

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leslie Uggams, *Sing Along with Mitch* (1961–64), and the Reverberations of Minstrelsy

Esther M. Morgan-Ellis

University of North Georgia, Dahlonega, Georgia, USA
Email: esther.morgan-ellis@ung.edu

Abstract

In his television program *Sing Along with Mitch* (1961–1964), Mitch Miller employed the talents of African American singer Leslie Uggams in ways that explicitly countered the legacy of minstrelsy. Although the program can be criticized as reactionary on other grounds, the fact that *Sing Along with Mitch* presented older, white viewers with a nostalgic vision of American identity realized through collective song amplified the impact of Uggams's performances. The program was well-received by Black viewers, and suited the dominant integrationist philosophy of the early 1960s. However, surviving correspondence indicates that some viewers persisted in perceiving Uggams through a lens clouded by minstrel stereotypes. This article documents and analyzes the ways in which these viewers continued to see and hear Uggams as a minstrel performer despite her presentation as a consummate professional and fully integrated member of the *Sing Along* "family."

In 1961, Leslie Uggams (b. 1943) became the first female African American singer to star in a weekly television variety show.¹ As the top-billed talent on *Sing Along with Mitch*, she rendered one or two solo numbers over the course of each hour-long broadcast and joined the cast for the closing sing-along.² The show was developed and hosted by Mitch Miller, director of the artists and repertoire division (or "A&R man") at Columbia Records, but at the time best known for his series of sing-along albums. Miller always insisted that Uggams's race was of no significance to him, and that he hired her on the basis of talent alone; as he was frequently quoted as saying, "A singer like Leslie Uggams comes along once in a lifetime."³ However, Uggams was intensely aware of her role as a pathbreaker, and her participation in Miller's mostly white sing-along world sent a powerful message to both Black and white viewers.⁴ This was made all the more profound by the fact that *Sing Along with Mitch* was a deeply nostalgic program targeting an older, white audience that tended to hold traditional values. While some of these viewers might have had their racist preconceptions softened by the sights and sounds of Uggams, an attractive and primly dressed young Black woman who sang spirituals and the American songbook with equal sensitivity, many were unmoved. In this article, I will examine the contexts in which Uggams performed before interrogating this negative response, which has been preserved in the form of complaint letters housed in the Mitch Miller papers at the New York Public Library. While Uggams's work contributed to the imagining of a new social framework in which blacks and whites could mingle freely, the letters attest to the fact that many viewers perceived her through a lens distorted by stereotypes from the minstrel stage.

¹Most of the episodes of *Sing Along with Mitch* are not available to view. Seventeen episodes have been digitized by the New York Public Library and can be streamed on-site, while two additional episodes are similarly available through the Paley Center in New York City. A handful of episodes have been uploaded on YouTube.

²Uggams's prominence grew over the course of the show's run. Beginning with the broadcast on March 22, 1962, she always sang two solos. Typed episode outlines, Mitch Miller papers, box 6, folder 1, JPB 14–31. Music Division, The New York Public Library.

³Thomas A. Johnson, "Leslie Uggams A CLOSE-UP AT 19—AND WOW!," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 21, 1962.

⁴"Leslie Uggams," *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*, *Television Academy Foundation*, filmed June 3, 2016, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/leslie-uggams>.

Uggams's association with Miller began in 1958, when he heard her perform on the television program *Name That Tune*.⁵ Impressed with her ability, he signed her to Columbia and produced her first album, *The Eyes of God* (1959). Although there is no doubt that Miller played an important role in Uggams's career, she was already an experienced performer. She had trained at the Professional Children's School of New York before appearing on various television programs as a singer and actress.⁶ She would go on to establish herself as a major force on the Broadway stage, winning a Tony in 1968 for her performance in *Hallelujah, Baby!* In 1969 she became the first Black woman to host a weekly television variety show, *The Leslie Uggams Show* on CBS, and she later earned Golden Globe and Emmy nominations for her role as Kizzy Reynolds on the television miniseries *Roots* (1977).⁷ For the first half of the 1960s, however, Uggams dedicated herself to Miller's sing-along project, at the same time releasing annual albums—*Leslie Uggams on TV* (1961), *More Leslie Uggams on TV* (1962), and *So In Love!* (1963)—under his supervision.

Sing Along with Mitch aired on NBC—at first every other week, and then weekly—from January 27, 1961, to April 27, 1964, totaling ninety-six episodes.⁸ The show, however, was but one outgrowth of an expansive sing-along empire that included dozens of LPs and frequent live performances.⁹ Miller's first foray into sing-along media was the 1958 album *Sing Along with Mitch*, featuring Mitch Miller and The Gang in choral renditions of Tin Pan Alley classics.¹⁰ The runaway success of the album led to a flurry of sequels and ultimately landed Miller a one-shot special on *Ford Startime*, which aired on May 24, 1960, with Uggams as the lead soloist.¹¹ Viewer response suggested that there was an appetite for the program, which was immediately picked up by NBC for regular broadcast. Even after *Sing Along with Mitch* was canceled due to declining ratings (a decision that Miller condemned for years to follow), NBC continued to advertise scheduled rebroadcasts heavily.¹² Miller released sing-along albums well into the 1970s and attempted to reboot the series with a 1981 special, which seems to have marked the end of his efforts.¹³

Despite (or because of) his enormous popular success, Miller has been largely overlooked by scholars. After decades of neglect, recent accounts have been influenced by a perceived need to write him back into the popular culture narrative. In 2009, Elijah Wald provided a comprehensive overview of Miller's career as an A&R man at Mercury and Columbia.¹⁴ Although Wald mentioned *Sing Along with Mitch* only in passing, he took Miller's contributions to 1950s popular music seriously. In his

⁵*Name That Tune* was a quiz show for which Uggams won a spot as a contestant. During her first broadcast, however, the host invited her to sing a tune after learning that she was a singer. Her rendition of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" elicited such an enthusiastic flood of viewer mail that she became a regular on the show. "Leslie Uggams," *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁶An adequate biography of Uggams has yet to be written. Currently, the best account of her life is contained in her 2016 interview for the Television Academy Foundation. "Leslie Uggams," *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁷Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 245. Like other Black-hosted shows of the era, *The Leslie Uggams Show* was short-lived, airing only ten episodes between September 28 and December 14, 1969.

⁸The proposal for *The New Mitch Miller Show*, to be aired live for 30 minutes daily starting in fall of 1965, reports that there were ninety-eight episodes of *Sing Along with Mitch*. "The New Mitch Miller Show," Mitch Miller papers, box 6, folder 2. My count is based on the set of outlines for each episode that has been preserved in the Mitch Miller papers, box 6, folder 1, which includes an index indicating that there were ninety-six episodes.

⁹The program's cast undertook at least two extensive tours: a wide-ranging domestic tour in 1963 and a tour to Japan in 1965. Domestic tour memos, contracts, and accounting documents, Mitch Miller papers, box 6, folder 6. Japan tour contracts and accounting documents, Mitch Miller papers, box 6, folder 8.

¹⁰A complete list of sing-along selections included in each of Miller's albums and broadcasts is available on the audiovisual media page of the Database of American Sing-Along Repertoire, <http://dasar.us/avlist/>.

¹¹Emily Margot Gale, "Sounding Sentimental: American Popular Song from Nineteenth-Century Ballads to 1970s Soft Rock" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2014), 133, 145.

¹²Pamphlet advertising the 1966 rebroadcast of *Sing Along with Mitch*, Mitch Miller papers, box 5, folder 13. It was hypothesized in the Black press that *Sing Along with Mitch*, described as one "of the most liberal TV programs," was canceled because of Uggams's participation. Dave Hepburn, "In The Wings," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 22, 1964.

¹³Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing! Community Singing in the American Picture Palace* (Athens, GA: UGA Press, 2018), 227.

¹⁴Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155–65.

2011 Miller obituary, however, David Sanjek was still able to lament the fact that “For most popular music historians, he remains a figure of satire at best and outright erasure at worst.”¹⁵ Sanjek continued the tradition of downplaying the significance of *Sing Along with Mitch*, relegating discussion of the program to his penultimate paragraph—an oversight that Emily Gale sought in turn to rectify with her 2014 dissertation, which “contributes a long overdue study of Miller’s sing along show.”¹⁶ Sanjek identified “Miller’s pointed and unforgiving dismissal of rock and roll”—perhaps what he is best remembered for—as the culprit in his erasure, while Gale adds that his enormous popularity probably did him no favors in the scholarly world.¹⁷ Gale argues, however, that *Sing Along with Mitch* “played an important but unacknowledged role in the dissemination of ideas about American national identity,” and proceeds to convincingly explore the ways in which Miller shaped that identity through a process that she describes as “sounding citizenship.”¹⁸

I will hereby contribute my own revisionist perspective on Miller’s legacy—a legacy that I believe has been frequently misrepresented.¹⁹ There is no doubt that *Sing Along with Mitch* catered to a white, middle-class, adult audience, and that it did much to reinforce their hegemonic notions concerning gender roles and relations. When Gale observes that “it is hard not to see the show as overwhelmingly, even oppressively white and male,” I find myself in complete agreement.²⁰ However, Miller’s choice to hire and retain Leslie Uggams as his lead soloist was unprecedented, and their path-breaking collaboration clamors for closer consideration.

Sing Along with Mitch aired at the height of the civil rights movement, and it must be interpreted in the context of Black representation on television and the prevailing integrationist philosophy of the era.²¹ In general, Miller was received with great approbation by representatives of the African American community. In 1962, Dr. Rosa L. Gragg, president of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, presented him with an award “which commended the bearded maestro, his associates, and his sponsor, P. Ballantine and Sons brewing company for the quiet and dignified manner in which talented Leslie Uggams has been made an integral part of the TV series.”²² This honor was reported in Black newspapers across the country, most of which also printed photographs taken at the Washington, DC ceremony.²³ In general, the Black press spoke highly of Miller and often credited him with Uggams’s success.²⁴ Miller seems to have actively invested in developing a positive relationship with the African American community. In 1964, for example, he donated \$1,000 to Hope Day Nursery, a Harlem childcare center established in 1902 to support working Black mothers. The organization in turn presented Miller with a plaque “in recognition of his work with Leslie Uggams.”²⁵ It is evident that Uggams served as an effective ambassador for Miller, winning him support and good press. However, one must interrogate the motivations of both Miller and the Black journalists and civic organizations that fêted him.

Civil rights activists had good reason to encourage Miller in his work. In the early months of *Sing Along with Mitch*, Miller stood up to pressure from NBC and the program sponsors to drop Uggams

¹⁵David Sanjek, “Mitch Miller, 1910–2010,” *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 1 (2011): 115.

¹⁶Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 131. Gale is currently at work on a book manuscript that will expand upon this topic.

¹⁷Sanjek, “Mitch Miller,” 115; Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 131.

¹⁸Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 132–133.

¹⁹I myself have dismissed Miller as catering “to a segment of the American public that sought to retreat from the modern world by indulging in community singing as a nostalgic practice”—an overly reductive perspective that does not do justice to his efforts. Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 227.

²⁰Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 172.

²¹For a general survey of African Americans on television in the early 1960s, see J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1992), 77–110.

²²“Colored Women’s Clubs Fete Mitch, ‘Sing Along,’” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 26, 1962. Sponsors played a vital role in putting and keeping African Americans on television, as illustrated by the cancellation of *The Nat “King” Cole Show* (1956–1957) just five years earlier. MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 68.

²³“Leslie Uggams, Now 19, Makes Night Club Debut in Pittsburgh,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 21, 1962; “Women’s Clubs Honor Mitch, Leslie In Brief Ceremony,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 28, 1962; “Colored Women Award Mitch Miller Plaque,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 1, 1962.

²⁴“‘Sing Along’s’ Leslie Uggams: ‘They Won’t Let Me Grow Up!’,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 28, 1963.

²⁵“Mitch Miller Gives \$1,000 To Hope Day,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 16, 1964.

from the cast, or at least confine her to easily excised segments for broadcast in the South.²⁶ It might also be noted that Uggams was by far the highest-paid performer on the program (apart from Miller himself). Financial worksheets from late 1961 reveal that she received \$2,000 per episode, while the other female soloist at the time, Gloria Lambert, received \$1,100.²⁷ Fifteen months later, Uggams was earning \$2,500 per episode while the other soloist, now Louise O'Brien, earned \$1,350.²⁸ By early 1964, Uggams was receiving \$3,000 per episode, while the secondary soloist, Bob McGrath (formerly a chorister), was paid a paltry \$1,000.²⁹ However, did Miller retain and compensate Uggams out of a commitment to the project of integration or because she was the best performer he could secure? Miller himself always claimed the latter. In 1963, Morton Cooper Feinberg, a white writer who freelanced for the *Chicago Defender*, attempted to elicit a progressive statement from Miller but was rebuffed: "If you're looking for a sermon on television integration," he said, "count me out. Leslie is on the show because she's a fantastic singer. That's it."³⁰ All the same, Feinberg was not alone in valorizing Miller in the Black press.³¹ The assessment of James Hicks, editor of *New York Amsterdam News*, stands out as unusually critical: "Mitch Miller may have felt it was morally right to give a struggling little Negro a chance—but I'm sure that Mitch Miller also realized the box office value of a Leslie Uggams."³²

When African American journalists and community leaders praised Miller, however, they were executing a shrewd strategy. Securing "roles of dignity" for African American television actors was a top priority for early 1960s activists.³³ The decade started with a victory, when the NAACP successfully petitioned the Directors Guild of America to request of its members that "Negroes be depicted accurately in theatrical and television films," and in 1963 the America Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) would issue its own declaration of non-bias.³⁴ Newspaper commentators tracked developments with a critical eye, celebrating progress while measuring the distance still to be covered.³⁵ In late 1963, correspondent Rick Du Brow offered the titular assessment "Negroes On TV: Getting Better But Still Bad." He presented three demands: that Black characters "be portrayed in terms that members of their race feel is modern and fair;" that African Americans be represented in proportion to their overall numbers; and that Black actors be granted roles that could be played by a performer of any race.³⁶ Du Brow listed Uggams's role on *Sing Along With Mitch* as a positive example, and indeed, she clearly fulfilled the first and third of his demands.³⁷ Uggams was universally praised in the Black press as a performer of "poise and ability" who, "while still young, has become a master artist yet also maintaining the original grace of purity, the simple humility of a little girl, and the dignity and honor of a queen."³⁸ Published discourse emphasized her studiousness (she took extension classes at Juilliard while filming *Sing Along With Mitch*), purity (her mother accompanied her everywhere and she seldom dated), frugality (she allotted herself only twenty dollars a week in spending

²⁶"Leslie Uggams," *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*. In the previous decades, the on-screen appearances of Lena Horne—to whom Uggams was often compared—had been segregated in this way. Aaron Lefkowitz, *Transnational Cinematic and Popular Music Icons: Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, and Queen Latifah, 1917–2017* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 1.

²⁷Financial worksheets, Mitch Miller papers, box 25, folder 1.

²⁸Financial worksheets, Mitch Miller papers, box 26, folder 1.

²⁹Financial worksheets, Mitch Miller papers, box 26, folder 3. The salaries for other cast members remained stable throughout the run of the show: male choristers typically received about \$450, while female dancers were paid about half as much.

³⁰Morton Cooper, "Mitch Miller Laughs Off Race Crackpots," *Chicago Defender*, March 16, 1963.

³¹Johnson, "Leslie Uggams A CLOSE-UP AT 19"; "They Won't Let Me Grow Up!"

³²James L. Hicks, "Who Owes What?," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 14, 1963.

³³George E. Pitts, "Negroes Gaining Better Television Roles," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 3, 1962.

³⁴"Portray Negroes Accurately Screen Guild Tells Members," *Cleveland Call and Post*, December 30, 1961; MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 91.

³⁵The *Chicago Defender* was quick to observe that the AFTRA declaration, while "admirable," had a limited effect on actual programming. MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 92.

³⁶Rick Du Brow, "Negroes On TV: Getting Better But Still Bad," *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 4, 1963.

³⁷Although Uggams occasionally sang spirituals, these were incidental to her role on the show, which could just as well have been occupied by a performer of any other race.

³⁸"Sing Along's Leslie Uggams Called a Singer's Singer," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 2, 1961; "Leslie Uggams Gets College Citation," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 1, 1963.

money), domesticity (her preferred pastimes were cooking and knitting), and conservative approach to dress and makeup (described by Uggams herself in a 1962 editorial).³⁹ Uggams's public image as a role model—a young Black woman impervious to criticism on ethical or artistic grounds—earned her approbation in the early 1960s, described by television scholar Donald Bogle as “an era in which integration was very much a desired social goal for Black Americans.”⁴⁰

Just as the integrationist strategy has been questioned and re-evaluated, the television programs produced during this era—and the motivations of the white men responsible for putting them on the air—have been subject to critical assessment. Sociologist Herman Gray offers an incisive analysis of the “discursive adjustment and readjustment of Black representations in commercial television” that took place in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴¹ Following the “racist and stereotypical” representations offered by programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, television programs of the late 1950s and early 1960s “attempted to make Blacks acceptable to whites by containing them or rendering them, if not culturally white, invisible. In these shows the social and cultural ‘fact of blackness’ was treated as a minor if not coincidental theme—present but contained.”⁴² Although Gray does not mention *Sing Along with Mitch*, his description captures Uggams's role with eerie precision. In addition, his account of NBC executives attempting to “contain” the blackness of Nat “King” Cole in order to appease white audiences foreshadows Miller's conflict with NBC and his own sponsors; indeed, the fact that *The Nat “King” Cole Show* (1956–1957) failed to secure national sponsors and was canceled after a single season must have loomed large for Miller and his backers.

Interpreting televisual texts is never straightforward, as Stuart Hall demonstrated in his foundational work on coding and decoding, and Miller's program has clearly communicated different messages to different viewers.⁴³ Although I will continue to draw upon contemporary and more recent perspectives, my own reading of *Sing Along with Mitch* has been principally informed by Uggams herself. In a 2016 interview, Uggams recalled her start on *Sing Along with Mitch*, and in particular Miller's refusal to treat her as anything other than a fully integrated member of “The Gang.” After giving an account of his repeated refusals to eliminate or reduce her role, she concluded with the following imperative: “You do not have to say anything negative about him to me ever.”⁴⁴ With this in mind, I want to explore the ways in which Miller used the program to create a vision of American society, rooted in nostalgic recollections of an imagined past, that made room for the full participation of a Black woman. At the same time, I freely admit that mine is but one reading; viewers were free to perceive the show as reinforcing patriarchy and/or white supremacy, and it seems likely that many of them did. However, correspondence from white viewers condemning the program—some of whom explicitly embraced segregation and white supremacy in their writing—attests to its potential as a weapon against these ideologies.

³⁹“Leslie Uggams Night Club Debut”; “Leslie Uggams Rather Be Old Than Just Tops,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 12, 1962; Sam Lacy, “The full-circle world of a pretty singer: Church, theatre, TV, nitery name it, Leslie's had it,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 25, 1964; Leslie Uggams, “Leslie Uggams, TV Songstress, Gives Views On Teenage Fashions, Makeup,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 6, 1962.

⁴⁰Bogle, *Primetime Blues*, 153. If *Sing Along With Mitch* had aired just a few years later, Uggams might have been criticized for “assimilation” and attacked for being “a ‘white folks’ [slur redacted]”—a fate that was soon to befall Diahann Carroll, star of *Julia* (1968–1971). Bogle, *Primetime Blues*, 154.

⁴¹Herman Gray, “The Politics of Representation in Network Television,” in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 160.

⁴²Gray, “The Politics of Representation in Network Television,” 159. As Gray and other scholars have pointed out, many working-class blacks enjoyed *Amos 'n' Andy*, and it was primarily middle-class blacks who read the characters as an affront to their self-image. Indeed, the efforts of the NAACP to turn public opinion against the program largely failed, and it was ultimately cancelled because the sponsor withdrew in search of “a higher-class image” Thomas Cripps, “*Amos 'n' Andy* and the Debate over American Racial Integration,” in *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 39.

⁴³Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, rev. ed., ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 125–7.

⁴⁴“Leslie Uggams,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

Singing “Memories” of an Integrated Past

As Gale has already observed, *Sing Along with Mitch* dripped with nostalgia.⁴⁵ In fact, the program was so shot through with nostalgia that we must consider the sing-along framework, repertoire, and mode of delivery each on their own terms to fully appreciate the program’s resonance with the American past.

I have noted elsewhere that, in twentieth-century American culture, community singing frequently carried nostalgic connotations. From the turn-of-the-century illustrated song to silent-era sing-along films to 1930s sing-along radio programs, the creators of sing-along media have sought to stir nostalgic sentiment more often than not.⁴⁶ The activity itself was often cast as nostalgic, with each form of the practice calling upon tender recollections of the last: picture-theater sings of the 1920s often poked fun at the old-fashioned illustrated song, while radio sing-alongs of the 1930s capitalized on a collective longing for lost experiences of the previous decade.⁴⁷ The pilot of *Sing Along with Mitch* was in turn accompanied by an announcement that the show “will encourage viewers to sing along with the thirty tunes programmed—much as movie patrons did to the beat of a bouncing ball some years ago.”⁴⁸ This is a reference to Fleischer Studios’ *Screen Songs* series of sing-along cartoons, which were produced between 1929 and 1938 and distributed to theaters by Paramount. Indeed, the connection between *Sing Along with Mitch* and its most famous predecessor was so strong that many of Miller’s fans later recollected that the “bouncing ball” had been used on his program (it was not).⁴⁹ The nostalgic associations of amateur group singing in the mid-twentieth century also extended beyond the mediated tradition. Gage Averill has identified a parallel nostalgic inclination in the contemporary practices of barbershop singing—an activity, incidentally, that was frequently referenced in sing-along media of the silent era and continued to feature heavily in *Sing Along with Mitch*.⁵⁰ Miller saw himself as following in a tradition that included not only the old “bouncing ball” cartoons but also community singing “in churches, in choirs, in glee clubs,” which he perceived as constituting an unbroken line that extended to the founding of the United States.⁵¹

It is worth noting that the tradition of community singing to which Miller connected himself was overwhelmingly white. I have previously described the systematic exclusion of African Americans from the grassroots activities that launched the community singing movement and the World War I-era sings that established it as mainstream entertainment.⁵² This sing-along tradition also perpetuated the legacy of blackface minstrelsy in various forms. Nicholas Sammond has documented the presence of minstrel tropes in *Song Car-Tunes*, the Fleischer-produced sing-along series that preceded the *Screen Songs* recalled by Miller and his viewers. Sammond’s damning analysis concludes that the films offered “white audiences an affectively positive experience of collective and distributed racism.”⁵³ My own study of a sing-along radio program that aired in 1936 and 1937 similarly describes the incorporation

⁴⁵Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 145.

⁴⁶Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, “Nostalgia, Sentiment, and Cynicism in Images of ‘After the Ball,’” *Magic Lantern Gazette* 23, no. 2 (2011): 5–6; Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 112.

⁴⁷Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 58, 226.

⁴⁸Norman Shavin, “Mitch Miller’s as Real As His 20-Year Beard,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 24, 1960. In Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 6.

⁴⁹Miller discussed this mistaken recollection in a 2004 interview. “Mitch Miller,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*, Television Academy Foundation, filmed July 24, 2004, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/mitch-miller>. The current entry on Mitch Miller in the Encyclopaedia Britannica replicates this error (“Miller cued his home audience with superimposed lyrics highlighted by a bouncing ball”), demonstrating the power of collective memory to rewrite the past. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, “Mitch Miller,” published July 27, 2019, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mitch-Miller-American-conductor-and-music-producer>.

⁵⁰Gage Averill, *Four Parts, No Waiting: A Social History of American Barbershop Harmony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15; Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 113.

⁵¹“Mitch Miller,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁵²Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, “‘Making the many-minded one’: Community Singing at the Peabody Prep in 1915,” *Musical Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2019): 389–92; Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, “Warren Kimsey and Community Singing at Camp Gordon, 1917–1918,” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 39, no. 2 (2018): 179.

⁵³Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 152.

of sketches, dialect, and songs from the minstrel stage, all delivered by white performers to a white audience.⁵⁴ The nostalgia of this community singing tradition, therefore, is often nostalgia for a white past shaped by overt racism and the exploitation of Black culture.

Another driver for the nostalgic tendency across community singing practices is certainly repertoire. Community singing almost always relies on a body of songs that are familiar to the participants—and for a song to be familiar, it must carry echoes from the participants' collective past. According to Miller, he assembled the repertoire lists for his early albums by asking his friends what they liked to sing “at parties, at camp, at Lion’s and Rotary Club meetings,” tracking the responses in columns and identifying the selections that appeared multiple times.⁵⁵ By this process, he tapped into existing sing-along practices that came pre-laden with nostalgic connotations. Miller was well-aware of what he was doing: “Nostalgia is everything in our show,” he declared. “All we do is open a door for people, but they have to enter that door by themselves. They hear the old songs in terms of their own experience or imagination.”⁵⁶ Much of the repertoire was itself explicitly nostalgic, most notably the 1926 song “The Gang That Sang Heart of My Heart,” which was included in the album *Sentimental Sing Along with Mitch* (1960), the *Ford Startime* special, and three episodes of the television program.⁵⁷ The use of nostalgic repertoire for community singing already had a long history; even in the 1920s, explicitly nostalgic songs from the Gilded Age seem to have further established the activity as intrinsically backwards-looking.⁵⁸

Miller, however, went above and beyond by framing his repertoire with nostalgic scenes. Each episode opened with a sing-along number led by The Gang and closed with a sing-along set incorporating the entire cast (including the soloists, dancers, and any special guests). These sequences focused on participation. Typically, Miller would conduct to camera while the song lyrics were displayed at the bottom of the screen.⁵⁹ The remainder of the show, however, was highly performative. Each episode was divided into four themed segments, during which solo and choral numbers were rendered with the aid of costumes, scenery, and choreography. While viewers *could* have sung along, they were clearly invited to sit back and enjoy the show.

These scenes frequently invited viewers to engage in imaginative time travel. The *Ford Startime* special, for example, included a “plunge into the 1920s” (complete with flappers), a visit to an early twentieth-century urban center, and a glimpse of World War I-era soldiers gathered around the campfire. A different type of time-travel characterized appearances by Milton Berle, Shirley Temple, and George Burns, all of whom visited the show in early 1964. Significantly, these individuals were all notable for their work as entertainers in a past era, about which viewers were invited to fondly reminisce. This was facilitated by flashbacks to their old television shows and films, and performances of their old songs.

While I invite the reader to consult Gale’s work for a more detailed consideration of Miller’s nostalgic frame, I will pivot now to an analysis of how he deployed Uggams within this frame. Although she did not appear in every scene, she was frequently featured in Miller’s nostalgic flashbacks—and, as a result, written into the program’s “memory” of the American past. I will consider several examples in depth.

Episode 17, titled “Show Business,” was first broadcast on October 26, 1961.⁶⁰ Its scenes were based on public recollections of an old-fashioned circus, a 1930s-era sponsored radio broadcast, a

⁵⁴Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, “Mediated Community and Participatory Blackface in *Gillette Original Community Sing* (CBS, 1936–1937),” *Music & Letters* (forthcoming).

⁵⁵Craig Rosen, *The Billboard Book of Number One Albums: The Inside Story Behind Pop Music’s Blockbuster Records* (New York: Billboard Books, 1996), 19; “Mitch Miller,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁵⁶Virginia Kelly, “‘Sing Along’ Success Story: Mitch Miller,” *LOOK*, December 5, 1961 (in Mitch Miller papers, box 26, folder 5).

⁵⁷This song is discussed in Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 150–1.

⁵⁸Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 58.

⁵⁹Gale provides further details on Miller’s conducting style, which she identifies as proof of Miller’s own conviction “that his televisual audience actually did sing along with him and the gang.” Gale, “Sounding Sentimental,” 177.

⁶⁰“Sing along with Mitch,” Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, The New York Public Library, New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed May 26, 2020, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3bec3fc0-66a7-0132-f48a-3c075448cc4b>



Figure 1. Leslie Uggams and The Gang recreate a scene from *Gold Diggers of 1935*. Episode 17, “Show Business.” NBC. October 26, 1961. Directed by Bill Hobin. Held in the New York Public Library. <https://www.nypl.org/research/research-catalog/bib/b20319216?originalUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fcatalog.nypl.org%2Frecord%3Db20319216~S1>.

turn-of-the-century vaudeville show, a nineteenth-century operetta, and early Warner Brothers film musicals. Uggams enters the last of these scenes, appearing as the elegant leading lady in a performance of “The Lullaby of Broadway” (1935). She is clad in a sequined and feathered dress and wears long white gloves; she is backed by The Gang, complete with tuxedos, top hats, and canes. Viewers were clearly expected to recall the film *Gold Diggers of 1935*, in which the song was debuted by (white) singer Wini Shaw and used for an extended (all-white) dance sequence choreographed by Busby Berkeley. Miller has reimagined a golden-era film musical with Uggams as the star. At the end of the sequence, the camera zooms in on Uggams for her rendition of “Bill” (1927), the voices of the men audible in the background even as they disappear from view. This time, Uggams is taking the place of white singer Helen Morgan, who played the role of mixed-race Julie LaVerne in the 1936 film version of *Show Boat* (Figure 1).⁶¹

A similar process of rewriting takes place in Episode 89, “Shirley Temple,” which aired on March 2, 1964.⁶² As the title suggests, this episode featured special guest Shirley Temple, who was thirty-six years old at the time. The episode was organized along simple lines: Temple herself would only sing new songs, while the cast and soloists would revisit classics from her career as a child star. Miller explicitly states his intent to be “sentimental about bygone days and the old Shirley.” His approach to celebrating her career, however, also invites the viewer to reimagine Temple’s legacy.

In her role as lead soloist, Uggams presents one of Temple’s old songs: “I Love to Walk in the Rain,” from the 1938 film *Just Around the Corner*. In the film, Temple sings the song onstage as part of a

⁶¹Morgan also played Julie in the Broadway premiere and a 1929 film adaptation. The reference in this episode, however, is clearly to the 1936 film.

⁶²“Sing along with Mitch,” Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound.

climactic show-within-a-show. About halfway through the scene, she comes upon a shabbily dressed Bill “Bojangles” Robinson picking comically oversized cotton from giant wooden bushes. She briefly joins him in his joyful labor before the two dance off down the road. While Robinson is remembered as another path-breaking African American who used his success to create opportunities for Black performers, the character he plays in the film, doorman Corporal Jones, comes straight from the minstrel stage. Ann duCille has noted Jones’s Zip Coon-type malapropisms, which clearly identify him as a minstrel character.⁶³ In broader terms, Kristen Hatch has argued that Temple and Robinson’s dances “recapitulate minstrelsy” across films, while Donna-Marie Peters has traced the history of tap dancing itself as “a non-threatening art form associated with the minstrel tradition.”⁶⁴ On *Sing Along with Mitch*, however, the scene is reimagined as a dignified performance by a smartly dressed Uggams, who sings with the entire cast respectfully looking on from the background. Earlier in the episode, Uggams had sung a duet with Temple. In keeping with Miller’s promise that Temple would only sing “the new ones,” they alternate phrases of “Make Someone Happy” from the 1960 musical *Do Re Mi*. The sight of Temple and Uggams singing and dancing together, however, must have sparked memories of Temple’s pairing with Robinson for some viewers.

Of course, the young Temple danced with white men in her films as well, and it is one of these scenes that Miller chose to reimagine near the beginning of the episode. The song in question is “We Should Be Together,” sung and danced by Temple and George Murphy in *Little Miss Broadway* (1938). For his recreation, Miller paired his staff dancer, Victor Griffin, with Gloria Chu, an Asian American girl who appeared prominently in a number of episodes. Although they sing “We Should Be Together,” their dance, which takes them up and down a set of stairs, is reminiscent not of *Little Miss Broadway* but of the famous scene in Robinson’s first Temple film, *The Little Colonel* (1935), in which the pair dance on a staircase. This made history as the first interracial dance in a Hollywood film; according to Ann Murphy, it is in this scene that Robinson, who “takes over and holds the center of the frame,” is “finally able to claim authority and power for himself and those he represents.”⁶⁵ Miller offers a new interracial pairing, with the gifted Chu filling in for Temple, perhaps leading the viewer to notice Temple’s whiteness, or to wonder whether Chu could have had such an opportunity if she had been born thirty years earlier. We might conclude that Chu, in turn, is “finally able to claim authority and power for [her]self and those [she] represents” (Figure 2).

I read these scenes as powerful rescriptings of a whitewashed past, and I am inclined to think that Miller consciously sought to write non-white Americans into cultural memory, despite his continued insistence that he was indifferent to matters of race.⁶⁶ Miller was certainly careful never to cast Uggams in scenes that revisited the racist and stereotypical tropes that were common on television programs of the previous decade—scenes like the presentation of “Miller’s Monumental Minstrels” in Episode 79, “Out of the Trunk,” which first aired on December 9, 1963.⁶⁷ In this episode, The Gang appears in polka-dotted vests, large red bowties, sequined hats, and white gloves (although they omit the blackface makeup). During a performance of “Li’l Liza Jane” (1916), the soloist strikes typical minstrel poses while seated singers strum air banjos. This is followed by Paul Friesen’s soulful rendition of “Might

⁶³Ann duCille, “The Shirley Temple of My Familiar,” *Transition* 73 (1997): 25.

⁶⁴Kristen Hatch, *Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 78; Donna-Marie Peters, “Dancing with the Ghost of Minstrelsy: A Case Study of the Marginalization and Continued Survival of Rhythm Tap,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (2011): 85.

⁶⁵Ann Murphy, “Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple Tap Past Jim Crow,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Screendance Studies*, ed. Douglas Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 739. Murphy argues broadly that Robinson, while seeming to replicate minstrel stereotypes, was in fact a powerfully subversive figure. She finds that his pairing with Temple “creates an alternative universe where a Black man one step up from slavery and a hair’s breadth away from blackface can become the embodiment of mastery and knowledge, and a white girl freed of Griffith’s racial prurience can literally and metaphorically look up to the Black man as the source of artistic and spiritual expertise.” Murphy, “Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple Tap Past Jim Crow,” 736.

⁶⁶At no point in his career did Miller ever capitulate on this issue. When asked in a 2004 interview why he chose to feature Uggams on his program, Miller responded, “To me, she’s one of the most obvious and unusual talents around.” “Mitch Miller,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁶⁷I viewed Episode 79, titled “Out of the Trunk,” on a bootleg DVD. It is not held in any archival collection.



Figure 2. Gloria Chu stands in for Shirley Temple in a scene that draws from *Little Miss Broadway* and *The Little Colonel*. Episode 89, “Shirley Temple.” NBC. March 2, 1964. Directed by Marcia Kuyper Schneider and James Starbuck. Held in the New York Public Library. <https://www.nypl.org/research/research-catalog/bib/b20319215?originalUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fcatalog.nypl.org%2Frecord%3Db20319215~S1>.

Lak’ a Rose” (1901) and a rousing performance of “Bam Bam Bamy Shore” (1925), complete with female dancers. This scene does not reflect well on Miller. Uggams, however, never participated in sequences of this type. In this episode, she had appeared in the previous scene to sing “The Music Goes Round and Round” (1935), accompanied by The Gang and Miller himself “playing” the sousaphone (Figure 3).

Like many of Uggams’s numbers on *Sing Along with Mitch*, “The Music Goes Round and Round” was popularized by and associated with white performers (in this case, Tommy Dorsey and Edythe Wright). As Uggams herself recalled, “I was doing the American songbook.”⁶⁸ She occasionally sang songs associated with African American musical tradition (especially spirituals) or performers (e.g. “Cabin in the Sky,” premiered by Ethel Waters in the 1940 musical of the same name). However, these examples are noteworthy *because* they deviated from her typical fare. The Black press reinforced Uggams’s image as a mainstream, non-racialized singer of “well-established standards.”⁶⁹ Commentators most frequently compared her to Judy Garland (with Lena Horne as a close second), and it was often mentioned that Uggams was first inspired to sing by Frank Sinatra records.⁷⁰ Columnist Samuel Lacy credited Uggams with “the kind of voice range that permits her

⁶⁸“Leslie Uggams,” *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁶⁹“Will TV Fans Let Leslie Grow Up?: ‘Girl Next Door’ Seeks New Image,” *New Journal and Guide*, January 4, 1964.

⁷⁰Johnson, “Leslie Uggams A CLOSE-UP AT 19,”; Morton Cooper, “Leslie Uggams: A Ball Of Charm And Talent,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, December 27, 1962; “Leslie Uggams Scores High With Moniker That ‘Just Wouldn’t Do’,” *Chicago Defender*, September 15, 1962; Bob Hunter, “Leslie Makes Club Debut, Wowed Vegas Crowd,” *Chicago Defender*, July 6, 1963.



Figure 3. A singer from *The Gang* strikes a pose familiar from the minstrel stage. Episode 79, “Out of the Trunk.” NBC. December 9, 1963. Directed by Marcia Kuyper Schneider and James Starbuck.

to do everything from ‘Clang, Clang, Clang Went the Trolley,’ to ‘Silent Night,’ although it was understood that Miller determined her on-air repertoire and coached her performances.⁷¹

Miller certainly exploited Uggams’s flexibility, assigning her comic, sentimental, and spiritual numbers. Her expressive (and largely de-racialized) presentations of ballads are perhaps the most noteworthy. Beginning on March 8, 1963, Miller backed her with a large, integrated string ensemble (all male, except for the harpist). When Miller debuted the tuxedo-clad *Sing Along Strings*, he suggested that only Uggams would have the privilege of performing with them. “Sometimes, like right now,” he concluded his introduction, “our strings will form a velvety background for the beautiful voice of Leslie Uggams.”⁷² The strings marked Uggams as a sensitive, romantic singer, and she appeared with them in a series of sentiment-laden ballads, including “Tenderley” (1946), “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” (1933), “Love Walked In” (1937), and “Lullaby of the Leaves” (1932). The strings also emphasized her status as the principal soloist. When Bob McGrath sang with the strings on December 9, 1963, much was made of the fact that this was Uggams’s territory. “Well, you know,” he says sheepishly to Miller, “I’ve always wanted to do a number with the strings.”⁷³ By this time McGrath was the principal male soloist (and, according to extant correspondence, much beloved by viewers), but he clearly ranked below Uggams.

Despite Uggams’s race-neutral performances, however, some viewers perceived her in highly racialized terms. Their views are preserved in 120 pieces of correspondence that reside in the New York Public Library and are surely among the more extraordinary contents of the Mitch Miller papers.⁷⁴

⁷¹Lacy, “The full-circle world of a pretty singer”; “Leslie ‘Sings With Mitch’ Every Week,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 21, 1961. It was reported that Miller only permitted Uggams to sing age-appropriate songs. When she debuted on the program at 17, he limited her to selections like “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” only letting her sing numbers like “Stormy Weather” and “Begin the Beguine” after she had turned 18. “Leslie Uggams Rather Be Old Than Just Tops”.

⁷²I viewed Episode 61, titled “Holidays,” on a bootleg DVD. It is not held in any archival collection.

⁷³I viewed Episode 79, titled “Out of the Trunk,” on a bootleg DVD. It is not held in any archival collection.

⁷⁴The letters to the creators and broadcasters of *Sing Along With Mitch* discussed in the remainder of this article are all preserved in the Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7–12. The first three folders are labeled “Leslie Uggams Complaints, 1963,” while the last three are labeled “Leslie Uggams Complaint Letters, 1963.” Two of the 120 letters do not in fact object to Uggams (one

The Correspondence as a Source for Knowledge

The extant viewer mail dates to a six-month time period spanning July 13, 1963 to January 13, 1964, and each piece registers an objection to Leslie Uggams's presence on the show. These objections, which I will consider in depth, are by no means homogenous. They span the gamut from gentle critique to racist outburst. As far as I can tell, every piece of correspondence was authored by a white viewer, many of whom explicitly disclosed their race. Before turning to the contents of the correspondence, however, we must consider it broadly as a source for knowledge.

The letters and postcards ask more questions than they answer. It is obvious that the correspondence, now spread across six archival folders, was carefully opened, sorted, and stored upon receipt. The manner in which each piece is marked and preserved changes from folder to folder, indicating that the correspondence was initially processed and stored in batches resembling its present archival organization.⁷⁵ There is no evidence that responses were issued, although they may well have been. (Miller later dismissed the letters with the statement "Drop dead, I never responded to them," but executives associated with his program might have taken a more diplomatic approach.⁷⁶) But why were these letters and postcards kept, and with such care? Were objections to Uggams treated this way throughout the show's run, or only in its final year? Is this the entirety of such correspondence received in this period, or only a sample? Miller's claims about the volume of correspondence received by his program suggest that this is not a complete collection for the months under consideration, although he likely exaggerated.⁷⁷

Most interesting to me are the annotations, often in red pencil, that summarize each article's contents and highlight passages referring to Uggams. As variations in the annotations parallel those in the preservation of the correspondence, it seems clear that a single individual opened, read, marked up, and filed each piece. The designation "racial" is scrawled across several offending passages, while a note that seems formerly to have been attached to a sheaf of correspondence reads "Nasty re: Leslie's Birthday Party or just general."⁷⁸

The identity of the annotator(s) is never indicated, although a tantalizing hint remains in the form of a note dated October 25, 1963. The note, signed "Bess," is typed on letterhead from All-American Features, Inc. It reads in part: "There are also more people who adore and love Leslie (according to the mail) as there are the other kind; more of the latter letters are also enclosed."⁷⁹ This note attests to the sorting process by which correspondence was organized according to the author's attitude toward Uggams. It also tells us something about the procedure applied to correspondence management. While most of the letters were addressed to the NBC headquarters in New York City, some were sent to local stations or to the TV Guide Viewer Service in Pennsylvania. It seems that they were all forwarded to Miller's production company for processing, where "Bess" (and perhaps other functionaries as well) was tasked with tracking the audience response to Uggams. The fact that "Bess" felt compelled to reassure Miller that Uggams was generally well-received captures the anxiety that surrounded her presence on the show, even in its third year.

praises her and the other excoriates Miller for representing the Philippines with an insulting song on his October 21, 1963 broadcast titled "Good Will Tour"), and have therefore been dropped from this analysis.

⁷⁵In some cases, the letters were returned to their envelopes for storage. In others, the envelopes were stapled to the letters. In yet others, the return address or postal mark was cut from each envelope and stapled to the accompanying letter.

⁷⁶"Mitch Miller," *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television*.

⁷⁷According to a newspaper clipping in the Mitch Miller papers, box 5, folder 9, the show's pilot episode elicited 920 pieces of mail addressed to NBC and 307 addressed to Miller, in addition to 632 phone calls and 200 telegrams. This column, although unidentified, was clearly published shortly after the pilot aired. In 1965, however, Miller recalled that within ten days the pilot has elicited 26,000 pieces of viewer mail. Lawrence Laurent, "Mitch is Trying for New Jackpot," *Washington Post*, December 11, 1965; in Mitch Miller papers, box 5, folder 12. Also in 1965, Miller reported that he had received 25,000 pieces of mail over the previous eighteen months asking for the return of the show. Jack Gaver, "Miller Hopes that 'Sing Along' will Swing Along on Network Again," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 17, 1965; in Mitch Miller papers, box 5, folder 12. The significant disparity between these reports suggests that Miller is not a reliable source for information on the volume of viewer mail.

⁷⁸All of these examples can be found in the Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

⁷⁹Memo addressed to Miller, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

There is a rich body of scholarship in audience studies that draws on fan letters for the purpose of understanding how viewers “decode” televisual texts.⁸⁰ Those who take this approach adhere to what is termed “active audience theory;” they concur that the meaning of a given program is not fixed, but rather constructed by the viewer.⁸¹ My aim is slightly different: I seek primarily to determine what viewers of *Sing Along with Mitch* saw and heard in a visceral sense, with a secondary objective of discovering what they understood to be the message of the show. All the same, there are parallels to be drawn with other correspondence-based approaches. These include broad methodological concerns and specific observations made regarding other integrated programs of the era.

The authors of the correspondence preserved in the Mitch Miller papers clearly conceived of themselves as part of a viewing public with a shared experience, at least at the local level. They reported their perceptions and opinions as being collective, not individual. Many of the letters are signed by couples, families, or groups of friends, and the authors frequently claimed the support of their communities. A viewer in Weaverville, NC, complained that “You have ruined your show for all of our friends + us,” thereby conjuring up two layers of communal consensus: the family and their social circle.⁸² Similar claims—such as that from a man in Topeka, KS, that “All of my wide circle of friends agree”—pepper the correspondence.⁸³ Jennifer Hayward observed the same phenomenon in her study of fan letters concerning the soap opera *All My Children* (ABC, 1970–2011). Her suggestion that “letter writers see themselves as spokespeople” seems to apply here as well, although it is also evident that some authors sought merely to back up their racist views.⁸⁴ In dealing with a body of correspondence related to another integrated program that featured a Black woman, *Julia* (1968–1971), Aniko Bodroghkozy observed that many racist authors concealed their identities.⁸⁵ I found this to be the case with some of the most virulent screeds, but most authors seemed proud to claim their views, reinforced by the imagined voices of “all of my friends and acquaintances” (Jamestown, RI).⁸⁶

Scholars who turn to viewer letters with the hopes of understanding what a television program meant to audiences always acknowledge the limitations of this approach. To begin with, letters are not representative of the viewership at large—in this case even less so than typically, given that only complaints were preserved. As Bodroghkozy sums up in her study of written responses to the sitcom *Julia*, “Letter writers tend to be a particularly motivated group of television viewers.”⁸⁷ Such respondents are not necessarily the most passionately involved with the program. They might not even be regular viewers. Instead, they represent a faction that feels compelled to respond in writing to an experience they had with the program. In the words of Claudia Collins, “Something makes them pause in the process and write to report their reaction.”⁸⁸ In the case of the preserved correspondence to *Sing Along with Mitch*, viewers “paused” because they had a negative response to the experience of listening to and watching Leslie Uggams.

I want to interrogate this pause, for I believe that it was a space in which viewers twisted and deformed the characteristics of Uggams’s song and gesture so as to make them adhere to stereotyped notions about Black performativity. Sandra Graham reached a similar conclusion in her analysis of white audiences’ reception of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. She found that “it is imagination that feeds the emotional reactions to the music”—reactions rooted not in an audience member’s experience of

⁸⁰The encoding/decoding concept was first proposed by Stuart Hall. See: Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” 163–173.

⁸¹Sally Shaw, “‘Light Entertainment’ as Contested Socio-Political Space: Audience and Institutional Responses to *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972–76),” *Critical Studies in Television* 7, no. 1 (2012): 64; see also David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁸²Viewer correspondence postmarked October 14, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

⁸³Viewer correspondence dated October 6, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

⁸⁴Hayward, “Day after Tomorrow: Audience Interaction and Soap Opera Production,” *Cultural Critique* 23 (1992–1993): 100.

⁸⁵Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Is This What You Mean by Color TV?: Race, Gender and Contested Meanings in NBC’s *Julia*,” in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 156.

⁸⁶Viewer correspondence dated September 23, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

⁸⁷Bodroghkozy, “Is This What You Mean by Color TV?,” 148.

⁸⁸Claudia Collins, “Viewer Letters as Audience Research: The Case of *Murphy Brown*,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 41 (1997): 110.

the performance but in their idealized notions about the horrors of slavery and the inherent yet primitive musical inclinations of the African race.⁸⁹ Audience members saw and heard what they expected to see and hear, ignoring the fact that the Singers were in fact highly trained and presented Europeanized arrangements; in the words of Graham, “white audiences obviously heard something from beyond their realm of experience.”⁹⁰ There is a great deal of distance between the Jubilee Singers and Uggams, and I do not suggest that each was perceived through the same lens. However, in both cases the race of the performer(s) shaped the perceptions of white audience members, whose descriptions might tell us more about their own perceptive limitations than about what they saw and heard. I found that the accounts of viewers who described Uggams’s performances were inconsistent both across the correspondence and, at times, with observable reality. I will not attempt to provide a “truthful” description of Uggams on screen, for I follow Nina Sun Eidsheim in suggesting that “there is no unified or stable voice” to which the descriptions of letter writers might be compared.⁹¹ However, I will rebut some objectively inaccurate statements and I encourage readers to consult Uggam’s audiovisual texts for themselves.

I am convinced that at least a portion of the writers believed that they were honestly and accurately describing Uggams’s performances. They remembered and subsequently *saw* the exaggerations of the minstrel stage. This was, of course, not a new phenomenon; Americans had been perceiving Black performance through a minstrel lens ever since that lens had become available. Brian Roberts has traced this tendency back at least as far as the Civil War, when Northern visitors to the Sea Islands understood the musical activities of former slaves in terms of minstrelsy, while Eric Lott has documented parallels between descriptions of minstrelsy and Black performance dating to the mid-nineteenth century.⁹² Graham likewise observed that, since “white Northerners had no aural model for interpreting the spirituals, they compared them to music they knew”—music that included minstrel tunes.⁹³

The reception of twentieth-century African American performers has been the subject of remarkable recent scholarship, most notably Eidsheim’s book *The Race of Sound* and Kira Thurman’s article “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race,” both published in 2019. Working from the premise that there is “historical precedent for expectations regarding singers’ ethnic or racial backgrounds in relation to musical genre, vocal ability, and vocal sound,” Eidsheim zeroes in on the element of timbre, concluding that “voice and vocal identity are *not* situated at a unified locus that can be unilaterally identified.”⁹⁴ Her proposal that “Voice’s source is not the singer; it is the listener” shaped my approach to this study.⁹⁵ How can we hear Uggams’s voice in the accounts of these viewers?

Informed by Eidsheim, Thurman examines reviews of Lieder performances given by African American singers Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson in interwar Central Europe, identifying the many ways in which listeners’ perceptions were shaped and challenged by racialized expectations. She found that, while “audiences’ responses were varied and even contradictory [...] they all processed their musical experiences through a racial filter.”⁹⁶ Thurman considers both sight and sound, opening her essay with a brutal caricature of African Americans singing spirituals and citing excerpts from criticism that describe the appearance of performers according to minstrelsy-derived frameworks.⁹⁷ I will be placing an even greater emphasis on appearance due to the fact that viewers who wrote to *Sing*

⁸⁹Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 75.

⁹⁰Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*, 50.

⁹¹Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.

⁹²Brian Roberts, *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812–1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 253; Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class*, 20th-anniversary ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88.

⁹³Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*, 78.

⁹⁴Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 3–4.

⁹⁵Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 9.

⁹⁶Kira Thurman, “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 831.

⁹⁷See, for example, the critic who described Roland Hayes as “a small, agile Negro with crisp hair, thick lips and shining white teeth.” Thurman, “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race,” 835.

Along with Mitch frequently commented on Uggams's facial expressions, physical characteristics, and presentational style.

The attitudes of the letters' authors, broadly considered, fall into three categories. A sizeable minority seem to have genuinely disliked Uggams's voice or performance style without evidently connecting their perceptions to her race. Many more explicitly reference race, although these references range from casual to hateful. (I will not be considering correspondence in which the author addresses only race, without considering elements of Uggams's performative style). It is worth noting that there is no correlation between attitudes toward race and the geographical location of the author in this collection of letters. Viewers in New England, the Midwest, and California were just as likely to express racist sentiments as viewers in the South.⁹⁸ The majority of the letter writers, however, avoid mentioning race while at the same time betraying the obvious influence upon their thinking of stereotypes developed on the minstrel stage. Did these authors truthfully report their perceptions? Or did they knowingly employ derogatory tropes to misrepresent their viewing experience for the purpose of having Uggams removed from the show? Where is the line between these positions—between *believing* that Uggams embodied minstrel stereotypes and *claiming* that she did while knowing that such claims were not consistent with reality?

What Discontented Viewers Heard and Saw

We will begin with the element that seems to have preoccupied most scholars: perceptions of the voice of the Black singer. Clear trends emerge in the correspondence. These include the claim that Uggams did not sing at all, but rather yelled; comparisons between her voice and that of various animals; and objections to her vibrato.

The argument that Uggams “doesn't sing half of the time—just sorta *hollers*,” as a pair of women from “a musical family” in Bartlesville, OK, put it, is typical of the correspondence.⁹⁹ Many of the letters employ similar language. Objections to Uggams's “screeching” came from a woman in Topeka, KS (“Her ‘screeching’ is painful to hear”),¹⁰⁰ a man in Denver, CO (“She sings off key, she screeches, and she pulls the most awful faces”),¹⁰¹ and a man in Detroit, MI (“She screeches sometimes and I also object to N.A.A.C.P. [*sic*] tactics”).¹⁰² “Some sincere people” in Pasadena, CA, claimed to be afraid of Uggams due to her vocal style (“you call this *singing* we call it *yelling*”),¹⁰³ while a woman in Long Beach, CA, urged Miller to instruct Uggams “not to SCREAM.”¹⁰⁴

For these viewers, Uggams was simply too loud—a crime for which Black women were lynched during Reconstruction.¹⁰⁵ The stereotype of the “loud” Black woman has a long history in American entertainment. These descriptions call to mind the tradition of “coon shouting,” a practice associated principally with women, most of whom were white.¹⁰⁶ In her study of Sophie Tucker, for example, Kathleen Casey explains how the singer cultivated a “loud, abrasive sound” in order to be heard as “Black.”¹⁰⁷ In the 1950s, “loudness” became a fundamental trait of the “Sapphire” character type—with the “Mammy” and “Jezebel” one of three types used to represent Black women on screen.

⁹⁸Approaching the topic of representation from the other direction, J. Fred MacDonald has demonstrated that Northern power-brokers—not Southern viewers—were responsible for the stereotyped (or non-existent) presentation of African Americans on the television screen in the early civil rights era. MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 77–79.

⁹⁹Viewer correspondence dated July 28, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10. Throughout these quotes, I have italicized words and passages that were underlined in the original.

¹⁰⁰Viewer correspondence dated August 30, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹⁰¹Viewer correspondence dated August 10, [1963], Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹⁰²Viewer correspondence postmarked September 16, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹⁰³Viewer correspondence postmarked September 13, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 11.

¹⁰⁴Viewer correspondence dated August 18, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹⁰⁵Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 165.

¹⁰⁶Sharon Ammen, *May Irwin: Singing, Shouting, and the Shadow of Minstrelsy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 74.

¹⁰⁷Kathleen B. Casey, “The Jewish Girl with a Colored Voice: Sophie Tucker and the Sounds of Race and Gender in Modern America,” *The Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 1 (2015): 17.

While the Mammy was asexual/nurturing to white children and the Jezebel was oversexed/dangerous to white men, the Sapphire—named after Kingfish’s shrewish wife on the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* television program, which originated the type—was “a domineering Black woman,” “rude, loud, and overbearing” and exhibiting “intensive expressiveness,” who controlled and threatened those around her.¹⁰⁸ While Uggams cannot qualify as an authentic Sapphire type (she is too young and not accompanied by the requisite Black male), some viewers might have read her performances through this lens. Others certainly perceived her as a Jezebel, some going so far as to suggest that she and Miller were having an affair. “Are you in love with her,” queried a woman in Altadena, CA, “or are you appealing to the colored people?”¹⁰⁹ Several letter-writers included a column from *Walter Scott’s Personality Parade* that rejected (yet simultaneously circulated) the rumor that Miller had divorced his wife and married Uggams.¹¹⁰

When viewers offered comparisons to animals, they were most likely to suggest that Uggams’s “uncultured voice resembles the bleating of a goat,” as a man in Albion, IN, put it.¹¹¹ “The other girl singers you have are much better,” agreed a female viewer, “not so much ‘billy-goat-baaing’ to their voices.”¹¹² A man in Weaverville, NC, described Uggams as having a voice “as pleasing as that of a crow.”¹¹³ The comparison of Black women to animals has a long and violent history, and was used to justify their physical and sexual subjugation both during and after slavery.¹¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, such comparisons were encouraged when Black female performers were presented as “animalistic” at venues like Harlem’s Cotton Club, resulting in reviews from the 1920s that describe Black female performers “as nearly bestial.”¹¹⁵ In this context, it is hardly surprising that American audiences should have “imagined [the Black voice] as having a particular sound [...] that of an animal,” as Casey has demonstrated.¹¹⁶

Objections to Uggams’s “quivering singing” (San Clemente, CA) are just as common.¹¹⁷ “Her voice irritates me the way she lets it tremble,” wrote a man from Winter Park, FL.¹¹⁸ A woman in Franklin, MA, agreed: “Her voice wavers and she sounds much older and also looks much older than she is.”¹¹⁹ These are joined by other fairly neutral complaints about Uggams’s sound production, such as the report from a woman in Brookfield, MA, that “Many of her tones do not sound round and full.”¹²⁰ These comments tend to suggest that Uggams lacked adequate control over her voice—an observation contested by authors who complained that her voice had been spoiled by too much training (to be addressed below).

While descriptions of Uggams’s voice are common, they are overwhelmed in frequency by references to her appearance. Viewers felt compelled to comment on each of her features individually, in particular detailing the movements of her eyes and mouth and criticizing her facial expressions. It is in these descriptions that visions from the minstrel stage are conjured with the greatest immediacy.

¹⁰⁸Shawna V. Hudson, “Re-Creational Television: The Paradox of Change and Continuity within Stereotypical Iconography,” *Sociological Inquiry* 68, no. 2 (1998): 246; Valerie N. Adams-Bass, Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, and Howard C. Stevenson, “That’s Not Me I See on TV . . . : African American Youth Interpret Media Images of Black Females.” *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2, no. 1 (2014): 80; K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 45.

¹⁰⁹Viewer correspondence postmarked September 26, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹¹⁰Two examples can be found in Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹¹¹Undated viewer correspondence, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹¹²Viewer correspondence dated October 8, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹¹³Viewer correspondence dated October 14, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹¹⁴Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 139.

¹¹⁵Megan E. Williams, “Performing Lena: Race, Representation, and the Postwar Autobiographical Performances of Lena Horne” (PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, 2012), 68; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 223.

¹¹⁶Casey, “The Jewish Girl with a Colored Voice,” 18.

¹¹⁷Viewer correspondence postmarked December 29, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 11.

¹¹⁸Viewer correspondence dated December 8, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 12.

¹¹⁹Viewer correspondence dated December 19, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 12.

¹²⁰Viewer correspondence dated November 19, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

The frequent references to “Those rolling eyes” (as a woman in Orlando, FL, described them) are the most striking—not least due to the fact that Uggams did not typically engage in activity that could be described as “eye rolling” while performing on *Sing Along with Mitch*.¹²¹ This did not prevent another Orlando viewer from “getting tired of her eye rolling and ‘mugging,’”¹²² nor did it get in the way of a pair of women in Peoria, IL, complaining that “The way she rolls those eyes is disgusting.”¹²³ A Houston, TX, viewer did not object to Uggams’s “eye rolling” per se, but requested that her solos “be confined to negro spirituals where she really excels and her eye rolling and other mannerisms are in place.”¹²⁴ (I will address comments on Uggams’s repertoire below.) “Rolling eyes,” of course, are a typical characteristic of the blackface minstrel.¹²⁵

References to Uggams’s eyes were almost always linked with comments regarding other parts of her body. “And may God deliver us in the future,” wrote a man in Tifton, GA, “from ‘blearing eyes’—fluttering eye lids—teeth and tonsils.”¹²⁶ Uggams “just bellows and shows her tonsils, swings her hips, and rolls her eyes,” reported a viewer in Mobile, AL.¹²⁷ An obsession with Uggams’s tonsils pervades the entire correspondence. References to this particular part of her anatomy range from a Seattle woman’s relatively conciliatory evaluation that if she “did not strain & try to show her tonsils, I do believe she could sing a fair song”¹²⁸ to a New Yorker’s graphic report that “You can see her tonsils, her eyes twist, her jaw looks like a cow chewing her cud.”¹²⁹ A viewer in Plainfield, NJ, was one of many to comment on her “huge mouth,”¹³⁰ while the Orlando woman already referenced in connection with Uggams’s eyes also contributed to the chorus of objections to her “gleaming teeth.”¹³¹ It can be stated as plain fact that Uggams did not possess a larger mouth than the other female singers on the program, nor did she show her teeth with greater frequency. Like “rolling eyes,” however, “gaping mouths” and “big white teeth” were attributes typically assigned to minstrel performers.¹³²

When authors commented more broadly on Uggams’s facial expressions, they usually condemned what a viewer in Alexandria, VA, described as her “mugging grimaces and cute winks.”¹³³ Using similar terms, a man in Weaverville, NC, complained that “Her *facial grimaces* nauseate the viewer,”¹³⁴ while a woman in Alhambra, CA, reported that “her facial contortions are painful to watch – grotesque – like something out of the Twilight Zone.”¹³⁵ Many viewers seemed to feel that she indulged in too much “putting-on,” to use a term from a generally sympathetic viewer in Beverley Hills, CA.¹³⁶ A less friendly viewer from Topeka, KS, reported Uggams to be “so extravagantly dramatic that she is positively repulsive.”¹³⁷

Comments about Uggams’s “putting-on” are interesting insofar as they carry a grain of truth: her physical presentations were often somewhat extravagant—as were those of the rest of the cast. The aesthetic of *Sing Along with Mitch* was indebted to Hollywood film musicals, as suggested by the

¹²¹Undated viewer correspondence, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹²²Viewer correspondence postmarked September 11, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹²³Viewer correspondence postmarked November 18, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹²⁴Viewer correspondence dated November 13, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 12.

¹²⁵References to “rolling eyes” in descriptions of minstrel performances are so common that it is impossible to provide a representative sample. However, for some examples, see: Lott, *Love & Theft*, 120; Eileen Southern, ed., “Black Musicians and Early Ethiopian Minstrelsy,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 36, 48.

¹²⁶Undated viewer correspondence, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹²⁷Viewer correspondence dated October 29, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹²⁸Viewer correspondence dated September 9, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹²⁹Viewer correspondence dated October 28, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹³⁰Viewer correspondence postmarked January 14, 1964, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹³¹Undated viewer correspondence, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹³²Lott, *Love & Theft*, 149; Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2016), 65.

¹³³Viewer correspondence dated August 16, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹³⁴Viewer correspondence dated October 14, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹³⁵Viewer correspondence dated October 4, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹³⁶Viewer correspondence postmarked November 12, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹³⁷Viewer correspondence dated October 6, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

program's frequent recreation of iconic song-and-dance numbers. While Uggams's more energetic performances might draw from a tradition of Black performativity with roots in minstrelsy, I believe that they are primarily informed by the work of white musical theater actors.¹³⁸ I will consider an example: Uggams's up-tempo performance of "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe" (1944) on January 11, 1963 broadcast, which must number among her most exuberant.¹³⁹ In this scene, Uggams makes frequent exaggerated gestures, pulls theatrical faces, and once even rolls her eyes up and to the right to accentuate the first syllable of the word "Philadelphia" (not at all noteworthy, except in the context of the remarks quoted above). However, Judy Garland is hardly innocent of these offences in her performance of the same song in the 1946 film *The Harvey Girls*, on which Uggams's scene is clearly based. Although the relaxed tempo of her rendition inspires a subtler and perhaps more dignified presentation, her use of gesture and facial expressions is not dissimilar. And of course, this is an extreme example; Uggams had a broad artistic range and only "mugged" when presenting light-hearted repertoire.

Denigration of Uggams for engaging in behavior that was typical of the entire cast extended to her personality and manners, which were often conflated. Authors who disapproved of integration were also likely to criticize the ways in which Uggams behaved onscreen, especially when it came to her interactions with other cast members. When a viewer from Dallas, TX, condemned her as "one of the most brazen and obnoxious individuals every perpetrated on an American TV audience," he certainly perceived her as behaving in a way that was inappropriate for her race.¹⁴⁰ In a similar vein, a letter signed by "a Virginian who believes in the strict separation of The Races" noted with distaste that Uggams "showed lack of training" when she used the first names of Miller and other cast members.¹⁴¹

Many of these descriptions were accompanied by expressions of regret that Uggams, once "pleasing and unspoiled" (in the words of a woman from Norfolk, VA), had somehow been ruined.¹⁴² "What have they done to Leslie Uggams [*sic*]?" queried a woman in Zephyrhills, FL. "She used to have a sweet voice but now she is positively repulsive looking when she sings."¹⁴³ (Note how this author conflates the sight and sound of Uggams.) A viewer in Melbourne, FL, recalled the "sweet, simple singer on George DeWitt's 'Name That Tune,'" asking, "Has the Juilliard School of Music 'messed' her up?"¹⁴⁴ These letters reveal anxieties concerning Uggams's perceived rejection of her "natural" sound in favor of training—and, perhaps, the pursuit of a "white" sound. While Thurman found that certain reviewers attributed Black singers' "supposed inadequacies to an insurmountable cultural and intellectual gulf that no amount of effort or training could bridge," these authors seem to feel that training can only make a Black singer worse due to the fact that it denies their natural talents (and limitations).¹⁴⁵

Now that we have surveyed responses to the ways in which Uggams was perceived to perform and behave, we can address attitudes toward the ways in which Miller used her in the program. Specifically, authors demonstrated concern with her repertoire, her mode of accompaniment, and the fact that she was given preference over the other female soloists.

The comments on her repertoire are few but striking. Two authors specifically objected to her singing the 1919 song "Alice Blue Gown," in which the narrator reminisces about a beautiful dress that she used to wear. The song is lyrically and stylistically nostalgic, rejecting the ragtime influence of its era in favor of lyrical strains in waltz time. Uggams sang "Alice Blue Gown" on December 2, 1963, as part of

¹³⁸The history of African American performers adopting and adapting the blackface tradition is long and complex, extending from minstrelsy itself into the twenty-first century. Lefkowitz, *Transnational Cinematic and Popular Music Icons*, 18; Jennifer Bloomquist, "The Minstrel Legacy: African American English and the Historical Construction of 'Black' Identities in Entertainment," *Journal of African American Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 412.

¹³⁹I viewed Episode 53, titled "Gilbert & Sullivan," on a bootleg DVD. It is not held in an archival collection.

¹⁴⁰Viewer correspondence dated October 15, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹⁴¹Viewer correspondence postmarked October 1, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹⁴²Viewer correspondence postmarked September 24, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹⁴³Viewer correspondence postmarked August 31, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹⁴⁴Viewer correspondence dated September 9, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹⁴⁵Thurman, "Performing Lieder, Hearing Race," 851.

a scene set in a department store. It was not an unusual selection for her: Uggams almost always performed Tin Pan Alley classics, most of which had been popularized by white singers and/or did not bear the traces of African American musical traditions.¹⁴⁶ On September 23, 1963, for example, she sang “Over the Rainbow,” a song firmly associated with Judy Garland’s 1939 performance in *The Wizard of Oz*, without provoking any repertoire-oriented criticism. For whatever reason, however, her rendition of “Alice Blue Gown” struck a nerve. “Leslie Uggams has a good voice,” wrote a viewer in Pittsburgh, PA, “but why not keep her in her own category – jazz, rock and roll, anything but romantic songs and songs such as ‘Alice Blue Gown’.”¹⁴⁷

The preference that Uggams be kept “in her own category” was fairly widespread. The suggestion that she “be confined to negro spirituals” was already quoted above, but it is noteworthy that *all* of the positive reviews of Uggams’s singing that referenced specific repertoire concerned her performance of spirituals. Two authors, both already cited for their general criticisms of Uggams, admitted that they were able to tolerate her performance of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” while another praised her rendition of “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” on the March 10, 1961, broadcast.¹⁴⁸ Interestingly, there is no record of Uggams ever performing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” on *Sing Along with Mitch*. This does not prove definitively that she never sang it, as not all of the episodes are available to view and my accounting of the repertoire is based on written documentation in the Mitch Miller papers, but it does suggest the possibility that viewers imagined—and even “remembered”—her singing a number that they strongly associated with Black performativity.

Other authors linked repertoire, style, and appearance as they sought to argue that Uggams could only succeed within racialized boundaries. As a woman in Cincinnati reported, “We used to enjoy Leslie Uggams when she sang jaunty songs with her eyes open very wide. Now that she has become a ‘smoothy’ with half closed eyes and ‘torch’ songs, one gets tired of her two solos every week—and she didn’t seem to fit in at all in the décor of your ‘Home for Thanksgiving’ program.”¹⁴⁹ Like many others, this viewer was willing to tolerate Uggams only as long as she was confined to roles (and scenes) considered appropriate for her race.

Viewers also became upset over the fact that Miller featured Uggams with the Sing Along Strings. It is difficult to tell whether authors objected to Uggams’s string-backed appearances on aesthetic grounds or on the grounds that she was perceived to receive special treatment. A viewer from Plainfield, NJ, found that Uggams came up short when measured against others of her race: “You make a mistake by having her sing with full orchestra—as she is no Marian Anderson.”¹⁵⁰ This comment seems to suggest that a different type of Black voice would be acceptable, although the author’s other remarks (e.g. “she just doesn’t fit in—and *never did*”) lead me to conclude that Uggams would have to clear a high bar indeed to be considered “good enough” for this viewer. A woman in Detroit reported that she loved the strings, but “to constantly have them behind Miss Uggams is a waste of their talent,”¹⁵¹ while a woman from Fort Lauderdale concluded that “any of the other girls would do just as well + look better” when given the same opportunity.¹⁵²

This last remark brings us to a complaint made across the correspondence: that Miller did not treat his white soloists fairly. Other scholars who have considered viewer correspondence addressed to integrated television programs have reported the same complaint.¹⁵³ In the case of *Sing Along with Mitch*, authors frequently coopted the language of the civil rights movement. As a man from Depoe Bay, OR,

¹⁴⁶A complete listing of Uggams’s solo numbers can be found in the episode outlines preserved in the Mitch Miller papers, box 6, folder 1.

¹⁴⁷Viewer correspondence postmarked November 9, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7.

¹⁴⁸Viewer correspondence dated October 4, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 7. Viewer correspondence dated September 21, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9. Viewer correspondence dated October 6, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹⁴⁹Viewer correspondence dated December 3, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹⁵⁰Viewer correspondence postmarked January 14, 1964, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹⁵¹Viewer correspondence dated October 8, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 10.

¹⁵²Viewer correspondence postmarked December 10, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 11.

¹⁵³Shaw, “‘Light Entertainment’ as Contested Socio-Political Space,” 69; Bodroghkozy, “Is This What You Mean by Color TV?,” 153.

queried, “Why don’t the white girls get ‘equal rights’ on your programs?”¹⁵⁴ Viewers often hypothesized that the white performers “must feel a deep resentment” (as a man from Portland, OR, put it) over the fact that Miller placed Uggams “over and above everyone else.”¹⁵⁵ “Why couldn’t you compliment the white girls *first* just once,” wrote a woman from Dallas, TX, who objected to Miller’s on-screen praise of Uggams. “You are not fair on any score.”¹⁵⁶

The greatest amount of criticism concerned Episode 68, titled “Leslie’s Birthday,” which aired on September 23, 1963. The broadcast inspired a flood of condemnation, most of which argued that it was unfair to single out Uggams for special celebration. “How about equal rights and birthdays for the white girls,” wrote a couple in Escondido, CA. A letter from Memphis, TN, included a newspaper clipping—a fairly common practice, seemingly employed by authors to add weight to their comments.¹⁵⁷ This particular clipping quoted another letter, written by a “Disgusted Viewer” to the paper in question, in which the author observes that Miller “never had a birthday party for any of the white performers.” While these comments shed no light on viewers’ perceptions of Uggams, they attest to the general resistance that she faced as the sole Black singer on an integrated program.

Conclusion

There is surely a remarkable contrast between the two portraits I have painted of Leslie Uggams. In one, she is a skilled and versatile singer who sparkles onscreen as a soloist and holds her own with celebrity duet partners. In the other, she is a grotesque minstrel caricature. But can it be determined which, if either, is the real Uggams of *Sing Along with Mitch*? I believe that the former representation captures Miller’s intent. Media scholars have long acknowledged, however, that creators cannot control the ways in which their audiovisual texts are read. Meaning resides in the viewer. This resonates with Eidsheim’s proposition: “Voice’s source is not the singer; it is the listener.” If viewers heard/read Uggams as a minstrel stereotype, that hearing/reading is as valid—as real—as any other. These two analytical approaches, however, do not produce identical knowledge. Active audience theory considers the construction of meaning, while Eidsheim considers the construction of a physical experience rooted in the activation of the tympanic membrane by sound waves. One approach asks what Uggams’s performances on *Sing Along with Mitch* meant, while the other asks how they were experienced (although that experience is certainly positioned in a rich web of culturally specific meaning).

It is difficult to identify the “message” of *Sing Along with Mitch*. According to Miller himself, his only aim was to present “good music” that was “well performed.”¹⁵⁸ I have argued that the program took a strong integrationist stance in the face of considerable pressure from the network and sponsors, going so far as to rewrite historical media by introducing a dignified and professional Black woman into nostalgic recollections of a whitewashed American past. I perceive Uggams in a way that endorses this message of equality and integration, and I am certain that many contemporary viewers did as well. The correspondence, however, attests to an alternate perception that endorses an alternate message. This is hardly surprising. It is not so easy to cast off the weight of a blackface minstrel tradition that has shaped the perception of African Americans as people and performers for well over a century.

References

Archival Sources

Mitch Miller papers, JPB 14-31. Music Division, The New York Public Library.

The Interviews: An Oral History of Television, Television Academy Foundation. Accessed May 26, 2020. <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews>.

¹⁵⁴Viewer correspondence dated January 1, 1964, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 8.

¹⁵⁵Viewer correspondence dated December 18, [1963], Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 12.

¹⁵⁶Viewer correspondence dated October 3, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 11.

¹⁵⁷Viewer correspondence postmarked October 1, 1963, Mitch Miller papers, box 2, folder 9.

¹⁵⁸P.M. Clepper, “Mitch Hopes to Get Show Back on Air,” *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press*, December 12, 1965, Mitch Miller papers, box 5, folder 13; Linda Seifert, “Mitch Miller Happy To Be Here; Band Readies Tonight’s Concert,” *The Central-Lite*, January 14, 1966, Mitch Miller papers, box 5, folder 13.

“Sing along with Mitch.” Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound. The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed May 26, 2020. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3bec3fc0-66a7-0132-f48a-3c075448cc4b>.

Books and Articles

- Adams-Bass, Valerie N., Keisha L. Bentley-Edwards, and Howard C. Stevenson.** “That’s Not Me I See on TV . . . : African American Youth Interpret Media Images of Black Females.” *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2, no. 1 (2014): 79–100.
- Ammen, Sharon.** *May Irwin: Singing, Shouting, and the Shadow of Minstrelsy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.
- Averill, Gage.** *Four Parts, No Waiting: A Social History of American Barbershop Harmony*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Bloomquist, Jennifer.** “The Minstrel Legacy: African American English and the Historical Construction of ‘Black’ Identities in Entertainment.” *Journal of African American Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 410–25.
- Bodroghkozy, Aniko.** “‘Is This What You Mean by Color TV?’: Race, Gender and Contested Meanings in NBC’s Julia.” In *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, edited by Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, 143–68. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Bogle, Donald.** *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.
- Brown, Jayna.** *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Casey, Kathleen B.** “‘The Jewish Girl with a Colored Voice’: Sophie Tucker and the Sounds of Race and Gender in Modern America.” *The Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 1 (2015): 16–26.
- Collins, Claudia.** “Viewer Letters as Audience Research: The Case of Murphy Brown.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 41 (1997): 109–131.
- Collins, Patricia Hill.** *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Second edition. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Cripps, Thomas.** “Amos ‘n’ Andy and the Debate over American Racial Integration.” In *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, edited by Joanne Morreale, 25–40. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003.
- duCille, Ann.** “The Shirley Temple of My Familiar.” *Transition* 73 (1997): 10–32.
- Eidsheim, Nina Sun.** *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Feimster, Crystal Nicole.** *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Gale, Emily Margot.** “Sounding Sentimental: American Popular Song from Nineteenth-Century Ballads to 1970s Soft Rock.” Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2014.
- Graham, Sandra Jean.** *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.
- Gray, Herman.** “The Politics of Representation in Network Television.” In *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, edited by Darnell M. Hunt, 155–74. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hall, Stuart.** “Encoding/decoding.” In *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, Revised Edition, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, 163–173. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- Hatch, Kristen.** *Shirley Temple and the Performance of Girlhood*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- Hayward, Jennifer.** “‘Day after Tomorrow’: Audience Interaction and Soap Opera Production.” *Cultural Critique* 23 (1992–1993): 83–109.
- Hudson, Shawna V.** “Re-Creational Television: The Paradox of Change and Continuity within Stereotypical Iconography.” *Sociological Inquiry* 68, no. 2 (1998): 242–57.
- Jewell, K. Sue.** *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Lefkowitz, Aaron.** *Transnational Cinematic and Popular Music Icons: Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, and Queen Latifah, 1917–2017*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.
- Lott, Eric.** *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class*. 20th-anniversary edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- MacDonald, J. Fred.** *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1992.
- Morgan-Ellis, Esther M.** “Nostalgia, Sentiment, and Cynicism in Images of ‘After the Ball.’” *Magic Lantern Gazette* 23, no. 2 (2011): 3–8.
- Morgan-Ellis, Esther M.** “Warren Kimsey and Community Singing at Camp Gordon, 1917–1918.” *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 39, no. 2 (2018): 171–94.
- Morgan-Ellis, Esther M.** *Everybody Sing! Community Singing in the American Picture Palace*. Athens, GA: UGA Press, 2018.
- Morgan-Ellis, Esther M.** “‘Making the many-minded one’: Community Singing at the Peabody Prep in 1915.” *Musical Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2019): 361–401.
- Morgan-Ellis, Esther M.** “Mediated Community and Participatory Blackface in *Gillette Original Community Sing* (CBS, 1936–1937).” *Music & Letters* (forthcoming).
- Morley, David.** *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1992.

- Murphy, Ann.** “Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple Tap Past Jim Crow.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Screen Dance Studies*, edited by Douglas Rosenberg, 731–48. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Peters, Donna-Marie.** “Dancing with the Ghost of Minstrelsy: A Case Study of the Marginalization and Continued Survival of Rhythm Tap.” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (2011): 82–103.
- Pickering, Michael.** *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Roberts, Brian.** *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812–1925*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Rosen, Craig.** *The Billboard Book of Number One Albums: The Inside Story Behind Pop Music’s Blockbuster Records*. New York: Billboard Books, 1996.
- Sammond, Nicholas.** *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Sanjek, David.** “Mitch Miller, 1910–2010.” *Popular Music and Society* 34, no. 1 (2011): 113–15.
- Shaw, Sally.** “‘Light Entertainment’ as Contested Socio-Political Space: Audience and Institutional Responses to *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972–76).” *Critical Studies in Television* 7, no. 1 (2012): 64–78.
- Southern, Eileen, ed.** “Black Musicians and Early Ethiopian Minstrelsy.” In *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, edited by Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara, 43–66. Hanover, NH: Weleyn University Press, 1996.
- Thurman, Kira.** “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 825–65.
- Wald, Elijah.** *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Williams, Megan E.** “Performing Lena: Race, Representation, and the Postwar Autobiographical Performances of Lena Horne.” Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Kansas, 2012.

Esther M. Morgan-Ellis is associate professor of music history at the University of North Georgia, where she also directs the orchestra. She is the author of *Everybody Sing! Community Singing in the American Picture Palace* (UGA Press, 2018), and has published on various aspects of the American community singing movement. Her music appreciation textbook, *Resonances: Engaging Music in Its Cultural Context* (UNG Press, 2020), is available as an open-access PDF. She also writes about participatory music-making practices of the present day, including old-time revivalism and Sacred Harp singing.