

SLAVE MUSIC IN THE UNITED STATES BEFORE 1860

A Survey of Sources¹ (Part I)

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In 1867 a native of South Carolina summarized what she knew of the growth of Negro spirituals in a few words: "I believe they have no history or a very short one" (manuscript letter, Annie M. Bowen to Wendell P. Garrison, April 24, [1867] in Cornell University Library). Few people could have been expected to know more, for she was the daughter of a popular Charleston author, whose pictures of Negroes are accounted the most detailed and sympathetic written in the ante-bellum period. Her mother's name, Caroline Howard Gilman, will recur in the pages that follow. Now, after almost a century, the state of our knowledge still leaves much to be desired. Unchallenged facts are few; controversy and speculative theorizing, however lively, are not a wholly satisfying substitute. Despite the real contributions of such men as Gilbert Chase and Marshall Stearns, documentation is sketchy.

In hopes of finding a reasonable basis for further discussion, a search was begun for contemporary descriptions of slave music in travel accounts, slave narratives, missionary reports, letters, memoirs, fiction, and polemics on slavery, both for and against. There can be nothing final, of course, about this preliminary report. No one person could hope to scan every volume published before 1860, to say nothing of the germane material issued later. Manuscripts and newspapers were barely touched. And, as I arranged the findings, it soon became apparent that my rummaging had been more successful in some areas than in others.

The documents were chosen for their musical interest, omitting the words, which have attracted so many commentators, except for a few very early texts. Material reprinted in works on music and readily available will not be given, unless needed to clarify a line of development. In general, a chronological arrangement will be followed to 1800. After that date, as the records become more profuse, subject divisions will be used: sacred songs (the "spirituals"), the style of singing;

¹ The first day of this year, January 1, 1963, was the centennial of the date on which the Emancipation Proclamation was declared in effect by President Abraham Lincoln, thus officially adding the abolition of slavery to the objectives for which the Union fought. NORES does not intend to join, sheep-like, in the curious phenomenon of Civil War "celebrations," of which we have already had too many too soon; but it does herewith offer Mrs. Epstein's survey of ante-bellum sources on slave music in commemoration of the official abolition of slavery in the United States. Surely no one can read some of the sources cited in this survey of a hitherto neglected topic without feeling newly aware of the enormous psychological gap that had to be bridged, and thankful for the progress—however imperfect—that the intervening century has brought.

secular music, including corn songs, boat songs, "patting Juba," and instruments; restrictions on singing; and finally, two specialized topics, the ring-shout or sacred dance, and the music of the Place Congo in New Orleans. In keeping with current usage, the word "Negro" will be capitalized throughout, regardless of the practice of the original. Otherwise the quotations will be exact, and full bibliographical information for each title will be given.

Extensive evaluation is beyond the scope of a survey, but a word of caution seems in order. The existence of music and dance among the slaves, often cited as evidence of their contentment, became itself a controversial topic, particularly in the hands of writers whose prejudices might make them unreliable witnesses. Concentrating on minutiae of slave culture, we are necessarily seeing only a small part of the picture.

Seven years after his flight from Maryland, Frederick Douglass wrote: "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart . . . At least, such is my experience" (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Ed. by Benjamin Quarles. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960; p. 38. First published in 1845). The classic indictment of slavery from which much of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was drawn, Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, did not deny that slaves sang, nor claim that they sang only hymns. In a footnote, the editor commented:

Slaves sometimes sing, and so do convicts in jails under sentence, and both for the same reason. Their singing proves that they *want* to be happy, not that they *are* so. It is the *means* that they use to make themselves happy, not the evidence that they are so already. Sometimes, doubtless, the excitement of song whelms their misery in momentary oblivion. He who argues from this that they have no conscious misery to forget, knows as little of human nature as of slavery. (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839; p. 13.)

It seems only right to present this point of view as a counterbalance to the many scenes of happy slaves to follow.

Before 1800

Among Europeans the tradition of impressive African singing reaches back to the voyages made under Prince Henry, the Navigator. The official account, *Cronica do Descobrimento e Conquista da Guiné*, of Gomes Eannes de Azurara, who was evidently an eyewitness, described the landing in Portugal of a group of Negroes captured in 1444. "But what heart was that, how hard soever, which was not pierced with sorrow, seeing that company; for some had sunken cheeks and their faces bathed in tears,

looking at each other; . . . others struck their faces with their hands, throwing themselves on the earth; others made their lamentations in songs, according to the customs of their country, which, although we could not understand their language, we saw corresponded well to the height of their sorrow” (the translation from *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* is that made apparently by Sir Arthur Helps for his book, *The Spanish Conquest in America, and Its Relation to the History of Slavery and to the Government of Colonies*. London: J. W. Parker and Son, 1855; Vol. I, p. 38).

Nearly 180 years later, soon after the landing of the first Negroes in what is now continental United States, an English traveler in Africa, Richard Jobson, wrote: “There is, without doubt, no people on the earth more naturally affected to the sound of musick then [sic] these people . . .,” followed by a description of their music and instruments (*The Golden Trade: or, A Discovery of the River Gambia, and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians . . . Set Downe as They Were Collected in Travelling, part of the Yeares, 1620 and 1621*. London: Printed by N. Okes, 1623; pp. 105-108). In 1786 Thomas Clarkson summed up current British impressions of African music:

. . . Their abilities in musick are such, as to have been generally noticed. They play frequently upon a variety of instruments, without any other assistance than their own ingenuity. They have also tunes of their own composition. Some of these have been imported among us; are now in use; and are admired for their sprightliness and ease, though the ungenerous and prejudiced importer has concealed their original. (*An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African, Translated from a Latin Dissertation, Which Was Honoured with the First Prize in the University of Cambridge, for the Year 1785, with Additions*. London: Printed by J. Phillips, 1786; p. 170.)

And an African, who had lived in England for many years, wrote in his autobiography: “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion. . . . We have many musical instruments, particularly drums of different kinds, a piece of music which resembles a guitar, and another much like a stickado.” (Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, the African. Written by Himself*. New York: Printed by W. Durrell, 1791; Vol. I, pp. 7-8.)

Accounts of the slave trade refer repeatedly to what must have been a common practice in the “Middle Passage”: compelling the slaves to dance on shipboard. *A Journal of a Voyage Made in the Hannibal of London, Ann. 1693-1694* . . . reported: “We often at sea in the evenings would let the slaves come up into the sun to air themselves, and make them jump and dance for an hour or two to our bagpipes, harp, and fiddle, by which exercise to preserve them in health . . .” (Elizabeth Donnan, ed., *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*. Washing-

ton: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930-1935; Vol. I, p. 407). The exposure to European instruments thus began in mid-ocean. Almost 100 years later, Alexander Falconbridge described similar practices:

Exercise being deemed necessary for the preservation of their health, they are sometimes obliged to dance, when the weather will permit their coming on deck. If they go about it reluctantly, or do not move with agility, they are flogged; a person standing by them all the time with a cat-o'-nine-tails in his hand for that purpose. Their musick, upon these occasions, consists of a drum, sometimes with only one head; and when that is worn out, they do not scruple to make use of the bottom of one of the tubs . . . The poor wretches are frequently compelled to sing also; but when they do so, their songs are generally, as may naturally be expected, melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native country. (*An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*. London: Printed by J. Phillips, 1788; p. 23.)

Those slaves who survived the "Middle Passage" landed in a world where life would be vastly different from what they had known. That they should try to maintain what they could of familiar customs and culture seems perfectly natural to 20th century minds, but Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries felt differently. Clergymen and missionaries in particular viewed the native recreations of the slaves with pious horror. Lacking at present any other record of the music and dancing, we must glean what we can from their disapproving strictures. In 1680 Morgan Godwin exhorted: ". . . nothing is more barbarous, and contrary to Christianity, than their . . . *Idolatrous Dances*, and *Revels*; in which they usually spend the *Sunday* . . . And here, that I may not be thought too rashly to impute Idolatry to their *Dances*, my Conjecture is raised upon this ground . . . for that they use their *Dances* as a *means to procure Rain*: Some of them having been known to beg this Liberty upon the Week Days, in order thereunto." (*The Negro's & Indians Advocate, Suing for Their Admission into the Church: or A Persuasive to the Instructing and Baptizing of the Negro's [sic] and Indians in our Plantations*. . . . London: Printed by F. D., 1680; p. 33.) Despite his disapproval, Godwin pleaded for instruction of the Negroes in Christian doctrine, a privilege not always granted during the colonial period.

One of the early missionaries sent out by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Dr. Francis Le Jau, arrived in Goose Creek, South Carolina, in 1706. On October 20, 1709, he wrote to John Chamberlayne: "It has been customary among them to have their feasts, dances and merry meetings upon the Lord's day, that practise is pretty well over in this parish, but not absolutely." Later, in a letter of June 13, 1710, he noted: "The Lord's Day is no more profaned by their dancings at least about me." (*Quoted in Frank J. Klingberg: An Appraisal of the Negro in Colonial South Carolina; A Study in Americanization*. Washington: The Associated Publishers, 1941; pp. 12, 18.)

The first survey of religious conditions among the Negroes in the colonies was made in 1724, when the Bishop of London sent queries to the

clergy. The replies indicated that most masters were unwilling to have their servants instructed, even though the churches were open to them. In a letter dated at Savannah, January 23, 1739, the Methodist leader, George Whitefield, wrote: "... I have great reason to believe, that most of you, on Purpose, keep your Negroes ignorant of Christianity; or otherwise, why are they permitted thro' your Provinces, openly to prophane the Lord's Day, by their Dancing, Piping and such like?" (*Three Letters from the Reverend Mr. G. Whitefield . . .* "Letter III. To the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina, Concerning their Negroes." Philadelphia: Printed by B. Franklin, 1740; p. 15.)

The official report of the so-called Stono insurrection demonstrated that drumming could be more than a musical performance. General Oglethorpe wrote on October 9, 1739:

. . . On the 9th day of September last being Sunday which is the day the Planters allow them to work for themselves, Some Angola Negroes assembled, to the number of Twenty; at a place called Stonehow . . . Several Negroes joyned them, they calling out Liberty, marched on with Colours displayed, and two Drums beating, pursuing all the white people they met with, and killing Man Woman and Child . . . They increased every minute by new Negroes coming to them, so that they were above Sixty, some say a hundred, on which they halted in a field, and set to dancing, Singing and beating Drums, to draw more Negroes to them, thinking they were now victorious over the whole Province, having marched ten miles & burnt all before them without opposition. . . . (Genl. Oglethorpe to the Accotant, Mr. Harman Verelst. *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, comp. by Allen D. Candler. Atlanta: C. P. Byrd, State Printer, 1913; Vol. 22, pt. 2, p. 235.)

From 1740 on, the period of the Great Awakening, the dissenting sects—Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists—began to extend their work in the South. While the Anglican Church continued its efforts, evangelical clergymen such as Samuel Davies, a Presbyterian of Hanover, Virginia, were active in converting the Negroes. From Hanover he wrote on June 28, 1751, to a Mr. Bellamy "of Bethlem in New-England": "The Books I principally want for them are, *Watts's Psalms and Hymns*, and *Bibles* . . . I cannot but observe, that the *Negroes*, above all the Human Species that I ever knew, have an Ear for Musick, and a kind of extatic Delight in *Psalmody*; and there are no books they learn so soon, or take so much Pleasure in . . ." (Quoted in the Appendix to Benjamin Fawcett: *A Compassionate Address to the Christian Negroes in Virginia, and Other British Colonies in North America. With an Appendix Containing Some Account of the Rise and Progress of Christianity Among that Poor People*. 2d ed. [London]: Salop, Printed by F. Edwards & F. Cotton, [ca. 1755]; p. 37.) Mr. Davies wrote again on August 26, 1758: "I can hardly express the pleasure it affords me to turn to that part of the gallery where they sit, and see so many of them with their Psalm or Hymn Books, turning to the part then sung, and assisting their fellows, who are beginners, to find the place; and then all breaking out in a torrent of sacred harmony, enough to bear away the whole congregation to heaven." The Rev. Mr. Todd, also of Hanover,

described the happy results of this instruction on November 18: "The sacred hours of the *Sabbath*, that used to be spent in frolicking, dancing, and other profane courses, are now employed in attending upon public ordinances, in learning to read at home, or in praying together, and singing the praises of God and the Lamb." (*Letters from the Rev. Samuel Davies and Others; Shewing the State of Religion in Virginia, South Carolina, &c. Particularly Among the Negroes*. London: J. and W. Oliver, 1759; pp. 17, 14, 15.)

It appears that the efforts of these evangelists were directed primarily toward the proper observance of the Sabbath, rather than to that complete elimination of secular music and dance which followed in the wake of the camp meetings and revivals after 1800. More evidence is needed as to the attitude of the clergy toward frolicking on week-days, when such recreation was permitted. Before the Revolution the degree of Christianization of the slave population varied widely, depending on the effectiveness of the local divine and the attitude and piety of the master.² It is possible, however, to demonstrate the persistence of "idolatrous songs and dances" long after the Great Awakening. In his *Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia* (London: A. Donaldson, 1779; Vol. II, pp. 100, 103), Alexander Hewatt grieved: ". . . the Negroes of that country, a few only excepted, are to this day as great strangers to Christianity, and as much under the influence of Pagan darkness, idolatry and superstition, as they were at their first arrival from Africa. . . . Holidays there are days of idleness, riot, wantonness and excess; in which the slaves assemble together in alarming crowds, for the purposes of dancing, feasting, and merriment."

Writing in 1809 of the Negroes on Edisto Island, South Carolina, the noted historian, David Ramsay, said: ". . . 40 years ago . . . in their voyages to the city they were wont to beguile the time and toil of rowing with songs and extravagant vociferations, and were accustomed to devote their holidays to dancing, dissipation and irregularities . . . These practices they have in a great measure abandoned . . . from an impression they have acquired that they are incompatible with a religious frame of mind." (*The History of South-Carolina, From Its First Settlement in 1670 to the Year 1808*. Charleston: D. Longworth, 1809; "Appendix No. 1. A Statistical Account of Edisto Island . . .," Vol. II, p. 545.)

Louisiana, with greater French and Spanish influence, had a somewhat different development than the other colonies. The dances in the Place Congo will be discussed later; here is the description of a Negro dance that followed the capture of a wildcat, seen along the Washita River sometime before 1833.

Les airs variaient selon l'inspiration des musiciens. Il y avait parfois des chants mélancolique sur lesquels les esclaves d'Afrique aiment à soupirer la liberté; et

² For a definitive discussion of the subject, see Marcus W. Jernegan, "Slavery and Conversion in the Colonies," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 21 (April 1916) pp. 504-527.

quand les jeunes Nègresses les répétaient, il sortait du cercle des vieillards un murmure monotone et régulier qui montait jusqu'aux plus hautes notes, et formait l'accompagnement de cette mélodie triste et plaintive d'un autre hémisphère. (Théodore Pavie: *Souvenirs Atlantiques; Voyage aux États-Unis et au Canada*. Paris: Roret, 1833; Vol. II, pp. 319-320.)

Let us return to the period before 1800. Franklin's friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, in a pamphlet exchange with Richard Nisbet, remarked: "The Amusements, Songs &c. of the Negroes, are urged as signs of their Happiness, or Contentment in Slavery. . . . Although some of their Songs, like those of *civilized* Nations, are Obscene and Warlike, yet I have been informed that many of them, as well as their Tunes, are of a most plaintive [sic] Nature, and very expressive of their Misery." (*A Vindication of the Address, To the Inhabitants of the British Settlements, on the Slavery of the Negroes in America, in Answer to a Pamphlet Entitled, "Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture; or a Defence of the West-India Planters from the Aspersions Thrown out Against Them by the Author of the Address."* By a Pennsylvanian. Philadelphia: Printed by J. Dunlap, 1773; p. 30.) Elsewhere Dr. Rush wrote in the same vein: "The singing and dancing to which the Negroes in the West-Indies are so much addicted, are the effects of mirth, and not of happiness . . . instead of considering the songs and dances of the Negroes . . . as marks of their happiness, I have long considered them as physical symptoms of *Melancholy Madness*, and therefore as certain proofs of their misery" ("An Account of the Diseases Peculiar to the Negroes in the West-Indies, and Which Are Produced by Their Slavery," *The American Museum*, Vol. 4 (1788) p. 82).

A description of a Negro dance by a young Englishman, Nicholas Creswell, included an early reference to the banjo, written seven years before Jefferson's mention of it in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The journal entry dated Nanjemoy, Maryland, Sunday, May 29th, 1774, reads in part:

Mr. Bayley and I went to see a Negro Ball. Sundays being the only days these poor creatures have to themselves, they generally meet together and amuse themselves with Dancing to the Banjo. This musical instrument (if it may be so called) is made of a Gourd something in the imitation of a Guitarr, with only four strings and played with the fingers in the same manner. Some of them sing to it, which is very droll music indeed. In their songs they generally relate the usage they have received from their Masters or Mistresses in a very satirical stile and manner. Their poetry is like the Music, Rude and uncultivated. Their Dancing is most violent exercise, but so irregular and grotesque, I am not able to describe it. (*Journal of Nicholas Creswell, 1774-1777*. New York: L. MacVeagh, The Dial Press, 1924; pp. 17-19.)

Another English visitor, describing conditions before the Revolution, referred to similar dances occurring on week nights. After a long hard day's work, the slave ". . . generally sets out from home, and walks six or seven miles in the night, be the weather ever so sultry, to a Negroe dance, in which he performs with astonishing agility, and the most vigorous exertions, keeping time and cadence, most exactly, with the music of a banjo

(a large hollow instrument with three strings), and a quaqua (somewhat resembling a drum) . . ." (John Ferdinand Dalziel Smyth: *A Tour in the United States of America*. . . London: Printed for G. Robinson, 1784; Vol. I, p. 46. This passage was reprinted in the *American Museum*, Vol. 1 (March 1787) p. 247, in an unsigned article, "Manner of Living of the Different Ranks of Inhabitants of Virginia. Hardships of the Negro Slaves. Traits of Their Character. Their Passion for Music and Dancing.") Note that Smyth mentioned three strings where Creswell and Jefferson specified four. Similar instruments were pictured in an anonymous watercolor from about 1800, "The Old Plantation," in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection at Colonial Williamsburg. On the authority of Lorenzo Turner and Melville Herskovits, they are identified as an African *molo* (resembling a banjo) and a drum of Yoruba origin, called a *gudugudu*. (Nina Fletcher Little: *The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection; A Descriptive Catalogue*. Boston: Colonial Williamsburg, 1957; Item #66, p. 132.)

The intermittent and spasmodic efforts to convert the slaves during the colonial period increased in intensity as the era came to a close. Before camp meetings as such were known, large protracted meetings grew in popularity, especially in the wake of such noted preachers as Bishop Francis Asbury, of the Methodist church. A typical entry in his journal, that for Sunday, June 7, 1776, reads, "I preached at White's chapel [Va.?] . . . The house was greatly crowded, and four or five hundred stood at the doors and windows, and listened with unabated attention . . . I was obliged to stop again and again, and beg of the people to compose themselves. But they could not; some on their knees, and some on their faces, were crying mightily to God all the time I was preaching. Hundreds of Negroes were among them, with the tears streaming down their faces." (*The Journals and Letters of Francis Asbury*, Elmer T. Clark, editor-in-chief. . . London: Epworth Press, [1958]; Vol. I, p. 222.)

After 1800

THE SPIRITUALS

By 1800 the opposition to giving the slaves religious instruction was disappearing as the tide of evangelical revival rose steadily. Reports of eyewitnesses agreed that, at every stage of the revival movement in the South, including camp meetings, Negroes took an active role in close proximity with white worshippers.³ Regular organized missions to the slaves began in South Carolina in 1829 under Methodist auspices, and continued,

³ For the participation of Negroes in the camp meeting movement in Kentucky, North and South Carolina, see: William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier: the Baptists, 1783-1830; A Collection of Source Material*. New York: H. Holt and Company, [c1931]; p. 611. William Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical*. New York: R. Carter, 1846; pp. 391-392, 403. David Ramsay, *The History of South Carolina, from Its First Settlement in 1670 to the Year 1808*, op. cit., n., p. 32; p. 36.

gradually increasing in influence, until the outbreak of the Civil War (William Pope Harrison, ed., *The Gospel Among the Slaves*. Nashville: Publishing House of the M. E. Church, 1893; p. 149).

The earliest description found of distinctive religious singing by slaves dates from 1816. George Tucker wrote anonymously of an incident in Portsmouth, Virginia, where, as he stood on the steps of the court house:

. . . my ears were assailed by the voice of singing . . . I saw a group of about thirty Negroes, of different ages and sizes, following a rough looking white man . . . As they came nearer, I saw some of them loaded with chains to prevent their escape; while others had hold of each others hands . . . They came along singing a little wild hymn of sweet and mournful melody; flying by a divine instinct of the heart, to the consolation of religion . . . "It's nothing at all but a parcel of Negroes sold to Carolina, and that man is their driver, who has bought them." . . . The truth is, they feel, and exquisitely too . . . Even in the land of their banishment, it is said, they . . . have several little wild songs which they sing with tears, recalling the images of past felicity, their cabins and their cornfields. (*Letters from Virginia, Translated from the French*. Baltimore: F. Lucas, Jr., 1816; pp. 29-34.)

Many years later, Levi Coffin recalled a Sunday-school for slaves he and a cousin had organized in New Garden, North Carolina, in the summer of 1821. (A Quaker, Coffin moved to Indiana in 1822.) At the close of the session "the Negroes broke out with one of their plantation songs, or hymns, led by Uncle Frank [one of Thomas Caldwell's slaves]; a sort of prayer in rhyme, in which the same words occurred again and again." (*Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*. . . Cincinnati: Western Tract Society, [c1876]; pp. 70-71.)

Neither of these reports is sufficiently specific to provide unquestionable evidence of the existence of spirituals as we know them; Coffin's account was written so long after the event as to require corroboration. In 1830, however, a report appeared discussing the Negro population of Charleston, which unequivocally documented the existence of a distinctive type of sacred song.

. . . upon the evening of a Sunday, the song of praise may frequently be heard to issue from the hovel of the Negro . . . the religious fervor of the Negroes does not always break forth in strains the most reverential or refined. The downfall of the archfiend forms the principal topic of their anthems. A few lines recollected at random may serve as an example, as—

"Sturdy sinners, come along,
"Hip and thigh we'll pull him down,
"Let us pull old Satan down,
"We shall get a heavenly crown," &c, &c.

Or,

"Old Satan, come before my face
"To pull my kingdom down,
"Jesus come before my face
"To put my kingdom up.
"Well done, tankee, Massa Jesus.
Halleluja," &c.

(Peter Neilson: *Recollections of a Six Years' Residence in the United States of America*. . . Glasgow: D. Robertson, 1830; pp. 258-259.)

From 1834 comes a description of slave children singing hymns, written by the Northern-born Charleston author, Caroline Howard Gilman, in one of the earliest magazines for children. The excerpt is from a serial story intended "For my Youngest Readers," called *The Country Visit*. It tells of an outing on a nearby plantation, where three Charleston children see everyday sights such as cotton picking. Chapter X is entitled "Singing Hymns," with the footnote: "It may add to the interest of these little sketches to know that the writer has witnessed the scenes she describes." Mrs. Gilman later made a collection of slave songs of which more will be said.

George and James and Clara loved to hear the young Negroes sing the hymns taught them by the old ones. The place the little choir chose for their singing seat was beneath a circle of cedar trees; they selected it themselves . . . George . . . counted sixteen children. . . .

There was a whispering among the young blacks for a few moments, and then they began with a shout, clear and ringing—

"Master Jesus is my Captain,
"He is my all in all,
"He give me grace to conquer,
"And take me home to rest.

"I'm walking on to Jesus,
Hallelujah!

"I'm walking on to Jesus,
Hallelujah!"

The boys and Clara grew sleepy, but Negroes will sit up all night singing if permitted, and Clara's papa had to tell them to go to bed. The infants were asleep in the larger children's arms. They parted off, each to their houses, and as they went they sang,

"Don't you hear the Gospel trumpet
Sound Jubilee?"

(*The Southern Rose Bud*, Vol. 2 (August 9, 1834) p. 199.)

From the middle thirties on, more frequent references were found to the distinctive religious songs of the slaves, coexisting with reports that did not distinguish between the songs learned at mixed religious meetings and those belonging exclusively to the slave. Native Southern whites in this period sometimes referred to Negro songs in such an off-hand manner as to imply that these songs were too widely known to need explanation. For example, one of the leaders in the movement to provide missions to the slaves, Charles Colcock Jones, of Liberty County, Georgia, wrote in one of his didactic works, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: T. Purse, 1842; p. 266):

To give variety and interest to . . . the Sabbath school, it is proper to teach the scholars *hymns and psalms, and how to sing them*. They are extravagantly fond of music; and this taste may be turned to good account in their instruction . . . One great advantage in teaching them good psalms and hymns is that they are thereby induced to lay aside the extravagant and nonsensical chants, and catches and hallelujah songs of their own composing; and when they sing, which is very often

while about their business or of an evening in their houses, they will have something profitable to sing.

One Ella Storrs Christian wrote in her diary: "When Baptist Negroes attended the church of their masters, or when their mistress sang with them, they used hymn books, but in their own meetings they often made up their own words and tunes. They said their songs had 'more religion than those in the books'" (p. 59; *quoted* (without date) in James Benson Sellers: *Slavery in Alabama*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1950; p. 300. The manuscript diary has not been located.) A perceptive girl wrote on a plantation in southwest Georgia, between Albany and Thomasville:

Feb. 12 [1865], *Sunday*. . . I went over to the quarter after dinner, to the "Praise House," to hear the Negroes sing . . . At their "praise meetings" they go through with all sorts of motions in connection with their songs, but they won't give way to their wildest gesticulations or engage in their sacred dances before white people, for fear of being laughed at. They didn't get out of their seats while I was there, but whenever the "sperrit" of the song moved them very much, would pat their feet and flap their arms . . . They call these native airs "little speritual songs," in contradistinction to the hymns that the preachers read to them in church, out of a book, and seem to enjoy them a great deal more . . . I wish I was musician enough to write down the melodies; they are worth preserving. (Eliza Frances Andrews: *The War-time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1908; pp. 89-91.)

A similar distinction was drawn in the first notice of these songs found in a musical journal, *The Musical Gazette* of Boston, Vol. 1 (July 6, 1846) p. 91:

. . . Many of the slave melodies are well known at the north, but not much is said about their sacred music. Many of them sing all common psalm tunes with accuracy, and in addition there are verses evidently original. When you hear them you are half inclined to laugh at their queerness, and yet cannot but be affected at the sincerity and thrilling tones of the singer. Here is a specimen:

"Oh, Satan he came by my heart,
Throw brickbats in de door,
But *Master Jesus* come wid brush,
Make cleaner dan before."

Another, (spoken) "My soul leap, and my soul dance,"
(sung) "My soul leap, and my soul dance."

An article, "Songs of the Blacks," sometimes described as the earliest mentioning Negro music, appeared in *Dwight's Journal of Music* [Vol. 10 (November 15, 1856) pp. 51-52, and again, Vol. 15 (1859) pp. 178-180]. "Evangelist" at the end referred, not to the author, but to the journal where it originally appeared, *The Evangelist*, a religious weekly edited in New York by William Bradford, Henry M. Field, and J. G. Craighead. "Songs of the Blacks" appeared unsigned in the issue for October 23, 1856 (Vol. 27, p. [1]). Significant as the first extended article to discuss the spirituals in a musical periodical, it has disappointingly little specific information.

STYLE OF SINGING

Probably because few of the observers were sensitive to details of musical performance, we find very little of value on the style of the singing. With maddening frequency the writers confessed, "I cannot give you the least idea of it." Very few made the attempt. The earliest found was a Russian, whose narrative was published at St. Petersburg in 1815. When he visited a Negro Methodist church in Philadelphia, "... every psalm the entire congregation, men and women alike, sang verses in a loud, shrill monotone. This lasted about half an hour. . . . Afterwards . . . all rose and began chanting psalms in chorus, the men and women alternating, a procedure which lasted some twenty minutes." (Pavel Petrovich Svinin: *Picturesque United States of America, 1811, 1812, 1813, Being a Memoir on Paul Svinin, Russian Diplomatic Officer, Artist and Author, Containing Copious Extracts from his Account of his Travels in America* . . . by Avrahm Yarmolinsky, New York, New York; W. E. Rudge, 1930; page 20.)

The most discerning comments on the style of singing of the slaves were made by Fanny Kemble in her widely quoted (and recently reissued) *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1863). Rather than repeat her words once more, I cite instead her son-in-law, an English clergyman, who visited the same plantation after the Civil War, but before outside influences had had much effect. Referring to their sacred songs, he wrote an interesting account from which I can quote only the following:

. . . it is the way they *sing* the words, and the natural seconds they take, and the antiphonal mode they unconsciously adopt, also the remarkable minors that many of their songs are sung in, which is almost impossible to imitate. . . . They always keep exquisite time and tune, and no words seem too hard for them to adapt to their tunes, so that they can sing a long-metre hymn to a short-metre tune without any difficulty. Their voices have a peculiar quality, and their intonations and delicate variations cannot be reproduced on paper. The leading singer starts the words of each verse or line, often improvising, and the others who base him, as it is called, strike in with a refrain. The basers seem often to follow their own whims, beginning when they please and leaving off when they please, striking an octave above or below (in case they have pitched the tune too high or too low), or hitting some other note that chords, so as to produce the effect of a marvellous complication and variety, and yet with the most perfect time and rarely with any discord. . . . I once invited Arthur Sullivan to come down and stay with us to hear their singing and to produce an oratorio to be called *The Queen of Sheba* or some such name, with these Negro choruses introduced, but he was unable to find the time. (James Wentworth Leigh: *Other Days*. . . . London: The Macmillan Company, 1921; pp. 155-156.)

What a pity that Sir Arthur could not come! And even more to be regretted that Sidney Lanier and Frederick Delius, two perceptive musicians who heard these songs and responded to them with a sensitivity and appreciation rare at that time, have left us so little of description and comment.

SECULAR MUSIC

The mounting interest in the spirituals during and after the Civil War completely overshadowed secular slave music in the popular mind. This oversight may have been due in part to a feeling that the secular music was tarred with the same vulgar brush as minstrel songs and hence was unworthy of rising free men. Evangelical missionaries, both native and Yankee, had made strenuous efforts to stamp out secular amusements, with considerable success in some areas. It was true, apparently, that secular music had virtually disappeared in the Sea Islands by 1862; all witnesses were agreed on that.⁴ Similar reports came from some other areas. For instance, Moncure Conway lived near Falmouth, Virginia, from 1832 until 1854 without seeing a Negro dance, although he heard of a few in the neighborhood (*Testimonies Concerning Slavery*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1864; p. 4). And when the teachers from Hampton Institute in Virginia begged to hear work songs or corn songs, they were told nobody sang such things after they "got" religion (Mrs. M. F. Armstrong & Helen F. Ludlow: *Hampton and its Students*. . . . New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1874; p. 113). Nevertheless the many contemporary descriptions of corn shuckings, dances, and other secular festivities demonstrated that the clergy had not won complete ascendancy. In fact, criticism of the influence of the stricter sects was voiced by a few independent souls. A "model" slave-trader, Zephaniah Kingsley, wrote in 1829:

About twenty-five years ago, I settled a plantation on St. Johns river, in Florida, with about fifty new African Negroes . . . I never interfered with their . . . domestic affairs, but let them regulate these after their own manner . . . I encouraged as much as possible dancing, merriment and dress, for which Saturday afternoon and night, and Sunday morning were dedicated . . . A man, calling himself a minister, got among them. It was now sinful to dance, work their corn or catch fish, on a Sunday . . . all pastime or pleasure in this iniquitous world was sinful . . . I cannot help regretting that honest well meaning men . . . should so misapply their talents as to subvert all natural and rational happiness, and endeavor to render our species miserable. (*Treatise on the Patriarchal or Co-operative System of Society as it Exists in Some Governments, and Colonies in America, and in the United States, under the Name of Slavery, with its Necessity and Advantages*. By an Inhabitant of Florida. 2d ed. [n. p.], 1829; pp. 14-15.)

That urbane planter-author, William Gilmore Simms, signing himself "A South Carolinian," observed: "The very abolition of singing and dancing, as a result of religion . . . should certainly have produced some pause in the mind . . . whether the religion itself which, at the outset, subverts the innocent and natural recreations of a people, was not likely to produce

⁴An exception to this statement has just been found (after this survey was prepared for the printer) in a manuscript recently acquired by the Rutgers University Library. The manuscript actually is a handwritten newspaper compiled for the author's family at home, and is impressively entitled "The Port Royal Gazette." Its "editor," Isaac W. Brinkerhoff, a lay missionary, went south with the first group of "occupation" teachers and superintendents, which left New York on March 5, 1862. Under the date of March 15 he describes a Negro dance he saw in Beaufort, [South Carolina], for which the music was provided by a fiddler and a man "making time upon the floor with two sticks." I have not yet had a chance to examine the whole manuscript.

even greater evils than it professed to cure." ("Miss Martineau on Slavery," *Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. 3 (November 1839) p. 646.)

George Tucker's *Letters from Virginia*, 1816, which gave us our earliest mention of distinctive religious singing among slaves, also referred to secular songs. In a reply to Jefferson's censure in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* of slave activity after a day's work, Tucker asked: "And what are, not unfrequently, their amusements on these occasions? Such as would not suffer from a comparison with those of their more enlightened masters. Legendary ballads, narratives of alternate dialogue and singing, and things of that sort, rude indeed and coarse enough in all conscience; but surely sufficient to show their taste for intellectual pleasures" (p. 79).

A wealth of evidence points to a widespread tradition of improvised secular song among the slaves—corn songs and other harvest chants as well as boat songs and various types of work songs. A perceptive observer commented: ". . . the music and the dancing . . . with the chorus, constitute all that is essentially permanent in the Negro song. The blacks themselves leave out old stanzas, and introduce new ones at pleasure. Travelling through the South, you may, in passing from Virginia to Louisiana, hear the same tune a hundred times, but seldom the same words accompanying it. This necessarily results from the fact that the songs are unwritten, and also from the habit of extemporizing, in which the performers indulge on festive occasions." (J. K., Jr., "Who Are Our National Poets?," *Knickerbocker Magazine*, Vol. 26 (October 1845) p. 336.)

CORN SONGS

The earliest mention of corn songs found appeared in one of the first novels of plantation life, George Tucker's anonymously published *The Valley of Shenandoah; or, Memoirs of the Graysons* (New York: C. Wiley, 1824; Vol. II, pp. 116-118). In this tale, set ostensibly in 1796, the planter explains to a visitor:

. . . the corn songs of these humble creatures would please you . . . for some of them have a small smack of poetry, and are natural at expressions of kind and amiable feelings—such as, praise of their master, gratitude for his kindness, thanks for his goodness, praise of one another, and, now and then, a little humorous satire. The air of these songs has not much variety or melody, and requires not more flexibility of voice than they all possess, as they all join in the chorus. Some one, who feels himself qualified for the office, strikes up, and singly gives a few rude stanzas, sometimes in rhyme, and sometimes in short expressive sentences, while the rest unite in chorus, and this he continues, until some other improvisatore relieves him. One of the favourite occasions, on which their talent for music and poetry is thus exercised, is when they are "shocking" out the Indian corn—at which time, all Negroes of the plantation, and sometimes many from the neighborhood, are assembled, and sit up nearly the whole night. This is a practice prevailing more or less throughout this state [Virginia], and, I believe, the other slave states; but it prevails most in the lower country, where the Negroes are in the greatest numbers, and the plantations the largest; and yet, there are thousands among us, who never attended a corn-shocking, or even heard a corn song—so

enlivening, however, either in words or tune—as the reader will perceive. I have entitled it

SOLD OFF TO GEORGY.

Chorus. Solo. Chorus. Chorus. Solo. Chorus.

1. Farewell, fellow-servants! O - ho! O - ho! I'm gwine way to leabe you; O - ho! O - ho! I'm gwine to leabe de ole coun-ty; O - ho! O - ho! I'm sold off to Georgy! O - ho! O - ho!

2. Farewell, ole plantation, (Oho! Oho!)

Farewell, de ole quarter, (Oho! Oho!)

Un daddy, un mammy, (Oho! Oho!)

Un marster, un missus! (Oho! Oho!)

3. My dear wife un one chile, (Oho! Oho!)

My poor heart is breaking; (Oho! Oho!)

No more shall I see you, (Oho! Oho!)

Oho! no more foreber! (Oho! Oho!)

The reader will observe that the lines of the song do not rhyme; and it may be remarked that the negro songs—that is, such as they can compose themselves—are mostly without rhymes. When they do attempt to rhyme they frequently take more than the poetic license, being satisfied—when they can not do better—if the vowel-sounds at the ends of the lines agree.

The tone of voice in which this boat-song was sung was inexpressibly plaintive, and, bearing such a melancholy tune, and such affecting words, produced a very pathetic effect. I saw tears in the eyes of the young ladies, and could scarcely restrain my own. We heard but the three verses given (such songs are sometimes stretched out to many verses); for at the end of the third verse the major interrupted the song.

"Confound such *lively* music," he exclaimed; "it is mak-

ing the girls cry, I do believe. And with such slow measure to sing to, we shall scarcely get into Weatherly's Creek to-night."

"De boat-songs is always dat way, marster," said Charley—"dat is mo' er less."

"Well, try to find something better than that," said the major; "I am sure that it is impossible for any thing to be more low-spirited in words, or tune, or manner of singing."

"Yas, marster," was Charley's answer. And the negroes sang another boat-song, but not so very sad as their first.

"Charley is right," said Miss Bettie, with a laugh; "the boat-songs are 'all that way, more or less.' I think that we had better have silence than such low-spirited music. Do you not think so, uncle?"

"Entirely," said the major. "The pathetic is well enough when there is need of stirring up our feelings of humanity, but I can see no use in creating mere low spirits."

"I like the music," said Lizzie; "it is sometimes pleasant—if I may speak such a seeming paradox—to be made sad without any personal cause for being so. Such a state of feeling may be called 'the luxury of woe.'"

Miss Susan and I agreed with her. The negroes seemed pleased at our approval.

"Uncle," asked Miss Susan, pointing to a house that stood on a hill on the eastern side of the river (we were keeping near the shore on that side), "whose is that queer-looking building made of a number of small houses joining each other at the gables, and without a tree near?"

"That belongs to the celebrated Dr. Jackson."

"Who is Dr. Jackson?"

"What! have you never heard of the famous Hiram L. Jackson?"

"Is it not the man," asked Miss Bettie, "that you tell so many funny stories about?"

"Say, rather, the man against whose humbuggeries I have declared war."

"I think that I have seen him," I observed. "When I was a school-boy in Chittering Neck, Cousin Walter Weatherby

(See p. 212, last paragraph)

heard. "You had him there, Bettie; and I must think of a suitable present to express my thanks to you before your visit to the Neck is over. What did Travers say to that, eh?"

"He laughed very uproariously," said Miss Susan, "and, I think, attempted in that way, to hide his inability to make a rejoinder."

We had some time before rounded Point Quiet, the long point to the south of the Flats, and had nearly gained the channels leading into Weatherby's Creek. Our boat was now speeding at a swift rate along a lee shore; and the water, shielded from the wind by the high cliffs of the river, lay tranquil around us.

"How clear the water is," remarked Miss Susan, looking over the side of the boat; "I can see the fishes moving among the sea-grass on the bottom."

"Our river is famous for the purity of the water," said the major, with some enthusiasm of manner, "and has been said by those who are competent to give an opinion, to be one of the most beautiful streams in the world."

"I have been told," observed Lizzie, "that its present title is a literal interpretation of the name given to it by the Indians."

"So they say," answered the old gentleman; "and the red men were sensible in that at any rate. But let us have some music; I always like to hear singing when on the water. Lizzie, will you sing us the Canadian Boat Song? Bettie and Susan do not sing, they say."

"I will, with pleasure," replied Lizzie, "if Clarence will assist me with his voice."

So we sang, keeping time to the action of the oars.

"Charley looks as if he would sing us another song," said Miss Bettie. "What is that lively little song, Charley, which I heard you and some of the hands sing the other day, when you were hanging tobacco at the barn? I am sure that you can row to that."

"Sure unnuft, young mistis," answered Charley; "I had forgot dat. But dat's a corn song; un we'll hab ter sing it slow ter row to."

"Try it, at any rate," said the major.

"Sartinly, sah, ef de marsters un mistisses wants it," Charley was evidently somewhat vexed at the disparaging remarks made by the petitioners on his previous performance. Nevertheless, there came a quiet smile to his face as he began the following song:

ROUN'-DE CORN, SALLY.

Chorus.
1. Hooray, hooray, ho! Roun' de corn, Sally! Hooray for all de lub-ly la-dies!

Solo.
Roun' de corn, Sal-ly! Hooray, loo-ray, ho! Roun' de corn, Sal-ly!

Chorus.
Hoo-ray for all de lub-ly la-dies! Roun' de corn, Sal-ly!

Solo.
Dib lub's er thing dat's sure to hab you, Roun' de corn, Sal-ly!

Chorus.
Ho hole you tight, when once he grab you, Roun' de corn, Sal-ly!

Solo.
Un ole un ug-ly, young un prit-ty, Roun' de corn, Sal-ly!

Chorus.
You need-en try wnen once he git you, Roun' de corn, Sal-ly!

D. C.
2. Dere's Mr. Travers lub Miss Jinny;
He thinks she is us good us any.
He comes from church wid her er Sunday,
Un don't go back ter town till Monday.
Hooray, hooray, ho! etc.

3. Dere's Mr. Lucas lub Miss Tresser,
Un ebry thing he does ter please her;

(See p. 212, last paragraph)

Dey say dat 'way out in Ohio,
She's got er plenty uv de rhino.

Hooray, hooray, ho! etc.

4. Dere's Marster Charley lub Miss Bettie;
I tell you what—he thinks her pretty;
Un den dey mean ter lib so lordly,
All at de Monner House at Audley.

Hooray, hooray, ho! etc.

5. Dere's Marster Wat, he lub Miss Susan;
He thinks she is de pick un choosin';
Un when dey gains de married station,
He'll take her to de ole plantation.

Hooray, hooray, ho! etc.

6. Dere's Marster Clarence lub Miss Lizzy;
Dressing nice, it keeps him busy;
Un where she goes den he gallants her,
Er riding on his sorrel prancer.

Hooray, hooray, ho! etc.

This song caused much amusement at the expense of each one of us who in turn became the subject of satire. The hit at Lizzie and me was the hardest, as we were both present, and was, therefore, I suppose, introduced at the end. Several laughing efforts were made by the ladies to interrupt the singing, when the words began to have reference to those who were present; but the old major insisted on "having it out," as he expressed himself. The decided "effect" produced by his song completely re-established Charley's good-humor. The old major, being the only white person present who was spared, of course enjoyed the occasion immensely; his laughter rang loud and far through the clear air, and was echoed back from the banks of the creek.

"Those are not the words, Charley," said Miss Bettie, "that you sung to that tune the other day."

"No, miss," was the answer. "Marse Weatherby's little Sam was ober at Sin Joseph's tud-day, un larnt um ter me. He said Clotidy made um un larnt um ter him dis morning."

"But why did she make that verse," I asked, "about my 'gallanting' Miss Lizzie, as she calls it? I never rode out with Miss Lizzie till this morning."

ROARING RIVER.

A REFRAIN OF THE RED RIVER PLANTATION.



"Harper's creek and rowin' ribber,
That, my dear, we'll live forebber;
Den we'll go to de lugin nation,
All I want in dis creation,
Is pretty little wife and big plantation.

CHORUS.

Up dat oak and down dat ribber,
Two over-seers and one little nigger."

(See p. 212, last paragraph)

entirely separated are the two classes of black and white, and so little curiosity does that excite, which is, and always has been, near us. . . . No wonder, then, the rude ditties of our hewers of wood and drawers of water, should not provoke curiosity or interest humanity.

Many other descriptions of corn-shuckings have been found, widely distributed from South Carolina to Missouri⁵; novels replying to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* commonly described them with varying degrees of authenticity. A particularly synthetic and unconvincing picture with song lyrics to match ("Sing, Darkeys, Sing" and "Shucking ob de Corn") appeared in Robert Criswell's *Uncle Tom's Cabin Contrasted with Buckingham Hall, the Planter's Home* (New York: D. Fanshaw, 1852; pp. 65-67).

Somewhat similar harvest celebrations were associated with other crops. The persimmon beer dance was described by William B. Smith in "The Persimmon Tree and the Beer Dance," *Farmer's Register*, Vol. 6 (April 1, 1838) pp. 58-61. In Louisiana at the close of the grinding season on sugar plantations, a holiday was customary, featuring the "cane-song—which is improvised by one of the gang, the rest all joining in a prolonged and unintelligible chorus . . . 'most musical, most melancholy'" ([Joseph Holt Ingraham], *The South-west. By a Yankee*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835; Vol. I, pp. 241).

The music of only one corn song has been found in print before 1860, "Roun' de Corn, Sally," included in the autobiographical novel, *The Old Plantation, and What I Gathered There in an Autumn Month*, by James Hungerford, of Maryland (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859; pp. 191-192). Recalling the fall of 1832, when his family moved to southern Maryland to avoid the cholera in Baltimore, Hungerford told of a boating party with much singing by both passengers and crew. When one of the The whole episode illustrated the flexibility of slave music; a corn song un we'll hab ter sing it slow ter row to." But sing it they did, improvising words to fit the members of the party. Another song sung on this outing and printed with its music was the mournful "Sold off to Georgy" (p. 184). The whole episode illustrated the flexibility of slave music; a corn song could be adapted for rowing, just as hymns were to be modified for the same purpose where secular songs were prohibited. (See pp. 209-211 for pages photographed from Hungerford's book.)

(To be concluded)

⁵ Thomas Holley Chivers wrote to Edgar Allan Poe March 12, 1853, of a corn song he wrote for his father's slaves before 1828. Quoted in Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1607-1900* ([Durham, N. C.]: Duke University Press, 1954; p. 555). Other descriptions with snatches of song-texts are found in: William Cullen Bryant, *Letters of a Traveler; or, Notes of Things Seen in Europe and America* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1850; pp. 84-87) from Barnwell District, South Carolina. James Battle Avirett, *The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War* (New York: F. T. Neely Co., [c1901]; pp. 144-145) from tidewater North Carolina. Francis Fedric, *Slave Life in Virginia and Kentucky; or, Fifty Years of Slavery in the Southern States of America*. By Francis Fedric, an Escaped Slave (London: Wertheim, Macintosh and Hunt, 1863; pp. 47-51). An extended description from the diary of Judge Cabell Chenault is quoted in J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940; pp. 70-77). William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People* (Boston: A. G. Brown & Co., 1880; pp. 91-95) from Missouri.