

PREFACE BY WILLIAM EDGAR

HANS ROOKMAKER

JAZZ, BLUES, AND SPIRITUALS

The Origins and Spirituality
of Black Music in the United States



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HANS ROOKMAAKER

Edited by Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker


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Preface to the First Edition¹

This book is an attempt to give as complete a picture as possible of developments in black music, past and present, in the USA. I have tried to explain the origin of new genres, the circumstances and reasons behind such developments, and also the comparative development of the different types of music, how they affected each other, degenerated or flourished. Besides the history of jazz music, I have also focused on Negro spirituals and gospel music. Considering recent developments in this area it seems strange that relatively little has been written on this subject so far.

I hope that this book will provide more insight into the spiritual background and qualitative differences of the various genres. Perhaps it will contribute to answering the many questions raised by pseudo-jazz, a poor-quality entertainment music, but also by modern jazz, which often boasts high quality but an existential spirit.

One significant drawback of any writing on the subject of music is that the audience cannot listen to the pieces in question. I have endeavored to overcome that problem by referring as much as possible to records (cassettes, etc.) that are still available [moreover, an updated discography has been included on p. 225]. Musical notation would be of little use since it would not do justice to the style of rendition, to the typical accents and timbres. In many cases the notes would

1. Originally published in Dutch by Zomer en Keunings (Wageningen, the Netherlands, 1960).

Preface to the First Edition

be counterfeit anyway, since they would inevitably be the victims of westernization.

H. R. R.
Leiden, 1960

Preface to the New Edition

Jazz music leaves few people indifferent. When it first appeared, in the early twentieth century, some, especially white Americans, published screeds with titles such as “Unspeakable Jazz Must Go” or the racist “Why ‘Jazz’ Sends Us Back to the Jungle.”¹ Others, including notable musicians and composers such as George Gershwin and Igor Stravinsky, embraced it with enthusiasm, finding it fresh and authentic. Maurice Ravel said he liked it better than high opera.

When it first appeared in 1960, Hans Rookmaaker’s book, written in Dutch, was a publishing event. It was a defense of this music before a public either hostile, or largely unaware of its beauties. Though his official position was professor of art history at the Free University of Amsterdam, Rookmaaker had already distinguished himself as an expert on the music of African Americans. He was the editor of the European edition of the great Riverside Records. The liner notes on these albums is worth their price in gold.

His work is scholarly and thorough, but it stems from his personal love for the music. He was once in our living room, and we only had a harpsichord, no piano, yet he requested I play “Honky Tonk Train Blues” by the great Meade Lux Lewis. When I was a student we had a jazz band and Hans was our mentor. His beloved wife, Anky, once told me he never studied or did much of anything without jazz

1. Maureen Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz in America” *African American Review* 38/1 (Spring, 2004), 135.

music being played in the background on 78s or vinyls. He traveled often to the United States and there was able to meet with some of the greats, including Mahalia Jackson. His first meeting with his life's colleague, Francis Schaeffer, was motivated by a hope to learn about jazz from an American.

This love comes across eloquently in these pages. And as we would expect from such a devotee his judgments are also abundant. Rookmaaker constantly reminds the reader not to evaluate the music according to the Western standards of "classical" music. He rails against sentimental "pseudo-jazz." He believed there was a kind of "fall" from the purity of New Orleans jazz, as played by King Oliver in the early 1920s, to the more individualistic jazz of Chicago style, exemplified by Louis Armstrong. Rookmaaker has little time for modern jazz, as he thought it had been tainted by "Existentialism" and other humanistic philosophies.

The most authentic jazz is inspired by the Christian faith of many of its performers. Jazz originates in the church. It was there that spirituals were generated, inspired by the hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. A high point in such music is the quartet styles, such as the Spirit of Memphis Quartet, with its close harmonies and biblical allusions. Duke Ellington wrote three sacred concerts to the glory of God. Even the blues, which are not played in church, carry a message of protest congenial to biblical prophecies. Before dismissing these views as wishful thinking, we need to read these pages respectfully and generously, humbly examining the evidence adduced. Rookmaaker has left few stones unturned. The book is a remarkable piece of ethnomusicology, and an even more remarkable piece of intellectual history.

We may be deeply grateful to the Rookmaaker family for giving us the green light on this republication. And very special thanks are due to the Case Family Properties Foundation for their support of this stand-alone volume. May it be an inspiration to many, in an age when music is so often anything but exquisite.

William Edgar

Acknowledgments to the First Edition

Here I would like to thank the many friends and acquaintances who have helped me in so many different ways. I will not mention them by all name for fear of forgetting someone, but I have to make an exception for Mrs. M. H. L. Boom-Sybrandi, who made available her late son's study of the blues which was unfortunately never published.

I must also thank the following people and organizations for helping with copyrighting: H. Courlander (copyright of songs by Doc Reed, Richard Amerson and one of the children's verses); W. L. Grossman; Alan Lomax (copyright for extracts from Mr. Jelly Roll [Cassel & Co., 1952, pages 64–109], copyright for "Whoa Black," "Jumpin' Judy," "No More, My Lord," "John Henry," which were collected, edited and published, and who holds exclusive copyright); the songs "Ain't No More Cane," "Here, Rattler, Here," "Do Lord, Remember Me" were published by the Library of Congress and taken from *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (MacMillan, 1934, copyright John A. and Alan Lomax); the copyright for "Roll 'im on Down" was from David Pryor and Alan Lomax; F. Ramsey Jr. (songs taken from the *Folkways Music from the South* series); Vogue record company (for copyright of Big Bill Broonzy's "Black, Brown and White"); Philips Phonographische Industrie, Baarn (for helping deal with the question of copyrights, especially Mr. H. van Baaren who has assisted

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H. R. R., 1960

A Note on Sources

The books referred to by shortened titles are listed in the Selected Bibliography at the back of the book. The recordings listed in the footnotes pertain to those mentioned throughout the book. In order to help the reader/listener, I have also given the records ratings according to my opinion of their importance. Records have not primarily been rated according to their quality but according to how interesting they might be to the jazz novice. Four stars mean that the recording makes for essential listening—worth getting hold of; three stars, less so, and so on.

Where a record is hard to obtain, it is indicated with one cross, and, if it is very rare, two crosses. The records are, as far as possible, samplers, i.e., multitrack recordings that feature various good examples of different genres. Two of these are mentioned several times and have been abbreviated and the crosses omitted. They are:

- ITJ **** Brunswick 87003 LPBM, *New Orleans, Dixieland, Chicago: An Introduction to Traditional Jazz*.
HCJ ***† *History of Classic Jazz*: a collection of five LPs, bound, with introduction. Riverside SDP 11 (RLP 12-112/116).

Besides the standard abbreviations of the well-known labels, the following abbreviations have been used:

FoW Folkways

A Note on Sources

- FoW MS Folkways' *Music from the South* series, nine records, also available separately. FP 650/658, indicated here as I-IX.
- LiC A Library of Congress recording of US folk music. (The Library of Congress is a large scientific institute in Washington, DC.) With the exception of a few other recordings, it is primarily these albums of black folk music that interest us. (There are also recordings of Indian music and white folk music.) After "LiC," I have indicated with a roman numeral the number of the album that includes that particular track. These albums have been released as LPs and are available on order.

Note: London records mentioned here are also available on the Riverside label.

1

Origins

AFRICAN MUSIC: “ORIN MURITALI ALHAJI”

Africa, the land of rhythm, the land where “the gods speak through the drums” is the creed. You would be hard pressed to find such a diversity and sophistication of rhythm elsewhere. To the uninitiated, African music is an almost indecipherable pattern of rhythmic sound, frequently evolving from a large number of rhythms of different character and nature, played simultaneously on heavier and lighter drums and other percussion and plucked instruments.

Is this music primitive? That depends on the definition of primitive. Performing this music is certainly no mean feat. It requires knowledge and skill. Some would describe it as the voice of primitive humanity—an unrestrained human spirit, unspoiled by civilization. However, it would need to be proved that this art is more direct, more spontaneous, more authentic and purer than that of Western Europe. The Africans have their own culture, which might perhaps in one sense be regarded as primitive, as when referring to a paralysis, a closing of the route to development and progress due to the belief in a hostile spirit world. Here “primitive” refers to little people in an awesome world—frightened mortals amidst the incomprehensible forces of nature, threatened by demons, spirits and mysterious powers, sometimes products of the religious imagination, sometimes real, and certainly evil.

The multifarious and complex rhythmic patterns cannot be said to express joy. Like magic it often evokes hostile gods and demonic forces. It incites a trance to allay fear or to overpower the hostile forces. African rhythms can often be compared with the masks used by the indigenous peoples to disguise themselves during religious ceremonies, to repel, summon or tame powers. They show us how pagans have lost positive touch with creation, paving the way for fear and alienation.

The rhythms are undeniably characteristic of Africa, and also of the Dahomeys and Yorubas who live on the Gold Coast of West Africa, but that does not mean that we have exhausted the subject of their music: indeed, it is more closely related to ours than we may realize. They have developed their rhythms further than Western Europeans have, who since the Middle Ages have paid more attention to harmony, to the sounding together of different notes. Still, African and Western music are undeniably similar in many ways: in the scales used, in the musical approach, in the nature of the melody. We do not know whether this can be attributed to the influence of those blacks who occupied an important place in the court chapel of the Egyptian pharaoh (and which we see portrayed in many murals) or whether there are other factors involved. But those who listen will certainly discover that African music is more closely related to Western European than to Indian, Chinese or Arabian music, for example. Listen to “Orin Muritali Alhaji,”¹ a solemn song of the Yorubas of Nigeria, one of the highest black cultures before the arrival of the Europeans. We hear the polyrhythmic sound of the drums as the foundation, the melody sung by a male-voice choir. If we listen to the royal drums of the Abatusi—possibly the most impressive of pure rhythms—let us not forget that the girls of this tribe from the Congo can sing very melodically whilst clapping their hands in accompaniment.²

1. ** FoW P 500 B (together with B, two records, series *Negro Folk Music of Africa and America*).

2. HCJ.

WHITE FOLK MUSIC: “BLOW THE MAN DOWN”

Since the Europeans settled in America, they have regarded it as their own, to do with as they please. When its indigenous population did not prove to be as subservient as required, slaves were quickly sought and imported. Murderous battles between African tribes supplied the slaves—prisoners of war—who were sold to the slave-traders, who in turn disposed of them in the New World while pocketing a tidy sum. The Spanish slave owners preferred Yorubas, the French opted for Dahomeys, while the English were partial to Ashantis.

It goes without saying that the slave traders were no gentlemen, and that the quality of their ware was of little concern to them. As long as enough were imported, alive, to secure a decent margin—that was all that mattered. Their victims, spoils of war from the neighboring black tribes, had already been stripped of anything of value before they were sold, so we can be sure that they took nothing with them to their new destination—at least nothing tangible or portable. What lives in a person’s mind is less easily displaced. These people took their music, their religion, their views with them—invisible but nonetheless present.

En route and on arrival the slaves were immediately confronted with Western culture. They were certainly subjected to the crudest and least pleasant side, but they were also introduced to its music, shanties and possibly even psalms. One of those shanties was “Blow the man down.” Although it originated in England, it was often sung by American sailors. It is actually a work song, sung whilst reeling in the anchor chain. The song has eight beats to a bar and includes a chorus-like stanza:

Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow the man down,
To me way, aye, blow the man down.
Oh, blow the man down, bullies, blow him right down,
Give me some time to blow the man down.³

3. O. Downes, E. Siegmeister: *A Treasury of American Song* (New York, 1943, second edition), p. 90.

This tune can be traced to the Bahamas where it is sung, in almost identical form, by the black fishermen as they haul their boats up onto the sand for the low season. The recorded version allows us to hear what fantastic singers they are:

So pull 'im along,
Well, we pull 'im along,
Hey, aye, pull 'im along,
Now we pull 'im along from this old shipyard,
Give me some time to roll 'im along.⁴

AFRICAN MUSIC IN SOUTH AMERICA: 'JESHA FOR OSHUN

The blacks who were slaves to the Spanish or French in South or Central America or on the large islands in the Gulf of Mexico seldom saw their own bosses. They lived elsewhere, leaving the supervision to a few overseers. The slaves worked on the plantations, which were often large, and as long as they worked there was no need for their owners to bother about them. Their religion, their music, their lives was of no interest to their masters. If missionaries wanted to evangelize them, that was fine.

Since they had arrived in a Roman Catholic country the blacks became mainly Catholic, but nowhere has the principle of mission, of Christianization by the simple renaming of pagan religious customs, been so avenged. These people did become Christians, but they were often unaware of the basic principles of the gospel. This led to a range of mergers. A Roman Catholic saint might be likened to an African god. The Dahomey god Legba, protector of crossroads, might be likened to St. Antony, for example. Both were portrayed as old men with weathered faces. African religion sometimes existed unashamedly alongside the Roman beliefs.

We can hear pure African sounds in the former Spanish and French colonies; not only work songs, but also cult music, such as the

4. LiC VIII No. 40.

song of the Brazilian, 'Jesha cult followers, which is a call to Oshun, the goddess of Pure Water.⁵ This sort of song can also be heard on Haiti. There the god Legba is evoked in pure African style. The drums form a complicated, repetitively rhythmical pattern, whilst the solemn melody is sung by the priestess and all the believers alternately.⁶ The alternating solo call and group response is typically African. We call it responsive song because it has the character of a game, of question and answer.

The blacks also became familiar with the music of their Spanish or French owners, depending on which country they ended up in. Some of the European folk songs were adopted in their original form, and some became hybrids. This is apparent on Haiti nowadays where the meringue,⁷ French in character and related to the chanson, can be heard. On Cuba the habanera, which is almost purely Spanish, and the guaracha, which is influenced only slightly by African rhythms, are performed alongside the rumba, conga, son, etc. These dances, which are characterized by varying rhythms, have a stronger African definition. The more African the music, the more drums and percussion dominate; the more European the music, the more the percussion is replaced by instruments like the piano or guitar.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORK SONGS IN THE USA: "NO MORE, MY LORD"

Things progressed very differently in North America. The plantations were smaller there and slave owners were less indifferent towards their slaves. Because fewer people worked on the plantations and the plantation owners lived there and were in charge, there was a much closer bond between slave owner and slave. This was particularly evident in the case of domestic slaves—servants. The largely Protestant slave owners were of English descent and, in order

5. ** FoW P 500 B.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

to defend their practices, they argued that the heathen slaves must be rescued from the dark realms of idolatry and brought to the true Light of the gospel. Indeed, it seems that efforts were made in that direction and that slavery in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, without wishing to idealize it, was not necessarily an unbearable lot. Pagan religion has consequently all but died out in North America. It is still evident in superstition, which stubbornly manifests itself in voodoo, as a kind of degenerated remnant of paganism, just as folklore and superstition live on in old myths in our Western culture. The disappearance of the African religions meant that their rhythm, inextricably linked to the exorcism and invocation of gods and powers, also lost its meaning. Black American music was therefore always based on a simple rhythm, while a number of characteristics of African-style music only survived in a new form.

The nineteenth century saw the import of thousands of blacks and the slave trade assumed a much harder, less compassionate character. And even though slavery was abolished more than a century ago, there are still cases of black convicts carrying out forced labor in penal colonies [in the 1950s] in similar conditions to those of the days of slavery. It was only in the mid-1940s that things began to improve. These colonies have been home to songs of a similar character to the ones heard more than a century ago.

Besides blues and spirituals, which we will come to later, it is work songs that we most often hear in the colonies. The blacks worked there in shifts called chain gangs, supervised by a captain. While they were working they sang songs to help lighten the labor. The chopping of wood, hewing of rock, cutting of sugarcane, harvesting of cotton was accompanied by music strongly reminiscent of Africa. The rhythm was not provided by drums but was much simpler of character—the sound of the axe or the pickaxe. There is always a preceptor, a convict like the others, but one who can sing well and has a wide repertoire, while the rest sing the “response” together. This is another example of responsive song. The melodies are sometimes exuberant, frequently solemn, but always musical and interesting,

each with its own unmistakable beauty. Here is one such song sung in the Mississippi State Penitentiary during work on the great cotton plantation in the Yazoo Delta:⁸

*No more, my Lord, no more, my Lord,
Lord, I'll never turn back no more.*

Precentor:

I found in Him a restin' place
And He has made me glad.
*No more, my Lord, no more, my Lord,
Lord, I'll never turn back no more.*

Precentor:

Jesus, the Man I am looking for,
Can you tell me where He is gone.
*No more, my Lord, no more, my Lord,
Lord, I'll never turn back no more.*

Another group would sing the next, more exuberant responsive song as a full ensemble, though the precentor's voice is still clearly audible above the rest:

O well it's Jumpin' Judy
O well it's Jumpin' Judy,
Boys she was a mighty fine gal.
You catch the Illinois Central,
You catch the Illinois Central,
Baby, go to Kankakee. [This expresses the desire to go north.]

O well, and yonder comes old Rosie,
O well, and yonder comes old Rosie,
Baby, how in the world do you know.
O well, I know her by her apron, O well, I know her by her apron,

8. Note that in the lyrics a refrain printed in italics means it is sung by the choir. Also, we have used standard and not phonetic spellings in the lyrics.

Baby, red's the dress that she wore.
Etc.⁹

It is not easy to establish exactly who Jumpin' Judy is, in spite of her many appearances in this sort of song. Perhaps she is the personification of hard work, but that is admittedly a stab in the dark. The name Rosie—truly beloved—also appears regularly. The word “old” is a reference to the faithful beloved. It does not mean that she is old, but refers to a well-established relationship, the name “Rosie” having a familiar ring.

CHILDREN'S SONGS/NURSERY RHYMES: “SATISFIED”

Children will play, irrespective of their situation. Slave children too, play. There was little in the way of toys, but an abundance of song. The repertoire consequently embraced both African children's songs and Western children's songs, and included all sorts of combinations of the two. This is still the case today, for there is after all nothing more traditional than children's songs.

The songs were sung whilst playing, mainly during so-called ring-games such as “The farmer's in his den.”¹⁰ The next example has both melodic and in its delivery strong Western (i.e., Anglo-Saxon) characteristics. It is striking how well these children sing. The child sitting in the middle is sung to by the others, and “Sally Walker,” for that is her name, has to make a hip movement at the end of the verse to indicate which child is to replace her:

Li'l Sally Walker,
Sittin' in the saucer,
Cryin' for the old man,

9. *** *Murderer's Home*, Nixa NJL 11.

10. I traced the melody from a similar Dutch song called “In Holland staat een huis,” back to a spiritual. Perhaps it was derived from Dutch children's games—on the record *He Shut the Lion's Mouth*, Vi 38507, Elder Richard Bryant, vocals and orchestra.

To come for the dollar,
Rise Sally rise,
Put your hands on your hips,
Let your backbone slip,
And shake it to the East,
And shake it to the West,
And shake it to the very one you love best.¹¹

Once you have heard this song it should be obvious which source Armstrong used when he wrote “Georgia Grind” in 1926.

A song such as “All around the maypole” is also clearly of Anglo-Saxon origin, but there are many others whose flavor is much more African. They have a typical responsive form whereby a game-leader-cum-precentor (usually an older girl) is answered each time by the children’s choir singing the response. The lyrics also are in line with the artistic tradition characteristic of black Americans (which I will refer to in the coming chapters), and smack of self-mockery and irony—a sort of humor unfamiliar to Europeans. Here is a typical example:

I’m going up North
Satisfied
An’ I would tell
Satisfied
Lord I am
Satisfied
Some people up there
Satisfied
Going to bring you back
Satisfied
Ain’t nothing up there
Satisfied

11. ** FoW EFL 1417, *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*, secular. For children’s songs also: *Ring Games*, FoW FP 704.

What can you do
Satisfied
Mamma cooked a cow
Satisfied
Have to get all the girls
Satisfied
Their bellies full
Satisfied
I'm going up North
Satisfied
Etc.¹²

There are also adult versions of this type of song to be found away from the cities. A game called “Liza Jane” often played at parties involves couples dancing in a circle while a solitary male performs the most amazing dance steps in the middle. He has to try to “get” one of the dancing women, whose partner is then banished to the middle. There is also a jazz version of the folk song to accompany this dance.¹³ The lyrics go like this:

Come my love and go with me
L'il Liza Jane
Come my love and go with me
L'il Liza Jane
O Miss Liza, L'il Liza Jane
O Miss Liza, L'il Liza Jane

I got a house in Baltimore
L'il Liza Jane
Streetcar runs right by my door
L'il Liza Jane
Chorus.

12. Ibid.

13. *Celestin's Tuxedo Jazz Band*, Storyville SEP 308 (EP).

I got a house in Baltimore
L'il Liza Jane
Brussels carpet on the floor
L'il Liza Jane
Chorus etc.¹⁴

The connection between African-American music and the stories told by blacks to their children might not be immediately clear, but anybody who has witnessed a black storyteller in action (or a black preacher, as we will see later) will recognize that the intonation and rhythm used come close to music. It is a sort of rhythmic prose, like a recitative.

Many of these stories are related to African and, strangely enough, also to Indian tales such as those heard in South America. The latter creates a problem for us, which we will not discuss here.¹⁵ An important series of stories has been preserved for us, thanks to Noel Chandler Harris who wrote them down in 1880 from oral tradition. We are not confronted here with Western misrepresentations as Schulte Northolt contends¹⁶—the stereotypical image of a simple man, grateful for the privilege of being a slave, an idealized image fostered by the plantation holders of the Southern States. These are real black folk tales that can still be heard in remote parts of the South.¹⁷

The following is part of the “Tar-Baby” story, the writer having tried to reflect the dialect characteristic of that period. If the words are pronounced out loud, the intention becomes clear. The fox has made a little figure of tar that he uses to bait the hare. This tar-baby is placed on the road and the fox lies in wait in the bushes:

En he didn't hatter wait long, kaze bimeby here come Brer (Brother)
Rabbit pacin' down the road—lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity—
dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer fox, he lay low. Brer rabbit come

14. Natalie Curtis-Burlin, *Negro Folk Songs*, Hampton series IV, New York, 1919.

15. See leaflet with FoW EFL 1417.

16. Dr. J. W. Schulte Northolt, *Het volk dat in duisternis wandelt* (Arnhem, 1957), p. 163.

17. A.o. on FoW EFL 1417.

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prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar-Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

'Mawnin!' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee—'nice wedder dis mawnin,' sezee.

Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

'How you come on, den? Is you deaf?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

'Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder,' sezee.

Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

'Youer stuck up, dat's w'at you is', says Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'en I's gwineter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm gwineter do,' sezee.

Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummuck, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin'.

'I'm gwineter larn you how-ter talk ter 'spectubble fokes,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwineter bus' you wide open,' sezee. Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side de head. His fis stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

'Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby she ain't sayin' nothin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

'Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nothin'. She des hilt on,

en den Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' des es innercent ez one eryo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

'Howdy Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee, 'you look sorter stuck up dis mawnin',' sezee, en den he rolled on de groun', en laughed en laughed twel he couldn't laugh no mo'.¹⁸

The story goes on to tell how the hare, in spite of being in a tight spot, manages to get free by bamboozling the fox. Almost all these stories have the same moral, of a hare who is too clever for the fox. Perhaps they reflect the hopes of the blacks who, in spite of their weaker position, were still able to outwit the "stronger" whites.¹⁹

THE FIRST OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHRISTIAN SONGS IN NORTH AMERICA: "GO PREACH MY GOSPEL"

When black slaves arrived in North America, still an English colony in the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries, they were introduced to the Protestantism of their masters. There were various denominations, the majority of them dissenters or Nonconformists, i.e., Christians who did not wish to belong to the Anglican Church, the established church in England. These people sang psalms only.

Thanks to Calvin in Geneva, the psalms were translated and set to music, which in turn contributed greatly to the propagation of the Reformation. They were sung briskly and cheerfully. Even Queen Elizabeth I once made a reference to these "Geneva jigs." Since people at first were not familiar with English rhymed versions of the psalms it became customary to have a precentor recite a line, which was then sung by the congregation, and so on. The custom continued even when it was no longer necessary.

18. J. Chandler Harris: *Uncle Remus* (New York, 1933), p. 7 ff.

19. This adaptation by J. Harris of the stories in which Brer Rabbit plays the leading role was used by Walt Disney for the cartoon film based on the story.

In the seventeenth century people began to sing the psalms slower—more solemnly and legato (this may still be heard in some old Calvinistic churches). It became so slow that it was impossible to hold a note for the required length of time. At that point “grace notes” were introduced to replace the notes that were too long. These took the form of decorative melodies that swerved very closely around the tone. Since everybody had his or her own method of application, the result was curious. The original note became frayed and obscure. The beginning of the eighteenth century in England saw an attempt to improve the standard of singing in churches. Dr. Isaac Watts, a clergyman from London, particularly devoted himself to the abolition of “lining out,” in which a precentor sings the line for the congregation to repeat. He was also responsible for revising the metrical psalms and writing a large number of hymns.

Let us return to the Africans in America, who at this time were learning psalms and hymns like those of Dr. Watts, but performing them as described above. While Dr. Watts had been successful with his hymns, his efforts to improve the standard of singing had rather failed. Having a precentor sing and the choir “respond” sounded familiar to the black slaves. This was what they had been used to in their native countries—responsive singing of solemn melodies. The rhythm as basis was certainly lacking, but as we discussed earlier, for various reasons the intensive contact with biblical Christianity led to African rhythms being abandoned. These were considered pagan—after all, the gods spoke through the drums.

There is therefore much evidence that blacks, having arrived from Africa, were very fond of psalms and hymns. They simply could not stop singing them. That sort of song was in fact the most Western, European music to be found in America. Although it cannot be referred to as highly sophisticated, it was conceivable only in the context of Puritan, Christian Europe. At the same time, and without any modification, it was also African song in its purest form. There was no mutation necessary; no hybrids were involved—the music was purely African and purely Western at the same time.

It seems strange that it was the very hymns from Dr. Watts that

the blacks preferred to sing in this way. They still do for, as we shall see later, it was the “songs of the old Dr. Watts,” alongside other sorts of sacred songs, that remained popular—a regular feature of the blacks’ church service. The precentor “lines out” a line, which is then sung very slowly, elaborately drawn out by the congregation. This sort of singing died out in other parts. It is only in the black American churches today that we can witness how the English congregations sung around 1700. Just how slowly and spun out the hymns were sung can be seen by the following hymn that took more than five minutes to sing.

This is one of Dr. Watts’ hymns, which is still sung today in the prescribed fashion.

Go preach my Gospel, saith the Lord,
Bid the whole earth my grace receive;
He shall be safe that trusts my word,
He shall be damned that won’t believe.

I’ll make your great commission known,
And ye shall prove my gospel true
By all the works that I have done,
By all the wonders ye shall do.²⁰

**THE ORIGIN OF THE TRUE NEGRO SPIRITUAL:
“I WANT TO BE A CHRISTIAN”**

Dr. Watts’ songs were sung by slaves (and free blacks) in the Northern states, and here and there in the South. In the South, however, there lived large groups of slaves who worked in remote plantations and who had hardly encountered Christianity. The eighteenth century in particular witnessed concern about the fate of the blacks, and a more conscious effort was made to preach the gospel to them. Baptists and Methodists were particularly committed to this work,

20. ** FoW MS VI.

but Presbyterians also made a contribution. Consequently, African Americans were exposed to the sacred song of the whites—the hymn. It was not only the Dr. Watts’ hymns that were circulating; hymns by Wesley and his family were in circulation as well. The Wesley brothers were leaders of a spiritual revival movement in England in the middle of the eighteenth century. Methodism, as it was called, devoted much attention to improving and reforming the standard of hymns. They were more successful than Watts in breaking down the rusty traditions of “lining out” and note-stretching. For their hymns they often used the tunes of folk songs.

It is evident that these hymns were also sung by blacks. The words were often too difficult for them, however, as they lacked the formal education of the average Westerner, and it was this that led to the simplification of the songs. Sometimes the hymns profited from it for, once it was stripped of its poetic frills, the essentials became more evident. Songs of this sort are still sung by black Christians. They often have an attractive melody which is sung slowly, either collectively or as a solo. It is possible that the following song stems from that period:

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart,
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart,
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart.²¹

The next few verses may read:

Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart (x 3)
Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart (x 3) Etc.

The following variations developed:

When Jesus comes into my heart, into my heart (x 3)
I’m filled with joy, Etc.

21. M. Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the U.S.* (Ithaca, NY, 1953), p. 30.

Wesley's lyrics are often constructed in four-line verses which, when set to music, require eight measures (four times two). This sort of Negro spiritual consequently consists of verses of eight bars.

At the end of the eighteenth century a great revival took place, also known as the Great Awakening, mainly in the Southern States of the United States of America. The influence of the Wesleys and others created a strong revival movement focused on a more personal, warm, authentic Christianity—biblical and primarily practical. Conversion was emphasized—a personal, direct relationship with Jesus, with a whiff of mysticism manifest in such expressions as “Jesus comes into my heart.” There was also a certain moralism involved, and an emphasis on going to heaven to be with Jesus. Little attention was given to doctrine and a scriptural, solidly formulated confession. In practical terms the revival consisted primarily of camp meetings, social gatherings in large tents lasting several days. There was singing, prayer and preaching from the Bible. It was at these meetings in particular that the need was felt to make Wesley's new type of hymn accessible to everyone. That would promote the standard of combined singing. Simplicity was the key since these camp meetings were primarily attended by the lower classes.

An interesting feature of these meetings was that blacks and whites were on a par with each other, side by side and not separated. That was significant. It also made an impact on the singing, since the blacks were not only good singers with a sense of rhythm but their principle of responsive singing was a welcome addition. It worked by enabling the crowd to join in easily: the songs with tricky words and irregular word patterns were chanted by the precentor-preacher and the crowd responded with the chorus.

This is how the most well-known type of Negro spiritual probably came into being. Having said that, there are many unanswered questions in this area and there is little about the origin and the early development of the Negro spiritual of which we can be absolutely certain. In any case, the structure of this kind of Negro spiritual generally follows the pattern as described next.

Firstly, there is a verse consisting of eight bars, divided as four times two. Each set of two bars is allocated a single sentence, which is also

a musical phrase. At the end of the line there is often a word or short sentence that is sung collectively which we might call a short refrain. After this verse comes the actual chorus, which we call the main chorus, also consisting of eight bars. This is sung collectively. Many variations are possible—the verse is sung twice and the chorus once, or a verse of sixteen bars is followed by a chorus of sixteen bars, for example. The main chorus is sometimes omitted. This type of song is still often sung in churches by blacks, briskly but not hurriedly. A rhythmic accompaniment such as the clapping of hands is regularly heard, but true African polyrhythms are never heard—they have barely survived in North America. The tune is always based on a simple, even meter and so is the rhythm, which is often varied, never monotonous. Rhythm, however, is never the feature of the spiritual. The following is an example:

When I am sick and by myself, (one bar)

Do remember me. (short refrain, also one bar) x3

Do Lord, remember me. (all together, two bars, last syllables on long notes)

Main chorus:

Do Lord, do Lord, remember me. (two bars)

Do Lord, do Lord, remember me.

Do Lord, do Lord, remember me.

Do Lord, remember me. (see the last line of the verse)

The first lines of the following verses are:

When I'm crossing Jordan. [which means, when I die and go to
the "promised land," namely heaven]

If I ain't got no friend at all.

When I'm going from door to door.

When I am bound in trouble, Etc.²²

22. M. A. Grissom, *The Negro Sings a New Heaven* (Chapel Hill, 1930), p. 69.

Origins

We can be reasonably certain that one of these spirituals, “Roll, Jordan Roll,” came into being around this time:

Brother you ought to be there, (two bars)

Yes my Lord, (two bars)

A-sittin’ in the Kingdom, (two bars)

Just to hear old Jordan roll, (two bars)

Roll, Jordan roll, roll, Jordan roll, (2x2 bars)

I want to go to heaven when I die, (two bars)

To hear of Jordan roll, (two bars)

Both the words and the music (which is a tune derived from an English folk song) are based on a song written by Charles Wesley, but it has undergone significant changes since the original.²³

23. G. P. Jackson, *Spiritual Folk-Songs of Early America* (New York, 1937), p. 193, no. 184; Idem., *White Spirituals*, p. 264.