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Tropi Can Can: Race and performance in '50s Las Vegas

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TROPI CAN CAN: RACE AND PERFORMANCE
IN '50S LAS VEGAS

by

Malcolm Womack

Bachelor of Arts
University of California, Los Angeles
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree
Department of Theatre
College of Fine Arts

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Tropi Can Can: Race and Performance in '50s Las Vegas

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ABSTRACT

***Tropi Can Can: Race and Performance
in '50s Las Vegas***

by
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In 1955 the Jim Crow resort town of Las Vegas opened its first interracial hotel/casino, the Moulin Rouge, and staged its first all-black production show, the *Tropi Can Can* revue. On the Café Rouge stage were the wild antics Stump & Stumpy, bringing a sad reminder of the past; the romantic music of the Platters, bringing a hopeful note for the future; and the very non-traditional showgirls, bringing a host of audience expectations about the immediate present.

This paper attempts to deconstruct and analyze that show and the theatrical elements of the resort, the differing experiences of white and black audience members, and the experiences of black performers on and off stage. Sifting through legend and hyperbolic show biz writing, I hope to clear up misconceptions about the resort and explain why the show was so groundbreaking for Las Vegas, so resonant for African Americans, and so much fun for everyone.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Las Vegas' first interracial resort, the Moulin Rouge, opened in 1955 and closed in that same year. In the following years it has reopened, closed, reopened, closed, reopened, and then burned down in 2003 (there are currently plans to reopen it again). During the six months of the first incarnation of the property, there were three production shows in the Café Rouge showroom: *Tropi Can Can*, which ran seven weeks; *Hot, Brown & Beige*, which ran three; and *The Lionel Hampton International All-Star Revue*, which also ran three. During the final weeks, Les Brown & His Band of Renown were booked. There were different acts for each production show, of course, but also many touring acts were booked to fill a specific slot just as they might be engaged in any other venue. In the 'vocal group' slot, for example, *Tropi Can Can* opened with the Platters, who were succeeded by the Honeytones, who were followed by the Penguins. Following the late show, the Café Rouge was used for the Moulin Rouge's best remembered feature – all-night jam sessions where celebrities from the main show, as well as those booked in other Las Vegas casinos, would play, sing, or dance.

Between four versions of the resort, three showroom shows, and the number of stars who dropped by after hours, it is no wonder that writing about the Moulin Rouge tends to get confused. Celebrities from the third show are given mistaken billing as headliners of the first, legal troubles of later incarnations of the property are misattributed

to earlier ones, and it often seems that every African American entertainer alive in the 1950s is given credit for performing in the *Tropi Can Can* revue. Often, these are simply mistaken second or third-hand accounts. Sometimes it is misremembered nostalgia for what many see as Las Vegas' best years ("things were better when the Mafia ran the town" seems to be the somewhat horrifying mantra of many older Las Vegas locals¹); sometimes it is just show biz hyperbole.

A certain style surfaces in works about Las Vegas and works by or about celebrities. Ed Reid, who wrote several books on Las Vegas, exemplifies this style. On the subject of the Moulin Rouge, Reid wrote:

The hotel, situated on the west side of Las Vegas next to the heart of the colored section, had hoped to attract a polyglot audience, selected by the god of chance, and happy in a camaraderie that would simmer in a stewpot, or fleshpot, if you will, of mixed colors, mixed emotions, and mixed drinks For democracy was operating here, a floodtide of democracy in which the customers were dedicated not so much to the constitution, but to the numbers on a pair of galloping red dice that made all men equal in their desire for status; a pair of red dice that played no favorites, whether clutched in a black or white fist, for whatever number you threw was an inter-racial and democratic number, loved by all. But the stewpot ran out of gravy.²

This is the sort of writing, an odd combination of backhanded boosterism and Mickey Spillane-esque 'tough guy' prose, that students of Las Vegas history must negotiate.

¹Among many other sources, see Dick Odessky, *Fly on the Wall* (Las Vegas: Huntington Press, 1999).

² Ed Reid, *Las Vegas: City Without Clocks* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961) 174-175.

In this paper I have waded through the various stories, often told bombastically and with questionable accuracy, of Las Vegas, show business, the Moulin Rouge and the *Tropi Can Can*, and presented a brief history of Las Vegas' first interracial casino and its first all-black revue. I have attempted to show the world of a black entertainer in '50s Las Vegas as it was and as it has been remembered. I have limited my focus to the Moulin Rouge's first incarnation, its first production show (*Tropi Can Can*), and the performers in that show who were most relevant to and resonant for black culture, and I have analyzed the different degrees of relevance and resonance that the *Tropi Can Can* and the more theatrical elements of the Moulin Rouge had for black and white audience members and guests. I have tried to match the tone of my paper to the tone of my subject. My fear is that I will be unable to convey just how much crazy fun a night at the *Tropi Can Can* must have been. I am well aware that no writing, even that as colorful as Ed Reid's, can fully capture the sense of celebration, spontaneous joy, and temporary release of racial tension that must have been felt by those in the Café Rouge showroom.

Nineteen fifty-five was one of the very first years of the civil rights movement. Old indignities were no longer being suffered quietly, national feelings of outrage were slowly coming to the fore, and African Americans were beginning to organize against the impossible odds and long traditions of the Jim Crow South. If the Moulin Rouge had been built in Mississippi it would have become one of the great familiar landmarks of the civil rights movement, but no one went to Biloxi for a fabulous, glamorous, ring-a-ding-ding vacation. The Moulin Rouge and the *Tropi Can Can* revue could only have happened in Las Vegas.

It is this location that has relegated the Moulin Rouge to a civil rights footnote, hardly remembered outside of Las Vegas. This location is rooted both in geography – the Southwest is a good distance from the American South, where the greatest battles in the civil rights movement would be waged – and perceptions of morality. The civil rights movement was born out of churches in the South led by churchmen, mostly ministers and reverends, and even if they had known about the *Tropi Can Can* revue (and the cover of *Life* magazine guarantees that some of them surely must have known about it) it is unlikely that a racially integrated Vegas casino would have been symbolic of their goals. The fight was to integrate schoolrooms and lunch tables, not barrooms and craps tables.

The *Tropi Can Can* revue was unique. It took its format from the traditional Las Vegas showroom spectacle, but it borrowed much from black culture. Like Harlem's Cotton Club of twenty years earlier, it favored the company over any one headliner and favored the showgirls over a star. Like the integrated clubs of black urban centers, the evening began in earnest after midnight. As it was the only upscale place in a town full of musicians and performers where white entertainers and black entertainers, friends and colleagues, could fraternize, it became home to late night jam sessions which had always been part of the jazz culture, and which gave the Moulin Rouge its most lasting fame. This was, literally, a party, for audience and performers alike. But when the party ended each night, very few went home – almost all went to hotel rooms. Las Vegas was (and, for the most part, still is) a transitory city, and this was a theatrical event in a time of transition for both black entertainment and American culture. Things in transition are by nature unstable. New rules of behavior and social business are discovered, old ones are rethought and reworked, and there is confusion as well as discovery. This confusion

pervades the remembrances of the Moulin Rouge; this discovery is one of forgotten social progress. This instability made the Moulin Rouge and *Tropi Can Can* thrilling, electric, and ultimately short-lived. It made the Café Rouge showroom, for its brief six-month existence, the most exciting place in the most exciting resort town in America.

Finally, a note on semantics. When writing on the unique institution of the Las Vegas resort, there are a number of words that at first seem interchangeable – ‘hotel’, ‘casino’, ‘resort’ or the 1990’s title of choice for casino executives, ‘mega-resort’. For this paper, the word ‘resort’ will refer to the property in its totality, ‘hotel’ will refer specifically to the accommodations, and ‘casino’ to the gambling floor.

The phrase ‘mega-resort’ will not be used.

CHAPTER 2

1955

Jim Crow was alive and well in 1955 America.

The Virginia State Supreme Court that year upheld anti-miscegenation laws, writing that the laws were necessary “to preserve the racial integrity of its citizens” and to prevent “the corruption of blood” and “a mongrel race of citizens.”³

In 1955, eight couples were indicted in St. Bernard, Louisiana for the crime of interracial marriage.⁴

There were three reported lynchings in America, a statistic that a contemporary historian has qualified with the word “only.”⁵ However, as there were no lynchings reported in 1952, 1953, or 1954, three reported lynchings was not progress.⁶

In 1955 President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed the first African-American to a White House post. Rutgers graduate E. Frederick Morrow was given the position of Administrative Assistant to the President (not White House Advisor on Minority Affairs – that position was held by a white man). He had to interview secretaries two at a time in

³ Naim vs. Naim, 87 S.E. 2d 749, Virginia State Supreme Ct., Virginia 1955.

⁴ Wil Haygood, *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York: Knopf, 2003) 227.

⁵ Lynn Fabian Lasner, “Fighting Jim Crow,” *Humanities* Volume 23 Number 5 (September/October 2002): 3.

⁶ Anonymous, “Lynching Statistics by Year,” *Archives at the Tuskegee Institute*, <<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html>>.

order to avoid being alone with a white woman, and he was openly called a ‘nigger rat’ by the Assistant Secretary of State during a morning briefing.⁷

In March of that year on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, a black woman refused to give up her seat for a white passenger. The bus pulled over, the police were called, and the woman was arrested. Her name was Claudette Colvin. There was no visible outrage in the black community, no meetings, no protests, no boycotts. Claudette Colvin simply did her time in jail and was released to the personal obscurity of an African American in the Jim Crow South.⁸

And on the cover of the June 20, 1955 issue of *Life*, easily the most popular and important magazine for middle-class America, there was a picture of a beautiful black woman dancing the Can Can.

This was not the first time that an African American had appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine - Jackie Robinson was featured in 1950; nor was it the first time an African American woman had made the cover, as Dorothy Dandridge appeared on it in 1954; and this was not even the first time a Las Vegas showgirl had been showcased, as Kim Smith (‘Las Vegas’ Prettiest Showgirl’) was profiled almost exactly one year earlier than the Moulin Rouge cover. This is not a case of a groundbreaking ‘first’ to be appreciated in retrospect, but rather a tremendous immediate achievement in 1955. “Getting on the cover of *Life* was considered the pinnacle of postwar success,” writes Erika Doss in her introduction to the collection of postmodern essays on the magazine, *Looking at Life Magazine*. The weekly magazine was an influential taste-maker and self-conscious social force with a readership greater than any other periodical and a fan base that extended to

⁷ Robert Frederick Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984) 69-83.

⁸ Haygood 227.

practically all of America (only a handful of writers and intellectuals, unhappy with their perception of the magazine's emphasis on style – pictures – over substance – words – publically decried this American institution). Its appearance on the cover made the Moulin Rouge known to a readership of over 22 million people.⁹ It seems almost impossible to overestimate the importance of this publicity. For the non-Nevadan readers of *Life*, the *Tropi Can Can* revue was the face of Las Vegas and, at least for a week, the face of Las Vegas was black.

“For much of the decade, racism was seen by non-Southerners as existing only in the South,” write historians Miller and Nowak in *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (referring, presumably, to non-Southern whites). They explain this by “media coverage of the great events of modern racism” and call this “an unfair distraction from northern bigotry.”¹⁰ The ‘separate but equal’ Jim Crow laws that kept blacks as second-class citizens were certainly not limited to the American South. Other states had imported these customs, including Nevada. Nevada was infamous for its treatment of African Americans, and was often called ‘the Mississippi of the West.’ In a 1954 article in *Ebony* magazine entitled “Negroes Can’t Win in Las Vegas,” James Goodrich exposed the resort town’s pronounced racist attitudes and tried to discourage blacks who might be tempted by Las Vegas’ growing number of hotel and service industry jobs. “Nevada gambling town has more racial barriers than anyplace outside of Dixie,” reads the subtitle. Goodrich explains that during the 1930s, many of the whites moving to the town were Southerners, and they brought their prejudices and customs with them. One “grizzled native” he spoke with told him, “Sure, we Jim Crow Negroes Mixing of races could

⁹ Erika Doss, *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) 3-8.

¹⁰ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) 185.

never work here. We just don't like it, that's all. So we keep the Negro in his place."

Also, many vacationers were coming from Southern states and the casinos had a vested interest in keeping them comfortable. Discussing the lack of civic services afforded to blacks, the poor condition of Las Vegas' black neighborhood, the Westside, and the absence of an NAACP chapter or African American trade union, Goodrich concludes "for the Negro, 'Vegas' is as bad as towns come." There were very few restaurants available for blacks, only two in the large downtown area and six on the Westside, and (in essence admitting the chief appeal of the city for blacks as well as whites) very few places to gamble. "Whenever a Negro is spotted in a ... gaming hall," Goodrich writes, "it is a safe wager that he is behind a broom, mop, or dish cloth."¹¹

Or, he might have added, a microphone. Black entertainers performed in the lounges and showrooms of the upscale Strip resorts about as often as whites, and were paid comparably – indeed, the pay was the chief appeal for them. In her autobiography, singer Lena Horne writes:

...the thing that galled me was that Las Vegas was the *only* big-money channel open to Negroes. TV was closed to us, movies were closed to us, Broadway was mostly closed to us. The only place we could get the big loot was Vegas!

That was hardly Las Vegas' fault, I know. But I had to resent it. And the resentment grew and grew

Las Vegas came to be a symbol of a great deal I hated in this business.¹²

For nightclub performers like Lena Horne, musicians looking for a steady gig, or comedians who had been slaving away on the notorious TOBA circuit (Theater Owners

¹¹ James Goodrich, "Negroes Can't Win in Las Vegas." *Ebony*, IX, 5 (March, 1954) 44-53.

¹² Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1986) 234-235.

Booking Association, the grueling, low-paying, and often downright crooked 'new Vaudeville' for black performers, whose acronym comedian Redd Foxx suggested stood for 'Tough On Black Asses'¹³), Las Vegas held the promise of being a financial gold mine. The 'big loot' of the all-white lounges and showrooms was enough of a draw to cause black performers to head to Vegas.

The image of the talented and respected black performer forced to enter a venue through the kitchen door was nothing new in 1955, and nothing specific to Las Vegas. There were all-white clubs in even the most tolerant cities where African Americans were not allowed to eat, drink, socialize, or use the front door – but where they were certainly allowed to entertain. Black performers were used to being lauded while they were on the stage and shunned once they were off it, and in this respect performing at the Sands in Las Vegas was no different than performing at the Mocambo in Hollywood or at the Copacabana in New York. What was so different and difficult about Las Vegas was that it was a vacation spot, a resort town. In 1955 no big name performers lived there, so anyone playing Vegas had no choice but to stay at a hotel, eat at a restaurant, and spend their free time away from the comforts of home, often in public. This is where the Jim Crow laws took their toll on black performers.

Most every African American entertainer working in Las Vegas stayed in the black part of town, the dismal Westside, where a pair of enterprising residents, Mrs. Harrison and Mrs. Cartwright, had converted their homes to boarding houses (and charged exorbitant rates - \$15 a night, compared to \$4 a night at the Strip resort the El Rancho¹⁴). There were no hotels or motels on the Westside that were decent enough to

¹³ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* (New York: Touchstone 1995) 367.

¹⁴ Eugene P. Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989) 182.

receive a AAA rating. They would eat their meals at one of the six restaurants there (serving a population of over 16,000 resident African Americans¹⁵), spend their free time there (often at one of the three tiny Westside gambling halls that were optimistically named after fabulous nightclubs: the Cotton Club, the Brown Derby, and the El Morocco), and stay within the boundaries of Las Vegas' black slum until it neared showtime. They would then drive to their venue on the fabulous Las Vegas Strip, enter through a back door, and perform on an often opulent stage (Lena Horne called the showroom at the Sands "beautiful, very classy"¹⁶). Breaks would be spent out of the eyesight of customers, and after the show they would immediately leave the resort and return to the Westside, continuing this cycle for the length of the engagement.

There were some exceptions. Some performers passed as either whites or South Americans and stayed downtown or on the Strip (early in his career Harry Belafonte's manager passed the singer off as 'Latin' for one night. Belafonte discovered this and immediately relocated to the Westside¹⁷), the Will Mastin Trio (featuring Sammy Davis, Jr.) had a room at the Old Frontier in the early '50s, and black performers lucky enough to be playing at the Flamingo didn't have to worry about housing at all. Mobster owner Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel, arguably the man who created modern Las Vegas, was never one for strict adherence to laws (Jim Crow or otherwise) and was always starstruck in the presence of celebrity. African American performers at his resort stayed in small cottages he had built on the property – not in the hotel with the white guests, but not on the dispiriting Westside either. Pearl Bailey was happy with the arrangement, Lena Horne

¹⁵ Moehring 184.

¹⁶ Moehring 235.

¹⁷ Roosevelt Fitzgerald, *The Moulin Rouge Hotel: History in the Making* (Las Vegas: The Moulin Rouge Preservation Association, 1996) 6.

was not, but both singers spoke glowingly of Siegel in their memoirs. Siegel showed great kindnesses to both ladies, in his way. For Bailey, this meant Siegel's acquiescing to her somewhat elaborate dressing room demands of numerous white linen tablecloths and buying her a Roadmaster Buick because she had mentioned that she wanted one.¹⁸ For Horne, this meant Siegel sending two of his boys to "give a little lecture" to bandleader Xavier Cugat and some of his musicians who had made their feelings about performing with a black singer clearly and insultingly known, the aftermath of which, as Horne tells it, was that she "noticed that he [Cugat] and his band, who had been hanging around the club between and after the shows to gamble, were suddenly in a big hurry to pack up and get outside once they had finished work ... I thought there was a kind of rude justice in it",¹⁹

Stories like these, of the kind-hearted gangster standing up for the torch singer, are part of an ingrained Las Vegas tradition. Las Vegas is a fabulous city, by every definition of the word. It is a city made up of fables, of stories, which is hardly surprising in a city so tied with organized crime and show business, two areas where public fascination often leads to gross hyperbole. Sometimes these stories are delightful, sometimes they are downright ugly, but as they are so frequently subject to exaggeration and reinterpretations in the storytelling they often have to be taken with a grain of salt. Easily the most famous story of racial prejudice towards a black performer in Las Vegas is the story of Sammy Davis, Jr. and the drained swimming pool. The story goes that while staying in Las Vegas, Sammy Davis, Jr. went swimming in the pool at the Sands. A wealthy Texan couple who also wanted to swim saw Davis and demanded that the pool

¹⁸ Pearl Bailey, *Raw Pearl* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1968) 83-84.

¹⁹ Horne and Schickel 203.

be drained and cleaned, presumably to avoid coming into contact with water that had been ‘tainted’ by black skin. The Sands complied, and the pool was drained.²⁰

This story, however, does not appear in Wil Haygood’s exhaustive biography *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* or in Davis’ memoir *Yes, I Can*. In fact, the only story in *Yes, I Can* that involves Las Vegas and swimming pools takes place at the Frontier and deals not with racist attitudes at all but rather the subversion of Davis’ expectations of such attitudes:

The manager sat down on the stool next to me. “Sammy, I hope you won’t mind but I’d consider it a favor if you’d try not to spend too much time around the pool.”

I looked him in the eye, waiting for “It’s not that *we* mind, but you know how people are”

He said, “Whenever a star sits down at a table he draws a crowd. And it’s fine, no harm there. But if you hang around the pool during the day, you’ll attract crowds there, too, and frankly we’d just as soon not have you pull them away from the tables. Naturally, if you feel like a swim, fine, but we’ll appreciate it if you’ll keep it down to a minimum.”

The pulse in my forehead began slowing down to normal again. I smiled. “I don’t know how to swim, anyway. Besides, I’ve already got my tan.”²¹

With characteristic (and to many, troubling) self-deprecation, Davis’ one remembered incident at a Las Vegas swimming pool ends. Management is concerned about gambling

²⁰ This story is told, among other places, in Charles Fleming’s article “Viva Black Vegas,” *Los Angeles Magazine* (Nov. 1999): 3; and in the television documentary *The Rat Pack*. Dir. Carol Langer, writ. Luke Sacher, A&E Documentary, 1999.

²¹ Sammy Davis, Jr., Jane Boyar and Burt Boyar, *Yes, I Can* (New York: Pocket Cardinal, 1966) 190.

revenue, not race relations. The pool remains undrained, Davis is offered a swim if he wants one, and there are no racist Texans in sight. And Sammy Davis, Jr. says he doesn't know how to swim.

Yet the story of Sammy and the drained pool has been repeated often enough to give it some credence. I have personally spoken with two Las Vegas natives who are, or claim to be, acquainted with a man who was, or claims to be, the Sands lifeguard at the time of the incident. There are several variations. Some versions place this story in the 1950s while Davis was performing with the Will Mastin Trio, some place it in the early 1960s, while Davis was performing with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin in the act that the press called, to Sinatra's perennial distaste, the Rat Pack. Most often the story is attributed to Davis, sometimes to Harry Belafonte, sometimes to Ethel Waters or Dorothy Dandridge.²² Usually the pool is drained, although one story has whites happily breaking taboo and swimming with Belafonte.²³ Perhaps more than one version is true, perhaps it never happened at all, or perhaps defiant black singers were leaping into pools all over town while exhausted pool boys readied hoses and skimmers.

This story has been so frequently told as gospel truth that any writing on racial injustices involving performers in mid-century Las Vegas would be remiss to ignore it. True or not, it certainly seems plausible – Las Vegas was a town with pronounced racist attitudes and a history of catering to every whim of wealthy gamblers (the Texan, presumably an oilman, is an easy stereotypical symbol of the demanding Southern millionaire). While the story may be so often repeated only to give its listeners a congratulatory sense of 'weren't things terrible, but look how far we've come,' it

²²Anonymous, "Integrating Casino Resorts." *Soul of America*.
<http://www.soulofamerica.com/cityfldr2/lasvegas14_p2.html>.

²³ Arnold Shaw, *Belafonte* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1960) 184.

remains, if only in its popularity and believability, a powerful emblem of black/white relations in '50s Vegas.

While the Westside of Las Vegas was unquestionably an unpleasant slum with unpaved roads and limited services, both commercial and civic, all of its residents weren't living in abject poverty. There was a black professional class in America, mostly serving the needs of fellow blacks, who were financially doing nearly as well as many middle-class white Americans. At the time, African Americans often simply couldn't move out of poorer black neighborhoods, and there was no separation between white-collar workers, blue-collar workers, and the destitute. As they were all black, they all lived in the same neighborhood – there was just no where else where they could buy property. Although the Westside had little city money spent on it, some of its residents had money to spend on themselves. Despite the unpaved roads, Pearl Bailey remembered the Westside as a place where “the joints were jumping I've never seen so many Cadillacs in front of shacks in my life, and quite a few big bills crept out of overalls pockets.”²⁴ Describing what he referred to as “the lively, if by Strip standards considerably less lavish, casino and entertainment culture” of Westside gambling halls such as the Brown Derby, one Las Vegas historian wrote that “long-time residents recall that the problem was not a lack of money to spend, but that there was nowhere else to spend it. A new first-class establishment seemed to make good business sense.”²⁵

That first-class establishment would be the Moulin Rouge, Las Vegas' first inter-racial resort (and, indeed, the first resort to do a lot of things which would later become standard Las Vegas practice). The two chief draws of the new resort would be the

²⁴ P. Bailey 115.

²⁵ Fitzgerald 6.

showroom production, the *Tropi Can Can* revue, and its celebrity ‘casino greeter,’ a role the Moulin Rouge created for Joe Louis (Moulin Rouge publicity often linked the two of these together, as in “*Tropi Can Can*, with Your Host Joe Louis”²⁶). These innovations made the Moulin Rouge by all accounts the most successful property in Las Vegas, phenomenally exciting for whites, resonantly meaningful for blacks, and one hell of a good time for everybody (gambling losses notwithstanding, naturally).

The traditional approach in writing on the inter-disciplinary subject of the arts and ‘minority studies’ is to find a set of double meanings, what scholars of African American culture often call ‘signifying.’ The idea is that there is one message for the majority, mainstream audience (heterosexuals, men, whites) and a hidden message for a group of intended recipients (homosexuals, women, blacks). Sometimes this second message is consciously placed by the creator, sometimes it is not, and in fact the intent of the creator is irrelevant, as the creation is seen by an audience with no notion of authorial intent. The *Tropi Can Can* seems to have been an entertainment, first and foremost, and to see in it an intentional social statement of some kind is simply unsupportable by the evidence at hand. But both the show and the resort itself were rife with elements that held a deep and resonant meaning for black patrons. The management seems to have been clearly aware of the cultural importance to blacks of certain people, actions, and ideas, and they used the “deep meaning” of elements of the African American experience to send messages to their black patrons. There may have been no signifying in the show - the comedy team of Stump & Stumpy weren’t signifying - but the fact of the show itself and the fact of Stump & Stumpy were significant. The double meanings of the Moulin Rouge came not from

²⁶Anonymous, “Gambling Town Pushes its Luck,” *Life* 20 Jun. 1955: 22.

songs and jokes, but from the resort itself, from the performers themselves, and from the man who shook your hand at the door.

CHAPTER 3

THE MOULIN ROUGE

The creators of the Moulin Rouge were motivated less by social conscience than by good business sense. Los Angeles real estate developers Alexander Bisno and Alf Childs and New York restaurateur Louis Rubin,²⁷ three white men, gathered together the start-up money from two sources: their own personal funds, and from shares sold throughout the country, mostly to those in the Northeast who had an eye towards retirement in the Southwest, at the not inconsiderable rate of ten thousand dollars a share.²⁸ They raised enough to begin construction on a three-and-a-half million dollar property which they intended to be world-class, with fine dining, an elegant bar, and a fabulous showroom.

Bisno, Childs and Rubin always intended the Moulin Rouge to be racially integrated, for both financial and practical reasons. This was a hotel and casino, not a social experiment. They believed that a resort friendly to blacks would be more likely to draw black entertainers, and big-name black entertainers would draw customers. They were keenly aware of the growing black middle class, and believed that a premiere vacation destination would be a draw for the largely untapped entertainment dollar of

²⁷ In Moehring's book the names are spelled 'Bismo' and 'Ruben'. Deciding on consistent spelling has been a challenge throughout this work – Clarence Robinson is sometimes called Clarence 'Robison', and *Tropi Can Can* has been written as *Tropi-Can-Can* and *Tropicana-Can*, with the word *Revue* sometimes part of the title, sometimes not. I have decided on using the most frequently used spelling for personal names, and the spelling from the marquee of the Moulin Rouge – *Tropi Can Can* – for the show (which may be a mistake, as the marquee calls it "a dazling [sic] revue").

²⁸ William H. (Bob) Bailey, interview with Elizabeth Nelson Patrick, *Black Experience in Southern Nevada* (UNLV Special Collections Library, December 1978), 8.

middle and upper-middle class black America (a miscalculation). They knew that the problem with Las Vegas' Westside was less about blacks having no money than about blacks having no nice place to spend it. They also wanted, sensibly enough, to avoid upsetting the mob. Although it would be eight years before Ed Reid published his Vegas expose *Green Felt Jungle*, the fact that organized crime virtually ran Las Vegas was an open secret. Opening a casino in direct competition with the major Strip hotels was foolish at best, and had the potential to be downright dangerous at worst. By catering to African Americans, a clientele that the owners of the Strip properties had no interest in, Bisno and his partners would be avoiding potential conflicts²⁹ (although depending on which of the many rumors about the end of the Moulin Rouge is to be believed, this, too, may have been a miscalculation).

The three investors chose as the location for their new resort an area to the northwest of the Las Vegas Strip, between the glamour of the Strip and the dirt roads of the Westside. This was an area where both residents of the Westside and tourists from the Strip could visit comfortably – not so close to the whites-only Strip properties that African Americans would feel unwelcome, and not so deep in the black part of town that white vacationers would have second thoughts. Often writings on the Moulin Rouge erroneously locate it deep in the slums of the Westside, and it is often colloquially referred to as having been in the Westside, but this is simply not the case. The Moulin Rouge was at 900 W. Bonanza Road in the city of Las Vegas proper, about three miles from the Las Vegas Strip. Photographs clearly show the road to the Moulin Rouge was paved, unlike most of the Westside. According to Bob Bailey, assistant producer and emcee of the Tropi Can Can Revue, “it was put on the borderline on Bonanza, which was

²⁹ Fleming 3.

not in the white area and not in the black area.”³⁰ Bisno and his partners didn’t want to deprive themselves of any possible revenue, white or black, and the location of the casino helped assure this.

The theme of the Moulin Rouge was also a well-calculated decision, and an absolute innovation in Las Vegas resorts. The created atmosphere of the property was a fantasized version of France – French elegance, French sex appeal, and general French *joie de vivre*. This held obvious appeal for white America with its jolly connotations of carefree, debonaire cheer (in the vein of Maurice Chevalier’s “savoir faire ees everywhere!”), but for black America the resonances of a French theme ran much, much deeper. France was perceived by many African Americans as not just a jaunty, colorful playground, but as a truly colorblind society. For many African American veterans of World War I or the European theater of World War II, service in France was the first time in their lives that they had not been treated as second-class citizens. One black serviceman wrote in a letter to his mother that “these French people don’t bother with no color line business. The only time I know I’m colored is when I look in the glass.”³¹ The French obsession with *le jazz* brought many black musicians to a nearly iconic status. France held a long tradition of honoring black American artists who were largely ignored or disrespected in their homeland such as Josephine Baker and Dorothy Dandridge, and France became the home of virtually every important African American writer of the ‘40s and ‘50s. Richard Wright, before he moved to Paris himself, exemplified this longing for a colorblind France when he wrote that he “always felt that France would mean

³⁰ W. Bailey 2.

³¹ Tyler Stovall, “The Color Line Behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France During the Great War,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 766f.

something to me, and that I'd live there. So I'm honor bound to see France."³² Once there he was not disappointed. He wrote, "For the first time in my life, I stepped on free land. If you are not black you will never know how heavy weights seem to fall off your body There was more freedom in one square block of Paris than there was in the entire United States."³³ For whites, France may have been emblematic of wine, women, and accordion-accompanied song, but for blacks France was an all-too-rare symbol of basic human dignity.

The Moulin Rouge took its theme farther than any resort in Las Vegas. While hotels like the Sands or the Sahara might occasionally nod to their "Arabian Nights" motif, this acknowledgement seems to have usually taken the form of trotting out a rented camel for publicity photos. Their theme did not extend to the decoration of the casinos or the costuming of the employees. The Moulin Rouge, however, put Gallic touches on every area of its operation. The cocktail waitresses were colorfully dressed as Can Can girls, with feathers in their hair, black stockings, and eye-catchingly voluminous skirts (which must have made serving drinks in a crowded casino something of a challenge). Hotel security and doormen were dressed as the Hollywood image of soldiers in the French Foreign Legion, and waiters were given vibrant red and gold jackets which, while not exactly French, were called by *Life* magazine the snappiest in town.³⁴ The only members of the floor staff to escape outrageous costuming were the plainly dressed dealers – for many gamblers, colorful frivolity was simply unwelcome around cards, dice, and money.

³² Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 297.

³³ Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968) 245, 247.

³⁴ Anonymous, "Gambling Town Pushes its Luck" 23

Every area of the casino that could be given a French-sounding name was, with results ranging from the fairly elegant (the Deauville Restaurant) to the incredibly silly (Lucky Pierre's Bar). The façade of the Moulin Rouge featured an enormous image of the ultimate French touchstone, the Eiffel Tower. Murals across the walls showed the ubiquitous Can Can girls as well as musicians, dancers, and revellers. Victoria Dale, who would choreograph at the Moulin Rouge in later years, remarked that "even on the walls, it was a party."³⁵ Not only was it a French party (with the Eiffel Tower glowing in the background), but it was a multiracial one. The mural didn't just depict the familiar black musicians playing for smiling blonde couples, it showed black and white musicians playing together and black and white couples laughing and dancing in the streets (but not, of course, any couples of mixed race. Some taboos were still not so publically broken, even in a wall mural). Between the costumes and the murals, the Can Can girl imagery and the abundance of *fleurs-de-lis* seemingly decorating any flat surface, the Moulin Rouge created a theme more immersive than any in '50s Las Vegas. This theatrical atmosphere invited guests to include themselves in the over-the-top romance of a fantasized world, a tradition that has evolved into modern-day Las Vegas. Vegas resorts today invariably have an extended theme and a particular vein of romance for the guests to be immersed in. Although Jay Sarno is generally credited with being the father of the themed casino when he opened Caesars Palace (plural, not apostrophe – Sarno created his theatrical environment very consciously, and he wanted all guests to make-believe that they were emperors) in 1966, and while the pure scale of Caesars certainly outdid the Moulin Rouge, the Moulin Rouge was eleven years ahead of Sarno, and the first Las Vegas resort to have a fully realized theme with costuming and decoration.

³⁵ Victoria Dale, personal interview, October 12, 2004.

Before the hotel opened, Bisno and his associates hired two ex-athletes with strong ties to the African American community. To serve as general manager of the Moulin Rouge they chose Wyatt 'Sonny' Boswell. Sonny Boswell was a minor celebrity in his own right, having spent several years playing on what was then (and arguably, is now) the most famous basketball team in America, the Harlem Globetrotters. Unlike the Globetrotters of today, showboating clowns perennially throwing confetti and dismantling the hapless Washington Generals, the Globetrotters of the 1940s and 1950s were a barnstorming exhibition team legitimately taking on all comers, and Boswell's celebrity came from being an athlete, not an entertainer. An outside shooter with deadly accuracy, Boswell was the MVP of the 1940 World Championship Tournament, and after his playing days he worked in the hotel industry, eventually running the Palace Hotel in Chicago. He had the work experience and some name recognition as a basketball star, and he seemed eminently qualified for the job.

The other man they hired was Joe Louis.

Joe Louis wasn't the first black heavyweight champion – that distinction goes to Jack Johnson, and in the pre-modern era the Black Ajax, Tom Molyneaux – but he was the best boxer of his era and quite possibly the greatest prizefighter of all time. He reigned as champion for twelve years, with a break to enlist in the army during World War II, and retired undefeated in 1949. To this day, he has more successful title defenses than any fighter, in any weight class, in the modern era of boxing. His 1938 defeat of the Nazi heavyweight Max Schmeling was ranked by *Sporting News* magazine as the second greatest sporting event of the twentieth century. Heywood Broun wrote in *Ring* magazine that:

It was known that Schmeling regarded himself as a Nazi symbol. It is not known whether Joe Louis consciously regards himself as a representative of his race and as one under dedication to advance its prestige. I can't remember that he has ever said anything about it. But that may have been in his heart when he exploded the Nordic myth with a bombing glove.³⁶

Louis was admired by both white and black America, but for different reasons and to a greatly different degree. White America accorded Louis the respect of a champion that he greatly deserved. To many whites, Louis represented America in general rather than black America in particular when he knocked out Schmeling, and much of America was happy to see the supremely confident Nazi annihilated in the first round. Joe Louis also carried himself in a manner very different from the previous black champions, a way much closer to how white America wanted successful (and physically dangerous) black men to behave. Louis was by nature a quiet, self-effacing man. The only time he made any comment close to self-aggrandizement was before his rematch with Schmelling. Sportswriter Jimmy Cannon told Louis that he predicted the Brown Bomber would win by knockout in six rounds, prompting Louis to hold up one finger and say "One. It go one." Louis knocked out Schmelling in two minutes and four seconds, less than one round.³⁷ The previous black champions, Jack Johnson and Tom Molyneaux, were loud, flamboyant men who favored flashy clothes and white women, and made no secret of their predilections. Where Joe Louis was a good sportsman, Jack Johnson claimed to be taking dives with every fight he lost. Where Louis joined the army, Johnson was sent to

³⁶ Dave Kindred, "Joe Louis' Biggest Knockout", *Sporting News*, 10 Feb. 1999.

<<http://www.sportingnews.com/archives/sports2000/moments/140271.html>>

³⁷ Kindred.

prison (on charges involving the aforementioned white women). It may be that white America simply grew more racially tolerant in the thirty years between Johnson's championship and Louis', it may be that people simply prefer humble gentlemen to boisterous braggarts, or it may be that in Joe Louis whites believed that they finally had a black champion who knew his place.

To black America, the Brown Bomber Joe Louis was a hero, a superman, an icon. He was a powerful symbol of a black man succeeding in a white man's world, and succeeding both gloriously and violently. He was respected by whites, often to the point of being treated deferentially, something many blacks of his time could only dream of and would never experience for themselves. He was wealthy, and although foolish business practices and poor accounting would quickly sap his fortune, the public perception of his wealth remained. Moreover, he acquired his respect and his wealth by beating a succession of white men to a pulp. This was a powerful, forbidden fantasy that Joe Louis made real. In his book *Why We Can't Wait*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. tells a chilling story that shows how deeply imbedded Joe Louis was in the black consciousness. King explains that when the gas chamber was introduced as the latest means of execution in a Southern state, a microphone was placed in the chamber for scientific purposes:

The first victim was a young Negro. As the pellet dropped into the container, and the gas curled upward, through the microphone came these words: "Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis..."

...the words of this boy reveal the helplessness, the loneliness, and the profound despair of Negroes in that period. The condemned young Negro, groping for someone who might care for him, and had power enough to rescue him, found

only the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Joe Louis would care because he was a Negro. Joe Louis could do something because he was a fighter. ... Not God, not government, not charitably minded white men, but a Negro who was the world's most expert fighter ... was the last hope.³⁸

To King, this terrible story was emblematic of the need of the black community to save itself and to much of black America, as well as to the unfortunate convict in the story, that self-determination and hope for the future was embodied by Joe Louis.

By 1955 Joe Louis was desperately in need of money. He had lost over three million dollars since his fighting days, and had worked unsuccessfully as an actor and a professional wrestler (he had been a 'face,' or a good guy, but his career on the so-called 'grunt n' grin' circuit ended when he had had his ribs broken in a match against the 'heel,' or bad guy, Cowboy Jack), and he had affixed his name and image to a variety of products, from bourbon to powdered milk.³⁹ The offer from the Moulin Rouge came at a good time, and it was a good offer – he was given accommodations, a base salary, and a percentage of the casino revenue equalling approximately two per cent of the take.⁴⁰ This was cunning on the part of Bisno and the owners. With Joe Louis owning two per cent of the property, it allowed them to claim with some honesty that the Moulin Rouge was a black-owned business, a claim that would appeal to professional and educated African Americans at the time. This notion has erroneously stuck with many today, despite the fact that white businessmen owned 98% of the Moulin Rouge.

³⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 119-120.

³⁹ Donald McRae, *Heroes Without a Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002) 289.

⁴⁰ W. Bailey 7.

Despite financial troubles and the embarrassment of professional wrestling, Joe Louis was still a celebrity to whites, a hero to blacks, and a profoundly marketable commodity to the owners of the Moulin Rouge. For a white man it was fun to shake hands with the champ, have him clap you on the shoulder and wish you good luck, maybe take a picture with both of you shadow boxing. For a black man this encounter might have the same external lightness, but it would almost certainly have a deeper resonance and become a story to be told to family and friends, never forgotten in a lifetime. To either man it was a reason to come to the Moulin Rouge, and the admen working at the resort knew it. Louis' face was plastered on newspaper ads and postcards, his name adorned the hotel's enormous marquee (as "Your Host Joe Louis"), and he made public appearances around Las Vegas. At the 1955 Helldorado celebration, a Las Vegas institution involving a Western-themed parade, Louis appeared dressed something like Roy Rogers – cowboy hat, holster and spurs, and a snow-white shirt decorated with little rhinestones lassos. Not an expressive man at the happiest of times, Louis looks particularly stone-faced in photographs from this event, but despite his apparent discomfort he shook hands, waved to the people and even rode a horse.⁴¹

In more recent times, the idea of a casino greeter has become a very sad one, a joke. The immediate connotations are of a washed-up champion, hit hard by fate or by the taxman, embarrassing himself by shamefacedly pressing the flesh and posing for pictures with a gawking public that used to be far beneath him. When 1980s heavyweight and Mike Tyson victim Gerry Cooney voiced himself on an episode of *The Simpsons*, the joke was less that he was beaten up by school bus driver Otto, but rather that he was

⁴¹ Fitzgerald 8.

employed as a casino greeter in the first place.⁴² This sort of joke at the expense of a pathetic fighter is not uncommon. Even Joe Louis was looked at with some pity at the time, with one writer calling him “sad but sincere.”⁴³ All other accounts, however, disagree, and tell of a charming and cheerful Brown Bomber greeting the guests at the Moulin Rouge. The job must not have been all that shameful to Louis – in his twilight years he moved back to Las Vegas to work as a casino greeter at Caesars Palace, and Louis was a proud man who never returned to a job he disliked even in his most lean times. When guests were met by Louis, they saw the glitter of celebrity, not the misery of a humbled man.

They also saw a black man, the first of many they would encounter during the evening. Nearly every employee of the Moulin Rouge, from the general manager to the janitor, was African American. The only exceptions were the dealers – as the Strip and Downtown properties wouldn’t hire them, there were simply no black dealers trained in proper casino procedure.⁴⁴ For white tourists staying at a Strip hotel where the only black employees were behind mops and dishcloths, to see blacks at the Moulin Rouge in positions ranging from waiter to cashier must have brought an immediate response, an immediate understanding that they were in a non-traditional space. The transition from standard, white Las Vegas to a liminal, integrated place where the culture was black had begun. The rules were beginning to be broken and the show hadn’t even started yet.

⁴² Wes Archer, dir., Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein, writ., “Springfield: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Legalized Gambling”. *The Simpsons*. Fox television. 16 Dec. 1993.

⁴³ Reid 175.

⁴⁴ Fleming 3.

CHAPTER 4

TROPI CAN CAN

The format of a traditional Las Vegas production show comes in part from American Vaudeville and English Music Hall performances, with their quick paced numbers, no single act dominating the stage for any length of time, in part from the *Ziegfeld Follies* in the style of the showgirl and her ultimate dominance of the show, and from Parisian shows such as those performed at the Lido, Moulin Rouge, and Follies Bergere with the elaborate use of rhinestones and feathers in the costuming, the risqué nature of the show, the formula of singers and clowns as an entertaining respite for and from the dancers. Modern-day Las Vegas production show such as *Splash!*, *Jubilee!*, or the more sedately punctuated *Follies Bergere* follow the same format that was used fifty years ago.

The standard Las Vegas showroom has also remained virtually unchanged since the 1950s. The main seating area of the Café Rouge showroom consisted of rows of tables, seating four in the center area and six on the sides. Patrons would sit shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors, facing those on the opposite side of the table, and either clever negotiation of seats or painful twisting of necks was required to fully see the show. Considering that dinner was served at the Café Rouge, taking up valuable elbow room, and that dress standards were far less casual in 1955 than today, with suits or evening gowns expected for those attending a show, those on the main floor were more than a

little cramped. Photographs show an audience jammed together but still enjoying the show.⁴⁵ Forming a half-circle around this main area were a series of roomy booths, and although they were slightly farther from the stage they were clearly the best seats in the house. The house could hold approximately five hundred audience members. The stage was a standard proscenium stage, fairly large for a Las Vegas showroom in order to accommodate the orchestra and the twenty dancers, with a slightly curved apron.⁴⁶

At the *Tropi Can Can*, producer and choreographer Clarence Robinson set up his show in the following manner: the showgirls opened with the Can Can; comedy, song, and dance from Timmie Rogers ('the Hot Sophisticate'); the new musical act, The Platters; a few songs from Ann Weldon ('The Girl With the Velvet Voice'); in the prime slot (the one right before the final number) were the comedy team of Stump & Stumpy; and the show closed with an enormously flashy production number where the showgirls returned to dance the Watusi. The master of ceremonies for the evening was Bob Bailey, and he'd sing a song or two himself. The show played in the Café Rouge showroom and ran a fast ninety minutes.⁴⁷

Clarence Robinson was not a young man by the time he got to Las Vegas. He had had a long career in black dance, having worked at Paris' Moulin Rouge and at Harlem's Apollo Theater and Cotton Club. Paul Corr writes that some dance historians credit Robinson with bringing tap to the Cotton Club in 1934, but by then several tap specialty acts had played the Harlem club, including the Four Step Brothers and the renowned Nicholas Brothers. Corr suggests that perhaps Robinson acquired this erroneous

⁴⁵ Fitzgerald 7.

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald 10.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, "Moulin Rouge Late Show is Luring Crowds" *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 24 June 1955: 5.

distinction by being the first to choreograph tap dance numbers for the showgirls of the Cotton Club.⁴⁸ Robinson was familiar with casino culture, having choreographed a revue featuring the comedy team Stump & Stumpy and the delightfully-named swing band Johnny Sparrow and His Bow and Arrows for the Paradise nightclub in Atlantic City. He had only one Hollywood credit to his name, but it was a good one – the seminal all-black 1943 film *Stormy Weather* starring dancing greats Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers, as well as Cab Calloway and Lena Horne. Horne remembers Robinson fondly in her autobiography, calling him “a very sweet man” who went out of his way to get her a job with Charlie Barnet’s orchestra.⁴⁹ He certainly had some respect or name recognition by the time he reached Las Vegas, as his name appeared on the Moulin Rouge marquee. Robinson had spent his career in black clubs working with black performers and the sensibilities of the *Tropi Can Can* revue reflected that.

Robinson’s emphasis for the performers in the show was on a quick pace, a high level of energy, and unity. Unity was important to Robinson not just as a choreographer of large dance numbers, but because the show had no real headliner. This decision to rely on the overall show rather than a single star would seem to be an economic one from Moulin Rouge management rather than an artistic one from Clarence Robinson – the two production shows that followed *Tropi Can Can* had a similar lack of star power and were not produced by Robinson. As there was no black superstar that could be relied on to carry the show, the star of the show became the company itself. Reviewing the show, Les Devor, entertainment writer for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, wrote admiringly in his column “Vegas Vagaries” that “the acts are subordinate to the overall coherence of the

⁴⁸ Paul Corr. *Tap Origins: A Brief History*.< <http://www.tapdance.org/tap/referenc.htm>>.

⁴⁹ Horne and Schickel, 107-108.

show which raises the production numbers to the level of starring spots.”⁵⁰ This feeling that the black company was more important than the spotlight specialty acts would not have been unusual at Harlem’s Cotton Club in the 1930s, but it was a rarity in Las Vegas of the 1950s. Until this point, showgoers in Las Vegas were less interested in seeing groups of dancers than they were interested in seeing one star. Pearl Bailey, Nat King Cole, Lena Horne, Sammy Davis, Jr. (with the Will Mastin Trio, but by this point Davis was clearly the breakout star of the act with Mastin and Sammy Davis, Sr. merely along for the ride) – these were among the biggest stars of 1950s Vegas, and to audiences their race was less important than their fame. The celebrity of the entertainer and the fact that when a vacationer got back home he could drop an instantly recognizable name to friends and co-workers – this was what was important to audiences (the last idea, that telling the folks back home about a show was almost as important as seeing the show, was well understood by the Moulin Rouge, who ran ads for the *Tropi Can Can* that read, “When you get home, they’ll ask you if you saw it. So plan to see it now!”⁵¹). The point wasn’t to tell friends that while you were in Vegas you saw some talented black singer, it was to tell friends that you saw Pearl Bailey. Celebrity trumped race, and without celebrities onstage Robinson tweaked the rules of Las Vegas entertainment and reverted to the old Harlem formula of making the show, and in particular (like at the Cotton Club) the showgirls, the star.

The singers and specialty acts came in and out during the run of the show, with some engaged for less than a week and some staying for the run of the revue. Thankfully, preparation for this sort of show was simply a matter of telling a performer when to go on

⁵⁰ Les Devor, “Vegas Vagaries,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal* 26 May 1955:5.

⁵¹ Anonymous, advertisement, *Las Vegas Review-Journal* 25 May 1955:38.

stage and making sure the orchestra had any necessary sheet music. Appearances were made briefly by, among others, singer Margie McGlory, the Honeytones, “low-down blues exponent” Ann Weldon and “frenetic dance master” Teddy Hale (who both had the good fortune to work the revue’s opening weekend, and thus receive the typically glowing *Review-Journal* reviews⁵²). Of the specialty acts that made an appearance in the *Tropi Can Can*, the three most constant, most remembered, and most resonant to black culture were Stump & Stumpy, the Platters, and ‘The Hot Sophisticate’ Timmie Rogers.

Jimmy ‘Stump’ Cross was a boy from Philadelphia who first gained notice as a singer on the local radio program, *The Colored Kiddies Amateur Hour*. By the time he was fifteen he and his childhood friend Eddie Hartman were working professionally as the song-and-dance team Stump & Stumpy, performing at the Cotton Club and touring Europe. Cross appeared in 1943, uncredited, in the patriotic Irving Berlin movie musical *This Is The Army*, where he sings the swing number “What the Well Dressed Man in Harlem Will Wear” (he will, of course, wear an army uniform) and tap dances to a rhythm set up by Joe Louis working a speed bag (they would reunite at the Moulin Rouge, as would Cross and Robinson who had worked together in Atlantic City). After Eddie Hartman died of a heroin overdose, Cross joined up with his second Stumpy, dancer Harold Cromer, and the two of them rethought the act. There was still singing and frenetic dancing, but taking advantage of Cross’ comedic talent Stumpy became the straight man, a suave singer who would like nothing more than to croon a few ballads,

⁵² Anonymous, “Success Looms For New Moulin Rouge” 17.

and Stump became the clown, always interrupting the songs, crazily goofing off, and using his greater size to manhandle his dapper partner.⁵³

Stump & Stumpy were known then to African Americans, and are still remembered today, as the greatest comedy team that no one has ever heard of. In a recent interview, hip hop mogul Russell Simmons said, “Martin & Lewis? Stump & Stumpy could sing better, could dance better, they were funnier. Black people knew it. They’d kill Martin & Lewis.”⁵⁴ The comparison to Martin & Lewis is not accidental. In film and television appearances of the most popular movie comedy team of the 1950s, Dean Martin was the tall good-looking crooner forever attempting to reign in, but ultimately tolerating, the antics of his spastic man-child partner, Jerry Lewis. For the black comedy team, Stump was tall, immature and spastic, Stumpy was short, musical and tolerant. Only the skin colors and the respective heights were different. Although there is no denying the talents of Martin & Lewis, their act was absolutely stolen from the lesser-known black duo (putting a kinder spin on it, black historian Mel Watkins writes that Martin & Lewis “borrowed freely” from Stump & Stumpy⁵⁵). In an episode of the PBS documentary series *Frontline*, Jerry Lewis speaks openly of going to black clubs in New York City and watching Stump & Stumpy solely, he insists, for inspiration and not theft. Documentarian June Cross (daughter of Jimmy ‘Stump’ Cross) shows a moment of Stump & Stumpy’s act, where Stump sticks two straws in his front teeth, pulls his hat low over his eyes, claps his hands together and barks like a walrus. Cross then quickly cuts away from this oddly entertaining bit to show a Martin & Lewis television appearance,

⁵³ June Cross, writ. and dir., “Secret Daughter,” *Frontline*, PBS, WGBH Boston, Nov. 1996.

⁵⁴ Russell Simmons, interview, *It’s Black Entertainment!*, Showtime Entertainment 2, Dir. Stan Lathan 2002.

⁵⁵ Watkins 396.

where Jerry Lewis sticks two straws in his front teeth, pulls his hat low over his eyes, claps his hands together and barks like a walrus.⁵⁶ In music, judgements on this sort of cross-cultural appropriation of material is ambiguous – the argument of whether Elvis Presley was a white man stealing from black culture or paying tribute to it will never fully be resolved. In comedy though, stealing is stealing, and it is often gleefully and unashamedly done – Milton Berle, for example, was well-known for his bald-faced thievery (black comic Pigmeat Markham was one of his victims, remembering a time when Berle came to Harlem’s Apollo Theater and “this little white cat hardly out of knee pants showed up with his scratch pad and pencil and started copying down every word I said”⁵⁷) and even incorporated it into his comic persona.

This sort of creative dishonesty where comics steal from one another is winked at in show biz stories, but when a white act steals a good routine from a black one and has the talent to pull it off, there are serious ramifications. Watkins writes, “In comedy, gags, jokes and routines are regularly exchanged and repeated by various comedians; the originator or inventor is often not as important as the comic who popularizes the routine. And that usually depends on opportunity.”⁵⁸ In the 1950s, that opportunity almost always went to the white act. While Stump & Stumpy were still touring around on the TOBA circuit, Martin & Lewis had moved from Catskills nightclubs to television appearances to their 1949 feature film debut in *My Friend Irma* where they were breakout sensations. A string of hits followed, and Martin & Lewis became a genuine phenomenon. Stump & Stumpy, however, stayed right where they were. Harold ‘Stumpy’ Cromer remembers

⁵⁶ Cross.

⁵⁷ Watkins 274.

⁵⁸ Watkins 274.

that their opportunities were profoundly limited, and echoing Lena Horne's Vegas rationale said that there were "no plays, no movies, no nothin'. We were just catching shows here and there."⁵⁹ One of the shows they caught was at the Moulin Rouge.

Stump & Stumpy were fairly well-known to African Americans from their national TOBA tours, and in 1955 Martin & Lewis were known by everyone. Black audiences could not help but make a comparison, and could not help but reflect on the injustice of the situation. While Dean and Jerry were, they might have reasonably assumed, living the high life of movie stars and raking in cash, Stump & Stumpy were still gigging around the country and making ends meet. They created the act but didn't popularize it, and that meant mainstream obscurity. The fact that the white reviewers, who all raved about the team (they were called "the fastest moving comedy team"⁶⁰ by one, and another noted that "their zany antics earned them a standing ovation"⁶¹), were unable or unwilling to see that it was practically the exact same act as the most famous one in America must have been galling. The resonant double meaning of Stump & Stumpy to African Americans is the exact opposite from that of Joe Louis. Joe Louis was a celebrity to whites, and a one-in-a-million story of heroic success to blacks. Stump & Stumpy were unknown to whites, and a one-of-millions story of tremendous talent working in obscurity to blacks. Joe Louis was a reminder of what could be achieved; Stump & Stumpy were reminders of the unfair way things usually were.

Things were changing for some African American artists, however, particularly in the Los Angeles music scene. In South Central Los Angeles, some students and recent

⁵⁹ Cross.

⁶⁰ Anonymous, "Success Looms For New Moulin Rouge" 19.

⁶¹ Anonymous, "Moulin Rouge Late Show is Luring Crowds" 5.

graduates of the predominantly black Jefferson High School had taken to forming vocal harmony groups. These groups, with names like the Robins and the Flairs, would sing mainstream pop standards with a smoothness, a slight touch of East Coast doo-wop, and a number of distinctively black vocal flourishes. Rules were being broken and popular music was being rethought, and the result was that they made old songs sound new. Federal Records A&R man Ralph Bass began holding amateur nights at Club Alabam and among his discoveries were three talented young men – Alex Hodge, Herbert Reed and David Lynch (not the filmmaker) – who called themselves, after the slang term for record albums, the Platters. Bass signed them and turned them over to Samuel ‘Buck’ Ram, who had worked with the Ink Spots a decade earlier, and he became their chief songwriter, manager and (as is the case with so many boy bands in the history of popular music) svengali. He immediately reshuffled the group. Tenor Tony Williams was added, Alex Hodge was replaced by Paul Robi, and Ram decided the Platters needed a female singer and hired 15-year-old Zola Taylor. Ram then wrote a song for them, “Only You (And You Alone),” recorded it, and then moved on to messing around with the lineup of another teen group, the Penguins (who would also perform in one of the later showroom shows at the Moulin Rouge, and score a huge hit with “Earth Angel”). This was in May of 1955, and less than a week after recording “Only You” the five teenagers headed to Las Vegas to perform in the *Tropi Can Can* revue.⁶²

It would be ridiculous to assume that every African American audience member in the Café Rouge was familiar with the new trend of music by South Central teenagers. But some of them certainly were, and they all must have recognized on some level that

⁶² Fred Bronson, liner notes, *The Platters All-Time Greatest Hits*, CD, Mercury, 2004.

what they were hearing was a new sound, one that was youthful and immediately black. Their plaque at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (which inducted the Platters in 1990) puts it rather coyly, citing the “soulful coat of uptown polish”⁶³ that the Platters brought to their music. It would be as honest, if less elegant, to simply say that the Platters sounded black. Their trademark strings-heavy arrangements of middle-of-the-road standards combined with the inner-city black vocal sound (in the 1950s, velvety and harmonious, very different from what is meant by ‘inner-city’ today) was a style of music in transition, and a style that would ultimately last. “It was the perfect link between two eras,” wrote Billboard magazine historian Fred Bronson, “following in the footsteps of black vocal harmony groups like the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers, while ushering in a new age of contemporary pop and R&B.”⁶⁴

Another act that linked two eras and was on the forefront of a growing entertainment movement was Timmie Rogers. Rogers, like Jimmy ‘Stump’ Cross, began his career as a child performer and eventually became a teenaged song-and-dance man, performing in *Blackbirds of 1936* (with good company - the Nicholas Brothers, one-legged tap dancer Peg Leg Bates, and Tim ‘Kingfish’ Moore). Mel Watkins writes that in the 1940s Rogers “pioneered a crucial change in the stage image of African-American comedians by abandoning the traditional clownish attire and donning a tuxedo for his act. ... The first time he introduced the formal attire ... the owner of the Los Angeles Clover Club fired him on the spot.”⁶⁵ Despite this, the tuxedo stayed, and it worked well with the traditional hat and cane that always accompanied the dancer onstage. Throughout his

⁶³ Anonymous, “The Platters,” *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*, <<http://www.rockhall.com/hof/inductee.asp?id=169>>.

⁶⁴ Bronson 1.

⁶⁵ Watkins 489.

career, he would end his act by calling out to the audience, “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s fun time now!” and launching into novelty songs (at the *Tropi Can Can*, he alternated between “New Kind of Cowboy” and “Good Whiskey, Bad Woman”⁶⁶) and pratfall-laden tap dance. In the late 1940s Rogers made a significant change to his act – he wouldn’t just sing and dance anymore. He had something to say before the singing and dancing started up. He decided to tell jokes.

One of the first black stand-up comedians to work before predominantly white audiences, Rogers’ “social satire” was, in his words:

strictly political and other side of the coin ... I used sophisticated material that they already knew about ... What makes a black person laugh, a white person may not understand. A black comedian can say, ‘Shut up, fool!’ and a black audience will laugh their butts off. Downtown that wouldn’t even get a chuckle.⁶⁷

Rogers’ challenge was to find a happy medium where his comedy neither puzzled white audiences nor overly offended them. In this middle ground he became perhaps too gentle, but he became very, very successful, with both white and black audiences. Four years after his stint at the Moulin Rouge he would become the first comedian to headline at the Apollo Theater. He told mother-in-law jokes (“Momma, you can’t talk to me like that, I am the President of the United States.” [followed by, in the voice of the mother-in-law] “Yeah, another one of your temporary jobs. In four years, you’ll be back on the street again”⁶⁸), jokes about his family (“I’ve got three children – one of each! Oh yeah!”⁶⁹),

⁶⁶ Anonymous, *Moulin Rouge Hotel History Book 1955-1995* (Las Vegas: Beehive Press, 1994) 6.

⁶⁷ Watkins 489-490.

⁶⁸ Watkins 490.

and jokes about the advanced technology of children's toys ("I got my daughter a little plastic dog – the next day, it had little plastic puppies! I don't mind the little plastic puppies, but I hate the little plastic fleas! Oh yeah!"⁷⁰). While this sort of material hardly seems designed to subvert the white culture, the fact that an African American was telling these jokes was gently doing just that by altering their expectations. Rogers was a black comedian doing not the self-deprecating 'coon' act that a white audience might have been expecting, but rather talking about universal issues of family and society, and being entertaining and likeable while he did so. He was inviting the white audience to laugh with him rather than at him. Timmie Rogers, a well-dressed black man with a bubbly personality and an infectious catchphrase ("Oh yeah!", delivered call-and-response style, until he can trick the audience with an inevitable "Oh no!") was talking about middle class concerns and worries, middle class foibles. He might not have been quite as sophisticated and political as he gave himself credit for, but his gentleness doesn't make his contributions to black culture any less meaningful.

The first bandleader in the Café Rouge showroom was Benny Carter. By taking this job in the heavy brass, heavy strings, heavily orchestrated world of Las Vegas, Carter was returning to his big band roots. He had played alto saxophone with Duke Ellington and Chick Webb. In the late 1930s he became the first jazz musician to play in Spain, and he had led a number of disastrously unsuccessful big bands. "Carter always communicated better with musicians than with the public,"⁷¹ wrote jazz historian George T. Simon. In a less charitable vein, *Metronome* magazine wrote that "band after band of

⁶⁹Timmie Rogers, appearing on *The Jackie Gleason American Scene Magazine*. CBS. 16 May 1964.

⁷⁰Rogers.

⁷¹George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1981) 115.

Benny Carter's has died, some painfully, some so slowly that rigor mortis never set in.”⁷²

After spending the late '40s and early '50s playing be-bop with smaller combos, he had remade a name for himself and was a fairly well-known and well-respected musician by the time he took the job at the *Tropi Can Can* revue. The *Review-Journal* called him an “exponent of scorching blue-jazz”⁷³ and said somewhat torturously that “the music of Benny Carter and his men of music backgrounded the show with excellent rhythm and hot music.”⁷⁴

Dancing to this “hot music” were the chief attraction of the *Tropi Can Can*, the showgirls. The showgirls tended to be very young women (dancers Norma Tolbert and Dee Dee Jasmin were only seventeen) who had lived and worked in other parts of the country, the nightclubs of Harlem and Los Angeles' predominantly black entertainment district Central Avenue, mostly. They had all moved to a strange city, they all worked together closely and exhaustively in rehearsal and performance, and they all roomed together in the Cadillac Arms, an apartment complex next to the Moulin Rouge that had been constructed to house the performers, the showgirls as well as band members and specialty acts. They didn't stay in the hotel proper for financial reasons, not racial ones – the owners wanted to keep the rooms available for paying customers. They were black women in a Jim Crow town, so their entertainment options were profoundly limited, the best option being their workplace, the Moulin Rouge. But if they were teen-aged girls coping with a new town and new friendships offstage, onstage they were something

⁷² Simon 116.

⁷³ “Benny Carter's Band Big Hit at Moulin Rouge” 19.

⁷⁴ Anonymous, Entertainment column, *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (25 May 1955): 3.

altogether different. They were Las Vegas showgirls, with all the attendant implications of glamour and sexuality that the idea conveyed in 1955 and conveys to this day.

The dancers were given the typically over-the-top costumes that Las Vegas audiences, and aficionados of showgirls, had come to expect (it should be noted in order to avoid confusion that the *Tropi Can Can* revue was not a topless or nude show, the first topless show in Las Vegas coming four years later with *Minsky's Follies* at the Dunes. The *Follies* did not last long, due in no small part to backstage animosity between the resident 'legitimate' showgirls who saw themselves as respectable girls who were slumming, and recently arrived burlesque dancers who saw themselves as women who were doing their job. Sparks, not surprisingly, flew⁷⁵). The costumes that opened the *Tropi Can Can* were those for the Can Can number - yellow feathers in the showgirls' hair, yellow shoes and vibrant canary bodices and outer skirts. The inside of the voluminous Can Can skirt was red and green, with red garters and red high-cut knickers. The dark skin of the showgirls was positively radiant against the bright yellow, and yellow was used again for the closing Watusi number. For this, the women wore yellow or blue bodices covered in rhinestone patterns, yellow, red and green feathered headdresses (according to a showgirl working on the Strip at the time, this was the first time headdresses were worn by showgirls in Las Vegas⁷⁶), and they danced barefoot with the ankle-length "feather tails" mentioned by *Life*. Some wore elbow-length red gloves,

⁷⁵ Kim Krantz, interview with Joyce Marshall, *Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project* (UNLV Special Collections Library, 1997) 10-11.

⁷⁶ Krantz 7.

some did not. The costumes were described as “beautiful” by one reviewer,⁷⁷ and the photos in *Life* magazine bear this out.

Not only were the costumes beautiful, the girls themselves were beautiful. An early ad for the Moulin Rouge billed them as “the most beautiful cover girls on earth”⁷⁸ and the *Review-Journal* called them “twenty-five of the most beautiful dancers in the land,”⁷⁹ in both cases somewhat surprisingly avoiding any mention of race. Race was not mentioned in any of the six *Review-Journal* articles involving the *Tropi Can Can* nor in any Moulin Rouge advertising. Perhaps this decision was a business one, a fear that any mention of an integrated casino would dissuade white vacationers; perhaps it was a social one, a feeling that since racial boundaries are rightly being broken there is no need to raise what should be a non-issue; or perhaps the admen just assumed that everyone knew the property was racially integrated (Ed Reid, however, couldn’t help but discuss the showgirls’ ethnicity, calling them, in what is hopefully typical Ed Reid style rather than an appalling display of ignorance, “a sepia chorus line of dancers flown straight from Kikuyu land in the heart of Black Africa”⁸⁰).

The image of the showgirl has remained largely unchanged from the days of the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Statuesque, beautiful, and extravagantly costumed, these women were presented (and presented themselves) as both commodity and icon, sexually desirable but ultimately untouchable. They would slowly walk onstage, stand still while their beauty was admired, and then they slowly walk away. While they were certainly an eyeful, with

⁷⁷ Anonymous, Entertainment column, 3.

⁷⁸ Anonymous, Moulin Rouge advertisement, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 25 May 1955: 38.

⁷⁹ Anonymous, “Benny Carter’s Band Big Hit at Moulin Rouge,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 26 May 1955: 19.

⁸⁰ Reid 175.

glittery costumes and invariably staggering good looks (one of the best descriptions of this combination of glamor and sexuality comes not from academic writing but rather from the current ad campaign for Bally's *Jubilee!* – “thousands of rhinestones covering practically nothing”⁸¹), the showgirls typically weren't performers. Ziegfeld had the girls separated into two groups: glamorous showgirls and their shorter, more poorly paid dancing sisters, known as ‘ponies’ (for their comparative stature). The showgirls got the glory, the ponies did the sweaty work of dancing (although they may have been comforted by the fact that Ziegfeld, oddly, wrote that “small, agile chorus girls make better wives than tall, stately showgirls.”⁸² His rationale was not explained). In her analysis of the cultural meanings of the Ziegfeld girls, Linda Mizejewski writes of the traditional showgirls that “they neither sang nor danced – they were simply delightful to see.”⁸³ The much-lauded sexuality of the showgirl belies the fact that traditionally she rarely does anything more provocative than walk cautiously. The showgirls of the *Tropi Can Can* were different, though. They didn't just walk, they danced. And they didn't dance like Ziegfeld's ponies.

The women of the *Tropi Can Can* were black women who had worked at black nightclubs, choreographed by a black man from Harlem, and their resultant dance style was very different from that of the blonde chorines shuffling off to Buffalo on the Strip. Much of African American culture can be directly traced to the plantation days of the Antebellum South, and from there to the people of West Africa, and dance is certainly no exception. The women of the Moulin Rouge were used to dancing in what is typically an

⁸¹ Anonymous, Bally's *Jubilee!* Billboard advertisement. September 2004.

⁸² Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 95.

⁸³ Mizejewski 92.

African style, low to the ground, with what is called a multi-unit torso. The multi-unit torso, seen in African and South American dance, is where the chest area and ribcage area move independently from one another, sometimes gyrating, sometimes with one or the other thrust out rhythmically. European and white American tradition favors the single-unit torso in dance, where the upper body is kept stiff and upright. Even when dances originated in the African American community, as so many did, they were usually molded by whites to conform to their taste. The Charleston, for example, was originally a black dance performed bent low to the ground, but when it became popular with the white 'jazz babies' and flappers they danced it absolutely vertical and with an upper body rigidly upright. Only the synchopation and herky-jerky movement of the limbs remained.⁸⁴ These are the sort of differences that historically lead to cultural misunderstandings and feelings of superiority - whites see blacks as unsophisticated, blacks see whites as uptight and joyless.

The showgirls at the Moulin Rouge danced in both European and African fashion, and both dances were very different from the standard style known as 'Broadway tap' practiced by most white chorus girls in Las Vegas. The choice for European dance was an obvious one, and the one most conducive to their stylistic bent – the Can Can. It was in keeping with the French theme of the Moulin Rouge, it was familiar to the audience (mostly from Hollywood Westerns, where even the dustiest small town always seems to have a chorus line of voluminously-skirted saloon girls and appreciative audiences firing Colt Peacemakers into the ceiling), and it lent itself well to the African style of the dancers. Surprisingly, this European dance was well in keeping with the showgirls'

⁸⁴ Victoria Dale, lecture, "African American Dance Survey", University of Nevada Las Vegas, 9 Sept. 2004.

ingrained African American tradition. There are several elements to the risqué dance: the skirt manipulation, for visual spectacle and giving the audience glimpses of knee, thigh, and underwear; high kicks and ‘circling the leg,’ the move where one leg is lifted and, from the knee down, rotated; and the ‘Pigeon Wing.’ The ‘Pigeon Wing’ step is described in the online Dance History Archives as “bringing the bust into play by leaping forward, kicking high, and throwing the shoulders back”⁸⁵ – a multi-unit torso step very similar to the ‘Buck & Wing’ step danced first on plantations. The only difference between the two steps is that in the ‘Pigeon Wing’ one arm is always held, curved, over the head.

The Can Can opened the show, unlike in Parisian theater. Typically the high-stepping, high-energy dance closes a show and, if done well, brings the house down – Clarence Robinson seemed to be making a point that at the emotional and physical peak where other shows end, the *Tropi Can Can* begins. The show began with a frenetic European dance and ended with an equally frenetic African one - the Watusi. In a photo caption, *Life* magazine described the closing number as follows: “African dance called the Watusi brought the chorus line at the Moulin Rouge – shown in different costumes on the cover - out in feather tails to writhe through a violent sequence of jumps and contortions. At climax of the dance (sic) a medicine man came bounding out brandishing two live squawking chickens.”⁸⁶ The photo shows an army of barefoot chorus girls, some with mouths wide, clearly shouting (vocal cadences and shouts being a traditional part of African, and African American, dance culture). They have their arms twisted, their chests back, and their hips and pelvises forward. The dance clearly involves upper-body

⁸⁵ Sonny Watson, ed., “Can-Can.” *Dance History Archives by StreetSwing.com*, 3 May 2004 <<http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/z3cancan.html>>.

⁸⁶ Anonymous, “Gambling Town Pushes its Luck” 22.

isolations, a multi-unit torso (presumably what the *Life* writer meant by “violent contortions” – although there is no way of knowing, it feels that the writer’s choice of words reflects more an unfamiliarity with African dance than a racially judgmental attitude. Someone who had only seen the ‘Broadway tap’ style on a chorus line might be excused in thinking that rhythmically jerking shoulders and chests looked ‘violent’). There is, unfortunately, no photograph of the medicine man or the chickens.

While it is possible to see this dance number, the Watusi, as pandering to the white culture and turning important African traditions (in particular, the medicine man) into light-hearted entertainment at best, an insulting joke at worst, that reading seems dependent on 21st century sensibilities that would have been absent among the performers and audiences of the *Tropi Can Can*. This number seems to have been intended as an African fantasia, not a serious representation of another culture’s ritualistic practices. For many in the audience this must have been their first exposure to African culture, transformed into simple entertainment though it was, outside of Tarzan movies. The Watusi is, after all, named after an African warrior tribe, and in all likelihood this was the first time that the Watusi had ever been danced on an American stage - most dance history works erroneously list the Watusi as having been created in the 1960s, where it joins the Mashed Potato and the Swim in the catalogue of endearingly silly go-go dances.⁸⁷ At the *Tropi Can Can* the Watusi was much closer to a traditional African dance with the bare feet, the shouts, the movements and, in case the point was missed, an appearance by a showboy done up as a Papa Shango-esque medicine man, than a mere 1960s fad.

⁸⁷ Agnes de Mille, *America Dances* (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 21, among others.

The Watusi, then, was used not as a joke or a lesson, but as the end of a theatrical journey. *Tropi Can Can* began with a traditional European number, comfortable to the audience, and ended with an African one, a great deal more foreign to them, to black audience members as well as white. Afro-centrism existed in 1955, but it was a minor movement often misunderstood by African Americans – pride in self was often seen as naïve arrogance, and it was difficult for many jaded urbanites to look past the trappings of dashikis, ceremonial jewelry, and conversations peppered with affected-seeming Yoruba phrases. Lee Jacobus writes in his introduction to Lorraine Hansbury's *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play not without conflicting views on Afro-centrism, that “in the early days of the Pan-African movement ... blacks were often bemused by the way Africans presented themselves.”⁸⁸ The Café Rouge audience may have been bemused by the Watusi as well, but by all accounts they were also electrified by it. It was a fitting final number for Las Vegas' first all-black show. The show, and the audience, had transitioned from a white world into a black one, and both worlds were created with showy energy and good humor.

Mizejewski writes that a showgirl's occupation is “a romanticization of ‘woman's work’ which avoids questions of authority and education and which further connects women to issues of appearance and décor.”⁸⁹ The romanticized “woman's work” is to stand around in an elaborate outfit and look beautiful, not to engage in any physical activity that might make her more of a potentially challenging person and less of a lovely, objectified thing. Mizejewski connects the fairly sedentary activities of the typical showgirl to an image of ladylike propriety, and concepts of propriety are akin to

⁸⁸ Lee Jacobus, *The Bedford Introduction to Drama* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001) 1272-1273.

⁸⁹ Mizejewski 74.

race. An idealized woman is a well-dressed, lovely, inactive one, and this idealized woman is invariably white. The perfect woman, who is white, doesn't work – she has ethnic women working for her. If the showgirl were more active, she would be less ideal, and this applies not just to the *Ziegfeld Follies*, but to '50s Las Vegas. Reid tells us that the Copa Girls in the Sands' showroom "do one production number which lasts about six minutes, and that is the extent of their work. There isn't much dancing to do because the Sands stage is a rather confined area."⁹⁰ The showgirls at the Moulin Rouge, while beautiful and elaborately costumed, were the very opposite of sedentary inactivity. The *Review-Journal* extravagantly praised the "frenetic" dancing abilities of the *Tropi Can Can* showgirls, saying that "the twenty dancers who highlight the show provide it with a rapid pace which brings the audience at times, close to exhaustion from having watched them,"⁹¹ and Les Devor wrote that the dancers "exhaustively perform ... There could be no more dancing for a while after one of their numbers...it was that furious, and enervating."⁹² These were women who were working hard. This puts them directly at odds with the classic showgirls, the Ziegfeld girls. By their "frenetic" dancing as much as the color of their skin, the women at the Moulin Rouge proved that they were not traditional showgirls.

This was certainly part of the appeal for some men. The original Ziegfeld girls were famously pursued by both stage-door Johnnies and millionaires alike, the former looking for a good time and the masculine coup that comes with attaching oneself to a publicly desired woman, the latter looking for these things as well but, unlike their

⁹⁰ Reid 159.

⁹¹ Anonymous, "Success Looms For New Moulin Rouge," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 26 May 1955: 19. "Success Looms For New Moulin Rouge" 17.

⁹² Devor 5.

wolfish counterparts, they were willing to marry to get them (Mizejewski asserts that “the upper-class man could comfortably marry ‘down’ in this case because the new currency of ‘fun’ could compensate for the slippage in class”⁹³). The women in the *Tropi Can Can* were chased as well, by “the white men especially,” said showgirl Norma Tolbert. “I had so many white men pursuing me it was unbelievable!”⁹⁴ “The white guys came to the club to meet black girls,” adds Dee Dee Jasmin. “There were so many propositions it was unreal. I know, ‘cause I got some of them.”⁹⁵ White men chasing black showgirls was nothing new – it was commonplace at Harlem’s Cotton Club in the 1930s, where the owner Owney Madden knew full well what he was encouraging by advertising “the cream of sepia talent, the greatest array of Creole stars ever assembled, supported by a chorus of bronze beauties” (happy and flattered to be hired as a Cotton Club dancer, Lena Horne recites this list and adds, “‘...bronze beauties.’ Hot dog!”⁹⁶). All the male patrons during the Cotton Club’s most famous years were white and, like the white men chasing after Tolbert and Jasmin in ‘50s Vegas, they saw in a chorus line of ‘bronze beauties’ a sexuality that was both dangerous and safe.

The dangerous sexuality is what made the whole thing so appealing for them in the first place. To white audiences the African dance styles were more immediately suggestive than the slow Ziegfeld walk, with the African movement traditions of isolating the chest and pelvis and rolling the hips. Ultimately any dance style would be, as the visible ‘work’ that the women were putting out distanced them from propriety and ladylike behavior, and accordingly made them more sexual creatures. Ignorance about

⁹³ Mizejewski 74.

⁹⁴ Fleming 4.

⁹⁵ Fleming 4.

⁹⁶ Horne and Schickel 53.

black culture made it all that more thrilling and exotic to some whites, and white culture long held the stereotype that blacks were more sexual, connecting hot jungles in Africa with hot blood in America. There is often a powerful sexual charge in that which is “forbidden,” the woman that a white man can’t have, shouldn’t have, the “exoticized other.” This concept of simultaneous desire, repulsion and curiosity takes its cue from Freud’s famous comparison of female sexuality to a “dark continent” and has been written about extensively. Scholar Samir Dayal’s explanation is that through the black dancer’s

sensual abandon, they [whites] could discover that strange, arational ‘dark continent,’ their internal Africa, within themselves, although of course it would be a breach of civilized comportment to be defined by that arational blackness as ‘real’ blacks were. Fantasy allowed the European to indulge the desire to shake off the strictures of propriety – the desire for ‘blackness’ as symptom of one’s own animal being – while retaining the security of being able to return from the darkness of that radical negation of civilization’s sustaining fictions.⁹⁷

The safety came in the fact that they’d never have to marry these girls – it was still illegal in some of America, after all. Their superior societal status as white men, combined with the perception of Las Vegas showgirls as objects of entertainment, gave them a chance to behave more aggressively and insensitively towards black women, confident in the belief that black women were culturally powerless to do much more than smile and politely demure against even the most aggressive come-on.

⁹⁷ Samir Dayal, “Blackness as Symptom,” *Blackening Europe*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004) 41.

Also, unlike the Ziegfeld girls who had the strictest protocols about mixing with the general public (Flo Ziegfeld wanted them to retain their superiority and intangibility), or the Cotton Club girls who due to their race were unable to socialize in the very club they worked at, showgirls in '50s Las Vegas were eminently available. They were ordered to mingle with the customers between shows, join them in the casino, and sit with them for drinks.⁹⁸ This wasn't a case of the resorts prostituting the girls (in the strictest sense, at least), rather it was about using beautiful women to keep gamblers from moving to another property. Reid writes "even hard-bitten gamblers and 'high rollers' are somewhat flustered when surrounded by several dozen chorus cuties in full stage make-up."⁹⁹ But not, of course, so flustered that they want to leave (even if they were able to make their way through the massive crowd of "several dozen" showgirls). Between the frenetic dancing, the forbidden fruit of the exoticized other, and the fact that these women were obligated to be at least friendly, the lure of sexuality to male patrons of the Moulin Rouge was powerful.

How black men in the audience felt about this sexuality, "the most beautiful cover girls on earth"¹⁰⁰ and their white suitors, is a difficult question to answer. I have been unable to find any accounts from African Americans who were purely audience members, and the dancers who have been interviewed have only spoken about being chased by white men. Perhaps the masculine camaraderie that exists when watching pretty girls overrode questions of race; perhaps the thrill of being in a groundbreaking (and rulebreaking) venue made up for any old grievances about white men's behavior

⁹⁸ Fleming 4.

⁹⁹ Reid 158.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, Moulin Rouge advertisement.

towards black women; perhaps African American men were too busy chasing after the dancers themselves to notice; perhaps there was deep resentment and bitterness. Perhaps, of course, different men felt different things, and it is entirely possible that a single man could feel all these things in a given night. The answer is left to pure speculation. What is not speculation is that from opening night on, there were no accounts of brawling, fighting, or trouble at the Moulin Rouge.

Opening night of the Moulin Rouge and the *Tropi Can Can* revue was on May 26, 1955, and it was, by all accounts, spectacular. Dancer Dee Dee Jasmin remembered that “it was very elegant. It was a fairy tale. There were furs and chiffons and satins and taffetas. And all kinds of jewels. And lots of stars.”¹⁰¹ The throng of A-list celebrities included Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., Cary Grant and Ed Sullivan, and photographs show a crush of well-dressed, racially diverse guests. Given all the elements of the opening – massive crowds, celebrities, and the racial troubles of Las Vegas – it seems remarkable that there were no problems. According to *Tropi Can Can* emcee Bob Bailey, there were never any serious troubles during the six months of the Moulin Rouge.

There was never one fight. Never one incident. Not one black and white incident in the whole time it was open. They threw one guy out – and he was a white guy – that fell into the pool opening night and then got out and was mad at everybody.

¹⁰¹ Fleming 3.

He's the only guy that I know that they ever had to put out. It was a fantastic place.¹⁰²

If Bailey's memories are correct, this seems truly amazing. All the elements for bad behavior were there – a town with free-flowing alcohol, no last call, the possibility of heightened emotions due to gambling losses, and pronounced racial tension. Whites often treated blacks with little respect, and even the most tolerant whites weren't used to taking orders from them, yet the entire security staff of the Moulin Rouge was black, dressed like legionnaires, and still managed to keep the peace. Perhaps the security men were very good at their jobs, perhaps everyone wanted to make a point that racial integration could work (and so when tempers rose they swallowed their pride, tried to forget how much they lost at the craps table, and took a few deep breaths to sober up), perhaps they realized that Joe Louis might be just around the corner. Whatever the reason, any casino that remains constantly peaceful is a profound rarity.

The rules were being obeyed by the patrons while they were being broken by the property, the entertainers, and the show itself. And as elements of African American culture and jazz culture were mixing with and replacing traditions of Las Vegas entertainment, the rules were about to be discarded altogether by what has become the best remembered feature of the *Tropi Can Can* – the late-night show followed by the all-night jam session.

¹⁰² W. Bailey 10.

CHAPTER 5

MAN, WE HAD FUN

This feeling that the Moulin Rouge was what Charles Fleming called “an ebony and ivory Camelot”¹⁰³ extends over much of the Moulin Rouge’s history, and in particular the *Tropi Can Can* late show. It was the late night show that made the Moulin Rouge the most glamorous, most exciting, and hottest place in town after two in the morning. While the other showrooms had a dinner show (usually at eight) and most had a midnight show, the *Tropi Can Can* was the first show to go onstage a third time, with a 2:15 a.m. known as the “breakfast show.” “From tomorrow on, nobody goes to sleep early in Las Vegas!” read the pre-opening Moulin Rouge advertisement, “Everybody goes to the magnificent new Moulin Rouge! The later the greater! ... There’s a great late show every night at Moulin Rouge, the only major late show presented every night in Las Vegas!”¹⁰⁴ This was an inspired idea. While the Moulin Rouge was not solely responsible for making Las Vegas a twenty-four hour town, it did provide the visitors (and locals) something to do besides gambling and drinking. And the idea was born from African American sensibilities. Bob Bailey explained that “All the black-and-tans – the integrated clubs – happened after midnight. Harlem, in New York, was after midnight. Central Avenue, in L.A., was after midnight. Chicago’s South Side was after midnight.

¹⁰³ Fleming 1.

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, Moulin Rouge advertisement, 25 May 1955.

So we decided to do the same.”¹⁰⁵ Management’s effort to make the Moulin Rouge the next Harlem or Central Avenue created a late night scene that must have resonated with blacks from other major cities (and whites who were familiar with the idea of “after hours” clubs).

The people most familiar with the “after hours” clubs in other major cities were the performers who worked them, and when they played Vegas they wanted to be a part of the Moulin Rouge scene. This late-night atmosphere was one they felt comfortable in, and it was also the only place in town where white and black entertainers, who had often worked together and became friendly in other parts of the country, could freely get together and celebrate in style. This started a chain of events that gave the late-night *Tropi Can Can* its tremendous heat. Where the star performers went, the showgirls went, even if they had to be smuggled in. Claude Trenier, a black performer working the Strip lounges, remembers “We used to bring showgirls from the Strip over here. They’d say, ‘Oh, if we get seen on the Westside they’ll fire us.’ So we’d put ‘em in the car and lay a blanket over ‘em! Man, we had fun. I had more fun on the Westside than I ever had anyplace else in my life.”¹⁰⁶ And where the stars and the showgirls went, the tourists certainly wanted to go. The *Review-Journal* added fuel to the fire, writing:

The Moulin Rouge’s late show is quickly becoming known as “the show people’s show” since every performer who plays Vegas or visits town sees that third show. Saturday night the Moulin Rouge played host to a raft of Hollywood

¹⁰⁵ Fleming 3.

¹⁰⁶ Fleming 4.

celebs, including Jack Benny, Burns & Allen, Kay Starr, Nat King Cole, and Sammy Davis, Jr.¹⁰⁷

The informality of the early Las Vegas Strip, the chance to rub elbows with the famous, was a major draw for the town and has often been written about, but a late-night revue whose audience consisted largely of celebrities and beautiful showgirls was something extraordinary. The two earlier *Tropi Can Can* shows were still successful, but it was the late night ‘breakfast show’ that was the absolute smash.

With the alcohol flowing, beautiful showgirls to impress, and the high-energy *Tropi Can Can* still ringing in their ears, a roomful of musicians and performers did what came naturally – they jammed. Black and white musicians from different resorts, often friends from other outfits and other cities, played together, with new faces sitting in while those who got tired took breaks in the bar. Dancers would perform and occasionally engage in the African American tradition of the ‘challenge,’ where tap dancers would face off against one another in the hopes of drawing the most noise from the crowd (Sammy Davis, Jr. didn’t do any serious dancing in the Café Rouge, although he would sit in with the band and play drums, a talent that he was unable to showcase with the Will Mastin Trio). Singers sang and soloists soloed. “It didn’t rumble until after the third show, and then it really rumbled,” said Bob Bailey. “At 7 a.m., Louis Armstrong was still onstage playing or Harry Belafonte was still onstage singing.”¹⁰⁸ While some accounts of the late-night jam sessions seem like inspired myth-making - Fleming writes that “every night, onstage, it was Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Frank

¹⁰⁷ Anonymous, “Moulin Rouge Lures Crowds With Late Show.”

¹⁰⁸ Fleming 4.

Sinatra”¹⁰⁹ (unlikely, given Sinatra’s well-recorded dislike of spur-of-the-moment singing. And *every* night?) – the possibility was always there. And this possibility was powerful. For a vacationer in Vegas, the possibility of seeing some magical impromptu performance by some great talent or combination of talents, combined with the certainty of being in a high-class room full of showgirls and famous faces, was more than enough to convince them to make the trip to the Moulin Rouge. Seeing a great revue and then hearing Louis Armstrong jam until the sun came up was exactly the sort of thing visitors to Las Vegas dreamt of.

This was the high point of an evening at the Moulin Rouge, and it was the ultimate instance of rule-breaking. The rules were no longer being redefined or created, they were simply abandoned altogether. There was no time limit, no set structure, and the performers, both individually and as a group, performed until they were tired. The musicians weren’t a small jazz combo or a jug band – this was a big band, and obviously the orchestra needed to know what they were playing. This limited their repertoire, but the art form of Louis Armstrong and other jazz musicians was one rooted in spontaneity and improvisation, and the number of solos and their individual lengths were entirely up to the discretion of Benny Carter, Lionel Hampton, or whomever was leading the band at the moment. While it is unlikely that superstars played until dawn and beyond every night, on some nights they did and those nights at the Moulin Rouge must have been glorious.

The rules were being broken not only by the unstructured show onstage, but by the event itself. Modern day Las Vegas exists for one reason alone, making money off of

¹⁰⁹ Fleming 1.

gambling. Entertainment in the casino culture is simply a means to draw gamblers to a property in the hopes that they will hit the tables or machines when the show is over. Revenue from ticket sales, dinners, and cocktails is negligible – the real money is made in the casino. With a spontaneous show “rumbling” in the Café Rouge showroom potential gamblers were in the showroom and off the casino floor, and no matter how many drinks they bought this was not a loss the Moulin Rouge could afford. Nor could the other Strip properties. “It was supposed to be this nice little black hotel on the Westside,” said Bob Bailey, “but now, because of the third show, it’s competing with the Sands and the Sahara.”¹¹⁰ A transitional element may be, by its nature, unstable, but there is nothing more unstable than the fate of a Las Vegas resort that isn’t making money in the casino, and is taking money away from the mob-run casino down the street.

Within six months, the Moulin Rouge closed.

There was no explanation given to the performers, staff, or media. The *Review-Journal* didn’t publish anything at the time about the closing, and I have seen no sources that give an exact final date for the first incarnation of the Moulin Rouge. No one seems to know why it closed, either, but in any Jim Crow town African Americans have ample reason to be suspicious, and in any mob-run town there are going to be conspiracy theories flew. “The partners just couldn’t get along,” said James McMillan, a Westside doctor. “It was rumored that each of them would go into the boxes and put money in their pockets at the end of the night.”¹¹¹ Colorfully echoing this popular theory, Bob Bailey

¹¹⁰ Fleming 3.

¹¹¹ R.T. King, *Fighting Back: A Life in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Reno: University of Nevada Oral History Program 1997) 70.

said “someone was skimming. Someone was milking the pig.”¹¹² Skimming was tolerated, even wise, in the casinos run by the mob, where the money skimmed was to be sent back East to keep the big bosses happy. In a casino that wasn’t mobbed up, though, consistent embezzlement was devastating, and all the cocktails, dinners, and showroom tickets the Moulin Rouge could sell wouldn’t make up for heavy losses in gambling revenue. “It was a conspiracy, right from the beginning, and there was Mafia involvement from the get-go”¹¹³ according to showgirl Dee Dee Jasmin, voicing the opinion that the white powers in town felt threatened by the interracial resort. “There was no conspiracy,”¹¹⁴ disagrees historian Eugene Moehring, who writes that liens against the property came through because the building contractors had not been paid. The owners had not properly financed the resort’s construction, and short-term banknotes were their downfall. Some suggest both are true, believing the mob put the pressure on the banks to call in their notes. To Ed Reid, of course, the problem was that “the stewpot ran out of gravy,” but he points to an underlying social cause when he writes that a Moulin Rouge vacation “didn’t appeal to the country’s wealthier Negroes.” The idea of travelling to a resort town and then being confined to one resort, not allowed to travel to the place down the street, wasn’t what African Americans wanted out of their vacation time. Those with enough money to travel tended to be those who were becoming more politically and socially aware, and those weren’t people to spend their money in a Jim Crow town.¹¹⁵

Whether it was the mob, mismanagement, embezzlers or a lack of black tourist money (or some combination of the above) that closed it, the fact remains that the Moulin

¹¹² Fleming 4.

¹¹³ Fleming 4.

¹¹⁴ Moehring 183.

¹¹⁵ Reid 175

Rouge changed the face of Las Vegas. Some of the transitional elements pioneered at the Moulin Rouge became standard Vegas practice. The Sands added a late night show of their own to compete with the *Tropi Can Can*, popular mostly with tourists who didn't like the idea of heading to the black part of town late at night. Soon most Strip casinos followed suit, cementing Las Vegas' reputation as a 'city with no clocks.' The Sands also became the first Strip casino to allow blacks to gamble there, although they were still not allowed to reserve rooms. Exactly when the showrooms and hotel rooms became first integrated is a matter of some debate, although unquestionably the loudest voice pushing for integration was that of Frank Sinatra. He threw his weight around to get Sammy Davis, Jr. seats in showrooms and suites at the Sands.¹¹⁶ Casino bosses seem to have realized two things, that America was changing and that Sinatra was unhappy. Both were serious matters, and they changed their racial policies. The NAACP would open the rest of the Strip to blacks in 1960, when civic leaders would sign an accord officially ending Jim Crow laws in Las Vegas.¹¹⁷

That paper was signed at the Moulin Rouge.

¹¹⁶ Sacher.

¹¹⁷ Moehring 184-186.

AFTERWORD

In 1955, Marion Anderson became the first African American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera Company.

Later in that year Emmet Till, a fourteen year-old black Northerner, visited relatives in the small Southern town of Money, Mississippi. After making the mistake of whistling at a white woman in a grocery store, he was dragged from his great-uncle's home, beaten, mutilated, and murdered. His great-uncle, Mose Wright, despite numerous death threats, provided eye-witness testimony in court. He stood, he pointed to one of the white murderers and said, famously and courageously, "dar he." Despite this, the all-white jury returned with a verdict of not guilty in an hour. *Jet* magazine, however, published a photograph of the boy's brutalized body, and there was rioting in the streets and a national sense of outrage.

In December of that year on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, a black woman refused to give up her seat for a white passenger. The bus pulled over, the police were called, and the woman was arrested. Her name was Rosa Parks. There was visible outrage in the black community, meetings, protests, and ultimately a boycott that thrust Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. into the national spotlight and changed America forever.

In 1955, the first racially-integrated resort, the Moulin Rouge, opened in Las Vegas. The hotel and its showroom production, the *Tropi Can Can* revue, were popular with whites, viscerally important to blacks, and a hell of a good time for both.

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