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History of Animation

Jazz Toons:  
Depictions of African Americans in Pre and Post-WWII Animated Films

In recent years, DVD releases of old movies containing what is now considered potentially offensive and incendiary content are often preceded by a carefully worded disclaimer. These statements address a variety of images and/or dialogue reflecting outmoded attitudes and humor based on smoking, drinking, and of course, racial and ethnic stereotyping. The warnings are especially notable when they accompany films considered suitable for children, such as cartoons. A typical example is shown before many Warner Brothers features and cartoon compilations:

Some of the cartoons you are about to see are a product of their time. They may depict some of the ethnic and racial prejudices that were commonplace in American society. These depictions were wrong then and are wrong today. While the following does not represent the Warner Bros.' view of today's society, some of these cartoons are being presented as they were originally created, because to do otherwise would be the same as claiming these prejudices never existed (Daily Dot).

Some may balk at these annotations as being overly sensitive, catering too much to political correctness, or merely a "cover your ass" move by the distributors, but now more than ever, the open acknowledgement of racist content in old cartoons is essential. It is certainly preferable to the previous alternative approaches of simply showing the offensive imagery as though it is still the acceptable norm, or worse, the revisionist practice of adjusting or deleting it completely through editing or digital censorship,

blindly ignoring the fact that racism in movies ever occurred or that the world contained no ethnic diversity at all during those days. However, the DVDs' cautionary comments succeed only partially. They effectively express why it is historically important to present the cartoons as they were originally shown, but they fail to mention that there is enormous intrinsic *value* in studying and having easy access to these films produced during less enlightened times.

It is easy to understand why one might have a reactive and volatile response to witnessing ethnic stereotyping and profiling in a cartoon. However, beneath the wince-inducing imagery lie educational and social benefits for today if one is willing and able to look at the films in historical and cultural context, as well as inquire into the filmmakers' motivations during the artistic process. The purpose of such a review is not necessarily to excuse the producers' intentions, but to explain them. Upon close examination of key films from 1941 and 1946, it becomes clear that not all ethnic content was painted with the same bigoted brush.

The cruel racial segregation that pervaded America through the 1930s and 40s was not reflected accurately on movie screens. Mainstream films did not overtly show African American characters being barred from whites-only restaurants or neighborhoods or other examples of bigotry. The segregation that *did* occur in movies was primarily seen in a professional or musical context.

It is well known that African American actors and actresses were cast, almost exclusively, in roles subservient to whites. Somewhat less demeaning (though still stereotypical) was the depiction of the African American connection and profound contribution to American music. Although, by the 1940s, jazz was part of the general

popular musical landscape, it was still strongly associated with its black creators and developers. In music stores, though purchased by consumers of all ethnicities, the records of Louis Armstrong, Louie Jordan, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday were categorized as “race music.” The black association with jazz and swing is prevalent in cartoons of the 1940s, with rhythm, jazz, and blues commonly accompanying black characters on the screen. According to many films of the day, rhythm was not merely a soundtrack to the American black experience – it was an inherent way of life. In animation, this was used to both help and hinder the integrity of the African American image.

Possibly the most notoriously racist cartoon of the period is *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (1941). A regressive film even for the time, *Scrub Me Mama* is an empty litany of every existing negative black stereotype crammed into seven jaw-dropping minutes. The dark-skinned, simian-featured population of “Lazy Town” is “rescued” from their slothful state by the arrival of a light-skinned sexy singer who introduces rhythm into their world. Vivian Dandridge, who sings the title song, was the only African American involved in the production.

The 1940s was the height of the hipster culture (not to be confused with the hipster culture of today). 40s hipsters were predominantly made up of black urban jazz musicians and aficionados. This vivid subculture was marked by flashy clothing (primarily the zoot suit), specialized dancing known as “trucking,” and a new approach to slang specific to the jazz scene. The intricacies of jive talk eventually moved into the mainstream thanks to its inclusion in popular music and movies.

One of the most famous examples of hipster culture in 40s animation is the brief but powerful appearance of the crow quintet in Walt Disney’s *Dumbo* (1941). At first

reactive glance, especially if viewed out of context, *Dumbo*'s hipster crows may seem as stereotypically racist as the denizens of *Scrub Me Mama's Lazy Town*, but to end the discussion there is tantamount to deciding that *every* depiction of an African American in mainstream old movies is automatically racist. A closer contextual look at how the crows' fit into both the movie and film history helps to sharpen the focus.

The pivotal sequence occurs near the end of *Dumbo*. After a night of heavy drinking and hallucinating (perhaps cause for another pre-show disclaimer), Dumbo and his friend/manager Timothy Q. Mouse inexplicably awaken in the high branches of a tree. With the crows' help, they determine that Dumbo has the ability to fly due to his oversized ears, which heretofore had been his downfall. The crows then provide the advice and encouragement needed to bring about Dumbo's eventual ascent to stardom.

Unlike countless other vintage movie depictions of African Americans, *Dumbo*'s hipster crows are neither habitually lazy nor perpetually afraid. They are intelligent, insightful, and have a keen gift for clever word play as demonstrated by their number, "When I See an Elephant Fly." They do not exist merely to serve others. The crow sequence makes up about ten minutes of *Dumbo*'s sixty-four-minute running time and during their brief appearance they demonstrate a character *arc* – a refreshing change from other films' typically one-dimensional black characters. Starting off as good-natured adversaries they seamlessly evolve into empathetic allies once they fully recognize Dumbo's plight. He is a lonely, voiceless individual whose life has been torn apart by an unsympathetic society. He has been demeaned, ostracized, and marginalized based solely on his outer physical appearance. It is only natural that it is the black crows alone who can understand enough to truly help.

One of the oft-cited reasons the *Dumbo* crows are frequently labeled as racist is the name of their leader, “Jim Crow.” True, this could be easily interpreted as a terribly insensitive attempt at a joke, but it could alternately draw purposeful attention to the crows’ societal position and point of view giving them a valuable birds’-eye view of the situation. Decades later, in a sly tribute, the crows make a cameo appearance in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) as musicians in The Ink and Paint Club, a vintage 1940 establishment where, “Toons” are allowed to serve and entertain, but may not be patrons.

With their vastly different approaches to depicting African Americans in animation, it is astonishing to note that *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* and *Dumbo* were produced and released the same year. The United States entered World War II late in 1941 and during the course of the confrontation, two elements emerged to slowly change the nature of the animated image of African Americans – the collaborative spirit that pervaded America against common foreign enemies, and a stronger vocalization by the NAACP and other organizations in protest of imagery that affirmed already prevalent negative stereotypes against black people.

With Japanese and German enemies to demonize, wartime cartoons became somewhat more conscientious about how Americans of all ethnicities were portrayed, especially in terms of intelligence and ability. Though still sometimes laden with stereotypical images of dice and watermelons, cartoons featuring black characters regularly began enlisting active collaboration from African American performers and conveyed a “we’re all in this together” spirit set to an infectious swing soundtrack. A classic example is *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs* (1943), directed by Bob Clampett who, in the 1970s described the origin of the short:

In 1942, during the height of anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II, I was approached in Hollywood by the cast of an all-black musical off-Broadway production called *Jump for Joy* while they were doing some special performances in Los Angeles. They asked me why there weren't any Warner's cartoons with black characters and I didn't have any good answer for that question. So we sat down together and came up with a parody of Disney's *Snow White* and "Coal Black" was the result. They did all the voices for that cartoon (Clampett).

By the end of World War II, filmmakers had become more attentive to recognition of ethnic and cultural diversity within America. Though there was still a long way to go, Hollywood started producing "message pictures" dealing with prejudice and displaying some awareness of how minorities viewed the depictions being presented. The year 1946 alone provided three seminal films in the history of animation and African American image, *John Henry and the Inky Poo*, *Song of the South*, and *Brotherhood of Man*.

Hungarian-born stop-motion innovator George Pal loved black culture and music and equated it with pure Americana. The well meaning but ultimately naïve Pal assumed that images of watermelons and dice games surrounding his jazz-playing figurines would be warmly embraced by an identifying African American audience. Pal immigrated to America in 1939 and created a series of Puppertoons featuring an African American boy named Jasper, whom Pal deemed "the Hucklebery Finn of American folklore" (qtd. in Cohen 58). Though artistically and technically first-rate, the Jasper films are loaded with regressive stereotyping that according to *The Hollywood Quarterly*, "present the razor-

totin', ghost-haunted, chicken-stealin' concept of the American Negro" (qtd. in Cohen 58). Much to Pal's surprise and dismay, groups such as the NAACP complained loudly.

In an effort to placate the protestors and redefine his intentions, Pal produced *John Henry and the Inky Poo* (1946), a dramatic Puppetoon based on African American folklore. With narration and character voices by esteemed black actor Rex Ingram and members of the gospel group, The Luvenia Nash Singers, *John Henry* takes its story, its characters, and its responsibility seriously. "Miracle of miracles," wrote *Ebony Magazine*, "it is that rarest of Hollywood products that has no Negro stereotypes, but rather treats the Negro with dignity, imagination, poetry and love" (qtd. in Off-Ramp).

The same year, Walt Disney Studios attempted, with only partial success, to provide a respectful presentation of black folklore (albeit from a white source) with *Song of the South*, based on the Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris. Like Pal, Disney recruited African American actors to provide the voices for Brer Rabbit, Fox, and Bear in the animated sequences of the mostly live-action film, best admired today for its technical strides in the blending of live-action and animation. *Song of the South* was met with loud protest, both in print (including *Ebony Magazine*) and in front of theaters. The objection was not so much against the animation, but the warmly nostalgic picture of slavery the film projects. As with the equally contested and equally historically inaccurate *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the complaints are legitimate and should be spoken, written, and heard. But unlike those earlier films that are easily accessible, *Song of the South*, last released widely in 1986, lies in the Disney Vault, unavailable to anyone who wishes to view it. In a recent blog entry, African American artist Floyd Norman, who worked at the Disney Studio since 1955, commented:

The film remains a sweet and gentle tale of a kindly old gentleman helping a young boy through a very troubled time. The motion picture is also flavored with some of the most inspired cartoon animation ever put on the screen. Cynics may call the film, sappy. Those with a social or political agenda may call the movie racist. However, if you're a fan of classic Disney storytelling, I guarantee you'll not find a better film (Norman).

In contrast to *John Henry's* attempt to unite all people through a dignified reflection of the African American experience, UPA's *Brotherhood of Man* used a post-war optimism and clinical approach to battle the prejudice that pulls people apart. "The future of civilization depends on brotherhood!" shouts the lead character. While the narrator provides scientific statistics demonstrating that "they" are just as intelligent as "we" are, the animated characters are all drawn flatly and broadly caricatured, regardless of their color. In examining *John Henry* and *Brotherhood of Man*, historian Christopher Lehman comments, "Both cartoons blended social commentary with original African American imagery but in different manners" (Lehman).

When *Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* premiered in 1941, it met little outspoken opposition. Its post-war 1948 re-release ignited a firestorm of protest and controversy started by the NAACP, but echoed by individuals and organizations of all ethnicities and cultures offended by its already outmoded imagery. By that time, World War II and slow but steady social advances in popular culture had begun to demonstrate that animation was a valuable art form that, if used conscientiously, had the potential to draw people together.



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