

"Blackface" in Gander, World War two

(by Robert G Pelley, 23 December 2019)
<http://bobsganderhistory.com>

Minstrel shows were basically an American phenomenon. A white chap by the name of Thomas Dartmouth (Daddy) Rice is considered to be the father of the minstrel show. He developed the first popularly known blackface minstrel character (called "Jim Crow") in 1830.

Rice's stereotypic imitation of a black man was extremely popular with whites in both the North and South. His use of blackface, black stereotypes and the overall popularity and financial success of his performances set the basis for the "Virginia Minstrels", who performed as the first professional white minstrel troupe in 1843.

Rice's "Jim Crow", with his exaggerated dance movements, became the template for an enduring "Sambo" archetype, representing the uneducated rural slave. Urban African Americans were depicted as the "Zip Coon," typified by his flamboyant dress and his clumsy attempts at sophisticated speech. The other common stereotypes were the "Mammy," a mother figure, doting on her "pickanninnies," or black children. As well, the name "Hannah" appears in many a song, referring to a mulatto woman who is usually sexually desired, a symbol of master-on-slave sexuality.

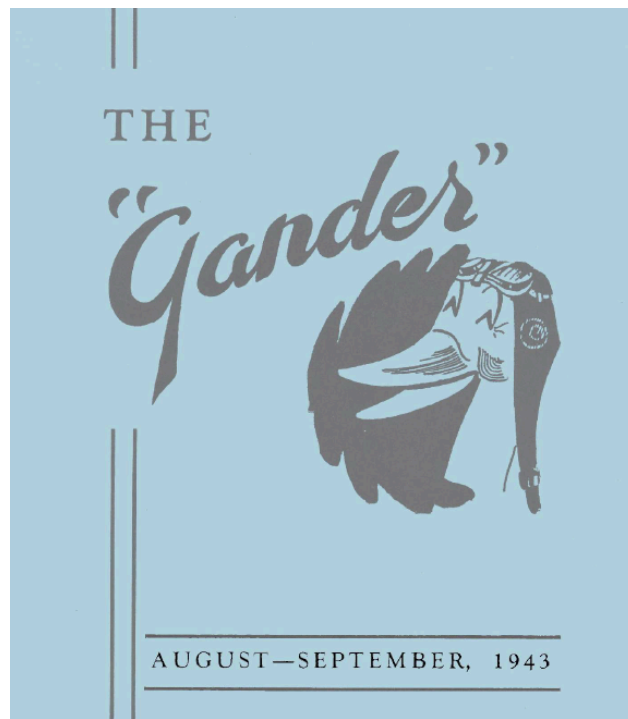
The Virginia Minstrels were followed by Christy's Minstrels who set up the standard structure and iconography for future minstrel shows. The band was in a semicircle facing the audience. The "interlocutor" sat in the middle of the arc and spoke very formally, the "straight man" of the ensemble. The jokers (often called endmen or gagmen) stood at either end of the arc, one called "Tambo" who played tambourine, the other called "Bones" who played castanets or spoons.

The “endmen” began the show with joking banter and quips. Along with comic songs, a sentimental ballad was usually performed by a “romantic tenor.” The second segment featured a variety show of song and dance. The third segment was a one-act play, usually set on a plantation. Finally, the entire ensemble performed a rousing “walkaround” of song and dance.

One frequent provider of songs was Stephen Foster, including the well-known "Oh! Susanna", "The old folks at home" and "Old Kentucky Home".

Around the end of the century, African American musicians and performers moved beyond minstrelsy and made artistic innovations, starting with ragtime, performed by an Afro-American, Scott Joplin. However, another black performer unfortunately wrote a love song for another context intitled "All Coons Look Alike to Me". It led to a sub-genre of "coon songs" even more degrading.

The best known, more recent, blackface singer was Al Jolson who died in 1950. He sang during the Second World War and was therefore known by those who put on the performance in 1943, as described in the quarterly RCAF magazine "The Gander".



Here is what the article said.

"MINSTREL SHOW"

The Minstrel Show that took place in the R.C.A.F. Station Theatre on Wednesday, August 7th at 2030 hours was indeed a success. In fact so much so that the "Gander Minstrels" put on a command performance for our friends across the way (NDLR- the USAAF on the American Side). Record crowds attended both 'performances and the audience was quite attentive. Now of course my readers no doubt will be interested in knowing that the Minstrel Show, sponsored by the Glee Club was carefully rehearsed for under the able supervision and direction of Eugene Hill, Y.M.C.A. Director, who, by the way, set the music for, "For your Necessary Action."

The Group consists of a Chorus of 35 W .D.'s and Airmen. This club had its inception in April, 1943, and has progressed steadily to its present strength and popularity.

The first performance of the Glee Club was broadcast over VONF, St. John's and re-broadcast through other stations to points in the United States and Canada.



THE MINSTRELS

Since several members in the chorus have recently received their posting, the Glee Club would welcome anyone interested in this endeavour. The members practice for a period of two hours every Wednesday evening.

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It would be hard to tell the spirit with which the members of the glee club painted their faces and gave their performance. Was it only a respectful search of authenticity?

The decor and the dress suggest otherwise. There were practically no airmen of Afro-American extraction in the RCAF, as they were considered by authorities to be insufficiently reliable to do other than the most basic of jobs. One could not expect that ordinary personnel of the RCAF would have any reason to think otherwise.

Main reference: USF Tampa Library's special collections, African American Sheet Music Collection: The History of Minstrelsy