

By **STERLING BROWN**

Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs

The Spirituals

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON, one of the very first to pay respectful attention to the Negro spiritual, called it a startling flower growing in dark soil. Using his figure, we might think of this flower as a hybrid, as the American Negro is a hybrid. And though flowers of its family grew in Africa, Europe, and other parts of America, this hybrid bloom is uniquely beautiful.

A large amount of recent scholarship has proved that the spirituals are not African, either in music or meaning (a claim made once with partisan zeal), that the American Negro was influenced by the religious music of rural America from the Great Awakening on, that at the frontier camp meetings he found to his liking many tunes both doleful and brisk, and that he took over both tunes and texts and refashioned them more to his taste. But careful musicologists, from studying phonograph records of folk singing rather than, as earlier, inadequate, conventional notations of "art" spirituals, are coming around to the verdict of Alan Lomax that "no amount of scholarly analysis and discussion can ever make a Negro spiritual sound like a white spiritual."

A new music, yes. But what of the poetry? Scholars have discovered that many phrases, lines, couplets, and even whole stanzas and songs, once thought to be Negro spirituals, were popular in white camp meetings. A full comparison of the words of white and Negro spirituals is out of the question here. It might be said that some of the parallels turn out to be tangents. Thus, "At his table we'll sit down, Christ will gird himself and serve us with sweet manna all around" is supposed to be the white source of "Gwine to sit down at the welcome table, gwine to feast off milk and honey," and "To hide yourself in the mountain top, to hide yourself from God" is supposed to have become "Went down to the rocks to hide my face, the rocks cried out no hiding place." Even when single lines were identical, the Negro made telling changes in the stanza. Briefly, the differences seem to result from a looser line, less tyrannized over by meter and rhyme, with the accent shifted unpredictably, from a more liberal use of refrains, and from imagery that is terser and starker. The improvising imagination seems freer. Some of the changes of words arose from confusion: "Paul and Silas bound in jail" has been sung:

“bounded Cyrus born in jail;” and “I want to cross over into campground” has been sung as “I want to cross over in a calm time.” Some of the changes, however, result from the truly poetic imagination at work on material deeply felt and pondered: “Tone de bell easy, Jesus gonna make up my dying bed.” “I’ll lie in de grave and stretch out my arms, when I lay dis body down.” “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus. Steal away, steal away home; I ain’t got long to stay here.”

Many spirituals tell of the joys of Christian fellowship. “Ain’t you glad you got out de wilderness?” “I been bawn of God, no condemnation; no condemnation in my soul.” “I been down in the valley; Never turn back no mo.’”

I went down in the valley to pray
My soul got happy and I stayed all day.

“Just like a tree, planted by the waters, I shall not be moved.” Belonging to the glorious company, the slaves found comfort, protection. Sinners would find no hole in the ground, but those of the true faith had “a hiding place, around the throne of God.” “I got a home in that rock, don’t you see?” “In God’s bosom gonna be my pillow.” Their souls were witnesses for their Lord. “Done done my duty; Got on my travelin’ shoes.” “I done crossed the separatin’ line; I done left the world behind.”

The world could be left behind in visions.

I’ve got two wings for to veil my face
I’ve got two wings for to fly away. . . .

Gabriel and his trumpet caught the imagination. “Where will you be when the first trumpet sounds; sounds so loud its gonna wake up the dead?” “O My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall!” “When the sun refuse to shine, when the moon goes down in blood!” In that great getting up morning, “you see the stars a falling, the forked lightning, the coffins bursting, the righteous marching.” “The blind will see, the dumb will talk; the deaf will hear; the lame will walk.” This apocalyptic imagery, clear to the initiated, is a release, a flight, a message in code, frequently used by oppressed people.

Then they’ll cry out for cold water
While the Christians shout in glory
Saying Amen to their damnation
Fare you well, fare you well.

It was not only to the far-off future of Revelations that the dreams turned. Heaven was a refuge too. In contrast to the shacks of slave row and the slums of the cities, to the work clothes and the unsavory victuals, would be the throne of God, the streets of gold, the harps, the robes, the milk and honey.

A-settin’ down with Jesus
Eatin’ honey and drinkin’ wine
Marchin’ round de throne
Wid Peter, James, and John. . . .

But the dream was not always so extravagant. Heaven promised simple satisfactions, but they were of great import to the slaves. Shoes for instance, as well as a harp. Heaven meant home: "I'm gonna feast at de welcome table." Heaven meant rest: just sitting down was one of the high privileges often mentioned. And acceptance as a person: "I'm going to walk and talk with Jesus." Moreover, the Heaven of escape is not a Heaven bringing forgetfulness of the past. The River Jordan is not Lethe.

I'm gonna tell God all my troubles,
When I get home . . .
I'm gonna tell him the road was rocky
When I get home.

The makers of the spirituals, looking toward heaven, found their triumphs there. But they did not blink their eyes to the troubles here. As the best expression of the slaves' deepest thoughts and yearnings, they speak with convincing finality against the legend of contented slavery. This world was not their home. "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home." They never tell of joy in the "good old days." The only joy in the spirituals is in dreams of escape.

That the spirituals were otherworldly, then, is less than half-truth. In more exact truth, they tell of this life, of "rollin' through an unfriendly world." "Oh, bye and bye, bye and bye, I'm going to lay down this heavy load." "My way is cloudy." "Oh, stand the storm, it won't be long, we'll anchor by and by." "Lord keep me from sinking down." And there is that couplet of tragic intensity:

Don't know what my mother wants to stay here fuh,
Dis ole world ain't been no friend to huh.

Out of the workaday life came figures of speech: "Keep a-inchin' along lak a po' inch-worm"; such a couplet as:

Better mind that sun and see how she run
And mind! Don't let her catch you wid yo' work undone.

And such an allegory: "You hear de lambs a-crying; oh, shepherd, feed-a my sheep." Out of folk wisdom came: "Oh de ole sheep, they know de road; young lambs gotta find de way," and "Ole Satan is like a snake in the grass."

Sister, you better watch how you walk on the cross
Yo' foot might slip, and' yo' soul git lost.

The spirituals make an anthology of Biblical heroes and tales, from Genesis where Adam and Eve are in the Garden, picking up leaves, to John's calling the roll in Revelations. There are numerous gaps, of course, and many repetitions. Certain figures are seen in an unusual light; Paul, for instance, is generally bound in jail with Silas, to the exclusion of the rest of his busy career. Favored heroes are Noah, chosen of God to ride down the flood; Samson, who tore those buildings down; Joshua, who caused the walls of Jericho to fall (when the rams' lambs' sheephorns began to blow); Jonah, symbol of hard luck changed at last;

and Job, the man of tribulation who still would not curse his God. These are victors over odds. But losers, the wretched and despised, also serve as symbols. There is Lazarus, "poor as I, don't you see?" who went to heaven, in contrast to "Rich man Dives, who lived so well; when he died he found a home in hell." And finally there is Blind Barnabas, whose tormented cry found echoes in slave cabins down through the long, dark years:

Oh de blind man stood on de road an' cried
Cried, "Lord, oh, Lord, save-a po' me!"

In telling the story of Jesus, spirituals range from the tender "Mary had a little baby" and "Little Boy, how old are you" to the awe-inspiring "Were You There" and "He Never Said A Mumbalin' Word." Jesus is friend and brother, loving counselor, redeemer, Lord and King. The Negro slave's picturing of Calvary in such lines as

Dey whupped him up de hill . . .
Dey crowned his head with thorns . . .
Dey pierced him in de side,
An' de blood come a-twinklin' down;
But he never said a mumbalin' word;
Not a word; not a word.

belongs with the greatest Christian poetry. It fused belief and experience; it surged up from most passionate sympathy and understanding.

Some scholars who have found parallels between the words of Negro and white spirituals would have us believe that when the Negro sang of freedom, he meant only what the whites meant, namely freedom from sin. Free, individualistic whites on the make in a prospering civilization, nursing the American dream, could well have felt their only bondage to be that of sin, and freedom to be religious salvation. But with the drudgery, the hardships, the auction-block, the slave-mart, the shackles, and the lash so literally present in the Negro's experience, it is hard to imagine why for the Negro they would remain figurative. The scholars certainly do not make it clear, but rather take refuge in such dicta as: "The slave did not contemplate his low condition." Are we to believe that the slave singing "I been rebuked, I been scorned; done had a hard time sho's you bawn," referred to his being outside of the true religion? Ex-slaves, of course, inform us differently. The spirituals speak up strongly for freedom not only from sin (dear as that freedom was to the true believer) but from physical bondage. Those attacking slavery as such had to be as rare as anti-Hitler marching songs in occupied France. But there were oblique references. Frederick Douglass has told us of the double-talk of the spirituals: Canaan, for instance, stood for Canada; and over and beyond hidden satire the songs also were grapevines for communications. Harriet Tubman, herself called the Moses of her people, has told us that *Go Down, Moses* was tabu in the slave states, but the people sang it nonetheless.

Fairly easy allegories identified Egypt-land with the South, Pharaoh with the masters, the Israelites with themselves and Moses with their leader. "So Moses smote de water and the children all passed over; Children, ain't you glad that they drowned that sinful army?"

Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you moan;
Pharaoh's army got drowned,
Oh, Mary, don't you weep.

Some of the references were more direct:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
And why not every man?

In the wake of the Union army and in the contraband camps spirituals of freedom sprang up suddenly. The dry grass was ready for the quickening flame. Some celebrated the days of Jubilo: "O Freedom; O Freedom!, And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave! And go home to my Lord and be free." Some summed up slavery starkly: "No more driver's lash for me, no more, no more. . . . No more peck of corn for me; Many thousand go." "Slavery's chain done broke at last; gonna praise God till I die." And in all likelihood old spirituals got new meanings: "Ain't you glad you got out the wilderness?" "In That Great Gittin' Up Morning!" "And the moon went down in blood."

The best of the spirituals are, in W. E. B. DuBois's phrase, "the sorrow-songs of slavery." In spite of indifference and resentment from many educated and middle class Negroes, the spirituals are still sung, circulated, altered and created by folk Negroes. Some of the new ones, started in the backwoods, have a crude charm; for instance Joseph and Mary in Jersusalem "to pay their poll-taxes," find the little boy Jesus in the temple confounding with his questions the county doctor, lawyer, and judge. Some of them mix in more recent imagery: "Death's little black train is coming!" "If I have my ticket, Lord, can I ride?" and a chant of death in which the refrain "Same train. Same train" is repeated with vivid effect:

Same train took my mother.
Same train. Same train.

Some use modern inventions with strained incongruity: "Jus' call up Central in Heaven, tell Jesus to come to the phone," and "Jesus is my aeroplane, He holds the whole world in his hands"; and "Standing in the Safety Zone." But there is power in some of the new phrasing:

God's got your number; He knows where you live;
Death's got a warrant for you.

Instead of college choirs, as earlier, today it is groups closer to the folk like the Golden Gates, the Silver Echoes, the Mitchell Christian Singers, the Coleman Brothers, the Thrasher Wonders and the Original Harmony Kings, who carry the spirituals over the land. These groups and soloists like the Georgia Peach, Mahalia Jackson, Marie Knight and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, once churched for worldly ways but now re-

deemed, are extremely popular in churches, concert halls, and on records. They swing the spirituals, using a more pronounced rhythm and jazz voicing (some show-groups, alas, imitate even the Mills Brothers and the Ink Spots). Even the more sincere singers, however, fight the devil by using what have been considered the devil's weapons. Tambourines, cymbals, trumpets and even trombones and bass fiddles are now accepted in some churches. The devil has no right to all that fine rhythm, so a joyful noise is made unto the Lord with bounce and swing.

The Gospel Songs, sung "out of the book" as signs of "progress," are displacing the spirituals among the people. These are even more heavily influenced by jazz and the blues. One of the most popular composers of Gospel Songs is Thomas Dorsey, who once played barrelhouse piano under the alias of Georgia Tom. Many lovers of the older spirituals disdain the Gospel Songs as cheap and obvious. But this new urban religious folk music should not be dismissed too lightly. It is vigorously alive with its own musical values, and America turns no unwilling ear to it. And to hear some fervent congregations sing "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," "He Knows How Much You Can Bear," and "We Sure Do Need Him Now" can be unforgettable musical experiences. In sincerity, musical manner, and spirit, they are probably not so remote from the old prayer songs in the brush arbors.

Seculars and Ballads

The slaves had many other moods and concerns than the religious; indeed some of these ran counter to the spirituals. Irreverent parodies of religious songs, whether coming from the black-face minstrelsy or from tough-minded cynical slaves, passed current in the quarters. Other-worldliness was mocked: "I don't want to ride no golden chariot; I don't want no golden crown; I want to stay down here and be, Just as I am without one plea." "Live a humble to the Lord" was changed to "Live a humbug." Bible stories, especially the creation, the fall of Man, and the flood, were spoofed. "Reign, Master Jesus, reign" became "Rain, Mosser, rain hard! Rain flour and lard and a big hog head, Down in my back yard." After couplets of nonsense and ribaldry, slaves sang with their fingers crossed, or hopeless in defeat: "Po' mourner, you shall be free, when de good Lord set you free."

Even without the sacrilege, many secular songs were considered "devil-tunes." Especially so were the briskly syncopated lines which, with the clapping of hands and the patting of feet, set the beat for swift, gay dancing. "Juba dis, Juba dat; Juba skin a yeller cat; Juba, Juba!" Remnants of this syncopation are today in such children's play songs as

"Did you feed my cow?" "Yes, Maam."

"Will you tell-a me how?" "Yes, Maam."

"Oh, what did you give her?" "Cawn and hay."

"Oh, what did you give her?" "Cawn and hay."

Verses for reels made use of the favorite animals of the fables. "Brer Rabbit, Brer Rabbit, yo' eare mighty long; Yes, My Lord, they're put on wrong; Every little soul gonna shine; every little soul gonna shine!" Often power and pomp in the guise of the bullfrog and bulldog have the tables turned on them by the sassy blue-jay and crow:

A bullfrog dressed in soldier's clothes
Went in de field to shoot some crows,
De crows smell powder and fly away,
De bullfrog mighty mad dat day.

Even the easy going ox or sheep or hog acquired characteristics:

De ole sow say to de boar
I'll tell you what let's do,
Let's go and git dat broad-axe
And die in de pig-pen too.
Die in de pig-pen fighting,
Die wid a bitin' jaw!

Unlike Stephen Foster's sweet and sad¹ songs such as "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," the folk seculars looked at slavery ironically. And where Foster saw comic nonsense, they added satiric point. Short comments flash us back to social reality: "Ole Master bought a yaller gal, He bought her from the South"; "My name's Ran, I wuks in de sand, I'd rather be a nigger dan a po' white man." Frederick Douglass remembers his fellow slaves singing "We raise de wheat, dey gib us de corn; We sift de meal, de gib us de huss; We peel de meat, dey gib us de skin; An dat's de way dey take us in."² Grousing about food is common: "Milk in the dairy getting mighty old, Skippers and the mice working mighty bold. . . . A long-tailed rat an' a bowl of souse, Jes' come down from de white folk's house." With robust humor, they laughed even at the dread patrollers:

Run, nigger, run, de patterollers will ketch you
Run, nigger, run; its almost day.
Dat nigger run, dat nigger flew;
Dat nigger tore his shirt in two.

The bitterest secular begins:

My ole Mistis promise me
Fo' she died, she'd set me free;
She lived so long dat her head got bald,
And she give out de notion dyin' at all.

Ole marster also failed his promise. Then, with the sharp surprise of the best balladry: "A dose of poison helped him along, May de devil preach his funeral song!"

Under a certain kind of protection the new freedmen took to heart the songs of such an abolitionist as Henry C. Work, and sang exultantly of jubilo. They sang his lines lampooning ole master, and turned out their own:

¹ Thomas Talley, *Negro Folk Rhymes* (New York, 1922), p. 39.

² Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times* (Hartford, Conn., 1882), p. 39.

Missus and mosser a-walkin' de street,
 Deir hands in deir pockets and nothin' to eat.
 She'd better be home a-washin' up de dishes,
 An' a-cleanin' up de ole man's raggitty britches. . . .³

But when the protection ran out, the freedmen found the following parody too true:

Our father, who is in heaven,
 White man owe me eleven and pay me seven,
 Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
 And if I hadn't took that, I wouldn't had none.

Toward the end of the century, there was interplay between the folk-seculars and the vaudeville stage, and the accepted stereotypes appeared. "Ain't no use my working so hard, I got a gal in the white folks yard." From tent shows and roving guitar players, the folks accepted such hits as the "Bully Song" and the "coon-songs." "Bill Bailey, Won't You Please Come Home," and "Alabama Bound" shuttled back and forth between the folk and vaudeville. In the honky-tonks ribald songs grew up to become standbys of the early jazz: "Make Me a Pallet on The Floor," "Bucket Got A Hole In It," "Don't you leave me here; if you must go, baby, leave me a dime for beer." "Jelly Roll" Morton's autobiography, now released from the Library of Congress Archives, proves this close connection between the rising jazz and the old folk seculars. In the honky-tonks, songs handled sex freely, even licentiously; and obscenity and vituperation ran rampant in songs called the "dirty dozens."

One of the heroes of secular balladry is Uncle Bud, who was noted for his sexual prowess, a combination Don Juan and John Henry. His song is perhaps as uncollected as it is unprintable. Appreciative tales are told of railroading, of crack trains like The Cannon Ball and The Dixie Flyer, and The Rock Island Line, which is praised in rattling good verses. Such folk delights as hunting with the yipping and baying of the hounds and the yells and cheering of the hunters are vividly recreated. "Old Dog Blue" has been memorialized over all of his lop-eared kindred. The greatest trailer on earth, Old Blue keeps his unerring sense in heaven; there he treed a possum in Noah's ark. When Old Dog Blue died,

I dug his grave wid a silver spade
 I let him down wid a golden chain
 And every link I called his name;
 Go on Blue, you good dog, you!

The above lines illustrate a feature of Negro folksong worth remarking. Coming from an old sea-chantey "Stormalong," their presence in a song about a hunting dog show the folk habit of lifting what they want and using it how they will. Like southern white groups, the Negro has retained many of the old Scotch-English ballads. Still to be found are Negroes singing "In London town where I was born" and going on to tell

³ Talley, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

of hard-hearted Barbara Allen. John Lomax found a Negro mixing up "Bobby Allen" with the cowboy song "The Streets of Laredo," burying "Miss Allen in a desert of New Mexico with six pretty maidens all dressed in white for her pallbearers."⁴ But Negroes hand down fairly straight versions of "Lord Lovel," "Pretty Polly," and "The Hangman's Tree," which has special point for them with its repetend: "Hangman, hangman, slack on the line." The Elizabethan broadside "The Frog Went A-Courtin'" has long been a favorite Negro lullaby. From "The Lass of Roch Royal" two stanzas beginning "Who's gonna shoe yo' little feet" have found their way into the ballad of John Henry. The famous Irish racehorse Stewball reappears in Negro balladry as Skewball and Kimball. English nonsense refrains appear in songs like "Keemo-Kimo" and "Old Bangum." Even the Gaelic "Schule Aroon" has been found among Negroes, though the collector unwarily surmises it to be Guinea or Ebo. Similarly the Negro folk singer lends to and borrows from American balladry. "Casey Jones," though about an engineer, is part of the repertory; it has been established that a Negro engine-wiper was the first author of it. "Frankie and Johnnie," the most widely known tragedy in America, is attributed to both white and Negro authorship. It could come from either; it probably comes from both; the tenderloin cuts across both sections. Current singers continue the trading of songs: Leadbelly sings cowboy songs, yelling "Ki-yi-yippy-yippy-yay" with his own zest; and Josh White sings "Molly Malone" and "Randall, My Son" with telling power. But it is in narratives of their own heroes that Negro ballad makers have done best.

Prominent among such heroes are fugitives who outtrick and outspeed the law. "Travelin' Man" is more of a coon-song than authentically folk, but the hero whom the cops chased from six in the morning till seven the next afternoon has been warmly adopted by the people. Aboard the Titanic he spied the iceberg and dove off, and "When the old Titanic ship went down, he was shooting crap in Liverpool." More genuine is "Long Gone, Lost John" in which the hero outmatches the sheriff, the police, and the bloodhounds: "The hounds ain't caught me and they never will." Fast enough to hop the Dixie Flyer — "he missed the cow-catcher but he caught the blind" — Lost John can even dally briefly with a girl friend, like Brer Rabbit waiting for Brer Tortoise. But when he travels, he goes far: "the funniest thing I ever seen, was Lost John comin' through Bowlin' Green," but "the last time I seed him he was jumping into Mexico."

When Lost John "doubled up his fist and knocked the police down" his deed wins approval from the audience as much as his winged heels do. With bitter memories and suspicion of the law, many Negroes admire outlaws. Some are just tough killers; one is "a bad, bad man from bad, bad

⁴ John Lomax, *Adventure of A Ballad Hunter* (New York, 1947), p. 179.

land"; another is going to start "a graveyard all of his own"; another, Roscoe Bill, who sleeps with one ear out because of the rounders about, reports to the judge blandly that

I didn't quite kill him, but I fixed him so dis mornin'
 He won't bodder wid me no mo'
 Dis mornin', dis evenin', so soon.

But the favorites, like such western desperadoes as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and Sam Bass, stand up against the law. Railroad Bill (an actual outlaw of southern Alabama) "shot all the buttons off the sheriff's coat." On the manhunt, "the policemen dressed in blue, come down the street two by two." It took a posse to bring him in dead. Po' Lazarus also told the deputy to his face that he had never been arrested "by no one man, Lawd, Lawd, by no one man." Unlike his Biblical namesake in nature, Po' Lazarus broke into the commissary. The high sheriff sent the deputy to bring him back, dead or alive. They found him "way out between two mountains" and they "blowed him down."

They shot Po' Lazarus, shot him with a great big number
 Number 45, Lawd, Lawd, number 45.

They laid Po' Lazarus on the commissary counter, and walked away. His mother, always worrying over the trouble she had with Lazarus, sees the body and cries.

Dat's my only son, Lawd, Lawd, dat's my only son.

In contrast "Stackolee" ends on a hard note. At Stack's murder trial, his lawyer pleads for mercy because his aged mother is lying very low. The prosecutor states that

Stackolee's aged mammy
 Has been dead these 'leven years.

Starting from a murder in Memphis in a dice game (some say over a Stetson Hat), Stackolee's saga has travelled from the Ohio River to the Brazos; in a Texas version, Stack goes to hell, challenges the devil to a duel — pitchfork versus forty-one revolver — and then takes over the lower world.

One of America's greatest ballads tells of John Henry. Based on the strength and courage of an actual hammer-swinging giant, though in spite of what folk-singers say, his hammer cannot be seen decorating the Big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. Road, John Henry reflects the struggle of manual labor against the displacing machine. The ballad starts with ill omens. Even as a boy John Henry prophesies his death at the Big Bend Tunnel. But he stays to face it out. Pitting his brawn and stamina against the new-fangled steam drill, John Henry says to his captain:

A man ain't nothing but a man.
 But before I'll let that steam driver beat me down
 I'll die with my hammer in my hand.

The heat of the contest makes him call for water (in one variant for

tom-cat gin). When John Henry is momentarily overcome, his woman, Polly Ann, spelled him, hammering "like a natural man." At one crucial point, John Henry gave "a loud and lonesome cry," saying, "A hammer'll be the death of me." But the general tone is self confidence. John Henry throws the hammer from his hips on down, "Great gawd amighty how she rings!" He warns his shaker (the holder of the drill) that if ever he misses that piece of steel, "tomorrow'll be yo' burial day." His captain, hearing the mighty rumbling, thinks the mountain must be caving in. John Henry says to the captain: "It's my hammer swinging in the wind." Finally he defeats the drill, but the strain kills him. The people gather round, but all he asks is "a cool drink of water 'fo I die." Polly Ann swears to be true to the memory (although in another version she turns out to be as fickle as Mrs. Casey Jones). John Henry was buried near the railroad where

Every locomotive come a-roarin' by
Says, "There lies a steel-drivin' man, Lawd, Lawd;
There lies a steel-drivin' man."

The topical nature of American balladry is seen in "Boll Weevil," a ballad that grew up almost as soon as the swarm of pests descended. "Come up from Mexico, they say."

The first time I seed the boll weevil
He was sitting on the square —

(The folk poet puns on the "square" of the cotton boll, and the familiar southern town square.) A tough little rascal is celebrated who, when buried in the hot sand, says "I can stand it like a man"; when put into ice, says: "This is mighty cool and nice," and thrives and breeds right on, until finally he can take over:

You better leave me alone
I done et up all your cotton,
And now I'll start on your corn.

The ballad has grim side glances; the boll weevil didn't leave "the farmer's wife but one old cotton dress"; made his nest in the farmer's "best Sunday hat"; and closed the church doors since the farmer couldn't pay the preacher.

Oh, de Farmer say to de Merchant
I ain't made but only one bale
An' befo' I bring you dat one
I'll fight an' go to jail
I'll have a home
I'll have a home.

The stanzaic forms and general structure of "John Henry" and "The Boll Weevil" are fairly developed. One of the best folk ballads, however, is in the simpler, unrhymed African leader-chorus design. This is "The Grey Goose," a ballad about a seemingly ordinary fowl who becomes a symbol of ability to take it. It is a song done with the highest spirits;

the "Lord, Lord, Lord" of the responding chorus expressing amazement, flattery, and good-humored respect for the tough bird:

Well, last Monday mornin'
 Lord, Lord, Lord!
 Well, last Monday mornin'
 Lord, Lord, Lord!

They went hunting for the grey goose. When shot "Boo-loom!" the grey goose was six weeks a-falling. Then it was six weeks a-finding, and once in the white house, was six weeks a-picking. Even after the great feather-picking he was six months parboiling. And then on the table, the forks couldn't stick him; the knife couldn't cut him. So they threw him in the hog-pen where he broke the sow's jawbone. Even in the sawmill, he broke the saw's teeth out. He was indestructible. Last seen the grey goose was flying across the ocean, with a long string of goslings, all going "Quank-quink-quank." Yessir, it was one hell of a gray goose. Lord, Lord, Lord!

Work Songs and Social Protest

More work songs come from the Negro than from any other American folk group. Rowing the cypress dug-outs in Carolina low-country, slaves timed their singing to the long sweep of the oars. The leader, a sort of coxswain, chanted verse after verse; the rowers rumbled a refrain. On the docks Negroes sang sailors' chanteys as metronomes to their heaving and hauling. Some chanteys, like "Old Stormy," they took over from the white seamen; others they improvised. Along the Ohio and Mississippi waterfronts Negro roustabouts created "coonjine" songs, so-called after the shuffling dance over bucking gang-planks in and out of steamboat holds. Unless the rhythm was just right a roustabout and his bale or sack of cottonseed might be jolted into the brown waters. The singers cheered the speed of the highballing paddlewheelers: "left Baton Rouge at half pas' one, and got to Vicksburg at settin of de sun." But they griped over the tough captains "workin' hell out of me" and sang

Ole Roustabout ain't got no home
 Makes his livin' on his shoulder bone.

For release from the timber and the heavy sacks there was always some city around the bend — Paducah, Cairo, Memphis, Natchez, and then

Alberta let yo' hair hang low . . .
 I'll give you mo' gold
 Than yo' apron can hold . . .
 Alberta let yo' hair hang low.

These songs flourished in the hey-day of the packets; today they are nearly lost.

Another type of work song was chanted as a gang unloaded steel rails. Since these rails weighed over a ton apiece and were over ten yards long, any break in the rhythm of lifting them from the flat cars to the ground was a good way to get ruptured, maimed, or killed. So a

chanter was employed to time the hoisting, lowering, and the getting away from it. He was a coach, directing the teamwork, and in self-protection the men had to learn his rhythmic tricks. In track-lining, a similar chanter functioned to keep the track straight in line. As he called, the men jammed their bars under the rails and braced in unison:

Shove it over! Hey, hey, can't you line it!
 Ah shack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-a-lack-alack (Grunt)
 Can't you move it? Hey, hey, can't you try.⁵

As they caught their breath and got a new purchase, he turned off a couplet. Then came the shouted refrain as the men strained together.

More widely spread and known are the Negro work songs whose rhythm is timed with the swing back and down and the blow of broad-axe, pick, hammer, or tamper. The short lines are punctuated by a grunt as the axe bites into the wood, or the hammer finds the spike-head.

Dis ole hammer — hunh
 Ring like silver — hunh (3)
 Shine like gold, baby — hunh
 Shine like gold — hunh.

The leader rings countless changes in his words and melody over the unchanging rhythm. When he grows dull or forgets, another singer takes over. The song is consecutive, fluid; it is doubtful if any one version is ever exactly repeated. Ballads, blues, even church-songs are levied on for lines, a simple matter since the stanzas are unrhymed. Some lines tell of the satisfaction of doing a man's work well:

I got a rainbow — hunh
 Tied 'round my shoulder — hunh — (3)
 Tain't gonna rain, baby — hunh
 Tain't gonna rain.

(The rainbow is the arc of the hammer as the sunlight glints on the moving metal.) Sometimes a singer boasts of being a "sun-down man," who can work the sun down without breaking down himself. Lines quite as popular, however, oppose any speed-up stretch-out system:

Dis ole hammer — hunh
 Killt John Henry — hunh — (3)
 Twon't kill me, baby — hunh
 Twon't kill me.

Some lines get close to the blues: "Every mail day / Gits a letter / Son, come home, baby / Son, come home." Sometimes they tell of a hard captain (boss)

Told my captain — hunh
 Hands are cold — hunh — (3)
 Damn yo' hands — hunh
 Let de wheelin' roll.

The new-fangled machine killed John Henry; its numerous offspring have killed the work songs of his buddies. No hammer song could com-

⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia, 1935), p. 322.

pete now with the staccato roaring drill even if the will to sing were there. The steamboat is coming back to the Mississippi but the winches and cranes do not call forth the old gang choruses. A few songs connected with work survive such as the hollers of the lonely worker in the fields and woods, or the call boy's chant to the glory-hole.

Sleeping good, sleeping good,
Give me them covers, I wish you would.

At ease from their work in their bunkhouses, the men may sing, but their fancies ramble from the job oftener than they stay with it. Song as a rhythmic accompaniment to work is declining. John and Alan Lomax, whose bag of Negro work songs is the fullest, had to go to the penitentiaries, where labor-saving devices were not yet numerous, in order to find the art thriving. They found lively cotton-picking songs:

A-pick a bale, a-pick a bale
Pick a bale of cotton
A-pick a bale, a-pick a bale
Pick a bale a day.⁶

Slower songs came from gangs that were cutting cane or chopping weeds or hewing timber. Prison work is of course mean and tough: "You oughta come on de Brazo in nineteen-fo'; you could find a dead man on every turn-row." So the convicts cry out to the taskmaster sun:

Go down, Ol' Hannah, doncha rise no mo'
Ef you rise any mo' bring judgment day.

They grouse about the food: ever "the same damn thing," and at that the cook isn't clean. An old evangelical stand-by, "Let the Light of the Lighthouse Shine On Me," becomes a hymn of hope that the Midnight Special, a fast train, will some day bring a pardon from the governor. They sing of their long sentences:

Ninety-nine years so jumpin' long
To be here rollin' an' cain' go home.

If women aren't to be blamed for it all, they are still to be blamed for a great deal:

Ain't but de one thing worries my min'
My cheating woman and my great long time.

One song, like the best balladry, throws a searchlight into the darkness:

"Little boy, what'd you do for to get so long?"
Said, "I killed my rider in the high sheriff's arms."

From these men — long-termers, lifers, three-time losers — come songs brewed in bitterness. This is not the double-talk of the slave seculars, but the naked truth of desperate men telling what is on their brooding minds. Only to collectors who have won their trust — such as the Lomaxes, Lawrence Gellert and Josh White — and only when the white captain is far enough away, do the prisoners confide these songs.

⁶ The Library of Congress, Music Division. Archive of American Folk Song for this and the following quotations.

Then they sing not loudly but deeply their hatred of the brutality of the chain-gang:

If I'd a had my weight in lime
I'd a whupped dat captain, till he went stone blind.

If you don't believe my buddy's dead
Just look at that hole in my buddy's head.⁷

A prisoner is told: "Don't you go worryin' about forty [the years of your sentence], Cause in five years you'll be dead."

They glorify the man who makes a crazy dare for freedom; Jimbo, for instance, who escapes almost under the nose of his captain, described as "a big Goliath," who walks like Samson and "totes his talker." They boast: "Ef ah git de drop / Ah'm goin' on / Dat same good way / Dat Jimbo's gone / Lawd, Lawd, Lawd."⁸ They reenact with graphic realism the lashing of a fellow-prisoner; the man-hunting of Ol' Rattler, "fastest and smellinest bloodhound in the South"; and the power of Black Betty, the ugly bull-whip. They make stark drama out of the pain, and hopelessness, and shame.

All I wants is dese cold iron shackles off my leg.

It is not only in the prison songs that there is social protest. Where there is some protection or guaranteed secrecy other *verboten* songs come to light. Coal miners, fortified by a strong, truculent union, sing grimly of the exorbitant company stores:

What's de use of me working any more, my baby? (2)
What's de use of me working any more,
When I have to take it up at de company store,
My baby? ⁹

Or they use the blues idiom with a new twist:

Operator will forsake you, he'll drive you from his do' . . .
No matter what you do, dis union gwine to stand by you
While de union growing strong in dis land.¹⁰

And the sharecroppers sharply phrase their plight:

Go in the store and the merchant would say,
'Your mortgage is due and I'm looking for my pay.'
Down in his pocket with a tremblin' hand
'Can't pay you all but I'll pay what I can,'
Then to the telephone the merchant made a call,
They'll put you on the chain-gang, an' you don't pay at all.¹¹

Big Bill Broonzy is best known as a blues singer, but in the cotton belt of Arkansas he learned a great deal that sank deep. His sharp "Black, Brown, and White Blues" has the new militancy built up on the sills of the old folksong. In an employment office, Big Bill sings. "They called

⁷ Josh White, *Chain Gang Songs* (Bridgeport, Conn., Columbia Recording Corporation), Set C-22.

⁸ Willis James, "Hyah Come De Cap'n," from Brown, Davis, and Lee, *The Negro Caravan* (New York, 1948), p. 469.

⁹ John and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* (New York, 1941), pp. 278-288.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

everybody's number / But they never did call mine." Then working side by side with a white man:

He was getting a dollar an hour
When I was making fifty cents.

Onto this new protest he ties an old vaudeville chorus, deepening the irony:

If you's black, ah brother,
Git back, git back, git back.¹²

Such songs, together with the blues composed by Waring Cuney and Josh White on poverty, hardship, poor housing and jim crow military service, come from conscious propagandists, not truly folk. They make use of the folk idiom in both text and music, however, and the folk listen and applaud. They know very well what Josh White is talking about in such lines as:

Great gawdamighty, folks feelin' bad
Lost everything they ever had.

Prospect

It is evident that Negro folk culture is breaking up. Where Negro met only with Negro in the black belt the old beliefs strengthened. But when mud traps give way to gravel roads, and black tops and even concrete highways with buses and jalopies and trucks lumbering over them, the world comes closer. The churches and schools, such as they are, struggle against some of the results of isolation, and the radio plays a part. Even in the backwoods, aerials are mounted on shanties that seem ready to collapse from the extra weight on the roof, or from a good burst of static against the walls. The phonograph is common, the television set is by no means unknown, and down at the four corners store, a juke-box gives out the latest jive. Rural folk closer to towns and cities may on Saturday jaunts even see an occasional movie, where a rootin'-tootin' Western gangster film introduces them to the advancements of civilization. Newspapers, especially the Negro press, give the people a sense of belonging to a larger world. Letters from their boys in the army, located in all corners of the world, and the tales of the returning veterans, true Marco Polos, also prod the inert into curiosity. Brer Rabbit and Old Jack no longer are enough. Increasingly in the churches the spirituals lose favor to singing out of the books or from broadsides, and city-born blues and jive take over the jook-joints.

The migration of the folk Negro to the cities, started by the hope for better living and schooling, and greater self-respect, quickened by the industrial demands of two world wars is sure to be increased by the new cotton picker and other man-displacing machines. In the city the folk become a submerged proletariat. Leisurely yarn-spinning, slow-paced aphoristic conversation become lost arts; jazzed-up gospel hymns

¹² *People's Songs*, Vol. 1, No. 10 (November, 1940), 9.

provide a different sort of release from the old spirituals; the blues reflect the distortions of the new way of life. Folk arts are no longer by the folk for the folk; smart businessmen now put them up for sale. Gospel songs often become show-pieces for radio slummers, and the blues become the double-talk of the dives. And yet, in spite of the commercializing, the folk roots often show a stubborn vitality. Just as the transplanted folk may show the old credulity, though the sophisticated impulse sends them to an American Indian for nostrums, or for fortune-telling to an East Indian "madame" with a turban around her head rather than to a mammy with a bandanna around her's; so the folk for all their disorganization may keep something of the fine quality of their old tales and songs. Assuredly even in the new gospel songs and blues much is retained of the phrasing and the distinctive musical manner. Finally, it should be pointed out that even in the transplanting, a certain kind of isolation — class and racial — remains. What may come of it, if anything, is unpredictable, but so far the vigor of the creative impulse has not been snapped, even in the slums.

Whatever may be the future of the folk Negro, American literature as well as American music is the richer because of his expression. Just as Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer were fascinated by the immense lore of their friend Jim, American authors have been drawn to Negro folk life and character. With varying authenticity and understanding, Joel Chandler Harris, Du Bose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Roark Bradford, Marc Connelly, E. C. L. Adams, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes have all made rewarding use of this material. Folk Negroes have themselves bequeathed a wealth of moving song, both religious and secular, of pithy folk-say and entertaining and wise folk-tales. They have settled characters in the gallery of American heroes; resourceful Brer Rabbit and Old Jack, and indomitable John Henry. They have told their own story so well that all men should be able to hear it and understand.

