

Introduction

The Origins of Blacksound

St. Louis was becoming an epicenter among midwestern American cities in the 1890s. Recent decades of economic growth and a thriving cultural scene had turned the city into a developing “gateway” metropolitan that attracted an array of permanent and transient residents during the Gilded Age following the Civil War.¹ Situated in a prime location along the Mississippi River, St. Louis became critical to trade and transportation routes in the mid-nineteenth century, while popular entertainment itself was developing into an industry both within St. Louis and throughout the expanding nation. Like other growing urban centers, it contained what were then known as “vice districts”—areas where urban and political “Reformers” sought to sequester all manner of vice entertainment (e.g., sex work, gambling, and drinking) into one vicinity—usually centrally located in the “downtown” area of a city.²

Popular music served as the soundtrack to these heavily trafficked districts of diversion and became the source that fueled these areas’ economic activity.³ At the same time as the city’s economic importance grew, so did its cultural production, especially its music—and African Americans were some of its central creators.⁴ Ragtime, jazz, and many other forms of popular music could be heard nightly in the city’s many entertainment halls and clubs. Some of the most famous musical artists of the late nineteenth century emerged out of St. Louis, including Scott Joplin and Thomas Turpin.

In 1956, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reran a story about one of St. Louis's famous sporting halls of the late nineteenth century. The feature mentions a popular musician named "Mama Lou"—one of the most important singers of the time in St. Louis nightlife and popular entertainment. The article notes that "The Castle was operated by Sarah Bilas Connors, known as Babe Connors, who usually dripped with diamonds when she made her grand entrance down the chandelier-lit stairway to welcome her callers. She maintained eight to ten beautiful 'Creole' maidens imported from Louisiana for her guests' entertainment." While the article is clear that Babe "ran the house," it also points out that Mama Lou "sang the songs. Between the two of them, they became undisputed tops in after dark entertainment in 1890 St. Louis."⁵

Babe Connors's the Castle was a members-only club in Chestnut Hill (St. Louis's red-light/vice district): a US double-eagle gold twenty-dollar piece was required for entry after members paid their club dues. Most of the patrons who got to experience Connors's "Creole" (i.e., mixed-race black) girls, the burgeoning ragtime sound, and Mama Lou's distinct entertainment style were white men with the financial and structural means to do so.⁶ "Dressed in her comic maid's apron and red bandana," the Castle's "main star" "ferociously insulted the customers and the girls, pausing occasionally to bellow obscene songs."⁷ Mama Lou was not only one of the most popular musical acts in St. Louis—her musical performances, as described in this introduction, would influence the growing popular music industry across the country and in the United Kingdom. But this influence took shape in an industry emerging directly out of a culture of blackface minstrelsy—limiting possibilities for black musicians like Mama Lou in that process. My discussion of Blacksound throughout this book goes beyond individuals like Mama Lou to describe the larger cultural and economic history of this phenomenon, as it tells the story of how blackface has shaped the making of American popular music, identity, and culture.

To help capture this broader history, Blacksound is defined and explored as the sonic complement and aesthetic legacy of blackface minstrelsy and performance within American popular music and its industry. I have developed the concept to trace the musical, political, structural, and proprietary legacies of blackface minstrelsy—a theatrical form that emerged during slavery as the nation's *first* original mass entertainment. Before formally defining Blacksound, a brief foray into the life, musical legacy, and historical treatment of Mama Lou provides a glimpse into how black performance, blackface, and their develop-

ment through popular sound formed the aesthetic and (intellectual) property basis of the popular music industry in the wake of slavery.⁸

In contrast to the sexualized description of the “beautiful ‘Creole’ maidens” reprinted in the 1959 article from the *Baltimore Afro-American*, many of the historical descriptions of Mama Lou, like the quoted one above, invoke the racist caricatures of black women (as a “wench” or “mammy” figure) that had, by the 1890s, and as discussed in Chapter 1, been rehearsed in blackface through figures like “Lucy Long” for decades. From this historical description (probably written by a white male observer), it appears as though Mama Lou played on *and* had to negotiate these stereotypes of black women in the United States for (mostly white male) patrons, being herself a larger, dark-skinned Afro-descended woman (possibly of Dominican or Haitian origins, according to descriptions).⁹ Out of the shadow of minstrel representations of black womanhood and through her own (black) performance practices, Mama Lou simultaneously presented and created some of the most famous popular tunes of the late nineteenth century, as sheet music sales and commercial entertainment reached new peaks.

Orrick Johns recounts an event from 1891, as told by his father, George S. Johns (editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* under Joseph Pulitzer). Ignaz Paderewski, the well-known classical Polish pianist and composer (who later became the second prime minister of Poland), was in St. Louis for a recital. Afterward, Paderewski, Johns recounted, was seeking “diversion”; naturally, he was taken to the “hottest” place in town, Babe Connors’s: “After a very informal and polite introduction—a dozen beauties danced to the music of a blind pianist, and Mama Lou sang her raucous songs. Among them was *Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay*. . . . It was still unknown to the wide world, and it caught Paderewski’s fancy. He went to the piano and asked her to sing it again and again. He learned that, and a number of other songs from her.”¹⁰

In the late nineteenth century, Western classical music was commonly associated with “high” or European-descended “white” culture, while popular music was connected to black, poorer whites of various ethnicities, and other people of color of working and lower financial classes.¹¹ This imagined and ideological cultural division, however, is challenged by this anecdote about Paderewski, the European classical pianist and composer who ventured to St. Louis’s red-light district for “novel” entertainment at Babe Connors’s sporting hall. Paderewski’s fascination (as a European pianist and composer of “classical” music) with Mama Lou’s “raucous songs” highlights the tensions that emerge

with the widespread transmission and regulation of regional, vernacular sounds of black performers, who were largely denied recognition of their own creative practices as forms of property to be owned themselves through sheet music or publication. Ephemeral, innovative, and improvisational African American performance practices were often consumed for their entertainment value, but not valued as sources of property themselves to be claimed by the black people with whom the performances originated.

Despite Mama Lou's significance in early American popular music, direct references to Mama Lou in publications from that era are not easy to trace. Her performances were ephemeral, there is no record that she published her own sheet music, and detailed written recollections of her scarcely remain. And yet still, sources point to two other of the biggest hits of the 1890s as either originating with or being introduced to the wider public by Mama Lou: "The Bully Song" and "A Hot Time in Old Town." These two songs were eventually recorded and performed by one of the first pop music recording stars, Irish American "coon shouter" May Irwin.¹² "A Hot Time" even became such a popular song that it was adapted as a theme of the Spanish American War.¹³ "A Hot Time," "The Bully Song," and "Ta Ra Ra"—all of which have been recorded as originating with Mama Lou—were national and in some cases international hits. They were also some of the best-selling sheet music at the fin de siècle.¹⁴

Mama Lou's songs were heard and (legally) taken up by white writers and publishers who had both the means and the structural access to claim ownership over her performed material. Live musical performances were not deemed copyrightable, and anyone who had the ability to do so could publish their written version of her tunes as sheet music, thereby obtaining ownership over them through copyright.¹⁵ Copyright provides the owner with the exclusive right (within a limited amount of time) to reproduce, prepare, distribute, perform, and display their work.¹⁶ The vernacular, regionalized sounds of Mama Lou that went from local to popular helped to define the developing "ragtime" aesthetic, a style that registered as novel and original to white audiences of the time.¹⁷ What also enabled their popularity was the packaging and marketing of her sounds by mostly white music industrialists into sheet music (as the primary source of music property) for consumption and performance by a wider audience—and the inability for most black musicians to publish and receive royalties or claim "property rights" over their own works. Black performers in areas where this music was

being cultivated (e.g., vice districts) had limited access to the developing publishing rights and presses of the music industry, especially under Jim Crow and racist US systems. Mostly white men were in positions of structural power to claim authority to manipulate, own, and distribute Blacksound out of black and blackface performance practices as the basis of the modern popular music industry in the 1890s.

Henry J. Sayers was a (white American) popular music composer who became famous for his copied version of Mama Lou's "Ta Ra Ra" in his blackface variety show, *Tuxedo* (1890). Mama Lou's tune gained international fame through Sayer's sheet music, which was eventually performed by a British music hall entertainer by the name of Lottie Collins. Collins was an English musician-actress who performed "Ta Ra Ra" in London theaters, after her husband had heard the song in Sayers's blackface revue in the early 1890s and subsequently purchased the rights to publish it in England (as the 1891 International Copyright Act, discussed in Chapter 5, required publishers in the United States and United Kingdom to obtain rights to publish works in the other country). Once Collins, a then lesser-known entertainer, returned to London in 1892 and performed "Ta Ra Ra," the song, the dance, her "Can Can" high kicks, and Collins herself became sensations in the metropolis's burgeoning popular music halls.¹⁸

Almost thirty years after Mama Lou performed the soon-to-be-viral "Ta Ra Ra" at Babe Connors's the Castle in St. Louis, Sayers went on to publish a 1919 version of the song in the United States, which sold over a *million* copies. A song that had originated with Mama Lou in St. Louis became a sensation across the country and beyond for decades to come.¹⁹ Importantly, this song and its sheet music were copyrighted by Sayers after the first major revision of US copyright laws in 1909. The Copyright Act of 1909 granted more comprehensive protection for originally published works against unauthorized reproduction, and it also protected against the unauthorized mechanical reproduction of a musical composition without the consent of its owner.²⁰

"Ta Ra Ra Boom De Aye," which began with Mama Lou and continues to resonate through American popular culture, travelled from Babe Connors's local, black-owned sporting house to becoming the subject of a copyright case in 1932: *Henry J. Sayers v. Sigmund Spaeth, et al.* Sayers claimed infringement by Spaeth's (a musicologist) reprinting of music and lyrics from "Ta Ra Ra." In the case, the judge (Patterson) decided that aside from a couple of new verses, the song and melody were ubiquitous enough by this time to be considered "public domain."

Henry J. Sayers admitted within the court case that the melody originated in a performance he had heard by Mama Lou at Babe Connors's sporting house. Sayers also suggested during this trial that, although he didn't print or commercialize them, the melodies for the two other aforementioned high-selling ragtime and coon songs printed in the 1890s—"The Bully Song" and "A Hot Time"—also originated with Mama Lou.²¹ Sayers did not see a conflict in citing Mama Lou as the original source of the tune within his legal battle, because he still considered himself its "author," as he was the first to *publish* it, even though Mama Lou is cited by Sayers and others as its original performer.

Although "Ta Ra Ra's" popularity and style developed through various levels of "interaction" between white and black musicians, it was Mama's Lou's performance of ragtime-like, syncopated, vocal, and improvisational practices that was consumed and commodified by the growing industries of music and entertainment. Blacksound is the locus through which the original performances (sonic and corporeal aesthetics) of black musicians—who developed their practices both within their own segregated communities and in relation to European American and other ethnic styles over time—were then taken up as sources of property to be owned and copyrighted by mostly white musicians in the establishment of the popular music industry. At the same time, they absorbed black aesthetics into a more stylized and sanitized popular performance that was consumable for white audiences.²² Thus, by the time "Ta Ra Ra Boom De Aye" was deemed "public domain" in the 1932 court case, it had become associated with (white) American popular entertainment and was rarely attributed to the person responsible for its initial popularity, Mama Lou. As Orrick Johns suggests in the *St. Louis Dispatch* at the end of his story about Mama Lou: "In a season or two the song, like many others that *originated* with Mammy Lou, got into vaudeville by way of some manager who visited Babe's and became a sensation."²³

As the example of Mama Lou's song "Ta Ra Ra Boom de Aye" demonstrates, the movement and absorption of localized black aesthetics into the popular sphere—from the antebellum era through the turn of the twentieth century—were shaped by several factors, including place, the migration of people and their (structural access to) sounds/performances, political and industrial developments, and legal systems. Blacksound does not take music and its performance a priori without a consideration of how it is produced along a continuum of cultural,

historical, geographic, political, technological, and temporal shifts in the making of popular music and entertainment.²⁴

• • •

This book uncovers the story of Blacksound in America through significant figures, musical case studies, IP and copyright law, and performance. By doing so, I bring into view fundamental influences in the construction of American popular music from slavery, through emancipation and reconstruction, and into the establishment of Jim Crow segregation policies. Each chapter chronologically considers the specific racialized and political context in which popular entertainment developed out of blackface. They also highlight how the sounds and styles produced by black people were mined as sources of property and gradually absorbed (as well as amalgamated with other ethnic sounds) into Blacksound as the foundation of popular music throughout the nineteenth century. As the nomenclature Blacksound suggests, it is always (performances of) blackness, whether real or imagined—even within amalgamation—that serves as the foundation of American popular music.

Part I, “Racial Identity and Popular Music in Early Blackface,” explores the birth and development of blackface minstrelsy during the antebellum era. Chapter 1 (“Slavery and Blackface in the Making of Blacksound”) reconstructs the sonic and embodied making of blackface’s initial stereotype characters: “Jim Crow,” “Zip Coon,” and “Lucy Long.” This revised history offers new ways to consider how notions of racial authenticity developed out of the sounds and performances of mostly Irish and British American men through the form’s earliest stock blackface characters between the 1820s and 1840s. Chapter 2 (“William Henry ‘Master Juba’ Lane and Antebellum Blacksound”) points directly to how black performance practices influenced the proliferation of blackface minstrelsy as the most quotidian form of US popular music in the mid-nineteenth century. William Henry “Master Juba” Lane—the Long Island–born African American performer known as the “father of modern tap dance”—emerged as one of the first international pop stars in the United States and the United Kingdom because of his unique amalgamation of black performance aesthetics within the blackface tropes that were previously developed by (mostly) white performers. Through Lane, I theorize the concept of *intellectual performance property* to account for the ways in which performance and black performativity have historically been constructed as public domain. Chapter 3

(“Stephen Foster and the Composition of Americana”) investigates the development of popular music leading up to the Civil War through sheet music, blackface minstrelsy, and the “Father of American popular song”—Stephen Foster. Specifically, it points to how popular entertainment and the explosion of blackface minstrelsy occurred in relation to the rise of Irish immigration, Jacksonian Democracy, and the emergence of the Democratic “populist” party. Blackface reflects the cultural anxieties many European-Americans felt in relation to the potential emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the antebellum era.

Part II, “The Birth of the Popular Music Industry,” considers the development and dispersal of Blacksound through the industry of popular music in a post-emancipation context. Chapter 4 (“The House that Blackface Built: M. Witmark & Sons and the Birth of Tin Pan Alley”) considers the construction and function of Blacksound through the legacy of slavery after emancipation, large-scale immigration from Eastern Europe and Asia, and the dispersal of black people and their performance practices from rural to urban centers throughout the nation in the late nineteenth century. Specifically, this chapter discusses the establishment of the popular music industry and the aesthetic construction of racial identity through M. Witmark and Sons—a founding popular music publishing house of Tin Pan Alley—their publications, and their marketing tactics, which developed out of the racialized performances of blackface during Jim Crow segregation. Chapter 5 (“Intellectual (Performance) Property: Ragtime Goes Pop”) describes the proliferation of Blacksound as the basis of Tin Pan Alley and the emerging modern music and recording industry from the 1890s to the 1910s through ragtime and the “coon song”—a popular genre that allowed for the performance of blackface tropes and aesthetics with and without the blackface mask. I explore how Blacksound began to develop in relation to and apart from blackface (via technology) through an analysis of two of the earliest popular phonographic recordings, “The Whistling Coon” and “Laughing Song,” by George W. Johnson—a formerly enslaved musician who became one of the first commercial recording artists in the Americas.

A THEORY OF BLACKSOUND

Blacksound, the sonic complement and legacy of blackface performance, signals both an aesthetic phenomenon (concept) and an analytical tool (theory) for addressing the complex historical relationship between

sound, identity, performance, and property, within American popular music.²⁵ Through *Blacksound*, I trace the birth of a performance practice (in sound and movement) that laid the foundation for the industry of American popular music and entertainment within the context of chattel slavery. I follow the ways in which blackness is ventriloquized as the arbiter of popular sound, as I consider what performances constitute its actual aesthetic-making. My consideration centers who does the performing, the listening, the consumption, the scripting, and the regulation of these sounds into modes of property to be contained through publications (i.e., sheet music) and performances (both live and early recordings).²⁶

The story of *Blacksound* is one that extends beyond ideas of “appropriation” and notions of authenticity that often surround discussions of blackface and (black) popular music.²⁷ Within *Blacksound*, the lens through which fear, desire, fascination, and mimicry collide through blackface performance is considered through the formulation of “terror and enjoyment.” Saidiya Hartman introduces this dyad, as she points out that “the desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery. . . . Here my intention is not to shock or exploit the perverse but to consider critically the complicated nexus of *terror and enjoyment*.”²⁸

While blackface granted white performers and consumers the ability to transgress expectations of a “proper” white (male) citizen—as they expressed their own ideals (of self and other) through racialized ventriloquy and the simultaneous construction of whiteness—this study holds at its center the societal realities stemming from the politics of antebellum society.²⁹ Because blackface developed as popular entertainment during slavery, the ability for white audiences and performers to embody, consume, and enact blackness as a source of “delectability” cannot be separated from the real-life terror that black people experienced in everyday life.³⁰ *Blacksound* points to how blackface performance developed as a (staged) ritual act of what bell hooks refers to as “eating the other,” enabling both the embodied consumption and the (violent) commodification of blackness under the guise of popular entertainment.³¹

Exploring the origins and performance of American popular music through such a lens allows one to sit with the complexity of an industry that was established by European-American (white) men during slavery. (White) Blackface minstrels blackened their faces, as they presented their interpretations of blackness and antiblackness through sheet music

and performance, along with their own self-identifying cultural and musical traits. Antiblackness is defined by Calvin Warren as “an accretion of practices, systems, and institutions designed to impose nothing onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence as nothing incarnated.”³² While my focus is on race, race does not exist apart from its intersectional considerations with gender, sexuality, class, ability, and so on.³³ As such, I briefly discuss some of the more complex considerations of gender and sexuality within blackface through figures like “Zip Coon” and “Lucy Long” (Chapters 1 and 2), but further exploration of the construction and impact of gender/sexuality within blackface is warranted and encouraged beyond this book.

My approach also demonstrates how American popular sound has been co-constructed by its various black and other non-white players, yet primarily under the control, fantasies, and ownership of its European-American (white) arbiters.³⁴ While this book is largely focused on the United States, blackface was also the first mass popular entertainment export to travel from the America’s to other parts of the world. American minstrel troupes and performers ventured to Europe, Australia, and even Japan by the middle of the nineteenth century. Blackface performers effectively created the network for the globalization of American popular music and culture (alongside its racialized components) out of blackface.³⁵

The rehearsal of blackface caricatures enforced a racialized binary in the white imaginary between blackness and whiteness, and fueled notions of antiblackness, while they also allowed space for the racialization of Indigenous, Asian, and other non-European-descended groups of people.³⁶ As Daphne Brooks notes in *Bodies in Dissent*, blackface enabled the “scopophilic display of racially indeterminate bodies in transatlantic theatre culture into an expression of (white) ontological anxiety and theatrical control over corporeal representation.”³⁷ Black performance aesthetics might derive from or are “authored” by black people, but their own fungible status leaves their aesthetics available as sources of property (under the control of white producers and consumers) to be possessed, consumed, embodied, and articulated through Blacksound.³⁸ Their fungible status informed how black performance practices (real and imagined) came to be understood as part of the “public domain” early on, or as belonging to anyone who could formally claim authorship or authority of their aesthetics through publication and commercial performance.

Although this book looks directly at the construction of the black/white binary, it is not an attempt to erase other ethnically and racially