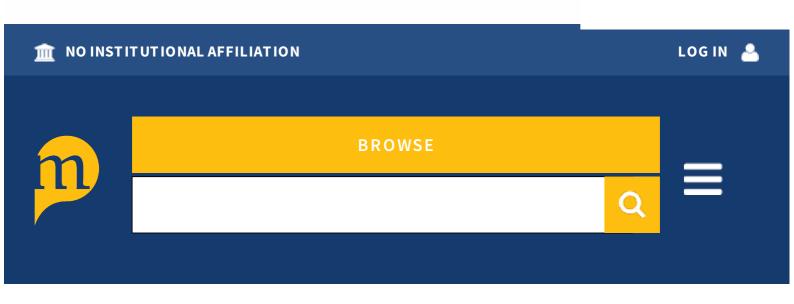
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Southern Cultures

The University of North Carolina Press

Volume 8, Number 2, Summer 2002

pp. 9-37

10.1353/scu.2002.0025

ARTICLE

View Citation

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Southern Cultures 8.2 (2002) 9-37

[Access article in PDF]

Essay

Is It True What They Sing About Dixie?

Stephen J. Whitfield

To succeed in the New World, Jewish song writers adopted a southern strategy. Immigrants or the sons of immigrants, these men found their vocation in the era of the First World War, flourished for a couple of decades, and did not fully surrender their sovereignty over popular taste until shortly before the Vietnam War. To produce America's varied carols did not require rootedness or pedigree, since such artists operated in a latitudinarian and unstable society, marked by kaleidoscopic permutations of ancestry as well as by geographical restlessness. These song writers attached themselves to the musical culture of the nation by celebrating one region above all. The idea of the South inspired a pool of melody into which just about anyone—black or white, Jew or Gentile—could dip.

Why did the South so strongly appeal to the Jewish song smiths who dominated Tin Pan Alley, and then after a few decades fail to inspire such song writers? The song writers themselves offered no direct answer. But it is certain that Jewish song writers did not invent an image of the South. Instead, they inherited it, adopted it, and perpetuated it. They were buoyed by an awareness that no other region had managed to exert so powerful a hold upon the popular imagination. No other region elicited what literary critic Leslie A. Fiedler labeled "inadvertent epics": his examples are *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (both as novel and as "Tom shows"), *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* (both as novel and as film) and *Roots* (both as novel and as TV miniseries). All were "rooted in demonic dreams of race, sex and violence." All are situated in the South. Nor is it accidental that all these representations of the region are haunted by what George Washington Cable called "the shadow of the Ethiopian." ¹

Tin Pan Alley, the name that journalist Monroe Rosenfeld conferred in 1909 upon the song-writing district centered on West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, tapped into this enduring national fascination with the South. The populace of Tin Pan Alley—the owners of the music publishing houses, the creators of the record companies, the song pluggers and writers—were overwhelmingly Jewish immigrants. At the beginning of the twentieth century, four inten American Jews had lived in the United States for less than a decade. From these new Americans came such now-obscure songs as "The Girl I Loved in Old Virginia" (1899), music by Max Dreyfus; "Where the Sweet Magnolias Grow" (1899), music by Harry von Tilzer, also responsible for "Down Where the Cotton Blossoms Grow" (1901); "Oh, Tennessee, I Hear You Calling Me" (1914), music by Harry Ruby, who tried again with "My Sunny Tennessee" in 1921; "Sailin' Away on the Henry Clay" (1917), lyrics by Gus Kahn; "Everything is Peaches Down in Georgia" (1918), co-written by the Chicagoan Milton Ager, who repeated the trick the next year with "Anything Is Nice If It Comes from Dixieland"; "Georgia Rose" (1921), music by Harry Rosenthal; "Tuck Me to Sleep in My Old 'Tucky Home" (1921), co-written by Sam Lewis and Joe Young, [End Page 9] and made into a huge hit by Eddie Cantor, who had been born on the Lower East Side; "Sunny South" (1922), music by Lou Hirsch; "My Heart's in the Sunny South" (1924), music by Harold Levy; "Song of the Bayou" (1928), by Rube Bloom; and "Savannah Stomp" (1928), music by W. G. Samuels, lyrics by Morrie Ryskind. The titles speak for themselves, and there were scores of others.²

Tin Pan Alley followed a tradition in which individuals from outside the region created and sustained the image of the South, whether as in *Cotton Is King* (1855) by the Ohioan David Christy, or the plantation fiction of the New Yorker James K. Paulding, who "never owned a slave nor planted an acre of cotton." Paulding's "concrete knowledge of southern life," historian William R. Taylor remarked, "was gained...

ESSAY

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Librarian-born Al Johns was reported to base rhymed 'Manuny' with 'Alabammy' 1.94s times and to base done more for Dixie than Robert E. Lee. From 'The Singing Vood, courtesy of the Massum of Madern Art Film Stills Archive and Warner Brathers. © 1924. All Rights Reserved.

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