

African-Derived Music of the Americas: European Effect

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Abstract

The energy of the music of the Americas comes out of the African American community in the Caribbean, Latin and North America. With African contribution to the music of the region readily recognizable through the syncopation of interlocking, call-and-response organization, duality of songs, use of blue notes, instrumentation, and overall African timbre, this article focuses on the European effect on and relationship to the African's artistic flowering and cultural preservation in the Hemisphere during slavery to the present time. The discovery has been made that with both cultures co-existing in close proximity to each other, the European effect has been, essentially, the imitation, dilution, superimposition of European aesthetic values on, and, in many cases, the possession of African artistry and culture, like in the case of blues and jazz, and in the ownership of instruments such as the banjo and guitar.

Keywords: The Americas, blues, spirituals, minstrelsy, African, European, cross-cultural pollination

I. Introduction

Having looked at the African contribution to the music of the Americas, the findings of which have been documented in the article "African-Derived Music of the Americas"¹ (2015), it became necessary to seek information regarding the European contribution to this music. In terms of artistic flowering in the Americas, evidence of the African contribution has not been difficult to find. Characteristics of African music are experienced as one encounters any of the many genres of "American" music such as, for example blues, spirituals, jazz, hip hop in North America; mento, reggae, calypso, soca in The Caribbean; compa, salsa, samba, merengue in Latin America (just to name a few). Readily recognizable are the energy, subtlety and drive of syncopated rhythm resulting from the employment of the African musical device [of] interlocking; the African musical organization of call-and-response; duality of songs, use of blue notes, instrumentation [evidenced, for example, in the prolific use of African drums such as djembe and conga, and strings such as banjo and guitar]; melodic style[, evidenced in minor tonalities of blues, jazz, spirituals, calypso, etc.]; and overall African musical timbre.² Such strong African showing leaves the question very often asked, what did the Europeans contribute to the music of the Americas? That question is also asked regarding the contribution of the Amerindians, since they, of the three, were first in the area. The Amerindians were first but with their genocide executed by the Europeans and the Africans being brought in subsequently, the co-existence of the three cultures has been difficult to fathom. Research will be conducted in this regard. Africans and Europeans have co-existed in the Americas since the fifteenth century. They have been on equal footing neither economically nor socially. Europeans have been in the ascendancy from being slave-owners to ruling class they have been privileged, rich, and for the most part, oppressive. Africans, on the other hand, with no privilege have had little or no money, and have been forced to live in servitude and bondage.

During the age of slavery, both Africans and Europeans maintained and practiced their culture within ear-shot of each other. The Europeans, with the determination to convert the slaves to make them more pliable, immersed the Africans into the Christian religion through which the Africans became acquainted with Scriptural sayings, hymns and spiritual songs. "Music figured prominently in the religious observances of the early Plymouth Colony Settlers, and the Ainsworth Psalter provided a primary source for singing of Psalms among them."³

The Africans also observed the Europeans during their (Europeans') social occasions (e.g., ballroom dancing) and, with the African natural affinity for all things musical,⁴ were soon able to master European musical instruments and conventions in the expression of their own African culture and, at times, in imitation of European culture. Due to the fact that "music is with the African always and comes forth in times of joy or pain,"⁵ despite their lack of *freedom*, the African slaves lost no opportunity to engage in music and dance. Europeans also found occasions to observe Africans during their times of African cultural expression. As historian Roger Abrahams noted, the masters 'came to regard their charges as *exploitable* [emphasis supplied] for their capabilities as both workers and players. The planters constructed situations in which blacks played in front of whites for their mutual enjoyment. The slaves represented an *exotic* [emphasis supplied] presence to their masters.'⁶ It did not escape the notice of the slaves that dancing or playing the fiddle was more pleasant than sweating in the fields, and before too long, there were slave orchestras featuring the [Senegambia] instrument called the banjo. Playing and dancing also offered the chance for the slaves to make fun of their owners, whether singing mocking songs in code or performing dances that mimicked those of the master.⁷

These occasions of cultural observation on both sides contributed to cross-pollination recognized as the *Music of the Americas*. 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 Hemisphere'⁸ -- 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,⁹ 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]'.¹⁰ Accounts have been given (Ligon, 1657¹¹ and Ellison, 1964)¹² 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.'^{13,14} "Music and religion and a fragment of kinship networks were all that was left to Africans on the shores of [the] America[s], and against all probability they used these elements to build a culture."¹⁵ At first notice, the music is prominently, strongly, obviously African due to the very noticeable African aesthetics of rhythmic complexity, call-and-response organization, minor tonality, timbre, and performance traditions such as improvisation, and song and dance combination. On second look, European musical influences through meter, instrumentation, and hymnody are evident. This article will focus attention on the European retentions common to the afore-mentioned genres found in American, Caribbean, and Latin music, which genres represent a sampling of the region's music. Each genre will not be addressed in detail but, with these genres in mind, the reader will be asked to consider the European elements evident in the music of the region.

The musical forms of today evolved from the strident laments manifested in the shouts and hollers of the slaves on the plantations, the mixture of shouts and songs which imitated the songs of the white masters by the solitary emancipated sharecroppers on the many "tiny farms that dotted the less fertile lands of the South,"¹⁶ the superimposition of European aesthetic values on African musical compositions, to the music which reflect the ever-changing social and cultural complexities encountered by the African in America.

2. Blues

According to Delridge Hunter (2005), "there was a musical form (style) now called blues in existence during slavery in the United States as it was in places like the Congo during the same period."¹⁷ In the Congo, Africa, this form of music, blues, called Engung, sung by the "Lyric Poets"¹⁸ of the Mbuwun people of Bndundu Province, were songs which expressed "feelings of sadness[, executed by the employment of minor tonality,] and commentary as poetry by themselves... without the accompaniment of anyone or anything else [except] possibly [a] self-made string instrument."¹⁹ Lyric poets were snatched not only from the Congo but from various places across West Africa such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Ghana, and Nigeria. This form of music, centuries old in Africa, was brought to the New World, the Americas by the lyric poets who were stolen, transported and sold into bondage. In the Americas, "the lyric poet assumed the responsibility of adapting the African musical styles to the new setting known as [the Americas]."²⁰

Using song as his mode of expression and poetry as his means of commentary, the lyric poet spoke to and for the slave, keeping alive the slave's position regarding the system that "kept the African oppressed."²¹ The songs being referred to here were not what are called spirituals today.

They were not from a mindset that had anything to do with conforming to the ways of white culture, they were not field hollers or work songs but were engung which expressed "slave realities of oppression."²² They were secular and often referred to as freedom, protest, pre-zodiac and Devil songs and "used the styles of delivery and lyrics that qualify them as blues today."²³

Singing engung (blues) music as social commentary became the mission of the lyric poet in the Americas. It was engaged in for entertainment purposes and set the stage for the creation of what whites called "Black music." What is Black music? As mentioned before, all styles, genres, and forms that owe their existence to the people of Africa enslaved as captives within the Americas acquired the label of "Black music."²⁴ Like most musical forms in Africa, this style of social commentary has the possibility of expressing praise and/or derision, characteristic duality of songs, and is evidenced throughout the Americas inclusive of the Caribbean (e.g. calypso), Latin (e.g. salsa) and North America (e.g. blues).

Blues issued directly out of the African forms which were sung in the fields as hollers when needed, as rhythmic coordination of large groups of workers on large plantations, employed sacred lyrics when required, and became mixed with the "ballits"²⁵, English ballads of the white masters imitated by the solitary share-croppers. The new popular blues singers, freed lyric poets, were expected to devote their entire itinerary to singing commercial non-offensive blues in a language understandable to the dominant, white population. Blues became commercial as early as the end of the Civil War The War of Liberation (April 12, 1861-April 9, 1865) and is understood to be the surviving source that arrived on the shores of the Americas with the African who retained it and enabled it to evolve into the present-day music of the Americas.²⁶

By utilizing a simplified Dorian (the variety of scales utilized by slaves and their immediate offspring) related scale referred to as the blues scale, W. C. Handy²⁷ popularized a standardized musical form that would attract musicians, composers and bandleaders such as Leon Bix Beiderbecke, George Gershwin and Paul Whiteman to Black music; and patrons who demanded more and more blues music because it was conducive to dancing, moved Black music from being common folk music to becoming commercial and in-demand by the favored white population.

The 1960s ushered in a period of extensive imitation and dilution of the blues idioms. "World-wide recognition of the blues ...also meant widespread copying of the music [with] student groups in Liverpool or London [playing] 'rhythm and blues' in R & B clubs whilst their counterparts in the United States, the student 'white blues singers' are acclaimed in the city 'folk-song' clubs."²⁸ The rapid changes brought about by popularization and imitation continue through to today where it becomes more and more difficult to identify the originators of the blues and related genres such as jazz, country blues, hip hop, etc.

3. Instruments

The most obvious European contribution to the fabric of the music of the Americas is in instrumentation. The Africans were adept at employing European instruments available to them in creating music expressive of the African musical aesthetics and performance traditions. For example, the European cymbal and triangle were used as part of the metallic percussion section of the African-American bands because their sounds closely approximated that of the African bell and were effective as bell substitutes.²⁹ Metal percussion is of great importance in much of the music of West Africa and, subsequently, also in the African cultures of the Caribbean and mainland North and South America --- the Americas. It is commonly used as an element of percussion accompaniment to singing. In addition to African drums being used as accompaniment to dance, the European snare and bass drums became an essential element in Jazz performance during the late nineteenth century. Other European instruments employed in jazz, reggae, and most other genres of the region include the piano/keyboard, string bass, clarinet, trombone, trumpet, and/or guitar. "The piano was one of the last instruments to be mastered by Negro performers..."³⁰

Another example of the African skill at adapting European instruments in producing a wide range of timbre expressive of the African musical tradition was found in New Orleans jazz as early as the 1920s and 30s. During these times, performers on the clarinet, trumpet, and trombone created special effects such as the growl, by simultaneously blowing and humming into the instrument; the shake, by either an exaggerated hand vibrato or by

jaw vibrato; lipping, in which the pitch is controlled by stiffening or slackening the lip muscles; fluttering, by vibrating the tongue against the upper alveolar ridge of the mouth (the bony ridge behind the teeth); and the use of muting devices such as hats and bathroom plungers.

“The practice of varying instrumental timbres has roots in the music of West and Central Africa, where buzzing and other vibrating effects are intentionally produced on African horns and trumpets.”³¹ “With the advent of boogie-woogie, the Negro musicians succeeded in creating a piano music that was within the emotional tradition of Negro music.”³²

The Moors of West Africa, the Mauritians, the so-called Negroes who had been forcibly brought to the Americas subsequently re-created the Banjo, this West African musical instrument which is very similar to the North African Moorish guitarro. The banjo has been called the outstanding American contribution to the music of folklore. It existed in Africa for centuries and arrived on the shores of the Americas (the New World) with the enslaved African lyric poets. By 1847 the fiddle and banjo were being played together in the South - the origin of the modern string band or bluegrass band. These early black folk traditions along with the banjo were eventually transferred to whites, especially in the Appalachians.³³

The Krar harp or one of its variations later developed into the guitarro, the direct ancestor of the guitar which was used widely in ancient Mauritania, later known as the Maghreb, the Sahel and Guinea. Guitarro was introduced to Spain by African Moors in the 9th century AD. They used it for their music and soon the whole of Spain, southern Italy, southern France, became avid acolytes of guitarro culture. When the Moors fell from power, guitarro had already become an integral part of Iberian music. The Moors, many of whom migrated to the Americas, brought their guitarro with them. Guitarro was widely played in the Spanish colonies since it was the Spaniards and the Portuguese that conquered and shared the Moorish lands in America between them.

Although widely played in the Latin territories of America in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was only known in the southern region of the United States in the 19th century. Its use was not widespread until the early 20th century when it was used by popular professional musicians like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.³⁴

4. Meter

During the early 1800s, “when African American musicians played for recreational dances among their own people, the musical repertoire often included play-party [(for the benefit of the children)]songs, many of which were based on melodies and lyrics that were similar to and sometimes almost indistinguishable from the songs of White pioneers, but modified with African approaches to rhythm and traditional performance practices.”³⁵ The popularity of the military band during the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, spread from France to all the French settlements in the Americas. The fascinating rhythms of the quadrilles, 2/4 and 6/8, and the 4/4 meters of the marching bands made an impression on the slaves who tried and succeeded in incorporating them into their own music.³⁶

5. Spiritual Songs

In their contribution to the American musical landscape, African Americans were effective in the portrayal of their innate culture mixed with their skillful imitation of the European American culture around them. According to Lucy McKin Garrison (1867), as quoted by Dana Epstein (1977), “Negroes in their turn imitate[d] the whites, but they show[ed] their peculiar musical genius as much in their imitations as in their compositions. A ‘white tune’ so to speak, adopted and sung by them ‘in their own way’ becomes a different thing. The words may be simply mangled, but the music is changed under an inspiration; it becomes a vital force. Hence the difficulty of accrediting authorship; to say how much is pure African, how much Methodist or Baptist camp-meeting. Where did the camp-meeting songs come from? Why might they not as likely emanate from black as from white worshippers?”³⁷

6. Spirituals

Whites also were found to be influenced by Blacks in all areas of music from sacred to secular, folk and art. For example, Burnim (2014) noted that Whites were found to engage in the performance of the folk spirituals which were an outgrowth of slavery and a “uniquely African response to an institution that engaged [and continues to engage] in a systematic, though unsuccessful, attack on the cultural legacy of Black people in America.”³⁸

Spirituals were the first organized musical style of African slaves to receive exposure and acceptance by [whites].³⁹

The Negro spiritual is a good example of the African being able to imitate the European phenomenon called “art song”⁴⁰ but compose and perform them with the rhythmic energy, subtlety, and organizational structure of the African musical tradition.

“The spirituals emerged from the encounter between slave culture and Christianity that began in the era of the Great Awakening in the 1740s.”⁴¹ Folk Spirituals which existed during the period of the Great Awakening, 1740-1800, were distinct from the Negro Spirituals which emerged around 1871. The Negro Spirituals were the Folk Spirituals transformed for the concert stage where hand clapping, foot stomping, and individual latitude in interpreting the melodic line, characteristics of the folk spirituals were replaced by predictability, controlled reserve, and the absence of overt demonstrative behavior.⁴² These aesthetic values, which characterized European musical culture, were superimposed on the Negro Spiritual by George White, the White treasurer of Fisk University, who established the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1871 as a touring group of singers to raise much-needed funds for the young institution. The Negro Spirituals from this period are still being performed today. George Pullen Jackson (1943, re-issued 1975), one of the three southern American professors, primary proponents of the European origin of the Negro spiritual, concluded from his research that “the hymnody of whites provided the foundation for Negro spirituals, even though the songs underwent radical transformation in the transfer from one culture to another.”⁴³ The origins debate concluded in the 1960s with the acknowledgement of “the syncretism that forged the unique character of spirituals as a genre grounded in African-derived musical values yet shaped into its distinctiveness as a direct result of the North American sociocultural experience.”⁴⁴ Here, again, is evidence of the African’s skill at adeptly incorporating attributes of the master culture while preserving his/her original culture.

7. Minstrelsy

Cross-cultural pollination between Africans and Europeans also manifested itself in the emergence of minstrelsy. “For a majority of Americans, their introduction to African-American music came via a curious institution called minstrelsy.”⁴⁵ “The minstrel show is traceable back to the beginning of the nineteenth century”⁴⁶-- around 1800, a time when white performers, using black face were obsessed with imitating Negro life. This was a phenomenon in which white working-class men spent time and effort as a money-making exercise in “imitating, or caricaturing, what they consider certain generic characteristics of the black man’s life in America to entertain other white men.”⁴⁷ The audiences consisted of working-class, largely Irish people who enjoyed having “someone lower on the social totem pole to mock. Yet there was more than a pinch of admiration in the shows, especially for the music. As the title of a recent scholarly treatment of minstrelsy put it, it was both *Love and theft*.”⁴⁸

As posited by McNally (2014), black face minstrelsy began as solo song and dance performed between two acts of a play, “added burlesques and comic dimensions in the 1830s, became a full-fledged show in the 1840s, and was a profitable, fully established institution by the 1850s. He pointed out that it was by far the “most popular piece of American popular culture throughout the nineteenth century and beyond (see Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn*, 1942).”⁴⁹ As early as the Revolutionary era, the masters, with their fascination with a white simulation of black music, began to also imitate black dancing styles out of which developed the *Cakewalk*, an evolution of the European *Minuet*.⁵⁰

8. Conclusion

Blues forms grew out of the old African musical forms that retain the minor chords as the base of all musical expression... Scores of compositions have emanated from that source, and the source continues to expand and evolve into different genres such as jazz, pop, gospel, country and western, boogie-woogie, rock-n-roll, salsa, reggae, zydeco, Afro-pop, and hip-hop. The advancement of the blues appears through the classic nature of the different art forms. These art forms may be shown within the classic recordings heard on the nickelodeon (ragtime), the stage blues of the 1920s known as “classic blues”, classic swing bands of the 1930s and 40s, the revolution of the 1940s called bebop, the free form experimental period of the 1950/60s, the fusion of the 1960/70s, and, the new music of the 1980/90s/2000s.⁵¹ It is concluded that the musical characteristics of the Americas has been forged by the syncretism grounded in African-derived musical values yet shaped into its distinctiveness as a direct result of the imitation, dilution, and superimposition of European aesthetic values on the African artistry and culture.

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Endnotes

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- ²² Hunter, Delridge (2005e), p. 20
- ²³ Hunter, Delridge (2005f), p. 19
- ²⁴ Hunter, Delridge (2005h), p. 13
- ²⁵ Jones, Leroi (Amiri Baraka) 2002b, p. 61
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- ²⁷ W.C. Handy was born on November 16, 1873, in Florence, Alabama. He played with several bands and traveled throughout the Midwest and the South, learning about the African-American folk music that would become known as the blues. Handy later composed his own songs—including "St. Louis Blues," "Memphis Blues" and "Aunt Hagar's Blues"—which would help popularize the form and come to be major commercial hits. He died in New York City in 1958.
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- ⁵¹ Hunter, Delridge (2005g), p. 31