



Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture

By John Strausbaugh

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A refreshingly clearheaded and taboo-breaking look at race in America reveals our culture as neither Black nor White nor Other, but a mix-a mongrel.

Black Like You is an erudite and entertaining exploration of race relations in American popular culture. Particularly compelling is the author's ability to tackle blackface--a strange, often scandalous, and now taboo entertainment. Although blackface performance came to be denounced as purely racist mockery, and shamefacedly erased from most modern accounts of American cultural history, Strausbaugh shows that, nevertheless, its impact has been deep and longlasting. The influence of blackface can be seen in rock and roll and hip-hop; in vaudeville, Broadway, and drag performances; in Mark Twain and "gangsta lit"; in the earliest filmstrips and Hollywood's 2004 *White Chicks*; on radio and television; in advertising and product marketing; and even in the way Americans speak.

With remarkable common sense and clarity, Strausbaugh candidly illuminates truths about race rarely discussed in public, including:

- American culture neither conforms to knee-jerk racism nor to political correctness. It is neither Black nor White nor Other, but a mix-a mongrel.
- No history is best forgotten-however uncomfortable it may be to remember. The power of blackface to enrage and mortify Americans to this day is reason enough to examine what it still tells us about our culture and ourselves.
- Blackface is still alive. Its impact and derivations- including Black performers in "whiteface"-can be seen all around us.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Strausbaugh is a regular contributor to *The New York Times*. His previous books include *Rock Til You Drop* and *E: Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*.

From The Washington Post

Anyone familiar with director Spike Lee's satirical film "Bamboozled" will have a head start on the themes in *Black Like You*, John Strausbaugh's take on the sordid history of blackface minstrelsy, the mongrel nature of America and related skeletons in the closet of U.S. pop culture. However, this excellently detailed account provides a more sympathetic examination of blackface -- defined here as "a form of racist caricature invented by White Americans in the minstrel-show days of the 1800s" -- than Lee's moralizing assessment. The less didactic approach is not necessarily a good thing, lending an often apologist air ("Why does Eminem sound black?" he asks. "Why does Oprah wear her hair straight? Maybe they just like it.") to an otherwise thoroughgoing overview.

Near the beginning of *Black Like You*, Strausbaugh lines up the nativists -- arguing "that American culture was and always had been the culture the first Europeans had brought with them across the Atlantic" -- against the multiculturalists, who subscribe to the melting pot theory and rally "against the evil, imperialist, genocidal, sexist, racist, homophobic, exclusionist culture the Founding Fathers brought with them and transplanted here." Though he refuses to side completely with the second faction because of what he perceives as their often ironic divisiveness, he does conclude that America owes its true personality to the collective makeup of its various ethnic groups. Americans of color will likely shrug their shoulders at this, an observation they have long taken for granted. How Strausbaugh goes about supporting his perhaps obvious point is what matters most, though, as he delves into the origins of blackface, the minstrel show, early African-American literature, black cinema and Negrobilia collectibles (e.g. "mammy" cookie jars).

A friend once admonished me for being offended by comedian Mike Myers's hip-hop parody in "Austin Powers in Goldmember," for the same reason Strausbaugh offers when denouncing the politically correct: "Surely no one can still be so hypocritical as to believe disrespectful stereotypes are acceptable from people who look like you, but insist it is racism when a member of another race finds humor in it." The author has a point, and he raises it to defend white comedians' right to find above-the-belt humor in the ways of African Americans in the same manner that, say, jokesters on BET's "Comic View" continually poke fun at the behavior of whites. Though Strausbaugh doesn't wholeheartedly excuse the harsher aspects of blackface, this is typical of his stance in *Black Like You*. He is confident that modern Americans are mature enough to be able to indulge in some mutual teasing about our differences, and he is hopeful that this may lead to some reciprocal appreciation as well.

Strausbaugh is most on target with his rundown of minstrel history, which he concludes by drawing a parallel with modern aspects of rap music. In 1832, T. D. Rice, a white man professionally known as Jim Crow, toured frontier towns dressed in tatters and blackface makeup -- the infamous mixture of burnt-cork ashes worn with clownish red lipstick. His hillbilly minstrel hit, "Jump Jim Crow," sparked a craze that lasted another 50 years as the dominant form of popular music in the United States, before giving way to vaudeville and ragtime. Following the Civil War, black performers took to minstrelsy for the rare professional opportunities it offered.

"Some minstrel songs started as Negro folk songs, were adapted by White minstrels, became widely popular, and were readopted by Blacks," writes Strausbaugh. "The question of whether minstrelsy was white or black music was moot. It was a mix, a mutt -- that is, it was American music." The same case is made nowadays to claim jazz as American music rather than the sole invention of black Americans.

The chronological approach of *Black Like You* surveys the evolution of minstrel music from backwoods immigrant entertainment to its appearance in more legitimate theater, such as stage adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In 1890 Ernest Hogan incorporated ragtime into the minstrel format with his "All Coons Look Alike to Me," creating the offshoot of "coon songs." Strausbaugh makes it simple to trace the lineage from a minstrel dandy such as Zip Coon to the current rap popularizers of bling such as Lil Jon. He occasionally strays off message, such as when he wanders into an ill-considered exploration of Ebonics. But overall, *Black Like You* is an all-encompassing, breezily written summary of an aspect of American popular culture usually swept under the rug.

Reviewed by Miles Marshall Lewis

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Users Review

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