics to lighten skin tones. But those same accounts also registered widespread disapproval of such practices. The key point here is that the transatlantic popularity of Lew Leslie's revues with white audiences had always depended on the idea that the performers were "genuinely" black – no matter that such a concept was itself the subject of constant popular and medical debate and, in America at least, of regular legal redefinition. African American performers were popular among whites precisely to the degree that they were believed to be delivering sincere, natural, unmediated expressions of black life and sensibilities. Revues like *Black Birds* seemed to hover somewhere between being genuine vehicles for black expression and just another form of minstrelsy. This dichotomy became increasingly problematic at a time when, as the Guardian insisted, British audiences felt "a right to demand the real thing, and not Al Jolson, with a corked face and a black wig, singing coon songs."[19]

Lew Leslie tried to address these concerns by reasserting the racial integrity of his shows. When the *Black Birds of 1934* appeared briefly at London's Coliseum Theatre starring Valaida Snow and featuring dancer Peg Leg Bates, Theatre World ran a profile of Leslie in which he insisted that in dealing with his black troupe, "The great thing I try to impress upon all these young people is not to 'go white.' So many of them, when they come over here, try to forget their origin and talk like Europeans, think like Europeans. I tell them No! Be yourselves."[20] This was less a sign of sympathy for black cultural autonomy than of good business sense. As Leslie appreciated, predominantly white audiences wanted to indulge their fantasies of the dark "other" and to experience what black culture was "really like", with its exotic allure, edge of danger, and perceived sexual freedoms. According to Theatre World, Leslie had shrewdly identified that the authenticity of his performers was "responsible for the Blackbirds' remarkable vogue" in Britain, adding that "his understanding of the negro character is profound."[21]

Sixteen months later, when the 1936 *Black Birds* opened in Manchester before transferring to the Gaiety in London with singer-comedian Lavaida Carter and the brilliant Nicholas Brothers dancing team as the main attractions, not everyone shared Theatre World's views. Interlocking anxieties about the racial provenance and therefore the artistic integrity of the show haunted even some of the most positive reviews. As ever, much of that praise was

drenched in racial stereotyping. For example, the Evening Standard's Stephen Williams celebrated that the Black Birds, true to Leslie's advice, were "unlike any European artists. They have no diffidence, no hesitation no shame. They stick at nothing; and in their savage exuberance, their utter abandonment to the emotion of the moment there is a quality that transcends all traditions of the stage and brings us back to the merciless principles of nature itself." Here, then, in stark relief, was the core appeal of African American artists to British audiences, who revelled in the apparent primitivism, the unfettered emotionalism of the performances, seeing them as direct conduits into the exotic, transgressive, hyper-physical reality of black life, offering an exhilarating alternative to the mundane worlds of blue collar labour, white collar routine and the tyranny of propriety. Williams concluded that "the main impression is of a shattering sincerity that knows no inhibitions and perceives no indecorum in any aspect of human life."[22]

Elsewhere, however, there were clear signs of weariness with the revue format. In July, The Times dismissed the show as musically brash and overwrought and registered uncertainty about the racial status of the performers: "The cast is, or appears to be, predominantly, negro."[23] Writing in The Sphere, Philip Page was more enthusiastic, but he was also preoccupied with the skin colour of the cast and its implications. "A negro revue at any time has the average London audience predisposed in its favour. We are so accustomed to imagine, with some degree of accuracy, that possessors of a dusky skin know all there is to know about slick tap-dancing, red-hot rhythm, homely humour and coal-black mammy sentimentality that the battle is more than half won before the curtain goes up," Page wrote. He added that "The ladies of the chorus, though of course, non-blonde, vary in hue from sable to a pale and delicate *café-au-lait* and are as shapely as they are versatile."[24]

Alongside fears that the "black" quotient in these shows was declining came a rather belated recognition that they were not actually written or produced by African Americans at all. British commentators began to question whether white writers could ever write authentically of the black experience. Melody Maker, for example, shared the general excitement at the prospect of a London production of George Gershwin's "Porgy & Bess" with an "all-Negro cast" and admitted that "Any work by George Gershwin performed in this country would receive the serious attention of music critics…for no one would deny him a unique gift for original song writing." Yet it warned that "those who have made a study of Negro music will not expect 'Porgy and Bess' to be in any way characteristic of the race. Gershwin has essentially a white man's outlook and, in trying to express the music of the coloured man, he is liable to be too synthetic to be convincing, at least judged by his past works."[25] The editorial continued that "The same sort of criticism can be levelled at the current 'Blackbirds' show…" and concluded unequivocally that "It requires coloured men to write and produce the best coloured music."[26]

In order to allay such concerns and restore public confidence in his revues, Leslie added a distinctly regional spin to his habitual, but increasingly shrill, insistence on the unalloyed racial status of his performers. When asked if it was true that "negro talent is at its best when there is a mixture of white race with it," he responded negatively and proudly – if erroneously – insisted that "Florence Mills and Paul Robeson are both pure-blooded negroes." Again, Leslie linked the prestige and appeal of the *Black Birds* to ideas about the racial identity of the black performers, neatly sidestepping the issue of white conception, composition and capitalization of his revues.

"They've got bold personalities, expressive features – all of them, without exception," Lewis explained in tellingly reductive terms, once more claiming that it was the directness of emotional communication, the production of pure affect that assured the authenticity of his shows. "They 'have' whatever it is they're acting," he explained, "If they have to cry a tear, it is a tear, and you see it splashing down from their faces."[27]

But then, as if to clinch his point about the honesty and sincerity of his revues, Leslie turned to the regional, rather than the racial, credentials of his *Black Birds*. He explained that he was always careful to recruit performers from the South, where he could be sure to find ample amateur – and, therefore, suitably raw and unvarnished -- black talent. "I find a lot of it among amateur negro performances. They are always giving these in the South—usually connected with a church."[28] This was a shrewd ploy, in the sense that British fascination with the South continued to flourish in the years leading up to World War Two. Moreover, the region – in British popular consciousness figured as perpetually pastoral, pre-industrial, vernacular, and unspoiled by modernity and commercialization – managed to retain an aura of simple honesty that could offset rumbling disquiet about the integrity of white-authored "black" entertainment. Indeed, there was even a sense in some British minds that southern African Americans rather than migrants to the urban North were somehow the real thing – or at least that they conformed more closely to their ideas of what black Americans should be like. "Do not confuse the Southern Negro with the hot-cha Harlem type," warned E. Mawby Green in a Theatre World piece on Marc Connelly's film *Green Pastures*, published just as the *Black Birds* revue transferred from the Gaiety to the Lyceum Theatre. Mawby clearly favoured what he saw – again in thoroughly clichéd terms -- as the simple honesty of God-fearing rural southern blacks over the showy flamboyance of more secular Harlemites.[29] In this context, it was not surprising that Lew Leslie should hire Georgian Johnny Mercer and more generally work to ensure that the southern motifs in *Black Birds of 1936* remained prominent – which may also explain why a song like Mercer's "Hollywood to Harlem" was dropped from the show in favour of other, more southern-oriented "Americana."[30]

As has been suggested, somewhere near the heart of growing British reservations about the *Black Birds* was the question of the extent to which any white authored show could offer an authentic representation of black life. In concluding, it is instructive to examine this issue from two rather different, though related, perspectives. The first considers the relationship of these revues to minstrelsy -- another form of popular culture in which whites generally constructed fantasies of black southern life primarily for the entertainment of other whites, although there was an obvious and vital difference in so far as in minstrelsy the performers were also usually white. The second perspective considers the lyrics that one white southerner, Johnny Mercer, provided for the black artists in the *Black Birds of 1936*.

Despite their portrayals of black ignorance, laziness, superstition and unreliability, minstrel shows were far from simple vehicles for white racism and affirmations of racial superiority. Embedded in the production and reception of minstrelsy was an expression of a barely suppressed white fascination with and admiration for many aspects of black culture, some more imagined than real, and a desire to borrow and imitate some of those qualities, even while ridiculing them. In minstrelsy, Eric Lott argues, white audiences found their values and dreams,

sometimes the ones they most carefully suppressed or publicly disavowed "expressed through figures drawn not from their own lives but from another part of the social formation."[31]

Similarly complex and ambivalent responses to black culture shaped the production of and reactions to the all-black revues of the 1920s and 1930s. Conceived, written and profited from mainly by whites using primarily black jazz and blues-based musical idioms and dance styles to complement narratives drawn principally from white fantasies of the Old South that were then articulated on stage by African American artists -- these were inherently and intricately hybrid entertainment forms. The black artists involved brought a level of dignity, nuance and humanity to their performances that was seldom evident in black-faced minstrelsy. It was their capacity to remake and authenticate the white-penned materials which helps to explain why black audiences also enjoyed the revues. The gifted black performers in the Lew Leslie revues collectively moved black musical theatre beyond the most demeaning caricatures of minstrelsy, even when performing songs, dances, and sketches that were uncomfortably close to stereotypical depictions of the South, replete with faithful Mammies, fields of cotton, and resolutely grinning happy black folks.

But what of the white writers who furnished the raw material for those black performers? More particularly, what are we to make of Johnny Mercer's contribution to the *Black Birds of 1936*, for which he collaborated with Rube Bloom? As a consequence of growing up in Savannah, on Vernon Island, and in the Virginia Piedmont, Mercer was more deeply immersed in black and southern musical culture than any of the other white Tin Pan Alley songwriters who also wrote classic evocations of southern life. George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Hoagy Carmichael, and Jerome Kern were all appreciative and gifted re-interpreters of black southern musical idioms. Yet none could claim Mercer's personal intimacy with those forms or, ultimately match his ear for southern – often black southern -- vernacular that marked some of his best lyrics.[32] "Lazybones" would seem a prime illustration of this talent. But marvellous though that lyric is in so many respects, its images of sloth and indolence mobilized some of the most entrenched white stereotypes regarding African American character and capabilities.

Generally speaking, the "southern" lyrics Mercer composed for *Black Birds of 1936* were similarly reductive in their depictions of peoples of colour and relentlessly nostalgic about a vanishing South. These were the songs of a white southerner who, notwithstanding his deep love of African American musical forms and his admiration for, indeed friendships with, many black performers, was no champion of racial equality. During the interwar years and beyond, Mercer accepted the segregated status quo and never questioned the basic racial ideologies upon which Jim Crow and white supremacy rested. In later years he would be dumbfounded to the point of hostility by the mass black insurgency of the freedom struggle and appalled by federal efforts to desegregate the South and secure black voting rights. Despite his cosmopolitan experiences in New York, Hollywood and overseas, Mercer was always at heart a white southern gentleman: a product of a particular time, place, class and gender, as well as race. His default setting on racial matters mixed fascination, sympathy and paternalistic kindness towards African Americans, with an expectation that they should know and accept their "place" in society with good grace. Whenever he felt that African Americans had forgotten that place, he was quite capable of resorting to the crudest of racial insults. And he seldom balked at using popular racial stereotypes, negative or positive, if they fitted the needs of his lyrics.[33]

Mercer's racial attitudes and regional loyalties were clearly evident in three songs written for *Black Birds*. "South Wind" expressed a fairly straightforward desire to be blown back to an idyllic South ("Drop me in a field of cotton,/ Softer than a feather bed"), but "Jo-Jo The Cannibal Kid" and "Dixie Isn't Dixie Anymore" were more complex and interesting. In "Jo-Jo"-- sung by Lavaida Carter during the show's Akosiah's Wedding scene -- Mercer's turned for humour to one of the most pernicious white stereotypes of black savagery. Introducing him as "the African Clark Gable," the lyric explained how, "All the tribes eat roots and berries,/He's the one that never did,/He prefers his missionaries,/Jo-Jo the Cannibal Kid."

And yet, without mounting a Quixotic effort to claim anything especially progressive in a song about black cannibalism, there are some surprising ambiguities that complicate the crude stereotypes. The juxtaposition of a contemporary white popular cultural icon (Clark Gable) with what appear to be rather tongue-in–cheek references to myths about cannibals and their penchant for missionary stew, combined to take some of the worst racist sting out of the song. Rube Bloom's jaunty music and Lavaida Carter's rather deadpan delivery also suggested a kind of knowing distancing from the literal meaning of the lyric. Even more intriguingly, the song hints, with a play on the racially charged word "pass", that it was well within Jo-Jo's capabilities to mingle in polite – read here as white -- company if he wanted. In this song there was no insurmountable genetic impediment to Jo-Jo's ability to behave in a perfectly civilized, even charming, manner: "He could always pass/on his manner and his savoir faire,/mixed with every class,/eats the finest people everywhere." Indeed, within the logic of the song, Jo-Jo's apparent preference for eating people had nothing to do with a primal racial instinct towards barbarism and everything to do with a shrewd all-American business acumen. Above all, it indicated Jo-Jo's intimate understanding of what white audiences expected of black people and performers. Jo-Jo even seems to have the last, and the most important, laugh. The song ends with various showbiz promoters, including Billy Rose, trying to sign him up to perform his acts of savagery for eager and gullible white audiences, whose darkest, most elemental black fantasies he seems to embody. Having turned down several lucrative offers, we leave Jo-Jo holding out for a better deal from Barnum Bailey. It was a grim and in some ways Pyrrhic victory, but Jo-Jo was able to exploit white racism by performing a hyper-primitive version of an imagined blackness that he never actually lived.

If "Jo-Jo" played with racial stereotypes, "Dixie Isn't Dixie Anymore" explored both regional and racial themes. Given that among African Americans the eclipse of the "Sunny South" that the song celebrated was seldom cause for the fierce nostalgia it aroused in many southern whites, putting the song in the hands of Lavaida Carter instantly gave it an ironic twist. The song ostensibly mourned the passing of the traditional South as modernization in the shape of irresistible economic forces, new transportation links, and the emergence of the mass media and culture industries eroded regional distinctiveness and bound Dixie ever-more tightly to national economic and cultural trends. "Far away down South in heaven,/now it's Highway 97" ran one couplet, while another complained "There's a tram car passing by the cabin door/And the famous old plantation has become a filling station." The Old South of rural living, cotton cultivation, and vernacular folk culture, was fast vanishing. "On the spot where all the traders used to sell their cotton./There is now a Woolworth 5 and 10 cent store./And where Aunty had a

shanty,/ There's a poster of Durante." The tone here expressed the same yearning for a vanishing world that had characterized "Dixie Dreams" more than a decade earlier.

And yet, when Mercer wrote of – and, more importantly, when Lavaida Carter sang of -- the impact on African Americans of modernization the consequences seem far less regrettable. Mercer's lyric hinted that agricultural reform might free African Americans from a life of exploitative rural labour and sharecropping, while the national entertainment and mass media industries that delivered Jimmy Durante's poster to the humble shacks of the South, might actually provide a rewarding outlet for black talents: "You won't hear those darkies,/ In the fields as white as snow,/'cause they're all too busy singing on the radio." As with "Jo-Jo", the song offers an unexpected, if only partial, triumph for the African Americans. Carter sings of how, in the past, "my Mammy sat home every evening, /In the simple gingham dress she always wore," before noting her own upward mobility, eating in fine restaurants and wearing clothes by the best Parisian designers ("In a gown from Schiaparelli"). Hidden beneath the dominant theme of loss and regret for the passing of the Old South, then, is a lurking suspicion – quite possibly a fear -- that African Americans might actually benefit from its demise.

By the time the *Black Birds of* 1936 completed a respectable, if not spectacular, run of 124 performances in London, the British vogue for all-black revues of that type had just about run its course, too. *Harlem on Parade* and Lew Lake Jr's *Blackberries* both briefly played in the UK in 1937 and 1938, while in October of that year the BBC even devoted a radio show to Leslie's *Black Birds*. But the 1939 incarnation of Leslie's revue never crossed the Atlantic-- partly because Britain was at war and the seas were not especially safe. But it was also because the formula was exhausted and the shows were poor.[34] In truth, after Florence Mills' mid-1920s triumphs, only the *Black Birds of 1928* had been a major success for Lew Leslie in the US. It was only in Britain – and to some extent in France -- that popular interest in Leslie's particular blend of black and southern entertainment had endured, albeit somewhat precariously, well into the 1930s.

ENDNOTES

1. Savannah Tribune, August 3, 1922, p.1.

2. Bystander, July 18, 1923, in Folder 9, Box 1, Florence Mills Collection, Schomburg Center (Hereafter, FMC).

3.Guardian, June 23, 1925, p.13.

4. Observer, October 3, 1915, p.3.

5. Martin Pugh, We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars (London: Vintage, 2009), p.396.

6. Guardian, September 14, 1914, p.7.

7. Stage, May 16, 1918, p.19; see, also Stage, May 23, p.19.

8. Stage, March 27, 1919, p.27.

9. Stage May 16, 1918, p.14.

10. Catherine Parsonage, The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), p.164.

11. HMV releases, listed in, "His Master's Voice: New Records for February 1919," p.16 http://sounds.bl.uk/File.aspx?item=029I-HMVNX1919X02-0000A0.pdf (accessed October 22, 2009). On Dormer, see Stage, April 17, 1919.

12. Much of the biographical material on Fred Godfrey comes from http://www.fredgodfreysongs.ca/index.htm

13. For biographical details on Mills, see Bill Egan, Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004); James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (1930: New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), pp.196-201; Jervis Anderson, This Was Harlem,1900-1950 (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981), pp.181-184; Richard Newman, "Florence Mills," in Jessie Carney Smith, Notable Black American Women (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), pp.752-776.

14. "A Poor White Man," Letter to Florence Mills, May 14, 1923, Folder 5, Letters (Fan Letters), 1923, 1925-27, Box 1, FMC.

15. Charles Goody, Letter to Florence Mills, January 27 1927, Folder 5: Letters (Fan Letters), 1923, 1925-27, Box 1, FMC.

16. Melody Maker, v.1, 2, February 1926, p.21; p.22.

17. H.H. "*Black Birds*" Observer, September 12, 1926, p.17

18. H.H. "*Black Birds*" Observer, September 12, 1926, p.17.

19. Guardian, "The Week on the Screen: Negro Films," December 15, 1929, p.11.

20. Theatre World, February 1935, p.66.

21. Theatre World, February 1935, p.66.

22. London Evening Standard, July 10, 1936, p.9.

23. Times, July 10, 1936, p.14.

24. Philip Page, "Review of *Black Birds of 1936*," Sphere, July 18, 1936, p.108.

25. Melody Maker, July 18, 1936, p.1.

26. Melody Maker, July 18, 1936, p.1.

27. Observer, July 12, 1936, p.15.

28. Observer, July 12, 1936, p.15.

29. E. Mawby Green, "Echoes from Broadway," Theatre World, September 1936, p.141.

30. See, Johnny Mercer, Letter to Jack Robbins (of Robbins Music, Hollywood), July 14, 1936, Folder 6: Correspondence, 1930-1936, Box 2, M0001, Johnny Mercer Papers, Popular Music Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta.

31. Eric Lott, Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, (New York: Oxford, 1993), p.92.

32. Biographical details of Mercer's life are drawn from Gene Lees, Portrait of Johnny: The Life of John Herndon Mercer (New York: Random House, 2004) and Philip Furia, Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer (New York: St. Martins Press, 2003). See, Furia, pp.12-16 for a fine discussion of the influence of Mercer's southern upbringing on his musical style and sensibilities.

33. Philip Furia, Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer (New York: St. Martins Press, 2003), pp.244-247.

34. For the *Black Birds* broadcast, see, Guardian, October 13, 1938, p.2. The Oxford Companion to Black British History edited by David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p.333.