BOOK REVIEW

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In 1835, a year before he died at the Alamo, Davy Crockett visited the infamous Five Points section of New York City.

The cellars of many houses there, he discovered, were filled with people fiddling and dancing like “nobody ever saw before in this world.” The “heaven-born” revelers were “white and black all hug-em-snug together, happy as lords and ladies. And with a dram handy to all.”

Seven years later, Charles Dickens, the celebrated English novelist, included the Five Points on his tour of the United States. As he turned off Anthony Street, Dickens made his way down sets of stairs, stepping into a dance hall-cum-brothel, frequented by Blacks, and stumbling on men and women entwined together.

Other stops included Almack's dance hall, where William Henry Lane (“Juba”) performed his “dance of life,” leapt on the bar, laughed the laugh “of a million Jim Crows,” and ordered a drink.

COMMINGLING IN THE 1880S

In “Everybody's Doin' It,” Dale Cockrell, a professor emeritus of musicology at Vanderbilt University and author of “Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World,” draws on first-hand observations, tabloids, police and court records, and reports issued by social reformers, to provide a vivid account of New York's brothels, dance halls and dives.

In this underworld, in which working-class Blacks and Whites danced madly to wild music, played by Negro and White musicians, and prostitutes seemed to be everywhere, he claims, popular music, including ragtime and jazz, was born.

The word “dive,” Cockrell demonstrates, took on racial as well as social connotations.
In the 1880s, he reveals, the basement of 151 Bleecker Street, a once-fashionable brick building, became the original “Black and Tan,” featuring “goings-on” that moral reformers found revolting. Not only were Blacks and Whites commingling, but “Malays, Chinese, Lascars, and other Asiatics as well, and on one evening not long ago two American Indians were found there imbibing fire water.”

**OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIMENTS**

Alcohol, gambling and prostitutes attracted patrons to the Black and Tan, Cockrell acknowledges, but “mostly it was a dance hall, with tight, hot quarters, reeking with sex.

Patrons bumped and jostled one another,” waiting for the cancan, the culmination of the festivities, in which women contested to see who could kick the highest, some taking their skirts in their hands, and kicking a cigar from the lips of one of the men.

Cockrell, it is important to note, tends to take the lurid observations of moral reformers and their estimates of the ubiquity of prostitutes in New York at face value.

Indeed, in support of “the veracity of common anecdotes” and, no doubt, his own belief that “the richness of sensual experiences involving sex, music or dance is an elemental humanity that joins all of us together,” he cites 21st-century experiments suggesting that the hormonal levels and genetic make-up of men and women can be communicated to potential mates through dancing.

**‘COLOR LINE’ TO ‘COLOR WALL’**

By 1920, Cockrell concludes, “the color line had become a color wall.”

As Jim Crow cast a long dark shadow on New York, and brothels, dance halls, and dives were shuttered by the police, musicians had a far more difficult time finding jobs: “Music as an intimate, backroom black and tan experience was in rapid decline; music as a public, big space segregated experience was in high ascendance.”

“Swing” supplanted ragtime and jazz, at least in some circles, and dance was tamed as well. That is, until rock ‘n’ roll took American popular culture by storm, demonstrating once again, the power of the libido, as the music pulsed, the guitarist fondled his instrument, the singer undulated sensuously, and dancers shook, rattled, and rolled.

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