

A Special Editorial Section On Black History Black Music And Entertainers 1600 - 1920

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Introduction

Music has been an integral part of the human experience since before recorded time. It is the language of sound which expresses all levels of the conditions under and into that which man was and is; and, as such, becomes a form of communication which fits the needs of the people who created it.

Most early peoples attributed music to their gods, and the anonymous poets and singers can be said to have been music's first historians.

In Genesis, the first Book of the Old Testament, Jubal, a relative of Cain, is said to be "... the father of all such as handle the harp and organ." Moses affirms this. The Greeks, through their legends and mythology, had a God and Goddess who "invented" music. Following that ancient civilization came the Romans with their carbon copies.

In the Sudan, the Dogans have eight kinds of drums, each a different size, which correspond to their interpretation of the creation of the world, from the birth of the Great Monitor (God), symbolized by the Kunga drum, to the age when the human race began to increase and multiply, symbolized by the Barba drum. One might find an analogy in the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the Creation.

Music and religion, then, have been intimately interwoven since the Dawn of Man.

—AFRICA—

According to some eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans, culture in Africa was said to be non-existent; however, reports belie this. Before the African was brought to the New World as a slave, his musicality was well-developed and documented. The earliest published account was written by Richard Jobson, Esquire, during a visit to Gambia in 1620-21. He observed the importance of music in the African's life, and stated that all "... principall persons (that is, the kings and chiefs) do hold as an ornament of their state, so as when wee come to see them, their musicks will seldome be wanting." The important rulers employed their own bands and the bandmaster, master drummer and royal hornblower had the highest status. The better band members and singers were also held in high esteem, often receiving some form of gratuity from the dancers and visitors.

An important member of every village was the bard. After having been identified as possessing possibilities for such a career, he served an apprenticeship of many years. His responsibilities were manifold. As chief historian, he related all information in song. Before

a battle, he whipped the warriors into a frenzy with music; continuing on into the battle, constantly encouraging the troops with songs of the glorious deeds of their ancestors. He acted also as court jester, and often became the conscience of the ruler. Some became wanderers or itinerant minstrels and performed in religious ceremonies in addition to being the musical focus at social occasions. In the late eighteenth century, Olaudah (Ibo) Equiano, one of the first Africans to write in English, wrote:

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus every great event... is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion.

Various European writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries corroborated this. Music, therefore, was a functional part of each person's life from birth to death. The Ashanti, according to Bowdich, thought it "... absurd to worship God in any other way than with chanting or singing." Music was used socially, recreationally, politically and as an act of communication. All chores, community involvements, human conditions, contracts, and expressions were manifested in this form. Each song had a specific motive for being instrumentalized, danced or sung.

AFRICAN INSTRUMENTS

One of the earliest instruments on record, other than the drum, was the balafou or balafo, the forerunner of today's xylophone or marimba. Jobson carefully described it and remarked upon its unusual construction. Two gourds suspended from each key, afforded extraordinary resonance when this wooden slat (key) was struck by a stick swathed in "... some soft stuff to avoid the clattering noise the bare stick would make."

Drums, of course, were the most important instruments and were indigenous to all communities or tribes. They were formed from hollowed out logs, gourds or calabashes which were covered by stretched animal skins. The instrument ranged in size from one to seven feet high and from two or three inches to several feet wide. Different pitches were achieved on the same drum when the drum was struck by a stick, fist, foot or elbow.

Accompaniment to the drum was afforded by wooden flutes, horns from elephant tusks, *dududen* a sort of clarinet; trumpets fashioned from wood and tusks; various percussion instruments constructed of iron; and rattles made from gourds or other dried vegetables. So, too, were the stringed in-



BALAFU IN WEST AFRICA, sketched by William Smith, surveyor for the Royal Africa Company, 1726. Frontispiece in his *New Voyage to Guinea*. . . London: J. Nourse, 1744. Courtesy of the Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

struments commonly formed from large gourds with strings stretched across the opening and attached to a long neck without frets. One of these stringed instruments was specifically noted by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia*. He stated "The instrument proper to them (African slaves) is the banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar." It later became known as the banjo.

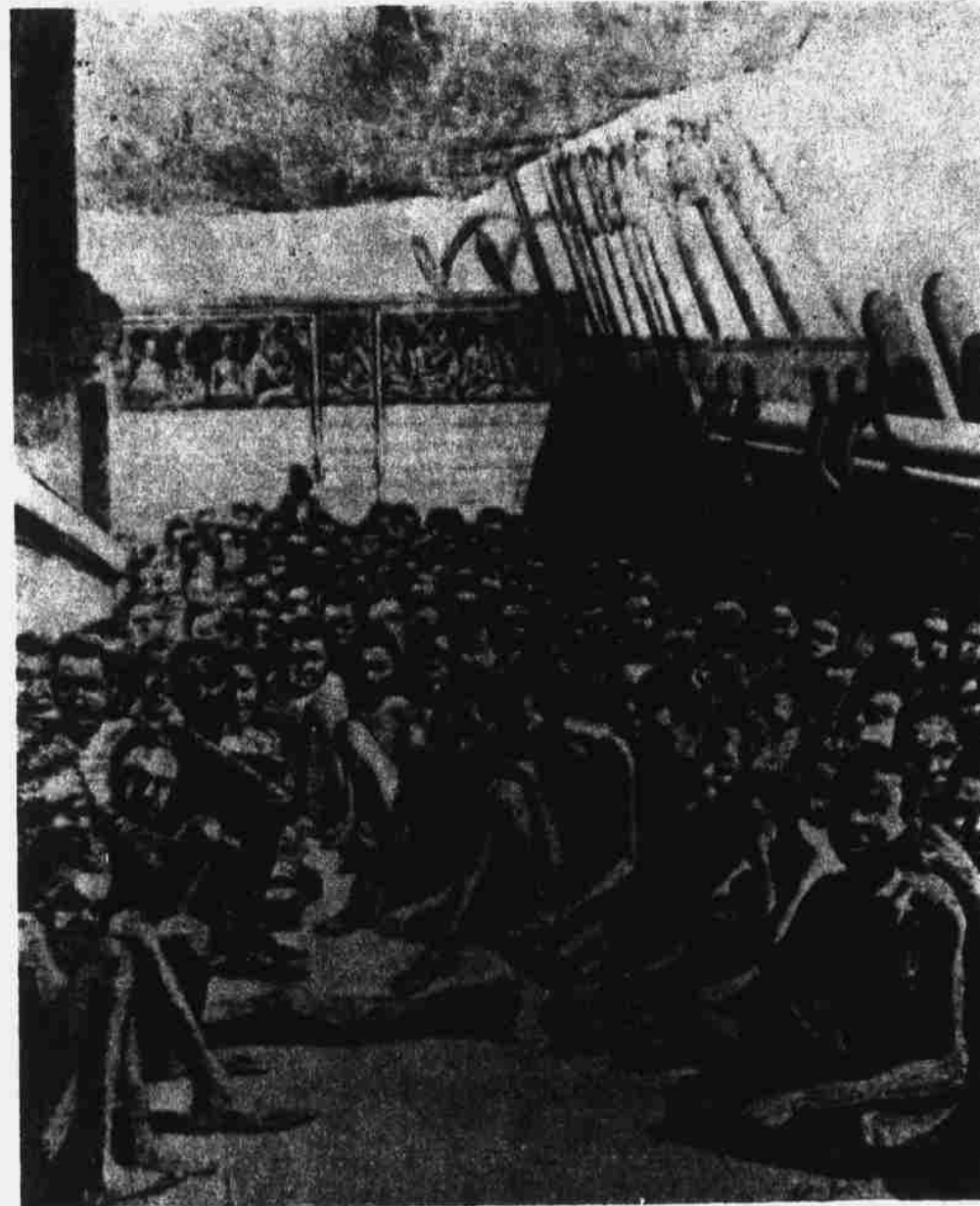
Women used the thumb piano, a wooden box with varying lengths of thin slivers of wood or metal fastened over an opening. This was the only instrument that was allowed them. Generally, they were singers and dancers; men were the instrumentalists, and thus enjoyed higher status. Essentially, all were participants, for onlookers clapped, stamped and shouted their approval or disapproval and communal activity was therefore emphasized.

Thus, when the African crossed the Atlantic as a slave, with him came some of his instruments, if not physically, at least in memory, awaiting the time when they could be fashioned from materials at hand in the New World. So, too, came a rich history of his past in song.

COLONIAL AMERICA 1700 - 1800

Adjustments by the slave to his new "home" included differences in language, customs, music, religion, instruments, and the ways of his white "master."

Memories of his former home were maintained in the field through work songs. He received sustenance through his religious songs and expressed joy through his dance and secular music.



En Route

Slave deck of the barque "Wildfire," captured by the U.S. steamer "Mohawk," is from a woodcut that appeared in an American newspaper circa 1860. A steady flow of forced immigrants helped reinforce and keep alive an African tradition in American music.

Music afforded him some modicum of ease in his transition.

Little primary documentation exists to indicate how the slave became a musician able to render American or European songs to entertain himself and others with some skill. Newspapers of the time carried listings that refer to slaves for sale, hire or runaways who possessed the ability to perform well on various instruments. These ads indicate that the violin, fid-

dle, French horn, drum, fife and flute were the most common instruments employed by the slaves.

Much of the dance music was performed by black musicians, for dancing was the chief diversion for the aristocracy. Meager documentation does not present a definitive picture as to how a slave acquired the necessary skill to perform in a band. There are records that refer to this "slave fiddler," or that "black musician," and an

occasional diary will give a glimpse into how some were actually trained. Army records indicate that there were more than a few blacks who played the fife or drum and the distinction of being the earliest black musician of record belongs to a slave named Nero Benson who served as a trumpeter with a Captain Isaac Clark of Framingham, Massachusetts in 1723; but only conjecture can lead one to conclude that they continued their

musical career after the Revolutionary War was won.

In the southern colonies, it is evident that some household slaves learned through being present when itinerant musicians taught the children of the wealthy. In more specific cases, the more accomplished Virginia musicians may have gained virtuosity by attending classes with their young masters at the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg, Virginia.

Fiddlers such as Sy Gilliat, owned by the Royal Governor of Virginia, and John Stokes, who belonged to Charles Carrol of Annapolis, provided the call and music for reels, jigs, and the like. Their abilities were such that they, and others, often provided additional income for their masters through being "hired out" for glittering affairs. Some were fortunate enough to receive monies independent of the stipend paid to their owners. The more frugal saved until they could purchase their freedom.

Newport Gardner (1746 - c.1826) is one notable example. At the age of fourteen, he was sold to Calib Gardner in Newport, Rhode Island. Early evidencing a propensity for music, he was allowed by Mrs. Gardner to study with a singing master after teaching himself to read. His superior intelligence enabled him to quickly learn the rudiments of reading and writing music. He became a teacher of a fair-sized singing school in the city, and was able to purchase his freedom in 1791. He then opened his own music school and composed many tunes. One of his anthems was performed in Boston in 1825.

During this century, one of the more unique forms of entertainment that the slaves performed for themselves (at first) was called the Jubilee. Generally, it was held on Sunday on the plantations, and it helped to relieve the tensions and tedious ignominy of the work week. However, the high spirits, infectious humor and "primitive" steps afforded the master and his guests a different form of amusement. At this time, the slaves poked fun at their masters' ways, attitudes and culture in an "innocent" manner that was reminiscent of the bards in that far-off home in Africa. Apparently the meanings were obscure enough for the slaveholders not to recognize themselves. Here, improvisations and embellishments on standard themes was common. In addition, original songs were extemporaneously composed to fit an immediate situation. "Call and response," a form which became common to gospel and spiritual music, with the soloist giving evidence of his or her im-

portance, indicated the great complexity of African music, and the seemingly unlimited skills the artists possessed.

Typically, the whites would adapt this form into a caricature of the Jubilee, and take it on stage in the nineteenth century. Thus, the minstrel, with its cork blackened faces, exaggerated dialects and insulting buffoonery, was born.

ANTEBELLUM SOUTH 1800 - 1865

Although a Congressional Act abolished the slave trade on January 1, 1808, the invention — fifteen years earlier — of the cotton gin revitalized the need for slaves in a way that the founding fathers never visualized. Cotton was King, and the agrarian south became more determined to circumvent a useless law.

There was little to lighten the spirits of the slaves during these sad days. Each tedious day was replaced by another; it was inevitable that music would continue to be an important focus in their lives. Often, the insatiable need for beauty and order in such a miserably condemned life could only be produced in song.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the fields. Many of the work songs that the field hands sang or chanted were directly traceable to their former homes in Africa in their rhythms. Because the rough workers sang songs that were not likely to interest "genteel" people, the intellectual snobbery of the aristocracy, as evidenced in the Jubilee, again prevented them from recognizing any irreverencies directed toward them from the fields. The only factor that was important was that a singing slave was likely to produce more. Frederick Douglass noted that, "Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. . . . This may account for the almost constant singing heard in the southern states." He refuted the philosophy erroneously held by many that the singing indicated contentment. Hundreds of documented slave revolts and thousands of runaways also bear witness to this.

The apologist historian U.B. Phillips painted plantation life as idyllic as did the movie *Gone With the Wind*. Phillips stated: The plantation was pageant and variety show in alternation. . . . the bonfire in the quarter with contests in clogs, cakewalks, and charlestons whose fascinations were as yet undiscovered by the great world; the work songs in solo and refrain. . . .

The "solo" part that Phillips mentioned was sung by a leader who was