

Background for and Observations about

The Music of Black America

Did the various forms of music developed by slaves derive directly from tribal cultures?

We shall examine the facts available to us, to determine what possibilities exist that forms of Black music in North America represent music directly from African cultures.

First, let us examine the historical conditions which brought slaves to the Americas.

Language: The Basis for the development of music

Language is a tool, a method of communicating within a community. Primitive humans organized communities and developed languages with distinctive characteristics as tools for survival in threatening environments. Language is NOT always sound that we westerners know how to interpret. (Think of the whistle language of the Canary Islands.) Human Survival requires diverse practices in different communities. Gestures and behaviors are also components of Language. Most cultural anthropologists agree that language is culture. Music and dance are distilled forms of a Language, a culture.

African languages may incorporate sounds totally unfamiliar to English speakers, including clicks and tonal elements of the same syllable or word which indicate totally different meanings.

There are 1,250 to 2,100 and by some counts over 3,000 languages spoken in Africa. We can assume that music traditions related to and derived from language culture are equally numerous.

Dates Related to Slave Trade

- 1502** African slaves first reported in the New World.
- 1640-80** Large-scale introduction of African slaves into the British Caribbean for sugar production.
- 1791** Slave revolt in French colony of Santo Domingo leads to establishment of black nation of Haiti in 1804.
- 1793** White refugees from Santa Domingo flee Haitian insurrection to U.S. ports.
- 1794** France emancipates slaves in French colonies. U.S. Congress prohibits use of U.S. vessels in the slave trade.
- 1800** U.S. forbids its citizens from serving on slave ships.
- 1807** Britain bans the Atlantic slave trade. -1808 U.S. bans slave trade

The Principle of Slave Trading

Goods manufactured in Europe were carried to the West African coast by European sailing ships and traded for human cargo. Slaves then were shipped to the West Indies to work on sugar cane plantations. Some Africans were sent to U.S coast for sale to plantation owners.

The bulk of the slaves for trade were brought by Nigerian chieftains and Muslim dealers. They captured slaves from various regions and then sold them on the west coast. Cowrie shells were used as money for exchanges.

Slaves of various tribes were loaded on ships. European captains mixed captives from different tribes to prevent communication, rebellion and mutiny. Many traditions of various tribes were weakened or lost, but basic social principles of followers choosing leaders survived from tribal culture.

The Middle Passage

Ships carried such cargo as iron, cloth, brandy, firearms, and gunpowder from Europe to Africa's western coast.

There captive slaves brought by Nigerian and Arab traders from Africa's interior (roughly 20 million over about 300 years), were sold and laded on ships. Then they set sail on the "Middle Passage."

Ships were compelled by trade winds to sail toward the West Indies. There slaves were sold to work on sugar plantations, or transported for sale to New Orleans, or shipped northward along the tidewater coast to the slave markets in the British colonies.

After slaves were sold, the ships, now laded with colonial sugar, tobacco, and rum, used the Gulf Stream for speed to return to northern Europe.

The languages of the Caribbean reflect the region's diverse history and culture.

The eight official languages are the following:

Spanish (official language of Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico)

French (official language of Guadeloupe, Haiti, Martinique, St. Barthelemy, and St. Martin)

English (official language of Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, Puerto Rico, Saba, St. Eustatius, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Maarten, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands)

Dutch (official language of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten)

Haitian Creole (official language of Haiti)

Papiamentu (a Portuguese and Spanish-based Creole language) (official language of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao)

There are also number of unofficial creoles and local patois. All of these language cultures could have contributed to one or more the slave cultures.

The Possible Diversity of Music Cultures

Over the years, many African slaves may have retained some cultural characteristics from their tribal origins, but it is doubtful that they preserved only primary elements of their one original culture.

Enslaved Africans in the West Indies could have remembered tools and instruments, and they probably reconstructed them in the New World -- such musical instruments as primitive percussion, strings, and winds—but it is unlikely that slaves living in the mix of diverse languages and cultures in the Indies would not have absorbed influences which would corrupt their original tribal culture. Gulla and Geeshee dialects seem to prove this theory.

Gulla and Geeshee

Gullah speakers live on the Sea Islands of South Carolina; Geechee speakers on the islands off the coast of Georgia and Florida. These slave cultures practice farming methods learned from slaves who acquired skills in the Indies. Gullahs were imported to the island plantations to grow rice, indigo, and tobacco and cotton. Their dialects are far from culturally pure. They have been corrupted by contact with West Indies dialects and colonial English. A few elements of the African tongues may persist, but native speakers say their dialects were invented so slaves could communicate with white people.

Slave Education

The tide-water slaves worked on plantations and remained isolated from the mainland. The newly-rich English and Irish plantation developers sent their children back to England for classical education, which enforced the concept of ennobled ownership with Christian values, including military leadership with honor.

Owners treated their slaves as protected property, but most slaves, like commoners in England, got very limited or no education.

However, being Irish Catholics, Church of England Episcopalians, or Scot Presbyterians, owners required many of their slaves to attend church with them, but sit apart from Whites in separate slave balconies. There they were exposed to Christian culture Biblical stories, and music

Cruel treatment of slaves

Some owners gave their slaves little or no opportunity for pleasurable activities and followed the dictum of extreme corporal punishment for blacks. Laws for punishment were passed in some states which included unbelievable acts of extreme sadism. Such rules were published in Slavery Magazines. There were long lists of severe punishments for specific crimes. Here are some mild examples:

- No slave can own anything of his own without the consent of his master.
- No slave can sell anything he has made without his master's consent.
- No slave can be a witness in any case against a white person.
- No slave shall be allowed off of his plantation without written permission from his master.
- If a slave willfully strikes a white person to cause shedding of blood, the slave shall be punished with death.
- Any person who teaches a slave to read and write shall be imprisoned for no less than one month or more than 12 months.

Black Entertainment and Recreation

Some owners allowed slaves little opportunity for pleasure. Wise owners and members of mixed race communities knew that recreation was necessary for health, good will, co-operative attitudes, and productive work. Such owners and employers supported entertainment for blacks and mixed race people, as well as their own Aristocratic class.

In Baltimore, Charleston, Louisville, and New Orleans there were seasonal balls for blacks, enslaved and free, and such were elaborate. In 1856 Falls City Hotel, Louisville, gave a New Year's Eve Ball for hired free and slaves. The local newspaper said that the staff "rendered colored guests comfortable and entertainment was agreeable."

Music for dancing in taverns was also provided by fiddles, flutes, clarinets, tambourines, and drums.

Northerners often expressed contrary views about slave attitudes and music. Frederick Douglass, having been a slave, observed that slave singing was not evidence of contentment and happiness but that slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.

The Negro Spiritual

The sentimental appeal of sad melodies and longing words made Negro Spiritual Songs popular with concert audiences in the 1930's.

More Popular Forms of Black Songs

The author for a web site listed *Digital History*, states under "Music:" "Many aspects of later African American music trace their roots to the distinctive features of slave music. These include songs with such elements as intricate rhythm patterns, off key notes (or what are technically called blues notes, bent notes, and elisions), the incorporation of hums, moans, and vocables (sounds without a distinct meaning), foot patting, and a strong rhythmic drive."

The author classifies off-key notes as "blue notes, bent notes and elisions." However, "blue notes." are possibly related to the origin of the term "blues" (1741). In black culture it refers to songs of lament using the slightly off-pitch flatted seventh tone of the scale.

More Characteristics of Black Music

Returning to the author's quote from the previous slide... "Among the distinctly African elements that persisted in slave music were irregular rhythms and tones, a rasping voice, a call-and-response pattern (with a leader improvising calls and the group responding), and a combination of sound and bodily movement."

Slave music took diverse forms. Although the Negro spirituals are the best known form of slave music, in fact secular music was as common as sacred music. There were **field hollers**, sung by individuals, **work songs**, sung by groups of laborers, **and satirical songs**. Interestingly, there are no pre-Civil War references to narrative songs among slaves, suggesting that the **blues ballad** was a post-Civil War innovation.

Wealthy Blacks Who Owned Slaves

Numbers of free Negroes owned black slaves. In 1860 a small minority of white U.S. citizens owned slaves. According to the U.S. census report for that last year before the Civil War, there were nearly 27 million whites in the country. Some eight million of them lived in the slaveholding states.

The census determined that fewer than 385,000 individuals owned slaves. Even if all slaveholders had been white, that would amount to only 1.4 percent of whites in the country (or 4.8 percent of southern whites who owned one or more slaves.)

In Natchez, Mississippi, while remodeling a down-town store some years ago, workmen discovered dozens of photographic plates stored by a pre-Civil War photographer. They were restored and printed. They became a famous collection which is on display in the annex of the First Presbyterian Church and can be viewed by the public. Among other subjects on display are photos of wealthy blacks and their children photographed in their plantation homes.

Musical Gift Versus Audience Appreciation

All races produce some human beings with exceptional musical gifts and potential genius. The ways in which these individuals express their gifts depend on their environmental conditioning and developmental experiences.

The degree of appreciation the greater society assigns to the form and style of black musical performance depends on the capacity of surrounding cultures to discover rewarding values in the Black musical tradition. Rap, break dancing, acid rock may be distasteful to some, but could be significant for future generations.

Genes plus individual experience produce the performer. Social conditioning and attitude of particular audiences produce audience appreciation. Sophisticated audiences as well as naive ones learn to appreciate diverse styles of expressing feeling musically. The appreciation they discover depends on their ability to find personal values in what they see and hear.

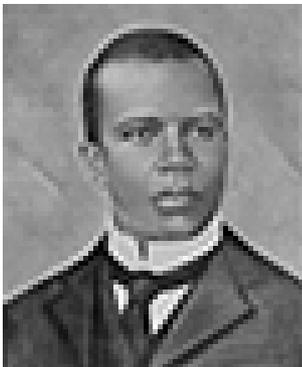
Following are brief excerpts from recordings by black musicians that past generations have valued. We look to future generations to determine which performances of today will be of lasting value.



Frank Isaac Robinson (b. December 28, 1938), known in his early musical career as "Sugar Chile." He gave up music as a career to become an academic.



Lena Mary Calhoun Horne (1917–2010) American singer, dancer, actress, and civil rights activist. She joined the chorus of the New York Cotton Club at the age of 16, became a nightclub performer, and moved to Hollywood where she was blacklisted for a while. Over 70 years she appeared in film, television and on Broadway.



Scott Joplin (1868-1917)
Born in Linden, TX.
African-American
composer, pianist. famed
for his ragtime
compositions, dubbed the
"King of Ragtime Writers".



Louis Armstrong (1901-1971), born in New Orleans, LA, called "Satchmo," was a jazz trumpeter, composer and singer, one of the most influential figures in jazz. With Ella Fitzgerald he sings "Tenderly."

Ella Jane Fitzgerald (1917-1996), born Newport News, VA, one of the greatest jazz singers, referred to as "Lady Ella, Queen of Jazz."

Nathaniel Adams Coles (Nat King Cole), (1919 – 1965) jazz pianist, became famous for his soft, baritone voice. He was a major force in popular music for three decades.

Oscar Moore, guitarist, was part of the Nat King Cole Trio from 1937 to 1947. Voted top guitarist of 1945, 1946, and 1947 in Down Beat readers' poll, he left music and became a bricklayer in Los Angeles.



The End

Jim Tryer
for the Music Club of Kingsville
2016