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The rat pack and the British pierrot: negotiations of national identity, alienation and belonging in the aesthetics and influences of concerted troupes in popular entertainment

### **Original Citation**

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**THE RAT PACK AND THE BRITISH PIERROT:  
NEGOTIATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY,  
ALIENATION AND BELONGING IN THE  
AESTHETICS AND INFLUENCES OF CONCERTED  
TROUPES IN POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT.**

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A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts by Research

The University of Huddersfield

January 2013

## **Abstract**

The thesis below consists of an introduction followed by three chapters that reflect on the performance work of two distinct forms, the British Pierrot troupe and the Rat Pack. The former is a model of performance adopted and adapted by several hundred companies around the British coastline in the first half of the twentieth century. The latter is an exclusive collaboration between five performers with celebrated individual careers in post-World War Two America. Both are indebted to the rise of blackface minstrelsy, and the subsequent traditions of variety or vaudeville performance. Both are also concerned with matters of national unity, alienation and belonging.

The Introduction will expand on the two forms, and the similarities and differences between them. While these broad similarities lend a thematic framework to the thesis, the distinctions are marked and specific. Accordingly, the chapters are discrete and do not directly inform or refer to each other. Chapter One considers the emergence of the Pierrot troupe from a historical European aesthetic and argues that despite references to earlier Italian and French modes of performance, the innovations of the new form situate the British Pierrot in its contemporary and domestic context. Chapter Two explores this context in more detail, and looks at the Pierrot's place in a symbolic network that encompasses royal imagery and identity, the racial implications of blackface minstrelsy and the carnivalesque liminality of the seaside.

Chapter Three is exclusively focussed on the Rat Pack. As such, the approach here changes due to a focus on the public and performed identities of particular individuals, and the wealth of documented performances by this troupe. This allows for more detailed analysis of the personalities and performances involved. The chapter observes the performers' unifying backgrounds in vaudeville entertainment, with a particular emphasis on impersonation and emulation. It also considers the aesthetic debt to blackface minstrelsy and the troupe's negotiation of American identities with an immigrant heritage.

As the chapters remain discretely focussed on their particular topics, each one contains its own conclusion rather than providing an overarching conclusion at the close of the thesis.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are wholeheartedly due to Eric Pinder of the Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey for managing my access to their collection of memorabilia on Andie Caine's Royal Pierrots. Equally, Tony Lidington, aka Uncle Tacko, has been a great source of information and material thanks to his personal archive, but also a source of inspiration in his unparalleled enthusiasm for the Pierrot tradition and his singlehanded preservation of it. This is both an academic and a practical encouragement which drew me into the world of Pierrot as a researcher and as a performer. By the same token, immeasurable thanks are also due to the other members of The Pierrotters: Mister Macko, Old Boy Gacko, El Senor Don McFacko and Shabby Shabacko.

Thanks to Dr. Lisa Colton for meticulous, appreciative and invaluable comments on the drafts, and for engaging with the subject in a manner both enthusiastic and rigorous.

And finally, thanks, as ever, to Linda Taylor for unstinting support, the sharing of advice, insight and wisdom, and being (to borrow a lyric from Johnny Mercer and vocal from Frank Sinatra) too marvellous for words.

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## Introduction

### Overview

The thesis below consists of three discrete chapters, considering two distinct strands of popular entertainment which operate according to their own aesthetic forms, and are separated by history, geography and culture. The first is the Pierrot troupe, a seaside performance construct peculiar to the British Isles that originated in the late nineteenth century. The form was most readily identified by its image, adopting the white smock and trousers, dressed with pom-poms, a neck ruff and conical hat, characteristic of the Pierrot from commedia dell'arte and French pantomime. Also in keeping with this tradition, the performers' faces were usually whitened. The traditional Pierrot show would feature comic songs and sentimental ballads, as well as clowning, sketches and dances. The form was prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century, with many coastal resorts hosting several competing troupes. The second strand is the Rat Pack, a gathering of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Peter Lawford and Joey Bishop, each one a celebrated performer in their own right. Collectively, they first appeared together in 1960, working across several media: nightclub appearances in Las Vegas and Miami; the film *Ocean's 11* (1960); and - with the exception of Dean Martin - a live television broadcast, hosted by Frank Sinatra and marking Elvis Presley's return to civilian life (*The Frank Sinatra Show*, 1960).

Despite their respective levels of popularity, the Pierrot tradition and the Rat Pack have received relatively little academic attention. In this introduction, I will outline further the particular characteristics and history of each strand of popular entertainment. I will also open up some areas of similarity and difference between



them by way of contextualising the later discussion in the chapters below. Before elaborating on the two subjects of the thesis, it is also worth noting a thematic strand that runs through my consideration of both acts: the construction and consideration of national identity within them.

Hobsbawm (1992, p.18) recognises that ‘in its modern and basically political sense the concept *nation* is historically very young’. This modern reformulation of the nation drew from the turn to republicanism following revolutionary activity in both America and France, in which it ‘was the body of citizens whose collective sovereignty constituted them a state which was their political expression’ (1992, p.18-19). The political ideals inherent in this new concept fused nation and government together for the first time, but in doing so established the central difficulty that would subsequently trouble ideas of ‘nationhood’: if nationality was no longer a voluntary question of identity but inextricably linked to statutory political organisation, how was membership of the ‘body of citizens’ to be determined?

The concern for, and negotiation of, national forms of identity and belonging that advanced throughout the nineteenth century established an influential context that shaped both the Pierrot troupe and the Rat Pack. In America, independence from colonial Britain in 1783 provoked a desire to foster a national character distinct from lofty European sensibilities. Toll (1977) documents how this gave rise to earthy American folk heroes such as Davy Crockett, but also prompted the rise of blackface minstrelsy which informs the discussions of both performance acts in the thesis. Key political questions of the American nation in the mid-nineteenth century concerned the status of slaves in the avowedly libertarian republic, and,

consequently, the fragility of national union in the divisions between north and south. The Civil War of 1861-1865 resulted in the abolition of slavery and maintenance of the Union but decimated the country's resources.

A period of Reconstruction, ending in 1877, sought to consolidate the Union after the violence of the Civil War. During and, particularly, following this period, America experienced a dramatic increase in immigration from European countries including Germany, Ireland, Britain, Italy and Eastern European states. Alongside the emancipation of African-Americans in the Civil War, the ethnic identification of American nationality became complex and tense. In this context, America is confronted by 'the criteria [for nationality] so hotly debated by the nineteenth-century theorists, such as ethnicity, common language, religion, territory and common historical memories' (Hobsbawm, 1992, p.20). For the Rat Pack (consisting of two Italian-Americans, a Jewish African-American, an Anglo-American, and an American Jew of East European heritage), political and cultural modes of belonging in a young superpower remained subject to negotiation in the 1960s.

For the British Pierrot troupe emerging in the 1890s, the white-faced clown succeeding the blackface minstrel opened up a negotiation of British nationality at the height of Empire. Despite the loss of the American colonies, the British Empire advanced in territory and power throughout the nineteenth century. The extent of European empires in this period made concerns with nationhood and national identity a global rather than Western preoccupation. Following the republican revolutions that initiated such concerns, and coinciding with the diminishing popularity of the Royal family, the monarchy in Britain also saw a substantial

reduction in its political power during this period, especially following Queen Victoria's reclusive withdrawal from public life after the death of Prince Albert. In 1877, Disraeli increased her symbolic power by titling her Empress of India. The symbolic significance of the Royal family increased beyond this point, utilising spectacle and ceremony to affirm its regal importance.

British concerns with nationhood, unlike those of America, were preoccupied with negotiating a powerful imperial identity by drawing on a rich and celebrated history. America, by contrast, is perceived as emblematic of a new world. There was still turbulence to be negotiated in Britain, notably from a rebellious Irish population but also with growing considerations of specifically Welsh and Scottish nationalism. Navigating the complexities of nationhood, and associated questions of unity and belonging, was significant for both the Pierrot troupes and the Rat Pack in their respective historical and geographical settings. These are (largely) implicit rather than direct concerns of the two distinct forms, and explored as much through aesthetic construction as overt political reflection. Broadly, the similarities between both performance forms, discussed below, may perhaps be attributable to this shared agenda, while their differences arise from the particular contexts in which they emerge.

### **The Pierrot Troupe: Construction, Origin and History**

Chapman and Chapman follow general consensus in observing that '[t]he pierrots were first introduced to England in 1891 by Clifford Essex'. The location of these first performances is more disputed, with Brighton, the Isle of Man and Bray near Dublin, being variously put forward as contenders. The act itself is a combination of

two existing popular performance forms: the image is borrowed from the French Pierrot, and applied to the musical revue structure of blackface minstrelsy.

The genealogy of the French Pierrot leads back to the character of Pedrolino, or Pierro, in the sixteenth-century Italian form of commedia dell'arte (Duchartre, 1966). One of the multitude of variations within the 'zanni' (or servant-class of commedia characters), Pedrolino was 'the creation of Giovanni Pellesini who played first with a company known simply as Pedrolino's' (Rudlin, 1994, p.134). Pellesini went on to perform with major commedia dell'arte companies including the Confidenti and the Gelosi. It is, perhaps, through Pellesini's association with the latter company that the character appears in several of the commedia dell'arte scenarios recorded by Flaminio Scala (see Nicoll, 1963). Nonetheless, Pedrolino remained a comparatively minor character in the commedia canon.

The ascent of Pedrolino came not in Italy but in Paris, following the establishment of the Comedie Italienne in 1658. Moliere's experimentations with commedia form included a renamed Pierrot in the 1665 work *Le festin de pierre*. Subsequently, the Italian company brought in the actor Giuseppe Giaratone to undertake the role in their response to Moliere. (Nicoll, 1963, p.90). Giaratone romanticised the role, paying particular attention to its lovelorn situation, and so accentuating the 'engaging simplicity and elegance' (Duchartre, 1966, p.251) of the character. It is this refined French version of the clown, developed further in the nineteenth-century by the mime performer Jean Gaspard Debarau, that is seemingly the original model for the British appropriation of the character. No validation is given but Pertwee (1979, p.12) suggests that Essex adopted the Pierrot image following a visit to

France, whilst Nield (2004) suggests the run of the French play *L'Enfant Prodigue* at London's Prince of Wales Theatre provided the inspiration.

Nicoll concludes that:

Pierrot's costume was assumed by Deburau as a convenient attire to clothe his own individual pantomimic skill. In effect, there was thus established the tradition which stretches down to the modern Pierrots of the trestle stages at seaside resorts.

(Nicoll, 1963, p.93)

It is true that the British Pierrots did assume the same costume of white smock, black pom poms and whitened face, but their own particular skill was far from pantomimic, being much noisier than the fey mime of its Gallic ancestor.

Pickering points out that such whitening in the British context sets up another relationship, operating 'as if in reverse semiotic principle to blackface' (Pickering, 2008, p.69), and so marking the Pierrot troupe as successors to the earlier 'nigger' minstrel troupes that appeared on the coastal sands and elsewhere. The musical structure of the acts also recalled this blackface minstrel form, which revolved around the banjo. Clifford Essex himself was a celebrated banjoist and later turned to banjo manufacture. Other troupe managers, such as Sam Paul of the Cleveland Cadets and Andie Caine of Filey's Royal Pierrots also specialised on the banjo. Following the success of Essex's Pierrots, other troupes quickly mushroomed, appearing all round the British coast, and developing a more distinct identity with the piano or strill becoming a common form of accompaniment, although other instruments could be used such as the harp and fiddle of the Waterloo Pierrots at Bridlington.

Drawing on visual and musical motifs from earlier traditions, the aesthetics of the British Pierrot troupe implicitly summon up a sense of anachronism. This infuses

the performances with a sense of nostalgia, often evocative of a time which is not only obsolete but also simpler and more pleasant than the contemporary. This nostalgic sense may have inflected the experience of Victorian audiences, and colours a twenty-first century perception of the form, not least in its belonging to a seaside tradition that has significantly declined. The analysis of the Pierrot performance form in the chapters below is, perhaps, not immune to a nostalgic appreciation. The intention, however, is to attempt to interrogate the form and consider its significance in relation to its immediate historical context.

### **The Rat Pack: Construction, Origin and History.**

The name 'Rat Pack' originally identified a social grouping of Hollywood stars and personalities with liberal political leanings that gathered at the Holmby Hills, home of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. The group included Judy Garland and Sid Luft, Irving 'Swifty' Lazar, David and Hjordis Niven, Mike Romanoff and Frank Sinatra. It was Bacall, the story goes, who gave the group a name when she encountered them in the middle of a drinking session and, as Chris Rojek records, 'she spontaneously described the dishevelled, hung-over, mildewed, supine, middle-aged group as "a god-damn rat pack"' (Rojek, 2004, p.121).

This group disbanded following Bogart's death in 1957. In the following year, Sinatra assembled his own social network which included Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh, Jimmy van Heusen, Milton Berle and the four other members of the more widely known Rat Pack: Martin, Davis, Lawford and Bishop. Sinatra was the lynchpin and common denominator for this group. He had been an admirer of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis's nightclub double act before they had successfully transferred their partnership to the big screen. Martin and Lewis split up in 1956,

and the widespread expectation had been that Lewis's star would continue to rise while Martin would fade into obscurity. Martin, however, continued a career as a successful recording artist, alongside nightclub and television work which was noted for its comic value as well as musical numbers. More surprisingly, he continued in film work as a straight actor with considerable success in supporting roles in films such as *The Young Lions* (with Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando) and *Rio Bravo* (with John Wayne). It was in a supporting role for Sinatra in *Some Came Running* (1958) that the two became firm friends.

Sinatra's friendships with Davis and Bishop went back further. Davis had been a child performer on the American vaudeville circuit and subsequently joined an act with his father Sammy Davis Sr and uncle Will Mastin, known as the Will Mastin Trio. Sinatra was an admirer of this act and booked them in the supporting slot for his shows at New York's Capitol Theater in 1947. Davis subsequently became a star in his own right, as a singer, dancer and impressionist. Joey Bishop was a stand-up comedian who was well-known as a live performer but had had little media impact. Similar to Davis, he was booked to appear as a support act at the Riviera Club in New Jersey in 1952, a deliberate choice by headliner Sinatra which brought Bishop to wider public recognition.

By the early 1950s, Sinatra's own career was at the end of a period of decline. As a singer, he had been consistently top of the charts during the 1940s, and this had led to a successful career as a film actor. At the end of that decade, however, his career suffered on several fronts: a serious throat problem caused difficulty with his singing; his divorce from wife Nancy amid a much-publicised and scandalous affair with Ava Gardner dented his wholesome image; and his film work had

consequently begun to dry up. His career revived in 1953, thanks to his performance as Private Angelo Maggio in the film *From Here To Eternity*, which won him the Best Supporting Actor Oscar, and his subsequent musical collaboration with Nelson Riddle which reinvented the Sinatra sound. Richard Gehman describes him in 1961 as 'the foremost entertainer of his time, perhaps of all time....[who] stands today, in the vernacular of showbusiness, as the greatest of them all in every field into which he thrusts his talents - recordings, radio and nightclubs, television and films' (Gehman, 1961, p.9).

Peter Lawford was the son of aristocratically eccentric English parents, and had made his name as a film actor with roles in *Easter Parade*, *Little Women* and *It Happened in Brooklyn*, the latter with Sinatra shortly before Sinatra's career decline. Following the breakdown of Sinatra's turbulent relationship with Ava Gardner, it was reported that Lawford and Gardner had met socially and, according to biographers, this formed the reason that Sinatra abruptly ended his friendship with Lawford. Subsequently, however, Lawford married Patricia Kennedy, sister of the presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy. Drawn to the political possibilities of a reignited friendship, Sinatra began to court the newly nicknamed 'Brother-in-Lawford' both socially and professionally.

The varied careers of the Rat Pack brought them to the point in 1960 where they combined onstage at The Sands Hotel in Las Vegas and Fontainebleau in Miami, and on celluloid in *Ocean's 11*. With the exception of Bishop, all members were experienced film actors. More importantly, all were experienced in live performance in the nightclub field. Even Lawford, predominantly a film star, had worked regularly in live performance with the legendary comedian Jimmy Durante.



Drawing from the histories of the individual players, in both their public identities and professional experience, the Rat Pack act was built around an astonishing range of performance abilities including song, dance, comedy and impressions, a variety of performance styles which echoes the range of material presented by the British Pierrot troupes.

### **A brief comparison**

Before turning to the more detailed considerations of each form, it is worth identifying points of similarity and contrast between them. Central to the artistic construction of each act is the spirit of variety. Mellor (1966, p.36) describes Adeler and Sutton's troupe Pier Pierrots at New Brighton which 'comprised Edwin Adeler, Charlie Harvey, Bert Byrne and Hal Ford (all comedians); Tom Edwards (ventriloquist); J.H. Scotland (bass); Victor Wallace (baritone) and Forshaw Kershaw (pianist)'. Such a line up is not atypical, and it is noticeable that there is a strong central core of comedy surrounded by musical elements, with specialist novelty components. This is similar to the emphasis in the Rat Pack: despite the inclusion of three internationally iconic singers, the humour is given priority over a mixture of serious and comic vocal performances, with Davis particularly adding specialist routines as a dancer and impressionist.

Crossover between the wider field of variety and the specific Pierrot or Rat Pack forms is not unexpected. Many of the performers worked separately in other arenas. Will Catlin, perhaps the most successful Pierrot impresario, began performing as part of a double act on the Moss Stoll circuit with Charles Carson. Carson later worked with the Waterloo Pierrots at Bridlington, and both he and the troupe's 'Guv'nor' Charles Beanland went on to variety theatre management at Rotherham

and Pontefract respectively. Beanland also produced pantomimes in Huddersfield, as did the Filey impresario Andie Caine in London. As the company managers ranged across the popular theatre landscape, their performers outside of the summer season also had to make their living as entertainers in other contexts. In a later equivalence, the Rat Pack members were variously successful on the nightclub and Broadway stages, in film, television, radio with Martin, Sinatra and Davis also being pre-eminent recording artists.

This range of performance elements concentrated within a limited group of performers gives both acts a very particular place within the variety tradition. Variety (and its American counterpart vaudeville) consisted of an organised programme of individual artists delivering their acts successively. The composition of a standard variety bill could therefore incorporate any combination of artists, and the line-up would usually change on a weekly basis. A variation was the revue which, as Oliver Double (2012, p.47) notes, consisted of a set collection of performers working in a more integrated format of ‘song and dance numbers performed by a chorus, sketches, and usually some sort of finale’. If the revue featured more integration between the performers than the variety show, both the Pierrot and Rat Pack forms pursued this to an even greater degree.

Returning briefly to the organisation of *commedia dell’arte* companies, John Rudlin describes their ensemble structure as:

concerted playing after the English concert parties and Pierrot shows [...] who used the term to indicate a style of playing with the full company onstage, and also for its musical connotations.

(Rudlin, 1994, pp.60-61)

Such a description applies equally to the performance structure adopted by the Rat Pack. Double distinguishes further between variety and revue in the level of organisation and control of the show:

Whereas variety acts produced themselves and enjoyed a lot of control over their work, performers in a revue found themselves under the control of a director.

(Double, 2012, p.48)

While the Rat Pack regularly referred to Sinatra as ‘The Leader’, he himself was known to defer to Bishop in comedic matters beyond his expertise. The various routines and combinations of performers also drew from their particular skills, as well as elements from their individual stage performances elsewhere. The individual members retained control, and responsibility, for their own contributions to the shows.

Pierrot troupes operated under managers, such as Adeler and Sutton mentioned above. Other notable managers included: Will Catlin, running troupes in Scarborough, Bridlington and Colwyn Bay; Andie Caine who established and ran the main Filey troupe; and George Royle who established first the Imps and later the Fol-de-Rols. While the managers might have the final say on the shape, content and parameters of performance, the members of the Pierrot troupe could also bring their particular material, specialisms and routines to the shows. Working closely over the course of a season, the shows were negotiated and structured together. Again, this is reminiscent of the original *commedia dell’arte* structure which facilitated both collective and individual performance.

The close ensemble relationships and integrated performance structure of a select number of performers is common to the Rat Pack and the Pierrot tradition, both operating as what may be called ‘concerted troupes’. This is accentuated in each by

a uniformity of gender in their presentation. The constitution of the Adeler and Sutton troupe given above is noticeable for its male bias, and the Rat Pack is stridently masculine in its identity. Later Pierrot troupes were mixed, partly occasioned by the shortage of male performers during the First World War, and Adeler and Sutton adopted a policy of employing 'pierrettes'. Will Catlin, on the other hand, had 'an aversion to women performers' and only engaged female performers 'reluctantly' (Chapman and Chapman, 1988, p.45). On an aesthetic level, the uniformity of the troupe members was visually signalled to the audience: for the English form, this was marked by the shared Pierrot costume; similarly, for the Rat Pack, tuxedos, bow-ties and dress trousers were the outfit of choice.

The key difference between the two forms is also captured by these contrasting dress codes. The Pierrot costume announces the theatricality of the form, its artificiality and separation from the real life of the audience. Although the performers use their own names, the costume belongs only to performance and identifies them as distinct from their everyday selves. For the Rat Pack, this is inverted: the impression given to the audience is that the performance is an extension of the performers' offstage interaction and friendships, with the tuxedos presenting a formal yet elegantly social style. The Pierrot form operates symbolically, presenting knowingly fictionalised modes of being to the audience. Despite appearances, the Rat Pack performances are carefully constructed too, but their symbolic significance is masked by the seemingly naturalised modes of being.

Through the symbolic performance of both troupes, particular questions are raised and explored through both sets of performers. These questions circle around similar territory, in relation to racial identity, social engagement and the economic structures

of their respective contexts. The contexts themselves vary substantially, separated by the Atlantic Ocean, at least one World War and the gulf between new-world republicanism and traditional monarchy. In the chapters below, I hope to excavate the aesthetic structures and the symbolic intervention into questions of nationhood and identity that operate in each form.

In Chapter One, I will consider the emergence of the Pierrot troupe in relation to the character of Pierrot itself, considering the particularity of the British form with regard to its Italian and French predecessors. The focus of Chapter Two is more concerned with the symbolic significance of the character in its own historical setting through a network of relations with blackface minstrelsy, the public spectacle and identities of royalty and the designed curiosity of the seaside environment. The third and final Chapter switches attention to the Rat Pack to reflect on the unifying features that synthesise the five distinct performers into a troupe. As with the Pierrot troupe, this reflects a concern with aesthetics as well as the historical-political situation of the performances.

## **Chapter One**

### **From Pedrolino to a Pierrot: The Origin, Ancestry and Ambivalence of the British Pierrot Troupe**

#### **Introduction**

Emerging in the final decade of the nineteenth century, the Pierrot troupe became a familiar fixture on the British coast. John K. Walton acknowledges the eminent place of such troupes within popular entertainment:

at the beginning of the [twentieth] century the peculiar menu of seaside entertainments, a set of invented traditions with varying pedigrees, was well-established and flourishing [...] The Pierrots, white-faced performers in clown costumes who provided songs, jokes and sketches on beaches and in parks as well as on the pier, had superseded the Victorian 'nigger minstrels'.

(Walton, 2000, p.94)

Although troupes would visit inland, and some were permanently based there, the British Pierrot remained a regular sight at most seaside resorts during the summer months until the outbreak of the Second World War. Identified by the recognisable costume of a smock with pom-poms, neck-ruff, conical hat and (frequently) whitened faces, the troupes would offer *al fresco* performances to holiday-makers, usually three times a day. While there was no standard size for a troupe, the photographic evidence assembled by Chapman and Chapman (1988) suggests that the troupes of the Yorkshire Coast would number between 6 and 11 Pierrots, with Bert Grapho's Jovial Jollies consisting of 15.

Despite the popularity and visibility of the tradition in the first half of the twentieth century, there has been little serious study of the form. Local and amateur historians have preserved many details and stories of the troupes at particular resorts in several valuable books (Chapman and Chapman, 1988; Mellor, 1966; Pertwee, 1979).

Drawing from their work, alongside contemporary records, related scholarship and

popular references, I aim to provide a more detailed overview and in-depth reflection on the historical and cultural significance of the British Pierrot troupe.

Below, I investigate the emergence of the Pierrot troupe as an invented tradition at the end of the Victorian era through the ancestry of its central performance image.

Eric Hobsbawm notes the peculiarity that such newly fashioned traditions are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations' (Hobsbawm, 1992, p.4). The Pierrot character has had a complex evolution, taken up and refashioned in a range of historical contexts. If the establishment of a British Pierrot tradition recalled these older settings, it also reinvented the figure for its own time. Visually and nominally, this extracted the *commedia dell'arte* character Pedrolino, and its later variant Pierrot, from their original Italian and French contexts, resettling them in the late Victorian coastal resorts of Britain.

For Hobsbawm, invented tradition around the turn of the twentieth century was bound up with political concerns about the formation of the nation and models of nationality. This, I argue, is the novel situation being addressed by the Pierrot through recourse to archaic practices. Paul Ward (2004, p.13) offers 'an essential warning that nations and national identity are not permanent and unchanging, that they are the products of constant recomposition, renegotiation, contest and debate'.

The Pierrot troupe emerged in a period when such questions of identity were becoming a significant concern and the new performance tradition participated in these debates. While negotiating the contemporary concern with national identity and unity, the Pierrot performances became acts of constant recomposition in themselves that drew from the ambivalence of the character's ancestral origins in the *commedia dell'arte*.

## **The ambivalences of Pierrot-Pedrolino**

The history of commedia dell'arte is notable for the proliferations and reimagining of the characters as much as the form itself. In his 1963 book *The World of Harlequin*, Allardyce Nicoll is happy to 'aver with assurance that the two theatrical characters most universally known today are Harlequin and Hamlet' (Nicoll, 1963, p.2), indicating that by the mid-twentieth century the individual character of Harlequin (originally Arlecchino) had become more familiar than the form in which it originated. The appropriation and recontextualising of such characters already had cultural precedents when the British Pierrot emerged. Pulcinella, for example, had been transformed into the puppet Mr. Punch towards the end of the seventeenth century. A variation of Arlecchino, along with other commedia characters, was introduced into the English pantomime in the early eighteenth century, giving rise to the Harlequinade which, in Nicoll's view, 'stands far apart from the commedia dell'arte, and it was not long before the original Italian characters were vulgarised and transformed into the knockabout Pantaloon and Clown' (Nicoll, 1963, p.202).

Commedia dell'arte characters received similar evolutionary treatment in other European countries, forming one reason why the relationship between the British Pierrot and his Italian ancestor is complex. Originally known as Pedrolino (little Peter), the figure belongs, with Arlecchino, to the 'zanni', the servant class of commedia characters. A conventional commedia dell'arte scenario included two servants, the first and second zanni. Broadly speaking, these characters would not determine the narrative direction, but facilitate it through their control and manipulation of situations on behalf of their older masters (the 'vecchi'). Sostek



cites the writings of Pier Maria Cecchini, who managed the Compagnia degli Accessi between 1583 and 1622:

The first of the two servants is “astute and ingenious,” and “works without buffoonery to manage the plot.” The second is “an awkward ignoramus who pretends not to know, not to understand, and not to be able to carry out his orders.”

(Sostek, 1978, p.26)

Oreglia’s description of Arlecchino implies an evolution from the second type to a paradoxical combination of both. The character began as ‘the stupid and ever-hungry servant, but it later assumed a more complex form; credulous and diffident, a lazy-bones but also a busybody, a mixture of cunning and ingenuousness, of awkwardness and grace’ (Oreglia, 1968, p.56).

Nicoll’s overview of Pedrolino’s development suggests this character’s alternative historical movement from the first astute type to a similarly paradoxical personality. The original character, as created by Giovanni Pellesini in the sixteenth century and delineated in the scenarios of Flaminio Scala, was ‘a gay-witted confident intriguer’ (Nicoll, 1963, p.24). Taken on as a role by Guiseppe Giaratone at the Théâtre Italien in Paris in the latter half of the seventeenth century, the newly named Pierrot developed a ‘calculated stupidity; he mistakes absurdly, yet often his errors may be viewed as exhibitions of his common sense’ (Nicoll, 1963, p.90). For both Arlecchino and Pedrolino, the flexible dramatic function of the zanni results in characters marked by paradoxical ambivalences.

Pierrot’s move from the witty to the seemingly foolish character is accompanied by another development, from loyalty to honesty. Sostek (1978, p.157) recognises that ‘Pedrolino’s particular decorum...is that of a faithful servant of long standing’. On the other hand, Nicoll (1963, pp.90-91) notes that Giaratone’s Pierrot reveals and

exacerbates ‘the follies of his master’ through ‘gross misinterpretations of orders given to him’. It is these misinterpretations that are simultaneously markers of common sense, acts of innocent honesty that cut through the vecchi’s duplicity. For Duchartre, this accompanies a shift from ‘simplicity and elegance’ to ‘simplicity and *naïveté* and awkwardness’, establishing Pierrot as a comic character but one with ‘a tenderness and sensitiveness more characteristic of the lovers’ (Duchartre, 1966, pp.251-252).

This particular ambivalence leads to the next development in the theatrical history of Pierrot, its ‘third avatar’ in which ‘commonsense downrightness becomes changed into sensitivity, and the man who can so clearly discern the follies of others develops into a still honest but gentler character, rather lonely in his visions’ (Nicoll, 1963, pp.92-3). This more sympathetic variant, the unrequited lover trapped in an eternal



triangle with Colombine and Harlequin, became the dominant French version of the nineteenth century. As acted influentially by Jean Gaspard Debureau at the Théâtre des Funambules (pictured left), the character became a silent clown invested with emotional intensity through

which it ‘passed over from entertainment into high culture’ (Green and Swan, 1993, p.5). Even this romantic variant retained a characteristic ambivalence, however, as ‘Debureau seems to have presented the most various as well as the most intense version’ (Green and Swan, 1993, p.11), including adding ‘a touch of madness’ and performing Pierrot as a murderer in some playlets (Green and Swan, 1993, p.6).

Invented tradition at the end of the nineteenth century benefited from the ‘capacity to call in the old world to redress the balance of the new’ (Cannadine, 1983, p.124). Accordingly, the wide-ranging and paradoxical traits of the historical character were available to the British Pierrot, invented at the end of the nineteenth century during a spell of national fascination with the character. It was an offspring of Deburau’s Pierrot, performed in the visiting French mime production, *L’Enfant Prodigue* that sparked this fascination, and gave rise to the British adoption and transformation of Pierrot.

### ***L’Enfant Prodigue* and the invention of the British Pierrot**

Bill Pertwee records the origin of the British Pierrot as follows:

Early in 1891 a singer and banjoist, Clifford Essex, after a visit to France, was so taken with the costumes and make-up of Pierrot that he had seen, that he decided to form a ‘party’ of Pierrot entertainers, which he did. He obtained a booking at Bray near Dublin. Southern Ireland was then still part of the British Isles, so 1891 was the year that Pierrot came into being in the British Isles. Essex soon established his Pierrot troupe when his little party went to Cowes in the Isle of Wight for Regatta week.

(Pertwee, 1979, p.12)

There is no independent verification or record given of the debut performance at Bray. The earliest record of performance I have found comes from *The Ipswich Journal* the following year when, on 20 August 1892, the ‘London Gossip’ column gossiped:

I hear that one of the most successful ventures of the Cowes Regatta was the entertainments given by the Pierrot Troupe. A well-known London hostess was among the number, and tried to keep up a semi-incognito [...] The greatest attraction of the *troupe*, however, proved Mr. Clifford Essex, who is so well-known.

(ITA, 2011)

Neither the Pierrot Troupe nor its founder is treated as a novelty in this brief account, suggesting that both were established by this time. Cowes Regatta had been

held at the start of August, and so this later event may be a repeat performance or the performance by Essex's 'little party' that Pertwee suggests took place in 1891.

For other reasons, 1891 was highly significant for the development of the Pierrot in Britain, since, as Sophie Nield notes, 'the distinctive costume had been seen in London in the popular 1891 mime *L'Enfant prodigue* at the Prince of Wales's theatre' (Nield, 2004, p.101). Acclaimed during its 1890 run in Paris, the show was created by Le Cercle Funambulesque, a name acknowledging the influence of the Deburau Pierrot. In a narrative loosely based on the prodigal son, the show featured Jane May as the wayward child of the title, the Pierrot son of Pierrot parents. A review in *The Birmingham Daily Post* on November 24, 1891, remarked that: 'Nothing in the history of the modern stage has been more remarkable than the complete success in London of MM. Carré and Wormser's musical play without words' (Anon, 1891a). It also remarked, a little more moderately and with greater justification, that "'L'Enfant Prodigue" became the talk, and not only the artistic, but the financial triumph of the London season' (Anon, 1891a). Following its premiere on March 31 1891, the show's immediate success led to its swift promotion from the afternoon to the evening slot at the 1064-seat Prince of Wales's Theatre, and an extended run of over 250 performances. From late summer 1891, a second cast toured large provincial venues in cities such as Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Hull, Sheffield, Bristol, Glasgow and Brighton.

At the London premiere, Pierrot was received as an alien figure. Most reviewers of the original run commented on the novelty of the performance in that it was 'acted by a French company in an English theatre before a purely English body of spectators, in dumb show' (Anon, 1891b). This review in *The Times* on April 1,

1891, located the French identity of the production partly in the character of Pierrot which may ‘apprise a French public that they are about to witness something pantomimic. Such a consideration can have little or no weight in this country, however, where the pure white of Pierrot has, since the days of Grimaldi, given place to the spots and the dabs of red paint of the English clown’. Similarly, the *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post* on September 1, 1891, commented that while the mime communicated effectively, ‘[w]hat is not so well understood is the white face and costume of Pierrot’ (Anon, 1891c).

When *L’Enfant Prodigue* returned to London at the Criterion Theatre in 1892, the figure of Pierrot was more firmly established and passed without comment or explanation in the reviews. Across both years, the production launched a trend for all things Pierrot, including a host of theatrical imitations, both French and British. As early as April 18, 1891, the fashion advice in *The Cheshire Observer* included: ‘The latest craze is the “Pierrot” ruffle and [...] can be worn with day as well as evening gowns. “Miss Jane May” looked bewitching in this article of attire’ (Adina, 1891). According to *The Daily News* on December 31, 1891, the fancy dress costumes at the Royal Opera House’s carnival season included ‘every variety of the clown family, the ubiquitous Pierrot predominating’ (Anon, 1891d). The image was also taken up by some variety artistes: W.C. Bertram adopted the costume for his conjuring act in the ‘very merry ballet’ *By the Sea, or Fun on the Sands* (Anon, 1892a); and in 1892 the Sisters Preston performed a music hall duet in which one appeared in Pierrot costume (Anon, 1892b). The trend for Pierrot styling – metropolitan in focus but spread through provincial middle-class consciousness – would suggest that, whether Essex took inspiration from travelling abroad or from *L’Enfant Prodigue*, his invention of the Pierrot troupe was not itself importing a new

model from France but tapping into the fashionable reintroduction of Pierrot to a British public.

The ubiquity of the Pierrot image in carnival, fashion and variety made it much less alien, and Pertwee cites *The Variety Theatre* newspaper as observing of the seaside troupes that ‘Pierrot became the order of the day. The tasteful white costume [...] fairly “caught on”’ (Pertwee, 1979, pp.12-13). If Essex’s own contribution capitalised on the trends of 1891-92, it also instigated a new tradition of performance that would eclipse the popularity of *L’Enfant Prodigue* and expand over the following decades into an established fixture of the British seaside holiday. This fourth avatar of the Pierrot extended the meaning of the white face and costume for British spectators, while reiterating elements of its French catalyst and the Italian original.

### **Aesthetics of the British Pierrot**

As *The Variety Theatre* noted, the primary identifying feature of the Pierrot was a ‘tasteful white costume’, which consisted of a ‘loose blouse, ornamented with pom-poms, the equally loose pantaloons, the natty shoe, [...] the black silk handkerchief which wound artistically round the head, and tied tastefully at the side, [...] surmounted by the conically-shaped white hat’ (Pertwee, 1979, pp.12-13).

This remained the classic costume of the seaside acts, as



illustrated by a variety of photographs of troupes such as Johnny Grove’s Royal

Redcar Pierrots, Carrick's Popular Pierrots, the Waterloo Pierrots and Gold's Margate Pierrots (see Chapman and Chapman, 1988; Mellor, 1966; Pertwee, 1979). Variations on this classic image were largely restricted, initially, to the positioning of the pom-poms and the size and pattern of the ruff.

As the figure became more familiar to British holidaymakers, the costume design became more adventurous. George Royle's Imps added pixie-like touches to the ruff and boots, while photographs of Grapho's Jovial Jollies from the 1930s show a reversed scheme of dark tunics with light pom poms. One photograph of Catlin's Royal Pierrots shows the troupe in a mixture of classic and reversed costumes, though all have white ruffs.

The black-and-white photographs give little information about actual colour. Compton MacKenzie's 1918 *novel The Early Life and Adventures of Sylvia Scarlett* features a fictional troupe called The Pink Pierrots who wore pink costumes (Mackenzie, [1918] 2012). The contemporaneity of the novel is probably reflective of some extravagant adaptations of the classic Pierrot costume. A 1923 photograph of Hornsea's Reps Concert Party shows 'traditionally shaped Pierrot suits, the difference being that they were made from brightly coloured printed material with plain sleeves [...] The ladies' dresses were [...] topped with saucy little hats of the same material' (Chapman and Chapman, 1988, p.81). Where troupes were mixed gender, photographs suggest a convention that the men retained the classic conical hat while the women's hats were differently shaped.

These variations in costume indicate the retention of a classic, recognisably Pierrot impression alongside a move to add varying degrees of novel and innovative touches to it, reflecting the British approach to the Pierrot character itself. Despite the

fervour of *L'Enfant Prodigue*, adoption of the classic costume recalled the more distant commedia dell'arte. Illustrations of the time suggest that the fashion for ruffles sparked by the production copied the most prominent element of a hybrid theatrical costume, worn by Jane May. Rather than pantaloons, she appears to wear breeches, as well as a waistcoat and jacket (Anon, 1891e). The British Pierrot does not adopt this metropolitan image from the French pantomime, but returns to the original baggy white suit of the commedia.

In the early days of commedia dell'arte, the classic Pierrot costume was not exclusive to Pedrolino, and very similar outfits were worn by related characters such as Bertolino, Pagliaccio and Pulcinella. Noting this similarity, Nicoll draws a particular distinction between Pierrot and Pulcinella, in that the latter 'has no real basic 'character'' while the former 'is a developing personality, each stage in this development remaining consistent within itself'. He observes, consequently, that representations of Pulcinella in the visual arts have a 'tendency to double, treble and quadruple his person [...] Whether such droves of similarly clad, identical figures could have been actually found on the stage or not does not matter' since Pulcinella is artistically imagined 'not as a single recognisable entity but as a stock type capable of extended reproduction' (Nicoll, 1963, p.88). Alternatively, such multiplication would be anathema for Pierrot, especially in Giaratone's interpretation of a character 'rather lonely in his visions [...] likeable but strange' (Nicoll, 1963, p.93).

This romantic isolation, developed further by Deburau, is echoed in Jane May's description of Le Cercle Funambule's Pierrot, in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, May 4 1891, as 'a symbolical being, with the white moon, [...] a poetized [sic] being'



(Anon, 1891e). Pierrot in this French phase moves towards its apotheosis as an emblem of high culture. This is acknowledged in the above review by *The Bristol Mercury and Post*, describing *L'Enfant Prodigue* as 'true art' which, despite 'touches of genuine comedy', is predominantly a 'drama of serious interest' from which 'much of the humorous element [of British pantomime...] is practically absent' (Anon, 1891c).

The Pierrot troupe deviates from this strand of the French Pierrot, abandoning both the artistic intensity and the sense of isolated individuality. The performance material of the seaside entertainment is neither narrative in form nor silently pantomimic in style. It corresponds more with the Variety stages of the Stoll-Moss Syndicates, and many performers move between the indoor and alfresco platforms. As noted in the Introduction, Adeler and Sutton's Pier Pierrots at New Brighton comprised four comedians, a ventriloquist, two singers and a pianist. According to Geoff Mellor, Andie Caine's swansong troupe in Filey, 1939, had a similar line-up including comedian / ventriloquist Gus Yelrob and his 'feed' Tom Hall, singers Billy Gill and Wally Cliff, dancers Betty and Mollie Cutie and pianist Johnny Walsh (Mellor, 1998).

Harry Russell exemplified the crossover between variety theatre and the Pierrot troupe, having won the 1901 Professional Variety Artists Competition at the Middlesex Theatre of Varieties in Drury Lane. Subsequently, he:

appeared in the Halls with such luminaries as Kate Collins, G.H. Elliott, George Robey and Dan Leno. It was at this period that Harry wrote his first summer show which he produced on the Hoe at Plymouth for two or three seasons. He called his troupe Harry Russell's Popular Pierrots, which consisted of T.H. Biddick, musician; Beatrice Royle, singer comedienne; W. Pettitt, banjo; E. Harcourt, singer; and the Sisters Sylvia, soubrettes. Harry provided the laughs.

(Chapman and Chapman, 1988, p.79)

These troupes retained the commedia dell'arte ensemble of skilled performers working in solo segments, various combinations and concerted sequences, across comic, musical and novelty routines, moving between slapstick comedy, witty routines, virtuoso recitations, romantic ballads, comic songs and specialty turns. This breadth of form allowed various incarnations of the Pierrot genealogy to be embraced: the clever intriguer; the lonely romantic; the knockabout clown; and the performer of impressive, or surprising, abilities. Where the specialities of commedia dell'arte would have commonly focussed on the acrobatic, in the Victorian and Edwardian Pierrot show these would echo the novelty acts of the Variety theatres and Music Halls. Further following the Variety structure, each song, sketch or routine would have its own slot and internal logic, without the overarching narrative frameworks of either the Italian or French forms of commedia.

Establishing the British Pierrot outside of a conventional dramatic framework in this way recontextualised the figure. This was not a revolutionary development but a radical one, a return beyond commedia dell'arte to the roots of the Italian form, a return which recurs throughout the history of the characters. Rudlin (1994, p.23) notes that '*Commedia dell'arte* was born, some time around the middle of the sixteenth century, in the market place where a crowd has to be attracted, interested and then held'. In this context, characters were utilised which were absorbed later

into the narrative structures of *commedia dell'arte*. Drawing from contemporary accounts, he conjectures that:

A full mountebank performance, then, might have begun with busking by the Masks, leading to the introduction of the mountebank, who would begin to deliver his pitch with the aid of his masked *saltimbanque* assistants leaping on and off the stage to complete transactions or using their juggler's skills to throw the goods precisely to the person who had paid. When the audience were judged to have been sufficiently tapped, they would have been rewarded with a *Commedia* performance.

(Rudlin, 1994, pp.27-28)

He adds to this market place origin a recognition of the participation of the *commedia* characters in medieval carnival, pointing to 'at least a mid-sixteenth century interaction between the popular street celebrations of Carnival and professional performance [...] by itinerant troupes' (Rudlin, 1994, p.33).

The French performers of *commedia dell'arte* were restored to such a boisterous outdoor context following the closure of the Théâtre Italien in 1697. The theatres at the fairs, a synthesis of the carnival and the market place, featured 'the marionettes of Brioche and the two-headed cow' alongside vendors 'selling Marseilles soap, Siamese bonnets, all sorts of Greek and Italian wines, and hot cream *ratons*' (Duchartre, 1966, p.109). The *commedia* actors here 'returned to their original practice of tight-rope walking and acrobatics' (Duchartre, 1966, p.109). Three centuries later, the British Pierrot combined these roles of entertainer and vendor:

All members of the troupe had to take their turn at "bottling" (going round with the collection box) to the crowds which invariably gathered round the deck chairs (for which a fixed charge was made) and vantage points on the Promenade. The Pierrots had collecting bags on long sticks to cater for the Promenade viewers! They also had to sell song copies and picture post-cards of the troupe.

(Mellor, 1966, p.14)

The commercial basis of the seaside troupes situates them in relation to traditional market place exchanges, where the performative and the economic coincide.

There were other economic frameworks in operation at the seaside: the troupes would license pitches from the council, and then charge for deckchairs as a principal source of income. The artefacts for sale were also directly concerned with the performances, promotional merchandise rather than the broader range of goods available at the marketplace. Nonetheless, the form of exchange that links the Pierrot marketing back to the theatres at the fairs, an interactive model based on bartering and bantering, aestheticized the commercial structure. Rudlin, for example, suggests that an ideal starting point for the practical study of *commedia dell'arte* would be to:

listen to a barrow boy or a china salesman pitch his goods from a van in an outdoor market. His direct relationship to his public [...] has an ancestry as old as such markets themselves.

(Rudlin, 1994, pp.23-24)

The aesthetics of this economic structure in themselves constructed the troupes as a form of invented tradition, operating an arcane commercial model distinct from the trading systems of industrialized Britain.

For John K. Walton (2000, p.4), the British seaside context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also ‘conjures up the spirit of carnival, in the sense of upturning the social order and celebrating the rude, the excessive, the anarchic, the hidden and the gross, in ways which generate tension and put respectability on the defensive’. Operating in this context, the Pierrot troupe did not simply reflect or adopt the performance modes and structures of the Variety tradition, but revitalised the elements of song, dance, clowning and spectacle in the disruptive manner of the theatres at the fairs and earlier carnivals.

This is not solely a question of aesthetic form and atmosphere, but of engagement. For Rudlin, the carnival centres on an ‘inherent battle [...] between asceticism and artistic licence, censorship and freedom of expression’. This was a shared quality, in

his view, with the *commedia dell'arte*, manifested by the characters in both as a 'battle between the authority and the underdog, rich and poor, privileged and dispossessed' (Rudlin, 1994, pp.32-33). This element of tension became lost in nineteenth-century carnival, at least in its exclusive and most visible masked form. The Covent Garden carnival of 1891 mentioned above, with its ubiquitous Pierrots, was the preserve of the upper and middle classes, a more exclusive event than the theatre of the fairs. Similarly, based on an eyewitness account, Rudlin considers the Carnival in Rome in 1826 'a pretext for Hooray Henries to have fun at the expense of the lower classes' (Rudlin, 1994, p.31).

The seaside context is more suited to the spirit of the popular carnivalesque. Just as attendance at the theatres at the fairs extended to 'people belonging to every station in life' (Duchartre, 1966, p.109), Walton observes that '[b]y the beginning of the twentieth century the capacious diversity of the British seaside had room for visitors of all social classes and strata' (Walton, 2000, p.51). With such a representative audience, the traditional carnival battles between authority and servitude could recommence; the battle itself was a playfully engaging one, however, concerned with unity rather than division.

For Hobsbawm (1983, p.13), invented traditions 'are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the 'nation', with its associated phenomena [...] All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation'. It is with the innovations demanded in the particular historical context that the novel and exploratory ambivalence of the British Pierrot originated as an invitation to renegotiate a shared national identity.

## The British Pierrot and Invented Tradition

The apparent historicity of the Pierrot, constructed through the depth of its recall to various traditions, means that nostalgia can overshadow novelty in perception of the performance. Nonetheless, the British Pierrot differs fundamentally from its predecessors. The most novel innovation is that, unlike in *commedia dell'arte*, the entire ensemble is now made up of Pierrots. This is the very multiplication that Nicoll perceived as inimical to the character's transhistorical construction as an essentially unique individual. Such multiplication is potentially foreshadowed in *L'Enfant Prodigue* where Pierrot *fils* appears in a domestic setting with Pierrot *père*, also in conventional costume.

The multiplication of the British Pierrot was much greater, however, and framed neither as a familial or genetic connection between the individual figures nor a replicable essence as in the case of Pulcinella. As noted, the breadth of performance registers allows the troupe to contain diverse types and personalities. The primary means of connecting the disparate performers (regardless of their specific roles, individual skills and personal characteristics) were the visual uniformity of the troupe's costume design (however deviant from the classic Pierrot outfit) and the application of the title 'Pierrot' itself. The title now acquires an indefinite article: Jean Gaspard Deburau is simply 'Pierrot'; Clifford Essex is 'a Pierrot'. To be 'a Pierrot' designates role or occupation rather than persona; it also marks a particular mode of belonging by conferring membership of a wider collective of Pierrots, whether the immediate troupe or the greater constituency of the whole tradition. In this sense, the British construction emphasises its Pierrot less as a representation of a type of individual than as a *class* of character in its own right, instituting a historical

shift in the symbolic capability of the figure. This class is not identified along socio-economic lines, but a wider, communal negotiation of identity.

If the multiplication of Pierrot overrides the usual isolation of the figure, it also ranges beyond the limited status of the zanni, despite contrary expectations and perceptions. Green and Swan note a wider, and contemporary, Modernist practice which embraces the irreverence and theatrical artificiality of *commedia dell'arte*. This attention to the 'commedic spirit' in the work and/or lives of Diaghilev, Picasso, Meyerhold, Stravinsky, Reinhardt and others is viewed as 'highbrow and solemn' (Green and Swan, 1993, p.8) while being deliberately and 'paradoxically, vulgar' (Green and Swan, 1993, p.13). This is understood to be distinct from the seaside troupes, described as 'the more sordid and proletarian side of the *commedia* tradition' (Green and Swan, 1993, p.43).

The justification given by Green and Swan (1993, p.43) cites Sacheverell Sitwell's recollection that one Scarborough Pierrot 'was a rich man who paid for the privilege of dressing and singing as a woman. [Sitwell] hints at sexual scandal'. Any distinction from the highbrow and solemn cross-dressing of Jane May in *L'Enfant Prodigue* or the comedie spirit and irreverent sexual scandals of Diaghilev is not opened up, and so the accusation of sordid practice is not fully clarified. There does, however, appear to be an assumed correlation between sordid and proletarian which seemingly distinguishes the Pierrot troupe from the Modernist artists, however much the latter reacted against bourgeois artistic values. This correlation needs contesting, however, since we have already noted the socially diverse seaside audience, and the performer observed by Sitwell is himself rich rather than proletarian.

The socio-economic class composition of troupes was also complex. Some of the troupe managers were originally craftsmen, particularly those that developed troupes in their home towns, such as Joseph Denton, a stonemason from Scarborough, and Joe Mulvana, a jet turner from Whitby. Billy Scarrow, founder of the Cosy Corner Pierrots and The Optimists in Redcar, was the son of a locomotive driver. The more successful impresarios, who often adopted towns as their performance territory,



frequently had professional backgrounds in popular performance: Clifford Essex was already a celebrated

banjoist and Will Catlin performed in Variety theatres as a double act with Charles Carson. Both entrepreneurs became well-off, Essex as an acclaimed manufacturer of banjos whose company still trades today and Catlin through a far-ranging empire of seaside troupes, variety entertainments and cinemas. In the 1911 census, another Pierrot entrepreneur, Robert Sample, founder of the Cleveland Cadets (known as Sam Paul), gives his occupation as Picture Hall Manager and includes a servant in the household listing.

As discussed, Harry Russell also had a professional background in popular entertainment, while his personal background belonged to the educated middle classes. Russell's father 'was a Doctor of Music who had obtained his degree from Trinity College, Dublin. He [...] was also a classical scholar in Greek, Latin and Hebrew' (Chapman and Chapman, 1988, p.77). This is not an isolated example:



mention has already been made of a semi-incognito London hostess performing with Essex's troupe; Celia Ridgway, who performed with the Cosy Corner Pierrots, was the daughter of an army officer and grand-daughter of a physician; and Kemsley Scott Barrie, female impersonator with Will Catlin's Scarborough troupe, 'was related to Sir Percy Scott, Admiral of the Fleet' (Chapman and Chapman, 1988, p.46).<sup>1</sup>

Neither constituency, the performers nor their audiences, was therefore restricted to working class membership, rather they comprised a diverse range of social levels. Ambivalence regarding socio-economic class is also inscribed into the aesthetics, commerce and marketing of the performances. One of the focal points of paradoxical ambivalence was the negotiation of respectability within the troupes. While the act of 'bottling' may have aligned the British Pierrot with the beggars, buskers and hawkers of medieval fairs, the troupes were also at pains to emphasise their refinement, as in this 1904 playbill:<sup>2</sup>

MR. ANDIE CAINE  
BEGS TO PRESENT HIS  
Troupe of Refined  
Pierrot Entertainers  
(10<sup>th</sup> SEASON)  
AN ENTERTAINMENT STRICTLY FREE  
FROM VULGARITY.

'Begs' is suitably ambiguous here, operating as both a semi-accurate marker of the economic relationship with the audience, and a nod towards polite discourse. The performance range similarly troubles the distinction between refinement and vulgarity.

In an anonymous letter to *The Dalesman*, November 1964,<sup>3</sup> a spectator recollects a childhood memory of a performance in which Caine himself 'lay on the floor on his

back, playing an imaginary violin and saying to the audience “Wake me at 7 with a cup of tea and a bath bun” and we all pealed with laughter’. The performance here stretches questions of refinement. It playfully lampoons the gentility of the leisured classes, whose principles of decorum set standards for refinement in social matters and manners. In its buffoonery, it also eschews decorum and recalls the vulgarised knockabout Nicoll perceives in the Harlequinade’s corruption of *commedia dell’arte*, rather than foregrounding sophisticated artistry.

As such, the performance problematises the polarity of the vulgar and the refined, which are clearly not identified here according to the aesthetic tastes and mannered dignity of the privileged classes. Another letter of 1903 complained of ‘intolerable nuisances caused by the performances of two troupes of Pierrots, and of various other itinerant musicians, who are rapidly bringing down Filey, to the level of Margate and Yarmouth’.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, other routines in the repertoire could observe more genteel qualities, especially in romantic ballads. A songbook from c.1912 includes the simple yet elegant lyric ‘There’s Something Fascinating In The Moon’ which is reminiscent of Jane May’s poetic characterisation of Pierrot:

Why do all the poets write about the silv’ry moon  
And rave about the bright star-light?  
Why does ev’rybody need the silv’ry moon to spoon  
When the sun shines just as bright?

[...]

The moonbeams seem to teach you how to love  
And your heart seems just as light,  
There’s something fascinating in the moon  
When it shines on a summer’s night.<sup>5</sup>

The popular Pierrot tradition is no less concerned with traversing the distinction between refinement and vulgarity than the Modernists. In this instance, however, the

paradox is not a matter of individual morality but a testing of the terms on communal and aesthetic levels.

The meaning of 'refined' in the context of Caine's sign is difficult to definitively pin down. It could refer simply to the elegance of the Pierrot costume. At a performative level, it could relate to the virtuosity of the performers – comic, musical or novel – in the same way as the 'arte' of the commedia. Alternatively, or additionally, the suitability of the performances for children could suggest refinement as a matter of avoiding material that would be considered offensive across social strata, rather than according to elite mores. It is in this latter sense that the vulgar buffoonery can be, paradoxically, refined. As such, the troupes negotiated refinement, and vulgarity, as a communal concern beyond the tastes of any particular socio-economic class.

This suggests that the uniform identity of the collective Pierrot troupe opened out to propose a unifying relationship with its audience. The aesthetic uniformity of the troupe was not concerned with constructing Pierrot simply as a symbol of the proletarian class, affiliated with his servile and comic zanni ancestor. The framework for uniformity inside the ambivalent and contested space was not principally provided by the shared costume, character or status of the performers. Instead, it emerged from the historical and geographical adoption of the name, further qualifying the significance of a Pierrot governed by an indefinite article.

In the transition from the Italian Pedrolino or French Pierrot to the British Pierrot, the direct etymological reference to 'little Peter' is lost. Inasmuch as this divorces the title Pierrot from being a proper noun, it opens the possibility for Pierrot to be redesignated as a class of character, rather than an identified personality. In one sense, this empties the name of any specific identification with the individual who

adopts it other than imposing the traditional and cultural associations of Pierrot on to them. In another, historically novel, sense, a new linguistic association is formed out of the relocation to the seaside context and the relationship between Pierrot and '[t]hat potent symbol of the Victorian seaside, the pier' which, for Walton (2000, p.104), is 'the essence of liminality'. This sets the symbolic framework for the Pierrot to occupy a metaphorical and literal space between the distinct tastes and judgements of socio-economic classes, and concern itself with broader questions of collective identity.

Through this linguistic association, 'Pierrot' replaces its status as proper noun with a status as demonym, assuming citizenship of a fictional and liminal nation-state, the Pier. The fundamental ambivalences of this Pierrot, therefore, become concerned with the theatrical negotiation of identity as a question of collective nationhood rather than individual personality. Accordingly, the invented tradition of the Pierrot performer centres on a final ambivalent symbol that is, simultaneously, British and foreign.

The social diversity and concerns of the alien Pierrot reflected the social diversity and concerns of the spectating British public. For example, as Ranger notes, '[o]ne of the functions of the invention of tradition in nineteenth-century Europe was to give rapid and recognizable symbolic form to developing types of authority and submission' (Ranger, 1983, p.237). In exploiting the ambivalence of 'refinement', with markers of social respectability yoked to the performed economic dependency of the busker, the Pierrot troupe engages internally in the battle between authority and underdog that is characteristic of both contemporary political concerns and carnivalesque play. In this way, where *commedia dell'arte* performed ambivalence

in the lowly individual character within a social hierarchy, the invented tradition of the seaside Pierrot approaches performance as an act of reconsidering collective identity at a cultural level of real and feigned nationality, beyond the divisions of socio-economic class.

## **Conclusion**

The arrival of *L'Enfant Prodigue* in London during 1891 inspired British experimentation with the image of the Pierrot that spanned the legitimate and Variety stages, masked balls and fashion houses. The very foreignness of the character, evolved primarily through Italian and French contexts, allowed for reinterpretation of the figure while maintaining its historic associations. As such, the trend could serve the late nineteenth-century enthusiasm for invented traditions as contemporary responses grounded in references to historical situations. The alien and anachronistic qualities of the character were also pertinent for performers around the British coast, offering a striking visual image suitable to their alfresco performances. Linguistic association with the Pier also constructed a sense of belonging at the seaside. Equally significantly, the early modern roots of Pierrot formed a bridge between the entertainment structures of Variety theatre and the carnivalesque spirit of the holiday resorts. While embracing the freedoms afforded by this environment, the British Pierrot multiplied its ancestral counterpart from an individual type to a class of character. In synthesising these aesthetic strands the British Pierrot followed other invented traditions in renegotiating models of national identity that transcended social groupings.

## Chapter Two

### **Come Away to Binga-Boo: National Imaginary and the Symbolic Network of the British Pierrot**

#### **Introduction**

If the inspiration for the adopted image of the Pierrot troupe came from the fashionable success of *L'Enfant Prodigieux*, its expansion and popularity – sustained until the Second World War – suggests that it held more deep-seated resonances with the British context of the time. The appropriation of archaic spectacle for contemporary purposes was certainly a tactic of public performance that ranged beyond the construction of the Pierrot troupe. In employing the strategy, such troupes connected with a symbolic network that included the ceremonial pageantry of royal occasions, the architectural landscape of the seaside and the influential performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy.

Speaking of the revival of royal pageantry in the late nineteenth century, Cannadine notes that:

In such an age of change, crisis and dislocation, the “preservation of anachronism”, the deliberate, ceremonial presentation of an impotent but venerated monarch as a unifying symbol of permanence and national community became both possible and necessary.

(Cannadine, 1992, p.122)

The public presentation of the royal family in this period aimed at providing an antidote to the unsettling advances of modernism, and a British anchor for the pandemic global concern with nationhood. While serving as the most emphatic symbol of such concerns, the monarch and its family were far from unique in this respect. Cannadine (1992, p.138) notes that the contemporary foundation of redbrick universities pursued, in their architecture and ceremonies, ‘the anachronistic allure of archaic but invented spectacle’. Ward (2004, p.63) notes

similarly that, after the First World War, 'guild socialism was temporarily able to flourish as it applied "medieval" organisation to building houses for local authorities'. In its reference back to the early-modern form of *commedia dell'arte*, the Pierrot troupe was linking into a contemporary rather than historical network grounded in the preservation of anachronism.

The connection with royalty was most explicitly drawn in the naming of several troupes as 'Royal Pierrots'. The wider resonance of this association moved from kingdom to empire. Since the declaration of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1877, monarchy and empire had become inextricable so that the symbolism of national community was encircled by symbolism of imperial community. The place of the Pierrot troupe in this network negotiated these inward and outward looking complexities of nationhood. In this, the symbolic location of the seaside added a secondary relation which further contextualised such negotiations. Characterised as a liminal space where everyday restraints could be relaxed, the seaside was also relatively contained between the borders with home and empire. In architecture and culture, it looked back to the nation's metropolitan centres and, at the same time, pointed beyond to the exoticism of distant colonies.

The space of the Pierrot troupe is, in this sense, one in which the demands, tensions and ambitions of the national and imperial character are brought into play. This is most markedly proposed through the third symbolic relation I would like to discuss, the interplay between Pierrot performance and blackface minstrelsy. The British tradition of blackface performance followed, but greatly diverged from, the American tradition. Where American blackface was, in part, a mechanism for a political response (from a predominantly white perspective) to urgent issues of race

relations, not least those presented by the abolitionist movement (see Toll, 1977, p.87), the British counterpart had become a ‘racial and national imaginary’ (Pickering, 2008, p.69) of the much more distant Other within imperial relations. Pickering’s description of Pierrots as ‘clowns in white make-up, as if in reverse semiotic principle to blackface’ (2008, p.69) opposes the two forms too neatly. Other shared aesthetics find greater points of connection that imply sympathetic as well as oppositional relations between them.

Situated between the power-base and the outposts of empire, between the symbolic construction of the monarch and theatrical representations of the colonised black Other, the Pierrot equally acts, I argue, as a racial and national imaginary. Starting with the crossover between whiteface and blackface minstrelsy, this chapter considers how the Pierrot, like the minstrel, ‘provided a set of symbolic bearings for the ongoing production of identity and social relations’ (Pickering, 2008, p.92).

### **The antithesis of the “nigger minstrels”?**

Pickering is not alone in recognising the establishment of the British Pierrot as an inversion of blackface acts. Chapman & Chapman (1988, p.10) see the new Pierrot troupes, with ‘faces whitened with zinc oxide’, as ‘the antithesis’ of the ‘nigger minstrels’. Mellor (1966) and Pertwee (1979) both suggest that the emergence of the seaside Pierrot unseated the once-dominant blackface performers, concurring with Walton’s chronological assessment that they ‘had superseded the Victorian “nigger minstrels” with their patter, banjos and arch or sentimental “plantation” song’ (Walton, 2000, p.94). The transition from pervasive blackface minstrelsy to the dominance of the Pierrot was not simply a question of the older tradition succumbing to a new, antithetical whiteface challenge, however, as both continued



alongside each other well into the twentieth century. As such, the two forms continued a complex inter-relationship built on overlap as well as difference.

The adoption of the Pierrot in Britain multiplied the individual *commedia dell'arte* character into a collective troupe, and this expansion itself directly followed the earlier development of blackface minstrel troupes. Pickering notes that 'from the 1830s to the mid-1840s, minstrelsy evolved from an initial solo type of performance within a routine theatrical package towards an autonomous genre of entertainment with established conventions' (Pickering, 2008, p.4). Many of these established conventions were also taken up by the Pierrot troupes, imposing generic connections beneath the differences in make-up.



Virginia Minstrels

Even the arrangement of the Pierrot stage space drew from blackface proxemics. The first half of a minstrel show tended to contain the variety performances, with the second half traditionally being given over to an extended dramatic entertainment, often a sentimentalised evocation of plantation life. During the variety section:

a single row of minstrels sat around on chairs in a semi-circle...[which] allowed the performers to keep each other continually within sight, encouraged musical and comedic exchange, allowed for flexibility and improvisation, and bonded the performers together in the various kinds of business they were about.

(Pickering, 2008, p.16)

Chapman & Chapman (1988) include photographs of various Pierrot troupes mid-performance with this exact semi-circular arrangement in evidence (Catlin's Pierrots at Withernsea, Bert Grapho's Jovial Jollies at Saltburn, the Waterloo Pierrots at Bridlington). Pertwee (1979) records the same arrangement being used by troupes at Scarborough and Roker.

This spatial arrangement is specifically borrowed from the theatrical variation of blackface in indoor venues. Yet blackface minstrelsy was perhaps the most pervasive, popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century, infiltrating all arenas of popular culture. It was the persistent, smaller roving troupes of minstrels that the Pierrot troupes descended from most immediately:

Blacked-up entertainers performed solo, in duos and small bands at street corners, galas and festivals, town fairs and mops, chapel gatherings and wakes, markets and agricultural shows, club days and race meetings, boating events and seaside resorts, annual beanos and festivals, as well as in village and small-town concerts, Punch and Judy shows, Christmas pantomimes, travelling shows and circuses.  
(Pickering, 2008, p.56)

The British Pierrot troupe could also be found in many of these contexts, though its most comfortable setting was at seaside resorts with their own traditions of blackface performance. Such beachfront minstrels were usually itinerant, busking on the sands during the day and in the hotels in the evening. Early Pierrot troupes followed this pattern while others performed on *al fresco* platforms, especially erected on the beach or promenade. It is this innovation in staging which allowed their adoption of the onstage semi-circle of chairs used by theatrical blackface troupes.

Other conventions of seaside minstrelsy were followed in some detail by the Pierrots. Pickering (2008, p.73) notes that 'beachfront minstrels commonly went

under the sobriquet of variously named Uncles. This appellation had long been associated with minstrels.’ He pays particular attention to Harry Summerson, known as Uncle Mack, whose Minstrels performed at Broadstairs. Summerson’s troupe postdates the first Pierrot troupes, but his title is indicative of a longstanding minstrel convention. The use of the epithet Uncle also crossed over into Pierrot tradition. Andie Caine was known as Uncle Andie (Mellor, 1966, p.19), and a clutch of autographs in the Crimlisk Fisher Archive reveal that several members of his troupe in the 1930s adopted the convention, with Gus Yelrob signing himself Uncle Gus, Tom Hall as Uncle Tommy and Billy Gill as Uncle Billy.

Charles Beanland of the Waterloo Pierrots in Bridlington was also called Uncle, though rather than Uncle Charles was ‘known to one and all as “Sammy”, and to the children as Uncle Sam’ (Chapman & Chapman, 1988, p.66). The reason for the change of name indicates one reason why the whiteface and blackface minstrel troupes resembled each other structurally and conventionally: the Waterloo Pierrots were originally the Waterloo Minstrels, who ‘performed in blackface and wore striped blazers and straw hats’ (Chapman & Chapman, 1988, p.64). It is, presumably, in this context that Charles adopted the American nickname of Sam, just as Harry Summerson became Mack, harking back to the earlier minstrelsy devotion to Uncle Tom and Uncle Ned.

The Waterloos were not the only troupe, or performers, to transform themselves from “nigger” minstrels to Pierrots: Johnny “Smiler” Grove ran a blackface troupe at Scarborough before establishing a Pierrot troupe at Redcar; Bert Grapho, Billy Jackson and Philip Rees of Grapho and Jackson’s Mascots had all performed for Joe Mulvana’s Minstrels at Whitby; and the South Shore Minstrels at Starr Gate in

Blackpool were re-invented around the turn of the century as a Pierrot troupe called the White Coons (Chapman & Chapman, 1988; Mellor, 1966). Fred White also ran a troupe known as the White Coons in Bognor Regis. Such titles not only acknowledged the transitions from blackface to whiteface performance; they also point to the ongoing fluidity and crossovers between these modes.



Uncle Mack's Minstrels instituted White Night in 1925, and would subsequently perform as Pierrots every Thursday evening while, conversely, Andie Caine would have his Pierrot troupe perform in blackface occasionally at Benefits Nights. There is some dispute about the origins of Caine's Pierrot troupe (pictured left) which could suggest even greater fluidity. Chapman and Chapman claim that photographic evidence suggests Caine came to Filey

after a couple of seasons with Will Catlin's troupe at Scarborough, placing his arrival at around 1897-98. This view was apparently proposed at one time by Geoff Mellor and refuted in a categorical letter to the Dalesman: 'soon after 1894 Andy [sic] Caine began his pierrot troupe with Teddy Miles and George Fisher [...] Mr Mellor said Andy left Will Catlin at the turn of the century, but I say he started no later than 1895'.<sup>6</sup> A playbill, identified as dating from 1904 and announcing the 10<sup>th</sup> season of Andie Caine's troupe, corroborates this account.<sup>7</sup> According to Caine's son, however, in 1895 Caine *was* performing in Scarborough but with Captain Frank's Minstrels, rather than Catlin (Elsom, 2010). These conflicting recollections suggest that his engagements were perhaps not exclusive and that, while

establishing his own troupe in Filey, Caine could also have been performing with both blackface and whiteface companies at Scarborough.

The semiotics of the Pierrot troupes therefore appear to establish connections between the whiteface and blackface tradition, not only in the reverse imaging of the make-up, but also through the titling of troupes and individual performers, use of theatrical conventions and the traffic of performers moving between the forms. At a striking visual level the contrast between blackface and whiteface would most readily distinguish the two forms from each other, putting the emphasis on racial difference. Yet the similarities of the forms and the fluidity of movement between them complicate this. A troupe name such as the White Coons does not only acknowledge the change from blackface to whiteface performance, but suggests some continuation between the former and current acts. Pickering objects, appropriately, to Rehin's reading of the use of blackface which:

yokes minstrelsy together with medieval English pageantry and the *commedia dell'arte*, and so regardless of social and historical context feels free to refer to black masks as a traditional dramatic device with no racial significance. It hardly needs to be added that Arlecchino was not a "coon".

(Pickering, 2008, p.95)

In the specific cultural context of the late nineteenth century, however, the emergence of Pierrot is interwoven with blackface performance to the extent that Pierrot, unlike Arlecchino, was in some measure identified as a "coon". In this sense, troupe names such as White Coons foreground racial significance by drawing a line of correspondence as well as distinction between the theatrical constructions of black and white identities. This was far from consistent or common to all troupes. Elsewhere, as in the case of Andie Caine's own Royal Pierrots, other

names were adopted which point to connections that emphasised the alternative – though increasingly related – field of national identity and significance.

### **Royal Pierrots**

The troupe name Royal Pierrots is almost as old as the tradition itself, with the originator of the form Clifford Essex adopting it following a performance for the Prince of Wales. As well as Andie Caine, other seaside impresarios on the North West and Yorkshire coasts followed suit after playing to members of the royal family. Catlin's Royal Pierrots performed in Scarborough and Johnny Grove's Pierrots in Redcar had become the Royal Entertainers by 1907. Bradford's Ernest Binns also promoted the Royal Arcadians alongside his coastal troupes.

Other troupes, perhaps without the license to use the Royal title having not appeared before royalty, referenced the empire in their names. Jack Bellamy's Imperial Pierrots performed at Houghton-le-Spring and Seaton Carew in the North-East of England, and The Imps (managed by George Royle as a precursor to his celebrated *Fol-de-Rols*) was an abbreviation of The Imperials. The symbolism that circulated through these company names went beyond lending status and prestige to the troupes. Ward notes that increasingly during this period 'the monarchy was fundamentally entwined with the idea and reality of the British Empire. They were seen together as forming two basic foundations upon which Britishness could be built' (Ward, 2004, p.14). The Royal and Imperial troupe names accordingly incorporated the British Pierrot into a network where national identity was in the process of being built through the cultural production of the monarchy.

The question of national identity through this symbolic network was not being settled by debate at a level of substance but through presentation at a level of form. Cannadine (1992) has mapped the revitalisation of royal ceremonial that coincided with the emergence of the British Pierrot troupe, beginning with Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, and advancing in grandeur and expertise through her Diamond Jubilee and a succession of royal funerals up to the investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1911. Financial and creative investment in spectacle was renewed at this time, and a more disciplined approach to the preparation and execution of public rituals was demanded. This was not necessarily a demonstration of grandeur and discipline as reflective properties of national character. Rather, these were competitive strategies that responded to similar investments in ceremony and spectacle elsewhere, the playing out of Britain's greatness before its rivals on a global stage (see Cannadine, 1992, pp.128-131).

On the domestic stage, the performance of royalty to British citizens utilised ceremony as a focus for national unity. The tropes here included the preservation of anachronism: the monarch's carriage and other ritual objects emphasised historical continuity not as proof of the durability of national character but as a defining feature of that character. The Pierrot, with its own anachronistic allure drawn from the reference back to the early modern form of *commedia dell'arte*, contributed to the public impression of continuity operating here. Within the network, this was partly constituted by the hierarchical relationships being performed between monarch and entertainer: the Pierrot retained a servile and comic status, consistent with the *zanni* in the original Italian form, acknowledging regal patronage and observing the dignified authority of the royal position. The emphasis on continuity through anachronism can be seen as operating on the domestic stage as an

overarching, national form of *commedia dell'arte* in which the intrigues played out in one sphere by the servile buskers are relative to, and bound up with, those of the royal masters – equivalent to the *vecchi* of the *commedia* – in another. In the symbolic network, national relations were also filtered performatively through the motifs of the family circulating in public discourse: the authority of Victoria as matriarch, or Edward VII as patriarch, was extended and complemented by the playfulness of the nominally avuncular Pierrots. Rather than advocating the observable properties of a singular British character, Britishness became constructed here through a network of relations.

Walter Bagehot wrote in 1867 of the Court Circular, the daily reports of the monarch's engagements, that '[i]ts use is not in what it says, but in those to whom it speaks'. The analysis, in which the activities are meaningless in themselves and accrue value only *because* they are reported, is extended to the royal family, which:

sweetens politics by the seasonable addition of nice and pretty events. It introduces irrelevant facts into the business of government, but they are facts which speak to "men's bosoms" and employ their thoughts.  
(Bagehot, [1867] 2012, No.III: The Monarchy)

The sovereign augmented by an active royal family collectively constituted a peculiarly constitutional form of entertainment which, in the public playing out of its activities, operated as a political disguise. Specifically, the continuity it represented distracted from the lack of continuity – indeed the uncertainty – of elected governments. The announcements of the royal family's ongoing domestic engagements promoted a transcendent stability in British public life that remained untroubled by the destabilising political context of the time. At a national level, this extended beyond the persistent turbulence of the 'politically explosive' Irish question: it 'was also the period when the first official recognition of Welsh



national interests as such was made' and Scotland acquired 'a modest Home Rule movement' (Hobsbawm, 1992, p.105).

Bagehot was writing some twenty-four years before the emergence of the Pierrot, however, and also at a time when royal pageantry was a less ostentatious affair. He himself opposed extravagant ceremony, arguing that it would compromise the necessary mystery and associated dignity of royalty. A necessary increase in royal prestige acquired some urgency in 1877, the year that Bagehot died and the reclusive Victoria became Empress of India. This expansion of the symbolic royal role may have prompted the revival of grand pageantry a decade later; it also coincided with a diminishment of genuine royal authority in political matters, so that the revitalised ceremony was, for Cannadine, 'not so much the re-opening of theatre of power as the première of the cavalcade of impotence' (Cannadine, 1992, p.121).

Towards the end of the century, it was not only the changes in internal politics that unsettled royal power but the international threats from, and rivalries with, the newly-unified nations of Germany and Italy, and a re-invigorated United States of America. If these new pageants continued to operate as forms of disguise, this was perhaps less a constitutional distraction from political discontinuity than the introspective masking of national insecurities:

Whether these royal ceremonials [...] were an expression of national self-confidence or of doubt is not altogether clear. It remains a widely held view that Victoria's jubilees and Edward's coronation mark the high noon of empire, confidence and splendour. But others, following the mood of Kipling's "Recessional", regard them in a very different light – as an assertion of show and grandeur, bombast and bravado, at a time when real power was already on the wane.

(Cannadine, 1992, pp.125-6)

The display of bravado was certainly a showcase of British power abroad; it was also a matter of domestic morale, bolstering national self-assurance. The deployment of continuity and anachronism that made the British Pierrot into a Royal Pierrot was not simply concerned with the maintenance of traditional reverence and privileges. The symbolic network bringing monarchy and Pierrot together was situated within a shared project to reaffirm confidence in the nation's sense of itself. As in *commedia dell'arte*, the skill and action of the zanni were orientated towards the realisation of the larger design.

It was possibly for this reason that the whiteface clowns emerged from the blackface form, constructing 'a racial and national imaginary' of whiteness which confronted political reality and domestic anxiety. As Hobsbawm (1992) has noted, this period saw a surge in nationalism which was predicated on ethnicity and language. Since English was already a major international language, British nationality was contested more, perhaps, through the ethnic question. The continuity evoked through anachronism and social relations in the Pierrot correlated with its whiteness. If the form suggested sympathy and overlap with blackface minstrelsy, it also marked clear distinctions along racial lines. The soubriquet Uncle is again illustrative here: in the case of blackface minstrelsy, the assumed name of the Uncle was fictionalised: Harry became Mack, Charles became Sam. In whiteface, the Pierrot retained its own name. In this, as in other distinctions, the minstrel constructed a 'low-black Other' (Pickering, 2008, p.105) while the Pierrot assumed a higher status, though still below its royal patrons. The constructed white persona was, however, no less imaginary than either its blackface or regal correlates.

Hobsbawm remarks that, coinciding with the rise of national identities along ethnic lines, ‘the old-established division of mankind into a few “races” distinguished by skin colour was now elaborated into a set of “radical” distinctions separating people of approximately the same pale skin, such as “Aryans” and “Semites”, or, among the “Aryans”, Nordics, Alpines and Mediterraneans’ (Hobsbawm, 1992, p.108). Combined with the demonymic title Pierrot, designating the character as a citizen of the coastal Pier, the troupe performances constructed a fictionalised white race. Pickering (2008, p.96) proposes that the mask in blackface minstrelsy ‘concealed the everyday ethnic identity of the performer, and revealed the racialized identity of the persona’. In whiteface, the constructed racial gap between performer and persona was present but significantly reduced. The imaginary persona of the Pierrot still sat within the broader category of “Aryan” consistent with the performer’s own racial identity. The ‘Uncle’ character was neither Self nor Other in its ethnic dimension, but a racialized performance of whiteness, related to but removed from the performer’s everyday reality.

Although distanced from a reflective representation of white identity, the Royal title adopted by the Pierrot troupes also conferred a sense of belonging that was not available to its counterparts in blackface minstrelsy. As a pivotal point between the royal and blackface elements of this symbolic network, the Pierrot in its imaginary zanni status mediated national power from neither the heights of the former nor the depths of the latter. The mediating, imaginary and resistant properties of the Pierrot character found a logical home at the seaside, betwixt and between land and sea, in which individual, or national, identity could be suspended and re-imagined.

## **Oh We Do Like To Redefine The Seaside**

Ward (2004, p.66) has noted that ‘the urban as well as the rural has been celebrated as contributing to national identity’. The binary poles of town and country observed here suggest that, even within discourse, the seaside – neither conventionally urban nor rural – exists separately from the social environments that shape everyday experience. For residents of seaside resorts, of course, questions of identity are no less urgent, and the particular economic and political structures of the coast no less determinate. Analysis is governed, however, by the principle that seaside locations are not primarily orientated towards the permanence and stability of residency, but the temporary experiences of visitors. Thus, for Ward:

holidays, especially those at the seaside and abroad, have often been seen as spaces where many of the rules of “national character” no longer apply [...] [H]olidays have been about an escape from restraint, including that presumed to come from Englishness, for the middle and upper classes associated with the stiff upper lip and for the working class associated with “respectability”.

(Ward, 2004, p.86)

Walton also recognises the temporary escape of the seaside when he notes that it ‘conjures up the spirit of carnival’ and allows liberation from ‘the leaden constraints of day-to-day identity’ (Walton, 2000, p.4).

At the same time, he places restrictions around such freedom, insofar as resorts:

were seldom places where constraints and conventions were cast to the winds; people brought their own internal controls and assumptions about proper behaviour with them [...]; but the seaside provided a changed register of expectations, freer but still bounded by wider notions of respectability and propriety.

(Walton, 2000, p.5)

Coastal resorts therefore allowed a ripe space for the indulgence of imagined national identities in which social expectations could be loosened. This was not a

revolutionary opportunity, however: rather than a *tabula rasa* the promenade was already inscribed with the boundaries and co-ordinates of national identity.



The symbolic network in which the British Pierrot was located operated in a compacted form at the seaside and so was instrumental

in drawing these boundaries. Blackface minstrelsy already had a continuing, and competing, tradition here, strengthening the association with the Pierrot form. The naming of Royal Pierrots also served as a reminder of royal witnesses to performances, with the entertainers themselves acting as the shared connection between current spectators and their regal predecessors. Royalty was not only summoned in the oblique claims and recall of the Pierrots, of course, and could be as physically present as blackface minstrels. Wally Cliff, a performer in Filey during the 1930s, recalls Gerald and George Lascelles, the sons of Princess Mary, building sandcastles and paying little attention to the Royal Pierrots' nearby performance (Mellor, 1998).

This distilled national constituency of the seaside was matched by the setting: holidaymakers were 'met not only by the sea but by the extraordinary architecture of the Empire, and spectacular buildings given patriotic names such as the Victoria Pier, Empress Ballroom and Royalty Theatre' (Ward, 2004, p.87). Other regular

attractions at the resorts dealt in foreign curiosities, including ‘zoos, circuses, aquaria, roof gardens, exhibitions of exotica and of “other” cultures (Zulus, native Americans)’ (Walton, 2000, p.96). All the features of the resort lay on a continuum which began with the monarch at the heart of the nation and continued well beyond the familiar and the native to distant colonial endpoints.

In line with the displays of exotica, the Pierrot did not present British whiteness as it habitually existed but an exhibition of whiteness, at a remove from the context it inhabits. Its place in this continuum remained anchored to the primary national symbol of the monarch, so that it honoured and, on some level, harboured the ethnic dominance that informed national identity within Empire. At the same time, in the imaginary whiteness of the character, it also nodded towards the exotic Otherness of the blackface minstrel. Pickering observes that the ‘dual purpose’ of blackface was:

to objectify, and make a stereotypical object of, a repressed self which was projected onto the low-black Other, and use this projection to give a satirical, burlesquing or simply frivolous dimension to the entertainment.

(Pickering, 2008, p.105)

The Pierrot could equally engage in satire, burlesque and frivolity, indulging the repressed elements of national identity, those which may unsettle the ‘sense of uniqueness and superiority’ (Ward, 2000, p.16) proper to imperial character. These traits range across buffoonery, fantasy and sentimentalism which are staples of both blackface and whiteface performance, but are excised from the royal imaginary.

While the troupe names Royal Pierrots and White Coons emphasised different associations within the symbolic network, the underlying project remained the same: to construct a racial imaginary which negotiated the idealism of the imperial

self-image and the turbulent realities of political division and, in doing so, to situate itself at the boundary between the familiar and the foreign. The imaginary whiteness of the Pierrot, however, acted as a corollary of the imaginary whiteness of a common national (or imperial) British identity. Engaging with the repressed and alienated properties of identity, it occupied a critical distance from its own selfhood. Without being wholly located in otherness it also avoided diminishment by the destructive stereotyping that operated in the constructions of blackness by white performers. Rather, the frivolous dimension here allowed some licensing, or even celebration, of the repressed and alienated elements of white identity. As long as these were understood as exotic and contained by the liminally carnivalesque spaces of the seaside, such traits secured a place in the national psyche without, in theory, threatening social order and belonging.

The geographical isolation of such repressed elements was nevertheless impossible to regulate in practice. Walton notes that the exotica of the seaside also encompasses preserved anachronism alongside the novelties of modernity:

the seaside resort was to become the last outpost of the horse-drawn landau, providing another reliably old-fashioned travel experience alongside the shock of the new on the fairground rides (some of which were themselves to focus nostalgia as they passed from novelty to tradition).

(Walton, 2000, p.95)

This opens up one further network that the Pierrot is implicated in, a negotiation between its own emphasis on continuity and the dramatic social changes brought about by technological innovation. Hobsbawm (1992, p.109) further identifies the ‘onrush of modernity’ as one of the threats to social order that demanded the invention of imagined national communities as a response.

The Pierrot form is acutely distanced from the technical advances of modernity in its practice. Acoustic and intimate in performance, the troupes could not compete with the overwhelming spectacle of fairground rides which is why they ‘flourished most in smaller resorts where there was little competition from a weighty entertainment industry: they struggled to make headway against the competition of Blackpool, for example, except when a company found a niche on one of the piers’ (Walton, 2000, p.108). Their own commitment to continuity and anachronism already implies incompatibility with change and innovation.

Such resistance acts as a reminder that the Pierrots were not simply offering a temporary liberation of the repressed elements of national identity, but were engaged in a more intricate process of managing national identity as continuity of the established relations between things. As such, the racial and national imaginary performed at the seaside emphasised continuity as a provocative challenge to the contemporary investment in technological change and innovation.

This is indicated in Walton’s observation on fairground rides which assume nostalgia in the passage from novelty to tradition. The peculiarity of the seaside is that, in its diverse yet coherent array of exotica, distinctions between the archaic and the innovative become confused: all exhibits appear to always already belong to the imaginary space of the resort and only the encounter with it is new. It is through this perception that the seaside can accelerate the passage from novelty to tradition, as the objects, characters and curiosities found there are assumed always to have existed somewhere in the space between the native and the non-native.

The dichotomy of the seaside as both a permanent landscape and a temporary escape is significant here. The coastal resorts are only a site of impermanent



experience for the visitors who arrive and leave; unlike conventional carnival, the seaside is primarily defined by the space, rather than the time, of festivity and so carries its own permanence that endures beyond the temporally-bounded holiday period. It persists – as both place and memory – outside of the tourist experience, lending additional dimensions of continuity and belonging to the Pierrot troupe.

Sacheverell Sitwell recalls watching the Pierrots in Scarborough during his youth:

Two or even three companies of them in their theatre booths at low tide, where one could walk later and even see the marks of their trestles on the wet sands. Or on a winter morning or afternoon when there was no sign of them whatever. They might never have existed at all, and their season was still far away [...] I have not forgotten it, and still remember individuals in those summer companies of more than half-a-century ago.

(Sitwell, 1973, p.185-6)

The description here notes the paradoxical situation that the Pierrot exists vividly in Sitwell's memory at moments when it appears never to have existed at all in reality. It is in this imaginary dimension that the Pierrot ultimately acquires a sense of permanence outside of its coastal existence. The Pierrot occupied the marginal spaces of the seaside but was not contained by or in them, haunting the national imagination long after the close of the show.

### **Come Away to Binga-Boo**

Despite the widespread success and popularity of the form, there is little documentation of actual performances by Pierrot troupes in the early twentieth century. Sitwell offers some details of the performers he watched during his teenage years, and there also exist other fragmentary – but similarly vivid – recollections of performances by Pierrot troupes in other sources. There are also some extant songbooks, sold by the troupes during their summer season, which contain the

lyrics to various songs from their repertoire. This allows some insight into the material of the troupes, although it does not include details of the comic sketches or specialty turns, and cannot clarify how the songs were delivered in performance.

Nonetheless, the songbooks can point to some ways in which the symbolic construction and concerns of Pierrots may have been approached. One such book belongs to Andie Caine's Royal Filey Pierrots, probably dating from around 1912.<sup>8</sup> The lyric collection contains a mixture of comic songs and romantic ballads, consistent with a music hall programme. Contributors to the volume include prolific music hall songwriters such as H. Worton David, F. Clifford Harris and Bennett Scott.

Broadly speaking, the comic songs tend to have a focus on national events and characters, fostering the satirical potential of clowning continuous with both music hall and the blackface tradition. Worton David and Bert Lee's 'Seaside Swank', for example, lampoons arrogant, duplicitous dandies while David's 'The Insurance "Pill"', co-written with Harry Fragson, offers a conservative attack on Lloyd George's Insurance Bill of 1911.

The romantic songs tend towards more otherworldly conceits and the construction of fantasy realms beyond everyday reality. 'The Garden of Idle Dreams' by Frank Clifford Harris and Eddie Jewell offers an imaginary idyll:

Far away, far away  
There is a garden where children play;  
Lovers true, bill and coo,  
Live there in cottages built for two.

More whimsically, the song 'I'd Like To Be In Peachland With A Peach Like You', by American writing team Fleta Jan Brown and Herbert Spencer, just about avoids

tipping over from the romantic to the comic while imagining a fantasy of courting-related countries and their associated nationalities:

I've spooned a lot in spoon-land,  
I've mooned a lot in moon-land,  
I've even crooned in croon-land,  
And tho't was fine;  
I've loved some loves in love-land,  
I've cooed some doves in dove-land,  
I've held some hands in hand-land,  
And swore they would be mine.

#### CHORUS

But I'd rather be in peachland with a peach like you,  
I'd love to be in date-land if you'd be there too;  
We'll leave the land of make believe for the land where dreams  
come  
true  
I'd like to be in peachland with a peach like you.

The penultimate line of the chorus hints at an underlying theme of escape here, in which the constructions of these fantasy lands not only propose a space where romance and idleness can flourish (an evocation that is consistent with the holiday resort itself); it also implies a domestic atmosphere built on pretence and self-delusion that must be left behind.

The song 'Come Away To Binga-Boo' by Hampden Gordon and R. Penso is perhaps most representative of the songbook's repertoire, as it synthesises the trends that cut across both comic and romantic numbers, although it is an explicitly satirical lyric. The opening verse contains a similarly conservative inclination as 'The Insurance "Pill"', which in this instance targets modern urban technology ('Aeroplanes and motor bikes') and oppositional politics ('Suffragettes and Railway strikes'). The emphasis is on resistance to such political antagonisms and noisy new inventions which are 'awf'ly in the way' and form disturbances to the status quo.

The thrust of the song is avowedly lacking in patriotic fervour, however. Within the satirical framework, the opening line – ‘England’s going to the dogs!’ – is less a lament for the nation than a note of despair at progress, underpinned with a feeling of disenfranchisement. The singer evokes alienation from politics, modernity and even the personal (‘If you’re tired of life or your wife is tired of you’). The lyric itself cannot give a decisive indication of the song in performance; the line ‘People! Don’t be trodden on!’ suggests, however, that the song is sung direct address to the collective audience. The song appeals to a presumed sympathy with the alienation experienced by the singer(s) when confronted with the inexorable anxieties of progress.

Taking the appeal further, a rallying cry to arms is not offered by the Pierrot(s); instead, those who identify with such alienation are invited to abandon England for ‘Binga-Boo’, a distant and fictional island. The mock-African name of this exotic asylum points towards the blackface tradition, resonant with the sense of disenfranchisement in the song, and also to the wider imperial context beyond the restraints of solely English concerns. The predominant characteristic of the island, as with the Garden of Idle Dreams, is ‘the simple life’ devoid of the complexities of modernity, in which political rupture and insecurities play no part.

Curiously, the second verse outlines that ‘the joys of Theatreland’ are also blissfully absent from Binga-Boo. This echoes the line from ‘I’d Like To Be In Peachland With A Peach Like You’, in which the romantic couple ‘leave the land of make believe for the land where dreams come true’: the implication is that Britain has become infested with artifice. Both songs thereby contain a tacit perspective that any ordinary claim to national unity, continuity and stability within England is

purely wishful pretence in the face of fractious political antagonisms and relentless technological change.

The paradox, of course, is that the troupe's response is to recover the strength of national identity by relocating to the idyllic fantasy lands of its own imagining.

Pickering notes that the mask worn by blackface performers 'raised the question as to whether what they represented was real or imaginary, but in raising it, minstrelsy confounded it, so that it was never clear where the answer finally lay' (Pickering, 2008, p.156). The Pierrot mask operated similarly to confuse reality and make believe. This was also the core of the reverse semiotic principle that distinguished the whiteface from the blackface traditions.

The white construction of a stereotypical black identity was used to bolster national unity through mockery of an imagined, inferior Other. The whiteface mask, performed by and to a once-removed ethnic variation of itself, confounds the sense of which version of whiteness is the more desirable, and therefore the more truthful. The everyday experience of a common white British identity – complicated and powerless in the face of political disjuncture and relentless change – becomes the actual make believe position. This was reinforced by the relocation of the songs from the music hall stage to the exotic atmosphere of the coastal resorts. In the indoor context, the proposition of Binga Boo would carry the fictional and temporal properties of theatrical space. At the al fresco seaside, however, it becomes as tangible as the other exotic exhibits that are called into existence in the space between the permanent and the temporal, the new and the traditional, the yet-to-be and the already-is. The fantasy lands constructed in these songs extend the transcendental realm of the seaside in which the anachronistic and untroubled

relations between the imaginaries of the Pierrot, royal personages and blackface minstrels can continue to be negotiated without interference.

## **Conclusion**

The institution of the British Pierrot, enduring for the first half of the twentieth century, suggests that it held relevance for its audience, predominantly composed of British holidaymakers. Although a unique performance form, it located itself within a symbolic network that resonated with contemporary national concerns. These included the increasing significance of racial and national identity, against an imperial backdrop; the diminishment of British power at international levels; anxiety about the political discontinuities inherent in the parliamentary system; and a growing sense of disenfranchisement in the face of relentless modernisation.

Such concerns were addressed by the repositioning of the royal family as symbols of national continuity and power that transcended socio-political ruptures. At the other end of the scale, the performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy constructed a low-black Other through which a white audience could vicariously enjoy and dispel all of the traits considered inimical to a proper British identity. The whiteface Pierrot situated itself between these two poles, recognising growing points of alienation within the country and seeming to hold the potential to reconnect them to a unified and continuous whole.

This dimension of the Pierrots' significance was accentuated by its context at the seaside, a space in which national restraints could be loosened – within reason – with a view to exploring alternative modes of being. The atmosphere of exotica that was pervasive here extended to the Pierrot itself, which appeared as an imaginary

variation on a white racial and national identity. In its conservative antipathy to change, however, the imaginary character could blur and present itself as the more authentic sense of British aspiration and realisation. As such, it existed between reality and imagination, in both the fantasy lands of its own making and the recollections of its audiences, where its symbolic significance could circulate and exert a vivid influence.

## Chapter Three

### Similar Hats on Similar Heads: Uniformity and Alienation at the Rat Pack's Summit Conference of Cool

#### Introduction

The Rat Pack remains a somewhat amorphous collection of associates in the popular imagination, in terms of both its membership and their range of activities. Richard Gehman's contemporaneous book *Sinatra and his Rat Pack* (1961) notes that a tendency to mythologise has always accompanied the group in the American national psyche:

All the members of this group vehemently deny that it exists. Yet it does, if only in the minds of those who are not in it, for we in this foolish yet good-intentioned country tend to think in terms of groups. We feel troubled when we cannot think of all of us together putting similar hats on similar heads.

(Gehman, 1961, p.36)

He considers the Rat Pack to be primarily a social clique centred on Frank Sinatra that, invested with the glamour, wealth and power of Hollywood, privately indulges in hedonistic entertainment. Bill Zehme (1997, p.56), alternatively, identifies 'the quintessential membership' as Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Joey Bishop and Peter Lawford, with all other associates as satellites. Shawn Levy's book *Rat Pack Confidential* (2002) focuses on the same men, as does Lawrence J. Quirk's and William Schoell's *The Rat Pack* (1999).

This select group assembled in Las Vegas in January 1960 to make the film *Ocean's 11* (1960). At the close of the film, the assembled fictional gangsters amble dolefully away from Las Vegas having accidentally cremated their loot. Gradually emerging in the background is the iconic marquee for the Sands Hotel, which lists Sinatra, Martin, Davis, Lawford and Bishop as the Hotel's resident entertainment,



appearing in their nightclub space The Copa Room. This live performance work, running alongside the filming of *Ocean's 11* (1960), and recreated later in 1960 at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami, is the event which crystallised the quintessential membership of the Rat Pack. The act was largely organised around the five central performers, in various combinations, engaging in an apparently chaotic programme of songs, dances, comic routines and improvisation. It is these nightclub performances, known as The Summit Conference of Cool, which most emphatically engage the core membership of the Rat Pack.

Comparatively little attention has been paid to this live work. Levy and Gehman are more concerned with the personal, professional and social biographies of the players. Quirk and Schoell also cover these, while paying much more attention to the films. Towards the end of their book there is a suggestion why this might be the case, acknowledging only two points of access to the live work: the Museum of Television and Radio's event *The Rat Pack Captured* in 1997, which screened a video recording of a 1965 concert at Kiel Opera House, St. Louis; and unreleased audio recordings of 1963 performances in Chicago. These recordings are now in the public domain (Martin et al, [1963, 1965] 2003) but are limited as reference points since they cover later performances that only feature Frank, Dean and Sammy of the original quintet. Amateur camera recordings of The Summit meetings, however, have also become available (Rat Pack, 1960a, 1960b, 1960c).<sup>9</sup> These recordings, filmed on separate nights, offer a valuable insight into the construction of the act, the nature of the material and the interaction between members. While this demonstrates considerable variation between performances, it also reveals points of consistency. In the sections below, central principles of this structure will be addressed to start to identify the workings and significance of the Rat Pack.

The analysis draws attention to factors that unite these performers, the similar hats that sit on similar heads. The most evident of these is the collaboration of five entertainers whose public images are typical constructions of historical masculine and heterosexual identities. The Summit performances indulge these identities through libidinous posturing, the unambiguous objectification of women and acts of stereotyping aimed at the emasculation of gay men. These will be touched on below, though they do not form the focus of discussion. Much more complex, however, is the performers' negotiation of their own cultural backgrounds and shared immigrant ancestry. Sinatra and Martin were of Italian-American heritage, Davis was African-American, Lawford had a British background and Bishop's parents were Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe. Thus they were connected by a partially alienated relationship to nationality that I term below as hyphenated-American.

The discussion begins with the professional influences on, and experiences and tendencies of, these performers that bring them together in the particular context of nightclub performance. This attends to the various points of engagement with vaudevillian performance in their backgrounds, and opens up the range of artistic elements that constitute The Summit shows. It leads also to the observation and discussion of a particular shared interest in acts of impersonation. As well as focussing on the aesthetic impact of such influences, these similarities start to point towards individual relationships to the act, and the structure that is operating within it. This structure is reflective of the more historical performance model of blackface minstrelsy, itself a significant influence on vaudeville. Involving its own forms of impersonation, minstrel performance lends the Rat Pack particular modes of interacting in which identities are claimed, challenged and reformulated. The

development of blackface performance in America was part of a movement to develop national forms of popular entertainment, with aesthetics and concerns that were distinct from European traditions (see Toll, 1977). As such, participation in the form staked a claim to American assimilation while, through the performance of other identities, negotiating cultural difference. The traces of blackface tradition found in the Rat Pack illuminate the final discussion of the troupe's internal negotiation of its own hyphenated-American status. Beginning with a sole focus on the recordings of The Summit performances in Las Vegas, the discussion will expand to cover the later performances with the reduced membership of Davis, Martin and Sinatra.

### **Vaudevillian roots**

Bob Hope: I have really enjoyed this Seagram's Talent Contest and I don't care who wins. It's been a hell of a lot of fun, hasn't it?  
[onstage with the Rat Pack, last night of The Summit]  
(Rat Pack, 1960c)

Shawn Levy depicts The Summit performances as a casual social occasion placed before an audience, rather than a considered performance event. The Rat Pack would 'make millions and all they had to do was show up, have a good time, pretend to give a damn, and, almost as an afterthought, sing' (Levy, 2002, p.3). Although the shows certainly contained musical numbers, Levy's emphasis on song presumes the eminence of singers Sinatra, Martin and Davis at the expense of Lawford and Bishop. Songs were far from the only element of the performances, or even the most dominant, in a range of components encompassing dance, stand-up comedy, clowning, impressions and sketches.

Sammy Davis Jr, widely acknowledged as the most versatile performer of the five, exemplifies the variety of The Summit event, excelling in all of the diverse

entertainment forms. This breadth of ability is an outcome of his professional background. From an early age, he toured the American vaudeville circuit in a company led by his uncle Will Mastin. As he grew older the company reduced to a trio, comprised of Will, Sammy and his father Sammy Davis Sr. With this schooling in vaudevillian performance, Sammy focussed mainly on dancing and impersonations, with singing only coming to the forefront later in his career at the encouragement of Sinatra. His vaudevillian origins are also evident in a number of speciality acts he later developed, including lip-synching and gun-slinging routines, although these were not employed in Rat Pack performances.



Chris Rojek notes that ‘Sinatra’s stage act with the Rat Pack in the 1950s [sic] borrowed some of the classic motifs and routines of high vaudeville’ (Rojek, 2004, p.39). To a greater or lesser degree, vaudeville exerts an influence on the careers of each member of the Rat Pack through their experiences in nightclub entertainment, working as part of various teams. Dean Martin had been part of the most successful of these collaborations, coming to prominence in a double act with Jerry Lewis. Like Davis, Lewis – whose father was an all-round entertainer – had an early initiation into vaudevillian performance. Although primarily remembered as a film partnership, he describes the double act of Martin and Lewis as ‘vaudevillians, stage performers who worked with an audience’ (Lewis and Kaplan, 2006, p.7).

Jerry provided clowning and comedy, while Dean sang and acted as the straight man. The double act was honed and presented in celebrated venues such as the 500 Club in Atlantic City, the Chez Paree in Chicago and the Copacabana in New York. Through this act, Martin established himself ostensibly as a singer. His abilities as a comedian and actor only became apparent once the double act had disbanded in 1956.

Although an admirer of the form, Sinatra had less professional experience of vaudeville having come to popular notice as a big band singer. It was as a solo performer that he subsequently achieved widespread public acclaim, idolised as a recording artist and star of film, radio and television. There were elements of vaudeville in his professional background, however. In his early career he performed as part of the Hoboken Four, a vocal group that appeared under a variety of pseudonyms on the radio programme *Major Bowes' Amateur Hour*. While famous, he also undertook the role of straight man as a favour to the comedian Phil Silvers for a series of performances at the Copacabana.

Bishop was a great deal more experienced in live nightclub performance than he was in any other media. Appearing in New York, Chicago and his home town of Philadelphia, he largely performed solo spots of stand-up comedy but worked on the same bill as singers such as Tony Martin and Tony Bennett, before Sinatra hired him as an opening act at the Riviera, New Jersey in 1952 (Starr, 2002). At the start of his professional career, however, he performed as part of a comedy trio under a shared, adopted surname – the Bishop Brothers – an act incorporating clowning and impressions with a smattering of song. Billed as ‘3 Mad Maniacs of Mirth and Mimicry’, they appeared on a bill of ‘Internationally Famous Vodvil [*sic*] Acts’ at

the Havana Casino, Buffalo in 1938. One ‘mad maniac’ was later replaced with a singer and straight man, extending the performative range of the group.

By contrast, Lawford came comparatively late to the world of vaudevillian entertainment. Like Davis, he had been a child star but in films rather than live performance. As a Hollywood actor in the integrated entertainment industry of mid-twentieth century America, however, his limited skills in variety performance were put to marketing use:

the MGM publicity department did not take the audiences for granted. They had such stars as June Allyson, Janet Leigh, Peter Lawford, and numerous others travel to major cities to appear before the showing of a film. The stars would talk to the audience and perform, often doing a song-and-dance number.

(Lawford and Schwarz, 1988, p.65)

Lawford also performed in a nightclub act with Jimmy Durante that pre- and post-dated his appearances at The Summit. Although he maintained a successful career in the entertainment industry, he did not attract the levels of critical acclaim or public enthusiasm drawn by the other Rat Pack performers. Even so, Levy’s observation that Lawford had ‘looks, breeding, savoir faire but no real talent’ (2002. p.65) is excessively harsh. In a 1955 televised performance, Lawford appeared in an under-rehearsed chorus line sketch with Durante, Liberace, Johnnie Ray and George Raft.<sup>10</sup> Although not a polished number, Lawford displays more focus than, and comparable ability to, the other performers with the exception of the precise Liberace. His contribution also observes a spirit of ensemble commitment unconcerned with upstaging the other entertainers, which may be partly why he appealed as a collaborator to both the Rat Pack and Durante. Within the sketch, he demonstrates an easier rapport with Durante than the other guests do, and his performance echoes traits of Durante’s own vocal styling. It is as a collaborator in

live performance, through his proximity and relationship to more capable entertainers, that Lawford makes his contribution.

Like Davis, Lawford could span the range of performance modes embraced by The Summit, only with much less skill and conviction. It is by comparison with Davis, or the other performers in their respective fields, that he attracts comments such as Levy's above, or Quirk and Schoell's observation (overlooking his collaboration with Durante) that 'he was not really an integral part of the group of which he was supposed to be a primary member; he had never been a "showman" or entertainer like the others' (Quirk and Schoell, 2003, p.183). Lawford's lesser abilities in the vaudeville spectrum certainly distinguish him from the other performers, but they do not ostracise him. As a more experienced dramatic actor, he holds a central position in the Rat Pack's film work than he can in the nightclub shows. But even at The Summit, when approached as a performance structure in its own right, his range of weaker abilities determine rather than disavow his integral position within the concerted troupe.

Just as he reinforces the vocal style of Durante in that particular collaboration, Lawford also understudies some characteristics of other performers at The Summit. In his duplication of Davis's versatility, he is the only other performer who commits himself to dancing. His general performance demeanour echoes the suave manner of Martin, and he incorporates the latter's physical comedy on occasion. The persona presented here differs from the clownish one he adopts in partnership with Durante. The other performers adjust their solo acts to this collaboration; Lawford, by contrast, synthesises aspects of their personae and consequently constructs an identity in order to belong. He aims to present the idealised model of a Rat Pack

member: talented, relaxed, confident, attractive, and emanating power and dignity. In failing to realise this persona convincingly, he appears alienated from the very image that he has constructed. In doing so, he points to two further indicative features of a Rat Pack identity. First, that it is more concerned with an aspirational mode of identity than an actual one. Second, that this manifests itself amongst all members in a further similarity: investment in the art of imitation.

### **Impressions and Emulations**

Dean: Well, let's drink up and be somebody  
Frank: Let's drink up and be anybody!  
[onstage at The Sands Hotel]  
(Rat Pack, 1960c)

As a child star, Lawford was not only known for his dramatic ability. A photograph caption in the 1930 edition of magazine *New Health* noted his 'ability as an actor and impersonator' (cited in Lawford and Schwarz, 1988, p.17). Davis, as already observed, had an established reputation as an impressionist on the vaudeville circuit. It was also a staple element of Bishop's act with the Bishop Brothers and beyond: 'I could always do the impressions [...] I did [Eddie] Cantor, [Al] Jolson, Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, Fred Allen' (Starr, 2002, p.27). Levy comments on the impressions given in The Summit performances: Sammy 'did all the usual guys, plus novelties like Billy Eckstien [sic], Vaughan Monroe, and Al Hibbler – but Dean could do an okay Cary Grant and Clark Gable, and Frank, well, Frank could do Cagney at least as good as a school kid' (Levy, 2002, p.127). This overview appears to come from the later Rat Pack performances featuring Sinatra, Martin and Davis alone. The recordings of The Summit performances include Sinatra. Davis and Bishop all contributing Cagney impressions, with Bishop adding Robinson (Rat Pack, 1960a).



The mutual interest in impersonation points to a related yet underlying similarity: the role played by emulation in shaping their professional identities. Within *The Summit*, Lawford's reflection of the personae of the other performers is an internal act of emulation. In turn, their craft as performers was developed by emulating idols of their own. For Martin, this was most notable in his vocal similarity to Bing Crosby; the cultivation of an easy going vocal manner, frequently emphasising the lower baritone registers and echoing the latter's use of ornaments such as appoggiaturas, mordents, and slurs (Tosches, 1999, p.74). Tosches notes further that '[n]o singer who came after Crosby would ever approach a microphone or a song without passing through his shadow' (Tosches, 1999, p.74). Sinatra was certainly inspired by Crosby, but wanted to distance himself musically: "I never wanted to sing like him, because every kid on the block was boo-boo-booing like Crosby. My voice was up higher" (cited in Lahr, 1999, p.14).

For styling, Sinatra turned to more idiosyncratic sources of emulation. Vocally, he admired female singers, striving for the authenticity and intimacy achieved by Billie Holiday, and the articulation of Mabel Mercer. He also appreciated the phrasing of violinist Jascha Heifetz, whose bowing technique allowed the phrase to be sustained with no apparent break during a change in direction. Approaching his voice as an instrument in this way, he sought a vocal technique that would allow a similar smoothness, and found it from the trombone-playing of big-band leader Tommy Dorsey, who would sneak a breath from the corner of his mouth while holding a note. It was the emulation of Dorsey's breath control that underpinned Sinatra's musical technique, his innovative ability to sustain a phrase which offered greater potential for the interpretation of a lyric.

Such emulation is not limited to musical technique in the case of Martin and Davis. Following his split with comedy partner Jerry Lewis, Martin developed a drunken stage persona that became a trademark of his live work and public identity. According to his wife Jeannie Martin ‘He got the act originally from Phil Harris, one of his idols’ (cited in Gehman, 1961, p.63). Coming full circle, Levy detects the influence of Jerry Lewis on the Rat Pack persona of Sammy Davis Jr. Describing himself as a hero of Davis’s, Lewis himself observes that ‘Sammy played off Dean as well as I did’ (Lewis and Kaplan, 2005, p.102). There are noticeable reflections of Lewis’s technique in Davis’s onstage relationship to Martin, as well as Sinatra and Lawford. Both performers adopt high physical and vocal energy to counterbalance the more restrained, less expressive, delivery of their collaborators; both use height, proxemics and eye contact to emphasise themselves as the junior member of the act; both frequently adopt exaggerated facial expressions and comedy voices in their responses (Davis sometimes lapsing into an imitation of Lewis); and both employ a turn to the audience to comment on their collaborator and the unfolding performance situation.

There is a third strand of impersonation that runs through the Rat Pack performances of the 1960s. In a recording of a 1963 Rat Pack performance at the Villa Venice nightclub in Chicago, Davis impersonates white performer Sinatra and black singer Nat King Cole. Sinatra, watching from the sidelines, comments ‘Have you noticed he does his people better than he does ours?’ (Sinatra et al, [1963] 2011). Ethnic impersonation is a staple feature of The Summit performances: Sinatra in particular explores Jewish and Chinese stereotypes. The pervasive influence here trails back further than vaudevillian styles to the blackface minstrel traditions of the nineteenth century.

## Mr Interlocutor(s) and the Endmen

Sammy: You sound awfully colored, Peter.  
Peter: South of England, Charley.  
[onstage at The Sands Hotel]  
(Rat Pack, 1960a)

In some cases, the Rat Pack's early experiences of vaudeville entertainment brought them into direct contact with blackface performance. Clarke recounts Sinatra's first professional connection with the Three Flashes, the vocal trio that he would later join to form the Hoboken Four. Sinatra was given a bit part in two films they were making for the producer Edward 'Major' Bowes:

The short films were called *The Night Club* and *The Minstrel*, and Frank didn't sing but played a waiter, in blackface, which is an indication of where Major Bowes was at: blackface as a vaudeville tradition left over from minstrelsy was already corny in 1935.  
(Clarke, 1998, p.21)

Clarke underestimates the continuing influence of the American blackface tradition, which had proven the dominant form of popular entertainment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Tosches describes minstrelsy as 'still a going form of entertainment in the late thirties' when Dean Martin performed as a blackface singer in a minstrel show (Tosches, 1999, p.75). Even Davis's first stage appearance as a child, c.1930, involved wearing blackface for a parody of Al Jolson's song 'Sonny Boy' (Davis et al, 2012).

The Summit performances make no overt reference to blacking up as a motif. Nonetheless, the influence of minstrelsy infiltrates the performance structure in other ways. The organisation of the troupe in particular echoes the characters, relationships and roles that were developed in the blackface tradition. Toll describes the key figures of 'the interlocutor' and 'the endmen' that emerged in the blackface format. These figures were utilised during the opening section of a typical minstrel show, which (like The Summit) included a mixture of jokes, comic and serious

songs, dances, topical material and a lively, concerted number to finish. The performers were seated in a semicircle, with the interlocutor in the centre and the endmen at the outer points. The interlocutor

orchestrated the loosely structured, heavily improvisational first part to meet the particular audience's tastes. Although unnoticed by the audience, his talent for knowing when to draw out or cut off comedians, when to change to a different type of humor, and whether to vary the prearranged musical selections largely determined the difference between a good and bad first part.

(Toll, 1977, p.53)

In the Rat Pack live performances, Bishop undertakes a very similar practical role, although solely concerned with the comic force of the event, as its musical choices were best delegated to the greater expertise of Sinatra, Davis and Martin. An often-cited story demonstrates the responsibility and trust placed in Bishop for determining the comic shape of the performances:

When Peter wasn't thrilled with a bit about pretending to be a busboy, Frank spat daggers: "Do it how Joey says or get the fuck off the show".

(Levy, 2002, p.127)

Bishop's judgement in comedic matters carries over into the performances themselves, as he continues to manage the direction and impromptu elements of the event. The blackface arrangement of a semicircle of chairs is not operative here, and the performers frequently leave and return to the stage. Bishop often remains in the background, however, alert to the developing performance.

At moments when Lawford had been quiet for some time, for example, Bishop could call him to the microphone asking him to 'say something British'. When Sinatra labours a joke to little response, brandishing a sign at Martin that reads 'Don't Think, Drink', Bishop intervenes and rescues the moment by taking the sign and commenting 'Put it back, he'll think it's an eye test' (Rat Pack 1960c).

Conversely, he also opens up the potential in other unexpected moments, being

particularly alert to Sinatra's physical clowning and placing comic frameworks around it. When Sinatra appears stooped, for example, Bishop draws the audience's attention to it: 'Look at this folks. [To Sinatra] Attaboy, go ahead, do Quasimodo' (Rat Pack, 1960a).

While the practical responsibility for orchestrating the comedic flow of the show rests with Bishop, he does not fulfil the secondary role of the interlocutor. This is more representational in purpose, a performance convention in which 'the interlocutor personified dignity' (Toll, 1977, p.53). Whereas Bishop manages the event through the use of his own comic sharpness, the traditional interlocutor is not a comedian in his own right. He is a source of humour, however, as the comic victim of the endmen, Tambo and Bones. In the blackface tradition, according to Pickering, these characters 'represented the antic spirit of madcap buffoons in ways that stepped the tightrope between black stereotype and subversive humour', supplying the 'temporary abandonment of prevailing norms, that made the minstrel show so popular' (Pickering, 2008, p.16).

The interaction between interlocutor and endmen 'was a test of their opposed personae and, while the butt, Mr Interlocutor was meant to rise above Tambo and Bones's comic sallies' (Pickering, 2008, p.16). His dignity is therefore treated with both reverence and scorn, perceived ambivalently as authoritatively superior yet ridiculously pompous. Within the Rat Pack, the role of interlocutor is broadly split along these lines between Bishop and Sinatra, with the latter taking on this representational function.

Uncontested as holding the most celebrity power amongst the troupe's members, throughout The Summit performances Sinatra is referred to variously as 'The

Leader' and 'The Pope'. There are traces of deference to him that maintain his elevated position in the hierarchy. It is undoubtedly, for example, his prerogative to introduce John F. Kennedy, despite Lawford's position as the would-be president's brother-in-law (Rat Pack, 1960a). He is also allowed the final word on performance choices at points, even by Bishop, and his authority in such matters does not brook contradiction once 'The Leader' has spoken.

Yet this same authority is lampooned by other members of the Rat Pack. Bishop is complicit in this: in one show, he kneels and pretends to kiss Sinatra's hand in mock-fealty; elsewhere he refers variously, and sarcastically, to Sinatra as 'O Ruler of us All, O Exalted One' and 'Danny Dumbwittage' (Rat Pack, 1960a). Bishop's participation in the undercutting of Sinatra's superiority indicates that the relationships of minstrelsy are more fluidly adopted here, as the emcee moves between his own responsibilities as interlocutor and the subversive humour of the endmen.

Lawford, consistent with his diminished role as an alert understudy to the other performers, moves between the roles of deputy-interlocutor and deputy-endman. Following the *Shall We Dance* routine, he adopts the former role, advising Davis to get off the stage and make way for The Leader, as a mark of respect and gratitude for the role in *Ocean's 11* (Rat Pack, 1960a). He is also subjected to ridicule in the interlocutor tradition. As Dorinson notes, Lawford's 'pompous British persona sparked mirth in others' (Dorinson, 2004, p.29). When Lawford presumes to introduce Davis's fiancée, despite admitting to not knowing her, it is Sinatra who now shifts into the endman role, asking 'what the hell are you introducing her for, then?' (Rat Pack, 1960b).

All performers at The Summit mock and receive mockery. It is when this is directed towards an elevated status that it echoes the blackface relationship between endmen and interlocutor. For this reason, it operates whenever Sinatra is the recipient, puncturing his in-group status as The Leader, but also the adulation he receives in the wider public context which Adamowski calls ‘the imaginary domain in which Sinatra ruled as Aristocrat of the emotional life’ (Adamowski, 2004, p.112). Lawford also participates in the undercutting of Sinatra’s dignity. During the latter’s version of ‘Pennies from Heaven’ he appears, with Bishop, and crosses the stage in his underwear (Rat Pack, 1960a).

The consistent endmen of The Summit shows are Martin and Davis, who rarely if ever ascend to the status of interlocutor. Davis had always stood publicly in Sinatra’s shadow, since he was:

the baby of the Rat Pack, born four days before Frank’s tenth birthday, and that banal fact – more than race, size, taste, line of work, personal habits, common friends, political leanings, money, sex or power – was the single governing factor in their relationship. Frank was always the big brother allowing the kid, Sammy, to hang out with the older guys.  
(Levy, 2002)

Martin, on the other hand, was so dismissive of his own celebrity status that he could not assume the mantle of interlocutor with any seriousness. Both performers have greater credibility in mocking Sinatra than Bishop or Lawford as they are his closest equals as entertainers, not only within the Rat Pack but also in the wider field of popular entertainment.

Within The Summit performances, Martin satirizes Sinatra’s intense persona directly. Beginning a short set of songs, he opens with ‘It Takes A Worried Man’, before calling the orchestra to a halt:

Martin: Hold it. [To the conductor] Who the hell's worried, boy?  
That's Sinatra's music. Play my music. Start it where it says  
'As he staggers in'.

(Rat Pack, 1960c)

Davis is more circumspect in his undercutting of Sinatra's power. When Lawford asks whether he is grateful for his role in *Ocean's 11*, he dolefully replies 'you mean the garbage collector?' pointing to the irony of gratitude being expected for such a demeaning role (Rat Pack, 1960a).

As The Rat Pack performances continued into the 1960s, with Bishop and Lawford participating less frequently, Davis became more confident in challenging Sinatra.

Furthermore, the trio of Sinatra, Martin and Davis was more solidly a relationship between The Leader as interlocutor and the others as endmen. At the Kiel Opera House performance in 1965, Sinatra commands the audience and performers to applaud the two orchestras that have performed. Martin replies rebelliously 'I didn't like either band', to



Sinatra's apparent displeasure. Later, when Sinatra is disrupting Davis's introduction to 'Birth of the Blues', Davis looks menacingly at him (pictured above) and jokingly threatens 'You may be my leader, but I'm going to punch you right in your mouth!' (Martin et al, [1963, 1965] 2003).

Such echoes of blackface minstrelsy are neither explicit nor, arguably, conscious in The Summit performances, and are probably more indicative of the pervasive influence the tradition had on popular entertainment, and vaudeville in particular.

The cultural legacy of the minstrel tradition is not only carried in the wearing of blackface or subversively structured relationships, and the use of black-voice is



more explicitly assimilated into The Summit's nightclub performances. As noted, Sinatra already experiments with ethnic impersonations in this context. He also adopts black-voice most readily, dropping in and out of an affected Southern black accent for no apparent purpose other than broadly comic effect. In one sequence at the Copa Room, when a drinks trolley covered with a tablecloth is wheeled onstage, he remarks 'look like Danny Thomas is unner dere. Somebody wid a big nose or sumpin' else'. Later in the routine he revives the same accent, criticising Martin, 'cos you kinda hesitated dere for a moment, boy' (Rat Pack, 1960c). The vocal impression here is consistent with the sonorous tone, grammatical traits and emphatic accenting associated with stereotypical black characters from the blackface tradition through to representations in early Hollywood films.

Lawford also imitates the black Southern accent, though in a more pointed network of references. During the 'Shall We Dance' routine, Davis executes a showstopping tapdance, and then invites Lawford to compete provoking the following exchange:

Peter: It's nice. [adopts black accent] But I ain't goin' follow it

Sammy: [adopts British accent] I say, old man, I thought we were going to engage in something together, as it were?

Peter: [in a broad black accent] No, I think I'm goin' go home, Kingfish.

(Rat Pack, 1960a)

The use of the black accent here is not only part of mutual ethnic impersonation between the two performers. The introductory dialogue to the sequence is developed against the background of the contemporary political situation regarding civil rights. When Lawford first proposes the song and dance duet, it is Davis who introduces black-voice, responding 'Would you lay dat on me one more time, dere, daddy?' The dialogue later continues:

Sammy: If I were you, I wouldn't want to dance with one of the great Jewish Mau Mau dancers of our time.

Peter: Sam, I'm not prejudiced, you know.

Sammy: Yeah, I know your kind. You'll dance with me but you won't go to school with me, will you?

Peter: Wanna room together?

(Rat Pack, 1960a)

Once the duet is underway, Sinatra interrupts from the offstage microphone 'I'd like to see them try this in Little Rock'. The references scattered throughout the section allude to the national crisis that emerged from the attempted integration of nine black students into the previously segregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Widespread resistance to the move escalated the situation to the extent that the State Governor deployed troops to blockade the school and deny entry to the black students, before President Eisenhower ordered his own troops to intervene and escort the black students into the school.

The question of integration – symbolically channelled through Davis's membership of the troupe – is a repeatedly stated theme of *The Summit*. In one show, while Davis is fixing himself a cocktail at the drinks trolley, Bishop puns 'Attaboy, Sam, mix' (Rat Pack, 1960a). In another performance, when Bishop suggests to Sinatra that they should stay in the background during Davis's performance, The Leader replies 'there'll be no segregation here' (Rat Pack, 1960a). The inclusion of Davis in the otherwise white troupe is an act of integration that carries its own political statement. It is also indicative of a wider similarity, the status of all five members as hyphenated-Americans at one remove from a full American identity by virtue of an immigrant ancestry. The negotiation of such compound identities fuels the collaboration, and lends the most complex dimension to its material.

## **The Similar Hats of Hyphenated-Americans**

Joey: [To Sammy] Try not to act so orthodox  
[onstage at The Sands Hotel]  
(Rat Pack, 1960a)

Sinatra's 'outspoken belief in the basic dignity of all human beings, regardless of race or ethnic origin or religion' (Mustazza, 2004, p.34) is well-documented, arguing throughout his career that black entertainers should be afforded equal treatment and hospitality as white entertainers. Hamill records Sinatra's own perspective that his sympathy for the African-American position arises from a shared sense of injustice as an Italian-American: 'we've been there too, man. It wasn't just black people hanging from the end of those fucking ropes' (Hamill, 2003, p.45). Hamill suggests that this is not sensitivity or paranoia on Sinatra's part by pointing to the execution of eleven Italian-Americans by a lynch-mob in 1891 following their acquittal for the murder of corrupt police chief David Hennessy. Berg notes that the overwhelming number of lynchings targeted African-Americans. At the same time:

racial and ethnic hatred not only played a role in the lynching of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Asians. Even so-called white victims sometimes belonged to ethnic groups whose "whiteness," measured by the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant standard, seemed in doubt. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Italian immigrants fell into this category.  
(Berg, 2011, pp.117-8)

The alienation that Sinatra experienced and observed as a consequence of being Italian-American led to a number of public and forceful statements advocating racial and religious tolerance. The jokes at Sammy Davis's expense in The Summit and later Rat Pack performances are criticised for demeaning Davis on racial grounds. Taraborrelli suggests they 'baffled' commentators through their 'complete

disregard for the ideal of racial tolerance during their shows' and cites Davis's later perspective that 'I had to bite my tongue a lot' (Taraborrelli, 1999, p.285).

The question is far more vexed than the simple accusation of racist humour would allow for. Racial jokes provoke anxiety by operating on the border between tolerance and intolerance: should the joke itself be tolerated as a non-serious, or even ironic, act? Or are such jokes always already markers of intolerant attitudes? Such troubling questions of racial (in)tolerance certainly circulate within The Summit performances. In line with Sinatra's perceptions, however, the Rat Pack's treatment of ethnic status extends beyond the single issue of black identity.

In his response to the Rat Pack's shows at the Fontainebleau Hotel, Gehman 'began to feel that perhaps at times they went too far in their references to each other's ancestry and religion' (Gehman, 1961, p.74). The viewpoint here provides contemporary recognition that matters of national, racial and religious identity were a noticeable preoccupation of The Summit shows. It further suggests that this was not solely, or even primarily, perceived as directed towards Davis. Bishop's persistent referencing of Sinatra and Martin's Italian heritage is equally judged to have worn thin over the course of the evening. As already seen, Lawford was similarly lampooned for his Britishness. Bishop's non-American ancestry received no explicit attention, except through jokes related to his Jewish faith as the distinguishing marker of a white East European character distinct from the Mediterranean heritage of Italian-Americans.

Whether Gehman considers 'too far' to be a matter of the volume or character of such jokes is not clear. There is a point of restraint and forethought in the Rat Pack's own limitations on racial and religious banter at The Summit. Bishop vetoed

the onstage use of the word ‘dago’, a derogatory term for Italians jokingly applied by Martin and Sinatra to each other. He argued his objection on the basis that the Italian-American performers could not subsequently challenge the use of the term outside of the act: Sinatra already had a reputation for violence against anyone who insulted him on ethnic grounds. According to Taraborrelli, ‘Frank agreed, and neither he nor the rest of the fellows used the word onstage again’ (Taraborrelli, 1999, p.284). This is not strictly true. Live recordings of the Rat Pack post-1963 – minus Bishop and Lawford – clearly include Martin using the term, or the abbreviation ‘dag’, in reference to Sinatra.

It is also in this later context, 1963 – 65, that discomfort with such jokes became more specifically focussed on those about Davis’s black identity and most of the onstage jokes that are cited come from this later period. This may be reflective of the ongoing intensification of the civil rights debate during this period, which consistently informed media discourse about Davis (see Early, 2001). Within the act, it was also a question of numbers: the circulation of jokes at The Summit covered a diverse range of national, religious and racial identities. Once the quintet reduced to a trio, it was emphatically two white Italian-Americans of Christian heritage exchanging banter with one Jewish African-American. An outnumbered Davis was viewed as a more isolated victim.

Santurri argues that:

it is hard not to wince at the accounts of Sinatra’s public racial jokes at Davis’s expense – even though the jokes seemed bereft of genuinely racist motivation and were clearly part of an act incorporating the kind of good-natured barbs one innocuously hurls at the best of friends. Yet the reason the jokes are unsettling despite their apparent lack of authentically racist intention is that they reinforce the patterns of subordination constitutive of Sinatra’s relation with Davis. [...] only

the most privileged among the vassals were permitted by the lord to respond in kind. From all indications, Davis was not so permitted.  
(Santurri, 2004, p.206)

Broadly speaking, this account seems a reasonable overview of the source of the unease that accompanies the racial jokes in these later Rat Pack performances.

There is little question that the jokes constitute mockery grounded in racial identity, or that they presume a certain power relation. This could, of course, be extended to note that the reinforcement of Sinatra's authority over Davis is not only a consolidation of their personal and professional relationship, but also emblematic of the wider political oppression of black (and Jewish) people from a dominant white (and Christian) position. With civil rights as a highly divisive issue in contemporary domestic politics, such jokes would undoubtedly be deeply uncomfortable.

There are difficulties with such a reading, however. In the first instance, given the combined professional experience and backgrounds of these performers, it seems unlikely that they would be naïve about the impact of such material. Although initiated in the light entertainment of vaudeville, Sinatra and Davis were both politically sensitive, out of commitment and necessity respectively. Sinatra in particular had been politically outspoken throughout his career, since his controversially public involvement in Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 re-election campaign. He had similarly rallied The Summit performers as Kennedy supporters in 1960. His closeness to the Kennedy campaign also forced him to compromise two defiant political statements he intended to make in that year: the hiring of Albert Maltz, a screenwriter who had been imprisoned as a communist in the McCarthy era; and his agreement to act as Best Man at Davis's interracial marriage to Swedish actress May Britt. As a concession to the election campaign, Maltz was sacked (with full pay) and Davis's wedding was postponed until after the election.

Despite Davis's own support and concessions, the Kennedys refused to allow him to appear in the inauguration gala that Sinatra was producing. According to Nancy Sinatra, 'it was one of the few times [Frank] ever felt at such a loss. In the past he'd [...] been able to protest, had helped bring about change. But now he could do nothing' (Sinatra, 1985, p.98). Sinatra's frustration was mainly due to his longstanding activism on behalf of advancing civil equality. It also demonstrates his awareness of the public statement that would be made by the inclusion or exclusion of Davis at such a significant event.

Quincy Jones, who conducted the orchestra at the 1965 Kiel Opera House performance, suggests that Davis's level of inclusion in the Rat Pack was an act of substantive political importance:

Sammy could do anything that anyone else in that group could. And that was the first time you ever saw anything like that going on. Before that, you would just have [...] situations in which the black person was always in some subservient role. Sammy, on the other hand, was an equal.

(Jones, 1990, p.119)

The profound racial statement, in this view, was Davis's equality in terms of ability, as well as the onstage and offstage privileges he accessed alongside his white colleagues. Implicit in this view is a perspective that the full inclusion of Davis in the troupe was as progressive and contentious in its public commitment as his interracial marriage. Significantly, Jones's perspective on equality contradicts Santurri's view that Davis is locked into subservience by the use of racial humour.

Within the Rat Pack performances, no racial joke exists as a self-contained closed statement that captures the meaning or intention of the act. In the framing of banter, as seen in the exchange above between Davis and Lawford, jokes are sites of dialogical interplay open to challenge, rebuttal and contestation. This is the

fundamental difference between the Rat Pack's jokes about national, racial and religious identity and their jokes rooted in gender and sexuality. From the avowedly public masculine and heterosexual identities of its members, the Rat Pack's belittling of women and gay people is a simplistic act of homogenization that, in its sexist and homophobic finality, is closed against contradiction. None of the members defend a feminist or homosexual position, while women and gay people are performatively excluded from a right to reply.

On questions of race, nationality and religion, however, the troupe's shared hyphenated-American heritage covers a heterogeneity of personal identities that is internally subjected to ongoing attack and defence. Performed through such a comic framework, Davis's opportunity and ability to retaliate was often the very point of a sequence of jokes concerning race. The recordings of the later performances suggest that Sammy was not obliged to bite his tongue publicly in response to the racial jokes.

His retaliations included jokes that tested Sinatra's leadership, consistent with the structural role of the endman, such as the threat to punch him in the mouth quoted above. This joke also suggests the intensification of the violence of such humour – far removed from Davis's gentler humour at The Summit – consistent with the deepening battle for civil rights. Outside of the Rat Pack performances, Davis was known to comment on Sinatra's status as leader in racial and political terms:

Another fan asked him about Frank Sinatra and he answered with the crack he reserves for predominantly white audiences: "Sinatra? Sure, he's the leader," he said, "but he's your leader. My leader is Martin Luther King."

(Brown, 1962, p.229)



Through such public statements, the challenge to Sinatra's authority that informs the interlocutor-endmen relationships spills over from the performative to the political context, and places a specifically racial limitation on his leadership. It also marks a critical point of racial difference between Sinatra and Davis, despite the former's observations of shared experiences of bigotry across Italian- and African-American histories.

Alongside the diminishment of Sinatra's authority, Davis also draws power around himself through allusion to events in the ongoing battle for civil rights. During a performance at The Sands Hotel in September 1963, Sinatra interrupts Davis's performance with one of the stock racial jibes adopted by the trio in such darkened nightclub rooms:

Frank: Better keep smiling, Sam, so everybody knows where you are.

Sam: [laughing] You fellers go ahead. You ain't got many rights left.

Dean: No, but we sure got a couple of lefts.  
(Martin et al, [1963] 2008)

While Sinatra and Martin score moderate laughter, it is Davis's comeback which achieves the most resounding response, with gales of laughter running into applause. In comic terms, it is a victorious retaliation from Davis that gathers the audience to his corner.

Later in the same performance, Martin rolls out another racially-allusive gag which, through its inconsistency with Martin's onstage relationship to Davis, ironizes a white distaste for integration:

Dean: [to Sammy, who has placed a hand on his shoulder] Hey, hey, hey, hey! I'll sing with ya, I'll dance with ya, I'll go to parties with ya, I'll play on the lawn with ya, but don't touch me!  
(Martin et al, [1963] 2008)

When Martin clarifies that he is 'only kidding', Davis's response – which again draws applause – refers back to the military interventions of the Little Rock crisis:

Sammy: You'd better be kidding or you'd see some troops on this stage.  
(Martin et al, [1963] 2008)

In both of the above responses, Davis redresses the balance of power by evoking audience, military and presidential support for his cause and consequently weakening and outnumbering his assailants. The banter here does not subscribe to the oppressive power balance that maintains in the real world: at an imaginative and performative level, it acknowledges and then exceeds the shifts in civil rights that are advancing in legislative and political fields by playing out the same intense battle in a comic register.

Even so, while the historical context makes the jokes about black civil rights the most potent and visible theme of later Rat Pack performances, questions of racial and national identity are still not reduced to this single issue. Davis also mocks the Italian-American identities of Martin and Sinatra, as he had done with Lawford's Englishness at The Summit. At a 1963 Sands Hotel performance, Martin modifies the words of 'Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?' to 'Did you ever see a Jew-jitsu?' Davis immediately assumes outrage and interrupts:

Sammy: Would you like it if I came out here and sang 'Did you ever see a wop-sicle'?

Dean: Hold it! Hold it! You... you hold it!

Sammy: I ain't gonna hold it, whitey...  
(Martin et al, [1963] 2008)

The mutual (in)tolerance of this exchange reiterates that the racial banter of the Rat Pack is not solely directed at Sammy Davis Jr. In these later performances this may appear the case, since it positions Davis in a minority relation to his dominant colleagues, accentuated against the contentious political background of civil rights debates and battles. At the same time, the cut and thrust of the banter is a residue of the earlier, more complex national, racial and religious interactions of The Summit. In other words, the need to negotiate and defend one's national, racial and religious identity, by virtue of an immigrant ancestry, remains one of the consistent criteria for inclusion in the troupe that transcends the shifting membership across this entire period.

Pugliese notes 'the double bind confronted by all immigrants to America: The necessity of assimilating into American culture while retaining a distinct ancestral identity' (Pugliese, 2004, p.7). The Rat Pack performances exist in the space between these aspirational and historical identities, neither one nor the other but as the ongoing, and ultimately irresolvable negotiation of both. Lawford's integral position, as the understudy whose contribution involves the failed construction of an idealised persona through emulation of the other performers, is motivated and thwarted by this double bind. The same tension operates in the other members.

Brinkley has described Sinatra as 'the little guy who bucked the establishment and a charter member of that same prevailing culture' (Brinkley, 2004, p.18); he is also 'so powerful and yet somehow always the underdog at the prize fight' (Brinkley, 2004, p.20). The gap between these contradictory positions is the gap that allows him to stake a claim as The Leader and to have this claim both honoured and roundly rebutted in every Rat Pack performance. Davis is acclaimed as the most

fully-realised nightclub performer of the quintet; yet he is diminished by race and youth, performing his own junior status through the same comic mannerisms that Lewis employed in relation to Martin. Bishop, credited with holding the Rat Pack performances together, is ‘in it, but not of it’ (Gehman, 1961, p.72). Rojek’s perception of the Rat Pack as ‘an extended tribute to the values of hedonism, optimism and easy-living’ (Rojek, 2004, p.26) is a common one. Bishop, with a public image as an abstinent, worldweary grafter, rejects the epicurean values that seemingly define membership.

Martin, in many ways, is the most complete member of the Rat Pack: a skilled vaudevillian of hyphenated-American origin who carries himself with assurance and performs the hedonistic attitude. This is completed by his cultivated aura as a ‘*menefreghista* – one who simply did not give a fuck’ (Tosches, 1999, p.52). This apparent success in breaching the hyphenated divide – by virtue of not caring about reconciling the opposites – positions Martin as the polar extreme to Lawford within the act as the realisation of the Rat Pack ideal. Like Lawford’s, however, this is also a carefully cultivated act.

Martin’s drunken persona at this time not only emulated Phil Harris artistically but extended into a contrived offstage illusion, as Gehman recounts: ‘At parties he seldom has more than two shots of Scotch or vodka; but when photographers arrive and other celebrities begin concealing their glasses, he keeps his in his hand’ (Gehman, 1961, p.63). He cites an anonymous but longstanding colleague of Martin’s who theorizes that the drunken persona is not only an effective comic framework but also alleviates Martin’s ‘terrific inferiority complex’ about his

abilities as a performer: 'He figures that if he's about half-swacked, or looks like it, people will excuse him if he isn't good or funny' (Gehman, 1961, p.63).

Through this emulation and contrivance, Martin masks rather than reconciles the discrepancies of hyphenated identity. Nonetheless, it is this image of reconciliation that the Rat Pack sets out to emulate. Martin was, according to Zehme, 'the man [Sinatra] could not be, but wished he was' (Zehme, 1997, p.54). It is in this sense that the Rat Pack only exists in the imaginations of those not in it; what is significant is that those who are in it are also not in it. The nightclub performances at The Summit are the space of the hyphen itself, the gap between historical and aspirational identities where belonging is not an option since the fundamental criterion for membership is the paradoxical desire to belong.

This act of emulation is also at the root of the Rat Pack's descent from the blackface tradition. Toll notes that blackface originates within a growing entertainment movement that seeks to define American popular culture that is distinct from European models. It did so through the authenticating claims that it emulated African-American performance. Minstrelsy quickly became 'a national institution, one that more than any other of its time was truly shaped by and for the masses of average Americans' (Toll, 1977, p.26). Cultural identification with the influential form, which was already occupied with a representational form suspended between two distinct identities, became a mechanism for national assimilation. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, blackface increasingly concerned itself with a wider range of immigrant caricatures, developing Japanese, German and Irish stereotypes. It also became an opportunistic space for members of these stereotyped communities to engage as professional entertainers, with Irish-American and

African-American performers being particularly successful. The basis in impersonation, commitment to variety entertainment and exploration of assumed identities established a comedic template for the Rat Pack as a later generation of hyphenated-Americans, irreconcilably situated between the old and new countries.

## **Conclusion**

Increasing documentation of the Rat Pack in live performance, especially The Summit appearances of the quintessential membership, allow for greater assessment of the unifying features of the troupe. Against the perception that this is primarily a social gathering, the apparent chaos of these performances belies a consistent level of skill, structure and craft that lends coherence to the performance. This is grounded in the entertainers' own experiences of vaudevillian performance, and locates then in a tradition of popular entertainment that stretches further back to the blackface minstrelsy of the nineteenth century.

This common background has a particular shared focus in impersonation. This constitutes more than an extra dimension to the variety programme of the troupe's performances. In the form of emulation, it is a motivating force in the individual performers' development of their professional persona and abilities; and it is the driving force of the performances themselves. The Rat Pack is an imaginary, rather than ontological, collective and the members themselves are engaged in trying to become this mythical troupe. In pursuit of this, they rely on impersonation, while testing, undercutting and strengthening aspects of each others' identities.

This is most emphatically a treatment of ethnic identities, explored in comic, stereotypical, political, powerful, weak and aggressive modes. This points to the

shared identities of the performers as hyphenated-Americans with distinct ancestral heritages. What is ultimately performed by the troupe is the limitation of belonging: the performances cannot abolish the hyphen between ancestry and aspiration, and must constantly circulate in the space where membership, or assimilation, remains out of reach. The Rat Pack imaginary is the illusory character who performs reconciliation of the hyphenated divide.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> It is unlikely that Barrie is Sitwell's sexually scandalous figure who paid for the privilege of performing. Barrie subsequently had a celebrated spell as a performer, including as pantomime Dame in London, before dying in the Great War.
- <sup>2</sup> From the Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey.
- <sup>3</sup> Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey.
- <sup>4</sup> Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey
- <sup>5</sup> Written by Bob F. Sear, Worton David and Walter Wilson. From the private collection of Tony Lidington.
- <sup>6</sup> Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey.
- <sup>7</sup> Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey.
- <sup>8</sup> Private collection of Tony Lidington.
- <sup>9</sup> Excerpts from these recordings re available online at YouTube. Links include:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgiLmj56zKI>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iN7kswMmC4M>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GVDA34frwQ>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LHiE-lgkkM>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DI1d34XtODs>  
Some excerpts on the site, and the recordings – those that do not feature either Peter Lawford or Joey Bishop – are wrongly attributed to 1960, however, and probably date from 1963.
- <sup>10</sup> Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot8MXNW0ur0> [Accessed 8 December 2012].



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