

# The Disruptive Presence of African-American Performers in the Hollywood Musical

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White performers' dominance of the Hollywood musical created by industry strategies and wider cultural attitudes has resulted in a history of the genre in which African-American performers are regarded as having played a marginal role. Discussions focused on their restriction to the status of featured performer or displacement in the black cast musical, however, often fail to recognize the complex ways in which black musical performers have been positioned, as well as the range and impact of their performances. Despite an overriding insistence on exclusive stories told by white stars for white audiences, the Hollywood musical's emphasis on performance through numbers has conversely meant that African-American artists have proven essential to the musical's development, resulting in a presence unlike that in any other genre. In the midst of generic demands to promote an entertainment culture mythologized as evidence of American democracy and narratively defined by white cultural identity, African-American performers have acted moreover as a potent disruption to prevailing norms, injecting the musical with a powerful alternative to its own narrow vision of America.

The examples of performers who historically have managed to pierce the glass ceiling of white stardom are defined by both their rarity and cultural import as a challenge to America's intransigent racial politics. Paul Robeson's short run of screen musicals in the US and UK, frustrated by the political condemnation he received at the height of America's Cold War hysteria, represented a significant jolt to stereotypes of the African-American male. Robeson's proud bearing was a feature of his work both on stage and in film, and was fully in evidence in screen musicals, whether in the baritone delivery of 'Ol' Man River' in the racially integrated cast of *Show Boat* (James Whale, 1936), or his character's claim to a Caribbean throne in *The Emperor Jones* (Dudley Murphy, 1933). Less obviously, the ambivalence surrounding Bill Robinson's servant roles alongside child star Shirley Temple (later United States Ambassador Shirley Temple Black) frequently obscures the fact that the films positioned Robinson as a co-star to Hollywood's top box-office star of the mid to late-1930s and produced the first ever inter-racial dance team on screen. Their physical closeness, often holding hands as they danced, was not wholly made safe by their age difference, and was something otherwise invisible across Hollywood film due to Production Code fears about the representation of miscegenation. This intimacy and Robinson's tutelage of Temple's characters in song and dance had an unusual levelling effect, clashing with a wider society in which laws prohibiting inter-racial relationships remained fully in force. The films additionally drew on and expanded audience recognition of Robinson as one of the era's most revered dancers, placing the star front and centre in promotional material, and featuring Robinson's specialty stair dance in *The Little Colonel* (David Butler, 1935) in what would become his most celebrated number with Temple.

For other African-American performers, careers in the Hollywood musical were often carved out of appearances as featured performers or specialty acts, and limited to musical numbers with perhaps an additional small role. Studios sought to manage the problem of southern state censorship of black acts by restricting their performances, enabling them to be easily cut from films and ensure exhibition in the South, while retaining these performers as an attraction for other audiences. The limited impact of black artists on narrative development, however, reinforced an impression of a musical genre creating an idealized version of America in which African Americans were peripheral participants. Lena Horne was one of the most vocal in later expressing her resentment at the constraints placed on her career and the ways she was represented. For others, confinement to musical numbers perversely provided opportunities to disturb this white cultural idyll in a space highlighted by the genre's very structure. Fayard and Harold Nicholas, for example, were despite their youth already something of a 'name' act when they completed their first feature film *Kid Millions* (Roy Del Ruth, 1934) alongside Eddie Cantor, and literally danced the black-faced star off the screen in a symbolic disturbance of the classic minstrel number. The Nicholas Brothers' rapid ascent to critics' favourite resulted from both their spectacular style of performance that included back flips, leaps, slides and their trademark jumping splits, and their framing within discrete numbers that seemed almost designed to display their difference. The brothers' graceful, full-bodied movements drawing on influences from tap to ballet and flash, and their flawless appearance in tails promoted an image of the African-American male which both confounded stereotypes and intervened in the narratives' limited cultural imagery. When playing alongside the Glenn Miller Orchestra in *Orchestra Wives* (Archie Mayo, 1942) and *Sun Valley Serenade* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1941) – their performance of 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' with Dorothy Dandridge was described by *The Hollywood Reporter* as 'nothing short of dynamite' – their alternative versions of Miller numbers transformed by jazz orchestrations and hip lyrics provided an explicit contrast to the middle-American whiteness conveyed by Miller and vocal group The Modernaires. As the Nicholas Brothers seemed almost to leap through the movie screen, displaying an excess in opposition to the natural spontaneity at the heart of the integrated musical, their spectacular performances simultaneously worked to defiantly shatter the exclusive cultural imagery to which the films were otherwise assiduously bound.

The black cast musical became the other key framework through which African-American performers were marginalized within the Hollywood musical, and again played out in complex ways. Many of these films, even on first release, appeared anachronistic as they overlooked the contemporary African-American urban experience in favour of celebrating a rural southern culture while denying its slave past. The idea of racially casting musicals additionally evoked the false equivalence of the 'separate but equal' practices of the American South that were still current. Yet these films simultaneously acted as an unparalleled showcase for a range of African-American musical performance, and transferred to black artists the lead roles that were otherwise largely reserved for their white counterparts. The operatic basis of *Carmen Jones* (Preminger, 1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (Preminger, 1959) made them the most prestigious of the black cast musicals and still perhaps the most

problematic. As a tale of drugs, sex and crime on Catfish Row, *Porgy and Bess* did not sit well with many African American artists and proved a particularly difficult casting exercise. Sidney Poitier has related that his resistance to the male lead was overcome only due to the threats to his career made by producer Samuel Goldwyn. Most disconcerting, however, is that the achievement of Dorothy Dandridge in becoming the first African-American actor to be nominated for an Academy Award in a lead role for her performance in *Carmen Jones* occurred in the context of the dubbing of her numbers by white soprano Marilyn Horne. In both films, the vocal abilities of Dandridge were disregarded, as were those of co-star Harry Belafonte in *Carmen Jones*, in favour of a traditional operatic voice that, even so, aimed to convey Oscar Hammerstein's intended black diction. Belafonte's vocals, at least, were dubbed by one of the Broadway originators of the role, African-American LeVern Hutcherson. In the case of Dandridge, though, the intervention of white performance suggests a hidden revision of blackface that confuses the rationale of the black cast musical. Some of the most rewarding musical performances are therefore to be found in those films whose regressive narratives nevertheless betray the difficulties of portraying the African-American story while maintaining the genre's myth of American democracy. The pleasure of King Vidor's undoubtedly significant *Hallelujah* (1929) or musical favourite Vincente Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) therefore comes from the dynamic performance of 'Swanee Shuffle' by Nina Mae McKinney and cast or the gorgeous tones of Ethel Waters singing 'Taking a Chance on Love', rather than the sexual and religious stereotyping drawn through the films' narratives. As an explicit celebration of the contribution of African-American performers to American entertainment, *Stormy Weather* (Andrew Stone, 1943), on the other hand, achieves the feat of bringing narrative and numbers together in an attempt to redefine the genre's depiction of the country's cultural history. Through an array of performers from Lena Horne and Bill Robinson, to Cab Calloway, Fats Waller and the Nicholas Brothers, *Stormy Weather* makes the case that the past and present of American musical entertainment includes the cakewalk and the Katherine Dunham dancers alongside Fred Astaire and a Ziegfeld show.

One further sub-genre which, unsurprisingly, offers a remarkable assortment of musical performances by African-American artists is that of the jazz film, a cycle which engages explicitly with the cultural and social politics of race in America. While the cultural appropriation of jazz is evident in films such as *Young Man with a Horn* (Michael Curtiz, 1950), *Pete Kelly's Blues* (Jack Webb, 1955) and *Paris Blues* (Martin Ritt, 1961), each of which acknowledges the music's black roots while constructing narratives around white stars Kirk Douglas, Jack Webb and Paul Newman respectively, more interestingly the films seek to register the cultural legitimacy of jazz, problematically defined through white European high art traditions. The roots of jazz and blues in African-American culture are established through the performances that exist around the edges of these films, for example Ella Fitzgerald's 'Beale Street Blues' number in *St Louis Blues* (Allen Reisner, 1958) or Pearl Bailey's rendition of 'God Bless the Child' in *All the Fine Young Cannibals* (Michael Anderson, 1960). Parenthetically, Bailey's performance of 'Beat out Dat Rhythm on a Drum' in *Carmen Jones* was one of the few in the film not to be dubbed, reflecting the cultural authenticity the number aimed to suggest. The jazz

film cycle turns to Louis Armstrong, however, as its iconic symbol of jazz history best placed to win cultural legitimacy for the music by bridging the artistic and racial divides between basement clubs and the concert halls of Europe and the United States. In one of the most fascinating of these films, *New Orleans* (Arthur Lubin, 1947), Armstrong plays himself in a loose history of jazz that moves from Storyville to Chicago and New York. Here, Armstrong becomes the catalyst for cultural and racial crossovers between classical music and jazz, culminating in the performance of jazz on the stage of symphony hall (although Armstrong is pointedly restricted to the concert halls of London and Paris). The film excels though in the numbers, like Billie Holiday and Armstrong performing the jazz standard 'Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?', or implied moments of authenticity as we watch Armstrong and his band rehearse downstairs in a Storyville club.

Sammy Davis Jr.'s 1966 jazz film *A Man Called Adam* was a politically charged musical drama which reinforced the star's alignment with the era's racial politics, while simultaneously suggesting a new era of multi-media stardom and independent production for African-American performers. Davis' career in the Hollywood musical encompassed each experience and sub-genre discussed here, from the role of Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess*, to the featured 'Rhythm of Life' number in *Sweet Charity* (Bob Fosse, 1969), but the expansion of opportunities available to black performers in the Hollywood musical to which his political jazz musical pointed has arguably been negligible. The steady decline in popularity of the genre collided instead with a regressive industry trajectory that has repeated many of the generic strategies of the previous decades. African-American artists have often continued to linger on the outskirts of musical films, like Ben Vereen's final reel appearance in *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979), despite the rationale of censorship and a legally segregated South having long since lost its validity. At the same time, the practice of displacement has moved from the black cast film to the new musical silo of the biopic, where a quality musical drama such as *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004) nevertheless resembles something close to cinematic karaoke, and the representation of the black experience remains disconnected from the musical's central concern with the everyday American. Contemporary singers seeking a transition to the screen musical have been similarly confounded; Michael Jackson's attempt to update the black cast musical and confront the explicit generic mythology of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) led to the disappointing re-make *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, 1978), and even the remarkable performance by Diana Ross in *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972) failed to translate into a Hollywood musical career. It's notable too that Queen Latifah's lead musical role came in *Bessie* (Dee Rees, 2015), the television biopic of Bessie Smith, rather than in the conventional film musicals *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002) and *Hairspray* (Adam Shankman, 2007). Still, there have been moments of delight, such as the 1989 film *Tap*, written and directed by Nick Castle, the son of the famed Hollywood choreographer for whom he was named. While a flawed film, its combination of old-school technique provided by the likes of Harold Nicholas and Jimmy Slyde, and the contemporary twist served up by Gregory Hines, is blended through Sammy Davis Jr. and a breath-taking group challenge dance. Moreover, current moves towards greater cultural diversity both on and behind the camera, and the success of films such as *Dreamgirls* (Bill Condon,

2006) suggest several steps forward. The kind of backlash that greeted *La La Land's* (Damian Chazelle, 2016) white dominance of jazz culture is only to be avoided, after all, by an abundance of films that give space to multiple patterns of performance, role and racial identity. With the generic tools it has to employ, the Hollywood musical is well positioned as a beacon for wider industry change, and in the current political climate worldwide, audiences would surely do nothing but applaud.