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Black Performance in Political Spectacles, 1877–1932

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UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI / JACKSON

The University Press of Mississippi is the scholarly publishing agency of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning: Alcorn State University, Delta State University, Jackson State University, Mississippi State University, Mississippi University for Women, Mississippi Valley State University, University of Mississippi, and University of Southern Mississippi.

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of University Presses.

An earlier version of Chapter 4 originally appeared in *Southern Cultures* 20 (Summer 2014). An earlier version of the Bridge originally appeared in *Louisiana History* 56 (Summer 2015).

Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 2021
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Library of Congress Control Number available

Hardback ISBN 978-1-4968-3282-5
Trade paperback ISBN 978-1-4968-3283-2
Epub single ISBN 978-1-4968-3284-9
Epub institutional ISBN 978-1-4968-3285-6
PDF single ISBN 978-1-4968-3286-3
PDF institutional ISBN 978-1-4968-3287-0

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

I dedicate this book to my parents, Neil and Sandy, who showed me unconditional support and taught me to work hard and love the past.

CONTENTS

WORLD WAR I, PATRIOTISM, AND SPECTACLE

During World War I, African Americans frequently participated in patriotic rallies, albeit in segregated ways. Patriotic rallies still entailed partisan elements, and African Americans laid claim to membership in the nation and political parties with their participation at these events. Despite the dire circumstances of world war, African Americans could only lend patriotic support if it accommodated segregation and white mainstream cultural norms. They could march and perform in parades and fundraisers, but they could not always attend these events as spectators because of segregation laws.

Amid the rhetoric of democracy and freedom of World War I, African Americans, including those in military uniform, encountered danger within the United States. In 1917 Black soldiers stationed in Houston engaged with the Houston Police Department, and the ensuing deadly violence resulted in courts-martial, executions, and life imprisonment for many Black soldiers. During the Red Summer of 1919, several race riots occurred, including major events in Chicago, East St. Louis, and Knoxville, among others. With racial tensions at a fever pitch, African Americans could not always know how white Americans would react to their presence, but they found ways to express their patriotism through public spectacle.

During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson reviewed hundreds of American soldiers, including Black soldiers and Black musicians, parading through Baltimore's streets. On April 6, 1918, Wilson arrived in Baltimore as part of a Liberty Loan drive. Before a crowd of 15,000 people, the "negroes marched well and their band was classed as the best of several in the parade."[65] During the performance, the six-foot-five-inch tall drum major of the 368th Infantry band, Sergeant Landin, who had skin "almost as Black as the ace of spades" cakewalked "with a grin that forced thoughts of pickaninnies and watermelons into the heads of those who saw him."[66] With this performance, Sergeant Landin became regionally famous and Americans, especially white Americans, clamored to have his band participate in their fundraisers. Like so many Black performers before him, Landin earned by portraying the feckless Black character that white audiences desired to see. By manipulating negative stereotypes, African Americans could infiltrate the public sphere and gain economic opportunity.

Later that month, the white residents of Baltimore organized two fundraising campaigns. On April 18, Colonel W. Bladen Lowndes organized a fundraiser for the War Savings Stamp Campaign at the Garden Theater. The event featured speeches from Maryland's former governor, Phillips Lee Goldsborough, and Albert G. Towers, who served as chairman of the Public

Service Commission. It also featured the Black musicians of the 368th Infantry Band and, of course, Sergeant Landin. These musicians provided "excellent playing of classical, patriotic and ragtime music," and the "deportment of the drum major" put the audience "in a fine humor."[67] To attend, residents simply had to purchase one or more Thrift Stamps to help the war effort.

African Americans had a particularly high interest in attending the event because they wanted to see this Black band, "one of the many that is to cheer the colored boys on while they try to get the Kaiser." When they could not enter the Garden Theater, "some of the colored people made utterances that would be regarded as seditious." They assumed that they could not enter the fundraiser because of the venue's segregation policy, and the fundraiser's organizers confirmed these suspicions. After the debacle, the Maryland Council of Defense arranged for a separate fundraiser for Baltimore's Black residents, who refused the offer. In response to the situation, a spokesperson for the fundraiser explained, "I am sorry that any of our colored people went to the theater and thereby were insulted by being refused." He did not apologize for refusing them. He did admit, however, that "in these perilous times such treatment to the race has a tendency to dampen the patriotic ardor of the colored people." He explained, furthermore, that the war effort required "those who would aid in every way to crush Germany should see that petty race prejudices in this country are forgotten" to win the war.[68] On stage, the musicians became separate from the rest of the crowd. They played a role familiar to white Americans: the performer and entertainer. African Americans could not, however, mingle with white society on the dance floor and in the audience, even to the benefit of the war effort.

The Black bands of colored regiments often participated at these types of fundraisers. On April 28, 1918, in Baltimore, the 251st Field Artillery Band, including bandmaster and graduate of the New York Institute of Art Dorsey Rhodes, "sailed through a most difficult program" and "surpassed every expectation of the crowd." After the performance, the "crowd clamored for more before the serious work of selling stamps got under way."[69] This event occurred at the Garden Theater in Baltimore, which meant that African Americans could not attend and mingle with white society, but they could entertain whites.

When African Americans received military honors, they still encountered racial stereotypes. In July 1918, the Black soldiers in the 517th Engineer Reserve Corps stationed in Atlanta received their national and battalion banners. They gathered at the camp's parade grounds for the ceremony, which featured a series of speeches and prayers wishing them well. After the speeches, an officer presented the Black soldiers with "no less than a

thousand big slices of real Georgia watermelon." The Black soldiers picked up their slices "of the reddest watermelon" and returned to their place in line. For some time thereafter, it "was simply the old situation of 'the Georgia nigger and the watermelon.'" He observed that "there was smacking of lips and rolling of eyes, and above all, a cessation of conversation that lasted with the supply of watermelon." After eating, a Black band from Augusta "burst into several popular airs." With these words, the newspaper reporter suggested that when eating watermelon, Black men ceased in their role as respectable soldiers.[70] With the design of the spectacle, white officers could reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans and insult them even under the pretext of honor and praise. They could diminish the political significance of Black men in military uniform, which had caused so much tension among white Americans, by reducing them to an animalistic caricature.

During the war, Americans, including Black southerners, used spectacular demonstrations to register citizens for military service. In September 1918, amid "the strains of martial music played by military and civilian bands," thirty thousand Atlanta residents registered for military service. In order to attract all men of military age and fitness, officers organized a massive parade, which started at the state capitol on Washington Street and weaved through many of the city's principal streets, including Mitchell Street and Peachtree Street near the opera house. At the very end of the procession, a Black band from Camp Gordon marched, as well. After the parade, the musicians broke off from the main body and set up at each registration site to attract potential enlistees. The military designated some of the registration sites as "colored only," and it seems likely that Black musicians manned these particular sites.[71] Like their white neighbors, Black Atlantans contributed to the war effort with their participation at spectacles. Although biracial, the military segregated the spectacle and the registration drive by putting the Black musicians at the back of the parade. Given the prevalence of segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching, Black civil rights leaders debated as to whether Black men should or would enlist in the armed forces. Although some Black leaders believed that the war provided Black men the chance to demonstrate their patriotism and masculinity in an attempt to claim political rights, many Black leaders, specifically A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen of the *Messenger*, argued that Black men would not and should not enlist as a form of protest.[72] Given the uncertainty as to whether or not African Americans would join the military, military leaders hoped to use spectacular means to generate enthusiasm for the war and gain volunteers from the Black community, but they tailored their methods to accommodate segregation and discrimination.

James Reese Europe's band played throughout Europe during World War I, such as this performance in London. Upon returning home, they created a sensation playing for American audiences. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-anrc-00856.

After the war, African Americans received a hero's welcome in Black-dominated northern cities, including Harlem, but they did not always earn recognition for their military service. On February 17, 1919, Lieutenant James Reese Europe, known to many by the nickname Jim Europe, led his band and the Black soldiers of the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, also known as the 369th Infantry or Harlem's Hellfighters, on a parade through Harlem. His band had "'jazzed' all over France and Belgium to cheer up wounded and unwounded soldiers" during the war. For the performance, Lieutenant Europe procured new instruments because their old instruments revealed "signs of strenuous use" after more than 100,000 miles of travel in the war. In the report, the newspaper reporter focused on the musicians' effort "entertaining soldiers" despite the fact that the majority of the regiment participated in the actual fighting and even earned France's highest military honor, the Croix de Guerre. While the military service went unnoticed in white newspaper reports, this Black band traveled all over the country as part of victory celebrations.[73]

Europe traveled from his boyhood home in Mobile, Alabama, to Harlem, where he achieved fame and eventually joined the military. He arrived in Harlem in 1910 "with a strong pair of lungs" for playing the trombone and "some ideas about syncopation that other musicians refused to accept."

James Reese Europe led his band in a concert at a Paris hospital, which was just one of many performances across Europe during World War I. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ds-09800.

When the United States entered the war, New York organized the 15th National Guard Regiment. Colonel William Hayward asked Europe to lead the regiment's band. During the war, they became "so popular among the soldiers that they were kept traveling all the time." They also played for French president Henri Poincaré and American General John J. Pershing. Upon returning to the United States, Europe and his band played all over the country in victory celebrations, which earned them even more fame and economic opportunity. On May 9, 1919, Europe and his band played at Mechanic's Hall in Boston. When he told a drummer to pick up the pace, the drummer confronted Europe and slashed his throat, killing the famous bandleader.[74] During the war, the fighting men of the 15th National Guard Regiment achieved quite a bit of success, but their band received the most notice and applause upon its return home.

When African Americans returned from the war to the United States, they participated alongside white soldiers in celebratory parades. In March 1919,

Nashville residents organized a parade to welcome back the city's Black and white soldiers. In the planning process, the organizers did not immediately plan to honor the Black soldiers until a committee of Black civic leaders protested. After consulting with the committee, the organizers arranged for four to five hundred Black soldiers to march in the parade and for a forty-five-piece Black band to provide music, as well. In addition to the parade, the event's organizers wanted to provide the soldiers with a meal. They provided the "same food and same amount per capita" for the Black soldiers, but they fed them at the city's Black chapters of the Young Men's Christian Association.[75] At celebration spectacles, African Americans earned recognition of their martial contributions to the war, but organizers designed the spectacles to remind them of their inferior status.

THE 1920S AND THE GREAT MIGRATION

After the war, African Americans continued to participate in partisan spectacles on behalf of both political parties, but often in segregated events and increasingly in northern locales. In the early twentieth century, African Americans migrated northward in pursuit of economic opportunity, especially during World War I, and political rights. They also found a stronger Republican Party in terms of membership and electoral success, and the Republican Party remained their preferred choice, with some reservation, until President Franklin D. Roosevelt and President Harry Truman started to position the Democratic Party as the party of civil rights. In the North, the electoral contests remained vibrant because it had two, and sometimes more, legitimate parties. As African Americans concentrated in northern and border states, they appeared more often at campaign events.

In fact, Black civic leaders considered Black musicians a vital piece of the political process, and they expected African Americans to participate in campaign spectacles. In 1912 the editors of the *Chicago Defender* remarked, "All the candidates seemed to have ignored the colored bands this season as well as our colored musicians." The editors lamented that the candidates continued to use Black churches for rallies. The editors argued that "the people should rise as one and demand that if the colored bands are not good enough to use for political use, then their houses of worship should not be." In conclusion, he called upon Black women to safeguard the sanctity of the church and for the Black community to "demand of the man who would want your vote to give you work."[76] With these comments, the Black editors of the *Chicago Defender* connected economic opportunity with political

power. They expected economic opportunity and, in return, would deliver Black votes to the candidates that played along.

As Democrats started to attract more Black votes in the 1920s and 1930s, Republicans worked hard to keep Black votes. In 1923 a Black Republican, Henry Lincoln Johnson, spoke to a Baltimore audience of eight or nine hundred people, which served "as a test of Republican negro solidarity." In addition to the speech by Johnson, two white civic leaders came to speak to the Black audience after giving addresses at a meeting and torchlight parade of white Republicans.[77]

In local and state elections held in northern and border states, African Americans contributed to campaigns. In 1922 Youngstown, Missouri, mayor George Lawrence Oles credited a young evangelist and musicians for his campaign success. He explained, "I hired American, Italian, and negro bands. I gave 'em horns and red fire. It took people by storm. Nothing like that had been tried since the old 'cutthroat' campaign days." Although Oles suggests that spectacle had diminished, his comments imply that the people would still willingly come out for spectacular events if the candidates would use the method.

African Americans participated frequently in campaign events held on behalf of Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, especially in northern and border states. During the 1928 election, Smith stopped in Topeka, Kansas. "A noisy throng surrounded the rear of his train at the Topeka terminal," observed a reporter, who added that "the music of several bands" contributed to a festive atmosphere. Among them, a Black band struck up the vaudeville tune "The Sidewalks of New York" to welcome the New Yorker to the prairie.[78] Smith used the song as his campaign song throughout his tour of the country.[79] A month later, a Black band along with a crowd of "enthusiastic Democrats" welcomed Smith back to Albany after sixteen days on the campaign trail.[80]

In 1932 Lieutenant Governor E. H. Winter of Missouri, a Republican, ran for governor. On September 16, he officially kicked off his campaign with a rally and parade in Warrenton. In the evening, Warrenton's Republicans "turned out en masse to celebrate the formal opening of his drive for votes in the November election." They carried banners and torches through the town's streets led by musicians, including a Black band. As the Black band led the parade, another local band from Central Wesleyan College played at the courthouse lawn, where Winter gave his speech to an enthusiastic audience.[81] As they had done before World War I, African Americans were among the first members of the public sphere to greet candidates to the community. They also helped set the tone for the event with their enthusiastic playing.

African Americans took initiative and used spectacles to intimidate unfavorable candidates by putting them in humiliating circumstances. In 1928 Senator James Watson of Indiana traveled to Chicago to address a Black audience at a local armory. The event's organizers arranged for him to speak between two "colored spellbinders." After the first speaker, Watson stood up to speak but did not say a word. Then, the program continued. According to Black civic leaders, the audience detested Watson because of his ties to the Ku Klux Klan. According to one observer, "Well, he better not talk here if he knows the time, the place, and the girl. We'll burn him up. He's K. K. K."[82] If he had been intimidated by the program and presence of Black speakers, he did not concede that point, instead explaining that he had a bad throat and could not speak.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, African Americans had a visible and audible presence at political events for both Hoover and Roosevelt. At President Herbert Hoover's inaugural parade in 1929, a Black civic leader led the delegation from Mississippi. On March 3, S. D. Redmond, who served as the chairman of the Mississippi Republican State Executive Committee and the only Black person to lead a state executive committee, dined with fellow Republicans at the Mayflower Hotel. On March 4, he led Mississippi's Republicans in the inaugural parade. As of 1929, African Americans still tended to support Republicans, whether they reflected these allegiances at political spectacles or not.

By 1932 African Americans would become central features of spectacles staged on behalf of Franklin D. Roosevelt. In an event in Indianapolis, Black bands and Black marchers paraded through the streets in advance of the Democratic candidate and his wife.[83] African Americans had not yet completely left the Republican Party, especially in the South. In July 1932, Republicans staged a rally in Little Rock, Arkansas, to celebrate Hoover's candidacy for a second term. The Republicans recognized that African Americans had become disillusioned with the Republican Party, so they urged African Americans to attend and made special appeals to the Black community by focusing on how Reconstruction had helped Black businesses.[84]

African Americans expected a place in the public sphere. They participated in campaign rallies, inauguration ceremonies, and impromptu gatherings on behalf of both major political parties. By participating they generated enthusiasm, drove voters to the polls, and helped Republicans and Democrats spread a sectional interpretation of the Civil War. They even made unlikely alliances with Democrats and Confederates for the sake of economic opportunity and advantageous political alliances. When denied access to politics, they had various methods to make themselves visible participants in politics,

such as street theater and rough music. They used these means to harass politicians and demand recognition of their political aptitude. In an era of disfranchisement, white politicians sought out Black performers to rally and persuade not only white voters, but in some locales, Black voters, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo Courtesy of the Author

Mark A. Johnson, from Milwaukee, graduated in 2016 with a PhD in history from the University of Alabama. Previously, he earned an MA from the University of Maryland and a BA from Purdue University. As a professional historian, he specializes in the history of the United States and the U.S. South, and currently teaches at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is also the author of *An Irresistible History of Alabama Barbecue: From Wood Pit to White Sauce*.