

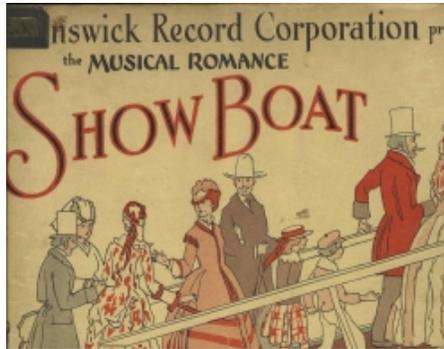
“Show Boat” (1932)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Todd Decker (guest post)*



Helen Morgan



Original album package



Paul Robeson

Before the long-playing record (or LP) made original cast albums a key component of the Broadway musical, record companies recognized the potential of turning a Broadway score into a unified experience for home listeners. The 1927 musical “Show Boat” was the first to receive this treatment. In 1932, the year of “Show Boat’s” first Broadway revival, the Brunswick label released a set of four specially-recorded 78s of songs from the show. The discs were bound in a handsome album featuring cover art taken from the sheet music for the Broadway show which had, in turn, been derived from the cover of Edna Ferber’s 1926 novel. The lavish set’s liner notes described the collection as an “album of music from one of the most tuneful and popular operettas of the modern day.” Conducted by Victor Young and using custom orchestral arrangements—not those played by the pit orchestra in the theater—the Brunswick set features two singing stars who shaped “Show Boat” both in the minds of its creators and for the show’s enthusiastic early audiences: Paul Robeson and Helen Morgan. Music critics praised the unity of Young’s collection, “obviously recorded as a unit and with great care.” And even though listening to all eight sides would have been a clunky affair at the time—involving much changing and flipping of discs—Young clearly imagined the set as a whole. The inclusion of sides titled “Overture” and “‘Show Boat’ Finale” suggest a partial playing order. The whole was touted on the album notes as a “Brunswick Production” of “Show Boat”: here, a record company endeavored to put on a Broadway show in the realm of sound.

The “Overture” is an elaborate instrumental fantasia on themes from the score. It’s an original musical work—not the overture heard in the theater—and anticipates composer Jerome Kern’s own much longer “Scenario for Orchestra” on themes from “Show Boat” created for the Cleveland Orchestra in 1942. Most Broadway overtures were medleys of hit tunes from the show. Young’s overture features the choruses of “Show Boat’s” best-known love songs—“Why Do I Love You” and “Make Believe”—in alternation with meandering explorations of mournful themes from the score, several drawn from a cut song titled “Mis’ry’s Comin’ Aroun’,” which survived in the original 1927 overture and in fragmentary moments of underscoring. The effect is one of moving from light tunes celebrating love to serious melodies evoking Negro spirituals, shifting from sunlight to shade, from white lovers to black laborers, capturing the back and forth of “Show Boat’s” interracial cast and content. The “Overture” concludes with a fugue based on

the opening notes of “Ol’ Man River”: Young explores Kern’s melody by way of strict counterpoint, a musically rigorous approach distant from the sound of Broadway and popular music. But the effect isn’t forced, as several prominent themes in Kern’s score are related to each other in a way that invites such treatment.

Easily the best remembered and most-often re-issued side from the Brunswick album is “Ol’ Man River” as sung by Paul Robeson. Kern and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II wrote this song expressly for Robeson, hoping he would take the role of Joe and introduce “Ol’ Man River” on Broadway. Robeson initially demurred—passing the role and song to his black singing peer Jules Bledsoe, who first sang “Ol’ Man River” on stage in December 1927, where Broadway’s predominantly white audiences embraced it with a rapture that has never abated. But within months Robeson played Joe on the London stage and he made “Ol’ Man River” a central part of his very popular concerts of spirituals. (In later decades, Robeson would change the lyrics and use “Ol’ Man River” as a protest song: on Young’s set he sings the original words.) Robeson took the part of Joe in the 1932 Broadway revival of “Show Boat” and his recording of “Ol’ Man River” under Young’s baton captures this historic moment. (Robeson had already recorded the song twice in 1928: a pop music version with Paul Whiteman’s band and a recording with the orchestra and cast of the London production. The latter, recorded in Drury Lane Theater where “Show Boat” was playing, qualifies as a “cast recording” in the strict sense.)

Robeson has only one side of the eight in Young’s set. Helen Morgan has two: the nightclub singer who introduced the role of Julie in “Show Boat” offers both “Bill” and “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.” “Bill” had been added to “Show Boat” specifically to feature Morgan’s talents. She began singing in speakeasies and nightclubs in Prohibition New York, where, in the words of one newspaper wag, she encouraged “nightclub cynics to see into their napkins and resolve to lead better, nobler lives.” “Bill,” a Kern song from 1918, was lightly revamped to work as Morgan’s act two feature in the show. The moment became so famous ticket buyers approaching the box office at the Ziegfeld Theater where “Show Boat” played were known to ask if it was, indeed, “that show where she sings about her poor Bill.” Morgan would keep on singing about “her poor Bill” to the end of her short life: she died of alcoholism-related illness in 1941. Morgan’s Brunswick recording of “Bill” captures a cultural touchstone of Prohibition and Depression-era America in lavish fashion, a far cry from the simple way she sang the song with mostly just piano accompaniment in the show.

“Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” had already been written when Morgan took the role of Julie but she managed to make it her own. In context in “Show Boat,” “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man” is described as a song “only colored folks sing.” Julie, a woman of mixed race parentage who is passing as white, defiantly sings the song even though her knowledge of it raises suspicions about her racial status. Hammerstein wrote blackness into the lyrics, dropping final “g”s throughout and using an initial “d” in the place of “th,” resulting in the song’s less that politically correct title. The verse’s opening exhortation—“Oh listen, sister”—suggests a black voice hailing a black listener. Kern, likewise and uncharacteristically, built musical markers of blackness into the tune, which incorporates many blue notes and has a verse built on the 12-bar blues realized in the full-voice quarter-note chords typical of bluesy Broadway songs at the time. The blackness of the musical text is over-determined. Morgan, who recorded the song several times and sang it in the 1929 and 1936 “Show Boat” films, consistently kept the song’s black

elements at arm's length. Her "can't" carries a hint of "cahn't"—an affectation that crops up regularly in her recordings of other songs—and she persists in putting the final "g"'s back in, even if it spoils Hammerstein's rhyme scheme. She always sings "that" instead of "dat." Morgan sang squarely on the beat and didn't lean on the blue notes. In short, she sang it "white."

Three sides in Young's set feature love duets composed for "Show Boat's" white romantic leads Magnolia and Ravenal: "You Are Love," "Make Believe" and "Why Do I Love You." These characters and songs hail from the vibrant operetta tradition of the 1920s. We might today think of that decade as the heyday of jazzy musical comedy on Broadway, typified by the syncopated tunes of George Gershwin, as interpreted by Fred and Adele Astaire, in shows like "Lady, Be Good!" (1924) and "Funny Face" (1927). In fact, the longest running shows of the 1920s were operettas featuring singers with trained voices. And the 1927 "Show Boat" featured one of Broadway's brightest operetta stars: Howard Marsh as Ravenal. The love duet "You Are Love," which features the highest notes, was composed expressly for Marsh, who was famous for his high notes. Marsh as Ravenal sang no fewer than three high B-flats each night in "Show Boat": each followed by a scene-ending blackout, the high notes hopefully cueing wild applause. Marsh never recorded any selections from "Show Boat" although visitors to the Library of Congress Recorded Sound Research Center can listen to his rare recordings of sentimental Irish waltz tunes like "Rose of Athlone."

On Young's set, tenor James Melton sings "You Are Love" and "Make Believe" as solos. Both are duets in the show although it wasn't difficult to change them: in the verse for the former, which opens Young's arrangement, the single line assigned to Magnolia in the show is simply taken by Melton. Melton sings "You Are Love" in the original key, including Marsh's signature high B-flat at the close. The arrangement adopts a popular feel: listen, for example, to the cocktail-style piano in the instrumental chorus. This is not the sound of "Show Boat" onstage.

The set closes with a side titled "Finale," another orchestral fantasy of tunes from the score. The "Finale" starts with a haunting fragment sung in the show by the black chorus at a dramatic moment, followed by a quick tempo version of "Why Do I Love You" (which contrasts with the rather slow, sentimental vocal version of the tune given its own side in the set and featuring Countess Olga Albani and Frank Munn). And, predictably, the "Finale" closes with "Ol' Man River," initially as a tuba solo. The connection between this bass tune and instrumental solos in the low register proved to be long lasting. (Several jazz bassists would record versions of "Ol' Man River," including Ray Brown and Eugene Wright.) At the close of the "Finale," Joe's voice re-enters joined by a chorus, re-creating the close of "Show Boat" onstage. But it's not Robeson singing here and the difference between just any bass-baritone and Robeson's unique voice can be heard in this somewhat generic close to the Brunswick set.

Brunswick's "Show Boat—Selections" was far from the last such album. Between 1949 and 1966, at least 20 studio-cast "Show Boats" were recorded and released in the United States and Great Britain (where the show has always been very popular). These audio-only productions each offer highlights from the score—typically the same selections chosen for inclusion in 1932--and use both a broad orchestral idiom and popular music stylings of the moment, echoing the arranging choices made by Young. All these discs reach back to the model of Brunswick's

pioneering set from 1932, which brought a bold Broadway musical into the home in a format designed to please a variety of listeners.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.