

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

Jazz: Negro's Musical Gift to America

(Eighth of 10 Articles)

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*I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O Yea! O Yea! O!*

—Chant used when plantation slaves went to the master's house for their monthly allowance of cornmeal.

Frederick Douglass, that most sensitive and articulate of American Negro slaves, once wrote that even he did not understand in his youth the "apparently incoherent songs" which his fellow slaves chanted over and over in "exultant and rapturous tones."

He only knew the supposedly happy songs filled him with woe and sent tears coursing down his cheeks. In later years, he finally realized that "every tone was actually a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains."

It was an irony to him "to find persons who could speak of the singing among slaves as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are unhappy . . ."

The songs were improvised to "relieve aching hearts," just as the white man's religion—which promised them a better life in the next world—prompted songs which have become "gospel" in Americana. The "chants" added simple words and thoughts to what had formerly been the mere repetition of tribal rhythms.

*Tell Jesus done done all I can
Tell Jesus done done all I can
Tell Jesus done done all I can
I can't do no more.*

Patting

At play, a former slave named Solomon Northrup once recalled, the songs were enlivened by "patting."

Patting was done to "unmeaning songs, composed rather for adaptation to a certain tune or measure than for . . . expressing any distinct idea. The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand and the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing, perhaps this song:

*Harper's Creek and roarin' ribber
Thar, my dear, we'll live forebber;
Then we'll go to de Ingin nation,
All I want in dis creation
Is pretty little wife and big plantation . . ."*

In New Orleans, by the turn of the century, the "Great House Farm"—gone with the abolition of slavery—was supplanted as a symbol by the next world. It was the custom among Negroes there to have funeral processions where small bands played dirges out to the cemetery, then exultant stomps and marches—like "Didn't He Ramble"—on the way back.

African Rhythms

But something new was added to the old joy-for-sorrow chants. Wedded to the African tribal rhythms, work songs and gospel spirituals were the "stomps" (derived from folk dances); a new syncopated beat called ragtime, and brass instruments, the play-

ing of which was developed at Creole picnic-grounds concerts.

This new music — unnamed as yet — evolved at day during the funeral processions and street parades, and at night in the brothels, gambling joints, saloons and dives of New Orleans' "red light" district, Storyville.

Pianist Jelly Roll Morton, a teen-age entertainer in a Storyville joint, later claimed to have invented this music "one fine afternoon in 1901." Jelly Roll was instrumental in its development, to be sure — but the child was of mixed parentage, its only sure debt to the Negro race itself, and its inter-breeding with American influences.

New Orleans

Countless small New Orleans Negro bands — such as the "Original Superior Orchestra," "Imperial Band" and "Tuxedo Band" — propagated this music. Some of their members — "Papa" Celestine, Manuel Perez, Buddy Bolden, Willie "Bunk" Johnson, Kid Ory and Kid Oliver — are now known only to jazz buffs. But at least one, cornetist Louis Armstrong (who played in the early 1900s with Kid Oliver), is still very much on the scene today.

Not until Storyville closed down at the end of World War I, did the new music really spread outside New Orleans. Riverboats carried it to St. Louis and California, then there was an exodus of musicians to Chicago, where prohibition and fast-paced night life added a strident new tone to New Orleans' two-beat music.

It came to be called "Jass" — jazz.

The most probably theory of the word origin is that several sports writers of the era were using the word "Jazz" as a synonym for "pep." One historic night some people in a Chicago audience thought the band was lagging, so they shouted, "Jazz it up! Jazz it up!"

Jazz it has stayed. And with its soulmate, "the blues" (propagated by such Mississippi Delta artists as Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson, then Bessie Smtih and Billie Holliday), jazz has permeated nearly every aspect of American music and life. Its influence can be seen in everything from avant garde symphonies to the most elemental rock 'n roll songs.

Essentially Negro

White men listened: they have played it (many with great talent) and above all, they have loved it for its ability to wrench the heart while feet twitch uncontrollably . . . but it still remains essentially the Negro's music.

Jazz, of course, is only one of many Negro contributions to American life and culture. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee in their book, "The Negro Caravan," deal at length with the contributions of Negro writers and artists.

But jazz bids fair to be the Negro's most universally enjoyed gift to the nation.

(NEXT: "The American Negro: 1920-1940.")