

Improvising Social Resistance

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Vocalist and bandleader Cab Calloway is a figure who has been largely ignored in many historical and critical analyses of the development of jazz, often dismissed by music scholars as little more than a “novelty act”: “Calloway was a braying wild-man who pandered to the masses” (Quaglieri 9). There certainly was a strong sensational aspect to Calloway’s performances, including his hilarious and technically astounding vocal histrionics and the bizarre and gaudy “zoot suits” that he would wear while running and jumping about the stage like a clown. Sadly, on account of these performance elements and the subject matter of many of his early songs, which deal with the street life and drug culture of Harlem and often present comedic images of stoned “Negroes,” Calloway has often been perceived as merely a pawn of white interests, one who willfully exhibited laughable and demeaning stereotypes of African Americans for the sake of his own commercial success. Such an interpretation does Calloway a great disservice as an artist and fails to recognize the complexities contained both within the lyrics and the performances of many of his songs.

Most of the lyrics to his songs are written in the language of “jive,” a dialect that originated among black musicians in Harlem in the 1920s and the early 1930s and which functioned as a kind of code by which the musicians could covertly communicate amongst each other. Similarly, Calloway’s ostentatious stage persona is very representative of what Houston Baker describes in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* as the “minstrel mask,” a facade designed to provide the white populace

with “reassuring sounds from the black quarters” (30). Thus rather than functioning as an instrument of white hegemony, Calloway’s music presents a fascinating dialectical form of expression whereby white stereotypes of African Americans are subtly subverted and resisted even while appearing, at the same moment, to be reinscribed.

In its early years, the Cab Calloway Orchestra’s primary employment was performing before all-white audiences. When the Duke Ellington Orchestra left the Cotton Club permanently in 1931, Calloway’s band succeeded them as the full-time feature act. As a famous “high-class” establishment frequented by aristocrats from all over New York City, the Cotton Club was strictly segregated. White people came to the club expecting to be entertained by blacks who “knew their place” and were appropriately subservient. In his autobiography, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me*, Calloway describes the atmosphere of the club perfectly:

The bandstand was a replica of a southern mansion, with large white columns and a backdrop painted with weeping willows and slave quarters.

The band played on the veranda of the mansion, and in front of the veranda, down a few steps, was the dance floor, which was also used for the shows. The waiters were dressed in red tuxedos, like butlers in a southern mansion, and the tables were covered with red-and-white-checked gingham tablecloths. There were huge cut-crystal chandeliers, and the whole set was like the sleepy-time-down-South during slavery.

Even the name, Cotton Club, was supposed to convey the southern feeling.

I suppose the idea was to make whites who came to the club feel like they were being catered to and entertained by black slaves. (88)

Calloway's experience was far from unusual among African Americans. Centuries of white slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination had taught black people the importance of maintaining a low profile, since any signs of intelligence or education were interpreted as threats by white authorities and punished accordingly. Calloway describes how state troopers in the South would frequently harass any black people of status and that many black doctors would, when driving on the highway, "put on a chauffeur's cap so the troopers would figure the car was owned by a white man and not some uppity Negro" (*Of Minnie* 123). As such, African Americans have had to evolve subtle and covert means of preserving their own independent identities within a white dominated society.

One significant means of identity preservation is manifested through the "minstrel mask," a construction that, according to Baker, provides "a space of habitation" for the repressed spirits of those who have had their humanity denied (17). Most stereotypes about black people have some real basis in African American culture through various elements that were misappropriated and then ridiculed by white culture and, as such, tend to contain dual or multiple meanings that can vary widely depending upon the perspective of the individual. By utilizing these multiple significations, African Americans have been able to create a dialectical discourse out of white stereotypes, "a device that only 'counts' in relationship to the Afro-American systems of sense from which it is appropriated" (Baker 21). The minstrel mask is thus a construction that allows

the African American to “sound” black while simultaneously maintaining to the white viewer that these are only the sounds “of an ignorant old darky” (Baker 43).

This uniquely African American sound is evident in the lyrics and style of many of Calloway’s early songs.¹ Beginning with “Minnie the Moocher” in 1931, Calloway created a series of songs referred to as “moaners.” These songs, heavily influenced by the blues, are set in minor keys with somber dirge-like tempos and deal with subjects such as unrequited love, crimes of passion, and drugs (Schuller 332-33). “Minnie the Moocher” is most often interpreted as a comedy number in which Calloway delights the crowd with his wild physical and facial expressions and the hilarious vocalese of his “ho-de-hos.” The lyrics to this song, however, tell a far more bleak and melancholy story. Minnie is a “frail,” a prostitute living a miserable and demeaning life on the street—her boyfriend is a similarly wretched figure addicted to cocaine. In order to escape from the harsh reality of their lives, these two “kick the gong around”: a reference to smoking marijuana or opium. “Kickin’ the gong around” is merely one example from an entire secret language referring to “the drug problem”, one that included other common terms such as “viper” and “reefer man” and was present in much of the popular music of the 1930s (Schuller 332). Through this jive language, the subversive and taboo subject of drugs could be openly promulgated in black music. From this perspective, the humour of “Minnie the Moocher” assumes a darker and more macabre tone. While destitute on the street and high on drugs, Minnie is having outrageous visions of luxury and extravagance, the great

¹ See the Appendix for my transcriptions of the lyrics to the songs analyzed in this essay, all found on the Proper Records album *Zah, Zuh, Zaz*.

American dream that has been cruelly and unjustly denied to African Americans. “Poor Minn” indeed.

This minstrel guise proved to be most effective, for “Minnie the Moocher” was a instant hit at the Cotton Club and across the United States after it was released on record. As Gunther Schuller explains in *The Swing Era*, “as long as the reefer-smoking characters were non-Caucasian, the white public that went slumming at the Cotton Club found it an exotic and deliciously “wicked” entertainment” (332). Drug problems, of course, were not confined to non-Caucasians—opium and cocaine were very popular in upper-class white society in the 1930s—and Calloway certainly did not let this trend go by without comment. In 1932, Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen wrote a sequel to “Minnie the Moocher,” “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day,” for one of the biannual Cotton Club revues. In this song, Minnie’s wedding is described as a massive drug party where there are “A million cokies shoutin’ hey-de-hey-de-hey.” Calloway’s white audiences would probably have assumed that all these “cokies” were black people; however, nowhere in this song, or in “Minnie the Moocher” for that matter, are the characters ever explicitly identified as black. On the other hand, in “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day” there are some explicitly white characters present at the wedding, including the king of Sweden, the Prince of Wales, and other monarchs from all over the world. The presence of all these figures at Minnie’s wedding creates a curious kind of homogenizing environment. “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day” essentially implies that problems of substance abuse transcend racial and class boundaries and that as far as this particular human flaw is concerned, we are all assembled together “in one bouquet.”

One element of minstrel “nonsense” that has been sadly trivialized in most critical studies of Calloway is that of his scat singing, an element which so distinguished his music that he became known as “the hi-de-ho man.” This scat singing does not initially appear to have any particular purpose other than for musical and dramatic effect. As Schuller explains, however, free syllabic improvisation can often prove to be a deceptively complex and elusive rhetorical device in African American music: “these were not the silly old Tin Pan Alley ‘novelty tunes’ with their inane play on words, fit for the mentalities of three-year-olds, but, rather, witty, frequently intricate verbal broadsides that more often than not told a little story” (341).

A song in which the personification of scat syllables is particularly evident is Calloway’s 1933 composition “Zah, Zuh, Zaz.” As with “ho-de-ho” in “Minnie the Moocher,” “zah-zuh-zaz” forms the phonetic basis for the seemingly nonsensical vocal improvisations that constitute the chorus of this song. This phrase is also used, however, as a noun in contexts such as “zah-zuh-zaz was handed down” and “zah-zuh-zaz will always see them through,” and we are told in an equally intriguing verbal metaphor that Smokey Joe “used to hi-de-hi-de-ho.” Given the context of other “Minnie” songs and the reference in this song to Smokey Joe having “kicked the gong aroun’,” it would be logical to interpret “zah-zuh-zaz” as a metaphor for drugs. As is typical in Calloway’s songs, however, this is never stated explicitly, and while I believe that “drugs” is certainly a legitimate definition of “zah-zuh-zaz” within the context of this song, it is definitely not the only possible interpretation. The free syllabic invention heard on many of Calloway’s recordings is not meaningless, but merely lacks a fixed meaning. In “Zah, Zuh, Zaz” we

have a perfect example of the proverbial slippery signifier that characterizes a wide variety of African American discourses, for “zah-zuh-zaz” has a potentially infinite number of meanings depending upon the context from which one perceives it. Thus Calloway's scat singing represents a truly unique and independent form of expression wherein African Americans can shout “‘hoots’ of assurance that remain incomprehensible only to the intruder” (Baker 51).

During his band's early years, Calloway produced a fascinating collection of vocal narratives, combining blues-oriented explorations of black street life and drug culture with sophisticated satires against white hegemony and communicating these themes through uniquely African American forms of expression such as the dialects of jive and the syllabic improvisation of scat singing. What is most extraordinary about Calloway's music, however, is that by exploiting the dialectical nature of these forms he was able to covertly communicate African American issues and experiences without alienating his white audiences or revealing to them the subversive nature of his music. As a body of work, his songs constitute “a book of speaking back and black” (Baker 24).

Appendix

“Minnie the Moocher” (Cab Calloway, Irving Mills)

Folks now here’s a story ‘bout Minnie the Moocher
She was a red-hot hoochy coocher
She was the roughest, toughest frail
But Minnie had a heart as big as a whale.

(Call and response chorus)

Ho-de-ho-de-ho

Hi-de-hi-de-hi

He-de-he-de-he

Ho-de-ho-de-ho (or improvised variations on these scat syllables)

Now she messed around with a bloke named Smokey
She loved him though he was cokey
He took her down to Chinatown
He showed her how to kick the gong around.
(All) ...showed her how to kick the gong around.

(Chorus)

Now she had a dream about the king of Sweden
He gave her things that she was needin’
He gave her a home built of gold and steel
A diamond car with a platinum wheel.

(Chorus)

Now he gave her his townhouse and his racing horses
Each meal she ate was a dozen courses
She had a million dollars worth of nickels and dimes
And she sat around and counted them all a million times.

(Chorus)

Poor Minn!
Poor Minn!
Poor Minn!

- recorded September 23, 1931

“Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day”

(Ted Koehler, Harold Arlen)

Here’s some news that’ll get you
It’s made to order for you
I just bet it’s a cinch you’ll
Follow up these red-hot blues.

Grab a taxi an’ go down
Chinatown’s on a spree
Let me give you the low-down
This is really history.

Whenever folks in Chinatown start actin’ gay
There’s something in the air that makes ‘em feel that way
“Yeah man,” I heard somebody say,
“It’s Minnie the Moocher’s wedding day.”

Ol’ Smokey Joe’s so happy he can hardly wait
He’s spent a million dollars for his wedding cake
Yeah man, they gonna celebrate
It’s Minnie the Moocher’s weddin’ day.

(Call and response, except for the fourth line)

You’d better come on down
Way down to Chinatown
Oh, let me take you down
To see them kick the gong around.

A million cokies shoutin’ hey-de-hey-de-hey
The king of Sweden’s gonna give the bride away
“Yeah man,” I heard somebody say,
“It’s Minnie the Moocher’s wedding day.”

The king an’ queen of every nation
Were glad to get an invitation
The Prince of Wales said he would get away
For Minnie the Moocher’s wedding day.
(all) ...Minnie the Moocher’s weddin’ day.

They sent a hundred thousand hoppers
Went over to China, pickin' poppies
They gonna put them all in one bouquet
For Minnie the Moocher's weddin' day.
(all) ...Minnie the Moocher's weddin' day.

(Call and response, except for the fourth line)
Hi-de-hi-de-hi
Ho-de-ho-de-ho-de-ho
Hae-de-hae
Whoa, it's Minnie the Moocher's wedding day.

“Yeah man,” why what's that them boys say,
“It's Minnie the Moocher's weddin' day.”

- recorded June 9, 1932

“Zah, Zuh, Zaz”
(Cab Calloway, Harry White)

Now here's a very entrancing phrase
It will put you in a daze
To me it don't mean a thing,
But it's got a very peculiar swing.

(Call and response chorus)
Zah-zuh-zaz-zuh-zaz-zuh-zae
Zah-zuh-zaz-zuh-zoh-oh-oh
Zah-zuh-zaz-zoh-zee-zoh-zae
Zoe-zah-zuh-zuh-zae
(or improvised variations)

Now zah-zuh-zaz was handed down
From a bloke down in Chinatown
It seems his name was Smokey Joe
An' he used to hi-de-hi-de-ho.

(Chorus)

(Scat solo)

When Smokey Joe came into town
An' he kicked the gong aroun'
Any place that he would go
Minnie the Moocher she would sure to go.

(Chorus)
With their zah-zuh-zae
An' uh-zah...

It makes no difference where you go
There's one thing that they sure do know
There's no need for them to be blue
'Cause zah-zuh-zaz will always see them though.

(Chorus)
(Scat solo)

- recorded January 22, 1934

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