

African American Music

For Dr. Cynthia Griggs Fleming

Submitted by

Wilma Jean Pippenger

## **African American Music**

Music is a universal language. People of all races, nationalities, and backgrounds can relate to music and its inspirations. African American music has had a tremendous influence on the music of today in the United States.

Slaves arriving from Africa came from many different tribes and spoke different languages. They were separated on the slave ships to prevent them from talking to each other and possibly planning revolts. At the slave markets slave owners would buy slaves from different tribes that were not able to communicate with one another. They did not realize that slaves were very good at communicating through their music. (1) Their music helped preserve the culture they brought with them from Africa. Their style of music, dancing, patting of feet, clapping of hands, pantomime and superstition came straight from Africa. Slave owners tried to stop the religious rituals of their slaves. Drums, which could be heard from one plantation to another and were sometimes used to send messages, were banned by many overseers. Slaves would try to use their feet when the drums were banned.

The African people are emotional with a rhythmic and instinctive flair for music. Slaves often sang while they worked. Their songs told of their highest joys and loves and also of their hard work, cruel treatment and deepest sadness. Many of their songs were composed as they went along not having meaning to

anyone but themselves. Fredrick Douglass recorded how slaves "would make the dense old woods, for miles around reverberate with their wild songs."(2)

Music was a form of relief and enjoyment for slaves. They made their drums from hollowed out logs or nail keys with animal skin stretched tightly over the ends. Drum beats from these homemade instruments were used to send a sort of "Morse Code" to make plans for revolts or escapes. The slaves liked to sing, dance, and play the banjo and fiddle. Though nearly two hundred and fifty years of slavery in the New World, slaves kept their hearts, souls, and culture alive through their music.(3)

Churches had to deal with the slavery issues where slaves were allowed to meet for Christian services. Many Christian ministers wrote against slavery while others were not as bold. In some rural areas slaves were allowed to stay after regular worship services in churches or in plantation "praise houses" to worship, sing and dance. In other areas, they had secret meeting places, such as "camp meetings" or "bush meetings", because they needed to share their joys, pains, and hopes by getting together. Itinerant preachers would gather thousands of slaves together where they would sing spirituals for hours. During the 1700s, they sang the precursors of spirituals, which were called "corn ditties."(4)

In some cities, the Protestant City Revival Movement provided revival meetings by setting up temporary tents where slaves could sing and worship. Many times hymns and psalms were transformed into songs of typical African

American form. Negro spiritual lyrics were tightly tied with the lives of their slave authors and were inspired by the message of Jesus Christ and his Good News Gospel of the Bible, "You can be saved." The hard conditions of being a slave were shared with these songs.

Some of the Negro spirituals refer to the Underground Railroad which helped slaves run away to a "free country", that they called "my home" or "Sweet Canaan, the Promised Land". This referred to the northern side of the Ohio River that they called "Jordon". A slave trying to escape would walk at night using hand lights and moonlight or wade in water so dogs could not smell their tracks. Sometimes they would hide in chariots to "stations" where they could hide out. From the experiences of the Underground Railroad such Negro Spirituals as "Wade in the Water," "The Gospel Train", and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" became popular slave songs.

Songs which had great meaning to them and helped them through their hard working times were called "chain gang" songs. Negro spirituals were often led by preachers. Praying and Singing Bands would meet after formal worship services for praying, holy dancing, and singing "cornfield ditties". The leader of the band would be the one with the loudest voice who could sing the longest. He would use a handkerchief to keep time with the music and tap his feet to sound like a bass drum. For "shouts", some participants would dance while others would sing. The "ring shout" was a primitive African dance where the men and

women would start to move around slowly at first then faster and faster for hours. Women would scream and fall, and exhausted men would drop out of the ring. Educated ministers and church members placed a ban on “ring shouts”. Some African American religious singing was called a “mean” or “groan” which did not refer to pain, but was a blissful song mixed with humming and various actions. Spontaneous songs were composed on the spot and called "spiritual songs" and the term “sperichil” (spiritual) appeared for the first time in the book "Slave Songs of the United States" (by Allen, Ware, Garrison, 1867.)

During the mid-eighteen hundreds, the term “quartet” was applied to groups of four to seven black religious soloists. Many Negro musicians and singers had the opportunity to perform spirituals in barbershops. These quartets gave birth to "street singers" which along with barbershop quartets are popular today.

Current popular hymns have their origins with Negro music. African American spirituals such as “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See,” “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” “Do Lord, Remember Me,” and “Send me, Lord”, as well as many others are standard songs in “The United Methodist Hymnal”. The Civil Rights Anthem, “We Shall Overcome” is also found in this hymnal (6)

Music of the African American slaves has blended with the white cultures to bring about many different styles. The Blues, Jazz, Ragtime, Country and many variations of these have become typical American music. Jazz grew out of

ragtime and the blues and was born in New Orleans with both African and European music as its parents. Some historians believe it originated in Congo Square while others claim it started in Storyville, a prostitution area, where white clients were entertained by black musicians. Parts of old French and Spanish music that was popular in Louisiana were incorporated into jazz. The first jazz band director was Joe “King” Oliver. His reputation was surpassed by Duke Ellington and Count Basie.

While black male jazz instrumentalists were creating new jazz sounds, black female singers were becoming very popular with the creation of new blues music. Black women blues singers were more acceptable to the public than black men probably because they were less threatening to whites. The blues is often about love and whites were not ready to accept black men singing about love. In some black communities, a black man singing about love on a record would not live up to a strong manly tradition. Bessie Smith became a very popular blues singer and has an outstanding museum named for her in Chattanooga. Ma Rainey became known as the “Mother of Blues.”

American culture owes much of its wonderful musical sounds to the slaves who came from Africa and their descendants. We are a nation blessed with many cultures that have made America unique. Music is truly a universal language.

## Reference Page

- (1). <http://library.thinkquest.org/10320/Tour.htm>
- (2). <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASsongs.htm>
- (3). <http://www.afroam.org/history/slavery/african.htm>
- (4). <http://www.carolinamusicways.org/history-1800.html>
- (5). <http://www.negrospirituals.com/composers.htm>
- (6). The United Methodist Hymnal. The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989.

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Submitted by Wilma Jean Pippenger

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Benton, TN

**Objectives/Purpose:** The students will:

- become familiar with the music and history of African American music;
- develop an understanding of how music brings people together;
- describe the conditions of black people before, during, and after the Civil War;
- research the use of music by slaves before and during the Civil War;
- list important events where music was used by blacks in events of historical importance; and
- learn and sing some of the songs of blacks that helped make a difference in their lives.

**Grade Level:** 11<sup>th</sup>

**Group Size:** regular class

**Lesson Time:** two to three weeks

**Background Information:** In this lesson, students will explore and gain an understanding of the importance of music to African Americans and how it has influenced their lives. Activities in music, art, language arts, agriculture, geography, and history will help the students understand the purpose of the project. To complete the unit the students will perform some of the songs they have learned.

**Materials:**

- *A History of the United States*, M<sup>c</sup>Graw-Hill, 2000.
- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, 1963, New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Inc., 1995.

- *If You Lived at the Time of Martin Luther King*. New York, NY, Scholastic Inc. 1990.
- DVD – Angels of Change DVD-R
- CD – Voices of the Civil Rights Movement – Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966. Smithsonian Folkways.
- CD – Martin Luther King – I Have a Dream
- *The Methodist Hymnal* – Cokesbury Publishing – 1999

**Strategies/Procedures:**

1. Read the pre-Civil War and Civil War sections in the textbook: *A History of the United States*, M<sup>c</sup>Graw-Hill, 2000
2. Listen to the I Have a Dream speech.
3. Discuss *If You Lives at the Time of Martin Luther King*.
4. Watch Angels of Change.
5. Listen to the CDs – Voices of the Civil Rights Movement.
6. Describe the difficulties of blacks during the events studied.
7. Distribute words to several African American songs.
8. Learn and practice the songs.
9. Perform the songs for other students.

**Evaluation/Assessment:**

Students wrote a paper on slavery before, during, and after the Civil War. Their level of participation in the project was evaluated to help determine their mastery of the objectives. The effort of learning the songs and participating in the program presentation was a major part of the assessment.

**Teacher's Evaluation:**

Most of the students in my class have had limited contact with African Americans. I believe this project has helped them understand black culture, the importance of Civil Rights, and how lucky we are to have the freedom we have. The music and presentations of it were the highlight of this project. The students have a better understanding of culture differences and historical events.