

African-Derived Music of the Americas

Verna B. Green

Assistant Professor

Medgar Evers College

Department of Mass Communications

Creative and Performing Arts and Speech

City University of New York

Brooklyn, NY 11225, USA

Abstract

The music and dance of the Americas today have African roots resulting from the shared history of the African slave-trade executed under European colonialism. The African, coming from cultures in which art was very functional, had the resilience to endure deprivation and the squalid conditions aboard slave-ships and on land in the Americas, and take the lead in shaping the music and dance of the Hemisphere. This article looks at the musical aesthetics such as rhythmic complexity, duality of songs, the presence of “blue notes”, the ever-present African drum and variety of percussion, melodic style and unique timbre brought to the Hemisphere from Africa during the 400-year period of the slave-trade and flowered into the numerous genres emanating from the Caribbean, Latin America (inclusive of South America), and North America today. It also looks at African performance traditions of improvisation, communal/ audience participation, performance with “soul”, and the dance connection.

Keywords: The Americas, African-derived music, musical aesthetics, performance traditions

1. From Africa to the Americas

For one to fully comprehend contemporary music of the Americas, it would be helpful to probe its development. What elements contributed to the phenomenon labeled American, Caribbean, or Latin music? By “American” music, genres such as blues, jazz, hip hop come to mind; with “Caribbean” music, genres such as mento, calypso, and reggae come to mind; and with “Latin” music, genres such as compa, salsa, samba come to mind. What do all these genres, both in their original and in their evolved states, have in common? For the purpose of this article, attention will be focused on the African retentions common to the afore-mentioned genres, just to name a few in representing the music of the Americas. There will not be a detailed discussion of each genre but the reader is being asked to consider the African elements which come to the fore and serve to identify any music born and grown in the Americas as being African-derived.

Music of the Americas is identified as music originating in the Caribbean – “the principal locale for the growth of Afro-American cultural syntheses in this Hemisphere¹ -- North, and South America. Music of the Americas is described as being African-derived, meaning music which retains the musical aesthetics and performance traditions brought from Africa during the 400-year, fifteenth to the nineteenth century, period of the African slave trade. By the time the slaves were emancipated, they had given to [the Americas] not just the sweat of their brows and the strength of their backs, but the seeds of the first truly American cultural gift to the world – American music,”² which music is reflective of the shared history of the Hemisphere. The influences on the music of the Americas have been pluralistic but “it was the African’s origin in cultures in which art was highly functional which gave him an edge in shaping the music and dance of this [Hemisphere]”.³ Accounts have been given (Ligon, 1657⁴ and Ellison, 1964)⁵ which chronicle the African’s skill at making new music out of old as he expresses his response to his experiences in the New World (the Americas). The African engaged in music and dance as a means of survival and succeeded in preserving his original culture while adeptly incorporating “attributes of the master culture which were essential to [his] survival or congenial to [his] past learning.”⁶ This article focuses on the African musical aesthetics and performance traditions evident in the music of the Americas.

The discussion regarding musical aesthetics, here, is meant to draw attention to the aural, visual and artistic elements which readily identify the music's origin and cultural kinship. For the African, music is an expression of life in all of its aspects through the medium of sound."⁷ Bebey posits music to be the birth right of every African child by which s/he is prepared for the strange adventure of life.

For example, the lullaby below has a dual purpose, one of comforting a child and two, of teaching him/ her why not to cry:

Ye ye ya ye - Do not cry Think of our friends who are childless
Hush, do not cry
Think of those who have no children
Think of my married brother
Who has no children yet?
And then look at me
I have a mother too
But I don't cry
Think of our friends who are childless
Think of my brother
Who married a Bacanda Girl?
What an idea, to marry a Bacanda
And they are still without children
Don't cry, my darling
Think of your unhappy father...⁸

Like almost all African music, this simple lullaby conveys numerous ideas at the same time. Outwardly, it is intended to soothe and lull the baby to sleep while it expresses the mother's gratitude towards God for enabling her to have a child – a privilege which so many other women do not have. It is obvious that, at this early stage in life, the child is just a listener but as he/she begins to grow up ... very soon takes an active role in music. The average African child reveals a natural aptitude for music at a very early age. He is already making his own musical instruments at three or four; an empty tin becomes a rattle, an old window-frame and a piece of animal hide make a drum (which musicologists call a "frame-drum"). Whether or not he has the makings of a musician, his talents as a singer soon become apparent; music is an indispensable element in children's games. Youngsters of four or five love to imitate the songs and dances of their elders and, even at this age, their priorities are quickly established; any child who is more interested in eating than singing is a subject of derision. It is also clear that talent has nothing to do with age, for the rhythms that these tiny tots hammer out on their makeshift instruments are a portent of their capabilities in later life. Thus, music is clearly an integral part of the life of every African individual from the moment of his birth. The musical games played by children are never gratuitous; they are a form of musical training which prepares them to participate in all areas of adult activity – fishing, hunting, farming, grinding maize, attending weddings, funerals, dances, and by necessity, even fleeing from wild animals. This explains why every conceivable sound has its place in traditional African music whether in its natural form as it is produced by the object or animal in question, or reproduced by an instrument that imitates them as faithfully as possible.⁹

1.1 Music-Making aboard Slave-Ships

Music is with the African always and comes forth in times of joy or pain. Even on the trans-Atlantic crossing during the slave trade, Africans made music despite the extremely negative circumstances. In the early 1800s, a slave-ship captain named Theodore Cannot described how the slaves kept their music alive even as they journeyed to unknown fates in the New World: 'During afternoons of serene weather, men, women, girls, and boys are allowed while on deck to unite in African melodies which they always enhance by extemporaneous tomtom on the bottom of a tub or tin kettle' While Cannot probably did not think about it, this was one of the only ways the slaves could unite in their sorrow and fear, for they did not often share a common language. The slaves who arrived at the African slave markets came from tribes all over Africa, and they were thrown together in the slave ships without regard for tribe or language. In fact, slave-ship captains made a point of not putting slaves from the same tribes together, for if the slaves had been able to talk with one another, they also might have been able to plan revolts... These slave-ship captains... did not understand that the slaves were able to communicate with one another quite well through their music.

Through their songs, the slaves shared the rhythms of their sorrow and their fear and their hopelessness. Through the rhythms of their make-shift drums, they communicated their calls to rebellion. Between 1699 and 1845, there were at least fifty-five revolts aboard slave ships. Most of them failed, but they caused enough trouble and damage to make the insurance companies that wrote policies for slave ships offer a special form of coverage against insurrections aboard slave ships. The most famous successful revolt occurred aboard the *Amistad*, an American clipper ship, in 1839. Bound for Cuba, the ship was taken over by slaves led by a man named Cinque, who changed course and headed for the United States, finally landing off New London, Connecticut. The slaves were taken into custody by American officials and sat through two federal trials to determine their status under United States and international law. Former President John Quincy Adams defended them, and in 1841 they were able to return to Africa.¹⁰ It is no surprise, therefore, to find the African slave and ex-slave in the Americas exhibiting the natural ability to sing, dance, and play a musical instrument in giving expression to the baleful conditions of slavery and thereafter. The music of the Americas, African-Caribbean, African-American (North/South) represents a triumph of the reinvention of the self, a transformation of culture emerging from the cruellest conditions yet capable of maintaining an African identity. "Today... the enduring rhythms and styles of African-derived music continue to cross racial, political and economic barriers to re-energize popular, religious and classical music [in the Americas]."¹¹

2. African Musical Aesthetics Recognized in the Music of the Americas

African musical aesthetics influence the music created and enjoyed in the Americas. When the ear encounters music that is African-derived, it is readily recognizable by its energy, subtlety and the drive of syncopated rhythm resulting from the employment of the African musical device **interlocking**. The rhythm which, more often than not, drives one to dance, juxtaposes 2 beats against 3 (interlocking) with the effect of syncopation and, depending on the number of rhythmic patterns and players employed, results in rhythmic complexity (polyrhythm). The essence of African music is rooted in the concept that simple rhythmic patterns played on rattles, drums, bells, horns, and other musical instruments simultaneously form a dense mixture of polyrhythmic impulses that fade in and out, constantly renewing and recombining as a kaleidoscope of sound textures.¹² The second recognizable African musical trait is the presence of **call-and-response organization** between caller and responder(s), soloist and chorus/backup singers, group and group, singer and instrument, dancer and dancer, instrument and singer or dancer. In this musical organization, singer or instrumentalist makes a musical statement which is then responded to by another soloist, instrumentalist, or group. There are times statement and response overlap.¹³ The third African musical aesthetic evident in the music of the Americas is **duality of songs (i.e., songs serving a dual purpose)**. As the example of the African lullaby, "Ye ye ya ye" cited above in which a lullaby was also used to express gratitude, almost all African music convey a number of ideas simultaneously.¹⁴ Even derisive singing, which at times refers to the king, was accepted as a means of expressing sentiments that would not be acceptable if spoken.¹⁵ The tradition continues in the Americas in genres such as Calypso in which singers evoke satire and eroticism alongside the main purpose of entertainment reminiscent of the griots and jalis of West Africa; Reggae filled with messages regarding love and social justice; Blues, another genre in the realm of popular music making commentary on the hardships of the slave/ex-slave; Spirituals, in the realm of religious music which have been used to convey messages of freedom from slavery.

The presence of the "**blue notes**"¹⁶ resulting from the African affinity for utilizing the minor mode melodically and harmonically is another African musical aesthetic connecting the music of the Americas with that of Africa. Blue notes are especially common at the third and seventh degrees of the scale (in reference to the European diatonic scale) but they can occur at other points as well, including even such a normally stable place as the fifth.¹⁷ The blue note is achieved by bending notes downward (e.g. a flat grace note preceding a natural) vocally or instrumentally, and is recognizable in all African-American musical genres. The prevalent use of blue notes in music originating in the Americas in general and the United States of America in particular is strong evidence of "musical continuity ... within African music as it has evolved and transformed within the [Hemisphere]."¹⁸ Without a doubt, the **ever-present African drum**, along with the **high-pitched bell**, or its equivalent (e.g. frying pan, tin can) or anything made of metal with short duration sound capable of producing "rhythmic background pulse, or figure embroidery upon basic drum patterns,"¹⁹ and a **variety of percussion instruments** such as clappers, shakers, scrapers which produce a variation of typically African rhythmic patterns are unmistakable evidences of the African connection in the music of the Americas.

African drums or their substitutes persisted all through the period of slavery²⁰ and continues to be essential paraphernalia associated with African-American song and dance. The **African melodic style** employing portamento – executing attack and release of notes through swoops, slurs, smears, and slides or glides from one tone to another vocally and instrumentally, and the **African vocal timbre** ranging from falsetto tones to a raucous vocal quality are also present in the music of the Americas. Another aspect of the African melody is its rhythmic relationship to the pulse of the meter. African melody is free to pursue its own rhythmic course, with its own accents originating from its form, separate from the pulse of the meter (background rhythm) and coincide with multiples of the basic beat. In the African-derived music of the Americas, melodic accents continue to fall on different beats from those of the percussion.²¹ finally, the combination of African vocal style with rhythmic complexity resulting from consistent employment of percussion produce a **unique musical timbre** in the music of the Americas recognized as being African-derived.

3. African Performance Traditions Recognized in the Music of the Americas

“Among the peoples of Africa, music was integrated into daily life, as a group activity, rather than as a performance before a passive audience. Music accompanied all kinds of group work, regulating the pace of work and lessening the monotony. Even individuals working alone often sang about their work. Festivities were accompanied by music and dancing... All these aspects of African culture were easily adapted to life in the [Americas].”²² Whites in the Americas made it difficult for African slaves on the plantations to maintain their African musical culture but the slaves found ways to circumvent the white effort. Due to the tonal structure of African languages, slaves were able to communicate by drum over long distances. Soon, drumming was banned on the plantations because whites felt threatened by the sound of drums. Also, in order to ensure the demise of the African culture among slaves, slave masters split up tribal affiliations through slave auctions, “but some West African cultures were similar enough, and the resolve of the Africans was greater than the brutality of the slave masters.”²³ Slaves found ways to communicate and express their culture through Coded Songs, Work Songs, Protest Songs, Spirituals, the adoption of other instruments in place of the drum, even to the adaptation of European musical instruments in playing African rhythms to accompany song and dance. The African cultural sensibilities, as expressed through song and rhythm, offered the slave a voice of dissent that ensured the slave did not commit cultural suicide, and by so doing preserved the social continuity of the African.²⁴ To this day, the African has the uncanny ability to sing, make music, and dance despite the immediate unpleasant situation. A case in point was BB King, born 1925 in Mississippi in poor economic conditions, yet managed to become King of the Blues ending a successful musical career, as a millionaire at age 89 years 8 months on May 14, 2015.²⁵ Another case in point occurred in the days following the Charleston, South Carolina, USA massacre, in which nine African-American parishioners, including their Pastor, attendees of a Bible study at the Emmanuel AME church were shot to death in the church by a white assailant who had sat with them for an hour before committing the act. On the day of the killer’s arraignment, mourners gathered outside the church singing gospel songs accompanied by hand-claps,²⁶ thus affirming Frederick Douglas’ point, as referenced by Dana J. Epstein (1977), that “slaves [and their descendants] sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart.”²⁷ Also true for descendants of slaves in 2015. African Performance Traditions readily recognizable in the music of the Americas addressed in this article are improvisation, communal/audience participation, performance with “soul”, and the dance connection. An African musician improvises freely in song or on an instrument. According to Richard Jobson, a British Trader who visited Africa in 1620-21, soon after the first African slaves arrived in Virginia, “there is without doubt, no people on the earth more naturally affected to the sound of musicke [sic] than these people ... singing... extempore upon any occasion”²⁸

Improvisation is present at some level in the music of the Americas. For example, it is a major feature of Jazz in the United States of America and of Musica Campesina in Cuba,²⁹ and can be found in some form in secular and religious singing all over the Hemisphere. For instance, it can be heard in singers who may choose to sometimes lengthen or shorten a vocal phrase, substitute words, repeat them or sing several notes to a syllable, in a bid to re-create the music.³⁰ Audience participation in African American music is a carry-over of the African experience in which there is a very thin line of demarcation between audience and performers. Much of black musical performances generate high energy and find performers inviting audience/communal participation by requesting the audience to stand, raise, wave, or clap their hands. There are times, even without invitation, the audience or some members of the audience will participate in the afore-mentioned ways. There are times too, when the music ends, both performers and audience are physically and emotionally exhausted.³¹

What does it mean to sing with “soul”? The music of the African Diaspora is built on dominant themes, and around key issues in the African-American (inclusive of the whole Hemisphere) experience. The songs are not of lament or self-pity but of a people wanting to assert their personality, in the face of racism, segregation and oppression. The songs and their performances invite the outsider into the world of the descendants of slaves permitting a view of their joys and pains, hopes and fears expressed most of the time with a unique sense of humour, including their willingness to celebrate life even in unpleasant situations. In bringing this off, musical performances are aimed at touching the listener’s soul and to do this, the performer must perform with intense sensitivity and emotional fervour – “soul”. According to Seeger (1980), “when filled with the spirit, [the performer] can moan, groan, hum, scream, wail, whisper, or seduce with ... voice or instrument, ... pace up and down, jump up, fall down, spin or ... repeat a syllable endlessly or use nonsense words.”³² As posited by Emielu (2014), this “soul” experience is a carry-over of the African tradition where the performance of music and dance are seen as a spiritual experience, [in which] the “spirit” must actually possess [one] to be able to reach out and grab the listeners by the soul. In Africa, music is said to unite the people with their gods in ecstasy and “spirit possession” is an essential African element in music and dance performances.³³

It is believed that dance helps to generate affinity and solidarity, and often becomes a sign of group affiliation. The link between music and dance is identifiably African and has always been associated with group activities such as hunting, planting, harvest, war, worship, and praise. According to John Chasteen (2004), African music and dance traditions had begun to influence societies in the Americas at all levels before the nineteenth century.

African-influenced dances have been embraced “as national symbols in many parts of Latin America ... Conventionally, official embrace of African-influenced national rhythms is a twentieth-century story in Latin America, yet it has powerful antecedents in the nineteenth century and before.”³⁴ From the time the Africans began arriving in droves on the shores of the Americas, as a result of the African slave-trade, African-derived music and dance of the Americas have been effective world-wide. The European masters were very much influenced by the slaves to the extent that during the decades of the seventeenth century, Afro-Latin music and dance forms like the sarabanda and chacona took Spain by storm enlivening Baroque music and dance in Western Europe;³⁵ reggae emanating from the island of Jamaica in the Caribbean resounds and is actively cultivated everywhere from Hawaii to Malawi; and Cuban music styles dominate much of African urban music in modern times. As styles like reggae and Cuban dance music achieve international popularity, they become part of world cultural history as well as that of the Caribbean – [the Americas].³⁶ Some of the countries in the Americas whose national identity is marked by African-influenced rhythms are Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Peru, Puerto Rico, United States of America, and Uruguay just to name a few. Some national dances, which are all African-derived, include tango, samba, salsa, merengue, reggae, rumba, jazz, again, to name a few. Evidences of African-influenced dance in the Americas are the vigorous hip and pelvic movement of the dancer, and the prevalence of men, women or communities dancing but rarely dancing as couples. Couple-dancing in the Americas is a carry-over of the European influence. A subsequent article will address the European and Amerindian influences evident in the music of the Americas.

4. Conclusion

Africans are “people who have demonstrated perseverance and courage in the face of incredible adversity throughout African history.”³⁷ The African slave and ex-slave have shown no less courage and have demonstrated no less perseverance in enduring the adversities of slavery, the “post-colonial environment,”³⁸ and the racism of the modern era to give to the Americas and the world the truly American cultural gift of music – American music, Caribbean music, Latin music.

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²⁵ For more than half a century, Riley B. King – better known as B.B. King – has defined the Blues for a worldwide audience. Since he started recording in the 1940s, he has released over fifty albums, many of them classics. He was born September 16, 1925, on a plantation in Itta Bena, Mississippi, near Indianola. In his youth, he played on street corners for dimes, and would sometimes play in as many as four towns a night. In 1947, he hitchhiked to Memphis, TN, to pursue his music career. Memphis was where every important musician of the South gravitated, and which supported a large musical community where every style of African American music could be found. B.B. stayed with his cousin Bukka White, one of the most celebrated blues performers of his time, who schooled B.B. further in the art of the blues. <http://www.bbking.com/bio/>

²⁶ Twenty-one year old white man, Dylan Roof perpetrated the massacre on Wednesday, June 17, 2015 after sitting in the Bible study for an hour. He was arraigned on Friday, June 19, 2015.

²⁷ Epstein, Dana J. (1977, reissued 2003) a *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, University of Illinois Press.

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²⁹ A Short History of Cuban Music, Boogalu Productions – Hosted in Havana, <http://www.boogalu.com/cuba-travel/resources/history-cuban-music>. Música campesina is a rural form of improvised music derived from a local form of décima and verso called punto. It has been popularized by artists like Celina González, and has become an important influence on modern son. While remaining mainly unchanged in its forms (thus provoking a steady decline in interest among the Cuban youth), some artists have tried to renew música campesina with new styles, lyrics, themes and arrangements.

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