African-American Music in the 19th century

- Until the 1890s, Black musical culture was not written down in musical notation

- African-American folk music was not a high priority for 19th-c American anthropologists

- Consequently, little is known about the music of black americans before the 20th century.
African-American Music in the 19th century

- Freed slaves in the south, after the civil war, bring a hidden culture and music "out of hiding."
  - Black Americans incorporate new musical practices into religious services and entertainment
    - “ring shouts”, “call and response”, flexible uses of pitch, layered rhythm and syncopation?
  - We can only discern these contributions through a (negative) processes of elimination:
    - looking at the multi-dimensional surface of a diasporic culture, and recognizing which elements aren’t likely to have been inherited from the traditions of a dominant culture.
Chernoff, John Miller


280 p., 1979
Minstrelsy

Two 19th-c white artists who appropriated African-American styles

Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808-1860)
Stephen Foster (1828-1864)
Minstrelsy

- **Minstrelsy:** parody of black music, dance, and language.

- **Some minstrelsy was blatant and hateful racism:** white (and sometimes black) entertainers ridiculing black mannerisms, in order to put black identity at a distance.

- But some scholars have suggested that minstrel shows by rural white musicians thrived as a form of respectful imitation and political **identification**.

- Identifying with black culture gave poor whites an opportunity to emphasize their differences from despised figures of authority.
Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808-1860)
Minstrelsy

- **Thomas Dartmouth Rice** (1808-1860), a white entertainer, was among the first to popularize black cultural forms, with his character *Jim Crow*.

- The character Jim Crow made fun of the upper classes, and exhibited sophisticated layers of irony.

- Rice's character was widely imitated after the civil war, and what began as a complex satirical character evolved into a cruder form of cultural insult. [Starr / Waterman p 20-21]
STEPHEN FOSTER (1826-1864)
Stephen Foster: Oh Susanna! = A “Parlor Song” interpretation of Minstrelsy

- **Oh Susannah!**
  - reflects African-American tradition in its reference to the banjo (an instrument at least partly connected to African origins, and commonly played by former slaves)
  - its plaintiff, declamatory melody, and its (sometimes absurd) comic lyrics reflect any number of folk music traditions
  - Brought a minstrel-song aesthetic to the middle-class consumer at a time when minstrel songs were considered either in poor taste or immoral.
Poster for the Virginia Minstrels (1843). Minstrelsy before the civil war mixed racist denegation with (still racist) praise for black music, as artists often attempted to "celebrate" and Romanticize black culture. Some white musicians imitate black humor with a mixture of mock-sophistication and folksy critiques of white authority. Others simply play up beliefs that blacks are inferior.
A late 19th-century cartoon racializes Black and Irish workers, depicting conflict between groups that many Anglo-Americans found suspect and threatening.

Irish and Blacks competed for the same jobs in the 1850s and onward. Violence was often incited between them, but they also sometimes organized together against their bosses.
Comedian's racist publicity poster ca. 1900

Late 19th-c depictions of Minstrelsy promote contrast to elevate whiteness and belittle blackness.