

AMERICAN SONG FROM THE NEGRO

DAVID EWEN

UNQUESTIONABLY, the Negro has been the richest contributor to the storehouse of American folk music. His songs have not only been the proudest and the most artistically significant fruits of our native music-making; more than that, they have exerted a direct and permanent influence on our popular music.

It is not difficult to comprehend why the Negro should have been so productive in music. He was, by nature, musical, expressing himself through rhythm and melody more naturally and instinctively than through speech. Beyond this, the conditions in which he was to find himself in this country (transplanted from familiar settings into a new cruel world where he was despised and rejected) inspired the birth of music: for the emotional disturbances he felt demanded an outlet.

From the heart of Africa, from which he had been snatched and brought in chains, the Negro brought with him devices of African music. It is not easy to say now how much of his later song contained within itself elements of African music; but there are those scholars (among them Dr. Lorenzo Turner and James Barnes) whose studies in African music encourage the belief that the African influence was profound. The extraordinary variety of rhythm found in the Negro stamping of feet, clapping of hands, swaying of head and body as he chanted his songs, derive from African voodoo rites with their incessant throb of drums and

accented measures by hands and feet. The syncopated beats and the shifting accents always betray African ancestry. So does the actual song-form of "call and answer": one line is provocatively thrown out by a leader and is answered by a repetitious word, phrase, or sentence intoned by a group of voices.

But the music of the Negro, in its richest development, is no longer the music of Africa. The same subtle chemistry that entered into all our foreign-born folk music, transforming it into something unmistakably American, played its part in the evolution of the Negro song. For one thing, the Negro in this country came into contact with European melody and harmony; he was far too musical not to be affected by such an influence. As he sang, African rhythms were married to European melody and harmony to produce an altogether new kind of musical expression.

Characteristics were developed found nowhere else in our musical folk art: the downward progression of some of the cadences; the elastic lapses from major to minor without formal modulations; the freedom in the use of rhythm and pitch; the different decorations found in the melody with repetitions; the occasional indulgence in a scale of pentatonic character or, in the formal major and minor scales, the frequent injection of notes (preferably the flatted third and seventh) foreign to the scale.

In the New World, the Negro found

Christianity, and it became for him a refuge and solace. His intense religious emotions became in turn the emotions of his songs. This common escape into the religion of Christianity (as well as the similar environment, conditions, influences, and problems faced by all Negroes in the new country) was responsible for the emergence of a homogeneous song, even though the Negroes themselves had originally come from different parts of Africa and had known different tribal customs and different kinds of musical expression.

An outcast in a strange land, with a strange language, habits, customs, the Negro was a child of sorrow. Frequently he was separated from his loved ones on the auction block, never again to see them. The lash of the overseer's whip, the harsh abuse of a martinet-master, made his hard work so much the more insufferable. He had to suffer his fate with silent acquiescence, for nobody, except others as black of skin as he, knew the trouble he was seeing.

An outlet for his misery came through singing; an escape from it was provided through religion. Frequently the two—song and religion—became one and the same thing. Sometimes the Negro sang sad, elegiac tunes—"sorrow songs" they have appropriately been called, the lamentations of an oppressed people. Sometimes his primitive instincts (an atavistic recollection of his African past) found release in orgiastic "shouts." But whether he sang in sorrow or in religious ecstasy, the Negro gave expression to a music which, though of primitive origin, became a great art. "In the Negro melodies of America," wrote Antonin Dvořák, after a study of Negro music which inspired him to compose his *Symphony From the New World* and the *American Quartet*, "I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, pas-

sionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay, gracious. . . . It is music that suits itself to any mood and purpose."

II

The Negro Spiritual stands sharply apart from all other American folk music. Its technical peculiarities have already been touched upon. Beyond this, it was created for the most part not by specially endowed ballad singers in the way shanty tunes, sailor chanteys, cowboy melodies, or the songs of the western pioneers were. Often it arose out of the hearts of an entire race of people. It was born, it grew, developed, and changed—and there was rarely evident any one identifiable hand (or several hands) in this birth and evolution. The creation of groups rather than of individuals, the Spiritual is almost alone in our folk music in being sung harmonically rather than by single voices.

The Spiritual (the "shouts" particularly) was frequently produced spontaneously, inspired by excited emotion, and carried on by the sheer momentum of hypnotized singers. It was "evolved partly under the influence of association with whites, but in the main, original in the best sense of the word; the inspiration of a moment of ecstasy, the expression of religious elation curiously intermingled with emotion of intrinsically barbaric character; the chanted prayer of a simple child-like mind, the melodious cry of a 'soul on its knees.'"

The Spiritual can be roughly subdivided into three groups. The first utilizes the "call and answer" form, African in its origin. Some of the most original and effective Spirituals are in this category. Usually in fast tempo, these are invariably spirited melodies, full of passion (for example *Shout for Joy* and *The Great Camp Meeting*). The second group is in a slower and more stately tempo, utilizing a long, sustained phrase as the principal melodic

subject (*Deep River, Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen*). In the third group we find some of the most famous Spirituals in the repertory. In place of a long sustained phrase in the melody, the lyric line is composed of segments of rhythmic patterns decidedly syncopated in nature (*Little David, Play on Yo' Harp, All God's Chillun Got Wings*).

The most wonderful of the songs—not only for their emotional content but for variety in form and melody—are those that arose from the Negro's simple deep piety. Religion fired the Negro's imagination and set it aflame. Christianity compensated him for his sufferings by giving him promise of a greater life to come. It taught him there was nobility in patience, hope, resignation. It gave an avenue through which to forget himself and his trials.

His Christmas carols, like *Glory to New Born Babe* and *Rise Up Shepherd and Foller*, are among the most beautiful in carol literature: devout, tender, humble, often touched with an other-world spirituality. When the Negro sang of the crucifixion of Christ, he brought to his singing the immense and shattering sorrow of one who feels himself crucified as well. Perhaps nothing more moving or noble has been said in music about the crucifixion than spirituals like *He Never Said a Mumblin' Word* or *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?* (The possessive pronoun in the singular in the latter Spiritual is important: the Lord was someone personal and intimate to the Negro, to whom he could speak his heavy heart openly as if to a sympathetic and understanding friend.) In Spirituals like these, the expression of sorrow is all the more intense and poignant for its restraint and understatement; it achieves a sublimity and otherworldliness comparable to the closing chorus of the *Passion According to St. Matthew* by Bach. The

religion of such Spirituals is, perhaps, the purest religion of all. As Heywood Broun wrote after attending a Negro Spiritual concert by Roland Hayes, these Spirituals express "a mood instead of a creed, an emotion rather than a doctrine. There was nothing to define and nothing to argue. Each person took what he felt and liked, whatever he had to feel, and so there was no heresy. . . . Half of the people who heard Hayes were black and the other half white; and while the mood of the song held they were all the same. They shared together the close silence. One emotion wrapped them. And at the end it was a single sob. . . . 'He never said a mumblin' word,' sang Hayes, and we knew that he spoke of Christ, whose voice was clear enough to cross all the seas of water and blood."

The Old Testament struck a particularly personal note with the Negro, for in the captivity of the Jews in Egypt he found a counterpart to his own sad position. *Let My People Go* rings out firm and clear in its interpretation of "Israel in Egypt land," because the Negro was, thereby, sounding a wish for his own emancipation. He could not openly confess his dreams of freedom, but in the appropriate allegory of the Old Testament he could speak unrestrictedly and without fear of reprisal. "Steal away to Jesus, Steal away home, I ain't Got long to stay here," was as much a hope for escape to places of liberation as it was an affirmation of deep religious conviction. Frederick Douglass emphasized this when he wrote: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of *O Canaan, Sweet Canaan, I am Bound for the Land of Canaan*, something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan. . . . On our lips it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage to a free state, and deliverance from all evils of slavery."

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Not all the Spirituals had the majesty of the Crucifixion songs. Some, like *The Ol' Time Religion*, *I Know the Lord Laid His Hands on Me* were more dynamic, full of animal spirits, full of joy. These contained within them the seeds of future ragtime. Still others—they were, strictly speaking, not Spirituals but Shouts—were more hysterical. Shouts were an outgrowth of the African voodoo dance transformed by the American Negro into Christian religious worship. What began as devout service developed into delirium. James Weldon Johnson describes the Shouts vividly: "A space is cleared by moving the benches, and men and women arrange themselves, generally alternately, in a ring, their bodies quite close. The music starts, and the ring begins to move. Around it goes, at first slowly, then with quickening force. Around and around it moves on shuffling feet that do not leave the floor, one foot beating with the heel in a decided accent in strict two-four time. The music is supplemented by the clapping of hands. As the ring goes around it begins to take on signs of frenzy. The music, starting perhaps with a Spiritual, becomes a wild monotonous chant. The same musical phrase is repeated over and over, one, two, three, four, five hours. The words become a repetition of an incoherent cry. The very monotony of sound and motion produces an ecstatic state. Women, screaming, fall to the ground prone and quivering. Men, exhausted, drop out of the shout. But the ring closes up and moves around and around."

Mr. Johnson further explains that the Shout was illicit. "It was distinctly frowned upon by a great many colored people. Indeed, I do not ever recall seeing a 'ring shout' except after the regular service. Almost whispered invitations would go around, 'Stay after church; there's going to be a ring shout.' The more educated

ministers and members, as far as they were able to brave the primitive element in the churches, placed a ban on the ring shout."

Yet the popularity of the Shout has remained great among large groups of Negroes everywhere up to the present time. These Shouts produced music of incomparable barbarity and abandon. Familiar Spirituals were converted into febrile music, throbbing with rhythmic intensity. Frequently, too, new songs would be improvised in the delirium of the dancing and the worship. A refrain would be sounded, one voice would then interpolate a line, another voice would contribute another—and thus, in the heat and passion of the orgy, a new Negro melody would be born.

III

It was some time before the rest of the country became acquainted with this music of the Southland. It first traveled northward on the Mississippi River. In 1811 the first steamboat traversed the length of the Mississippi, linking the North and South more closely than before. Southern cargo, fruits of the tropics, reached northern docks before the snow there began to melt. And the latest styles, gossip, and news of the North now came to the furthest point of the South while they were still comparatively new. By the middle of the century, about a thousand boats were traveling along the banks of the great river. Floating palaces, the last word in sumptuous trappings, the steamboats brought to their travelers a taste of that good life formerly known only to the rich. Traveling on the Mississippi became not only the favored mode of transportation for those desiring to go either North or South, but a popular type of holiday excursion. Gentlemen and ladies, dressed with almost foppish elegance, rubbed elbows on the decks, or, in the brilliantly

lit dining room, with gamblers, traders, and cotton planters, as the boat progressed in leisurely fashion along the Mississippi valley.

Northerners who took excursions on the river brought back with them tales of a strange and wonderful music they heard the colored folk sing. Negroes working on the southern docks to load the ship with cargo would accompany their strained labors with songs of their own making. These "roustabout" melodies were generally improvised; they frequently spoke about the elegance of the boats, the personal traits of their captain, the difficulty of the work at hand. Sometimes they went even further afield to tell about a love affair, trouble with the police, or a fight. At times the lyrics were sheer nonsense:

*Ducks play cards and chickens drink
wine,
And de monkey grow on de grape-
vine,
Corn starch pudding and tapioca pie,
Oh, de gray cat pick out de black
cat's eye.*

Elements of the Negro Spiritual—the languorous melody and the syncopated beat particularly—were found in these songs. As the Negroes sang, they went through the motions of loading and unloading with a peculiar gait, a slouching motion of the body and rhythmic movements of the hands, a kind of dance that synchronized perfectly with the music.

The passengers watched these Negroes at their work and dance, listened to their music with fascination. They listened, too, to the strange chants which on other occasions Negroes sang for their benefit—and for the reward of some coin—when the boat made stops at the southern end of the river. The music made northern songs appear bloodless in contrast. When the passengers returned North, they spoke

about this strange music and frequently tried to recall it to mind, or to reproduce it on the keyboard of a piano.

It was from the Mississippi River that Mark Twain first heard Negro melodies and was seduced by them. "Away back in the beginning to my mind, their music made all other vocal music cheap." It was also from the river that Stephen Foster is believed to have acquired his flair for Negro music: Foster's father loaded and unloaded the Mississippi boats at Pittsburgh and made the Mississippi trip frequently; Foster's brother had a steamer of his own to make the voyage; it was inevitable that they bring back with them fragments of this unforgettable music to sing to Stephen.

Some Negro Spirituals were introduced in the North by the abolitionists who used them as propaganda for their rallies. But it was not until 1871, and a few years afterwards, that the Spiritual came into general popularity throughout the country. In that year, a group of singers from Fisk University called the Jubilee Singers toured the country in concerts devoted exclusively to Negro songs. Fisk University had been founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee, to provide educational facilities for freed Negroes. Almost from the day of its founding it was harassed by financial problems. The treasurer, George L. White, had often heard the students sing in groups. In an inspired moment, he felt the entire country—the white majority particularly—might be interested in this poignant music of his race. The authorities reluctantly gave him permission to create a choral group comprising twelve pupils (at his own expense). For two years, he trained the ensemble until it acquired finish, precision, integration. On October 6, 1871, the group left Nashville for its tour of the country. The first concerts were greeted with cool reserve. But as the tour pro-

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gressed and as the music grew more familiar, the enthusiasm grew. The road was finally paved with unexpected triumphs. At the Gilmore Music Festival in Boston in 1872, an audience of 20,000 rose to its feet and shouted: "Jubilee forever!" In 1878, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers returned to the University, they brought back with them more than \$150,000—testimony that the Spiritual (first known as Jubilee Songs, in honor of the ensemble that made them famous) had conquered America, and conquered it decisively.

The fame of the Negro Spiritual now spread rapidly. The American critic, Henry E. Krehbiel, spoke for its musical importance, and by word of pen and mouth made many converts. One was Antonin Dvořák, who had come to America in 1892 to become director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. Dvořák was won completely. His use of authentic Negro material in his major works inspired many other serious composers to write works in similar vein. The Negro composer, Henry T. Burleigh, came under Dvořák's influence and was encouraged by him to make many arrangements of Negro folk music which further helped spread propaganda for the Spirituals among artists and the general public. His *Deep River* was subsequently performed by the Flonzaley Quartet, Fritz Kreisler, Maud Powell, and Frances Alda, confirming the artistic importance which the Spiritual had now acquired.

IV

Not all Negro folk songs are Spirituals. A musical people to the tips of their fingers, the Negroes created music for any and every condition in which they found themselves. Not only in religious worship or in lamentation over their sad fate did Negroes sing, but also in work and play. During their years of slavery, they relieved

the monotony and strain of cotton picking, toting bales, loading and unloading boats on the Mississippi, with singing. As they went through the motions of their work, their voices rang out, and their refrain carried with it the pulse and the rhythm of the work at hand.

*Got a nine foot shovel
My pick is four foot long.
I'm in a world of trouble,
When I'm singing dis song,
If you use a pick an' shovel,
You sure can't mess aroun'.*

The work songs which were born and died with the Mississippi traffic have been commented upon. In the mines and tunnels of Virginia, the cotton fields of the South, the rock piles of prisons in Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, a rich folk lore also grew. If it was music not so imaginative and so musically distinctive and moving as the Spiritual—these work songs were not born out of stirring emotional experiences and feelings but from the sheer humdrum monotony of a muscular job to be done—they nevertheless have their own fascination. Because they were sung out-of-doors, and never to the accompaniment of musical instruments to set the pitch and guide the intonation, these songs developed a curious intonation of their own. The voice was permitted to slide to tones foreign to the scale, and to intervals smaller than the half tone. The melody was sprinkled with grunts and groans which became part of the texture of the melodic line—grunts and groans that came from the physical strain of smashing a rock with hammer or ax, "flat-weeding" a ditch with hoe, or smashing through rock with a steel-drill. Out of this intonation a distinct melody and harmony developed; many years later this distinct intonation would become one of the major distinguishing features of authentic ragtime.

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This peculiar type of melody and harmony set an atmosphere of bleakness, generated a feeling of utter hopelessness which is found in all these songs. Negro work songs are drenched with pathos; even humorous verses appear in melodies saturated with melancholia. The work was unspeakably arduous, the conditions trying. In prison camps there was the barbarity of the overseers. In work camps there was the poor pay, and even that was often uncertain. Work songs frequently describe the difficulties under which Negroes labored:

*Told my Cap'n my hands was cold,
Said, 'Damn your hands, boy,
Let de wheelin' roll.'*

*Asked my Cap'n to give me my time,
Damn ol' Cap'n wouldn' pay me
no mind.*

*Raised my hand, wiped de sweat off
my head.
Cap'n got mad, Lord, shot my buddy
dead.*

"I works from kin to can't" (from the time I first kin see till I can't see), sighs the Negro in lamenting his long hours. "O Cap'n has de money come? Tain't none of yo' bizness, I don't owe you none!" he sang sadly about the uncertainty of his wages. These songs may well be said to have been the progenitors of the later blues.

Many songs were improvised during the progress of the work. The leader would raise his voice in the opening of a song like *Boll Weevil* or *John Henry* (both of them classics of the cotton pickers and the steel drillers respectively) or *Nine Foot Shovel* (of the Georgia chain gangs). The leader was a specialist in his own right; he had to know expertly not only the work at hand but what songs could best be adapted to that work; a

good leader could inspire good work in his men, while a bad one—through poor timing—could actually hamper progress. The work gangs, taking their cue from their leaders, would chime in in the chorus in a convention-defying harmony. Verse after verse would be sung, for hours on end. Lines were interpolated freely; the melody was varied at will with each repetition; the rhythm was permitted flexible changes. The melody might emerge in a form completely different in the last verse from the first. Frequently, altogether new melodies would be born to familiar words, permitted to develop as one voice after another made its own contribution, after the leader threw out a phrase; frequently, too, new words were created in this same way to familiar tunes.

With his work done, the Negro found relaxation in dancing, and this dancing produced the Negro social song. The work song was strictly a *cappella*; the social song primarily instrumental. The work song was choral; the social song, solo. In his social songs, improvisation played an even more important role than in work fields. A singer, accompanied by a banjo, guitar, or violin, would give full freedom to his imagination as he discoursed musically on a great variety of subjects ranging from love to death, from heroes to notorious villains. The singer would add embellishments to the monotonous melody each time the principal melodic subject was repeated; often, at the inspiration of the moment, he would spontaneously make up altogether new songs to new texts.

Because social songs were primarily intended to encourage dancing, they were strongly rhythmical, much more so than the Spirituals or work songs. Though the instrumental accompaniment was, often as not, improvised, it showed harmonic resourcefulness splashed with original colors.

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Numerous troubadours arose who had a particular flair for preserving the folk song literature and even for creating new songs of a folk character. After Emancipation, many Negroes, in search of some manner of earning a living, turned to music. With guitars or banjos, they roamed around singing the songs they had learned as children, improvising new ones on any and every subject that presented itself, appearing on street corners, in saloons, in bawdy houses. They were frequently wandering minstrels, traveling alone from town to town. Some had no other occupation than their music-making; others might supplement their income from some occasional job with coins earned from public singing. One such troubadour was James A. Bland, who achieved fame by composing *Carry Me Back to Old Virginia* and *In the Evening by the Moonlight*.

One of the most famous of these troubadours—and characteristic of many others like him—is Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly. Lead Belly's fabulous history is told in great detail in an anthology of his songs edited by the Lomaxes which should be read by everyone concerned with American folk music. For our purpose, it is necessary only to relate that with his twelve-tone guitar and his fabulous repertoire of folk music (some of which he, undoubtedly, created himself) Lead Belly sang his way out of prison and into national fame. He drew upon the fullest resources of work and social songs (most of which he had heard

and absorbed during his roving) and produced Negro songs of great variety. The richly ironic gem *Ham n' Eggs*, or the mournful ditty *Pick a Bale of Cotton* are random examples of the thousands of songs he sang from one end of the country to the other, and which the Lomaxes have collected and preserved.

V

It is not essential to labor the point here that the Negro has influenced our popular music permanently and decisively. The physiognomy of American popular music has been shaped for the better by Negro songs; it is impossible to conceive what our popular music would have been had we had no Spirituals, Shouts, or Negro work songs. Their techniques and idioms, moods and atmospheres, personality and idiosyncrasies have formed the bone and tissue of our popular musical expression. The ragtime of New Orleans (from which, in turn, swing was evolved), the blues of St. Louis, the boogie-woogie of Chicago, the sophisticated jazz of New York—these obviously betray their debt to Negro creativity.

David Ewen, prolific writer on American music, is now in the Army. He has appeared several times in *COMMON GROUND*, tracing America's musical heritage from its various immigrant groups. "America Becomes Musical" appeared in the Winter 1942 issue, and "America's Folk Music" in the Summer 1943 number.

AMERICA IS GRAND!

LETTERS TRANSLATED BY
MARGARET JACOBSON

(These are excerpts from letters written during the years after Hitler's coming to power by children who came to the United States in special children's transports. A German-Jewish Children's Aid Committee placed them in the homes of foster parents. The Jewish Welfare League in Germany, which had arranged the children's transports, asked the parents of the youngsters for permission to copy the original letters written home, and then sent a collection of them to this country. They have a kind of timeless fresh discovery of the miracle of America: "Everything is beautiful, even the teachers.")

"Dearest Mother,

"Saturday we went to a concert which would have cost at least 3 marks in Germany and here it was free and the music (Wagner, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms) was first-class. It was simply grand. Nothing like that ever happened to me in Germany. Here I enjoy myself very much. I attend splendid concerts and shows. We go to the movies where the most important thing is not the picture but the stage show. There are so many things which are just wonderful and only possible in such a big city. Our beach here in Coney Island is very long and one can walk along the boardwalk for hours and still be looking for the end. And then next to it, or rather behind it, there's the Amusement Park which consists of several parts as huge as kingdoms. The Leaping Lena (scenic railway) makes one shaky before one enters it. People amuse themselves by getting

sick, and it costs them lots of money. And all the stalls and stands. So many, many of them. We could stay there all our life, become old, and always find something new. And the hotels built with such a luxury that it hurts. You should be here!!

"Tonight, together with the older children, I'll attend a stage show and, imagine, the greatest living American actress is in it! A seat (one) costs \$3.50—about 11 marks. Such a grand thing never happened to me in my whole life. Jeremiah, my first play, cost only 50 pfennig. . . .

"Your loving daughter,

"Mary (formerly Marie)"

A few weeks later Mary had another experience and wrote her mother: "I have a great piece of news for you. On Tuesday I am going to live with a grand doctor's family. Dear Mama, you have no idea how nice it is there. Imagine, Mrs. K— (that's the name of the lady) has already bought me some dresses. Elegant! Mr. K— is also a dear. They live in one of the nicest hotels of New York on the 20th floor and this means a lot. The higher the floor where people live, the more money they have."

Not only the girls but also the boys were enthusiastic about the presents given them. One of the smaller boys wrote from Detroit: "Not often enough can I describe my good, good luck, and I have even left out this and that. Only a few days after my arrival, Aunt Anna told me to call them Uncle Walter and Aunt Anna, which of course I did. Uncle Walter is director of a factory. His one son is a