



African Music: A Sound of Dissent

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ABSTRACT: *In the postcolonial world, the musical outpourings of the Africans amidst precarity is a note of dissent to the political and social upheaval. This paper attempts to argue that the African music starting all the way from negro spirituals that resulted from their folk tradition and their slavery, is indeed a sound of resistance against the hardships that they faced during colonisation. Though the tone is of dissent, this musical movement bridges powerful divides across cultural and racial borders. As a result, people across the globe enjoys the rhythm without any barriers or boundaries. The music of the slaves has enslaved the minds of many. The power of music steers a middle course between the slaves and the political/social upheavals. Thus, the African music has travelled quite long in the musical world giving rise to many bands and artists. This paper argues the 'work songs' a type of negro spirituals as a social protest to the precarity of their times. Songs become a rhythmic resistance to ease their heavy burden as slaves. "Follow the drinking gourd....for your way to freedom."*

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I. INTRODUCTION

'Music speaks louder than words' African proverb Music is indeed a vital part of every single soul in Africa. People far and wide enjoy African music and the beats associated with it. This music which now emerges as a distinct type and eagerly awaited, underwent several pains and pangs for it to reach the present state. The African music goes all the way back to the folk culture of each community in Africa which is mostly seen on pictorial sources, written sources and other musical representations. Centuries of effort have paved way to this huge fan following culture. It is indeed quite interesting to view the songs that came about as a note of dissent or rather protest to their white masters. These protest in the music form gives rise to Spirituals or the work songs. The Negro spirituals one of the oldest forms of African music is the cry of their hearts and also a call to worship. They were of different kinds: cabin row songs, war songs and the work songs. Etymologically these originated on the basis of their work culture. Work as slaves at the cabins of ships, plantation and tobacco fields and any other work places. These songs were initially used as a mode of communication. This music permeates African life and mostly used ceremoniously to teach, guide, to tell stories, during life and death and not the least to provide political guidance and to express discontent. To the well-known acapellas, jazz, blues that we know of today, one has to go back to its past to search for the strenuous making of the music. This strain was undoubtedly not the birth of music with notes but rather the pains and pangs of the slaves which they blurted out loud that in turn took this melodious shape. The African culture encompassed this melody into their everyday lives and leads them to live on amidst their precarious lives.

Music is a form of communication and it plays a functional role in African society. It expresses the mood of the people and evokes emotion. The beat of the African drum which is also a vital part of the music culture is the 'heartbeat' of the community. The voice of the Slaves paved its way to the well-known culture of music, they were never heard of when they started as slaves, their voice and cries.

According to a famous blues singer George Higgs "Most of all these North Carolina blues singers are singing experienced things. If they didn't live that, somebody they know lived it. That's what most of their songs are made up of, life experience." It is an acknowledged fact that African music has undergone frequent and decisive changes throughout the centuries. What is termed traditional today may differ from what it has been during the former times. The individual music of each ethnic group had its own notable landmarks.

African-American work songs originally developed in the era of captivity, between the 17th and 19th centuries. Because they were part of an almost entirely oral culture, they had no fixed form and only began to be recorded as the era of slavery came to an end after 1865. Slave Songs of the United States was the first collection of African-American "slave songs." It was published in 1867 by William Francis Allen, Charles

Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. Many songs sung by enslaved individuals is seen as a means of withstanding hardship and expressing anger and frustration through creativity or covert verbal opposition. Similarly, work songs have been used as a form of rebellion and resistance.

A common feature of the work songs was the call and response format, a leader would sing a verse followed by the chorus by others. This came from African traditions of agricultural work song and found its way into the spirituals, developed when Africans in bondage began to convert to Christianity and moved towards gospel music and finally leading to the blues. The call and response format were mostly dialogues or conversations between them. The importance of dialogue is illuminated in many African American traditions and continues to the present day, mostly the acapellas. In early African captivity drums were used to provide rhythm, but they were banned in later years because of the fear that Africans would use them to communicate in a rebellion; nevertheless, they managed to generate percussion and percussive sounds, using other instruments and mostly their bodies as instruments.

Corn fields was a very common subject of work songs on a typical plantation. Because the crop was the main component of most Africans' diet, they would often sing about it regardless of whether it was being harvested. Often, communities in the south would hold "corn-shucking jubilees," during which an entire community of planters would gather on one plantation. The planters would bring their harvests, as well as their enslaved workers, and work such as shucking corn, rolling logs, or threshing rice would be done, accompanied by the singing of Africans doing work. The following is an example of a song Africans would sing as they approached one of these festivals. It is from ex bonded African William Brown's memoir "My Southern Home."

All them pretty gals will be there,
Shuck that corn before you eat;
They will fix it for us rare,
Shuck that corn before you eat.
I know that supper will be big,
Shuck that corn before you eat;
I think I smell a fine roast pig,
Shuck that corn before you eat.

Work songs were used by rail road workers and by those rowing boats. Anne Kimzey of the Alabama Centre For Traditional Culture writes: "All-black gandy dancer crews used songs and chants as tools to help accomplish specific tasks and to send coded messages to each other so as not to be understood by the foreman and others.

Singing as a form of communication is deeply rooted in the African American culture. It began with the African slaves who were kidnapped and shipped across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. Slaves from different countries, tribes and cultures used singing as a way to communicate during the voyage. Music was a way for slaves to express their feelings. Songs were passed down from generation to generation throughout slavery.

These songs were influenced by African and religious traditions and would later form the basis for what is known as "Negro Spirituals". Col. Thomas W. Higginson of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment recognized the term Negro Spiritual in the Atlantic Monthly (June 1867). One of the songs of the Underground Railroad was "Wade in the Water". While it hasn't been proven, it is believed that Harriett Tubman used this traditional Negro Spiritual as a way to warn slaves to get into the water to hide their scent from the slavecatching dogs on their trail.

Wade in the water, wade in the water children
Wade in the water,

God's gonna trouble the water..... Kenyatta D. Berry

Spirituals have played a pivotal role as vehicles for protest at several points during the 20th and the 21st centuries. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, spirituals as well as Gospel songs supported the efforts of civil rights activists. Freedom songs based on spirituals have also helped to overcome struggles towards democracy in many other countries around the world including Russia, Eastern Europe, China and South Africa. This protest has even paved way for many of the popular pop artists to bring in their new creation as a sound of protest. One good example is that of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" and Billy Bragg's "Sing their souls back home." As stated, spirituals are a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African people in the American South. The songs proliferated in the last few decades of the 18th century leading up to the abolishment of legalized slavery in the 1860s. The Negro Spirituals constitutes one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong.

Spirituals that is mostly regarded as codified protest songs were mostly seen as in incitements to slavery. Because 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. Hard evidence is difficult to come by because assisting slaves to freedom was illegal. A

spiritual that was certainly used as a code for escape to freedom was "Go down, Moses," used by Harriet Tubman to identify herself to slaves who might want to flee north.

At this juncture it is equally important to look into the blues music which was influenced by the work songs or the spirituals. The blues lyrics often deal with personal adversity and is dealt with a mixture of emotions. The blues is also about overcoming hard luck, saying what you feel, ridding yourself of frustration, letting your hair down, and simply having fun. The best blues is visceral, cathartic, and starkly emotional. From unbridled joy to deep sadness, no form of music communicates more genuine emotion. Exactly similar kind of emotions that we find in the work songs written as a protest to their masters.

History of the blues music shows that it has deep roots in American history, particularly African-American history. The blues originated on Southern plantations in the 19th Century. Its inventors were slaves, ex-slaves and the descendants of slaves African-American sharecroppers who sang as they toiled in the cotton and corn fields. It's generally accepted that the music evolved from African spirituals, African chants, work songs. The blues grew up in the Mississippi Delta just upriver from New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. Today there are many different shades of the blues such as Traditional county blues, Jump blues, Boogie-woogie, Chicago blues, Delta blues, Cool blues, West Coast blues and many others in line. Blues came into its own as an important part of the country's relatively new national popular culture in the 1920s with the recording, first, of the great female classic blues singers and, then, of the country folk blues singers of the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont of the Carolinas, and Texas.

The blues is the story of the frustrations, of violence and oppression, of the desperation, and of the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. What is often called the black soul is a white man's artefact. Frantz Fanon in his 'Black Skin, White Masks' states that among the many factors that contributed to the emergence of Blues music and, to the development of Afro-American culture, the experience of slavery is, due to its traumatic and, as well as emotionally devastating consequences, and indeed is one of the most relevant aspects that influenced the birth of a new form of expression. The plight of black Americans was set to music with a beat that enticed people to listen, not only to the rhythm, but the lyrics. It was the lyrics that told them how to act, and what to think about their social conditions. The blues is the commentary on one's sadness and inability to change, or in some cases, to change the state of one's affairs, as well as that of a group of people. It was rather a tool of resistance and an avenue toward freedom, self-empowerment, self-definition and independence, self-knowledge and transformation for the listeners.

The thrill is gone

It's gone away from me

The thrill is gone away baby

It's gone away for good B. B. King

This paper attempts to argue the Negro Spirituals or the work songs to be a tone of resistance. African Music which indeed is the soul of every Africans has also broken the cultural and racial boundaries. The melody and the words that they sang from their heart was more or less a sound of dissent. Music was a tool of resistance to all their frustrations, disappointments which was the effect of slavery. The work songs and the blues music, were a protest to the social that prevailed in the society. The words and the rhythmic drum beats were perhaps the only way in which they could carry out as a tone of dissent. And it is this protest which also moved them towards their freedom just as Martin Luther King had dreamt of. Without any social class barriers every single soul enjoys the African music and the beats. Yes, Bob Marley rightly stated, "I believe that racism, hatred and evil can be healed with music." A tremendous healing infact! Because Music speaks louder than words.

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