

Best known as the author of “Dixie,” Dan Emmett helped make minstrel shows an international sensation.

Emmett began to take jobs with circuses, performing as an African American impersonator and musician. Some time around 1838, he wrote “Bill Crowder,” a blackface song that was probably among his first compositions. Its stereotypical depictions of African Americans typified the blackface songs of the day.

Blackface had been popular in Europe for centuries. Many of the blackface songs performed in England during the eighteenth century related the plight of slaves, and helped hasten the end of slavery there. Transported to the United States, blackface became an integral part of the theater. But in America, blackface music soon evolved away from its sympathetic attitude, and songs started to depict African Americans as good-natured, ignorant buffoons.

During the fall and winter of 1842, Emmett collaborated with fellow circus performer Frank Brower, a comedian, singer, dancer and bones player, in a number of New York theater shows. During a raucous jam session in the off-hours, Emmett and Brower, along with William Whitlock and Richard Pelham, conceptualized the minstrel group.

In that first session, Emmett played fiddle, Whitlock the banjo, Pelham the tambourine, and Brower the bones, in a rendition of “Old Dan Tucker.” So satisfied were the performers that they decided to take the group format to the stage. The Virginia Minstrels, as the new blackface troupe was called, honed their act in a number of New York performances before premiering their first full-scale “Ethiopian Concert” at the Masonic Temple in Boston on March 7, 1843.

Like all blackface performers, the Virginia Minstrels relied upon crude, stereotypical depictions of blacks to entertain white audiences. Their early repertoire, for example, featured a “Negro Lecture on Locomotives,” designed to showcase the supposed ignorance of blacks. The performers’ ragged costumes, cork-blackened faces, protruding lips, and exaggerated dialectical diction added up to a negative image of blacks. And the shows’ depictions of the plantation as a benign, happy place ignored the brutality of slavery.

As pioneered by Emmett and his troupe, the minstrel show took on a standard format, consisting of two or sometimes three parts. Part one generally included jokes and songs. Often, it ended with a dance number. Part two, the variety section, often featured a humorous stump speech, given in dialect. The third act, which became common later, usually included a playlet. At first, such acts were set on the plantation. Later, they parodied serious dramas such as the works of Shakespeare.

Almost from the start, Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels were a smash hit -- but their run would be short lived. After performing to capacity crowds on Broadway, they toured England in the spring of 1843. There, the reception was mixed, although London crowds showed some enthusiasm. By then end of July, the Virginia Minstrels had disbanded. Emmett stayed in England another year before returning to the states.