

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?

One of the recurrent topics for debate among blues aficionados is the degree of African retentions. The discussion reflects the broader theme of the social-cultural position of African Americans in the American society, and relates to questions of assimilation, acculturation or retention of the original culture. In this context, it is common to quote the two opposite positions, represented by the theories of E. Franklin Frazier, on the one hand, and of Melville J. Herskovits, on the other hand. While the former contended that African retentions were insignificant because the Africans were stripped of their culture by the slavery system, the latter posited that the African American culture shows an important number of African traits despite the slavery. It is possible, according to Herskovits to make a distinction between the white American culture and the African American culture on the basis of the legacy of the former slaves.

I have a problem with this kind of discussion because it is unnaturally static and fundamentally ignores the dynamics of the way cultural elements of different populations interact and change over time in relation to altering conditions. An African retention is wrongly seen as some kind of a fossil that has resisted the erosion of time and foreign cultural pressures. In accepting the terms of this discussion, we disregard the lively interaction, as Lawrence Levine has convincingly demonstrated, between the past and the present. The toughness and resiliency of a culture is not determined by its ability to withstand change – which could be a sign of stagnation – but by its capacity to “react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation”ⁱ. Therefore, we should not look for African “retentions” but analyze the way the African legacy has reacted to the New World surrounding, and has given rise to a new cultural framework. In this perspective, we acknowledge the immensely challenging possibility that this new cultural framework in its turn has been, and is, generative again and again of expressions that are neither African, nor Western-European. Instead of “retentions” or fossils, aspects of African culture are living and creative components of contemporary American culture. The “archaeologist” approach is much less productive than the framework of the cultural ethnologist with an eye for the evolution of his subject matter.

In her essay, “Africanism in African American life”ⁱⁱ, Portia K. Maulsby, Professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology and Director of the Archives of African American Music and Culture, brilliantly summarizes the evolution of African-American music from the latter vantage point. In what follows, I like to present you the scheme of her reasoning. But, as I will show in my conclusion, I feel that Maulsby should have taken her argument a bit further. However, I don't

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?

want to anticipate my final words. Let me start with summarizing Maulsby's position.

MUSIC IS EQUATED WITH GROUP LIFE

It is fascinating to unearth in the evolution of African American music from the slaves' work songs, over rural to urban blues, to rhythm and blues, and from soul to eventually funk, techno and rap the manifestation of a *creative* process, formed out of African traditions that were reshaped in the course of time to fit the conditions of the African American populace. To me, the pivotal words in the understanding of this evolution are "*reshaping*" and "*contextual*": each of the musical genres that are listed in the pedigree of the African American music (see figure below this essay) can be explained in terms of the way in which African traditional and aesthetic elements have been inventively reworked using features of the contemporaneous mainstream European-American culture. In other words: the different forms of African American musical expression have been generated again and again dynamically responding to unique contexts and historical periods.

It would thus be both misleading and limitative to describe the impact of the African legacy on culture in general, and music in particular, in terms of the survival of particular characteristics. Finding a resemblance, for instance, between certain chords in the blues and the music of the griots in Mali is not particularly relevant. Not only, is it an over simplistic research path, it is bound to blind us for what really does matter: the way African traditional elements have shown continuity *and* change at the same time. The degree to which Africa is still present in today's African American culture and music cannot be measured by the number and quality of the traits that have survived the Middle Passage. Rather, we need to look at the *process* by which the African philosophy and world view have constantly manifested themselves. Quoting Olly Wilson, a leading American composer of contemporary classical music and musicologist, the African dimension of African American music does not "*exist as a static body of something which can be depleted, but rather as a conceptual approach. The common core of Africanness consists of the way of doing something, not simply something that is done.*"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

What is this African "way of doing things"?

Foremost, African American music can never be genuinely appreciated if one does not acknowledge the basic premise that music is an intrinsic part of all aspects of black community life. It is the cement of the African social fabric, and penetrates all facets of the group life. Music is equated with group life and serves as its unifying ritual. The central concept of African music is its *participatory* dimension that supports group cohesion. In other words: music is a social ritual that both reflects a group activity and reinforces it. Music making is sharing a creative experience; it is an expression and corroboration of a group sentiment.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?

This fundamental *communal* feature determines to a large extent the aesthetics of the music making throughout the African diaspora. These aesthetics can be described in terms of the (a) style of delivery, (b) the sound quality, and (c) the mechanics of delivery^{iv}. Let me elaborate on them, as does Maultsby.

MUSIC AS EXPRESSION OF ALIVENESS

The *style of delivery* of music stands for the way music is *physically* presented: how does the musician behave when he/she performs? The core trait of the African delivery style of music is that it is part of a *global performance* that unites music, physical movement, visual expression and even ritualistic drama, all together merging to symbolize vitality and a sense of aliveness.

One part of the visual experience is the element of the performer's *dress* as an essential component of the musical event. The aesthetics of the music need to be coherent with the costume of the performer that is an integral constituent of the communication process between the performer and the audience. The dress has to convey the same message as the sound; the image of vitality can only be sustained if it is supported by the colorful and flamboyant costume of the performer. The way a performer is dressed when he/she enters the stage is the start of a dialogue, an anchor point for mutual understanding of the meaning of the ritual that is to come alive.

Another part of the total visual experience is the complete *bodily* involvement of the performer. Not only does the African American performance embed an intense *emotionality* from the part of the performer, it requires also a total bodily and physical commitment. The movement of the body and the facial expressions follow the music and reinforce it. As an observer of a slave gathering formulated it: "*their bodies wagged, their heads nodded, their feet stamped, their knees shook, their elbows and their hands beat time to the tunes and the words which they sing...*"^v In African American music, from slavery times up until today, music and movement, sound and dance are intrinsically connected. They are one, and cannot exist on their own. They are part of a total visual and aural experience that symbolizes the group wherein performer and audience are creatively interconnected.

MUSIC IS NOT MEANT TO BE BEATIFUL

The Western aesthetics do not lend themselves particularly well to evaluate African sound. Beauty cannot be the criterion to appreciate a sound that is primarily an expression of the everyday experiences, the life, the natural, and the supernatural. The African music relates directly to the context of its performance, gives meaning to it and confirms the group dimension of this context. The sounds resulting from this contextual interpretation are unique, and are meaningless to any listener who is unaware of their function. This is why the uninformed listener will tend to label them as savage, or at least as not agreeable to his ears. Only to the participant in the communal music ritual can the sounds be interpreted as "effective" or not. In his very

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?

personal – even emotional - narrative of his learning process of the drums, John Miller Chernoff gives a brilliant insight in the way the drum music, for instance, plays an indispensable role in a group event when played “correctly”.^{vi}

Technically, the manipulation of the *timbre, texture and shading* will characterize the African music contrary to for instance Western oriented music. As Maultsby typifies it, the “*musicians bring intensity to their performance by alternating lyrical, percussive, and raspy timbres; juxtaposing vocal and instrumental textures; changing pitch and dynamic levels; alternating straight with vibrato tones; and weaving moans, shouts, grunts, hollers and screams in the melody.*”^{vii}

Instruments are meant to imitate the timbres produced by the voice. Instrumental sounds and the human voice speak the same language and work together in expressing the group activity. The differentiation between the sound of the instrument and of the voice is irrelevant in the African context.

A SALIENT SOUND STRUCTURE

African sound is *improvisation*, but not in the arbitrary sense that we may expect in a Western aesthetical model. Two performances are never the same, not because of some capricious mood of the performers, but because the audience expects the performer to offer unique interpretations of the actual context of the performance. The music maker will be evaluated by his/her technical capabilities to incorporate *hic et nunc* the context in his/her music, and meet the objectives of the group of which the music should be the perfect expression and unifying agent.

For improvisation purposes, the performer has at his/her disposal, as mentioned above, the elements of time, lyrics and pitch. Time is manipulated through the rhythm, the playing with the length of the notes, the repetition of words, phrases and song sections. Texture is created by the adding of different sound layers, for instance by stamping the feet, clapping the hands, adding voices and other instruments. Essentially however, the *call-and-response* structure is the key to the variations in time, text and pitch. It is the basic African technique to generate musical variety and change.

The *call-and-response pattern* is interwoven with the democratic, participatory characteristic of African music, and is also to be seen in connection with perhaps the most noticeable feature of African (American) music: *the rhythmic complexity and the polyrhythms*. The multi-linear soundscape is composed of different patterns, repeated with slight variations, assigned to different instruments. Each line follows its own rhythm, and all lines together create a unique whole that engenders a very intense and emotional beat. Variations in time, text and pitch interact in a creative way that allow the performer not only to demonstrate his/her technical capabilities, but foremost to enable the music to conform to the particularity of each group

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?

event, with its very own audience. The latter will join in the polyrhythmic structure with comments, physical gestures and its own sounds. The effectiveness of the performers' act can in this way be measured by the active involvement by the audience in the creation of the polyrhythmic sound texture. In the call-and-response pattern and the multi-linear African polyrhythmic sound scape, the unity of the performer and the audience finds its most expressive manifestation.

Within this frame, it is possible to analyze each genre of African-American music in its historical context, from the slaves' work songs to soul, disco and funk as the by-products of a specific social and historical context where the fundamental African approach to music takes a specific form. The common aesthetic features in terms of music and movement as a single unit, the use of call-and-response, and the polyrhythmic nature create each time again, in a changed contexts, new musical forms out of existing traditions. In the words of Maultsby: "*The old form persisted alongside the new and remained a vital form of expression within specific contexts. (New and older) forms reaffirmed the values of the African past and simultaneously expressed a sense of inner strength and optimism about the future.*"^{viii}

So it is, for example, for the blues, that shares general features and its aesthetic nature with past music traditions, combining the musical structure and poetic forms of spirituals, work songs and field hollers with new musical and textual ideas. In the blues, we discern the improvisation, as well as the call-and-response style. The "*slides, slurs, bends, and dips*" of the blues melodies and the variation in the timbres from "*moans, groans and shouts*" are further expressions of a basic African conceptual approach to music. The blues instruments support the human voice and are all played in the typical African percussive style. Hence, the particularity of the blues in terms of lyrics and style comes from the way the blacks responded to the realities of the time at the turn of the century, and from the way in which they reacted to the rebirth of the slavery in the form of a segregated society. At the end of the day, however, the blues are a reshaping of an African concept of music in a new environment.

WHITE AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC?

Maultsby concludes that the study of African American music from the arrival of the first slaves in Virginia in 1619 to the popular music of electro, house and techno in the twentieth century can be studied in terms of successive manifestations of a fundamental *African approach* to music in relation to the changing social environment of the black population. But there is more: music is not only the expression of a constant adaptation to changing contexts. African music, as the cement of the social fabric of the black population, has also been a key agent in the process of survival of this population. Again and again, music allowed the blacks to create a new meaningful existence in a world in which they were not welcome.

Old genres disappeared, new genres developed but all were created "*in the style of the tradition, using its vocabulary and idiom, or in an alternative style which combined African and*

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?

non-African resources. () New ideas were recycled through age-old concepts to produce new music styles^x. The fundamentals of culture established by slaves have persisted throughout history as constant reinterpretations in relation to the demands of time.

Maultsby's framework is a fruitful one, but her essay could be taken a step further. I believe there is sufficient material to argue that the African conceptual approach has not only granted *African American* music its basic features, but has also left its indelible traces on *American and Western music in general*. Today's popular music in general would sound quite differently if it would not have been influenced by the African concept.

On a broader level, the essay suffers from a distortion that is typical for the study of so-called Africanisms in African American culture^x. The bulk of this literature, in the Herskovits paradigm, has been focusing almost exclusively on African retentions in *African American* culture, looking for what *differentiates* African American culture from white American culture. Overemphasizing what makes black culture in America different from white culture, it failed to notice the complex processes by which manifestations of the African conceptual framework have crossed over into the white culture. I am convinced that an approach in which the *American* culture, in all its complexity, is considered as the result of both white and black influences holds more promises than the avenue that from the start posits the differences between black and white. An integrative framework leads us to questions on how and why African cultural traits entered mainstream white culture. It makes us wonder what the effect of this crossover was on the survival of the "migrated" traits within the original black population. Also, we could astonishingly unveil that certain cultural objects and customs today considered as typical "white" have in fact an African origin^{xi}. A striking example is the meanwhile acknowledged origin of the "cowboy", popularly depicted as the white man on his horse, but who has his roots in the black man herding the cattle, and who imported his cattle-keeping patterns from Senegambia, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan.

Applying this integrative perspective on music would equally be challenging and fruitful. Why did for instance the blues strike such a strong chord with the white population in a decade when the black population wanted to forget the genre and preferred other music as rhythm & blues, and soul? How can this perspective help us in understanding why the blues have become so popular *all around the world*, whilst the social environment that first gave rise to them is no longer present?

This approach - a synthesis between Herskovits' and Frazier's model - would shed a completely different light on the classic debate on black and white blues. It would learn that the African concept not only influenced, as Maultsby showed, the African American music, but Western music in general. I am convinced that the African concept, through all its historic reshaping, is still today a creative force in today's Western culture.

A topic for another essay....

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN
TODAY'S CULTURE?

FOOTNOTES

ⁱ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black consciousness*, 1977

ⁱⁱ In: *Africanisms in American Culture*, J.E. Holloway (ed.), 2nd edition, 2005, 326-355

ⁱⁱⁱ Olly Wilson, "The Association of Movement and Music as a Manifestation of a Black conceptual approach to music", 1981

^{iv} The author follows here the dimensions of music as described by the ethnomusicologist Mellonee Burnim, Professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology.

^v Quoted page 332

^{vi} John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, 1979

^{vii} Page 334

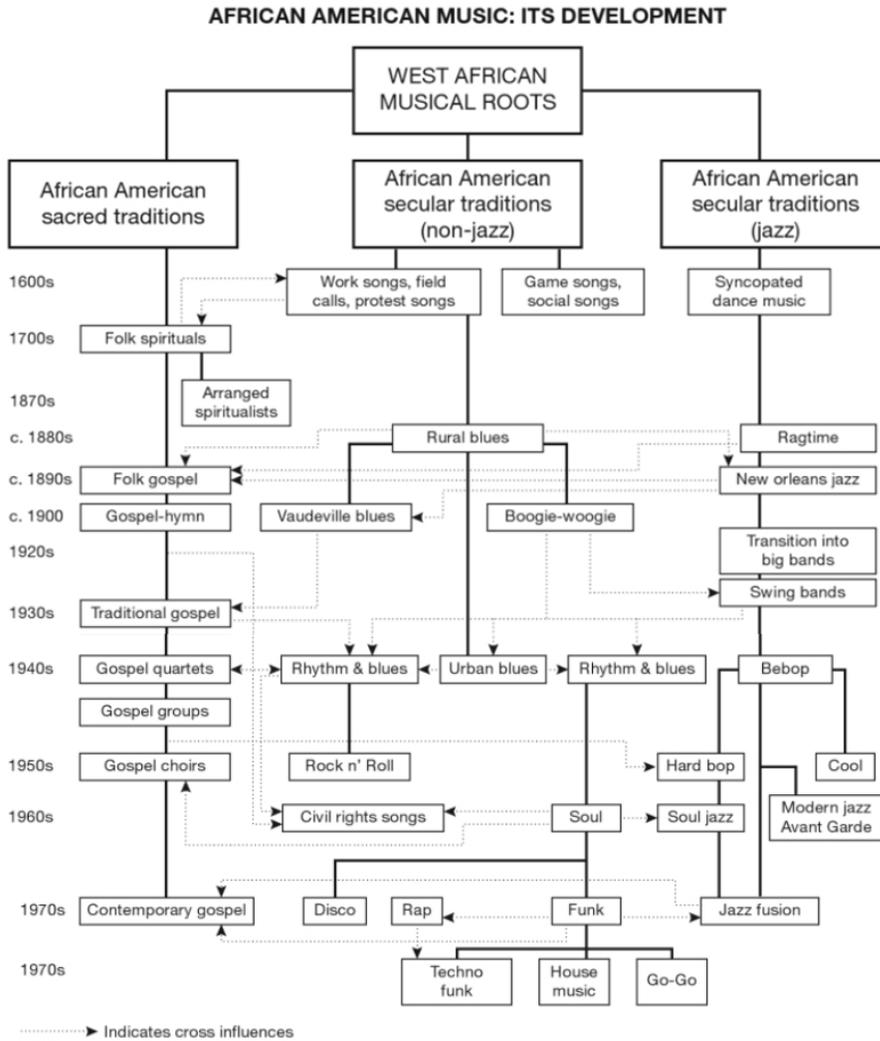
^{viii} Page 344

^{ix} Page 349

^x See also : *The African Heritage of White America*, Joh Edward Philips, in : *Africanisms in American Culture*, 2n edition, editor : J.E. Holloway, 2005

^{xi} See for instance D. Epstein's study on the origin of the banjo.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC - A SURVIVAL OR AN ACTUAL CREATIVE FORCE IN TODAY'S CULTURE?



(source: Maultsby)