

AMOS 'N' ANDY: Past as Prologue?

By Mark Freeman

Amos 'n' Andy was born on radio in 1928. But its stereotypes and caricatures have roots deep in American culture and branches that are still evident today. The negative images in Amos 'n' Andy not only have historical precedents, but that they continued to inform televised representations of black Americans long after the show was no longer available.

What is the significance of these depictions in popular culture on the African American family? African-Americans are among the heaviest viewers of commercial television. As a working premise it may be fair to assume that images are not insubstantial, that they powerfully shape perceptions, values and behavior; and that consequently negative images have negative consequences. The negative consequences of television viewing are likely to be disproportionately borne by viewers who are younger, less educated, and those whose sense of self-worth and self-image are the least formed--- that is our children. In particular, the unmonitored, unsupervised, uncritical viewing of television puts children at risk, and makes them the most vulnerable to negative consequences.

I've chosen Amos 'n' Andy for this case study because of the

importance of the show ---both as a radio series and as the first national television series to cast African-Americans in leading roles. Because the last Amos 'n' Andy radio program was broadcast on 1/25/60, and the television series was withdrawn from syndication in 1965 a generation and a half has grown up without direct access to the material.

Between June 28, 1951 and June 11, 1953 CBS broadcast 78 half hour episodes. The programs were shot on black and white film, and in 1951 the series was the most expensive show produced for television. The program was designed as a situation comedy set in Harlem. The majority of the stories revolved around the Kingfish (Tim Moore) and his schemes to both avoid work and, if possible, take financial advantage of the ignorance and naivete of Andy and other characters/caricatures. Although set in a decidedly middle class milieu and often depicting black professionals, the series did little to support black self-esteem, needless to say it did provide positive role models.

Amos 'n' Andy was created by Charles Correll and Freeman Godsen. Their personal histories were shaped by the Civil War and the legacy of slavery and race relations in the South. Correl's

family was related to Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. Godsen's father joined the rebels at 17 and was one of

75 officers who refused to surrender at Appomatox. Godsen claimed

to have been raised by a "mammy" and shared his home with Garrett

Brown, an African-American boy "adopted" by the Godsen's. Freeman

and Garrett created minstrel shows for the family's entertainment.

In fact the minstrel show tradition is the foundation for the "humor" of Amos 'n' Andy which depends on race for its effect.

What are the characteristics common to these popular entertainments?

Perhaps the most salient feature is that both Amos 'n' Andy and minstrel shows were created by whites, to entertain primarily white audiences. Thomas Rice created the Jim Crow caricature---

"plantation style" song and dance combined with "comic" dialect. By the 1850's minstrel shows were popular throughout the United States

and toured widely in Europe. By the 1920's these caricatures had become institutionalized in American popular culture. In fact the first talking picture *The Jazz Singer* (1927) starred Al Jolson singing "Mammy" in black face. Books of "Darky Jokes," "Minstrel

Jokes," and "Coon Jokes" were readily available in most 5 and 10 cent stores.

On the Real Side by Mel Watkins (pp 29–32) raises issues critical to an understanding humor at the expense of blacks and "Black Humor." "Blacks were funny for most white Americans only insofar as they engaged in quaint, foolish or childlike behavior, or stumbled over a language they were only half-heartedly taught to speak, and [during slavery] forbidden to read." (Watkins, p. 29). This "naive humor" re-enforces the power relationships between superior whites and inferior childlike blacks.

Nathan Huggins' Harlem Renaissance in (Lipsitz in Spigel and Mann) "points out that minstrel show stereotypes enabled white societyto attribute to black people the characteristics that it feared the most in itself....." Blacks represent laziness, greed, gluttony and licentiousness. The "...psychic reinforcement ... enabled whites to accept the suppression of their natural selves." (Lipsitz 94), and instead embraced thrift, sobriety, abstinence and restraint----behaviors necessary to the functioning of an industrial capitalist order."Amos 'n' Andy did for the values of the 50's what the minstrel shows of accomplished for previous generations.

Everything considered precious but contested in white society--- like the family or the work ethic--became violated in the world of the Kingfish. (Lipsitz, 95)

When the same type of humor is employed by blacks for blacks it

has been describes in psychological parlance as "masochism" --- redirecting rage away from dangerous persecutors and on to

themselves. This is a kind of false consciousness ---an

internalized oppression, a self-hating notion that agrees with the stereotypes. This is a tendency not unique to African Americans.

Freud described the phenomenon in his discussions of Jewish humor.

This strategy may appease whites, at the expense of further eroding estimates of black self-worth.

On the other hand, when such jokes are delivered by blacks for black audiences there is an undeniable sense of irony---intended to

reveal the barbarity of a system premised on a system of inherent inferiority. Activist Julius Lester reverse the messages of Amos

'n' Andy. "Kingfish has a joie de vivre no white person could

poison, and we new that whites ridiculed us because they were

incapable of such elan. I was proud to belong to the same race as

Kingsish." (in Lipsitz 97) So how should we understand the humor in Amos 'n' Andy? Henry Louis Gates recounts that "One of my favorite pastimes is screening episodes of Amos 'n' Andy for black friends who think that the series was both socially offensive and politically detrimental...." He asserts that "The performance of those great black actors...transformed racist stereotypes into authentic black humor." The historian Thomas Cripps suggests that only the main characters are stereotyped by language and dress. He points to many examples of well-dressed, supporting actors speaking in Yankee accents. (In fact there were Black professionals including a doctor, a minister, a teacher, a detective, a real estate broker and a nurse.) Only a few of these professionals were darker skinned. My own reading is that this does little to mitigate the show's concentration on and viewers repeated exposure to the negative impressions created by the lead characters.

Context has much to do with our evaluations. Patricia Davis a UC professor, "I think how excited my relatives would be when blacks first showed up on tv---it didn't matter that it was Amos 'n' Andy. It was just a confirmation that there were blacks in the world." (LA Times) Similarly Gates recalls his mother shouting that

"someone 'colored...colored!' was on tv and we had all better come downstairs at once." (Gates, NYT)

Today images of oppression are sometimes reclaimed by reframing them. Lightning's molasses like slowness in Amos 'n' Andy can be read as subversive. He's dragging his feet not obeying. In analyzing the effects of comedy I believe it's essential to determine whether the humor is subversive---a challenge to authority and conventional wisdom; or mainly cathartic----temporarily releasing (social) tension, but ultimately supporting the status quo. Perhaps one key to use is to determine who's doing the laughing---and at whose expense. "...Hollywood's slickest hipster[s] operate not as cultural purveyors of black American life, but rather as safety valves, generating laughs that mask the conflict between black aspirations and the maintenance of white power." (Erhenstein, 9)

In the minstrel shows and their successors on radio, white men impersonated black men. (In fact a white man ---Marlin Hurt--- even played a black woman---Beulah, a character instantly recognizable by

her high-pitched screams.) Lillian Rudolph who played Madame Queen,

Andy's girlfriend on the tv series spent three months studying with a white vocal coach so that she could master the "minstrel style black dialects." (A&J p., 35) And Godsen himself coached the black male actors. He maintained that as the creator of the series he "ought to know how Amos and Andy should talk." Spencer Williams

---Andy in the TV series---had been an director of independent black

films. He replied to Godsen that I "ought to know how Negroes talk, having been one all my life." (Clayton, Ebony in Fife p. 9) What we have is "a white man teaching a negro how to act like a white man

acting like a negro." (A&J p., 35) Take away this phony accent and much ---if not all-- of the "humor" is drained from the dialog.

Minstrel shows reached thousands and created the framework for

popular depictions of black life. Radio and later television

uncritically adopted these portrayals and by the agency of the mass media shaped our shared culture. The Amos 'n' Andy radio show

at it's height was a pervasive artifact of American culture. In

1931 there were an estimated 40 million nightly listeners out of a

US population of 123 million. At times the show captured 74% of the national radio audience. (A & J p., 31) The program was mentioned frequently in the Congressional Record. 2.4 million fans wrote in suggesting names for Amos' and Ruby's newborn daughter. The show introduced a number of expressions into the vernacular including: "Check and Double Check; Holy Mackerel," and "I'se regusted." [Not to mention the characters of the series themselves. For example Huey P. Long the populist governor of Louisiana ironically took his nickname "The Kingfish" from the series.] And the show's popularity resulted in a variety of lucrative spin-offs including a daily comic strip, a candy bar, toys, greeting cards, two books and a feature film. The prospect of an Amos 'n' Andy a tv show was eagerly anticipated. Experimental TV broadcasts were made throughout the '30's and in fact one at the '39 NY World's Fair featured Godsen and Correll as Amos 'n' Andy.

What were the basic caricatures common to the minstrel tradition and Amos 'n' Andy? Fred Mac Donald, radio historian Don't Touch That Dial describes 3 such characterizations. (Note Gates, NYT 11-12-89 "In 1933, Sterling Brown, the great black poet and critic divided the full range of black character types in American

literature into seven categories: the contended slave; the wretched freeman; the comic Negro; the brute Negro; the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive.")

Coons--- a clown, murdering the English

language, conniving to fleece a comrade out of money, bumblingly avoiding employment ----The Kingfish--stupid and scheming, and Andy

lazy and domineering. "Consistent with the values of the 50's as mediated through popular culture, family responsibilities--or neglect of them--define Kingfish....his most serious flaws stem from

his neglect of the proper role of husband and father." (Lipsitz

95-96) "As in so much of American comedy, marriage in Amos 'n Andy

us a snare and a straitjacket--- a cruel prank played upon men who'd

rather be fishing, swapping lies, wiping beery foam from their lips in a cool, dark bar. Instead they find that married life is one long chore; the honey-tempered angels they wooed in innocent youth have

turned into witches, shrews... When Andy announces his engagement o

a 21 year old beauty queen, the Kingfish slaps him on the shoulders and chortles, 'Welcome to the land of the living dead.' (Wolcott

in A & J p xviii)

SHOW CLIP KINGFISH

Lightning ---was a Step'n Fetchit like character. He was dull witted and slow of speech. He moved like "molasses" (not lightning). He played one of the most demeaning roles ---but was not without self-awareness. Nick Stewart says he took the role because "I couldn't have learned without an opportunity to play these roles, but I saw how this was poisoning the black community. People used to say to my children --"Hey let me see you talk like your daddy."

Calhoun the "shyster." This portrayal of a "coon lawyer" was perhaps one of the most offensive to middle class African Americans. The NAACP complained bitterly about the portrayal of "Negro lawyers ... as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics." (A&J p. 62)

Toms ---are typically good, gentle, religious and sober. In their 1929 book All About Amos 'n Andy Correll and Godsen described Amos as---"trusting, simple, unsophisticated." (p. 16)

SHOW CLIP OF THE LORDS PRAYER. This is an example of the notion

that we're all equal before god and saved by faith and prayer. A romantic if not outright reactionary response to the realities of racism ---segregation, poverty, lack of educational opportunities which existed outside the boundaries of the show.

Mammy is quick tempered, a source of earthy wisdom who brooks no backtalk. Kingfish's wife Sapphire and especially her mother are frequently cast as the Kingfish's foils. The result is domestic violence usually verbal, sometimes physical. "The glorification of motherhood pervading psychology and popular literature of the the 1950's becomes comedy in Amos 'n'

Andy. Wives named for precious stones (Ruby and Sapphire) are anything but precious, and "Mama" in this show appears as a nagging harpy screaming at the cowering---and emasculated---black man."

(Lipsitz 95 The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs.)

What was the response of the African-American community to Amos

'n Andy? Thomas Cripps identified three types of reactions in the period between WWI and WWII. Activists---like the NAACP attempted

to affect the products of white producers. They often called for substantial changes to offending programs. This response was often characterized as censorship. The second response was of "Hollywood Negroes" who in defense of their limited livelihoods were often opposed to the activists. The alternatives as they perceived them were that they could either play a maid for \$700 a week or be a maid for \$7 dollars a week. The third kind of response came from independent producers of "race movies" who were often far removed from the hollywood sources of expertise, funds and distribution. Seizing the "means of production" they produced hundreds of all black films between 1914 and 1950. These pictures were inspired by a backlash against racist depictions of black life. In 1937 there were about 800 inner city theaters most of which featured all black films. Most of these films were Black imitations of Hollywood B genre films---black cowboys, cops and crooks. Even the most obvious genre picture had the advantage of depicting blacks as people rather than social problems. Perhaps the most well-known producer of "race

movies" was Oscar Micheaux who wrote, produced, directed and distributed over 20 films between 1918 and 1940.

There is evidence of some support for the program among certain

segments of the black community. For example in 1931 Chicago's weekly black newspaper the Defender invited Godsen and Correll to be

guests of honor at a community picnic which the Defender described

as being attended by 35,000 and Time magazine characterized as 6000

pickaninies. Duke Ellington's Cotton Club band played "The Perfect Song." The audience broke into applause identifying it as the theme song of Amos 'n' Andy rather than from the 1915 Ku Klux

Klan epic Birth of a Nation. (Ely 4) At about the same time the Pittsburgh Courier was editorializing for the banning of the program

from the airwaves. (Ironically by the time of the TV series the Courier would be calling the NAACP protesters of the series "pinks.")

A survey of Negro "adult leaders" in 1932 confirmed the division of opinion about Amos 'n' Andy which ranged from sheer delight to "marked resentment and emphatic disapproval." (Cripps p

267.)

The imminent arrival of TV in America was predicated since the 1920's. Experimental broadcasts were made in the '30's including one at the '30 NY World's fair which featured the radio stars from Amos 'n' Andy. TV didn't really take off in the US until the 50's. Amos 'n' Andy was sponsored by Blatz Beer and ran from 6/28/1951-1953.

When the show premiered it was the only one with an all black cast. Although the writers, directors, producers, and technician were white. And in fact the program was designed for white audiences. Especially in the early 50's tv audiences were restricted to those who could afford the new appliances ---about 20 million predominately white households.

The TV show framed itself as folklore explicitly comparing the show to Huck Finn, Paul Bunyan and Rip Van Winkle. (A&J 1) Perhaps

Uncle Remus might have been a better comparison.

In response to NAACP protests about the TV show a survey by Advertest (sponsored by the network) claimed that 75% of the 365 Black interviewed disagreed with the proposition that Amos 'n' Andy reinforced stereotypes. The program premier coincided with an

NAACP's 1951 Congress and was viewed by the delegates assembled.

Organizing received a head start from this circumstance. This is how

the NAACP characterized its objections to the show:

1> It tends to strengthen the conclusion among uniformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest.

2> Every character in this 1 only a show with an all negro cast is either a clown or a crook.

3> Negro Doctors are shown as quacks and thieves.

4> Negro lawyers are shown as slippery cowards, ignorant of their profession and without ethics.

5> Negro women are shown as cackling screaming shrews, in big-mouthed close-ups using street slang just short of vulgarity. 6> All Negroes are shown as dodging work of any kind.

7> Millions of white Americans see this Amos 'n' Andy picture and think the entire race is the same.

Why was the NAACP eventually more successful in mounting a campaign against the tv show than the radio show? Before WW II the

NAACP had been a shadow of its postwar size and strength. But "membership increased 10 times over during the 1940s. By 1948 black

leaders were making waves in American journalism and entertainment.

The Democratic party courted them in the election. President Truman

appointed a Civil Rights Commission and declared 1949 a 'Year of Rededication' to the principals of racial equality....The liberal concept of full integration---gradual, painless, nonviolent, but inevitable captured the American conscience." (Jones 51) (Honey I'm

Home) The times had changed. The same Defender picnic that feted the

white Godsen and Correl in 1931 denied the all black cast an invitation 20 years later in 1951. In 1951 the show ranked 13th in Nielsen ratings (A&J 62). And in 1952 it won an Emmy award.

The NAACP responded by initiating a boycott of Blatz beer. By April 1953 Blatz withdrew its sponsorship and CBS announced "The network has bowed to the change in national thinking." Yet the series was in syndication more than 4 times as long as it was broadcast on the network. It remained in syndication for 13 years after it was withdrawn from the network schedule. And it aired

in 218 markets in the US as well as in Australia, Bermuda, Kenya, and Western Nigeria. As late as 1963 it still played on 50 US stations. The programs were finally locked in vaults as of 1966. Yet in the 1970's CBS applied for a renewal of it's copyright. Networks reacted to the controversy over A 'n' A by eliminating black families from television. 15 years passed from A 'n 'a until the introduction of another African-American situation comedy (Julia in 1968.) I would argue that despite the legacy of the civil rights movements, and the rise of a substantially larger African-American middle class, the stereotypes of Amos 'n' Andy have been recycled from year to year and show to show. The 70's continued to feature "coons and mammies" in minstrel shows including Sanford and Sons, The Jeffersons, Good Times, What's Happening and Diff'rent Strokes.

(Cummings, 78 The Changing Nature of the Black Family)

Even The Cosby Show while seeming to be the exception to this trend, ironically its portrait of successful black professionals may have reinforced pre-conceptions among white viewers. For both Amos 'n' Andy and Cosby live in world which seems determined only by personal choice. Cliff Huxtable's affluence and the Kingfish's

chronic unemployment are not placed in a social context. Racism, discrimination, the historical roots of poverty and lack of opportunity are nowhere to be found in these shows. Cosby and the

Kingfish both move in a world without social constraints, where individual initiative or its lack are the only determinants. "The domestic bliss of the Huxtable household is perceived by whites as the exception to the rule of black family life, reaffirming the notion that racism wouldn't be a problem if only blacks were more like 'us.'" (Ehrenstein, *The Color of Laughter* 8) Both *Amos 'n' Andy* and the *Cosby Show* reinforce a singular vision of the American Dream. The close identification of Bill Cosby and Cliff Huxtable confirming the "truth" of American fairness and opportunity.

(Jhally and Lewis 8 and Miller 213–214 in J &L)

Negative stereotypes of black life continue. South Central was in the words of Brotherhood Crusade President Danny Blackwell, "the *Amos 'n' Andy* of 1994." Ultimately as Tony Brown has observed, black families "became narrow, negative, stereotypical portrayals designed to reflect what television producers and distributors believe the majority of the American public/market imagines black families to be." (*Television and the*

Black Family in Black Families and the Medium of Television, 85 see note cummings images of the black family.)

Are there solutions to the problems I've identified here?

Historically there has been a call for greater black participation in all phase of television. If there were more black producers, if there were more black writers---goes the argument---if there were

more black actors and more black television programs, then African-

American images would be represented more accurately. Unfortunately

the evidence does not seem to support such an outcome. Fox TV more

than any other network "has been committed to airing so-called black

programs in prime time....nearly a third of Fox's series [in 1994]

were black oriented....." (Rosenberg p. F32). And yet not a single

on-going program represents a substantial improvement in the

depiction of African American families. A poignant example--

-Robert Townsend, a well-respected, talented African-American actor

and independent filmmaker, is the star and co-executive producer of

this season's Parent in the 'Hood. The program ---theoretically

aimed at family viewers, is crude, sexually explicit, tasteless and

relies for on working class coon and mammy caricatures for a good portion of its "humor."

The easy answer to why these forms persist lies in the exigencies of a market-driven, consumerist commercial television industry. "The sitcom is a corporate product. It is a mass consumption commodity.... The promises of bureaucratic democracy, managerial capitalism, secular humanism, and mass consumption are miniaturized, tested, and found true in the funny travails of TV families. The sitcom is the Miracle play of consumer society."

Jones 4)

Perhaps the coming 500 channel universe will offer diversity, intelligence and humor not based on racist stereotyping. Or perhaps we will have 500 channels of the same oldsame old. Let me suggest that while it is essential to continue to organize and protest the debasing impacts of negative television images, it is simultaneously imperative that we empower our children to become critical viewers. Unless we teach ourselves and our children the basic skills of media literacy, there is too great a risk that we will become what we watch. The alternative is to choose television

selectively, to watch it actively, to discuss and analyze the programming with children, to take control of an electronic medium that comes into our most intimate environment.

Children ought to be engaged as producers of video, not as passive consumers. Making video is one of the best ways to understand the mechanisms of television. Given access to tools and encouragement to create images that correspond to the realities of their lives, a new generation may be able to create community based productions that capture the reality of their families and their experiences. Perhaps the future offers the possibility of a decentralized, democratized media----a model not unlike the internet of from many voices to each one of us as we choose; rather than as mass media from a few centralized sources to the largest possible audience.

What ever the future holds, it is clear that the popular models of African-American family found on television are need in of radical change.

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