

MEGAN SULLIVAN

African-American Music as Rebellion: From Slavesong to Hip-Hop

Beginning in the seventeenth century, a burgeoning slave trade saw Africans captured and brought to America in bondage, separated from their relations and sold, leaving individuals with no point of familiarity: forced into slavery, on a new continent, without kin or social contacts. Out of this desolation came the unfortunate liberty for Africans to develop a new culture from their abrupt change of situation and the remnants of their old lives carried in their minds and bodies with them to the New World. Subsequent generations of Africans gradually became African-Americans as a rich culture infused with music developed under the harsh conditions of slavery. White Americans considered African-Americans separate and unequal for centuries, going to extraordinary lengths to keep Negroes oppressed and apart. Yet behind the strict, segregating curtain hung between “Black” and “White,” African-Americans created a distinctive music that sank its roots deeply into their American experience and drew from it an amazing evolution of sound that has penetrated that racist fabric and pervaded the entirety of American culture. Music became a way to remain connected to their African heritage while protesting the bleak conditions African-Americans faced throughout history. Musical protest took on assorted forms and functions as Blacks strove to advance their social station while simultaneously retaining their cultural heritage. To unconditionally adopt the culture imposed—typically demanded—by the dominant White society was to admit defeat. By working within sociocultural constraints, innovating and adapting musical styles, African-Americans created a musical tradition distinctively their own, and that in itself was a form of defiance.

Music was critical in the organization of early slave uprisings. When brought to America, drums were used as they had been in Africa: for communication. Using drums to spread messages in a rhythmic language undeciphered by Whites, slaves could orchestrate revolts on land and on slave ships as well.¹ The connection between drumming, communication, and resistance was eventually made: “It is

absolutely necessary to the safety of this province that all due care be taken to restrain Negroes from using or keeping drums.”² The subsequent ban on African drums and drumming contributed to the slaves’ cultural disorientation by weakening ties to the music that had filled their African existence. In order to replenish the void left by the ban on drums, slaves developed ways to imitate drumming’s complex polyrhythms by contriving new means of creating rhythm. They began using whatever means of rhythm-making were at hand: European instruments, household items such as spoons, jugs, and washboards, or even their own bodies used as percussive surfaces in a style that came to be known as “patting juba” or “slapping juba.” Intricate vocal rhythms and styles developed to imitate the drum patterns, even seeking to capture the essence of multiple drums into a single vocal line. Although Whites removed a vital instrument from their lives, slaves did not surrender their musical heritage by abandoning African rhythms, but retaliated by preserving those rhythms through adaptation to new instruments.

Slave owners in the United States sought to completely subjugate their slaves physically, mentally, and spiritually through brutality and demeaning acts. African-Americans frequently used music to counter this dehumanization—to boost morale and toughen themselves psychologically. An example of the humiliation slaves had to endure was the forced eating of juba (or jibba, jiba), a stew containing a week’s leftovers from the plantation-owner’s house, at times poured into an animal feeding trough for consumption. In protest and for mental fortification, African-Americans made songs to steel themselves against the debasement of eating juba:

Juba this and Juba that
Juba killed a yella’ cat
Get over double trouble, Juba . . .

Juba up, Juba down,
Juba all around the town.
Juba for Ma, Juba for Pa.
Juba for your brother-in-law.

These verses are an example of the disguised meaning often hidden within the lyrics of early African-American song. The words of the first stanza indicate the eclectic nature of the slop made from “. . . this and . . . that,” and express the expectation of proper food once

Notes

¹ Karlton Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call "Jazz"* (Ithaca, NY: Herteric Records and Publisher, 2000), Ch. 2, pp. 3–4.

² Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), p. 62.

³ Beverly J. Robinson, "Africanisms and the Study of Folklore," *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1990), pp. 214–16.

⁴ Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977), p. 72.

⁵ Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo, 1994), p. 22.

⁶ Hester, Ch. 3, p. 6.

⁷ John Storm Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 173.

⁸ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), p. 50.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Go Down Moses" (traditional)—performed by Bill McAdoo, vocal; Folkways, *Bill McAdoo Sings: Volume 2* (FA 2449).

¹¹ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 73.

¹² Hester, Ch. 3, pp. 16–17.

¹³ Hester, Ch. 3, pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ Hester, Ch. 4, p. 4.

¹⁵ Ellison, pp. 53–54.

¹⁶ John S. Otto and Augustus M. Burns, "'Welfare Store Blues'—Blues Recordings and The Great Depression," *American Popular Music Volume 1: Tin Pan Alley*, ed. Timothy Sheurer (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State UP, 1989), pp. 134–37.

¹⁷ Charles E. Cobb, Jr., "Travelling the Blues Highway," *National Geographic* vol. 195, (4), p. 58.

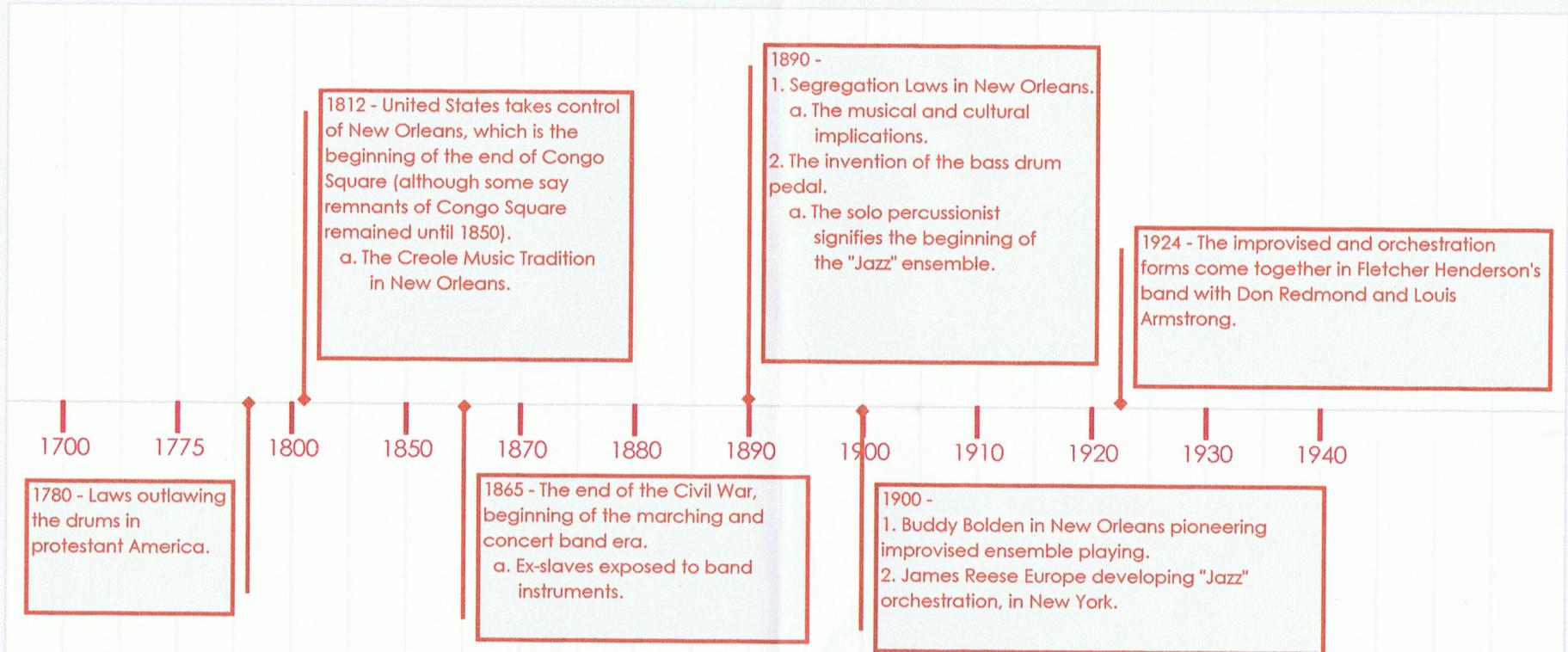
¹⁸ Hester, Ch. 4, p. 9.

¹⁹ Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism & the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 135.

²⁰ Ellison, p. 55.

- ²¹ Mark Tucker, “Uneasiness as Popular Tastes Shift,” *New York Times* (January 17, 1999), section 2, p. 32.
- ²² Tucker, p. 32.
- ²³ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1997), p. 242.
- ²⁴ DeVeaux, p. 251.
- ²⁵ Hester, Ch. 8, p. 11.
- ²⁶ DeVeaux, pp. 239–40.
- ²⁷ Hester, Ch. 9, p. 4.
- ²⁸ Hester, Ch. 8, p. 10.
- ²⁹ Hester, Ch. 10, p. 32.
- ³⁰ Guy and Candie Carawan. Liner notes accompanying *Sing for Freedom*. Smithsonian/Folkways, SF 40032.
- ³¹ Guy and Candie Carawan. *Sing for Freedom* (Bethlehem, PA: Sing Out Corporation, 1990), p. 60.
- ³² “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around” (traditional, recorded by Folkways in New York)—performed by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee Freedom Singers, vocal; Smithsonian/Folkways, *Sing for Freedom* (SF 40032).
- ³³ Hester, Ch. 8, p. 26.
- ³⁴ Hester, Ch. 9, p. 23.
- ³⁵ Hester, Ch. 9, p. 22.
- ³⁶ Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo, 1993), p. 20.
- ³⁷ Kofsky, p. 140.
- ³⁸ Hester, Ch. 12, p. 2.
- ³⁹ Clarence Lusane, “Rhapsodic Aspirations: Rap, Race and Power Politics.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 23 (2), p. 39.
- ⁴⁰ Lusane, p. 39.
- ⁴¹ Ice Cube, “A Bird in the Hand,” *Death Certificate*, Priority Records, 1991.
- ⁴² Lyrics from traditional spiritual, as printed in Mary Ellison’s *Lyrical Protest* (New York: Praeger Publishers), p. 50.

An African American Music Timeline



Rationale For An African American Music Timeline

The construction of an African American music timeline brings to focus those dates significant to the evolution of African American music. In the United States, African American culture has not been adequately examined. As a consequence, the methodology inherent in the music of that culture, as well as those responsible for the creation and development of that methodology have been woefully inadequate.

The African American Timeline outlines broad subject areas. Those broad subject areas are initial points of departure from which scholars and other students of music can conduct research and discussions about pertinent issues and persons relevant to the development of African American music.