



Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz (American Made Music Series)

Lynn Abbott, Doug Seroff

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The commercial explosion of ragtime in the early twentieth century created previously unimagined opportunities for black performers. However, every prospect was mitigated by systemic racism. The biggest hits of the ragtime era weren't Scott Joplin's stately piano rags. "Coon songs," with their ugly name, defined ragtime for the masses, and played a transitional role in the commercial ascendancy of blues and jazz.

In *Ragged but Right*, now in paperback, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff investigate black musical comedy productions, sideshow bands, and itinerant tented minstrel shows. Ragtime history is crowned by the "big shows," the stunning musical comedy successes of Williams and Walker, Bob Cole, and Ernest Hogan. Under the big tent of Tolliver's Smart Set, Ma Rainey, Clara Smith, and others were converted from "coon shouters" to "blues singers."

Throughout the ragtime era and into the era of blues and jazz, circuses and Wild West shows exploited the popular demand for black music and culture, yet segregated and subordinated black performers to the sideshow tent. Not to be confused with their nineteenth-century white predecessors, black, tented minstrel shows such as the Rabbit's Foot and *Silas Green from New Orleans* provided blues and jazz-heavy vernacular entertainment that black southern audiences identified with and took pride in.

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