


1  **The Roots of African-American Music**
Unit 04
Notes

2  **Introduction**

- African-American musicians have arguably had the greatest general impact on the creation of uniquely new American music genres such as...
 - Spirituals
 - Gospel
 - Blues
 - Jazz
 - Rhythm & Blues (R&B)
 - Rock 'n' Roll
 - Hip-Hop
 - Rap

3  **African-American Origins**

- The first immigrants of African descent arrived in North America in 1619, landing at Jamestown along with the English entrepreneurs who were looking to find fortune in the colonies.
- These twenty immigrants were either free or semi-free indentured servants, a quasi-legal status for limited servitude preceding slavery that was shared by some Native Americans and whites.

4  **African-American Origins**

- At first, such a small number of slaves were brought in that it did not seem necessary to even define their legal status. But the number increased steadily and by the time of the American Revolution in 1776 there were no longer African-American indentured servants but African-American slaves in the fullest sense of the term, with their legal, political, and social status in relation to their masters carefully articulated.
- The ancestors of most African-Americans were forced to immigrate to the United States as captives during the slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

5  **Challenges To Retaining African Culture**

- When Africans came to the United States, they brought with them many of their native traditions, although the extent to which they were able to retain these traditions varied. This variation was a result of four main reasons...
 1. Many Africans who were brought to the United States were second-generation Africans, unlike their counterparts in Latin America. They were brought first to the West Indies for "seasoning," a term to describe a process by which the slave owners tried to acclimate the slaves to the tropical climate and get them accustomed to a life of hard labor.

6  **Challenges To Retaining African Culture**


2. Slave owners intentionally tried to supplant African cultural roots because they felt that by making the slaves more dependent on the new white culture, it would be easier to foster the compliant attitude required for slave labor.
3. There were aspects of African culture, such as foreign language and the ability to

communicate through drumming, that slave owners prohibited because they feared slaves would use them secretly to plan insurrections and escapes.

7  **Challenges To Retaining African Culture**

4. European Americans regarded Africa as backward and uncivilized, and unfortunately many blacks assimilated this attitude and did not always actively attempt to retain their African heritage.

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9  **Close Relationship Between Performer and Community**

- In Africa, although there were professional or semi-professional musicians and, for example, Ewe and Yoruba master drummers were highly skilled musicians who had spent years practicing and performing their art, there was not the strong separation between musician and audience.
- Most members of African societies took part in the musical activities.
- The master musicians might provide the drumming or singing leads, but everyone else participated in the musical performance by singing choral parts, dancing, or adding to the general rhythmic texture with their own drums or handclapping.

10  **Based In Oral Tradition and Improvisation**







- Although written language existed, most Africans depended on oral and aural tradition for the transmission of music.
 - The means that the music is taught through performance and learned through hearing, as opposed to taught and learned through notation.
- This method of transmission encourages change. As the music passes from one generation to the next and is transported from one locale to another, the probability increases that song lyrics are misunderstood, melodies misremembered, or there are conscious attempts to change the music to make it more locally relevant.

11  **Based In Oral Tradition and Improvisation**

- The European tradition values composition of “masterpieces” with precise directions conveyed in notation that ensure that the music can be accurately reproduced in the future and in different geographic locations.
- In West African traditions, oral transmission was used to preserve the general elements of the music, but what was valued was the “master” improvisations that appropriately fulfilled the function and met the aesthetic needs of the particular moment.

12  **Based In Oral Tradition and Improvisation**

- Unlike Westerners, Africans had no intention of reproducing precisely that specific music or performance at another time or in another location.
- It was expected that musicians and participants would improvise melodic ornamentation, rhythmic accompaniment, song forms, and dance movements that reflected the inspiration of the moment.

- 13  **The Essential Role Of Rhythm**
- Rhythm provided the very foundation for African music, and it flowed out of the words and the movement of human activities. Following are some examples of some of the most common rhythmic devices familiar to African-American slaves.
 - Multimeter
 - Polymeter
 - Prolongation
 - Additive
- 14  **The Essential Role Of Rhythm**
- Multimeter
 - A style in which the overall metric pattern consists of a series of measures that are each heard as having a different meter.
 - Polymeter
 - Consists of two or more meters occurring simultaneously.
- 15  **The Essential Role Of Rhythm**
- Prolongation
 - A technique in which the duration of the beats gets progressively longer, obscuring the metric pulse.
 - Additive
 - A technique in which there is no regular metric pulse because beats are continually added.
- 16  **The Essential Role Of Rhythm**
- Prolongation and additives represent what some consider to be the essential difference between African and Western rhythm:
 - In traditional Western rhythm, there is a consistent regular pulse that is organized into a recurring pattern (meter), which is then subdivided into smaller beats.
 - Multimeter
 - Polymeter
 - In African rhythm, there is a consistent pulse, but it is organized into more fluid patterns that are perceived as accumulating rather than being subdivided.
 - Prolongation
 - Additive
 - *Dances Sénégalaises* (Yakouba Tribe – Dan County – 2006)
- 17  **Use Of Call-and-Response**
- Another common tradition was the reliance on an antiphonal performance practice termed “call-and-response.” In this practice, a leader sings (or “calls”) a phrase and the group responds with the same phrase or an answering phrase.
 - *Kpatsa/Toke* (Obo Addy – 2003)
- 18  **Use of Call-and-Response**
- The African practice of call-and-response differed from European “call-and-response” or American “lining out” on several accounts.
 - First, although the leader certainly fulfilled an important role, it was the response that was considered the essential part of the tune.
 - Second, in European and American practice, the leader’s phrase was a complete unit, whereas in the African tradition, the response provided the necessary completion of the

phrase.

– Third, the leader’s part and the responsive part might overlap.

19  **Tuning and Tonal Systems**

- A shared approach to tonality in African systems was the use of microtones within a tonal framework.
- In Western music, the octave has been divided into twelve equal parts, using eleven different pitches. This “equal temperament” tuning system is the basis for Western scales and harmonies.
- In African music, the approach to the octave could be described as a continuum in which the entire span of frequencies is used. These microtones were used primarily by vocalists, who would use them to embellish and ornament melodies.
 - *Osoide* (Obo Addy – 2003)

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21  **Colonial America**

- Africans resisted enslavement from the time of capture in Africa and throughout slavery in the Americas.
- Estimates of the number of Africans that were exported in the slave trade range from ten million to twenty million.
 - That does not take into account the Africans who died resisting capture or who managed to commit suicide during the journey.

22  **Vocal Music Throughout Slavery**

- There were three main kinds of vocal music that were maintained or developed during the period of slavery.
 - Work Songs
 - Cries / Calls / Hollers
 - Spirituals

23  **Work Songs**

- Because slaves’ lives were centered on labor, some of the earliest African-American songs were work songs developed to accompany labor.
- Typically sung in a responsorial manner between a leader and the rest of the workers, these songs served the function of motivating laborers, providing a sense of community, ensuring that the work progressed at a steady pace, and coordinating movements so that when tools such as axes were used, accidents were avoided.
- Work songs had been an integral part of African culture long before Africans were forcibly brought to America as slaves.
 - *Pick a Bale of Cotton* (Leadbelly – 2008)
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oms6o8m4axg>

24  **Cries / Calls / Hollers**

- Hollers, calls, and cries are terms often used synonymously to describe a melodic tradition that was used as a means for communicating across the fields and even to nearby plantations.

- This tradition was common in West Africa and it was also used with the slaves to convey a great variety of messages, from calling people to work to bringing them in from the fields, from conveying news to attracting attention of a girl.
 - *Follow The Drinking Gourd* (Pete Seeger – 2009)

25  **Spirituals**

- Black spirituals include three types of songs:
 - Standard Spirituals
 - Jubilees
 - Shouts

26  **Standard Spirituals**

- Standard Spirituals acquired their name because they were religious songs that bore a close relationship to the “Holy Spirit.”
- The texts focused on the Christian themes of faith, love, humility, and salvation.
 - *Roll Jordan Roll* (Fisk Jubilee Singers – 1910)

27  **Jubilees**

- Jubilees tended to be more exuberant than standard spirituals, because their origins were the jubilant expressions of “the heart” rather than “the spirit.”
- The text tell God of the singer’s happiness.
 - *I’d Feel Much Better* (Norfolk Jazz & Jubilee Quartet – 1922)

28  **Shouts**

- Shouts are songs used to accompany a specific type of dance in which the “shouters” formed and moved in a circle.
 - *Kneebone Bend* (The McIntosh County Shouters – 1984)

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30  **Rhythm, Melody, and Harmony**

- Most spirituals as we have inherited them use the major scale.
- Several spirituals also use the natural minor scale.
- They also use a variety of scales and pitches that have their origins in African scales. These include:
 - Pentatonic Scales
 - Hexatonic Scales
 - Lacking either the fourth or the seventh tone.
 - Variations on the major or minor scale
 - Such as major with a lowered seventh tone.

31  **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**

- In an effort to raise money, the Fisk School’s treasurer and music instructor, George L. White proposed that he take his all black chorus on a concert tour.
- He borrowed money to get started, contributed some of his own funds to the project, and took his students on a daring tour in 1871.
- The group’s performances were in towns and cities in the Reconstructionist South at a time

when the anger and frustration of whites at losing the Civil War was erupting in racial hatred through the recently formed Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

32  **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**

- Although George L. White was Caucasian, all nine of the members of the choir were black, and all but two had been slaves.
- The group had been trained in classical music and conventional Protestant hymns and anthems, and those were the pieces that constituted the bulk of their concert repertoire.

33  **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**

- In an inspired move at a performance they were giving for a convention of Congregational Church ministers in Oberlin, Ohio, on November 15, 1871, George L. White decided to include a spiritual toward the end of the program.
- The group sang “Steal Away” and the response was so overwhelmingly positive that White decided to shift the programs of later performances to emphasize spirituals.
 - *Steal Away* (Fisk Jubilee Singers – 1918)

34  **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**

- By mid-December, the group had made it to New York City and their five-week stay there became another important turning point.
- They brought back more than \$20,000 from NYC that was used to buy the land that is the present site of Fisk University.
- The Fisk Jubilee Singers continued to perform and to tour, even to Europe in 1873 to play before Queen Victoria.
- At the close of this tour, the group brought back \$150,000. This money was used to fund the building of Jubilee Hall, the first permanent building erected in the United States for the education of black students.

35  **The Europeanization and Dissemination of the Spirituals**

- As the success of The Fisk Jubilee Singers inspired other institutions to form choirs that toured and performed spirituals, another process was taking place that both helped expose American society to the black spirituals and slowly transformed these spirituals.
- This was the process of creating arrangements of spirituals into four-part quartets and solo art songs for the concert stage.

36  **The Europeanization and Dissemination of the Spirituals**

- An early contributor was Hampton College choir director Thomas P. Fenner (1829-1912), who in his arrangements attempted to retain the spirituals’ original character and “simplicity” while also trying to “develop them musically.”
- He added classical European vocal harmonies, straightened out the tempos and meters, and “cleaned up” the language of illiterate slaves by changing the words to ones that could be more clearly enunciated and more readily understood by white audiences.
 - *Wade In The Water* (SLAB – 2003)

37  **Conclusion**

- Work songs, hollers, and spirituals are the earliest examples of African-American music that represent the fusion of both African and European elements.
- All three have clear cultural roots in African traditions, including free rhythm, ornamented melody, call-and-response structure, and the tonal language that became the defining “blue” notes so common to African-American music.

38  **Conclusion**

- They also reflect European influence in their use of increasingly metrical rhythm, major and minor harmonic language, homophonic texture, transmission through notation, and performance on the concert stage.
- Work songs, hollers, and spirituals developed out of the slaves’ experience in the United States.
- Furthermore, although work songs, hollers, and spirituals may have arisen as specific expressions of African-American culture at an earlier time in American history, they have played a seminal role in influencing and shaping later African-American types of music and the musical traditions of America as a whole.

39  **Assignment**

- List five different types of African music.
- List five artists in the African music genre.
- List five albums in the African music genre.
- Do a listening report in MLA format of no more than ONE PAGE of any song in the African music genre.
 - Listening Report Example on the Music History portion of the Huron Bands Website.
- PAPER SUBMISSION OR E-MAIL DUE BY 3:00 P.M. THE DAY OF THE UNIT 04 TEST.
 - matthew.herr@huronbands.com
 - Microsoft Word Documents (.doc / .docx) and Portable Document Formats (.pdf) only.