

Folkways Records FD 5252

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Songs Of Sung By Michel Larue The American Negro Slaves

Notes On Negro Songs By John Hope Franklin Introduction By Ralph Knight

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVES / FOLKWAYS RECORDS FD 5252

LINK O' DAY
I JUST CAME FROM THE FOUNTAIN
PO' MOURNER
YOU GONNA REAP JUST WHAT
YOU SOW
AIN'T THAT GOOD NEWS
I STOOD ON THE RIVER
CERTAINLY, LAWD
RAILROAD BILL
CHILDREN'S GAME SONGS
GIT UP, CHILLUNS
GO TO SLEEP
THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE
EASY RIDER
I SHALL KNOW HIM
MY LAWD'S GETTING US READY
ONE MORNING SOON
GET RIGHT
STARS BEGIN TO FALL
BETTER DAY A-COMING
SALAGANDOU
STEP THIS WAY
I'M IN TROUBLE
STAND STILL, JORDAN
DO, LAWD, REMEMBER ME
GWINE TO ALABAMA
COME AND GO WITH ME TO MY
FATHER'S HOUSE
BEFORE THE SUN GOES DOWN
HOW COME ME HERE?
MARCH ON

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET



Songs Of The American Negro Slaves

SONGS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVES

Sung by MICHEL LARUE

A NOTE ON NEGRO SONGS by John Hope Franklin

There can be no doubt that there is a close relationship between the Negroes in the ante-bellum years and some of the songs that came out of that period. More difficult is to see the specific connections between these songs and the experiences of Negroes in Africa prior to coming to the New World. The extent of survival either of rhythms or melodies or both would depend on numerous factors, including the location of Negro settlements in the New World, the extent and nature of isolation, and the kinds of controls imposed on them by their masters. For the most part, because of the absence of reliable data, these matters must remain in the realm of uncertainty. They do not affect, however, the clear, verifiable fact that many songs grew out of the experiences of Negro slaves and have come down to us today, in some instances, in almost unchanged form.

It is difficult, however, to establish the time and place for the origins of specific songs. Dr. Miles Mark Fisher has attempted this in his Slave Songs in the United States, with varying degrees of success. Words and melodies, springing up in a particular place, rapidly spread elsewhere, presumably by the proverbial "grapevine," and soon became the common possession of many persons scattered over a wide area. This explains the emergence of several slightly different versions of the same song. People added words or modified the melodies to fit their own moods and experiences. This helps to explain, also, why given songs meant different things to different people. It is believed, for example, that "You Gonna Reap Just What You Sow" had two meanings. In some instances slaves were admonishing each other, in keeping with the words from the Scriptures, that divine retribution was real. In other contexts slaves were consoling themselves that their cruel masters would ultimately be punished for their inhumanity.

It was the dual meaning of the songs that made it possible for slaves to sing them almost anywhere and everywhere with impunity. When they sang "Ain't That Good News," their masters could well believe that the home in the Kingdom that they sang about was a heavenly home; but at least some slaves were singing about a home in Africa to which they wanted to return. Similar interpretations may be placed on "Stood on the River," "Better Day A-Coming," "March On," and "Come and Go with Me To My Father's House."

Some songs are usually associated with plans or attempts of slaves to revolt. On the fact of it, it would have been unwise for slaves to sing brazenly, even in symbols, about their plans to revolt. It is difficult to believe that such songs had any relationship to specific plans. Rather, a greater likelihood is that slaves who sang such songs had in mind either some effort that had already been made or some general aspiration they entertained. In this category is a large number of songs, prominent among which are "Do Lawd Remember Me," "My Lawd's Gitting Us Ready," "I'se in Trouble," "Steal Away," "One Morning Soon," and "Come and Go with Me to My Father's House."

Numerous songs sprang from the work experiences of slaves and were sung by them merely to pass the time of day, to make the work seem lighter, or to issue a mild protest against their assigned duties. Among them are some of the most poignant work songs to be found anywhere. "Trouble" is an excellent example of a work song that is nothing more than that, while "Before the Sun Goes Down" contains a protest against hard work.

Closely related to the work songs that were sung in the fields were the songs of religious fervor that were sung in the meetings and in the fields. As it became more difficult to hold meetings after the new proscriptive laws of 1831-1832, more of these songs could be heard in the fields. These are songs of faith and hope, born of religious experiences and fear as well as faith in God. "The Stars Begin to Fall," for example, shows respect for the omnipotence of the Almighty. More typical of these religious songs are "Old Ship O' Zion," "I Just Come From the Fountain," and "Certainly Lawd."

Songs such as these will remain an important part of the cultural heritage of America because they have grown out of the real and terribly significant experiences of the people who first sang them. They came from the heart, and their sincerity gives them not only fidelity but integrity. They have, of course, undergone many modifications at the hands of modern arrangers, but although such changes have, at times, done violence to them, it is difficult to destroy their freshness and their flavor. It is these qualities that have won for them a place among the great songs of the peoples of the world.

AMERICAN NEGRO SLAVERY, 1619-1865 by Ralph Knight

Of the systems of human exploitation known to history, American Negro slavery was one of the most cruel. Further, it has left an issue in our national life, the inferior status of the Negro, that persists to this day. The denial of Negro rights springs directly from the Negro's former condition as a slave; hence, in the study of slavery we seek to understand one of the great forces that have shaped our nation.

The slaveholding economy pitted itself in a fierce struggle against a better economic system, industrial capitalism, and lost. While Northern capitalism astonished the world with the rapid growth of its productive capacities and the dazzling extension of its commercial life, the Southern economy drooped and lagged in a condition of chronic sickness. Nevertheless, the slaveholders fought a bitter rear-guard action. They sought to hold on to national political power and, goaded by internal and external pressures, to extend their empire. Isolated, and beaten at every turn, they finally took up arms and launched a great War to Preserve Slavery.

We shall examine some of these matters a little later, because they lie at the center of any effort to understand the issues of our history. But slavery first comes to mind as a system of human degradation. It is a story, first of all, of a people seized from their native homes, manacled, and brought thousands of miles to a new continent, there to labor like beasts, to be deprived of all rights, to be whipped and tortured, and to struggle, to organize and to fight back in a long climb toward freedom. Their labor was the very basis of the creation of vast agrarian enterprises, but they were robbed and cheated of any rewards at all as wealth accumulated in the hands of their masters.

This is the way slavery appeared to John Brown, David Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, Thomas Garrett, Levi Coffin and all the thousands of whites who once dedicated themselves to its destruction: as a moral issue of a cheated people. But how much more so did it appear to the Negro heroes of the resistance, who felt the lash themselves! Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, Nathaniel Turner, Denmark Vesey, John S. Rock: these were the most relentless enemies of "the peculiar institution"--as the Abolitionists dubbed slavery--because they suffered from it most of all.

We must turn to the records of the words and deeds of the Negro as our first lesson in the meaning of slavery and the music to which it gave birth.

The first slaves were landed in colonial America, that is, in the area of the present United States, at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. They, and the thousands who followed them in the hideous Middle Passage, formed the basis of the Southern economy. They were set to work as planters and sowers, clearing the forests and tilling the soil; as craftsmen, as coopers, carpenters, and blacksmiths; as domestics, as cooks, waiters, nurses, and grooms. Their numbers multiplied rapidly and the plantation system took definite form; and as the slave empire extended itself across the South to Texas, the hegemony of the master on his tightly organized private barony became fixed with law and custom.

In the period immediately preceding the War, a small number of slaveholders and slaveholders, fewer than three hundred and fifty thousand, with a swarming army of "poor white" hirelings, ruled nearly four million Negro slaves. The area they ruled was an armed camp, organized politically and ideologically with the chief aim of holding the slaves imprisoned.

The slaveholders' armed patrols roamed the countryside to challenge any Negro who might be abroad, and woe to the one who could not show a pass! United States armed forces and State militia were on hand in case of serious trouble. The Negroes were stripped of any pretense of legal rights and were kept in total illiteracy, insofar as possible; they were not permitted to meet together except under supervision; they were worked from daybreak to nightfall on diets usually at starvation levels, meager and poor in nutrition; they were clothed in thin rags in all weathers; they were abused, insulted and beaten, frequently to death; they were bred as animals are, for the market, and it was common practice for slaveholders themselves to act as breeders on the bodies of Negro women. Marriage, in its legal sense, was not ordinarily permitted among slaves, but, once the match was made by the slaveholder and a family formed, it might be torn apart at any moment as wife, husband and children were sold from owner to owner and to distant places.

Josiah Henson, a slave of Charles county, Maryland, born in 1789, who escaped with his family, educated himself, and became a minister and leader of a Canadian settlement of escaped slaves, has left a stark record of everyday living conditions among the slaves. Henson writes in his autobiography:

"The principal food of those upon my master's plantation consisted of corn-meal, and salt herrings; to which was added in summer a little buttermilk, and the few vegetables which each might raise for himself and his family, on the little piece of ground which was assigned to him for the purpose, called a truck patch.

"In ordinary times we had two regular meals in a day: --breakfast at twelve o'clock, after laboring from daylight, and supper when the work of the remainder of the day was over. In harvest season we had three. Our dress was of tow-cloth; for the children nothing but a shirt; for the older ones a pair of pantaloons or a gown in addition, according to the sex. Besides these, in the winter a round jacket or overcoat, a wool hat once in two or three years, for the males, and a pair of coarse shoes once a year.

"We lodged in log huts, and on the bare ground. Wooden floors were an unknown luxury. In a single room were huddled, like cattle, ten or a dozen persons, men, women and children. All ideas of refinement and decency were, of course, out of the question. There were neither bedsteads, nor furniture of any description. Our beds were collections of straw and old rags, thrown down in the corners and boxed in with boards; a single blanket the only covering. Our favorite way of sleeping, however, was on a plank, our heads raised on an old jacket

and our feet toasting before the smouldering fire. The wind whistled and the rain and snow blew in through the cracks and the damp earth soaked in the moisture till the floor was miry as a pig-sty. Such were our houses. In these wretched hovels were we penned at night, and fed by day; here were the children born and the sick--neglected."

Henson's master, like all slaveholders, regarded the Negro as no more than an instrument of production to be exploited for maximum profit. To hold down the cost of maintenance and to extract as much labor as possible: this was the slaveholders' creed in regard to slaves. And that they were successful is attested by the fact that the slaveholders estimated the cost of keeping a prime field hand, in the middle Forties of the last century, as about thirty dollars a year. Women and children, fed and clothed less well, were estimated to cost half that amount.

Nothing could be further from the truth than to imagine that slaves were well treated because, like animals, they were property. A mule does not question his condition as a beast of burden; therefore there is no reason to break his mind. The slave could reason and question and dispute. He could see that his body and soul were in chains, that he was robbed and deprived. A fire of resentment burned in him, and the master must smother it with whip, gun, bowie knife, bloodhound, and, most of all, a sense of the futility of resistance, or the slave would revolt or run away.

The rule of the lash under slavery has been described by Frederick Douglass, one of the great geniuses of our history, a profound political thinker and man of action, the greatest of Abolitionists and himself an escaped slave. In his autobiography, Douglass writes:

"A mere look, word, or motion,--a mistake, accident, or want of power,--are all matters for which a slave may be whipped at any time. Does a slave look dissatisfied? It is said, he has the devil in him, and it must be whipped out. Does he speak loudly when spoken to by his master? Then he is getting high-minded, and should be taken down a button-hole lower. Does he forget to pull off his hat at the approach of a white person? Then he is wanting in reverence, and should be whipped for it. Does he ever venture to vindicate his conduct, when censured for it? Then he is guilty of impudence,--one of the greatest crimes of which a slave can be guilty. Does he ever venture to suggest a different mode of doing things from that pointed out by his master? He is indeed presumptuous, and getting above himself; and nothing less than a flogging will do for him. Does he, while ploughing, break a plough, or, while hoeing, break a hoe? It is owing to his carelessness, and for it a slave must always be whipped.

Murder of slaves, either to serve as examples in the policy of suppression or from degenerate cruelty, was so common as to cause the British Consul at Charleston to write privately in 1854: "It is literally no more to kill a slave than to shoot a dog." Few Negroes who escaped but were first-hand witnesses of the murder of their fellows.

Such was the law, written and unwritten, in all the vast, mournful countryside where the slaveholder was absolute ruler. No wonder Douglass cried out when he arrived on free soil: "...I felt like one who had escaped from a den of hungry lions."

It is idle to admit the argument, sometimes advanced by capricious, shallow or willfully misleading historians, that some masters were mild. Of what character was such mildness? The mildest slaveholder gave no return beyond mere existence for a lifetime of hard work. The kindest slaveholder would sell families piece by piece when necessary. To own and trade in human beings was in itself the intolerable cruelty.

Among the hundreds of escaping slaves who passed through Philadelphia going North to freedom, and whose stories were recorded by William Still, the Negro

station-master of the Underground Railroad there, were a few who reported that their masters were, by comparison, mild. A few examples of these, chosen at random, will show that it was slavery itself, not the individual personalities of the masters, that held master and slave in the grip of an inhuman relationship.

John Hambleton Christian was born in Virginia, the son of his white master. He was reared a body-servant and treated well. When his mistress married John Tyler, later President, Christian served at the White House. But he unfortunately fell in love with a free woman and could not marry because he was a slave. This, and his fear of being sold, caused him to flee.

Abram Galloway, of North Carolina, was the son of a white captain of a government vessel, who, though he did not own him, protected him as well as he could. Galloway's master did not whip and, further, permitted Galloway to hire himself out for wages when Galloway asked to do so. But Galloway found himself paying over his earnings to his master. "Toiling month after month the year round to support his master and not himself," Still writes, "was the one intolerable thought" that caused Galloway to run away.

Matilda Mahoney, of Maryland, was hired out by her master to a Baltimore household. Her master was old and his son was a slave-trader in New Orleans. She was treated well enough, but knew that when her master died she would probably be put on the slave block and, because of her handsome appearance, sold for a high price as a concubine. Further, she was in love with a Northerner, who arranged for a friend to go to Baltimore and help her to slip away from bondage.

Still's RECORDS teem with stories of unimaginable cruelty; yet all the fleeing slaves whom he interviewed were from nearby states, located near the urban centers, where the worst forms of oppression would be less likely to occur. In the great holdings of the deep South, in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana--it was there that the plantation system was more perfectly organized as the instrument of slave exploitation. There the slaves felt even more the pressure of the speed-up when improved manufacturing techniques and the development of rail transportation increased the demand for Southern products. There the slaves had less contact with their masters, and more with overseers. The moderating influences of personal relationships, if any could ever have been claimed, all but disappeared.

A scene on the New Orleans slave market was once described by a man, Solomon Northup, who was sold there. There was a mother and her two children, a boy and a girl. A buyer purchased the son, Randall, a young boy. The mother pleaded with him to purchase them all, but he could not afford it. When the mother, Eliza, burst into "a paroxysm of weeping," the slave-trader, Freeman, "turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her...Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously, not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy.

A great many times she repeated her former promises--how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life, if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her--all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain.

"Freeman damned her, calling her a blubbering, bawling wench, and ordered her to go to her place...

"The planter from Baton Rouge, with his new purchase, was ready to depart.

"Don't cry, mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry,"

said Randall, looking back, as they passed out of the door."

Such savage suppression of human rights had its origin in the nature of the plantation system. This was, in its inception, a colonial extension of European, principally English, capitalism. Its purpose was the commercial production of export crops, such as cotton, tobacco, rice, sugar and indigo, for the uses of the mother country and, in later times, the North. To accomplish this end in frontier conditions some form of forced labor was best, or rather, most profitable. Laborers free to do so would demand better conditions, entailing higher costs, and would take to their legs and become independent farmers.

The originators of the plantation system at first depended upon indentured toilers for their labor force. Even the first Negroes brought into Virginia, Maryland and South Carolina were considered indentured, there being no provision in English law for slavery, and not a few were set free after a term of service. But gradually a separation of Negro and white indentured occurred in custom and law. The Negro could be reduced to slavery. He could not run away and lose himself in the colonies as easily as a white. He could be cheated into life service more easily, and he was slightly lower in cost to maintain. The Negro was well established as a slave before 1700.

Because compulsion was involved, the organization of the plantation served more than mere economic aims. The plantation was also a political unit, "in which the planter exercised supreme authority in the disposal of the labor and lives of his slaves." (Frazier, see bibliography.) To this end the entire physical, legal and ideological structure of the plantation was organized. Religion was enlisted to teach submission. Negroes were called inferior peoples who should be enslaved. By combining among themselves, the slaveholders seized all state authority from the local to the national level. Thus the plantation organization became the model for political organization of government.

The Great House, or slave-owner's mansion, was the administrative center of the plantation. No slaves were permitted there except those employed in domestic service or on allowance day, when issues of food and clothing were made. Domestic slaves were thus separated from their fellows who worked in the fields. Domestic slaves came to model their conduct on the white masters much more than did the field hands; they even acquired fine manners and educated speech in many instances. They fared better from the leavings of the lavish tables of their masters, and bonds of affection frequently sprang up between master and slave. Domestic slaves were therefore held in great distrust by field hands, who saw them allied, at least to some degree, with the common enemy.

Set off from the Great House were the cabins of the field hands, described by Josiah Henson earlier, and of the overseers. The overseers would rouse the slaves before day and set them to their tasks, always under supervision, at which they would work until work was impossible, at the maximum pace. Men, women and children alike were herded into the fields, the tobacco houses, the cotton and sugar barns, and into the forests or at the construction site.

These conditions raised an obsessive yearning for freedom in the mind of the slave. For the one who would win his freedom, several possible courses were open: he could purchase himself, provided he could earn the money and his master were honest; he could run away to free soil; or he could join with his fellows and revolt. All these methods were quite common.

Slaves frequently purchased themselves and their families and friends, often by years of hard and discouraging labor. We read of Negro "slaveholders": these were men who had purchased their families to secure themselves against separation. We also read of many masters who, taking advantage of slaves' helplessness and inability to read and write, cheated them of freedom after accepting money for manumission.

In the later years of slavery, manumission declined drastically. The percentage of increase in the number of free Negroes dropped from 82.2 in the ten-year period before 1800 to only 12.2 for the same period before 1860. However, the number of free Negroes increased rapidly, due to the increasing number of births. The percentage of free Negroes in the Old South gained as slaves were sold into the cotton plantation area. In 1860, for example, when there were roughly half a million free Negroes, divided about equally between North and South, Maryland had nearly as many free as bound.

Those who ran away usually went on the Underground Railroad. This was an effective system developed by thousands of Negroes and whites on free soil to help the runaways. The slave would flee, choosing his time carefully to gain a start, and travel through the countryside by night to the nearest friendly house. There he would be sheltered and helped on his way to the next "station." Thus, by tedious stages and facing momentary danger of recapture, he would, if fortune were with him reach free soil. The Negroes came in streams, alone and in small groups, especially from the Border States, and as they came the numbers increased of those on free soil willing to help them. Some traveled by rail, some by coastwise ship. One is known to have traveled more than 1,200 miles on foot, swimming every river. Many were recaptured and escaped again. And hundreds who secured themselves on free soil returned each year to guide others out over the routes they had learned.

It has been estimated that more than sixty thousand slaves escaped to the North and Canada by the Underground Railroad in the thirty years before 1860. The tales of daring, endurance and determination shown by the fleeing slaves form one of the great epics of history. No people anywhere has shown more courage than did the Negroes on the Underground Railroad, or the whites who sacrificed so much, even life itself, to help them.

A large number of slaves also fled to the wilderness to live, frequently with friendly Indians. These were known as maroons (fr. Spanish *cimarrón*, wild). There are many records telling of their raids on slaveholders' settlements in every period of slavery. They and the slaves who plotted revolts kept the slaveholders in a continual state of fear.

Of Negro slave revolts, the leading authority, Herbert Aptheker, has stated that there are records of at least two hundred and fifty such attempts. Since suppression of report was one of the best means of preventing the conflagration of revolt from spreading, undoubtedly there were numerous cases that are not known and never will be known. The slaves revolted against hopeless odds, out of deep desperation. Usually only small numbers were involved, but Denmark Vesey, the leader of a plot in Charleston in 1822, was believed to have rallied nearly all the forty thousand slaves in the area. His plan was betrayed by a domestic slave and was smashed before a blow could be struck. Other notable insurrections were those led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Nathaniel Turner in 1831, both in Virginia.

Poverty, terror, illiteracy, degradation: this was the lot of the slaves under the slaveholding system. But there was another group, the non-slaveholding whites, even more numerous in the South than the Negroes, to whom slavery was also an abomination.

This group, more than six million in number just prior to 1860, enjoyed few privileges, little political liberty, and less prosperity. These small farmers and working people of urban areas, even many small businessmen, were permitted to live only as it pleased the slaveholders. They were the special target of the propaganda of white supremacy, with which the slaveholders, not believing it themselves, hoped to maintain their power. That a great deal of this propaganda found its mark, aided by the terror directed against those who spoke out against it, is evident from the support the slaveholding system found among them. Nevertheless, not all the non-slaveholding whites accepted slavery by any means, even though few

accepted the belief of Negro equality. Two hundred thousand fought with the Union armies during the War and that many again deserted the Confederate armies. Even more significant is the fact that a large number joined in slave revolts and engaged in anti-slavery political activity in every period.

The slaveholders admitted that had the question of slavery been put to an honest ballot among all the whites of the South, it is doubtful whether it could have survived. The restlessness among the non-slaveholding whites, in fact, was one of the sources of fear that drove the slaveholders finally to take up arms in the desperate gamble to maintain their system.

A great book, at once the expression of a point of view and a call for action to destroy slavery, was written by one of the members of this class. The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It, by Hinton Rowan Helper of North Carolina, first published in 1857, was a powerful indictment of slavery that rapidly went into many reprintings and was among the most influential of all anti-slavery books.

The Impending Crisis first takes the slaveholding system apart by statistical means. Helper shows that the slave states, in the beginning at least as vigorous economically as the free states, fell far behind in trade and commerce, population and culture. He shows that the free states far, far excelled their Southern sisters in manufacture, shipping, commerce, population growth, and even in agriculture--the one area in which it was commonly supposed, then and now, that the South led.

In order to hold the poor whites in leash, the slaveholders appropriated all power and kept the whites in ignorance.

"The lords of the lash," Helper wrote, "are not only the absolute masters of the blacks, who are bought and sold, and driven about like so many cattle, but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated..."

"Whenever it pleases, and to the extent it pleases a slaveholder to become communicative, poor whites may hear with fear and trembling, but not speak. They must be as mum as dumb brutes, and stand in awe of their august superiors, or be crushed with stern rebukes, cruel oppression, or downright violence...Never were the poorer classes of a people, and those classes so largely in the majority, and all inhabiting the same country, so basely duped, so adroitly swindled, or so damnable outraged."

Though Helper admitted a few moral arguments against slavery into the pages of his book, he did not foresee the great destiny of the Negro people in the United States. He considered Negroes inferior. He adopted the theory of colonization--a movement to return the Negroes to Africa, set afoot by slaveholding representatives such as John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay--as the solution to the Negro question.

In spite of this gross misconception, however, Helper's book served a useful purpose. It helped dig the grave of the slaveholding system by swaying millions with unanswerable arguments and exposing the plight of the poor white.

We may well ask how it was that so few slaveholders could hold in subjugation such an overwhelming majority of the population as the slaves and non-slaveholding whites. The answer, of course, lies in the fact that all economic power, and consequently all political power, was in the hands of the slaveholders. And they were ready to throw in the national interests, the welfare of the Negroes and poor whites of the South, and indeed all interests save their own, to maintain a cruel and unjust system of benefit only to themselves.

The music of the Negro must be viewed against the background of the conditions of his life under

slavery. The Negro sang to make the work go easier, to soften the pang of deprivation, to express his sorrow, anger and thirst for justice, creating song out of the materials of his life.

Musicologists tell us that African survivals are evident in the tones and styles of the slave singing, and we may well believe this when we compare it with present-day African singing. But we know, too, that traces of other influences, such as the white spirituals and secular folksong, are found in it; and that all these influences were transformed by the Negro to serve him in the new conditions of his life.

In the first of the few early attempts to collect authentic songs of the slave, and the only collection made from the singing of Negroes just released from slavery (Slave Songs of the United States, see bibliography), the author of the introduction deals at some length with the difficulty of writing down the songs as they were then sung.

"The voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate," he writes, "and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper. And I despair of conveying any notion of the effect of a number singing together, especially in a complicated shout ... There is no singing in parts, as we understand it, and yet no two appear to be singing the same thing--the leading singer starts the words of each verse, often improvising, and the others, who 'base' him, as it is called, strike in with the refrain, or even join in the solo, when the words are familiar. When the 'base' begins, the leader often stops, leaving the rest of his words to be guessed at, or it may be they are taken up by one of the other singers. And the 'basers' themselves seem 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 low or too high), 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. And what makes it all the harder to unravel a thread of melody out of this strange network is that, like birds, they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented by the gamut, and abound in 'slides from one note to another, and turns and cadences not in articulated notes.'"

This remarkable passage might very well serve as a description of Negro singing recorded in the present era in the prisons and religious congregations of the South. We immediately recognize the style heard on recordings as that described by the writer above in the year 1867. Negro singing has apparently persisted in a uniform style in conditions, such as the Negro prison farms, that are similar to the conditions under which the Negro sang in slavery. From these recordings and from the collections and reports made in slavery times, our imaginations can fly back in attempts to recreate the singing of the slaves.

What can we say of this music? How could words begin to convey the impossibly complex rhythms, the unbelievable cohesion of meaning and tone, the wild, terrible beauty they possess?

Frederick Douglass, in his autobiography, where he writes of the slaves singing as they went to the Great House on allowance day, groped for words to express their beauty and significance:

"I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs," he wrote. "I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains..."

"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 sorrow of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears."

The slaveholder, for his music, had to make do with importations from Europe and the dull sounds of written hymns. The slave created great art out of the stuff of his own life. His music, ordinarily held in contempt by his cultureless master, was a magnificent human expression. Now it is gone, gone forever--just as slavery has been uprooted and the struggle of the Negro people has taken on new forms. But we are left as our heritage the most marvelous body of American music; certainly the most important of all those that can be called distinctly American.

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Notes on the Songs

by Michel LaRue

SIDE A

LINK O' DAY

This is a song of exhortation to run away. Run away high up in the hills before the light (link) of day.

Massa bin an' sol' yuh O!
To go up in de country
'Fo' de link o' day.

Run yuh! Run yuh!
'Fo' de link o' day (2)

Dere gwina come a time O!
When we's gwine all be free,
We's gwine all be free

I JUST CAME FROM THE FOUNTAIN

I've heard this old song from slavery times all over the South.

O Lawd, I just come from the fountain,
Just from the fountain, Lawdy!
I just come from the fountain,
His name so sweet!

O my brother, do you love freedom?
Yes, O yes, I love my freedom,

Zion Elder, do you love freedom?

My mother, do you love freedom?

PO' MOURNER

This religious song tells us that all hard-working slave finally had a home.

Um---um---my Lawd
Po' mourner got a home at last.

O mourner! O mourner!
Ain't you tired of mourning?
Bow down on your knees and join the band with the angel.

Go tell brother Elijah,
No harm, no harm
Po' mourner got a home at last.

YOU GONNA REAP

I heard a group of Negroes in the cotton fields of Texas sing this until I could not hold back the tears. I asked an elderly Negro woman why they sang this song so long. She replied, "Child, my grandma told me that when you're burdened, just sing 'You Gonna Reap.'" She told me of her age and how long she had been working for a living and that she, too, felt that some day she would no longer have such burdens.

You gonna reap just what you sow,
You gonna reap what you sow,
Sowing on the mountain, sowing in the valley,
You'll reap what you sow.

I'm telling you, brother, to keep on fighting,
Telling you, brother, keep on fighting,
Fighting on the mountain, fight harder in the valley,
You will reap what you sow.

AIN'T THAT GOOD NEWS

The very thought that something was working to end slavery was good news. "Ain't That Good News" is on a note of happiness. I heard it first at a campfire meeting in Louisiana, and know three

versions. The most revolutionary changes the last line to sing, "Go on home to the Promised Land, and be free."

I've got a home in the Kingdom,
Ain't that good news? (2)

I'm gonna lay down this world,
Gonna shoulder up my cross,
Going home to the Promised Land,
Ain't that good news? (and be free)

I got a home in the rock,
Ain't that good news? (2)

I STOOD ON THE RIVER

Here is a song about the slave ships. Every slave longed to get back on that boat.

I stood on the river of Jordan
To see dem ships come sailing over,
Stood on the river of Jordan
To see dem ships sail by.

O brother, won't you help me,
O my brother, won't you help me pray?
O brother, come and help me
To see them ships sail by.

CERTAINLY, LAWD

This is one of the shouts I can never forget. We used it on the college campus, at picnics, at church or anyplace.

Leader: Have you got good religion?
Group: Certainly, Lawd!

Leader: Is your name on high?
Group: Certainly, Lawd!

RAILROAD BILL

A work ballad, telling of one more bad man who went down deep in the South and did some dirty things.

Railroad Bill, he was so bad,
Stole all de money his ol' man had,
Wasn't he bad? (3)

Railroad Bill, he went down South,
Shot all de teeth outa de constable's mouth.

Railroad Bill, he sat on de fence,
He called his gal a dirty wench.

Railroad Bill, he ran his train so fast,
Couldn't see de postes as dey passed.

CHILDREN'S GAME SONGS

Songs of nonsense, nothingness songs...songs I played games to during my entire childhood.

Little Sally Walters
Setting in the saucer,
Rise, Sally, rise,
Wipe your weeping eyes,
Put your hands on your hips,
And let your backbone slip,
Shake it to the East,
Shake it to the West,
Shake it to the one dat you love the best.

Jabo walks 'n' Jabo talks,
Jabo eats with a knife and a fork,
Jabo man, hey
Hey, Jabo, hey, hey, hey
Jabo boy was a lying man.

GIT UP, CHILLUNS

A combination of a morale builder for workers and game song for children and adults.

Git up, chilluns, go 'round de wall,
Don't wanna stumble 'n' I don't wanna fall,
(repeat with variations)
Dat suits me, dat suits me, dat suits me!

Give me yo' rice, give me yo' peas,
Clap your hand and bend yo' knees,
Git up, chilluns, etc.

GO TO SLEEP

I have learned this lullaby from books, though I have heard a version sung by an old Negro woman during my stay in the South.

Go to sleep, go to sleep,
Go to sleepy, mammy's baby;
When you wake you's gwina have cake,
Go to sleepy, mammy's baby.

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

I have heard this song in so many versions I hardly know which to use.

This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine. (3)
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Everywhere I go,
I'm gonna let it shine.

All in my room,
I'm gonna let it shine.

When I'm is free,
I'm gonna let it shine.

EASY RIDER

A real folk blues. It tells of a "play-boy lover," or woman...one who takes advantage of the love of another.

Easy rider, lookee what you done done, (3)
Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey.

Easy rider, now look and come.

Easy rider, lookee what you done done.

If she don't have me, she won't have no man at all.

Easy rider, lookee what you done done.

I SHALL KNOW HIM

Here is one of the spirituals for which the modern church is responsible. This song tells of the coming of the Messiah for the second time. I have heard it many times in a little one-room country church in Texas.

I shall know Him,
I shall know Him,
And redeemed by his side I will stand.
Hallelujah, brother, I shall know Him,
Will know Him
By the print of the nail in His hands.

SIDE B

MY LAWD'S GITTING US READY

Here is a song of happiness about progress in bringing to reality that great day of freedom.

My Lawd's gitting us ready for that great day, hey!
My Lawd's gitting us ready for that great and awful day!
awful day!

My Lawd's gitting us ready for that great day!
Who's gwina be able to stand?

We gwine all shout freedom on that great day!

Satan's camp's a-burning on that great day!

ONE MORNING SOON

This is a runaway song, first used by Negro slaves in Jamaica in connection with their revolting against the British. I've heard this song used many ways. I remember the first time was in a country church in the backwoods of Texas. An old Negro woman was in the "amen corner." She put her head back and sang it like it really would be one morning soon.

One morning soon,
One morning soon, my Lawd,
One morning soon,
I heard the angel singing.

Better mind, my brother,
How you walk on the cross,
I heard the angel singing,
Yo' foot might slip
And yo' soul'll be lost,
I heard the angel singing.

GET RIGHT

Here is a song of warning: Make yourself ready for when freedom comes.

O git right and stay right,
O git right and be ready when your freedom comes.

If you wanna go to Heaven, boy, when you die,
Be ready when your freedom comes,
You gotta stop your tongue from telling dem lies,
Be ready when your freedom comes.

STARS BEGIN TO FALL

A terrifying song about a historical fact concerning the elements. I am told that the stars really fell and all thought the day of judgment was at hand.

My Lawd, what a morning! (3)
When all them stars done gone and fall.

I run to de rock to hide my face,
But de rock cried out, no hiding place!

I got to de tree, says, fall on me,
Lawd, when de stars done gone and fall.

BETTER DAY A-COMING

This is a song of encouragement: the days of suffering are going fast and the better day will come and slavery will burn like Satan's camp.

There's a better day a-coming, Hallelujah! (4)
For we don't feel no ways tired,
O chilluns Hallelujah!
For we all shout, Glory! (shout, Freedom, in repeat)
O glory Hallelujah!

SALAGANDOU

A song of sorrow from the Negro Creole folks. A mother laments the loss of her child.

Salangadou, (4)
Coti Piti fille,
Salangadou. (2)

STEP THIS WAY

This is a party song for the ring dances. It is something like barn dance calling. I remember doing the "Juba-Juba" to this song so many times.

I first heard little Ezell in Texas yelling it out one day when the school had a picnic for us.

One step, two steps, step this way!
Hey! fiddle-day-eem, fiddle-day-a,
Keep on stepping till the break of day,
Hey! fiddle-day-eem, fiddle-day-a.

Little Liza Jane with the pretty little face,
Held her lips and took a little taste.

I'M IN TROUBLE

I'm in trouble,
I'm in trouble,
I'm in trouble, Lawd,
Trouble 'bout my grave.

Sometime I weep,
Sometime I moan,
I'm in trouble 'bout my grave;
Sometime I can't do nary one,
I'm in trouble 'bout my grave.

STAND STILL, JORDAN

This religious song tells of the River Jordan separating the slaves from eternal life in the world to come and about the loved one who have gone on before them.

Stand still, Jordan, Jordan,
Stand still, Jordan,
Stand still, Jordan,
Lawd, I can't stand still.

I've got a mother
In Heaven, Heaven,
I've got a mother in Heaven,
Stand still, Jordan,
Lawd, I can't stand still.

DO, LAWD, REMEMBER ME

Do, Lawd, do, Lawd, Lawd remember me,
Do, Lawd, do, Lawd, remember me,
Do, Lawd, do, Lawd, remember me,
Now do, Lawd, remember me.

When I'm sick and can't git well,
Lawd, remember me, (3)
Now do, Lawd, remember me.

TROUBLE

This is a "blues" sung by a man when he's driving his mule team. He simply tells and thinks of his troubles and forgets his driving.

Trouble, trouble, trouble,
Done had trouble all my days,
Trouble, trouble, trouble,
Done had trouble all my days.
Seems, boys, like dese troubles
Gwine carry me to my grave.

Hey, git up dere, mule. Come on, Sally! git you're head up there, gal. Gee! Haw! Steady, steady. Whoa now!

Uncle Heszic, Uncle Hiszic,
Uncle Jig-a-like a Johnson go.

Hey, hey, hey, etc.

GWINE TO ALABAMA

I have collected this song from books.

I'm gwine to Alabama, O
Gwine to see my mammy, Ah
She went from ol' Virginny, O
And I'm her pickaninny, Ah
But I'd like to see my mammy, O
Who lives in Alabama, Ah

COME AND GO WITH ME TO MY FATHER'S HOUSE

This is a song of happiness, and has more meanings than its obviously religious one.

Come and go with me to my Father's house,
To my Father's house, to my Father's house;
Come and go with me to my Father's house,
There is peace, peace, peace.

Ain't no dying there in my Father's house,
In my Father's house, in my Father's house;
Ain't no dying there in my Father's house,
There is peace, peace, peace.

We will all be free in my Father's house,
In my Father's house, in my Father's house,
We will all be free in my Father's house,
There is peace, peace, peace.

BEFORE THE SUN GOES DOWN

A work ballad from the Southern fields, this is terrifying because it is the cry of a terrified slave. An elderly Negro, from whom I first heard the song, told me how he hates to hear it because it brought back unhappy memories.

O how long, how long, (2)
Before the sun goes down?

I wish I had-a died when I was young,
Before the sun goes down;
I never would-a had-a dis race to run,
Before the sun goes down.

HOW COME ME HERE?

Another song of the fields. This song tells of personal suffering. Work in the field from sunrise to sunset, till my hands are bleeding, till my back is breaking. I don't know why I was born. We are grateful to Roland Hayes for keeping this song alive and available to the public.

O, how come me here? (3)
I wish I'd-a never been born.

MARCH ON

Here is a song of the day of jubilation, a day that all have been waiting for.

Way over in Egypt's land,
You shall gain the victory. (repeat)

This is the year of jubilee,
You gwine gain the victory,
Old Moses set his people free
You gwine gain the day.

March on, Lawd, and you will gain the victory;
March, my brother, Lawd, and you gwine gain the day.

We need no cowards in our band,
We call for valiant-hearted men.