Who Was Jim Crow?

We all know about the Jim Crow Laws that dominated the South and segregated the African Americans from the Whites, but where did the name "Jim Crow" come from? The following is a brief summation of how the name Jim Crow came about.

In the 1820s there were African theaters in New York City, the most famous being owned by William Henry Brown, a West Indian who began his troupe in his back yard and then at 38 Thomas Street in Lower Manhattan. The African Grove, the name Brown gave to his show, was a success and it grew to the size that his shows were tri-weekly at the Park Theater. His demise came when, in August 1822, fifteen members of a nearby circus attacked Brown and his performers, beating them severely and destroying their scenery and props. After trying to put on several more performances, Brown's troupe disbanded and no real African Theatre took his place.

What happened next in New York history was the emergence of "***blackface minstrelsy,***" where white men, painted up as black men, mimicked what they alleged to be Negro culture.[1] White people blackening their faces as part of acting went back to the colonial times when whites portrayed blacks as rioters within their society. It was again made popular by an English actor, Charles Matthews who toured American in 1822 to 1823. He was a comedian who mocked the British and then added a "Yankee" image, including the parts of a black preacher and other occupations associated with this race.

The most famous of all of the actors using "black minstrelsy" was a New Yorker by the name of Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice, who is credited with the creation of the characters Jim Crow and Zip Coon. Rice was born in 1808 and became a woodworker but due to the lack of work he changed careers and went into theatre. He traveled throughout the West and worked as a stagehand and a bit player. On his travels, it is said that he came across an old slave called Jim Crow. What struck Rice about Crow was his odd shuffling dance. Rice quickly copied his dance, his persona and even the old man's clothes, painted his face black and created a stage character that had his own song and dance routine. For a costume, Rice wore ramshackled clothes including old breeches, abroad-rimmed hat and a pair of shoes that were basically holes covered with leather. Rice's dance routine was just a shuffle of sorts which some say was the predecessor of the "soft shoe" dance steps. Rice's character became an instant success with the white theatre-goers.

In November 1832, Rice returned back to New York and brought his character to the Bowery Theater. He went on stage between dramas and one-act plays to do his skit along with his impersonations of New York's rich and elite, all to an exaggerated southern black accent. He then invented a second character, another southern black called Zip Coon. Zip Coon was the exact opposite of Jim Crow. He was a Northern gentleman, a fancy dresser in a silk hat and an indigo coat he called his "Long Blue Tail."

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[1] Burrows, Edwin G. and Wallace, Mike. *Gotham, A History of New York City to 1898* p. 488

The creation of Jim Crow and Zip Coon portrayed a story that claimed slavery as being natural and that all Southern slaves were lazy and dim-witted and free Northern blacks were immoral and absurd. The response of the audiences was that they condemned the "blacks" but at the same time, took extreme delight from their behaviors.

Rice and black minstrelsy was a diffusion of cultures, he blended white humor with black lifestyles, and mixed banjo music with fiddles, African dance steps with Irish jigs. Unfortunately, Rice's characters also told a true tale of American culture, one that saw "whiteness" versus "niggers" and the fact that white supremacy ruled the nation, regardless of the backgrounds of the many European immigrants who formed the white race.
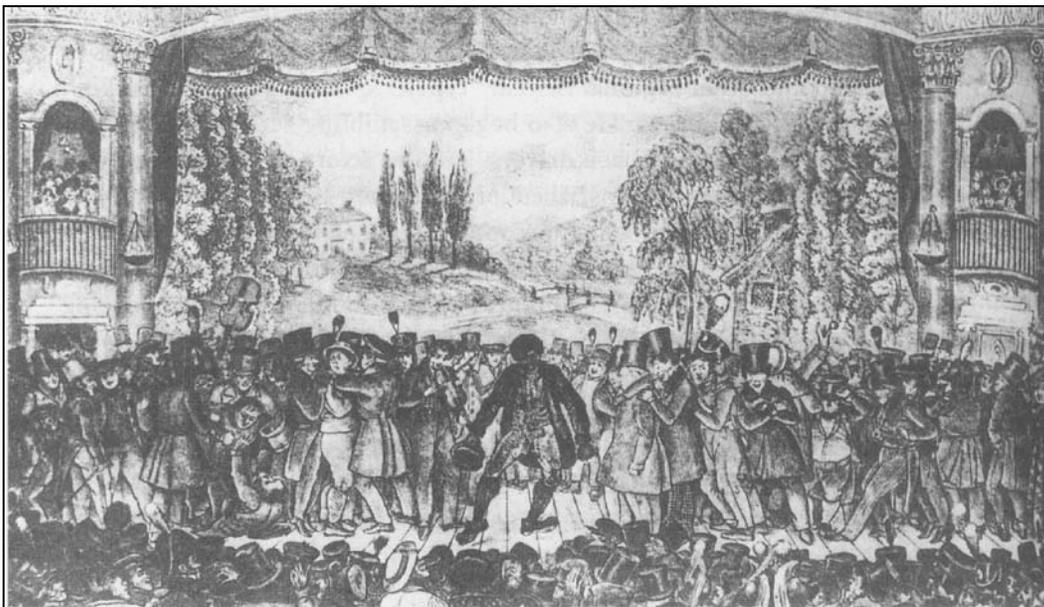
T.D. Rice as Jim Crow, 1833.
During Rice's performances at the Bowery Theater, enthusiastic audiences routinely clambered on stage, leaving him little room to perform.
(© Collection of the New-York Historical Society).[2]

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[2] [2] Burrows, Edwin G. and Wallace, Mike. *Gotham, A History of New York City to 1898* p. 490