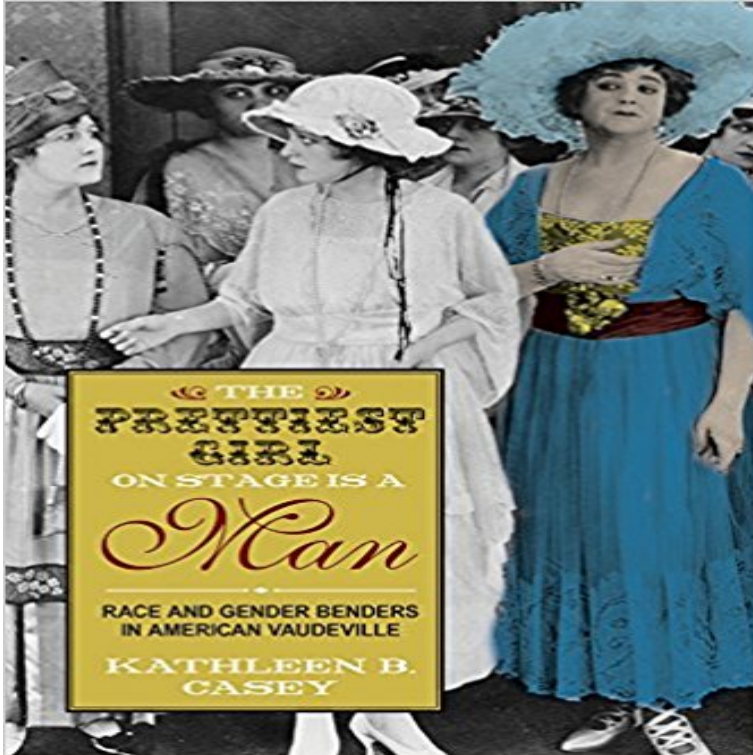


The Prettiest Girl on Stage Is a Man: Race and Gender Benders in American Vaudeville



From the 1890s through the 1920s, vaudeville reigned as one of the most popular entertainment forms in urban America. Through drama, humor, and satire, it invited its socially, economically, and ethnically diverse audiences to turn a self-conscious eye upon themselves and their culture, which was being rapidly transformed by such forces as immigration, racial discord, and new conceptions of gender roles. It was no coincidence that acts featuring cross-dressing performers and racial impersonators were among vaudeville's biggest attractions. In this lively and enlightening study, Kathleen B. Casey explores the ways in which the gender- and race-bending spectacles of vaudeville dramatized the economic, technological, social, and cultural upheaval that gripped the United States in the early twentieth century. She focuses on four key performers. Eva Tanguay, known as The I Don't Care Girl, was loved for her defiance of Victorian decorum, linking white womanliness to animalistic savagery at a time when racial and gender ideologies were undergoing significant reconstruction. In contrast, Julian Eltinge, the era's foremost female impersonator, used race to exaggerate notions of manliness and femininity in a way that reinforced traditional norms more than it undermined them. Lillyn Brown, a biracial woman who portrayed a cosmopolitan black male dandy while singing about an antebellum southern past, offered her audiences, black and white, starkly different visual and aural messages about race and gender. Finally, Sophie Tucker, who often performed in blackface during the early years of her long and heralded career, strategically played with prevailing ideologies by alternately portraying herself as white, Jewish, black, manly, and womanly, while managing, remarkably, to convince audiences that these identities could coexist within one body. Analyzing a wide assortment of

primary materials advertisements, recordings, lyrics, sheet music, costumes, photographs, reviews, and press accounts from the era Casey looks not only at gender and racial impersonation but also at how spectators reacted to these performances.

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