SOUL IN THE CULTURE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Phillip L. Mason explores the research and ideas surrounding the traces of African culture that have been integrated into African-American life.

BY PHILLIP L. MASON

Like all the peoples who populate the United States, African Americans (also identified as Afro-Americans and Negroes) are social beings. Consequently, much of the material written about them has been written in terms of social definitions. It must be recognized, however, that African Americans are also a cultural and a spiritual people.

Speaking of the spirituality of African Americans, LeRoi Jones comments that "To go back in any historical (or emotional) line of ascent leads us inevitably to religion, i.e., spirit worship. This phenomenon is always at the root ... the worship of the spirit."[1] African-American spirituality began in ancient African rituals, but the very nature of slavery in the United States dictated the way in which African culture could be adapted. Thus a ritual had no chance of survival in America at all unless it was incorporated into an analogous rite that was present in the new culture. The Dahomey River-god ceremony, for example, survived in the New World in the form of a socioreligious practice that Christians called baptism.[2]

Spiritual involvement is found in African-American music from diverse sources. From gospel singer Mahalia Jackson to jazz saxophonist Pharoah Saunders, African-American musicians have consistently dealt in one way or another with refining the essence of spirituality. You have only to listen to Pharoah Saunders's rendition of "Let Us Go into the House of the Lord" on *Summun Bukuman Umyum* (Impulse AS 9199) to hear how he lifted the African-American spiritual exemplified by Jackson out of the context of the traditional diaspora and propelled it toward a Neo-African realization of universal consciousness. Saunders's approach to the music of the spiritual finds its analogy in the work of the African *juju* or conjure man who takes the raw elements of the earth, separates them from their context, endows them with certain symbolic meaning, and thereby works spiritual magic.

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Africanisms

One of the main points of Melville Herskovitz's *Myth of the Negro Past* is that most of the attitudes, customs, and cultural characteristics of African Americans can be traced directly or indirectly back to Africa.[3] Various scholars define these characteristics that have been retained by African Americans in the New World as Africanisms: elements of African culture that permeate all African-American life, whether religious or secular. African Americans are spiritual people; they are also social beings moved by social currents, struggling for survival in a system that got its impetus through their sufferings. This social situation affects the way African Americans relate to their spirituality and the way they reflect it in their speech and in their arts.

When Blacks were forcibly brought to the United States, they were

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Africans. They were a foreign people whose whole culture was a complete antithesis of the culture they encountered in the New World. Just because they learned to speak English, however, does not mean that all traces of Africa were erased from their minds. One need only to consider the nature of the English that African Americans spoke. The linguist J. L. Dillard observed that "Negro nonstandard English is different in grammar (in syntax) from the standard American English of the mainstream white culture. Like the West Indian varieties, American Black English can be traced to a creolized version of English based upon a pidgin spoken by slaves. It probably came from the West Coast of Africa."[4] Although there are some scholars who disagree with Dillard, his observation is worthy of consideration in view of the work of Lorenzo Turner. In a personal communication to Herskovitz, Turner wrote, "Up to the present time I have found in the vocabulary of the Negroes in Coastal South Carolina and Georgia approximately four thousand West African words besides many survivals in syntax, inflections, sounds and intonation ... I have recorded in Georgia a few songs the words of which are entirely African. In some songs both African and English words appear. This is true also of many folktales. There are many compound words one part of which is African and the other English. Sometimes whole African phrases appear in Gullah [dialect] without change either of meaning or of pronunciation. Frequently, African phrases have been translated into English."[5]

African speech, customs, art, and music were changed by the American experience into American forms, but the Africanisms survived. For example, the popular African-American expression "be cool" is a translation of a phrase from the West African Ashanti language (Twi Dialect) that can be directly translated as "cool he heart give him" or more generally rendered as "to calm a person."[6]

Through the internalization of social pressures and their reactions to these pressures, African-American people have developed a strong sense of family—and this traditional concept of extended family sheds considerable light on the terms *soul brother* and *soul sister* used during the 1960s and 1970s.

There are many other examples of African cultural survival among African Americans, some of them very apparent and others more subtle. Study and analysis of such routine activities as walking, laughing, sitting postures, and movements made in industrial techniques show clearly that African traits have often held over in the motor habits of African Americans.

The Spirit World and Music

Much has been written about the African preoccupation with the spirit world. Most of it has been pure speculation. There is not much doubt, however, that there exists historically a certain attitude among African Americans in the New World about spirits. Thompson and Jahn have traced African-American spirit belief from Africa to the New World, showing how African-American life has always been interwoven with a survival of the African interest in spirits and superstition.[7]

One can hear this in African-American music: when Aretha Franklin or Ray Charles sing "Spirit in the Dark," the song takes on different meanings at different levels of consciousness in much the same way as when Stevie Wonder sings "Superstition." In his album *Rhassan, Rhassan* (Atlantic SD-

Ray Charles

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1575), the late jazz saxophonist Rhassan Roland Kirk exhorts his listeners to "seek, with the boogieman and the boogiewoman." The boogie (bogie) man is a ghost or spirit. Most of us can recall childhood memories of the boogieman as a scary ghost or bad spirit who dispensed punishment to naughty children, as in the saying "The boogieman will get you if you don't watch out!"

Whether a spirit is good or bad, of course, depends on one's frame of reference. During the 1930s and 1940s, the social definition of boogieman and boogiewoman was applied by African Americans to African Americans who were exceptional dancers and musicians. The boogie was a popular dance, and piano players such as Fats Waller were proficient in playing the "boogie woogie." Even today, popular African-American singers such as Al Jarreau and even Michael Jackson sing about the boogie. In this context, of course, "boogieman" and "boogiewoman" would be good spirits.

Soul and Music

The phenomenon among African Americans identified as *soul* is none other than the contemporary manifestation of Africanisms. One is inundated with the ubiquitous use of the word soul in such terms as "soul music," "soul food," and so on. The term "soul food," for example, signifies on one level a type of food (such as okra and yams) that is nourishment for the body that houses the soul. Okra (used in soups and gumbo) and yams are African foods that were introduced to the New World along with other African crops by slave owners to augment their own food. The word "gumbo" itself is said to come from the African *kingumbo,* which was what the African-American slaves called okra when it was first introduced into this country in New Orleans. Okra, on the other hand, is the Akan (African) name for the person who is the embodiment of the ruler's soul or spirit.[8]

The essence of soul is the essence of functionalism. Soul music is functional because it serves both a social and spiritual need. The end product of music is not an artifact like that produced in the arts of painting or sculpture. This nonmaterial aspect of African-American music virtually assured its survival, replete with Africanisms, from Africa through the slave period to the present.

Ortiz Walton, in *Music: Black, White and Blue,* illustrated this fact with one facet of African-American music when he wrote that "The tendency for instruments to act as imitators of the human voice is a direct African transmission. Contrasted with the music for the elite philosophy prevalent in the West, African music retained its functional and collective characteristics in America."[9] For excellent examples of the use of the voice as an instrument, listen to any album by the contemporary jazz singers Al Jarreau or Bobby McFerrin.

LeRoi Jones considered another aspect of African-American music when he wrote that "The call-and-response form of Africa (lead and chorus) has never left us, as a mode of musical expression. It has come down both as vocal and instrumental form." Herskovitz continues this train of thought with the observation that "The pattern whereby the statement of theme by a leader is repeated by a chorus, or a short choral phrase is balanced as a refrain against a longer melodic line sung by the soloist, is fundamental and has been commented on by all who have heard Negroes sing in Africa or elsewhere."[10]

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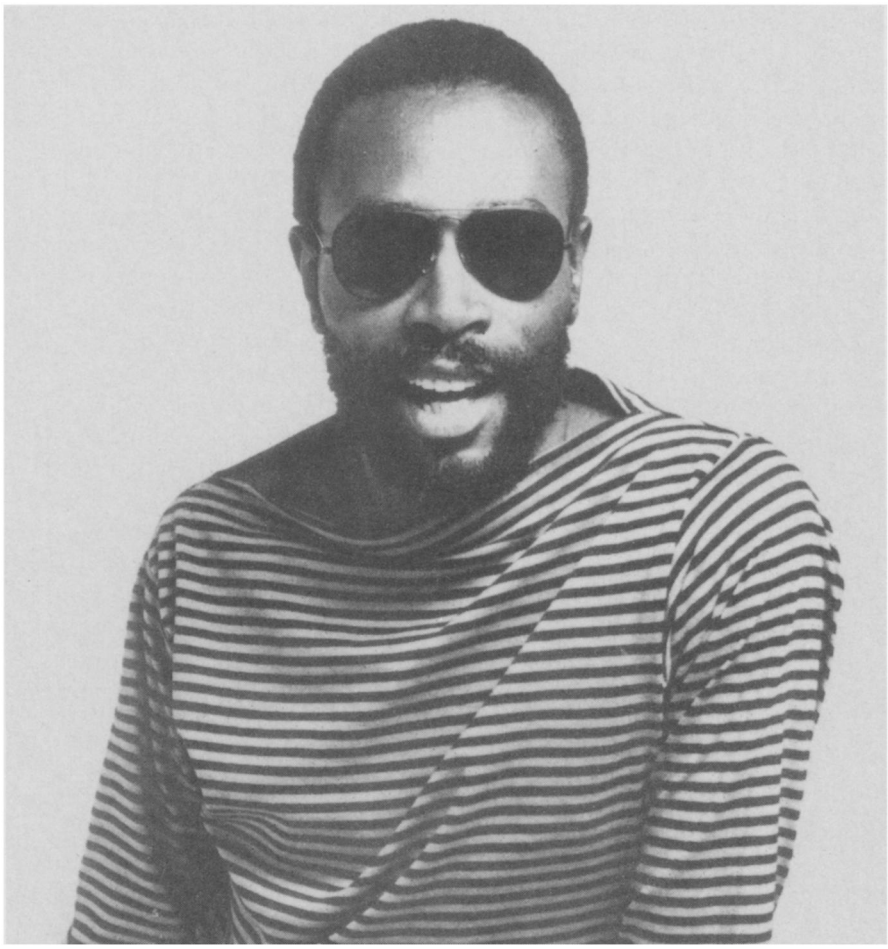
Aretha Franklin Photo courtesy of Rhino



Bobby McFerrin

Having *Soul*

Every being born in the world has a soul, but not everyone has "soul." Soul, in this context, is the socioethnic phenomenon peculiar to African Americans as manifested in the retention of African elements in African-American culture in the United States. One of the obvious forms of African cultural retention is in the once popular dance, the Charleston: it is almost identical to the dancing in motion pictures taken of the *Kwaside* rites for the ancestors of the Chief of the Ashanti Village of Asokore.[11]

One can find social implications of soul in jazz music: the late Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong's song "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" was a definitive statement of the plight of African Americans in America. Jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie once made a tongue-in-cheek comment on the American way of life and its values as they effect African Americans in a song titled "Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac." He ends the song with the sardonic statement "Old Cadillacs never die, the finance company just fades them away."

There are three interesting things connected to this particular song: The use of an African-derived call and response (lead and chorus) technique, the fact that the song title parodies the African-American spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and the African origin of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" itself.

Maude Cuney-Hare, in her early work *Negro Musicians and Their Music,* cites the experience of a Bishop Fisher of Calcutta who traveled to Central Africa:

> ... in Rhodesia he had heard natives sing a melody so closely resembling "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" that he felt that he had found it in its original form: moreover, the region near the great Victoria Falls has a custom from which the song arose. When one of the chiefs in the olden days was about to die, he was placed in a great canoe together with trappings that marked his rank, and food for his journey. The canoe was set afloat in midstream headed toward the great Falls and the vast column of mist that rises from them. Meanwhile the tribe on the shore would sing its chant of farewell. The legend is that on one occasion the king was seen to rise in his canoe at the very brink of the Falls and enter a chariot that, descending from the mist, bore him aloft. This incident gave rise to the words of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and the song, brought to America by African slaves long ago, became anglicized and modified by their Christian faith.[12]

No doubt the debate and discussion over the issue of soul will continue for some time to come. The subject is so broad that its surface has only been scratched, but it is a subject that must be grasped by music educators if they are to understand the social, spiritual, and musical values of their African-American students and of the community at large.

Notes

1. LeRoi Jones, *Black Music* (New York: Apollo, 1968).

2. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Apollo, 1963).

3. Melville J. Herskovitz, *Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Harper and Brothers, 1941).

4. J. L. Dillard, *Black English* (New York: Vintage Press, 1972).

5. Lorenzo D. Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah dialect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

6. Jones, *Blues People.*

7. R. F. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); J. Jahn, *Muntu* (New York: Grove Press, 1961).

8. J. W. Chase, *Afro-American Art and Craft* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971).

9. Ortiz M. Walton, *Music: Black, White and Blue* (New York: Apollo, 1972).

10. Herskovitz, *Myth of the Negro Past;* Jones, *Blues People.*

11. Herskovitz, *Myth of the Negro Past.*

12. Maude Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1936). ■