

African American Entertainers in Australia and New Zealand: A History, 1788-1941

By Bill Egan

McFarland and Co., 270 pp, 2020

Reviewed by Barbara Holloway

IN THE FIRST VERSION OF *THE CHERRY PICKERS* (1970), WIRADJURI AUTHOR KEVIN GILBERT HAD his characters pick up their guitars and sing 'Swanee River', a well-known Black American song about longing for 'de old plantation'. As the drama was described as the first by an Aboriginal writer and the song was known as traditional, it seemed an unexpected choice, for as 'we' were then so sure, Aboriginal and Black American experience and history had been so different. Weren't they? Gilbert replaced 'Swanee River' with his own lyrics in the second version of *The Cherry Pickers* but similar songs connect the two peoples, who have, in different ways, shared the experience of profound destructiveness, cruelty and exploitation at the hands of Europeans. Fifty years later, in 2020, as crowds took to Australian city streets in support of the American Black Lives Matter protests triggered by grief and outrage at the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the parallels between Australian Aboriginal deaths in custody and African-American experiences of police brutality and racially motivated violence were brought to national and international attention. And not for the first time. While interested people may have an awareness of the influence of Black American culture on Aboriginal arts and politics in the mid-twentieth century, an earlier history of performers from the States was barely known before the publication of *African American Entertainers in Australia and New Zealand*.

Bill Egan's story of the travels and performances of such entertainers as they criss-crossed Australia and New Zealand sheds light on the circulation of 'Swanee River' and other cultural and ethnic interchanges and exchanges with audiences and spectators of all backgrounds. Tracing 350 such performers, it begins with John Randall, the Black American convict-musician who played in Botany Bay's regimental band in the 1780s. The account ends with brief outlines of tours by jazz greats like Ella Fitzgerald in the 1950s and Paul Robeson's famous visit to the work site of the Sydney Opera House. Egan's focus is on the personnel on tour in the century between the 1840s and 1940s, whether they came in large troupes of up to 40 people or as solitary performers like the cyclist Major Taylor.

The circumstances for these African American entertainers bore no resemblance to those of Aboriginal entertainers of the same period who had been 'removed (possibly forcibly kidnapped) from communities in 1883 to appear in the notorious Barnum's 'Ethnological Exhibition of Strange Savage Tribes tour... throughout USA and later Europe' (Casey 52).

While it is hard to generalise across several forms of entertainment, African Americans were by contrast professional entertainers sought out and hired by managers. While Egan brings together studies like Cassandra Pybus's *Black Founders*, Peterson's *Profiles of African American Stage Performers* and Richard Waterhouse's history of the Australian popular stage to 1914, his own prowess in machine-readable data amasses—in every sense of the word—original material under chapter headings for tours by troupe or individual. With his definition of entertainer as 'anyone the public will pay money to see perform', Egan also provides the name and background of the manager and/or entrepreneur, the composition of the group and each performers' role within it, the name of ship and the date travelled on, the schedule, the venues and the plays, music, songs, dances, fights or races that constituted appearances. Each town or city performed in is named. Where it can be known—as it often can—the personal and professional life of performers before, during and after their Australasian tour is provided. First organised and underwritten by individual managers, from the 1890s the tours were 'pumped through a process that resembled a sausage machine' (65) with the advent of the centrally controlled theatre circuits such as the Tivoli.

Nearly all tours included New Zealand, inviting comparison between the two countries, but there seems little difference in how shows were organised or received. As white theatre troupes also did, companies travelled performing across both countries for long periods: more than three years in the case of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The punishing schedules meant not only performing nightly in lengthy seasons in the capital cities, but seemingly in every town or tiny collection of humanity often across the continent from Townsville to Hobart. The troupe's life on the road—or whenever possible, the rail—is glimpsed in local newspapers as they donated an evening's takings after local disasters, played goodwill baseball matches, occasionally appeared in court as individuals, or staged benefits as Lewis's Mastodons did for the Anti-Coloured Labour League in Townsville in 1883, supporting a fundraiser against 'blackbirding' of Pacific Islanders whose kidnapping and indentured labour were all too like by-then-illegal slavery (22-3).

The acts in the first African American shows to visit Australia mirrored the Black-face minstrel groups which had preceded and continued to tour at the same time.

Egan sketches in what constituted minstrel shows and describes how Black-face had evolved from the 1820s into popular entertainment in the USA so common that there were already amateur local Black-face groups in communities across all three countries—a troupe performing in Hobart as early as 1838—with music and dance that drew on ‘a wide repertoire from the European tradition, including Irish step dancing and English clog dancing’ (11) in addition to impersonating Blacks in stereotypical songs, dances and comic sketches ending with the ‘plantation’ segment of the show. ‘Swanee River’ was one such staple and was, symptomatically, not African-American but written by well-known white American composer Stephen Foster for the Black-face, New York-based, Christy’s Minstrels in 1851.

African American troupe tours of Australasia began in the 1870s and—knowing what audiences were already familiar with—managers advertised many of the same songs, music and acts. To distinguish the players from Black-face for Antipodean audiences, ‘authenticity’ of both colour and heritage was first promoted. As one poster boasts: ‘the singers number 11 coloured persons, all the direct descendants of slaves, the majority emancipated slaves. Their melodies were composed and sung in the days of captivity’ (33).

The African-American shows continued to include two anti-slavery dramas that were a staple of Black-face troupes—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Octoroon*. The less-known of the two, *The Octoroon*, remained a favourite into the early twentieth century. A melodrama with a Louisiana plantation narrative, it too had been written by a white man—the Irish impresario Dion Boucicault. The success of such theatre derives in part from discourse of slavery and race in the English-speaking world, reflecting shared dependence on and profit from slave labour: Australia had a significant acquaintance with both African race history and slavery through a number of West Indian plantation-owners bringing their wealth to our colonies after the British Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 with its financial compensation, as research by Ann Curthoys has found (Curthoys).

Readers will look for cross-currents connecting with Aboriginal people, to whom the book is dedicated. The connections come not with the minstrel shows but choirs bringing a new entertainment, the spirituals or ‘Sorrow Songs’. There were no caricatures or buffoonery in these troupes, spearheaded by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the first group of whom came in 1886. Not only were they hosted by Sir Henry and Lady Elizabeth Loch (the Victorian Governor and his wife, both of whom also attended most of the Singers’ concerts), they performed at Maloga Mission Station at Cumeragunga on their tour through Victoria and southern NSW to the great mutual pleasure of audience and singers. Their manager told the Melbourne *Argus*:

I shall never forget the effect of our singing there. The Aborigines were at first very shy of us, but when they heard us sing they went into a state I can only describe as one of almost ecstatic delight. The music of the plantations stirred their souls as no other music could have done, and they seemed to recognise us as brethren from a far distant tribe. They followed our carriages for miles along the road, and waved adieu from fences, trees, and rising grounds in a way that showed that were we ever able to return there we would be welcomed with a welcome white men seldom receive. (38)

Mavis Thorpe Clark notes: 'The Aboriginal people were drawn to Negro spirituals. For 50 years these songs flowed with the waters of the Murray' (quoted in Walker 27), but it seems the Fisk Singers perhaps inspired the Maloga community, some of whom began giving public performances of the Gospel songs and Negro spirituals, as Egan has found in both Cootamundra and Melbourne, fundraising for the Aborigines' Protection Association. This is the heritage of singers like Jimmy Little and the women's group, The Sapphires, who emerged from Cumeragunga in the 1970s.

While tracing troupes and individuals, *African American Entertainers in Australia and New Zealand* also shows how theatre practices and cultural fashions changed with cultural and commercial trends. Parts of the original minstrel show format became vaudeville, parts branched into gospel choirs or, in the early twentieth century, ragtime and jazz concerts. When audience enthusiasm for acrobat and comedy acts grew, managers steered performers into circuses like Wirth's, while the new Wild West shows hired more Native American Indian performers so opportunities for some African American entertainers dropped away—but jazz played by Black musicians ruled in popularity from the early twentieth century.

Egan presents a spectrum of reviews and responses that performances met with, from critics with a deep knowledge of music and theatre arts and respect for the performers to the enthusiastic and racist slang praising others alongside cartoon caricatures of them. By marked contrast, the numerous photographs show people dressed in the height of Victorian fashion. At times, stars introduced Australasia to the latest in fashion as they had in dance, so that their street clothes and stage costumes were as newsworthy as their act. While the performers were by no means all saints, the images, posed for publicity purposes, combine with the reviews and interviews to present a general narrative of mutual respect and successful shows. It is also striking how many of the nineteenth-century visitors chose (and were able) to stay in Australia for the rest of their lives, performing in their own acts or rehired by managers to join new troupes as they arrived from the USA.

The counter-narrative, all too clear among the wealth of images reproduced in this history, is the dehumanising terminology of the American South that Australian advertising posters reproduced and perpetuated, as did some reviews and news items. Though deeply aware of racism and not hesitating to name it, Egan suggests that there was less malice in its use in Australia before the Restricted Immigration Act formalised White Australia policies and before scientific racism permeated politics, social practices and attitudes. He dedicates a later chapter to what he calls 'White Australia's Darkest Hour,' a disgraceful episode in 1930s' Melbourne that saw Sonny Clay's Plantation Band leave prematurely after six young male members were arrested and sentenced to deportation for hosting a party that included some young white women. The media generated an atmosphere of such prejudice that Billy Hughes appeared to support lynching in a speech before Federal Parliament. No full jazz band obtained visas again until Louis Armstrong's All Stars in 1954.

African American Entertainers, published by a noted jazz music company in the US, must be one of the most thoroughly-researched and minutely-documented investigations ever conducted into any dimension of the entertainment industry in Australasia. In Egan's account, tours by solitary performers, usually sportsmen, were somewhat different from the theatre shows. For example, the teetotal and strict Christian, Major Taylor, was three times US cycling champion at the time of competing in Australia. Who knew that, in the 1890s, the richest bicycle race in the world was the Sydney Thousand, organised by the NSW League of Wheelmen? Taylor disembarked in Sydney to be greeted by a crowd waving US flags and then attended a mayoral reception in his honour. He won several races by his famous move when he 'fairly shakes up his wheel, lifts it along through the air and jumps past his competitors' (108) but local competitors connived at blocking him in what seems most unsportsmanlike moves in the biggest races. Nonetheless he wrote afterwards:

My stay in Australia is one of my most pleasant recollections, especially in view of the fact that I entered the country with dire misgivings because of my colour. While I experienced team-work and combinations [strategies to thwart his surge to the front in races] in Australia, I am satisfied that the field was interested in bringing about my defeat simply because I was [the] champion, and not because of my color. (107)

The author is less certain, but Taylor and his wife christened their daughter Sydney in honour of her birthplace. The cyclist had at least made a lot of money.

Egan is an independent scholar, whose previous research has focused on jazz, and he does not attempt to theorise this very substantial work. From the summit of

this mountain of research, the work provides an overview not only of developments in African American connections with Australia and New Zealand, performance and managerial practices, but race laws, public policies, attitudes and appetites. Specialist researchers are further served by bibliography, comprehensive footnotes, index and appendices.

Egan is disarmingly frank about any conflict between information overload and readability: 'There has been a (perhaps inevitable) tension between providing a comprehensive chronological history of the entertainers' complete activities, and the maintenance of a free-flowing narrative for general readers' (4). The danger of drowning readers in facts is averted first by timely overviews such as a preface that neatly summarises the nature and organisation of the nineteenth and early twentieth century entertainment industry, then by Egan's lively prose, his deep familiarity with the people and situations he presents, and the prolific, evocative images throughout the text.

Long past the timeframe of 1788-1941 that Egan adopts for *African American Entertainers*, visible and invisible threads of cultural and political exchange in the performing arts continue to be shared in Aboriginal and African American arts and politics. Other researchers in Australia, notably Maryrose Casey, have presented the long and complex history of Aboriginal performance for non-Indigenous audiences in Australia, and Clinton Walker and Jessie Lloyd trace the combinations of traditional and Western music performance for Aboriginal and general listeners.

The melodrama *The Octoroon* that was long a staple of minstrel shows has become an example of a shared reclaiming of power through performance. Rewritten by the African American playwright Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, renamed *An Octoroon* and staged in New York in 2015, it is now a confronting comedy/drama, highlighting, parodying and undercutting the racism of both nineteenth and twenty-first century US societies. In turn, at the request of Aboriginal festival director Wesley Enoch, Nakkiah Lui, Aboriginal playwright, producer and satirist, recontextualised it to North Queensland for the Brisbane Festival in 2017. It was a great success with reviewers and audiences alike (Convery).

BARBARA HOLLOWAY is a non-Indigenous writer and Visiting Fellow in SLLL at ANU. Her family acted in and owned Holloway's Travelling Theatre Companies that staged *The Octoroon* and advertised black-face shows as well as Shakespeare's plays in the Australia of the late nineteenth century.

Works Cited

- Casey, Maryrose. *Telling Stories: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performance*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Press, 2012.
- Convery, Stephanie. 'Nakkiah Lui reimagines An Octoroon: "It Appeals to the Contrarian in Me."' <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/sep/17/nakkiah-lui-on-re-imagining-an-octoroon>>.
- Curthoys, Ann. 'From Montserrat to Settler-Colonial Australia: The Intersecting Histories of Caribbean Slave-owning Families, Transported British Radicals, and Indigenous Peoples.' *History Workshop Journal* (forthcoming, 2020.)
- Gilbert, Kevin. *The Cherry-Pickers*. NLA: typescript dated 1970.
- Lloyd, Jessie. The Mission Songs Project. <<https://missionsongsproject.com>>. Accessed 26 Jul. 2020.
- Poignant, Roslyn. *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2014.
- Walker, Clinton. *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Waterhouse, Richard. *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788-1914*. Kensington, NSW: NSW UP, 1990.