

ECHOING CASCADES

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SONGS OF SORROW: AFRO-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS, A GLIMPSE

ANGELINE SORNA

*No more auction block for me / No more, no more
No more auction block for me / Many thousand gone*

No more peck of corn for me... / No more driver's lash for me...

No more pint of salt for me... / No more hundred lash for me...

No more mistress' call for me / No more, no more

(Negro Spirituals 692)

Africans are the kind of people whose soul is expressed solely by music and in the diaspora, denied the opportunities of concrete expression they have poured out their soul into the ephemerality of music. The national identity of the Africans as a people was forged in the kiln of the colonization and in the chattel enslavement of the Africans. In the late 19th century, there were around 4 million Africans in the US, almost all of them brought as slaves. They had brought with them a rich new heritage of music. Slaves were systematically deprived of any form of expression and they were forbidden to learn, read or write. All opportunities of expression denied, songs, chant and dancing became vehicles of creative expression for the blacks. All the creative energy and emotions that had been denied expression found vent through work songs with accompanied handclapping and rhythmic movements. Songs adapted to reflect the life of hard labour on plantations later evolved into a new musical form- the Spirituals. Spirituals in turn became the well spring for generations of Afro-American musicians who would create the Gospels, Blues, Jazz and the Protest songs of the 1960s and go on to influence African American writings in a big way. This paper gives a glimpse of the origin, structure and evolution of the spirituals.

Our music is our Mother Tongue, our meta-language that we use for the fullest expression of self.

Kalamu Ya Salaam (African-American Poet)

The Origin and Fabric of Spirituals:

African American spirituals developed out of the agony of the individuals stripped of their motherland, mother tongue and religion and were forced to travel to a new and unknown land. They were denied the opportunity to use or retain their native language. This made them resort to a more creative form of communication and expression; a language which expressed their worldly hardships and spiritual aspirations – music and the comforting genre of Spirituals. Such songs were used to express personal feelings and for cheering one another. The term ‘spiritual’ is derived from the King James Bible translation of Ephesians 5:19: ‘Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord’. The slaves, who were brought from various regions of the African continent and were forced to work in plantations under difficult work conditions, found comfort in the idea of a loving God and eventual promise of a free and pain free heaven.

Dere's no rain to wet you, O, yes, I want to go home. /Dere's no sun to burn you, O, yes, I want to go home; /O, push along, believers, O, yes, I want to go home. /Dere's no hard trials, /Dere's no whips a-crackin', /My brudder on de wayside, /O, push along, my brudder, /Where dere's no stormy weather, /Dere's no tribulation, /No more slavery in de kingdom, /No evil-doers in de kingdom, /All is gladness in de kingdom, O, yes, I want to go home. (Slave Songs of the United States, 125)

Originally known as “Corn-ditties”, spirituals were sung during and after work time and also in worship services or Praise houses accompanied by singing and dancing. While work songs dealt only with their daily life, spirituals were inspired by the Gospel and the life of Jesus Christ. Spirituals were a unique medley of hymns, scriptures, African style of singing and language. They focus on the recurrent themes of weariness, patience, faith, hope and unquenchable thirst for freedom. They focussed on the narratives and stories than of doctrines and dogmas and Biblical characters like Jesus, Moses, Jonah, Noah, David and Peter with whom they could relate to were common favourites.

The lack of musical aids made the structure of the spirituals simple. Using of drums or other musical instruments was banned by the slaveholders as it was feared that slave assemblies may start communicating to each other through drumbeats. Hence the spirituals were usually in call and response form which made singing and memorization simple. It took one of three forms: refrain only, verse and refrain, or only verse. Spirituals made use of syncopated

rhythms, atonal forms, antiphony and guttural interjections. Spirituals also stem from the "ring shout," a shuffling circular dance to chanting and handclapping and foot-stomping that was common among early plantation slaves.

Songs like "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child and "Nobody knows the troubles I have seen," describe the slaves' struggles and identification with the suffering of Jesus Christ. Other spirituals are more joyful. Known as jubilees, or camp meeting songs, they are fast, rhythmic and often syncopated. Examples include "Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham" and "Fare Ye Well".

Spirituals as Emotional Vent, Resistance, Communication, Code-Language and Hope

Forced into doing excruciating labour and endless hours of work under the hot sun, spirituals became a way of not just passing time but a creative outlet for all the pent-up agony. The songs contained deep religious meanings, messages of despair, hope, joy and sorrow. They also spoke in veiled allusions to the painful experiences of uprooted people. According to former slave Douglas F., spirituals represented their sorrows than joys and like tears, they provided a relief to their aching hearts.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,/ Nobody knows but He knows my sorrow /Yes, nobody knows the trouble I've seen/ But glory, Hallelujah

Sometimes I'm standing crying /Tears running down my face I cry to the Lord, have mercy / Help me run this all race... (Slave Songs of the United States, 13)

The pangs of separation echoed painfully even in the songs of children:

I wonder where my mudder gone; Sing, O graveyard! Graveyard ought to know me; Ring Jerusalem! /Grass grow in de graveyard; Sing, O graveyard! Graveyard ought to know me; Ring, Jerusalem! (Negro Spirituals, 686)

These songs sometimes also coordinated their efforts for heaving a heavy load or hauling a fallen tree or road construction. They provided a repetitive rhythm for repetitive manual labour. The following is a boat-song, which was timed well with the tug of the oar:

"I want to go to Canaan, /I want to go to Canaan, /I want to go to Canaan, /To meet 'em at de comin' day. /O, remember, let me go to Cannan, (Thrice.) /To meet 'em, &c. /O, brudder, let me go to Canaan, (Thrice.) /To meet 'em, &c. My brudder, you -- oh I -- remember (Thrice.) /To meet 'em at de comin' day." (Negro Spirituals, 687)

The songs also, more often than not, contained code words that helped them communicate and express protests with each other without the overseers noticing. Spirituals are also sometimes regarded as codified protest songs, with songs such as "Steal away to Jesus" and "Let my People Go" being seen by some commentators as incitements to escape slavery.

When Israel was in Egypt's Land, O let my people go! /Oppressed so hard they could not stand! O let my people go!

CHORUS—O go down, Moses, Away down in Egypt's land, /And tell King Pharaoh to let my people go!

Thus saith the Lord bold Moses said, O let my people go! / If not I'll smite your first-born dead, O let my people go!

No more shall they in bondage toil, O let my people go! /Let them come out with Egypt's spoil, O let my people go! (Songs of the Freedmen of Port Royal, 125)

The Underground Railroad of the mid- nineteenth century used terminology from railroads as a secret language for assisting slaves to freedom, it is often speculated that songs like "I got my ticket" may have been a code for escape. A spiritual that was certainly used as a code for escape to freedom was "Go down, Moses". Harriet Tubman remembers that she used the song to identify herself to the slaves who might want to flee north. She goes on to say that the song, "Wade in the Water" was a double entendre as is the case with much of the spirituals as the meaning of this song is not a depiction of a baptism but rather, it was used by slaves who were located on the plantation as a means of telling an escaped slave to head for the waters to put off the trail because the slave master was coming after him with the dogs.

Spirituals also became a rich source of hope and dream of a better life. The songs abounded with images of roads, rivers, running, travelling and crossing over to paradise. Home and paradise sometime meant Africa, sometimes the freer Northern states and most often about heaven where then can

finally be free. A song like "Being bound to the land of Canaan" was more a dream to escape to Canada. Crossing river Jordan commonly referred to crossing of Mississippi or Ohio to the freer Northern States. Chariot was a veiled reference to the Underground Railway:

*Swing low, sweet chariot,/ Comin' for to carry me home
I looked over Jordan and what did I see,/ Comin' for to carry me home
A band of angels coming after me/ Comin' for to carry me home
If you get to heaven before I do /Comin' for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I'm comin' there too, /Comin' for to carry me home*
(Negro Spirituals 36)

Growth and Evolution of Spirituals

The music that is considered classic "Negro Spirituals" was codified into a cultural force in the late 1800s when the spirituals were spruced up and presented as concert music in 1871 by the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers. Monophonic and a cappella, spirituals were the antecedents of the blues and later had a great impact on Jazz. In addition to oral storytelling, music also has a clear influence on African-American literature. Spirituals, blues and jazz have profoundly influenced the style and content of African-American writers from Langston Hughes to Alice Walker. Spirituals were among the first black art forms to fuse Western elements - in this case, the lexicon of Christianity - with the circumstances of black life. Songs about the Jews' bondage in Egypt and their deliverance into the Promised Land took on an added resonance for an enslaved or disenfranchised people. The power of such themes touched writers, too. W.E.B. DuBois, the black political theorist, began each chapter of his book "The Souls of Black Folk" with a quotation from a spiritual. Alice Walker listened extensively to the gospel singers Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward while writing her first novel, "The Third Life of Grange Copeland." She considers Stevie Wonder a spiritual singer, rather than a pop singer, and she opened "The Color Purple" with a quote from his song "Do Like You." Another one of Miss Walker's musical influences is the late reggae star Bob Marley, who filled his political anthems with biblical allusions.

"Music has had to be everything for us," said Alice Walker, "It had to be encoded with a lot of the spiritual messages, a lot of the social messages that we need in every generation. That's why our music tends to be both spiritual and political. It's had to bear a burden." The non-linear and improvisational style and

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and the reason they s
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structure of black music influenced African-American authors in how they conceived and structured their work. Authors such as Toni Morrison, whose works are structured in a non-linear way, create novels that seem "free form" and composed spontaneously.

The soothing spirituals capture a timeless message. They offer a historical record exposing the slaves' struggle for freedom and survival and the strength and power of African-American spirituals speak volumes of the continual relevance of these songs and the reason they still heal souls today.

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