minstrel show,

indigenous American theatrical form comprising a group of blackfaced white minstrels whose material caricatured the singing and dancing of Negro slaves. It was popular in England as well as the United States, reaching its zenith between 1850 and 1870. The form gradually declined, eventually disappeared from the professional theatres, and became purely a vehicle for amateurs. Although its influence was evident in vaudeville, radio, television, and motion pictures in the 20th century, its chief impact came through its folk music and dances, which made permanent contributions to American culture.

The father of the American minstrel show was Thomas Dartmouth Rice, popularly known as "Jim Crow." He was an early Negro impersonator whose art created a vogue for blackfaced minstrelsy. The pioneer company, the Virginia Minstrels, a quartet headed by Daniel Decatur Emmett, first performed in 1843. Other noteworthy companies were Bryant's, Campbell's, and Haverly's, but the most important of the early companies was the Christy Minstrels, who played on Broadway for nearly 10 years; Stephen Foster wrote songs for this company.

The format of the minstrel show, usually in two parts, was established by the Christy company and changed little thereafter. In part one the performers were arranged in a semicircle, with the interlocutor in the centre and the end men--Mr. Tambo, who played the tambourine, and Mr. Bones, who rattled the bones--at the ends. The interlocutor, in whiteface, usually wore formal attire; the others, in blackface, wore gaudy swallow-tailed coats and striped trousers. The program opened with a chorus, often as a grand entrance, and at the conclusion of the song the interlocutor gave the command, "Gentlemen, be seated." Then followed a series of jokes between the interlocutor and end men, interspersed with ballads, comic songs, and instrumental numbers, chiefly on the banjo and violin. The second part, or olio (mixture or medley), consisted of a series of individual acts that concluded with a hoedown or walk-around in which every member did a specialty number while the others sang and clapped. Occasionally there was a third part consisting of a farce, burlesque, or comic opera.

Minstrel troupes composed of black performers were formed after the Civil War. Some, like the Hicks and Sawyer Minstrels, had black owners and managers; some, including Callendar's Consolidated Spectacular Colored Minstrels, were popular in both the United States and England in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially these were all-male companies, including male alto and soprano singers; the larger black minstrel shows included bands of multitalented instrumentalists to play marches for the troupe's parades in the daytime and perform string accompaniments for the evening shows. In addition to some music by Stephen Foster, their repertoire featured music by black composers such as James Bland, a popular singer-banjoist who wrote some 700 songs, including "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny." In general, these minstrel shows were the only theatrical medium in which gifted black performers of the period could support themselves. A few of the larger companies employed both black and white performers. By the 20th century, women also appeared in minstrel shows, and the great blues singers Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were both minstrel performers early in their careers. Minstrel shows had effectively disappeared by the early 20th century, but the effects of its racial stereotyping persisted in performance mediums well into mid-century.