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African Influences in North American Indian Music

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WHETHER African musical elements are present in this country as a result of the importation of a Negro slave population, has long been the subject of heated controversy. That the question is still far from being clarified is due to various reasons. The music of Negro Africa, with its elaborate polyphonic, rhythmic, and instrumental developments, by no means represents one generalized style, but rather a composite of great stylistic diversity. This statement applies with particular force to the regions from which most of our slaves were taken: the coast of West Africa with its hinterland. Our knowledge of this music is spotty at best. The most important printed sources are not directly available; they are apt to be scattered and not in English. The extensive materials in the form of recordings, in various European archives and other collections, are little known. Nor has the available information been utilized fully in the discussions concerning African musical survivals, since much of the commentary has grown out of a popular and impressionistic rather than scholarly approach.

A survey of African music—based on records, publications, and some knowledge of the recordings in various European archives—suggests the conclusion that little or nothing has been found so far in the Negro folk music of the United States that is definitely African in origin, unless it be a matter of vague subtleties and some barely distinguishable flavor. The Negro Spirituals, which became the main subject of the controversy, appear to be, for the most part, re-worked versions of White prototypes—although they often show more originality than their models—rather than remainders of a dim African heritage. Yet, it should be granted that we do not know this side of the problem too well either—that is, our own Negro folk music. For one thing, we have hardly any serious musicological treatments in this field.[1] For another, our acquaintance is primarily with the religious songs; it is very slim when it comes to the secular

[1] Since these lines were written, George P. Jackson has added considerably to his painstaking investigation of Negro and White spiritual melodies and White secular folk melodies.

types. The work songs, perhaps because of their improvisatory technique, have been singled out occasionally for discussion. Their melodic material, it appears, derives often enough from the reintegrating of fragments from the Spirituals rather than from some wholly independent inspiration. Finally, our source materials are somewhat adulterated. The Spirituals have become familiar chiefly through concert versions, which already enjoyed considerable vogue in the first decade of this century. By that time the songs had been molded by the influence of our concert stage and our cultivated art singing. These factors had their effect on the famous Negro choirs, their conductors, and the editors of the published collections.

Processes of this kind often impinge on folk music when it becomes the object of artistic and cultural preoccupation; when it becomes "discovered". The tradition itself may be reshaped, as German folk music became reshaped through the interest and work of a long series of German composers. To what extent the Negro Spirituals changed while they were assimilated to a cultivated tradition, we do not know. A more primitive and perhaps less "White" musical strain has not shown itself in the simpler versions of less sophisticated performers that have become known lately; it may well become apparent after further search and examination.

In view of this inconclusive situation, it is refreshing to find that stylistic features and melodies undoubtedly of African origin have survived among Indians in the Southeastern states of this country, owing to contacts and even to a certain amount of intermixture between Indians and Negroes. These features have become incorporated into the local Indian musical idiom and have to some extent become integrated with it. Various stages of mutual adjustment and change may be observed in this material. Because of the fundamentally different nature of the musical elements—African and Indian—it provides for an unusually rewarding study of stylistic hybridization. Detailed results are in preparation for publication; the present report is restricted to indicating the presence of African elements.[2]

The music of all Negro Africa is dominated by the prevalence

[2] The Southeastern Indian (Cherokee) melodies utilized in this paper are from a larger collection recorded by Professor Frank G. Speck of the University of Pennsylvania, who placed the material at my disposal for study and kindly permitted the use of selected examples as well as this partial publication of results. All melodies are, for the sake of easier readability, given in a somewhat simplified notation.

of the solo-chorus technique, which very frequently takes one of two simple forms. In the first, the solo singer plays on what is often merely a brief and simple melodic motive, repeating it over with variations—sometimes slight, sometimes considerable; the chorus repeats each of the solo passages, retaining the variations. In the second, a more common form than the first, the chorus reiterates a fixed refrain. In North American Indian music the solo-chorus technique is on the whole rare. Indians most often sing either entirely solo or entirely in unison. In some tribes, or in some songs, a singer may start the song and may be joined by the group soon after. But this practice seldom results in modifications of the melody, and very rarely produces polyphonic formations such as, in Africa, so often show up at the meeting point of the solo and chorus. The only region where the solo-chorus technique is used quite extensively happens to be in the Southeast; to some extent it appears also to the North, along the Atlantic seaboard. That the technique is most prevalent exactly where contacts between Negroes and Indians have been the most intimate, is certainly noteworthy. It is of course hardly possible to say at present whether the use of this technique in our East was entirely old Indian practice, or whether it was introduced through contacts with Negroes, or even with White hymn singing of a responsorial type. It is safest to assume that both traditions—the autochthonous and the new—were familiar with this mode of singing, and that it maintained itself with the greater force just because of the double support. A similar assumption may be the best answer to the question concerning the African or White origin of the solo-chorus singing in the Spirituals.

A curious development establishes a fairly concrete parallel between African and Southeastern Indian solo-and-chorus singing. In primitive music there are examples from all over the world of the use of non-musical or half-musical elements—such as cries, yells, calls, spoken or *parlando* formulas, and the like—to introduce or finish off a song. In Africa the solo-chorus technique is occasionally applied also to this material. In Southeastern Indian songs the same thing happens, only with greater elaboration, since here these introductory (or terminal) formulas are much more detailed than is normally the case, and more musical in intonation and rhythm. Below is given the complete introductory section of a Cherokee example, with part of the song itself following:

Cherokee (Carolinas) Friendship Dance Song[2]
Speck Record 31A-1

There is a more important and telling feature, however, which identifies many Southeastern Indian songs as African or part African in style: mode of melodic elaboration. In this respect there is a fundamental difference between indigenous North American Indian and African music. In Indian music, once a melody has been completed, melodic development is, on the whole, closed. The melody is repeated a number of times, either with no change at all or with minor alterations. The structure consists of a fairly well-knit assemblage of motives, not too different from the type of grouping of motives or phrases characteristic of European folk-song, except that the melody is developed primarily downward. This may be illustrated

[2] The notes of the solo passages are indicated by ascending stems; those of the choral passages, by descending stems. The choral refrain is printed only once (see measure 2 in the 5/4 section), since it remains constant. The repetitions are indicated by blank measures with "c" over them.

by a few Indian melodies, selected at random from different regions. They could be matched with respect to the general structural features just mentioned by thousands of other melodies, published, or recorded in the Archives of Primitive Music in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University.

Kwakiutl (Vancouver Isl., Brit. Columbia) Gambling Song
Archives Record 3 B-2

Beating: etc.

Pawnee (Nebraska) War Dance, Victory Song
Archives Record 2e

Drum: etc.

Iroquois (New York State to Great Lakes) Women's Song[3]
Archives, M. Huot Record 2c

Rattle etc.

glissando glissando

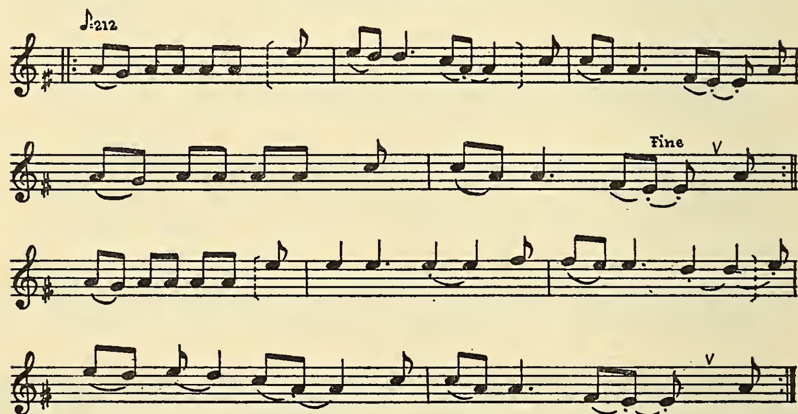
Pima (S. Arizona) Song of the Creator, in the Origin Myth
Herzog Record II 1b

When there is a sizable change upon repetition of the melody in Indian music, it is apt to produce a structural pattern. In a frequent type, found especially in the songs of tribes in the Middle West, the melody is first sung through with meaningless syllables, which have merely an ornamental function. The second time it is sung to a text consisting of meaningful words, and the melody is changed somewhat in order to accommodate the words. Yet, these changes are

[3] After the repeat the melody begins again, at the second measure, and has the repeat as before. The *glissando* calls end the last rendition.

fixed; they recur in identical order when the song is recorded from the same singer on another occasion, or when the song is recorded from another singer. Another change is related but more rare; it may occur when a song is repeated to a text that changes from stanza to stanza, again in order to accommodate the textual differences. In a third type, which is especially frequent in the music of the so-called Yuman tribes around the southern borders of Arizona and California, the force making for change is definitely musical. In this style, repetition of the melody is from time to time interspersed with higher phrases, which are apt to be built of the primary material of the song through free sequence, partial transposition, extension, or interpolation. Such a change is, again, fixed, and if a song has two developments of this type, they recur in the same order. In the following example, the third phrase is clearly such a special development of the first; the first phrase may perhaps be regarded as an extension of the second:

Diegueño (S. California) Dance Song[4]
Herzog Record 7b



African practice is quite different. While in North American Indian music the melody is normally a closed statement, in African music it is very often merely a point of departure. The chorus section may remain fixed and constant throughout the song; choral responses

[4] The first two phrases are repeated and followed by the third. The whole thing is repeated a number of times, ending up at *Fine*.

are at times even transferred from one song to another. But the solo may vary its own part in rather free fashion as it resumes activity again and again. Occasionally instead of a characteristic solo phrase there may be a loose assemblage of diverse motives, held together at least by the recurrent chorus part. A few examples may illustrate these features:

Bakongo (French and Belgian Congo) Dance Song for the fetish Lamba

Berlin Archives Record Laman 91

Mangbetu (Belgian Congo) Dance Song[5]
Belgian Congo Records, General Records Co. 1, 6th Song

Chewa (British East Africa) Song from a Story[6]
Andrade Record II Ac

[5] In this interesting polyphonic piece the main part of the chorus remains fixed. Of the two secondary voices, the upper one, imitating the solo, is not too clear on the record; the second is variable, it too has a few doubtful tones. These are placed in parentheses.

[6] The tone *f* is consistently taken lower in this song; about halfway between *f* and *e*.

Quite comparable is the treatment of the solo part in the following Cherokee Indian melodies:

Friendship Dance Song
Speck Record 6B

Friendship Dance Song
Speck Record 29a-3

Friendship Dance Song[7]
Speck Record 30A-1

This characteristically African melodic elasticity is usually associated with improvisation. We should bear in mind, however, that improvisation is a somewhat loose term that may mean a number of things. I well remember the comments of a professional native singer in West Africa on this point. She specialized in those songs with which the paid singer and mourner praises the dead, taking her entrance cue from the wailing of the women at a wake. In these songs all female relatives and clan sisters of the dead must be enumerated, and something complimentary must be said about each. I asked the singer how she could be certain of thinking of all the names and details. She answered that while she was on her way to the house of the dead person she would "sort of think things over" in her mind, while she was walking to the place. Confidentially, she added that if an important man appeared rather sickly, she would think things over even before he was expected to die, just to be sure. It may be added that while the singer's words are dubbed "singers' lies"—the local expression for what we call "poetic license"—she is not required to strain her imagination to the point of finding the perfectly fitting thing to say for everyone. If she extols a rather buxom clan sister with the stock simile, "she is slender as the highest palm-tree," no one will take it amiss. Nevertheless, the result of her little private

[7] The chorus part, too, varies somewhat in this song. On the other hand, another typical African feature appears: overlapping of the two voices, which in this case results in a telescoping of rhythm.

rehearsals was not a fixed form. She could not repeat the exact musical and textual content of any of her songs after they had been recorded on the phonograph. But undoubtedly the rehearsals and the contents of her other songs gave her ready raw material upon which to draw for the new song; the melodic and poetic *patterns* remained the same, although *details* might shift.

The variable nature of the initial or solo motives is, I believe, a definite indication of African influence in Cherokee Indian songs, more conclusive than the solo-chorus technique, and the force of the latter as evidence is strengthened by the presence of the former. Fortunately, some of the Cherokee songs were recorded from the same singers in duplicate, on different occasions, and, as in African songs, the exact order and nature of the changes that occurred through the successive repetitions of the melody were not the same when the piece was recorded again. Other features that point to the African background of this material do not need to be discussed here, nor does the generalized impression of relationship that one acquires when listening to the songs. As for the Indian side of the question, the thematic material of the melodies and their general cast are often Indian rather than African, and the complex African drumming has given way to the comparatively simple Indian method of instrumental accompaniment, which usually consists of an unbroken series of evenly spaced beats.

For the anthropologist, it is not too surprising that African stylistic features have survived in our Southeast. In other sections of the country, by the time the Negro populations grew to sizable proportions the Indian tribal groups had either melted away or become comparatively isolated from contact, on their reservations. In the Southeast, however, there has been a certain amount of mutual influence, even intermarriage, between Negroes and Indians; we know even of Indian slaveholders in the past. Traces of these contacts can be found also in the folklore of the region. We have here the only definite indications of the type of music the Negro slave groups had when they arrived on the shores of this country. Data of this type will contribute to the data the anthropologist is accumulating in his desire to locate those regions and tribes on the African continent from which the slaves were drawn. Our Southeast is of course not the only spot in this hemisphere where African music survives. In South America—especially Brazil—and in the West Indies, perhaps even on our Sea Islands, it is alive through the agency of the Negroes

themselves. That the African element is so elusive in the Negro folk music of the mainland of North America may well be due to the circumstance that the Negroes were exposed to infinitely stronger cultural influences and pressures here than elsewhere in the New World, and had less opportunity to maintain at least fragments of their original mode of life. African music may have become extinguished in this country among the descendants of those who brought it here. If so, it is doubly interesting that we owe our clearest glimpses of its character and history on our soil to survivals in Indian music, which was first hospitable enough to receive a foreign idiom and then conservative enough to preserve it.