

## Music of the Young Republic: The Contributions of African Americans

No folk music has enjoyed a more complex history in the New World than that of the black Americans, who were brought there against their will. Most blacks in 18th- and 19th-century America were slaves; hence, most black American communities existed under some degree of white control, which discouraged the survival of such elements as drums, Old World languages, and African religious beliefs. Living in proximity to whites, black Americans gradually adopted certain white musical genres without abandoning their own indigenous performing styles—much more aggressive in rhythm and freer in pitch than any Euro-American singing or playing. Perhaps the most famous example of an acculturated vocal music is the spiritual, the black American version of the Protestant hymn. First set down by white amateur musicians in the landmark collection *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), then sung in harmonized choral versions by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and other groups of young blacks under white direction, and much later turned by trained black musicians into art songs for solo voice and piano, the spirituals illustrate how the folk music of a people considered ‘half-barbarous’ by its first white collectors could be adapted without losing its distinctive, haunting beauty.

The rhythmic complexity that early white collectors of spirituals found hard to capture in notation also pervaded black American instrumental folk music, much of it tied up with dance. Black musicians' fondness for off-beat accents within a steady meter was expressed through all available means: vocables, body-slapping, and foot-stomping; African-derived instruments like the bones and the banjo; and eventually European instruments, especially the fiddle and the piano. By the end of the 19th century, black American performers had fashioned an entertainment and dance music called ‘ragtime’, in which square-cut, syncopated melodies were played in a series of contrasting, march-like strains. Published as piano music around the turn of the century, ragtime achieved special elegance in the works of the composer-pianist Scott Joplin—as far removed from folk tradition as Henry T. Burleigh's settings of spirituals, but just as unmistakably marked by it.

The ability of black Americans to assimilate European-based forms and bend them to their own purposes, as in the spiritual and ragtime, and to provide the inspiration for some of the most lively white music-making of the age, as in the minstrel show, suggests that in 19th-century America cultural power did not necessarily depend upon social position. That fact was to become even clearer in the 20th century, when black American musical traditions made a decisive impact on virtually all American popular music.

From Oxford Music Online;

[http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e7028?source=omo\\_t114&type=article&search=quick&q=america+civil+war+music&pos=3&start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e7028?source=omo_t114&type=article&search=quick&q=america+civil+war+music&pos=3&start=1#firsthit)