From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The "Nigger" as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment

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A culture's popular entertainment reflects the culture. America has always prided itself on being "the melting pot." How has America's most popular entertainment reflected America? With so many different immigrant groups joining "the melting pot," how have we defined an America? How does one "prove" he is American? How was that America reflected in its entertainment? In expressing an identifiable American culture through its popular entertainment, the "Nigger" has always played a vital role. From minstrelsy to gangsta rap, white America's notions of the "Nigger" is personified. The "Nigger" then becomes a popular commodity for entertainment. In every form of entertainment, from stage to videos, the "Nigger" has consistently been the most popular theme.

THE NIGGER AS THEME

In his 1930 book *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage*, white historian Carl Wittke detailed the early personification and commodification of the "Nigger" for entertainment. He wrote that the Negro minstrel show was "the one purely native form of entertainment and the only distinctively American contribution to the theatre" (p. 3). White men built their performance on "the pathos and humor of the Negros, their superstitions and their religious fervor, the "Nigger" is one of the most significant and popular themes in American entertainment. It evolves with the entertainment form. On the early American stage, it was minstrelsy. In the videos of the 1990s, it was gangsta rap. This article follows the "Nigger" and his metamorphoses through the popular entertainment forms. It also touches on his role in defining what is true American.
their plaintive and their hilarious melodies, their peculiarities of manner, dress and speech “ (p. 7). Yet, it was not what Wittke calls “genuine darky” that was personified, but, what I call, the white men’s notions of the darky, or the “Nigger,” that was personified for popular entertainment. Wittke wrote:

In the process of adapting this type [the genuine darky] to the theatre, the stage Negro became quite a different person from the model on which he was formed. More specifically, the plantation type which got into minstrelsy apparently was calculated to give the impression that all Negroes were lazy, shiftless fellows, careless of the morrow . . . He turned out to be an expert wielder of the razor, a weapon which he always had ready for use on such special social occasions as crap games, of which the stage Negro was passionately fond . . . he dressed in gaudy colors and in a flashy style he usually consumed more gin than he could properly hold . . . the Negro’s alleged love for the grand manner led him to use words so long that he not only did not understanding, but twisted the syllables in the most ludicrous fashion in his futile efforts to pronounce them. This, in the main, was the Negro of the joke-book tradition and more especially of the minstrel tradition, and undoubtedly he was a somewhat different individual from the one to be found in the real life in the Southern states. But it was this type of darky that the white minstrels strove to imitate or, better stated perhaps, created and perpetuated (pp. 7-9).

In fact, Wittke (1968) wrote, “many of the famous minstrel men were Northern-born-and-reared, or foreign-born immigrant white men, who had almost no first-hand knowledge of the Negro’s manner of life” (pp. 39-40).

The personification of white America’s notions of the “Nigger” was eventually transplanted to the radio. By the 1920s, minstrels were popular on the radio (p. 111). In 1928, two white men created the radio series Amos ‘n Andy. The two men played the roles of black men with exaggerated and stereotypical dialects, and engaged in antics and situations of the conventional minstrel show. The commodity proved successful, and the show was so popular, it became the longest running program in broadcast history. Media historian Donald Bogle (1998) wrote:

Its impact was astonishing. During the fifteen minutes that the program aired . . . much of America seemed to come to a halt. It was said that bars, restaurants, department stores, sometimes even movie theaters just about closed up sop to wheel out radios for their customers to hear the show . . . Presidents such as Coolidge, later, Truman and Eisenhower, all boasted of loving the series.