

The Birth of Broadway



3. A Watershed Show

March 4, 2025

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MOST BOOKS ON THE AMERICAN MUSICAL SINGLE OUT *SHOW BOAT*, the 1927 work by Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern, as a landmark in the genre. They talk about its *integration*, meaning the seamless way in which dialogue and musical numbers interact (at least in Act I), each advancing the story of Edna Ferber's 1925 book. The second hour of today's class will consist of a series of excerpts to demonstrate the truth of this point.

But *Show Boat* also demonstrates another kind of integration. It includes both leading and chorus roles for both White and Black characters, and racial intolerance in the Jim Crow South is a target of its plot, albeit a secondary one. Taking this as a cue, we devote the first hour to looking at how African Americans have been portrayed on the Broadway stage before *Show Boat*, including three remarkable musicals written, directed, and performed entirely by Black artists. *rb.*

A. Show Boat and Race

Given the lack of African American representation on Broadway for most of the Twentieth Century it may be a surprise to learn that several all-Black shows held the stage at the start of it. Unfortunately, there are no contemporary recordings, and much of the material has been lost, but we do what we can to get a sense of them, as the background against which *Show Boat* could have had the success it did.

Kern: *Show Boat* (1927), opening and "Ol' Man River" (SF. Opera 2014; d. Francesca Zambello; Morris Robinson, *Joe*)

Cook: *Clorindy, or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898), end of overture (piano roll played by the composer)

Cook: *Clorindy* (1898), "Darktown is out tonight" (Dick Hyman)

Cook: *In Dahomey* (1903), "On Emancipation Day" (Wm. Brown)

Cook: *In Dahomey* (1903), “Brown Skin Baby Mine” (Austin Rivers)

Blake: *Shuffle Along* (1821), Documentary

Blake: *Shuffle Along* (1821), “Love will find a way” (Rachel Simone Webb, Phillip Attmore)

Blake: *Shuffle Along* (1821), medley (Audra McDonald and cast of the 2016 revival at the Tony Awards)

Kern: *Show Boat* (1927), “In Dahomey” (number in the Chicago act cut after the original premiere)

Kern: *Show Boat* (1927), “Ol’ Man River” (Paul Robeson from the 1936 movie)

B. Show Boat and its Story

Show Boat begins at Natchez, Mississippi, in 1887 and ends there in 1927, with excursions to Chicago and New York in between. Here is a brief summary of the plot; the numbers to be played are in **bold**.

The showboat *Cotton Blossom* ties up at Natchez, and Captain Andy promotes the show. Magnolia, his daughter, falls for a handsome gambler, Gaylord Ravenal (“**Make believe**”). She confides in Joe, the stevedore, who advises her to see it in perspective (“**Ol’ Man River**”). Julie, the lead singer on the showboat, gives much the same advice and sings a song (“**Can’t help lovin’ dat man**”) which the cook Queenie remarks is generally sung by colored folks. Later, we see Queenie with a group of cleaning women, sharing her feeling that something bad is about to happen (“**Mis’ry’s comin’ around**”). Sure enough, the Sheriff interrupts a rehearsal that proof that Julie is of mixed race, and so is guilty of miscegenation for marrying a white man, Steve. Steve hits on a trick to declare that he has Black blood also, so there is no crime, but both have to leave the *Cotton Blossom*. The players round up a crowd to see the evening’s play, including a special appeal by Queenie to the Black folks (**Queenie’s Ballyhoo**), and we get to see an abbreviated version of the play itself. Towards the end of the act, Ravenal persuades Magnolia to marry him (“**You are Love**”), and the people gather on the levée for the **act finale** to send them off to Chicago.

At the beginning of Act Two, both Julie and Magnolia are in Chicago with their husbands Steve and Ravenal. Soon Ravenal returns to gambling and leaves Magnolia; later Steve also leaves Julie, who has become an alcoholic. Magnolia seeks employment at the Trocadero, the night club where Julie sings, though her drinking has brought her almost to the end of the road. Hearing Magnolia audition with “**Can’t help lovin’ dat man**,” Julie slips off into the night unseen. But Magnolia becomes a star, and her career takes her to Broadway and Europe. Years later, she retires and returns to the *Cotton Blossom* on a visit. Queenie celebrates by singing one of Magnolia’s songs (“**Hey Fella!**”), preparing the way for a bittersweet ending that differs between the various versions.

Kern: *Show Boat* (1927), excerpts as above (San Francisco Opera 2014; d. Francesca Zambello, c. John DeMain; Heidi Stober, *Magnolia*; Patricia Racette, *Julie*; Angela Renée Simpson, *Queenie*; Michael Todd Simpson, *Ravenal*; Morris Robinson, *Joe*)

Will Marion **Cook** (1869–1944, *American composer*), Paul Laurence **Dunbar** (1872–1906, *American poet*), Edna **Ferber** (1885–1968, *American writer*), Oscar **Hammerstein II** (1895–1960, *American lyricist*), Jerome **Kern** (1885–1945, *American composer*), Noble **Sissle** (1889–1975, *American lyricist and performer*)

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