

JAMES HASKINS



BLACK MUSIC

IN AMERICA

A HISTORY THROUGH ITS PEOPLE



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Illustrated with photographs

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CHAPTER 1

THEY CAME AGAINST THEIR WILL

EARLY SLAVE MUSIC

They came in chains, brought to the New World as slaves. They did not immigrate, seeking greater opportunity, like others who came to America. They were seized from their villages and homes and not allowed to take any possessions with them—no favorite piece of clothing or kitchen utensil or handmade musical instrument. But they did have their songs, and they would re-create their instruments and their music to keep their hearts and souls alive through nearly two hundred fifty years of slavery in the New World.

By the time slavery was abolished, most of them would not go back to Africa, for Africa was no longer their home. America

was. Despite their poor treatment, the land and the culture had become part of them. And in spite of the fact that most white Americans at the time did not consider blacks to be their equals, whites had taken into their own hearts certain elements of black culture. By the time the slaves were emancipated, they had given to America 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.

In the more than one hundred years since then, the influence of black music on American popular music, not to mention on popular music and culture around the world, has been incalculable. Blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll—all these musical forms originated with blacks. And white performers and groups—from Benny Goodman to Frank Sinatra to the Beatles to Rod Stewart to Boy George—have said that they owe their biggest debt to black music. Three hundred fifty years ago, who would have thought that the poor, helpless slaves aboard ships from Africa would bring such a powerful legacy with them to the new land?

Many of these slaves left no record at all of their lives. In fact, in the South, it was not until around World War II that the births of black babies were recorded systematically. Officially, blacks were all but invisible, defined more by laws that denied them their rights than by laws that guaranteed their rights. There was a time during slavery when they were even denied the right to make their own music, and for many years after that, white promoters and performers collected the lion's share of profits from black music. Meanwhile, whites didn't think that blacks were capable of singing or playing white music.

Without the stubborn efforts of blacks to show that they could play white music, some of the distinctively black forms that make up American music never would have enjoyed a wide audience. Without the courageous work of blacks to show that distinctively black music should be as celebrated as white music, some of the most important American musical styles would not have developed at all.

This is a history of black music in America through the lives of black people who made it. It focuses on the innovators and pioneers; on the black people who showed they could make white music, thus opening up new paths for black performers in general, as well as on the black people who made black music. It is as much a history of obstacles overcome as of the blossoming and branching out of new musical forms.

In the early 1800s, a slave-ship captain named Theodore Canot 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 *tom-tom* on the bottom of a tub or tin kettle."

While Canot probably didn't 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. The same was true of slave owners in the New World. It was in their best interests that slaves not be able to communicate with one another.

These slave-ship captains and slave owners 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.

Other slaves died during the voyages, for on many slave ships they were packed close together in narrow bunks below deck, chained together, and denied the food and sanitary facilities necessary for life. Some committed suicide by throwing themselves overboard. Those who reached the New World and were sold in the coastal slave markets to southern plan-

plantation owners and northern businessmen continued to rely on their music—their songs and their drums—both to communicate with one another and to keep their morale intact.

For some time, slave masters did not realize that the drums the slaves made from hollowed-out logs or nail kegs, with animal skins tightly stretched over one end, were being used for communication. They thought the slaves were just making their African music. They knew these drum sounds carried far, even to the next plantation, but it didn't occur to them that the drumbeats were a sort of "Morse code" the slaves used to make plans for revolts or escapes. Yet they knew that slaves on different plantations were somehow communicating with each other. There were too many revolts and escapes.

When it finally became clear to the slave masters that the drums were being used as a form of communication, drums were outlawed. But that didn't stop the slaves from keeping the drumbeat alive. Instead, they used their feet.

Back in Africa, in the absence of drums, some tribes had used their heels to tap out rhythms on the sun-baked clay. In the New World, slaves did the same thing on the floors of their huts or the boards of their dancing floors. As recently as 1942, a white woman named Lydia Parrish described the sound still being made in McIntosh County, Georgia: "It always rouses my admiration to see the way in which the McIntosh County 'shouters' tap their heels on the resonant board floor to imitate the beat of the drum their forbears were not allowed to have," she wrote. "Those who hear the records of the musical chants which accompany the ring-shout . . . cannot believe that a drum is not used, though how the effect is achieved with the heels alone—when they barely leave the

floor—remains a puzzle.” There is no way of knowing how many slave revolts or escapes were aided by the “Morse code” of slave heels tapping on wood floors on those southern slave plantations.

It is also likely that the slaves learned to give double meaning to the religious songs they sang. Quite a few Negro spirituals contain messages that white slave masters did not suspect and certainly did not anticipate when they decided that their slaves should be converted to Christianity. The slaves embraced Christianity. In Louisiana, which had first been settled by the Spanish and the French, they converted to Catholicism. In Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia, settled first by the English, the Methodist and Baptist churches were strong, and since they allowed much singing in their services, the slaves were able to incorporate their own love of song into their newfound faiths. Out of this mingling of slave culture and Protestant culture came the songs called spirituals, which were the first great black musical gift to America. They were often called sorrow songs, because they expressed the deep suffering the slaves endured and their yearnings for the peaceful kingdom of heaven.

But the songs were also a way for the slaves to communicate with each other—to plan meetings, to help escaped slaves, and to remind one another that there was hope for freedom. The spiritual “Deep River,” for example, was sung to announce a meeting at the river:

Deep river

My home is over Jordan, yes

Deep river, Lord,

I want to cross over into camp ground.

When a slave had run away and the master had discovered his absence, the other slaves on the plantation might sing "Wade in the Water." Slaves on neighboring plantations would hear the song and take it up, and the runaway, wherever he was, would know that he should take to the river so the bloodhounds would not be able to follow his scent:

*Wade in the water, wade in the water.
Children, God going to trouble the water.*

It is no accident that, after the Underground Railroad began, slaves in the South took to singing a spiritual called "The Gospel Train." The Underground Railroad was a route from the South to Canada and freedom, a route marked by homes that would take in runaways and provide them with places to sleep, food, clothing, and help in traveling to the next "station." Part of the spiritual went,

*The gospel train is coming
I hear it just at hand—
I hear the car wheels moving,
And—rumbling thro' the land.
Get on board—children,
Get on board.*

While it is interesting to think about how the slaves used their drums and drumlike sounds and their spirituals to work against their masters and for their own freedom, most of the music of the slaves was not used in that way. Mostly, the slaves used music to make their burdens lighter, to restore their spirits when they were drained of courage, and to enjoy the little free time they had.

When the slaves labored, they sang work songs. They made up songs about picking cotton, and harvesting sugarcane, and loading and unloading ships on the docks. In this, they were not very different from other groups of workers who shared a tradition of music and singing. English and Irish sailors sang sea chanteys as they worked. The slaves had a special form of singing, known as the call-and-response form, that allowed individuals to make up new verses and then to be answered by the group. The group acted like a chorus.

The slaves also used this call-and-response form when they sang their sorrow songs, or spirituals, on Sundays. They would take a plain Methodist hymn and turn it into an entirely new song, one with much more rhythm and depth. Church was often the only outlet for their feelings, both their deep suffering and their great religious joy. During the week, they were under the heel of the master, and they had to keep their emotions in check. But in church, they could let out all those pent-up emotions, and by singing together they could share those emotions and gain solace in their togetherness. At those southern slave religious services on Sundays, the voices could be heard for miles around, and the rhythms and intonations were like nothing the local whites had ever heard before.

The slaves also introduced new instruments to America. Among the first, besides the drum, were the bones. These were actually animal bones that had been cleaned and allowed to dry white in the sun. When played expertly, they made a wonderful *clackety-clack* sound to accompany the drum or heel rhythms the slaves produced. More familiar to us today is the banjo. In Africa, it is called a *bania* or *banju*. In 1784, Thomas Jefferson wrote about an intriguing instrument used

by his slaves that he called a banjar. Made by the slaves, the instrument did not have frets; but it was shaped the same way as banjos are today, and it had strings and was strummed in the same way as banjos.

The white slave owners were intrigued by the slaves' songs and instruments and music. At first, they encouraged the slaves to sing and play (but not beat drums) because they felt that the slaves were happier—and less rebellious—if they were allowed to make their music. But before long, the masters began enjoying the music for its own sake, as the rhythms and songs crept into their souls and set their feet to tapping and their bodies to moving. Generations of white southern children, raised by black women, remembered being sung to sleep with Negro spirituals, and associated them with warmth and security. (Today, there are Negro Spiritual societies in the South whose memberships are exclusively white, made up of people for whom the songs were lullabies.)

What made these southern whites respond to the music made by slaves, whom they otherwise degraded, is complex. For one thing, in the days of slavery, most white Americans were of Anglo-Saxon heritage and did not have a strong musical tradition. They came from a culture that regarded music and dancing and singing as sinful, or at least not very respectable, and that considered most public displays of emotion as poor taste. Their musical forms were very stiff and emotionless by comparison, and there was something about the great emotion and the great variety of rhythms in Negro music that they responded to in spite of themselves. Dr. Alain Locke, who wrote about Negro music in the 1930s, suggested that the most expressive and emotional musical forms in any so-

ciety come from its lowest class: "As we approach the peasant stocks of the Irish, Italian, German and Russian nations, we see they all have their well-springs of folk music," he wrote. "It has simply been the lot of the Negro in America to be the peasant class, and thus to furnish the sub-soil of our national music."

Plantation masters came to enjoy the music made by plantation slave bands. After a while, performances by these slave bands became part of the entertainment for visiting guests, as did slave dancing. But the whites still looked to Europe for their musical standards, although European music and dancing were generally not as lively. There were Irish jigs and folk songs, to be sure, but these were not considered real dancing and music, just as the dancing and the music of the slaves was not considered really acceptable. They were entertainment, but not to be considered an art form.

If you asked most Americans in those days what was music, they would have mentioned the names of European classical musicians and composers, voices such as the soprano and the baritone, and instruments such as the piano and the violin. If you asked most Americans if they thought a black person could sing or play that kind of music, they would have said no. But the first blacks in America to become famous for their music were trained in the classical European tradition. They became famous *because* they could play or sing "white" music. Still, they are important to the history of black music because they helped to make black musical performers acceptable, and that would eventually lead to greater acceptance of black music.

The blacks who managed to achieve some success in the

world of music in America in the first half of the nineteenth century were primarily women singers of European classical music. Of course, black men could learn European music as well as white men. But American whites were just not comfortable with the idea that black men could be classically trained; that would have made them too close to human. Black women were less threatening, and few whites worried about them demanding to be seen as human. Even so, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was in her forties before she enjoyed the opportunity for a major concert debut.

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was born in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1809. Both she and her parents were slaves, but they were lucky to have a mistress, Elizabeth H. Greenfield, who decided to join the Society of Friends (the Quakers) and who took the family with her when she moved to Philadelphia, where the Quakers were headquartered. There, she freed the infant Elizabeth and her parents.

Young Greenfield showed musical prowess early and taught herself to play the guitar. She also studied voice briefly with a local amateur singer named Miss Price. Unfortunately, the Society of Friends frowned on music and singing, and Greenfield realized that she had limited possibilities to develop her talent in Pennsylvania. In 1851, at the age of forty-two, she moved to Buffalo, New York.

That same year, Greenfield made her concert debut as a soprano under the sponsorship of the Buffalo Musical Asso-