

01/01/07

Professor David Roediger

U of I grad Samson Raphaelson is enjoying a nice little comeback lately, a quarter of a century after his death. Members of the marching band might recognize the name. A song that he coauthored in the 1920s has recently turned up and undergone a revival with, as the university's Website reports, the band featuring it this season after points-after-touchdowns. You have heard "Fight Illini: The Stadium Song" if you go to games. Playing it is appropriate enough. After graduating during World War One, Raphaelson stayed on to play a leading role in the fund-raising for Memorial Stadium, write the first account of the stadium's story, and orbit around the marching band as the figure of Chief Illiniwek took shape in the 20s to the strains of songs like "Fight Illini."

Beyond the corn fields none of those accomplishments account for the extent to which Raphaelson's name has recently resurfaced. He is discussed instead in connection with his role in bringing into being the foundational talking film, *The Jazz Singer*. The film, which also is the critical link between blackface minstrelsy and modern U.S. culture, turned eighty this year. It was recently the subject of a lavish retrospective at the American Cinematheque in Beverly Hills.

The story of the Raphaelson as the U of I football fan and that of Raphaelson as the sophisticated writer responsible for the play on which *The Jazz Singer* was based are in fact the same story. This reality greatly complicates the ways in which the university ought to think about its own racial past, about its students' present flirtations with blackface as well as with other racial impersonations, and about its inability to let go of Chief Illiniwek.

At about the same time that Raphaelson wrote *Days of Atonement*, which would become *The Jazz Singer*, a lynching occurred on the edge of the University of Missouri campus. The great African American writer W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that Missouri could claim the dubious honor of being the first university to offer a course in racist atrocity. University of Illinois could similarly cast itself as the academic home of modern blackface minstrelsy.

The story is sadly fascinating. In 1917, Raphaelson saw a performance of the imperialist classic *Robinson Crusoe* in Champaign-Urbana. Al Jolson, the eventual star of *The Jazz Singer*, headlined in multiple roles, one of them—think about this—in blackface as the "native" character Friday in the *Crusoe* story. Raphaelson fell in love:

I shall never forget the first five minutes of Jolson -- his velocity, the amazing fluidity with which he shifted from tremendous absorption in his audience to a tremendous absorption in his song ... when he finished I turned to the girl beside me, dazed with memories of my childhood on the East Side ... my God, this isn't a jazz singer, this is a cantor!

The horrors and history of white performance in blackface here fully gave way before an opportunity to use racial disguise as if it had nothing to do with antiblack racism. On this view blackface could even be said to pay respects to jazz and to combat racism in the form of anti-Jewish sentiments.

The result was *Days of Atonement*, published in *Everybody's Magazine* in 1922, at about the same moment that Raphaelson wrote "Fight Illini." Dramatizing something of Jolson's own life, the play followed the Americanization-through-music of a young entertainer and the ways in which his Jewish

roots both were transcended and survived. Jolson and George Jessel, then the bigger star of the two, both pitched production of the play on stage and as a film hard.

Approached early on was D.W. Griffith, who rejected making a movie of the play as too "racial." Presumably this meant too Jewish as Griffith's vicious use of blackface performance in the service of antiblack racism in *Birth of a Nation*, had already linked the minstrel tradition and U.S. silent film, as *The Jazz Singer* was to do for "talkies." When the film finally appeared in 1927, the victimization of African Americans by blackface was so off the studio's radar that it was touted as being made "for the sake of racial tolerance" because it allegedly critiqued anti-Semitism.

We should keep Samson Raphaelson in mind as we think about the persistent confusion and racism of young white partygoers on campus and the reappearance of Chief Illiniwek at this year's University homecoming parade as two sides of a weighty coin. Those blackfaced partygoers are routinely criticized as representing a departure from the traditions of a liberal and inclusive university. They ought to be criticized. But so should the traditions, which are in truth anything but inclusive or antiracist. At their liberal best, such traditions reproduced and recreated white supremacy.

Samson Raphaelson was very far from conforming to the academic and Hollywood stereotype that has conservatives, blue collar workers and hicks doing all of the heavy lifting required for building and rebuilding white racism. Jewish and urbane, he lived as an undergraduate with the great founder of the Catholic Worker movement Dorothy Day. After Illinois, he joined forces with the director Ernest Lubitsch in Hollywood, writing such witty and marvelous films as *Heaven Can Wait* and *Trouble in Paradise*.

During the post-World War 2 Red Scare in Hollywood, his politics earned him the enmity of Red Channels, the anti-Communist scandal sheet that insisted he should be blacklisted as a radical. When he returned briefly as a celebrity to teach writing at Illinois his star students included that embodiment of U.S.-style cosmopolitanism, Playboy founder Hugh Hefner. Just before Raphaelson died, the left-liberal journalist Bill Moyers filmed a warm tribute to him.

Nor, for sheer ugliness of racism, was *The Jazz Singer* anything like *Birth of a Nation*. Indeed when the late Michael Rogin dissected the special dangers presented by the modernist blackface of *The Jazz Singer*, precisely because it combined a white supremacist form of racial disguise with liberal and pro-religious tolerance subtexts, his *Blackface, White Noise* generated a host of tortured defenses of the film: but Jolson admired jazz; but the impersonation expressed solidarity with Blacks; but, lighten up.

As complicated as the whole story is and must be, Rogin was right and his critics wrong. Similarly the important historian of nineteenth-century blackface, Alexander Saxton, was right to insist that the very form of the act undermined any potential for it to carry progressive messages within a white supremacist social order. Indeed the very claim to control race and to decide if blackface, and Indian-face, are well-meaning, admiring, or somehow not about race is itself an act of white privilege. When the contemporary students who party in blackface or around anti-Mexican stereotypes offer the same justifications for their behavior they act up within a tradition.

It pains me coming from really southern Illinois to sometimes hear people in the university imagine that small-town people there are a reason that the university cannot do the right thing and acknowledge Chief Illiniwek as a lengthy and racist mistake. Mostly, none of us down there cared about the Chief (Salukis, maybe) as I grew up and do not care now. The Chief was made, endlessly marketed and

scandalously held onto for fifteen years after intense protest by Indians by cosmopolitan, often liberal, university-connected people, most powerfully by trustees and administrators.

Those same forces are now unable to acknowledge that the Chief was their, and their university's, mistake. They resort to all sorts of fancy footwork around whether the eighty years of selling it—not "him," as a symbol of whiteness the Chief requires an impersonal pronoun—was a mistake at all, or just a phase we all needed to go through. Perhaps our reflecting on the uncomfortably close local histories of modern blackface minstrelsy and of Chief Illiniwek will lead students, if not administrators and trustees, to a little more clarity on these issues.

David Roediger (Department of History/University of Illinois)