



HISTORIC WESTVILLE
Georgia's 1850's Living History Museum

Early Southern Music and Its Influence
by Matthew Moye

Part 1
“Early Southern Roots of Modern Popular Music”

During a performance of early African-American music at Westville recently, Frankie and Doug Quimby gave an apt demonstration of the link between 18th century Southern music and modern popular music. Mrs. Quimby explained how the captain of a slave ship, John Newton, had become disaffected with the wickedness of his work. In a fit of remorse for having stolen people into human bondage for profit, he wrote what would become the world's most famous religious song, “Amazing Grace.” The power of religious conversion, both then and now, was evident as Mr. Quimby offered a soulful, booming baritone rendition of the hymn.

Mr. Quimby's version was itself memorable, but then he fast-forwarded us to the 1950s. He told how the late Sam Cooke, one of the early innovators of modern popular music, had been a Gospel singer before he sang secular music. Cooke had sung the words “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound” to a different tune. Cooke later used that new tune with new words to compose his blockbusting chart hit, “Darling, You Send Me.” As Mr. Quimby gave his interpretation, he showed how the familiar 1789 hymn words fit into the also familiar 1956 tune, “Darling, You Send Me.”

An Exchange of Ideas

Spiritual conversion, as Mr. and Mrs. Quimby showed, was a pivotal element in the development of popular music. It did not come about easily or without resistance in America. The story of its addition to the cultural mix of the Southern colonies is the subject of this first installment of the history of Modern Popular Music. White people brought musical instruments with them on their voluntary journeys from the Old World. Africans were not afforded that luxury on the slave ships, though the traditions came with them nevertheless. Historians today note three important sources of musical backgrounds in the early South—European middle and upper class, British folk, and African folk. Africans brought very different ideas to the attention of white people. These ideas were described from the beginning of British slave importation to North America in the early 1600s: (1) pronounced rhythms and motion, (2) spontaneous group dynamics, (3) use of coded, subtle, or subversive meanings, and (4) gapped scales.

At first, blacks and whites kept their distances. Africans were not evangelized, nor did they respond. The reason was that European Protestants purposefully rejected emotion in their religious practice. Here is the evolution of evangelical hymnody, a critical bridge which eventually connected white formal and folk music with the vital elements of black folk music.

Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, Unlikely Fathers of Modern Popular Music

The American Protestant hymnody is huge and so pervasive today that it probably is the single-most influential source of creative expression in the English-speaking world. Strange as it may seem to us now, the early Protestant leaders (outside of Germany) were firebrands against church hymns.

The reason for this odd fact goes to the heart of Protestantism. In the Roman Church of the 1500s, the clergy supplied the liturgy and the music for the congregation. The German founder of the Protestant movement, Martin Luther, by contrast, felt that every person should pray and praise God individually.

Luther reasoned that the Scriptures were God's voice. If a person repeated the Scriptures, he would hear God's voice. By singing the Scriptures, then, the individual could have a personal conversation with God.

Luther looked to certain Catholic hymns called the Breviary to fill this bill. They were simple and plain, like the Scriptures. John Calvin of France, however, went a step further. He banned both hymns and instrumentation, which took the church organ out of use. As substitutes for the hymns, Calvin and others began setting the naturally musical Psalms of David to meter. Among Calvinist Protestants, hymns thus were thrown out, and Metrical Psalters were in.

Some of these Psalters are still used today, such as, "Old Hundredth" by Louis Bourgeois, also known as "The Doxology." Psalters were thus the religious music which the settlers of the New World brought with them.

This fact is important here because the first African slaves to Jamestown in 1619 probably heard music from Sternhold and Hopkins, a 1562 Psalter. The very first Western music that the very first slaves heard was probably the folk music of the Dutch sailors on board the slave ships. However, it's fair to say that their real indoctrination to the Western styles was through Metrical Psalters.

Seeing "David Converted into a Christian"

By 1700, the Church of England still allowed no hymns, but psalm-singing and music education in general had fallen off as well. In fact, many churches in the colonies had no music at all. Then, the common craving for music began to chip away at the Calvinist ban on hymns. The 1696 Irish Tate and Brady book introduced "paraphrases," which were less strictly Scriptural than the Psalters were. Next in 1706, Dr. Isaac Watts of England published his Psalms and Hymns which included some New Testament paraphrases. Watts felt he had "led the Psalmist of Israel into the Church of Christ."

To get the musically illiterate congregations to sing his music, Watts himself began "lining" the notes to them. When a music instructor lines, he stands in front of the congregation, singing out the notes, which they then repeat to him. We will see in a later installment that this practice became very important in spreading music in New England and the South.

In 1736, John and Charles Wesley arrived in Savannah. John began translating some German Protestant hymns for early morning devotionals, which he sang to people who met for mutual spiritual comfort. He published Collections of Psalms and Hymns in Charleston in 1737, the first Anglican hymnal. Instead of praise from church leaders, however, his work brought him a grand jury arraignment for altering the Psalms.

Evangelistic Hymns

Back in England, Charles and John Wesley had emotional "conversions," which led them to add emotional elements to the hymns they composed or used. In this way, the Wesleys invented the evangelistic hymn. By 1790, this new form of expression would be a fundamental element in the conversion of hundreds of thousands of slaves to Christianity. This musical phenomenon will be explored in next quarter's installment.

Summary

Martin Luther and John Calvin may be properly credited with putting church music into the mouths of the common folk of the colonies. John Wesley put the spirit of the music into their hearts. These contributions may seem obvious today, but they were enormous advances which took centuries to effect.

In the bi-racial colonies, the fruits were ready to burst forward as the colonies won their independence from England. Newton's hymn, "Amazing Grace," which Mr. Quimby sang so powerfully to the Westville audience, would play no small part in this impending revolution.

Part 2

We at Westville hear a whole lot of singing going on. When people come into our Climax Presbyterian Church on their tours, they often burst into versions of their favorite hymns. The wooden walls reverberate with their tunes, and the sound is good. After decades of overhearing these spontaneous concerts, we can assert authoritatively that we know hymns. In fact, one hymn wafts high above all others as the most popular. That hymn is Amazing Grace.

It is appropriate that this fact should be so, for Amazing Grace has played a critical role in Southern history. The hymn is one of the most influential among a group of early hymns which helped evangelize slaves to Christianity.

Christian conversion gave hope to those black men, women, and children who were held in bondage. By freeing the African-American spirit, the hymn made it possible for the slaves to share their talents and culture with the Western World. The impact on us today is staggering. American popular music, the result of a blend of British and African folk music in an American setting, may well be now the most pervasive cultural advance of the last 500 years. (See “The Most Thorough of Revolutions” on page 3 for explanation.)

Both Christian and Slave?

At first, slaves were not evangelized. Slave holders felt no moral dilemma in enslaving heathens. If a slave were baptized, however, then the master feared the obvious conclusion. That is, how can a Christian slave holder justify holding a Christian slave?

Early American Christians faced this question only because it was thrust upon them by blacks and Indians who asked to be baptized. The first known slave baptism took place in 1641. When an Indian slave was baptized in 1708, he had to promise to serve his worldly master while on this earth. In return, the slave, Tom, required only the promise of being “free and equal in the skies beyond.”

Even so, slave holders were panicked for fear of losing their chattel. The issue was finally settled in 1727 when the Bishop of London concluded that baptism should not lead to manumission. Thus, a pathway was opened for churches and slave holders to evangelize the slaves. If the Bishop said it was okay, then it must be okay.

Evangelization of the slaves still remained guarded. Slave holders decided that baptism might lead to rebellion. Also, the Great Awakening did not move to the Southern frontier until about 1800. Further, one colony, Georgia, had no slaves until 1749.

Gradually, though, other pressures prevailed. Colonial governors in the 1680s were instructed to convert the blacks and Indians. Church of England missionaries by 1701 began to come to America specifically for the slaves. The famous Puritan, Cotton Mather, wrote *The Negro Christianized* in 1706. Perhaps the most important catalyst of evangelization, however, was the advent of the hymn at the expense of the Psalter.

Words of Experience: A Defining Moment in American Music

The singing of Psalters was the only music tolerated by colonial churches (except for the Lutherans, who sang hymns). Unlike the Psalters, hymns spoke of personal concerns and did so less formally than was the fashion of the Psalters. Hymns seemed to spring from one human being’s spirit to touch the soul of the next.

Calvinist church leaders recoiled at the experientially-based texts of the hymns, fearing a return to Catholicism. However, once loosed upon the people, hymns captured the American mood. It is safe to say

that the transition to hymn music was a major factor causing the mass conversion to Christianity of the African-American slave.

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace (1779) is one such hymn. It was written by John Newton, an English clergyman, who earlier in life had been a slave ship captain. The words spoke of authentic remorse for his sinfulness and genuine humility at receiving God's grace.

Imagine for a moment that you are a fifth- or eighth-generation slave, as some were in 1790. What a terrible daily despair you would feel, both for yourself and for your children. Then, you hear this verse: Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.

The powerful message of this verse of Amazing Grace was that through faith, there would be a reward for enduring the misery of slave life. God is watching, and His grace will be triumphant.

Indeed, the rates of slave baptism began to steepen by 1790. By 1800, a tenth of the Methodists and a quarter of the Baptists in the South were blacks. Those figures would continue to rise as hymn-singing became established by 1830.

Conclusion

The cotton gin was invented in 1793, and cotton became a valuable international commodity. The planting, cultivation, and harvest of cotton thus soared, reviving the institution of slavery which supplied the labor. It was a coincidence that hymns came into use at the same time that slavery broadened. However, the music gave a new source of hope to a people whose future looked bleak. Hymn-singing was thus the birth of "Soul."

Amazing Grace A Video with Bill Moyers

To American Protestants, Amazing Grace is as familiar a tune as there is. However, for the rest of the world, it hasn't always been so. The folk singer, Judy Collins, released her version of the song in 1970, ranking #15 on the pop charts. From that point on, Amazing Grace has become the world's most popular religious tune.

The journalist Bill Moyers prepared a public television program on the song in 1989. He interviewed Collins, opera singer Jessye Norman, shape note singers Hugh McGraw and Dewey Williams, and country music legend Johnny Cash.

Jessye Norman sang the song in the Baptist Church of her youth in Augusta, Georgia. As an internationally acclaimed soprano, in the 1980s she sang it at a rock concert to benefit the freedom fight of Nelson Mandela.

Hugh McGraw, of Bremen, Georgia, has been to Westville numerous times for shape note singings. In the Moyers video, he noted that the song, known to shape note singers as New Britain, is sung by them essentially as it was in the tune's beginning.

Dewey Williams, of Ozark, Alabama, was the grandson a slave. Moore recalled that his grandfather "raised" Amazing Grace for the shape note singers. Moore and his Wiregrass Sacred Harp singers demonstrated the rhythms that African-Americans give the tune, which are very different from those of white singers.

Johnny Cash sang at prisons early in his career of country music. He said that in the three minutes that it takes to sing Amazing Grace, everyone is free. "[It] is a song that has no guile," said Cash. "Those lyrics are straight ahead, honest, gut-level, and hard-level. When I sing that song, I could be in a dungeon, or have chains all over me, but I'd be free as a breeze. It's a song that makes a difference. There are some songs that make a difference in your life, and that song makes a difference."

John Newton Author of "Amazing Grace"

Most people know that John Newton "once was lost" as a slave ship captain. The first stanza of the hymn—"I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see"—makes sense in this light. People are inspired by the contrast of his evil youth and his later humility. His full story is even more amazing. Here are some highlights:

Newton was born in 1725 in England. His father, a sea captain, made him a sailor at age eleven. Impressed into the navy, he deserted and was publicly flogged when captured. He next began sailing on slave ships. The white captain of one ship had a black wife. The captain made Newton her slave!

Rescued by his father, he sailed on a trading voyage. A storm nearly wrecked the ship, leading to his Christian conversion. It was thus only after he became a Christian that he became a slave ship captain. From 1745 to 1754, he bought and transported Guinean slaves. He began to get pangs of conscience and quit the trade when an illness forced him to leave the sea.

He then studied for the ministry, becoming curate to the vicar of Olney in 1764. His fervor was so strong that he held devotional meetings and wrote hymns, both of which the Established Church of the time considered heretical activities. With William Cowper, he published the now famous Olney Hymns in 1779, including Amazing Grace.

Late in his long life, he used his experience in slaving and his celebrity to advocate for the bill which in 1807 finally abolished slavery in all of Britain.

The Most Thorough of Revolutions (Elvis wasn't the first)

Many people mistakenly assume that when Elvis belted out, "you ain't nothin' but a hound dog/Cryin' all the time" and other tunes in 1956, he became the first white entertainer to perform to white audiences.

There are two major errors in that idea. The first is that even a quick study leads to white jazz players long before Elvis sang rock 'n' roll. For example, Elvis may have been "the King," but the earlier "King of Swing" was the famous (and white) Benny Goodman. Goodman used the arrangements of Fletcher Henderson, a black orchestra leader from Cuthbert, Georgia who invented Swing in the early '30s. There were dozens of other white "black entertainers" who pre-dated Elvis.

The bigger error, however, is that Elvis was a singing black music. It is true that rock 'n' roll began its life as a "white" rhythm and blues. Even so, R&B, jazz, Swing, blues, and all the rest are blends of the music of both blacks and whites.

This is one theme of this series: American popular music is a blend of African and British folk music (and some European middle and upper class music), which necessarily coincided with the advent of the Protestant hymn in the late 1700s.

The hymn-blend began in the South about 1800 and could not have happened elsewhere—not Los Angeles, not New York, not Detroit, not Rio, not London, not Dakar, and certainly not Vienna. Yet, there is hardly a corner of the world today that is not filled with modern interpretations of the basic Southern formula. It is the most thorough of revolutions.

Part 3 Instruments, Song, and Dance

At the recent Westville Dulcimer Festival, Southern musical heritage was rampant! The skills of the instructors were superb. Despite weather concerns, the two days of music drew people from all over the Southeast. It was a delightful time for those who participated, as well as for those who just listened.

At one moment on the second day, two champion dulcimer players improvised an instrumental duet out of the now-standard Hank Williams tune, "I'm So Lonesome, I Could Die." David Schnauffer played the lead, while Stephen Seifert accompanied. It was one of the most beautiful and moving performances of any type that I've ever witnessed.

Music of the Southern Soul

Everything about that performance was imbued with Southern heritage---the instruments, the song, the chording. I took notice of one technique in particular which Schnauffer and Seifert used. They "bent" some of the notes. Bending a note on a dulcimer, as with a guitar, is done by pushing a vibrating string to and fro along a fret. The pitch increases slightly for a moment---or bends---plaintively.

It was a singular moment, the essence of Southern music.

Appalachian dulcimers arose among the mountain folk of the eastern U.S. in the late 1700s. No note was ever bent on a dulcimer, however, until some unnamed player heard a black voice or instrumental player, harkening an African tradition. From then on, a Euro-African fusion inevitably took place. Musical style was forever changed, or "grayed," as historian C. Vann Woodward called this blending of black and white cultures.

Early Musical Instruments in Georgia

The dulcimer was probably not present in Georgia in the 18th century. It appeared in the state about the same time as the 19th century did. The next few paragraphs will look at Georgia's first instruments, the tools of this early cross-cultural mixing.

The influence of Native Americans and African-Americans on the early scene was mostly vocal and rhythmic. Nevertheless, each contributed certain instruments. The Indians, according to William Bartram, played the drum, rattle, and reed flute. The first African-American slaves associated with the British Georgia made banjars/banjers (from which came the banjo), drums, and perhaps horns.

Among the 1,847 people who lived in the new colony of Georgia by 1742, there was but one professional musician---a Moravian. Musical instruments were brought in quickly, however. The most common instrument was the violin or fiddle, and there were at least fourteen drums. Bagpipes arrived with the Scottish Highlanders at New Inverness (now Darien) in 1735. The colony progressed to employ trumpet and French horn players, though these instruments were probably different from today's versions. By the time of the Revolution, one could buy fifes, flutes, pianos, harpsichords, Jew's harps, and guitars in Savannah shops. There were even a few organs available by the 1790s.

Native and African Song and Dance

Bartram gave this description of an Indian dance in Georgia about 1775:

They have an endless variety of steps, but the most common...is a slow shuffling to accompany alternate steps...First a circle of young men, and within, a circle of young women, moving together opposite ways, the men with the course of the sun, and the females contrary to it; the men strike their arm with the open hand, and the girls clap hands and raise their shrill sweet voices... To accompany their dances they have songs, of different classes, as martial, bacchanalian, and amorous; which last I must confess are

extravagantly libidinous. This passage shows that Native Americans danced and sang primarily for spiritual/religious purposes. For early African-American slaves, however, the connection of music to cultural expression was less specific. For example, the heritage of a dozen slaves on a Georgia plantation might represent a dozen different African cultures. The knowledge of refined ceremonies was thus effectively extinguished by slave handlers.

Therefore, when slavery became legal in Georgia in 1749, the music of Georgia's early slaves contained only general work, entertainment, and spiritual meaning. An example is the "field holler." As the slaves worked in the corn and rice fields (this is before the invention of the cotton gin), one slave might sing a musical phrase. The phrase then would be answered by others in the field. These "calls-and-responses," African in nature, gave comfort to the individual workers through feelings of cohesiveness.

White Secular Song and Dance

In 1734, when some South Carolinians sought a clergyman in Savannah to perform their marriages, Governor James Oglethorpe ordered a hog killing. He served beer, wine, rum, and punch. The couples "were all very merry and danc'd the whole Night long." They probably danced to minuets and country dances.

Among the Highlanders at New Inverness, the bagpipes offered a variety of musical types---marches, reels, airs, laments, and more.

By 1763, Savannahians were enjoying balls. A fiddler, often a slave, would play minuets, gavottes, and country dances. Savannah had operas, though not the "heavy" type we know today. Dancing schools for children were popular as a sign of status. By 1786, concert-goers could hear the music of Arne, J.C. Bach, Stamitz, and others in a single evening (usually Mondays and Wednesdays). When President Washington visited Georgia in 1791, he was treated to a "dancing assembly, at which there was about 100 well dressed handsome women." He heard minuets and a country dance.

Folk Music Emerges

Society began forming around musical types in this period. In a general sense, urban music became the popular music, while rural music kept the folk tradition.

Out in the country of 18th century Georgia, one could hear such traditional ballads of the British Isles as "Barbara Allen," "Lord Randall," "The Outlandish Knight," and "The House Carpenter." They were sung solo with no instrumental backing.

Ballads recalled people and events of the past. Popular music, on the other hand, dealt with contemporary issues. Country folk thus retained their ties with the past through their music. The instruments themselves were a clue to status. City people might hear a guitar, but on the plantation---in the hands of a slave---one would hear the banjo.

Effect on West Georgia

West Georgia's official settlement was still over two decades in the future. Still, the music and instruments we have discussed in early east Georgia set the musical stage for the Chattahoochee Valley.

As the 18th century rolled into the 19th, a new economy based in cotton planting exploded into Georgia's farthest reaches. Georgia's economic elite were increasingly situated in the cities, including Columbus---places much influenced by Savannah. Popular music was sought and consumed in cities.

Those settlers who made their way to the farms and plantations of west Georgia, however, brought their African and British folk musical traditions with them from the Fall Line areas of east Georgia.

City/Country

Here is a confirmation of this early contrast of city and country. A decade ago, we at Westville studied the migration patterns affecting the settlement of Stewart County, Westville's home. We were amazed that we could identify only two Savannah families who had settled in this populous (but agricultural) county by 1850.

Rather, settlers overwhelmingly came here from other Fall Line counties of Georgia and of the Carolinas. (Indeed, half of Stewart County's early settlers came from Washington, Wilkes, Jones, Hancock, and Putnam Counties, a cluster in the Fall Line area near Macon and Augusta.) A similar pattern is seen in other agricultural counties of west Georgia.

If popular and folk music were polarized by urban and rural locales, though, a surprise was in the making. The gentle ladies and men of the cities could not have imagined that the musical forms and styles developing in the countryside (think note bending) would one day subsume all popular music!

Part 4

Urban Music in Antebellum West Georgia

Long before west Georgia was legally opened to white and black settlement, the native Indians had gotten an earful of non-native music.

This was because the Chattahoochee River was already a highway by the early 1820s. In addition, the Old Federal Road crossed over the river into Alabama at a site near the last waterfall on the river. This "crossroads" would become Columbus, Georgia in 1828. But, before that---importantly---it was a place to make and hear music. For more than a decade, until their forced removal from west Georgia, it was here that Native Americans heard the music of black and white Americans

At the Crossroads

The first quarter of the 19th century saw a great increase of quantity and variety of musical production in the South. One catalyst was the cotton gin, which set off a population explosion in the slave states. Settlers poured into the new frontiers faster than religion could follow. As a remedy, hymn-writing and -singing (which was prohibited in the 18th century among most colonists) became encouraged in the early 19th. Hymns gave the settlers spiritual comfort in the absence of clergy and neighbors.

But, secular music also abounded. In gathering places, such as the future site of Columbus, entertainment was as important as trade. By 1825, the air at the crossroads was saturated with many rich textures of music.

Music of the crossroads would become the urban music, distinctly different from that of the plantation. We will explore the urban side of this distinction in this segment of our study of Southern music. We are fortunate for the work of Dr. Katherine Mahan, who published a book on the history of music in Columbus (Showboats to Softshoes, 1968).

A Stage for Many Musicians

At any moment at a landing, music could be had for a price---money or alcohol. Barge crews were adept at jug-blowing, fiddling, harmonica-playing, and singing.

For organized events, on the other hand, Dr. Mahan suggests a likely stage for the earliest shows. A showboat might be a flat barge "one hundred feet long by fourteen feet wide...with a ridge roof over most of the deck." The stage would be at one end. In the middle would be the whites' section, lighted by "a hogshhead hoop filled with candles...dripping tallow on the patrons." Blacks were consigned to the rear section.

The patrons sat on rough benches. Theater time was announced by a flag, which proclaimed, "Theatre," and by a blast of the whistle. The performers usually were families playing music and producing plays.

One such performance in January, 1830 featured Martha Therese Mathews Smith, who had been the principal soprano for the Cincinnati Haydn Society. The evening began with a "petit comedy" called "The Lady and the Devil," followed with a dance by a Mrs. Petrie. Then, Mrs. Smith sang "Dashing White Sergeant." Next was a musical farce, "No Song, No Supper," and some more songs by Mrs. Smith.

Ever More Variety

As time wore on, theaters were built more and floated less. The city's third theater was built in 1837 on present day 10th Avenue with a 400-seat capacity. Columbus was thus able to support a production of Donizetti's new opera, *The Elixir of Love*, performed by an internationally acclaimed cast. Further, there was a production of some sort always available. The variety of music was impressive. Columbus had a

marching band which made frequent public appearances. A magician, Monsieur Adrian, featured "East Indian jugglers in full costume, performing to oriental music." Swiss bell ringers, circus troupes, flutists, ballet, a male Glee Club, The Peedee Ethiopian Opera Troupe Minstrels, and even a horse opera with men, horses, and dogs all performed at one time or another in antebellum Columbus. Young people could receive instruction in any of the instruments of an orchestra and then some. They also received "ballroom decorum and dancing instruction."

Resistance

Musical variety came sometimes with a price. Though much was happening in the city's entertainment, The Columbus Enquirer declined to lend assistance, at least for a while. The editor opined that "the theater deletes good morals [which is] bad for good order [and] happiness [and] bad for religion." Likewise, when the temperance movement was in full bloom in the 1850s, the temperance leaders in Columbus targeted theater, church organs, and drama as being as corruptive as alcohol. Producers had a ready solution, however. Whenever a quarrel arose concerning the fitness of one production, then a substitute would appear the next week. No one seemed to mind productions of either Biblical or Shakespearean texts.

Conclusion

The crossroads became the intersection of more than Road and River. It was also the intersection of class and culture. Whereas plantation music remained true to its British and African folk roots, the music of the crossroads (i.e., urban music) gave the music of Europe an opportunity of expression in west Georgia.

In the next newsletter, we will look at some of the contrasting rural expressions of music between 1820 and 1860, especially shape note singing and slave songs.

Part 5

“Fa-Sol-Las, Shape Notes, and The Sacred Harp”

One of the ironies of life is that the flow of time will wash memories away. Even key people and advances can be thoroughly scrubbed from the collective consciousness.

Such is the case with singing schools, the most important development in music education in American history. Shape notes brought the mechanics of music to practically every rural Southern family of the nineteenth century. The schools should never be forgotten, and yet, they nearly became extinct.

In this series of articles, we are tracing the major historical events which caused the music of the American South to become the world’s root-stock of popular music. Shape note (fa-sol-la) singing, the form of singing school so common in the antebellum South, is this edition’s musical subject.

Background on Singing Schools

As noted here before, between 1600 and 1750, most Protestant Churches allowed the singing of psalters (Biblical texts), but not hymns (human poetry about divine subjects). A deacon would “line out” a psalter (psalm), meaning that he would sing a line, and the congregation would repeat it. Thus, written music was not needed.

The Bay Psalm Book (ninth edition in 1698) was the first to use musical notes. It also introduced fa-sol-las, though as letters beneath the notes. Still, congregations needed instruction. Thus was born the New England singing school, aimed at “educating youth through music.”

Impact of Singing Schools

The singing school transformed the place of music. Psalm-singing had been conducted only in church. Singing schools, however, were conducted outside of church in order to improve singing skills, which then could be used in church. Once outside the sanctuary, the restrictions on music were unleashed.

The singing school also transformed the type of music. Singing schools started as a Bostonian, Congregationalist enterprise to assist Psalm-singing. As their popularity grew away from Boston and into other denominations, the schools slowly began to move from psalms to hymns by such English composers as Isaac Watts.

The singing school transformed the target of instruction. Psalm-singing was an adult effort. Singing schools brought musical education to all ages, but particularly to youth. The schools thus arose along with the public school concept.

Finally, the singing school arose along with the first native composers. The hallmark event was William Billings’ 1770 New-England Psalm Singer, which set off a rage for fuguing tunes, the lilting contrapuntal tunes of three- or four-part singing.

1800: A Time of Change

As we’ve noted before, many changes took place around 1800 that affected music:

- (1) The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 revived slavery.
- (2) People settled new Southern lands for cotton farms and plantations, causing a population shift to the south and west.
- (3) Religion kept up by sending out hymns with its Second Great Awakening. This connection of hymns with the Awakening was made by Lyman Beecher, as encouraged by Lowell Mason.

(4) If the 17th and 18th centuries can be characterized by their resistance to hymnody, the 19th was all about hymns. Likewise, slaves, who were indifferent to psalm-singing, responded directly to the personal messages of salvation they heard in hymns. By 1800, slave conversion to Christianity had exploded in size and scope.

(5) By 1800 also, singing schools were out of fashion in Boston, the original city to promote the schools. The center for singing schools shifted to Cincinnati, Ohio, the tune book publishing capital.

Shape Notes After 1800

The appearance in 1802, then, of *The Easy Instructor* by Little and Smith, with its shaped noteheads (called “patent notes”), nicely dove-tailed with the needs of outlying populations across the Southern frontier. Singing schools and patent notes were established with ease in the South.

Within a decade, though, there arose a conservative protest in favor of European teaching methods, Lowell Mason being a major proponent. Singing schools quite suddenly became a Southern and rural—and neither an urban nor a New England—phenomenon. Cincinnati remained a music center, but trade in shape-note tune books plummeted. Rather, Cincinnati became a round-note center.

Reform 1834-1844

This change took place because reformers criticized singing schools for allowing people who were neither religious nor musically trained to teach the schools. A Presbyterian newspaper, *The Cincinnati Journal*, led the attack on shape notes.

The proposed solutions for churches: (1) no more singing schools; (2) compose better music; (3) start up choirs; and, (4) hire real music teachers. These reforms were quickly adopted in the North and in the urban South.

The number of new shape-note tune books dropped dramatically. It is thus an irony that the best tune book of the whole patent-note movement should be published in the midst of this precipitous decline.

The Sacred Harp (1844)

This great tune book was *The Sacred Harp* (1844) by B.F. White and E.J. King. White lived in Hamilton, Georgia, while King lived at Talbotton. The youthful King died within weeks of the publishing. White, on the other hand, at age 44, was an experienced tune writer and singing school leader. Upon his arrival from South Carolina in 1840, he served variously as the mayor of Hamilton and clerk of the inferior court. Then, in 1852, he was the superintendent for Harris County’s first newspaper, *The Organ*.

Till its demise in 1857, *The Organ* served as a voice for *The Sacred Harp*. In it, White deflected the Northern criticism of patent notes. *The Organ* drew much support from the Southern Music Convention, another pro-Sacred-Harp organization nurtured by White.

The Sacred Harp was very popular. Through it and its many revisions—including *The Original Sacred Harp* (1971)—*Sacred Harp* singing spread through the South. Its importance can hardly be overstated, for it was largely responsible for the cultural continuity of America’s earliest musical traditions. In fact, these traditions survive today in both black and white practice.

Conclusion

Singing Schools molded the Southern taste for worship through group singing. One tunebook in particular, The Sacred Harp, is a major contributor to the musical traditions of the South. It is one of west Georgia's greatest accomplishments.

For most of the world, patent notes faded from memory by the Civil War. Unbeknownst to the world, Sacred Harp would continue to inform and shape rural Southerners for the next sixty years. The notes and music would re-emerge in the 1920s when they were identified with the folk movement. We will discuss that in more detail in a later edition.

The next edition of this newsletter will feature slave songs.

Part 6

American Slave Music to 1800

"We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets," remarked a former American slave.

The quote is found in the best-selling book, *The New Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself* (London, 1789). Equiano was specifically referring to Africans, but also to their enslaved brethren in the New World. For those American slaves, music was a precious trace of their African heritage---intangible, but real. It is hardly surprising that they should have preserved so carefully the African ways of music. It was their link to a common identity among the dispersed slaves.

This article on African-American music up to 1800 is the sixth in a series of articles summarizing how the American South came to produce the music which the rest of the world today sings and dances. Slave music, one of three major components of Southern music, has had a profound and enduring influence on international culture. (The other two are European upper class music and the folk music of the British Isles.)

The resource base for this topic is large. An important text for this article is Eileen Southern's 1971 edition of *The Music of Black Americans*.

"The Sound of Musicke" in 16th-18th Century Africa

There are fewer than 400 documented slave songs surviving today. These are enough, however, to link slave song traditions with the music of the historical people of east Africa from Senegal to Angola.

One common feature is that both native Africans and American slaves used music especially in ceremonies---birth, rites of passage such as adulthood and marriage, worship of God, and death. American writers often noted also the work and boat songs of the slaves. These are all documented in early European records of African contact.

In Africa, music was used in recounting history, in making war, and in identifying tribes. Even in court, the Angolan lawyers sang their cases. These uses were not readily applied in early America.

There was little opportunity for newly abducted slaves to bring along musical instruments. Still, the earliest American slaves had experience with guitar-, zither-, and harp-like instruments. They also had used bagpipes, reeds, horns, trumpets, rattles, bells, keyboards, and flutes. Most of all, though, their cultures in both Africa and the New World emphasized drums.

Vocal Traditions

According to Dr. Southern, "the most constant feature of African songs was the alternation of improvised lines and fixed refrains." Musicologists have noted this same technique among the American slaves, giving it the name, "call-and-response." A song leader improvises a verse (both with embellished words and tune), which is followed by a group refrain.

Dance

If call-and-response were the most common feature, then Dr. Southern indicates that the most noticeable feature was rhythm. Europeans were fascinated with multiple layers of rhythms in the same performance, particularly in the circle dance. Men leaped and made grand gestures, while women used the more subtle "shuffle step." Characteristic of both African and slave dance, the women were bent over and had "crooked knees." Finally, ecstatic seizures were noted on both continents.

Slaves Learn, Then Take a Turn

Slaves who could play instruments were given special status. The instrument of preference for both slaves and their masters was the fiddle. History has not yet fully answered the question of who taught the slave fiddlers to play or when the slaves had time to learn it. It is noteworthy, however, that the fiddle was small enough for a slave to carry easily and also that masters liked to have a fiddler handy for entertaining guests and family. Thus, the specialized job of slave/musician came to pass. Another way that slaves in the Southern colonies learned "European" musical forms was through instruction in religious music. Psalm-singing till about 1800, then hymn-singing by the 1790s, and finally singing schools were all readily available to the slaves. In fact, there remains even today among African Americans a preference for the hymns of Isaac Watts, whose hymns were prominent when the slaves were evangelized.

By the time of the American Revolution, slave compositions were being noted by the whites. Some slave musical masters were even apprenticing whites. Also at this time, the African-influenced banjar (banjo) came to be an accepted instrument among whites. Africa's influence, through the slaves, had finally blended into American life.

Movements Toward Independence

Between 1778 and 1796, independent churches for blacks (Baptist, A.M.E.) were being formed. Blacks inevitably began to have their own hymn books. A landmark publication was the 1801 book, *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns Selected from Various Authors* by Richard Allen, African Minister, published in Philadelphia. Allen was the organizer of the first African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Allen selected hymns that gave blacks hope for a better life after this one. The first verse of one of Watts's hymns, "There is a Land of Pure Delight" is an example: There is a land of pure delight Where saints immortal reign. Infinite day excludes the night, And pleasures banish pain. Allen also added refrain lines, which pre-dated the use of refrains in white churches.

Summary

Until 1800, blended music was bubbling everywhere in the Southern background, but almost no white observers understood that the impact was a two-way street. With the evangelization of slaves in the last half of the 18th Century, a new era for musical history was on the way. African influenced rhythms would soon be making their way into all manner of traditionally white forms.

The next article will discuss the music of American slaves in antebellum times, Westville's period.

Part 7 Slave Music in Antebellum Times

As we have noted several times before, the turn of the 19th century was a watershed time in the South. Slavery, which had been foundering, began instead to grow, fueled by the new cotton trade. And, as slavery increased, so did the influence of African-Americans on the music of the land.

Anti-slavery sentiment was strong in the United States in the new century. The slave trade ended officially in 1808. Manumission was complete in the North by 1827 (except in Maryland, Delaware, and parts of Illinois). Both The Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850 balanced the spread of slavery to new states.

One might assume, then, that slavery had been contained. In point of fact, though, the slave population increased from one to three million between 1800 and 1840. By Civil War times, the number of slaves increased by a third again. White cotton planters obviously encouraged slave reproduction as the sole means left to them for free labor.

The influence of black people thus became established in antebellum times. This edition of "The Southern Roots of Modern Popular Music" discusses these developments through the slaves' music. Slave music is seen today as one of the vital ingredients in the rich fabric of Southern music which yielded so many forms---Bluegrass, Blues, Country, Gospel (both black and white), Honky-Tonk, Jazz, Ragtime, Rock 'n' Roll, Sacred Harp, and Spirituals (among others).

Acceptance of Blacks in Music

As the decades wore on, differences widened between the music of urban and rural areas and among Northern and Southern blacks. In the North, African Americans struggled for social and economic acceptance. In the South, such a struggle was still a moot point. Rather, Southern blacks struggled for basic humanity, and their music was a major outlet. Three accounts of blacks in the urban North during this period will provide contrast:

Philadelphian Frank Johnson gained an international reputation for his mastery of instruments and for his orchestral and compositional skills. He even performed for Queen Victoria at Johnson's military band.

All society went to New York's African Grove Theater. One evening in 1822, the audience stopped a production and demanded **Ira Aldridge**, a Shakespearean actor known for his Othello, to come out-of-character. They wanted him to sing a slave song he had made popular, and he obliged: *Opossum him creep softly, Raccoon him lay mum;/ Pull him by the long tail, Down opossum come./ Jin kum, jan kum, beangash, Twist 'em, twist 'em, run;/ Oh, the poor opossum, Oh, the sly raccoon.*

Charles Dickens wrote about meeting the famous "Juba" (**William Henry Lane**) on his 1842 trip to New York. Lane was regarded as the "greatest of all dancers" of his time. He performed the "single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross cut...spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine."

Slave Songs

Slaves (meaning, for the most part, Southern blacks), by contrast, had to focus on the day-to-day misery of slavery and on the hope of eventual freedom. Here are some examples of how these issues played into slave music: In his 1845 autobiography just seven years after his own escape, **Frederick Douglass** remarked about slave music: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of *O Canaan, sweet Canaan,/ I am bound for the land of Canaan*, something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north---and the north was our Canaan."

Harriet Tubman [see the sidebar] was the most successful of the Underground Railroad "conductors." She used a particular song to let slaves know that she was present and thus to be alert for escape: "Dark and thorny is de pathway Where de pilgrim makes his ways;/ But beyond dis vale of sorrow Lie de fields of endless days."

Many slave hymns and Spirituals had escape messages in them, according to Eileen Southern in *The Music of Black Americans*. These included: "Steal Away, Jesus," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "Brother Moses Gone to de Promised Land." Some songs even provided escape directions: "*Follow the drinkin' gourd! Follow the drinkin' gourd./ For the old man is a-waitin' for to carry you to freedom if you follow the drinkin' gourd./ When the sun comes back and the first quail calls...*"

Southern and Urban

New Orleans in 1800 was stewpot of diversity---African, English, French, German, Irish, and Spanish people. Beginning in the 18th century, slaves allowed to gather at the Place Congo (Beauregard Square) for Sunday afternoon dances. Anywhere from 500 to 3,000 slaves, representing six African tribes (Kraels, Minahs, Congos and Mandringas, Gangas, Hiboas, and Fulas) would hold ring dances. Their instruments were drums, banjos, and rattles. These dances and similar ones in New York and Philadelphia were all stopped by city officials by 1843.

Following this ban, New Orleans blacks were divided between free blacks who openly performed "cultured" music for all to hear and those slaves who performed African rhythms underground. After the Civil War, these two strains fused, becoming the root-stock of music that would sweep the world by the 20th century.

Southern and Rural

Work songs characterized the usual music of the farming slave. For the masters, the work songs helped the slaves capture a rhythm in repetitive labor. Thus, work songs help produce more work. For slaves, the songs helped defeat the despair of doing hard, boring work. In group situations, masters encouraged a song leader.

"Shouts" (dances), on the other hand, were common events following worship services. The benches were moved out of the way and everyone stood in the middle of the room. The Spiritual began, and the people began to walk, then to shuffle, in a ring. The group evolved either into shouters (dancers) or singers (and clappers). However, since this was a religious event, the group was careful to observe a distinction of religious and social events. The feet were never to cross or even be lifted from the floor.

Over the next several hours, the singing became an intense, wild chant, and the religious words of the songs became like a cry. The pace quickened. When shouters tired, they dropped out to rest and sing instead.

White Protestants did not like dancing, and usually required converted slaves to drop the shouts. This was not so much the case in Catholic areas, such as Louisiana.

Themes in Slave Songs

Slaves often cited heroes in their music. The most common were Jacob (the most frequent hero), Daniel, Moses, and Gabriel. Satan represented the usual villain.

In terms of topics, the major themes of slave songs were: faith, optimism, patience, weariness, and fighting. It should be no surprise that faith, optimism, patience, and weariness were tools to help the slaves overcome the many psychological and physical burdens of slavery. A theme of fighting, on the other hand, was apparently held as an option, if a final one.

The slaves songs were syncopated and in an overlapping call-and-response pattern. Words were not as important as performance. Scale patterns were pentatonic (as was the folk music of the whites of Celtic heritage).

Conclusion

The influence of African-American performance, especially of slave music, swept through America between 1800 and 1860. Protestant hymns were the major medium for this dispersion---in churches and especially camp meetings.