

From *Wade in the Water* to *(We Gon Be) Alright*: The Continuing Influence of Slavery and Emancipation on Contemporary African-American Music and Culture

In the 236 years since America became an independent nation, it has forged its identity out of the trials it faced and the challenges it overcame. From the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the battle of Yorktown, through the War of 1812, and then to the first shots fired at Fort Sumter and General Lee's surrender at the Appomattox Court House, the first chapter of America's history as a nation can be largely defined as a series of challenges and victories. As a turning point in American history, the Civil War marks a moment where the country's identity became enriched by the trials not only of the people in power -- white Americans -- but also by the people whose stories had been essentially ignored or denied. Before and during the Civil War, patriotic and upbeat tunes such as "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" provided the soundtrack to the American experience. These songs written by white Americans had a much darker parallel, however. For generations, slaves in America had expressed their pain and aspirations through spirituals sung on plantations and subtle songs of rebellion and resistance. Upon their emancipation, the experience of American slaves was also set free. The powerful influence of African-American music in American culture is deeply rooted in both slavery and the hope for and eventual victory of emancipation supplied by the Civil War. The two themes drive the style and content of music created by African Americans even to this day.

The Civil War represents a key defining point in the evolution of American music. By the mid-point of the 18th century, music was infused with various themes of patriotism and the simple life of common people, as defined by the white, empowered majority. For example,

“When Johnny Comes Marching Home” was written by Louis Lambert in 1863, right in the middle of the Civil War, and tells the story of the loved one of a soldier named “Johnny,” who is eagerly awaiting his return from battle:

When Johnny comes marching home again/Hurrah! Hurrah!

We'll give him a hearty welcome then/Hurrah! Hurrah!

The men will cheer and the boys will shout/The ladies they will all turn out

And we'll all feel gay/When Johnny comes marching home.¹

To this day, the tune of “Johnny” remains popular; American children know it as “The Ants Go Marching.” Patriotism was a recurring theme within music written by white Americans during the Civil War. In fact, grand marches were composed for Union Generals in the Civil War, from George Meade, famed for his victory at Gettysburg, to Ulysses S. Grant, the future President. Overall, songs written by white Americans during the era were either light and cheery or patriotic and written to serve a purpose.

As slaves, Black Americans in the mid 19th-century were nearly invisible in popular music and entertainment. When referenced, they were depicted in incredibly racist terms. Many racially degrading stereotypes that have persisted into the 21st century stem from a popular type of entertainment from the time period, known as minstrel shows. These performances featured

¹ Louis Lambert, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* (Boston: Henry Tolman &, 1863).



This poster was just one of many advertisements for "Oliver Scott's Refined Negro Minstrels Representing the Pick of the Entire Minstrel World", a traveling minstrel show.

white actors donning blackface, and portraying Black characters in various comedic sketches. They insinuated that all Black people were foolish, lazy, and dim-witted, and in all ways inferior to their white masters. In fact, songs first featured in minstrel shows became American classics, such as "Oh, Susannah" and "Camptown Races."²

At this time, music actually created by African Americans was rarely heard beyond their own communities. How popular culture perceived African Americans was entirely shaped by how white artists portrayed them. One song, written by white songwriter G. A. Grace and published in 1861 in Boston, is particularly jarring. Titled "I Would I Were A Slave Again" and featuring four-part harmony, the song is written from the perspective of a runaway slave who has found his way to Massachusetts seeking freedom, only to have an epiphany as to what a kindhearted man his master was and how much he yearns to return to his old home. The lyrics demonstrate how detached from the experience of black Americans the whites who presumed to write about them could be:

² "The Minstrel Show," Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, accessed January 7, 2016, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/jackson/minstrel/minstrel.html>.

I would I were a slave again, As I was once before
With happy heart I'd then remain, Content for ever more
While fancy painted liberty, How bright the visions were
But now that I am really free I wander in despair.³

If songs that were a true testament to the pain of slaves had been heard by a larger audience in the North during the years before the Civil War, they might have sparked outrage and fiercer opposition to slavery sooner.

Of course, Black Americans, both enslaved and free, had been singing about their experiences since arriving as slaves generations before. Music created by slaves in the South came from a much deeper emotional standpoint and was very much an opposing parallel to their White counterparts, showing off a very different vantage point of the American experience. In fact, American slaves created a lexicon of hymns and spirituals, singing and playing music wherever they lived, worked, and gathered as a community. As Jim Davis, a former slave explained in the 1930s, "I used to be a banjo picker in Civil War times. I could pick a church song just as good as I could a reel. Some of 'em I used to pick was 'Amazing Grace', 'Old Dan Tucker', . . . I used to talk that on my banjo just like I talked it here."⁴ Another former slave,

³ G. A. Grace, *I Would I Were a Slave Again* (Boston: Russell & Patee, 1861), pg. #1-2.

⁴ Jim Davis, "Slavery Time Songs," interview by Bernice Bowden, *American Memory from the Library of Congress: Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, March 23, 2001, accessed December 9, 2015.

Betty Curlett, commented on the challenges slaves faced making music from the little they already had. According to Curlett:

The only musical instrument we had was a banjo. Some made their banjos. Take a bucket or pan a long strip of wood. 5 horses hairs twisted made the base string. 2 horsehairs twisted made the second string. 1 horse hair twisted made the fourth and the fifth string was the fine one, it was not twisted at all but drawn tight. They were all bees waxed.⁵

Despite the challenges and restrictions their masters put on the creation of the slaves' spirituals, their tales of heartbreak expressed through song could not be suppressed along with their freedom.

Many of the songs created by slaves contained themes of rebellion and resistance, even information. One of the most famous examples of such songs is the ever-popular choral piece "Wade In The Water." Inspired by a passage from the Bible's Book of John ("For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the waters stepped in was made whole, with whatsoever disease he was holden"⁶), the song assured slaves on the Underground Railroad that "God's a-going to trouble the water"⁷ and aid them on their journey to freedom. Many historians believe the song was also

⁵ Betty Curlett, "Musical Instrument.," interview by Inez Robertson, American Memory from the Library of Congress: Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938, March 23, 2001, Page 81 of 354, accessed December 9, 2015,

⁶ John 5:4.

⁷ *Wade in the Water*, Alan Lomax, John Langenegger, 1941, vinyl recording.

used among slaves to communicate with one another in a covert way their best instructions on how to successfully escape and avoid capture on the underground railroad. Considered today to be a spiritual, the song is a testament to the heartache and difficulties slaves faced on the underground railroad.

The key factor that separated African-American music from the music of the white majority before the Civil War was pain, suffering, and a desire to be free. This experience is just as real and, unfortunately, just as “American” as the patriotic songs written by whites and that infused American culture at the time of the Civil War. Famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass believed the songs that enslaved blacks sang around plantations were a testament to the heartache they faced every day, commenting in 1845:

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, 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 most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness.⁸

Considering Douglass’ sentiment, it is no surprise that slave spirituals are considered a direct influence of the blues, which was just beginning to be developed at the turn of the century.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips, "Chapter 2," in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

Following the Northern victory in the Civil War and the universal emancipation of all enslaved persons in America, the spirituals and other songs created by slaves became increasingly present in American society. Many people, including author and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, recognized and appreciated the beauty of the hymns and spirituals created by slaves and their importance as narratives to a more unfortunate part of American history. “Away back in the thirties the melody of these slave songs stirred the nation, but the songs were soon half forgotten.” commented Du Bois. “Some, like ‘Near the lake where drooped the willow,’ passed into current airs and their source was forgotten; others were caricatured on the “minstrel” stage and their memory died away . . . the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again.”⁹

Indeed, the Fisk Jubilee singers Du Bois mentions were key to the spread and appreciation of slave songs. A co-ed acappella group from Fisk University in Tennessee, a Black university established in 1866, the group’s mission was to introduce spirituals to a larger audience. Their soulful performances of songs such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Wade In The Water” made them a highly sought-after act of the 1890’s. They toured all across the

⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*(Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961).

country, including on routes associated with the Underground Railroad, performing for a variety of people. Their director, John Wesley Work, Jr. was also the first African-American collector of African-American folksongs. Because of him and the



This photograph of the Jubilee Fisk Singers, taken in the late 19th century, is kept in the Library of Congress.

Fisk Jubilee singers, slave spirituals were not lost and forgotten. Instead, choirs all over the world began to perform arrangements of American slave spirituals, and continue to do so until this day.¹⁰

Another important contributor to the preservation and distribution of African-American spirituals to a wider public audience was John Avery Lomax, an American musicologist. During the 1930's, with the help of his son John Jr., and the support of a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, Lomax drove to several penitentiaries throughout the South and, using a 315-pound acetate disc recorder, made some of the first recordings of Southern African-American folk songs. Many of them are kept in the Library of Congress, available to the public both in Washington DC and through MP3 recordings now available online. While the Fisk

¹⁰ Library of Congress, "African American Song," The Library of Congress, Songs During the Era of Slavery, accessed January 7, 2016, <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451/>.

Jubilee singers and John Wesley Work Jr. performed and published the sheet music of slave spirituals, John Lomax made it possible for people to enjoy authentic performances of them from the comfort of their own homes.¹¹ Music created by slaves very well could have been lost to history, but due to the persistence of individuals such as John Wesley Work Jr. and John Avery Lomax Sr., who understood its importance and significance, the tradition became engraved in American culture and influenced Black music over the generations to come.

Themes of slavery and emancipation are woven into music created by Black artists -- and Americans of other lineages -- to this day. Although slavery has been abolished for 150 years, the pain of early African Americans and the music they created influences and inspires the music of today in so many ways. With the invention of music recording devices, music evolved rapidly in all sorts of directions during the 20th century. Spirituals evolved into both gospel music and the blues; the blues evolved into soul; soul evolved into rhythm and blues and rhythm and blues led to hip hop. Although by the time hip hop developed in the 1970s there were no former slaves to draw accounts from, the legacy of slavery influenced today's rappers, both prominent and unknown, profoundly in their music. Kanye West, for example, in his 2004 song "All Falls Down," references the hardship former slaves faced after the Civil War and the broken promises fed to them after emancipation:

¹¹ Library of Congress, "John Avery Lomax (1867-1948)," The Library of Congress, accessed December 18, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196225/>.

We shine because they hate us
Floss cause they degrade us
We trying to buy back our 40 acres
And for that paper, look how low we a'stoop
Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe.¹²

“Forty acres and a mule,” of course, was the unrealized promise made to former slaves of land and resources to start their new lives as freed men. In these words, West also points out how respect for African Americans was not necessarily granted along with freedom.

In a world where the phrase “Black Lives Matter” is both controversial and a rallying cry, the shadow of the American institution of slavery is still very much felt. The anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement, Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright,” even features lyrics that connect and compare issues pressing in the lives of African Americans in the 21st century to those in the 19th. Similar to West’s sentiment, Lamar asks, “What you want, you a house, you a car/40 acres and a mule, a piano, a guitar?”¹³ Most slaves were never taught to read or write, but despite that disadvantage, their narratives were preserved through the music they created. Thanks to John Henry Work, Jr., the Fisk Jubilee singers, John Avery Lomax, and others, the music and the stories of enslaved African Americans were emancipated along with them after the Civil War.

¹² Kanye Omari West, *All Falls Down*, by Kanye Omari West and Lauryn Hill, Kanye West, 2003, MP3.

¹³ Kendrick Lamar, *Alright*, Pharrell Williams, Sounwave, 2015, MP3.

The African-American identity remains rooted in the American institution of slavery, with emancipation having set their stories free. In turn, the music of that experience is both a part of, as well as an inspiration to the future of the whole American identity today.

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