

# “TURN ME LOOSE

## WHITE MAN”

“Allen Lowe is the most dedicated and ambitious musical anthologist America has ever produced.” – Greil Marcus



Or: Appropriating  
Culture: How to  
Listen to American  
Music, 1900-1960

By Allen Lowe

Volume 1

with introductions  
by Greg Tate and  
Greil Marcus

# **Turn Me Loose White Man Or: Appropriating Culture: How to Listen to American Music, 1900-1960: Volume 1**

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# Introduction 1

Is it important to clarify what I mean by the main title of this new collection and book, *Turn Me Loose White Man*? Given the rawness of our current political atmosphere, yes. And I have to admit I ran the title by a few trusted friends before finally deciding to use it.

There is a recording, from 1902, which fits very neatly into what I would call the immediate pre-history of country music, by the white singing duo Cantrell and Williams, of a song called *Mississippi River Song Tapioca*. At one point in the tune the obviously-white singer - portraying a black character, and in the midst of warbling about working on the Mississippi River amongst the “darkies” and other happy workers - yells out “turn me loose, there, white man.” It is a jarring moment, representing, I would say, a kind of transference of the desire by a white man for artistic freedom onto the “other,” the black man, in the guise of demanding cultural/expressive liberation. “Set me free,” the white singer seems to be demanding, “by making me as black as I am pretending to be.” The call is clearly for cultural liberation in the guise of a classic minstrel taunt, of white men “exposing” black men for “pretensions” of free-minded independence. Less apparent is how singer and audience of the time perceived this call for action – was it simply a matter of comic silliness? Of contempt for the futility of any black notion of equality? Was it a staged impersonation, regarded by the audience as being as good as the real thing but safer and more manageable as long as white people were in charge? Or was it just a good, fun, catchy phrase in the midst of a catchy tune?

Given how minstrelsy (not unlike current white representations of black expression in the way white people dress, move, and use the idea of hip-hop time and lyrics) represents a complex love/hate/fear view by white people of African Americans, this is a perfect example of imitation as a protective barrier of privilege: Black me up and I will be free, and then when I am done I will be really free (in other words, white). You have a white man portraying a black man, and the white man is not only in a position of

power and privilege but is, ironically or not, expressing something that has historical resonance because it is being said at a time in American life when not only is black music struggling to overcome white hegemony, but Black America, in a political and social sense, is doing the same.

To me this, for the white singer, represents a different kind of double consciousness, though we have no idea if the white man who is singing has any sense of the deeper meaning of the gesture, or of the nastiness of the irony involved. Minstrels were actors and impersonators, yes, but their manner betrayed a sly - if racist - commentary on their actions, a simultaneous, social call and response, as though they were saying, or, really, being, one thing while meaning another, as part of a “secret” yet openly exposed pact with their equally racist audience. And yet - they were smart enough to create enough distance between their words and implied actions to allow for what politicians now call “plausible deniability:” the singer in this never says explicitly that he is portraying the black character as deluded; his words indicate the opposite. There is no obvious and audible proof, in the recording itself, that this exists in a false and racist reality; in order to know that, you have to extrapolate from not only the whole method of minstrelsy but also from the mass conditions of African Americans at the time this was made – something of which many white people were of no doubt aware, but which probably just seemed to most of them like the natural state of things in the post-Adam and Eve world. If in today’s America millions of white folks can say, as they have, that white people are as discriminated against as black people are (or more so, according to some polls I have seen), you can imagine how much less evolved the political landscape was 120 years ago. And at the time this was recorded there was no consensus, among white people, that minstrelsy was intrinsically evil; among black people, yes, but not necessarily among black entertainers, thousands of whom made a professional living in the minstrel field. Hence deniability, plausible or not.

As for, finally, the title of this book and of this collection, the history of American music, to my ears, is essentially a timeline of African Americans liberating themselves in sound, creating an alternative history to that which has been imposed on them. As a title and reference it is meant to evoke the not-so-straightforward way in which this has been achieved. Musically it implies nearly every form of American song as it grew out of our national consciousness, through cultural collision and white and black action and

reaction. In other words, in the glib terminology with which we sometimes by necessity describe such things, white music is black music and black music is white music, by force of habit and culture and by mass shifts in taste and intellectual convenience. Out of all of these come certain essential American musical forms, and out of these essences come this book.

That's what I really think, though as I write this I brace myself for any possible negative reactions. Though, like Cantrell and Williams, I feel somewhat hopeful, if not secure, in the knowledge that plausible deniability still exists, at least in my world, for liberals and other well meaning white people.

## Introduction 2

Where does one start with American music, and where does one end? There are some obvious musical signposts, as I call them, that serve well as beginnings, origins, sources. There are less clear endings, places that mark the discontinuation of styles, sound, and movements. Sometimes certain things seem to disappear, only to reappear as something else or something that seems like something else. Racial crossover comes, goes, complicates itself by way of musical and social changes and even alterations in the body politic, and becomes charged with modernist essences that often co-exist with much more conservative artistic impulses.

In this book we will browse the music, using specifics to make generalizations, generalizations to cue specifics. We will go from CD 1 to CD 30 of the accompanying set, representing each as chapters, small but significant episodes of American music in the first 60 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We will work from the assumption that the conventional wisdom – of American music as a fusion of expression both black and white – is both technically correct *and* grossly insufficient as a means by which to analyze what has happened in that music and why.

To this end I have developed my own conventional wisdom, based on not only all the music I have listened to but also on certain conditioned intellectual and emotional responses. My instinct in this sense was honed by a mixed sense of aesthetic worship and social consciousness – a true belief in art for art's sake, yes, and a social consciousness not strictly or even necessarily determined by material politics, but simply one that reflects an awareness and associated understanding of what happens and why – or why not – in the national musical conversation, and of the aesthetic and racial dynamics involved. I don't argue now and never have that America, in the commercial or business sense, represents a level playing field for black and white musicians, but I do argue that at some point those black and white Americans converge, for both better and worse, aesthetically. Of course to understand the 20<sup>th</sup> century of American music one has to understand the

19<sup>th</sup> century, with its composites of both stationery and travelling entertainments, some of the most distinctive of which, whether we like it or not, lead out from minstrelsy and/or the minstrel impulse. The problem, I think, however, with the hot button term of minstrelsy is that it is not, to my mind, what most people think it is. Sure, the surface of minstrelsy was racist caricature, and below that surface was a deep contempt for, as others have said, black bodies, for the whole idea of black people as human beings. And yet below even that surface, as many revisionist-minstrel-historians have claimed, was an essence of black sound and movement – sonic movement sometimes, physical movement at others, though often the two are/were inseparable. Buried deep as it was, it was still audible and reclaimable,

There are a few important writers in this area whose work I particularly admire, and these come to mind (sorry if I am leaving any important ones out): Eric Lott, Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott, Berndt Ostendorf, Dale Cockrell, Robert Tolls, W.T. Lhamon. What connects their work is a sense that through the racialist scrim of minstrelsy's merge of black/white can be sensed, or heard, a more complex struggle between, not just black and white but also between life and death, the life of black creativity and its struggle against the death knell of white power. We hear and see the beginning of an aesthetic merger in which blackness is clearly and profoundly victorious; still, whiteness survives by its own self destructive need to dominate, its propensity for a kind of cultural genocide in which its arrogance contained the seeds of both its own destruction and, paradoxically, its survival.

This may be the reason for the ultimate strangeness of American music and culture; black people begin the process by which the deepest and most meaningful aspects of cultural definition begin; whites grab at those black sources and symbols of psychic and physical freedom with both frustration and a sense of privilege and superiority, even as the grab itself belies any claim they might have or self-image they might covet of supremacy; blacks stay, as usual, creatively just out of reach in terms of cultural originality and newness, one clear step ahead of their white followers, like runaway slaves whose trail is always fresh yet fatally cold for the paterollers who come after them with a misplaced confidence and an implied and unearned arrogance. Yet, in the end, the result is neither loss nor victory for either party. Money flows more in one direction than the other, the white instinct for power and domination leads to certain essential and lasting kinds of

power and domination, and yet black survivals continue to tease and taunt the failing yet persistent sources of this power and domination.

It is as though white will and struggle is an end in itself, and creates, even as political and social relationships alter radically, a kind of cultural standoff. The very refusal of white artists to concede becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: American culture is black culture to the core, yet whites who work within its broad outlines regularly assimilate in ways which are not merely expressions of economic power but often seem, through sheer will and imaginative balance and intelligence, to be of undeniable artistic strength and resourcefulness. The racial and racist source of advantage becomes like a kind of political original sin for white people, neither to be denied nor to become a source of selfflagellation, because guilt, important for purposes of political reformation, is too great a burden to be borne indefinitely. Ultimately the selfish urge for creativity and economic survival wins out. The culture (and in the case of this book, the music) goes on. Whites, quite literally, have largely been content to fiddle while the rest of the world burns. So let us see how, and maybe why, some of that happened.

—Allen Lowe 7/6/19

“I told Monk that some of his intervals surprised me. They would sound unusual, but when I checked them out, they were ordinary fifths, sixths, sevenths. It was his touch that made them sound different. He nodded and said ‘it can’t be any new note. But if you mean a note enough it will sound different. You got to pick the notes you really mean!’

Bill Crow from his book  
Birdland to Broadway

# Chapter 1

## **Traditional Racism and Religiosity: Is This the Beginning of Country Music? (Or: Victims of Irony)**

Personally I accept the assumption that a great deal, if not all, of American music is rooted in forms that derive in some way from Minstrelsy. You don't have to agree; however, later on, in the reading list I will provide some useful sources to refer to in trying to understand this difficult yet essential form. Yes it was racist (but also yes, it made fun of not just black people but of women, the Irish, the Dutch, the Germans, etc; and any number of other immigrant groups); yes it was dominated by men, both black and white, in blackface makeup. Yes, it was, in this sense and many others, demeaning to African Americans (actually, all people of African descent). And yes, it contained the roots of country music in repertoire, humor, and instrumentation; of the American pop repertoire and the development of a commercial class of songwriter; of classic blues accompaniment (there is a report somewhere – long lost among my sources, I am sorry to say - of a singer being accompanied by a banjoist playing a melodic response to his vocal); and was the root of the translation and transition of gospel music and spirituals into the commercial world. There is also a credible report of a ring shout vocal/dance as performed on the minstrel stage. The early vernacular rhythms of minstrelsy, and its use of the banjo, likely predicted and effected early jazz. The transfer of the minstrel gesture to other stages – traveling shows, medicine shows, street performance, parades, vaudeville, circuses, and the new and essential *black* minstrel stage – created a mass movement of sound and motion that had

shattering effect on all of not just American music but, categorically, American culture.<sup>1</sup>

A lot of this is reflected in the commercial rise of the recording industry which, after the 1890s, grows increasingly diverse in its categorizations and coverages. And though this is a selective – and 30 CD – look at those (primarily, in this study, American) individuals who comprise(d) those categorizations and coverages, it gives us, nevertheless, a good look at what happened after minstrelsy, as a style and form, passed its commercial peak, as the American consciousness began to show some, if fleeting, signs of reconciling itself with black creativity; and as black consciousness, post-reconstruction and emancipation, came under not just increasing attack but also rose significantly to defend itself.

I defer to Ed Berlin<sup>2</sup> for some deeper and better-researched reflections on the pianist and composer **Ben Harney's** origins. Eubie Blake and some others swore he was black, though he clearly presented as white. Was he passing? Berlin has theorized that Harney had Melungeon ancestry; the Melungeons were Appalachians with a mixed genetic and social heritage, part of which was African, though apparently this connection was, in the interest of survival against the casual threat of racist violence in its day, regularly suppressed.<sup>3</sup> Was the reality, as I once suggested, that Harney was white for white people, black for black people? The best (or worst?) of all possible worlds (meaning: deny your heritage for one group, but grab it back in a temporary and short-term manner for the next)? Harney was a major figure, a popular performer/pianist who composed some the earliest music that established a commercial beachhead for ragtime.

He was clearly an estimable pianist, or probably much more than that; none other than James P. Johnson, the great stride pianist, admired Harney's playing. Harney was also an important songwriter in the emerging style of ragtime-related "coon songs" (songs which employed ragtime-type syncopations, plus lyric content which was sometimes just crudely stereotyped and racist, and at other times seemed weirdly predictive – though cause and effect is difficult to determine - of certain aspects of black composition and humor up to and including hip hop, in which the bluntness of racial stereotype and epithet is used as a kind of preemptive defense mechanism).<sup>4</sup> Harney was also a significant performer who helped spread the word about the new music while touring with his famous Stick Dance,

an early example of dance's deep impact on popular music. His composition **Mr. Johnson Turn Me Loose (1891)** which we will hear in several versions (including one from a generation later by a hillbilly band) was a huge success, and we are lucky to have this version by the man himself. Harney is unaccompanied here but phrases, perhaps, like Otis Blackwell on his Elvis demos (another and more complicated story in itself, because Blackwell seems less, based upon what I have heard, and as opposed to legend, like he influenced Elvis' style than that he adapted to it in order to make his songs work for the King). At the least, Harney was working to reflect the *au courant* popular vocal style as it spread from minstrelsy outward.

Of course, if we understood Ben Harney as being black, and nothing else, we might interpret his language and his style in a different way. For now we have the recordings and an understanding of the commercial impact of those recordings and they will have to do. As for **Mr. Johnson Turn Me Loose**, there is also a superb version by **Silas Leachman**, from **1901**, who engages in what I can only describe as ragtime diction, in which the music's duple rhythms are closely translated into march-like vocalisms. The unknown pianist keeps up admirably. From a year later we hear a version of what was Harney's first major song success, **You've Been A Good Old Wagon But You Done Broke Down** by **Len Spencer (1902)**. Spencer (whose **Climb the Golden Fence** from the **late 1890s** is essentially a compendium/recital of 'pickaninny mischief' told with an Uncle-Remus like 'wisdom' and perspective) is an interesting figure chronicled by Tim Brooks in his book *Lost Sounds*.

Very young when he started to record, Spencer rose quickly in the business to executive status. Spencer was also a very good performer, and his voice melts into the foreground in what has become, by the time he records, a standard mix of minstrel diction and minstrel-stage growl. I am struck, on this as well as on some other recordings from this era, by the pianist, whose playing is so letter perfect. There have been arguments over the years about how "free" ragtime rhythm was in its original sound and interpretation, and the rhythmic consistency of these anonymous accompanists may constitute the only evidence we have in this regard. The playing on this, just possibly, confirms my poorly-sampled impression that the music was still very much tethered to a relatively gentle foot-tapping-2 beat (as opposed to stomping), struggling to find a way to liberate itself.<sup>5</sup>

Further evidence as to the “accuracy” of Harney’s musical impression of early commercial ragtime is **Arthur Collins’** interpretation (1902) of another great coon-song success, **All Coons Look Alike to Me**, written by Ernest Hogan. Hogan was a black entertainer who became famous on the *black* minstrel stage (in which, it must be argued, African American performers became stealth invaders of the American popular imagination and music world). The general idea was that if the music of minstrelsy was going to become the commercial model for popular culture, it ought to be re-appropriated from those who lifted it in the first place, even as arguments persisted as to how “authentic” - or not - the minstrel origins of such material was in racialist and folkloric terms (and yet, certain and relatively recent books and journal articles have actually done a more-than-credible job of showing that, yes, white minstrels often modeled themselves after the real thing; see the reading list).

Hogan’s compositional success was also his undoing in a personal sense. Of course the song title says it all. Ironically enough, though it seems to reference white people’s inability to distinguish one black person from another, it was about something else altogether – the song is sung from a women’s perspective, saying, in essence, that if she loses one man she can easily get another, because they are pretty much all alike; shades of a later pop/blues song in which men are described as being like streetcars: if one gets away, no need to fret, as another will be along any minute.

Just as significant are the impressions of black entertainer Thomas Fletcher, who describes how important this song was, in its time, as a composition and stylistic indicator. *All Coons Look Alike to Me*, he says in his book *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*, was one of the first songs to define the burgeoning market for ragtime/coon songs, and opened up a lot of opportunities for black entertainers (and, as Hogan himself said, “colored and white songwriters,” who used his example to write more idiomatically and so claim at least some payment for their efforts). This was the way, Fletcher tells us, ragtime was played in the “back rooms of the cafes and other such places.” As Hogan describes it “I put it on paper.”

Fletcher’s chronicle makes it clear that this period in black and white entertainment was full of activity, invention, and opportunity for black artists, and he seems to believe that Hogan’s apostasy was not just forgivable but a necessary stage in the gradual reclamation by black artists of black music and its audience. Hogan for his part was condemned by

black critics, black audiences, and black intellectuals, and, though his career was varied and economically successful, he never lived down his association with a hated social and musical stereotype.

Great Moments in American Racism: Well, you decide. A few years back a collector came up with quite an amazing discovery, an **1894** recording of a song called **Haul The Woodpile Down** by a black gentleman named **Charles Asbury**. A relatively formal-sounding vocalist, Asbury, in the manner of the day, had a very clear and declarative voice and was, more significantly, an excellent, self-accompanying, banjoist. Though the recording was quickly circulated among collectors, the reaction was mixed – he couldn't be black, some insisted, because the way he sang was too formal, the delivery too “white.”

Well, aside from the fact that the recording was over 120 years old and from, socially and musically, a different galaxy than even a lot of other known old records, what were these guys (yes almost all guys) hearing? I have to admit I missed it when it was first rediscovered, but *Haul The Woodpile Down* is a fascinating song and performance, sung in a clearly enunciated manner and with a flailing banjo style that makes it unique in recording history. Even the vocal style, all business, is more than serviceable – and most happily it contains no minstrelisms, in ironic contrast to a lot of white singers of the time – and though I say ironic, in the context of its time it may have been quite the opposite. There is, however, something to be noted about an idiom in which white singers are trying to sound black by sounding like other whites trying to sound black, and in which a black man is condemned, by implication, years later, for sounding too white. Are you following me?

I call the reactions of these contemporary collectors racist because they contain so many racist assumptions about sound and inflection – never mind, by the way, that Asbury's banjo playing is exceptionally original, a specimen of some kind of country plucking and frailing (or is it fracking? I can't keep up with lingo) that goes much, much deeper into an instrumental vernacular than almost anything else we have on record from this era. Listen as well to the repeated strummed triplets that manage to give the illusion of acceleration in place, a very original musical gesture which I have not heard anywhere else in early music. And yes, he was black; his granddaughter is black, and as Richard Martin of Archeophone Records

(which has put out some of Asbury's work) has written: "What we do know is that Asbury was a patient in 1867 at the Freedmen's Hospital in Augusta, Georgia—that was an institution for the benefit of blacks only (primarily ex-slaves)—and that the orphan was raised by a mulatto Baptist preacher and his wife. To doubters I say, I am prepared to be shown how a white boy gets adopted by a black man in Reconstruction-era Georgia."

Years ago I wrote about how coercive I thought certain sociological burdens placed by critics on artists, to be more black or more – or less - white or more Jewish (Cynthia Ozick insisted that Jewish writers had to write about Jewish themes) were. In the case of these contemporary collectors, charging Asbury with formality and stiffness was not only a-historical but reflected racist assumptions about what makes a black man black, about what he needs to do to "justify" his blackness. This is not only distasteful and offensive, but ironically obtuse; *Haul the Woodpile Down*, a song about working on the steamboats, is likely one of black origin that was, like many others, forcibly, at some indeterminate point, filtered through a Minstrel viewpoint into ragtime. It came out the other side with dialect (essentially ignored by Asbury) that sounds, as usual, like a size 7 shoe forced onto a size 8 foot, but with lines as idiomatically charged as:

De old roof leaks and de rain comes thro'  
Away down in Florida  
De nig done die if he touch hoodoo  
I'll haul de wood-pile down<sup>6</sup>

Those ragtime songs thrived in an early market that was full of new sounds. There were vocal groups like the black **Standard Quartette**, whose **Every Day'll Be Sunday Bye and Bye** from, reportedly, **1894 or 1895**, was a welcome departure from the some of the grimier aspects of the minstrel process. As Tim Brooks reports, they recorded as they toured and performed, without sonic trickery and with an appealing and non-caricatured directness. Listen to the interesting way in which held notes, on this, are bent in a kind of consonant unison, implying a tonal flexibility that the evidence of the music, at least on record, does not yet quite support (though given reports on and witnessings of black musicality back to the 1700s, it is likely that this flexibility was already an essential part of less "respectable" black performance practices).<sup>7</sup>

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