Slavery & Abolition, volume 20, issue 3, 1999

'Us Likes a Mixtery': Listening to African-American Slave Music

SHANE WHITE and GRAHAM WHITE

On 18 October 1821, before a crowd of some 700 whites and 1500 blacks, the sheriff of Princess Ann, in Somerset County, Maryland, executed Jenny, a 70-year-old African-American woman. Seconds before Jenny was hung 'several hundreds of the colored people' turned their backs to the gallows, squatted on the ground, 'covered their faces with their hands, and uttered a simultaneous groan, which while it expressed their feelings, added not a little to the horror of the scene'.[1] In June 1820 an English traveller, W. Faux, sojourning among the plantations along the South Carolina coast, reported in his diary that close to sunset there 'suddenly burst upon my ear an earth-rending shout. It proceeded from negroes shouting three times three, on finishing their task.'[2] In the course of his journey through South Carolina in the years before the Civil War, Frederick Law Olmsted encountered a group of African-American slaves, members of a railroad work gang gathered around a fire. Suddenly, one of the men 'raised such a sound as I never heard before, a long, loud, musical shout, rising, and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle call'. The cry sounded, Olmsted would later write, like 'Negro jodling'.[3] In these three almost random cases (an examination of the records of the plantation South will turn up many such examples), the sounds created by slaves induced in white observers feelings of cultural dissonance. In this article we aim to begin the necessarily speculative process of recovering the role of sound in African-American slave culture, to chart some significant ways in which slaves experienced their environment differently from their Euro-American owners.

As the WPA interviews of the 1930s readily show, the sounds of the plantation and its surrounds were an important part of the remembered fabric of slavery, giving both shape and texture to former slaves' recollections of their early lives. Some of those sounds originated in the natural environment. A very young Uncle Stepney, eluding the dreaded patrollers by hiding out in the woods near his Alabama plantation, told how he had listened anxiously to 'de

---

Shane White and Graham White are in the Department of History, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.

Slavery and Abolition, Vol. 20, No. 3, December 1999, pp.22–48
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

panthers a screamin' a way off in de fores' an' de wildcats a howlin". More ominous, however, had been the cry of a screech owl, a sure sign of impending death. Quickly, the boy had turned the pockets of his overalls inside out and the cry had ceased.[4] Other memories related to the ordinary business of plantation life. Charley Williams could recall 'de anvil start dangling in de blacksmith shop; "Tank! Deling-ding! Tank! Deling-ding!"' 'Course you can't hear de shoemaker awling and pegging, and de card spinners, and de old mammy sewing by hand,' he added, 'but maybe you can hear de old loom going "frump, frump",' and if you did you knew that 'you gwine to git new britches purty soon!'[5] Mingo White explained that 'ever'body knowed when wash day was 'case dey could hear de paddle for 'bout three or four miles. "Pow-pow-pow," dat's how it sound.'[6] But the workaday soundscape of the plantation was punctuated by much starker aural reminders of the slaveholder's presence and power: the cries of children who were being sold away from their families; the sounds of cruel beatings ('Folks a mile away could hear dem awful whippings.');[7] the baying of hounds on the trail of slave runaways; and, most insistently, the sounds that marked the day's toil: 'Bells and horns! Bells for dis and horns for dat!' Charley Williams expostulated 'All we knowed was go and come by de bells and horns!'[8] Decades later, the Rev. W. B. Allen recalled the sound of the first of the day's bells, waking the slaves at 3 o'clock in the summer, and that of the second bell an hour later, signalling that it was time to trudge to the fields. But for Allen, still too young to work, the bells marked an hour's grace in which he would lie in bed and listen to his mother singing as she bent over the open fire making breakfast:

> Our troubles will soon be over,
> I'm going to live with Jesus – after while;
> Praying time will soon be over.
> I'm going home to live with Jesus – after while.[9]

Allen's reference to music is suggestive; few subjects appear as frequently in the recollections of former slaves. Our intention here is to begin an examination of this aspect of slavery's soundscape, to look at the deeper cultural significance of various forms of slave music, and then to trace some of the ways in which the sounds created by slaves related to other dimensions of African American culture.

In his famous autobiography, ex-slave Frederick Douglass observed that 'apparently incoherent' slave songs actually held 'deep meanings'. In saying this, Douglass was not alluding primarily to the verbal content of these songs; the meanings to which he referred were to be found, rather, in the 'wild notes' of the singers, the 'tones, loud, long and deep,' every one of which constituted 'a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains'. Those who wished 'to be impressed with a sense

of the soul-killing power of slavery', Douglass suggested, should 'go to Col. Lloyd's [Douglass's Maryland owner's] plantation, and, on allowance day,' as the slaves, singing all the while, passed by on their journey to collect their rations, 'place [themselves] in the deep, pine woods, and there ... in silence, thoughtfully analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of [their] soul[s]'.

Douglass assumed here that the 'deep meanings' of slave songs were transmissible as between blacks and whites. He believed, in other words, that the sounds of slaves' songs could serve as a point of entry into their cruel and oppressive world; that the wild and plaintive tones of the singers 'told a tale of grief and sorrow' that would reveal, to those who cared to listen, much about the peculiar institution's devastating psychological impact.[10] But to African American slaves, the musical sounds their compatriots created had meanings that were much more culturally specific, and vastly more powerful.

We can make an initial attempt to 'hear' those cultural messages, however imperfectly, if we 'listen', as best we can, to a type of slave vocal music that frequently assumed the character of 'pure sound', by which we mean no more than that the music contained no words at all. Many of the calls, cries, and hollers that echoed throughout the rural and urban South wherever African Americans were held captive were of this broad type.

Not surprisingly, the West African practice of using a variety of calls to announce important events, greet friends, summon meetings, and so on, was carried over to the New World.[11] As deployed by North American slaves, these elemental kinds of musical expression took various forms, ranging from the relatively simple to the complex, and served a range of purposes not all of them readily appreciated by outsiders. Particularly when African influences were strong – in the early years of slavery, for example, or wherever groups of newly-arrived slaves were kept together – calls functioned as an alternative communication system, conveying information through the medium of sounds that whites could neither confidently understand nor easily jam. Calls constructed from the languages of the slaves' homeland were, of course, unintelligible to whites. Moreover, just as West African drums could 'talk' by imitating the rhythmic and tonal characteristics of speech, so too, in all probability, could the wordless calls of North American slaves. As Harold Courlander, who interviewed a number of elderly African Americans in the rural South earlier this century, has pointed out, this process could become extremely complex.

> It is now well understood that African signal drumming is based largely on simulation, through rising and falling inflection, of speech tones. Voice signaling in Africa is sometimes based on this same

> principle, and signal horns are used in the same manner. In some instances, voice signals are not modeled directly on speech tones, but on the sound of instruments imitating speech. Many of the early day slave calls and cries in the United States may have utilized these communicative devices. In such disguise, seemingly wordless messages could have been quite unintelligible to outsiders.[12]

As slaves became acculturated, their calls incorporated English-language words, a development that would have made them intelligible to whites, at least in some degree. Such calls were often simple expressions of loneliness, pain, or despair. Harold Courlander was told that a slave 'working under the hot sun might give voice to such a cry on impulse, directing it to the world, or to the fields around him, or perhaps to himself'. The call 'might be a phrase like "I'm hot and hungry,"' or could, as in the case of the following Alabama cry, contain a more detailed message:

> Ay-oh-hoh!
> I'm goin' up the river!
> Oh, couldn't stay here!
> For I'm goin' home![13]

Other calls had a more obvious practical purpose. Yach Stringfellow, formerly a field slave in Texas, told his WPA interviewer how, 'ef de oberseer wuz comin', a slave named Ole man Jim, the possessor of 'a big boom voice', would 'wail out loud like an say: "Look-a long black man, look-a long; dere's trouble comin shore."'[14] Calls were also commonly used to aid work routines. Soon after the 'strange cry' of the black railroad worker whom Olmsted encountered had died away, Olmsted heard another member of the work gang 'urging the rest to come to work again, and soon he stepped towards the cotton bales, saying, "Come, brederen, come; let's go at it; come now, eoho! roll away! eeoho-eeoho-weeioho-i!" – and all the rest taking it up as before, in a few moments they all had their shoulders to a bale of cotton and were rolling it up the embankment'.[15]

But even after slaves had become relatively well acculturated, they continued to employ calls that contained either no or very few English words; if a few such words were included, they tended to function as do syllables in scat singing, as pure sound, rather than as vehicles for the conveying of information. The former slave Julia Frances Daniels revealed that her brother, a skilled hunter, used a celebratory but wordless call to broadcast his success. 'We would know when we hear him callin', "OoooooOOOooo-da-dah-dah-ske-e-e-e-t-t-t-ttt,' that he had sumpin". That was just a make-up of his own, but we knowed they was rabbits for the pot.'[16] The boastful Hector Godbold incorporated some English words into

the call he reproduced for his WPA interviewer, but those words were obviously valued for sound rather than sense. 'I was one of de grandest hollerers you ever hear tell bout... . Here how one go: O – OU – OU – O – OU, DO – MI – NICI – O, BLACK – GA – LE – LO, O – OU – OU – O – OU, WHO – O – OU – OU. Great King, dat ain' nothin.'[17]

It is important to realize here that contemporary white observers of the peculiar institution, as well as those who managed later to interview former slaves, were able to give only a very imperfect representation of the calls they heard. On many occasions, interviewers appear to have recorded only or mainly the words of a particular cry. African American voices could, however, transform such words into richly detailed patterns of sound. As visually represented by Yach Stringfellow's interviewer, Ole man Jim's warning call: 'Look-a long black man, look-a long; dere's trouble comin shore' seems simple in form and straightforward in meaning, but rich tonal and melismatic embellishment, which the interviewer may have lacked the time or ability to represent, could easily have translated this call into a complex, vocal utterance.[18] Again, the wordless 'plantation holler' that ex-Texas slave Jeff Calhoun performed for his interviewer, was merely written down as 'Uh, ... Uh . . Uh ... . Uh ... .Uh . . Uh.'[19] However, as Harold Courlander points out, apparently simple wordless calls of this type – he instances a call consisting merely of a long 'Hoo-Hoo' – could be 'filled with exuberance or melancholy', and 'stretched out and embellished with intricate ornamentation of a kind virtually impossible to notate'.[20]

In fact, wordless or near-wordless slave calls were often elaborate vocal creations which drew heavily, as Ashenafi Kebede points out, on 'many African vocal devices, such as yodels, echolike falsetto, tonal glides, embellished melismas, and microtonal inflections that are often impossible to indicate in European staff notation'.[21] In Willis Lawrence James's estimation, these more complex or 'coloratura' calls rank 'among the most amazing and remarkable vocal feats in folk music'.[22] It was a coloratura call that had attracted Olmsted's attention as he came upon the group of African-American railroad workers; the yodelling sounds that so intrigued him originated with the rainforest Pygmies of Central Africa, whose musical styles influenced, in turn, the Kongo peoples of West Africa, and, ultimately, broad segments of the North American slave population.[23] As we have seen, Olmsted had been puzzled by the lone railroad worker's richly filigreed cry; the more interesting issue, however, is what meanings that cry had communicated to those African Americans who heard it.

At the deepest cultural level, coloratura slave calls were emblematic African (and African-American) sounds, and deeply evocative on that account. Robert Farris Thompson's comment that 'the textlessness of [Pygmy] yodeling, unshackling sound from words, unlock[ed]

extraordinary freedom of voice' is applicable to many of the more complex New World calls as well.[24] These, too, were free musical forms, allowing virtually limitless scope for improvisation, for the admixture of the vocal leaps, glides, moans, yells, and elisions that gave to African-American musical expression its characteristic rhythmic and tonal complexity, its perennial inventiveness and love of surprise. Slave calls exemplified, that is to say, what Olly Wilson has termed 'the heterogeneous sound ideal', defined by Wilson as an 'approach to music making' that deploys 'a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound [which is to say, timbres]', qualities that characterized the West African tonal languages from which that music was derived.[25]

In West African societies, dramatic variations in timbre or tone 'colour' had been in evidence, of course, not merely in calls, but whenever music was made, and most saliently in the African dancing ring, the symbol, as Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. points out, of 'community, solidarity, affirmation, and catharsis'.[26] In the New World, the African circle or ring was initially shattered, as members of cultural groups were deliberately dispersed or indiscriminately distributed among competing buyers. The ring would take periodic physical shape again in the ring shout and, most publicly and dramatically, in the dancing formations of slaves at New Orleans's Place Congo, but to those who remained outside the ring – who lived relatively isolated lives or belonged to owners determined to suppress 'primitive' ritual – the calls, cries and hollers that drifted across an often hostile Southern soundscape constituted an idiom with which African Americans must have felt a high degree of aesthetic affinity. In emotional terms, slave calls fleetingly reconstituted the West African ring, the centre of communal life and locus of culture-affirming movement and sound. They evoked, that is to say, not merely a time-honoured African and African-American means of communication but deep-seated cultural memory.[27]

There is little reason to expect that former African-American slaves, interviewed by employees of the federal government, would have attempted to put such feelings into words, but an anecdote from the writings of Willis Laurence James conveys in some imperfect degree the evocative power of wordless but culturally compelling sound. The incident that James relates occurred during a conference on African American folk music.

> One morning at a lecture of mine on Negro cries ... I sang a florid Negro cry. Mr. [Eubie] Blake leaped halfway from his seat and yelled, 'Oh, professor, professor, you hit me, you hit me.' He placed both hands over his heart and continued with great emotion: 'You make me think of my dear mother. She always sang like that. I can hear her now. That's the stuff I was raised on.'[28]

For African-American slaves the more complex sonic textures of communal, interactive singing held still deeper meanings.

In May 1865 an official party, dispatched by President Andrew Johnson to investigate conditions in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War, reached the island of St Helena, off the South Carolina coast. The group's immediate purpose was to assess the condition of the island's African-American inhabitants, who, under the guidance of Major General Rufus Saxton, the Union General in command of Port Royal area, had worked the land since the hurried flight of their former owners some years before. Included in the party were General Saxton, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, the Reverend Doctor Richard Fuller, former owner of some hundreds of the island's slaves, and the northern journalist Whitelaw Reid. It is on Reid's sound-rich account of the day's events that the following discussion largely relies.

Arriving, without notice, on a Sunday, the official party found the roads thronged with African Americans, 'gay with holiday attire', heading for the island's main church. When Reid and the others reached the church they found large numbers of African Americans massed in front of it, the building being too small to contain them. Presently, a 'white-wooled deacon' arrived and informed General Saxton that 'De people is gathered, sah, and was ready for de suvvices to begin'. Saxton then led the official group to a small platform under some live-oaks, and after its members had taken their seats, 'a quaint old African' moved to the front of it as if to welcome them.

Instead of delivering an address, the old man began to sing. 'Leaning, like a patriarch, on his cane', Reid recorded, 'and gently swaying his body to and fro over it, as if to keep time, he struck up, in a shrill, cracked voice, a curiously monotonous melody, in which, in a moment, the whole congregation were energetically joining.' Reid quickly found himself agreeing with those who held 'that the language of these sea islanders (and I am told that, to some extent, the same is true of the majority of plantation hands in South Carolina), is an almost unintelligible patois'; the journalist found it 'impossible, for a time, to make out [the song leader's] meaning'. Not only this, but 'the vocal contortions to which the simplest words seemed to subject' the aged singer were 'a study that would have amazed a phonetic lecturer'.[29]

The first person whose presence the former slaves acknowledged in their song was the Rev. Dr Fuller, who had earlier won their affection by giving up his law practice in order to preach to them. The singing followed the usual call-and-response pattern, which Reid, in his later account, represented as best he could.

Ma-a-a-assa Fullah a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Ma-a-a-assa Fullah a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Roll, Jordan, roll.
Ma-a-a-assa Fullah a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Roll, Jordan, roll.
Ma-a-a-assa Fullah a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, roll,
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, roll,
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, roll.

Eventually, after 'repetitions that promised to be endless' the lyrics changed, and the name of General Saxton, who had assisted the former slaves as they struggled to adjust to a dramatically changed post-slavery world, was substituted for that of Master Fuller.

Gen-e-ul Sa-a-axby a sittin' on de tree ob life;
Roll, Jordan, Roll,
Gen-e-ul Sa-a-axby a sittin' on de tree ob life;
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, roll,
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, roll,
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, ro-o-oll!

When it came the turn of the Treasury Secretary to be honoured, the song leader 'struck out in harsher tones, and more indescribably bewildering difficulties of pronunciation than ever', and the answering chorus was sung, Reid wrote, 'with a vehemence that pierced the ears'.

Me-is-ta-ah Che-a-ase a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Me-is-ta-ah Che-a-ase a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Roll, Jordan, roll;
Me-is-ta-ah Che-a-ase a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Roll, Jordan, roll,
Me-is-ta-ah Che-a-ase a sittin' on de tree ob life,
Roll, Jordan, roll,
Roll, Jordan, roll,
Ro-o-oll, Jordan, ro-o-oll.[30]

Following this impromptu musical performance, a decided shift in musical styles occurred. A white teacher from one of the island's schools led the slave congregation in the singing of some of 'the ordinary hymns of the church', and soon, Reid observed, 'great volumes of sound rang like organ peals through the arches of the oaks'. If Reid now found the tones of the singers 'harsh', or their diction difficult to follow, or the repetitions in the songs tedious, he did not say so.

After some questions as to their well-being had been asked of the audience, Dr Fuller pronounced the blessing to end the day's formal proceedings. No sooner had he done so than he was surrounded by about one hundred of his former slaves, who 'pushed up against him, kissed his hands, passed their fingers over his hair, crowded about, eager to get a word of recognition'. Whitelaw Reid attempted to capture the ex-slaves' speech in dialecticized English. 'Sure, you 'member me, Massa Rich'd; I'm Tom.' 'Laws, Massa Rich'd, I mind ye when ye's a little 'un.' 'Don't ye mind, Massa Rich'd, when I used to gwine out gunnin' wid ye?' 'How's ye been dis long time?' 'Pears like we's never gwine to see 'ou any more; but, bress de Lord, you'm cum.' 'Oh, we's gittin' on cumf'able like; but ain't 'ou gwine to cum back and preach to us sometimes?'[31]

Whitelaw Reid's narrative of these events returns us, in some senses, to what Ronald Radano has termed the 'sound-filled, preliterate past' of a people not long out of slavery.[32] It does so, of course, in only a partial and unsatisfactory way. As Winthrop Jordan has pointed out, we cannot really recover the sounds of 'the long past'. The music of slaves (or, as in this case, of people not long out of slavery) could be described by whites but not recorded, except through conventional transcriptions, which, in the despairing words of William Francis Allen, a compiler of the volume entitled *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), were 'but a faint shadow of the original'. The slaves' voices, Allen declared, 'have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate; and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper'.[33] Slave speech has, to a degree, been preserved in written, and often, as in Reid's narrative, in dialecticized form, but, as Winthrop Jordan has warned, such visual records tell us nothing of its nuances and cadences, of 'the nearly infinite variety of human inflections and accents as they resonated in different places, situations, and time'. Even if 'something of [the] timbre and rhythm' of slave speech can be approximated 'by listening to twentieth-century audio electromagnetic recordings', Jordan cautions, 'there is always danger in listening backward in time by a process of extrapolation from the sounds of later years'.[34]

Though we are attempting, in some measure, to 'listen' once more to the sounds of the past, our main objective is to reach an understanding of what those sounds meant to enslaved African Americans. Limitations in the historical record often require historians to 'look' at slavery through the eyes of whites; the same limitations mean that we shall often have to 'hear' it through their ears, in the present instance, fortunately, through the ears of a shrewdly observant and more than usually perceptive journalist, one who knew, however, very little about a people large numbers of whom he was encountering for the first time.

In the main, Reid reacted negatively to the manner in which St Helena's former slaves sang and spoke. In that respect, of course, he was hardly unique. If Reid disliked the harsh tones and vehement delivery of the African-American singers, so also had the Scottish traveller Laurence Oliphant, who, after touring the South in 1856, objected that slaves' religious songs were performed 'with great vehemence and unction', and that, where they were mentioned, sacred names 'were generally screamed rather than sung, with an almost ecstatic fervour'.[35] Such comments become a testy refrain in white contemporaries' accounts of slave life. Occasionally a more sympathetic observer detected deeper messages in these apparently dissonant tones; like Frederick Douglass before her, Lucy McKim, who, with her abolitionist father, Rev. James Miller McKim, visited the Carolina Sea Islands in 1862, concluded that 'the wild, sad strains' of slave song 'tell, as the sufferers themselves never could, of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, and a dull daily misery which covered them as hopelessly as the fog from the rice swamps'.[36] Even in such cases, however, the more fundamental importance of tone and tonal variation in African-American music was not understood.

Underlying whites' objections to the 'harsh' and 'aberrant' tones of slave vocal music lay a different conception of the role of sound in musical performance. In the slaves' African homelands, Francis Bebey has argued, musicians sought 'not ... to combine sounds in a manner pleasing to the ear', but 'simply to express life in all its aspects through the medium of sound', to 'translate everyday experiences into living sound',[37] 'to render emotions and desires as naturally as possible'.[38] Reflecting the tonal nature of African languages, on which much African music is based, the tones employed by an African singer, Bebey writes, 'may be soft or harsh as circumstances demand'. Thus, a 'mellow tone' may be used 'to welcome a new bride; a husky voice to recount an indiscrete adventure'.[39] In the same way, impassioned falsetto might effectively express grief, a grainy rasp anguish, a sonorous wail despair. If, as we might anticipate, southern slaves too made freer use than did whites of different tones (strictly timbres, or tone 'colours') to express the pain and emotional trauma that must have been part and parcel of their lives, it is not surprising to find whites describing such sounds as 'wild and barbarous',[40] 'uncouth',[41] a 'dismal howl'[42] or 'hideous noise'.[43] The African and African-American practice of weaving a variety of wordless intensifiers – shouts, cries, yells, groans – into a melody, translating, thereby, their strongly felt emotions into sound, can only have increased whites' sense of alienation.

African-American vocal music sounded dissonant to many whites not only because of its use of harsh, impassioned, or gravely tonalities, but also because slave singers inflected the pitches of notes 'in ways quite foreign to regular melodic practice in Western art music'. Observing that the use of

inflected pitches and pitch play is common among people of African origin in North America, but not among those in South America or the West Indies, Paul Oliver has argued that these musical tendencies were brought to North America by Muslim slaves from the savannah areas in Africa, rather than by slaves from the rain forest areas of the Guinea coast, whose music did not display these characteristics and who, though they arrived in far greater numbers, came later. Pitch play and inflected pitches were characteristic also of English and Irish American folk music, to which Muslim slaves were also exposed. In the event, William Tallmadge argues, later slave arrivals from West Africa 'were unable to dominate and suppress the combined tonal practice of the white-English and Scotch-Irish folk singers and savannah Negro slaves'.[44]

William Francis Allen, one of the compilers of *Slave Songs of the United States*, remarked that 'like birds', slaves often seemed '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"'.[45] It was a view echoed by many others. After accompanying a slave funeral procession through the woods on her Virginia plantation in 1861, Mrs Roger Pryor reached a similar conclusion, declaring the mourners' song to be 'a strange, weird tune no white person's voice could ever follow'.[46] This tendency of black singers (and instrumentalists) to 'play' with pitch, to worry, for example, the third degree of the scale by 'slurring or wavering between flat and natural', was disconcerting to those whites who first encountered it in the musical performances of slaves.[47] To Mrs C. J. B., who transcribed the spiritual 'The Day of Judgment' for the publication *Slave Songs of the United States*, for instance, a 'tone' that would later have been described as a worried third merely sounded like 'a sort of prolonged wail'.[48]

Similarly disconcerting to whites were what Lucy McKim termed the 'odd turns made in the throat' of black singers, another of the characteristics which, like the presence of 'worried' notes, made it 'difficult to express the entire character of ... negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs'.[49] Lucy McKim may have been referring, here, to various forms of vocal embellishment practised by slaves, the use of yodels, bends, or slides, for instance, or most probably to melisma, the practice of carrying one syllable of a word over several different tones (or fractions of tones). When Whitelaw Reid called attention to the 'vocal contortions to which the simplest words seemed to subject' the former slave who led the St Helena blacks in song, he may have been describing certain difficulties of pronunciation, or alluding to the leader's Gullah or Gullah-inflected speech.[50] But it is more likely that Reid too was referring to the African-American practice of extending the number of syllables in a sung word in

order to give greater scope for melismatic play. By representing the song leader's enunciation of the word 'Massa' as 'Ma-a-a-assa', Reid reveals that the man had turned a two-syllable word into a five-syllable one. And when, instead of singing 'Mr. Chase', the caller sang 'Me-is-ta-ah Che-a-ase', he had effectively transformed three syllables into seven. The carrying of African-American voices over the additional tones these extra syllables allowed for may have produced the 'odd turns in the throat', those puzzling, and to whites 'unnatural' sounds to which McKim had alluded.

Like Reid, many whites regarded the words of slaves' songs as almost meaningless, a melange of mispronunciation, trivial content, and pointless repetition. In 1842 Rev. Charles Colcock Jones, anxious to replace the slaves' religious songs with 'approved hymns', described the former as 'extravagant and nonsensical chants'.[51] In similar vein, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, commander of the first African-American regiment to fight in the Civil War, a man whose general attitude towards black Americans was notably sympathetic, characterized the nightly singing of his troops as 'incomprehensible negro methodist, meaningless, monotonous, endless chants, with obscure syllables recurring constantly'.[52] So generally 'absurd and unmeaning' were the lyrics of the 'so-called hymns' in the recently published volume *Slave Songs of the United States*, a reviewer complained in March 1868 'that it would be as well for the teachers in the schools and meeting-houses where they are sung to commence, as speedily as possible, the destruction of the entire lot'.[53] Even slaves, it sometimes seemed, did not comprehend the meaning of the words they sang. Puzzled by the term 'cater nappen', included in the song line 'Wid a white a cater nappen tied "roun" he [Jesus's] wais', school teacher Elizabeth Kilham and her companions inquired of several of the slave singers as to its meaning, but 'received no further explanation than, "Why, dat's jes' in de hymn"'. Kilham was similarly bemused by the way in which slaves appended a hymn chorus – 'Shall we know each other there?' – of which they were particularly fond to 'almost everything, sometimes in rather startling association'. She cited the following examples:

> Hark from the tombs a doleful sound, –
> Chorus – Shall we know each other there?

And

> Hell is a dark an' a drefful affair,
> An' ef I war a sinner I wouldn't go dar, –
> Chorus – Shall we know each other there?[54]

Such seemingly odd alignments of song lines would not have seemed incongruous to blacks. On being asked by a white woman what an African American had preached about at a camp meeting, 'Jenny', a recently freed

slave, had replied that, while she could not 'tell de perticulars' (though 'I's got dem all in my heart'), she could 'sing some of de hymns I larned dar'. Encouraged to do so, Jenny began:

> I hears a rumblin' in de skies,
> Jews, screws, de fi dum!
> I hears a rumblin' in de skies,
> Jews, screws, de fi dum!

When asked the meaning of the second and fourth lines (which were the same in each of several additional verses), Jenny replied, with some impatience: 'La, dear soul, don't you know what dem is? Dem is de chorus!' Further efforts to secure a satisfactory reply provoked the following rejoinder: 'Mean?' cried Jenny, with a deprecating glance at the inquisitive mistress, 'dey don't mean nothin', as I knows on, dey's de chorus, I tell you!' Later, the white woman learned that the 'correct' words of the chorus were 'Jews crucified him'.

In all probability, the song Jenny described had originally been a white hymn that had been recast by an African-American gathering into the familiar call-and-response format. In this context, the main function of the chorus (response) was not to 'make sense', when placed after every call line that preceded it, but to provide a stable foundation against which the lyrical, melodic and rhythmic improvisations of the caller would be set. The chorus that Jenny used could adequately perform this task even if the 'words' of which it was composed had been scrambled in translation.[55]

But something deeper was involved here. To Elizabeth Kilham, the surprising juxtaposition of different elements within African-American songs seemed almost deliberate; the slaves made nearly 'all their hymns into this kind of patchwork', she wrote, 'without apparently, the slightest perception of any incongruity in the sentiments thus joined together'. She speculated that the future publication of a collection of African-American religious songs would prompt the question as to whether they were 'composed as a whole, with deliberate arrangement and definite meaning, or [were] fragments, caught here and there, and pieced into mosaic, haphazard as they come?'[56] To Texas schoolteacher William P. Stanton, too, his black students' hymns 'seem[ed] to be a sort of miscellaneous patchwork, made up from the most striking parts of popular Methodist hymns'.[57] And, endeavouring to describe the singing of companies of black soldiers as they marched along, Colonel Thomas Higginson wrote that 'for all the songs, but especially for their own wild hymns, they constantly improvised simple verses, with the same odd mingling, – the little facts of to-day's march being interwoven with the depths of theological gloom, and the same jubilant chorus annexed to all'.[58]

Once again, the bemused or hostile reactions to slaves' religious songs measure the cultural gap between black and white. The kind of spontaneous 'sampling' in which the creators of spirituals engaged reflected the imperatives of a culture that prized improvisation and was not bound by the processes of linear thought. In the manner of slave quilt-makers, slave musicians pieced their compositions from different, often provocatively juxtaposed elements.[59]

Whitelaw Reid was scarcely alone in finding the St Helena blacks' singing 'curiously monotonous', in expressing puzzlement over 'repetitions that promised to be endless'.[60] In similar vein, for instance, Thomas Wentworth Higginson referred to the nightly singing of his troops as 'monotonous, endless chants'.[61] Again, such judgments reflect impatience at the apparent sameness of slave music, its lack of lyrical progression, and prolonged reiteration of single melodic sequences. Yet, as we have seen, repetition, through the time-honoured practice of call-and-response, facilitates improvisation, rather than hindering it. As John Miller Chernoff points out, in African music 'a repeated rhythmic response provides a stable basis to clarify the rhythms which change'.[62] That is to say, it is against the regularly recurring rhythmic chorus or response that the varying rhythms of the caller are set, creating a more complex rhythmic pattern. For instance, overlapping antiphony, a feature of slave choral music which occurs, for example, where the lead singer's call overlaps the response, or begins before the chorus's response has ended, introduces in the music an element of polyrhythmic, as well as polyphonic (that is, many voiced) complexity. To the extent to which the St Helena blacks' lead singer's call ('Ma-a-a-assa Fullah a sittin' on de tree ob life') overlapped the crowd's response ('Roll, Jordan, Roll'), a more complex rhythmic structure would have been created. It was this kind of rhythmic complexity that African Americans prized, but that whites 'heard' merely as discord and confusion. Criticisms of the repetitive nature of slave singing miss, also, the elements of tonal variety and imaginative forms of vocal embellishment – melisma, yodels, glides, falsetto swoops, and other vocal techniques – that invariably characterized the lead singer's performance.

Repetition enabled the creation of a fluid, non-linear musical form; singing was cyclical, continuing not, as in Western practice, until the song was finished, but until the singers had accomplished their purpose. In the case of the St Helena blacks, the reiteration in song of the names of each of the white men who either helped them in the past or now intended to do so was exuberantly prolonged until the former slaves' celebration of those individuals was complete. This was not something to hurry over.

It was, among other things, the complex rhythmic structure of slave music that made it so difficult to notate in conventional European form.

Such music was 'almost as impossible to place on score, as the singing of birds, or the tones of an Aeolian Harp', Lucy McKim declared, in large part because of the additive rhythmic effect created by 'voices chiming in at different irregular intervals'.[63] William Francis Allen did attempt to score slave music. As Ronald Radano has revealed, in Allen's own copy of *Slave Songs of the United States*, a number of loose-leaf transcriptions were discovered, representing his attempts to capture the melodies of slave shouts probably performed around the area of Beaufort, South Carolina. In one of these transcriptions, 'Bell Da Ring', Allen has reproduced, under the standard, five-line bars of music, the words the slaves sang. These words are set in two or sometimes three rows of horizontal lines, arranged one under the other, and distributed laterally in such a manner that the words in the three lines frequently overlap. In *Slave Songs of the United States*, the first section of the lyrics of 'Bell Da Ring' reads as follows (the bracketed words have been added; 'yedde' is a Gullah word meaning 'hear'):

> (introduction) I know, member, know, Lord, I know I yedde de bell da ring
> (call) Want to go to meeting, Bell da ring, (response)
> (call) Want to go to meeting, Bell da ring. (response)
> (call) Road so stormy, Bell da ring, (response)
> (call) Road so stormy, Bell da ring. (response)

In Allen's private formulation, on the other hand, the lyrics are shown thus:

> I know member, know Lord I want to go to meeting
> I know I yedde de bell da ring Bell da ring

What Allen illustrates here is overlapping call and response, a common, if not ubiquitous, slave practice. (In his introduction to Slave Songs of the United States, Allen remarked that slaves 'overlap in singing ... in such degree that at no time is there any complete pause'.) Overlapping of this kind created thicker sonic textures and a more complex interweaving of rhythms, characteristics that, as Lucy McKim and others quickly discovered, rendered slave singing virtually impossible to score.[64]

Listening, in bemused fashion, to the performance of the St Helena ex-slaves, Whitelaw Reid almost certainly missed not only the complex rhythmic colloquy between lead singer and chorus, and the polyphonic effect of other voices chiming in at irregular intervals, but also the purpose of the former slaves' performance. The message of their song – celebratory, profound – was that those who had helped them and whose names they now honoured had, like the members of that great African-American church congregation, won the right to the tree of life. It was a message worthy of repetition.

There is a striking uniformity in whites' reactions to African and African-American vocal music not only in United States across time, but also in the diaspora. Whitelaw Reid's complaints had been anticipated, decades earlier, by George Pinckard, who, in 1796, described the singing of a group of Africans on the deck of a slave ship at anchor in Carlisle Bay, Jamaica, on its way to Georgia. 'Their song', Pinckard declared, 'was a wild yell, devoid of all softness and harmony, and loudly chanted in harsh monotony.'[65] Here again are the objections to harsh tones, to timbres that clash rather than blend, to dissonance, and to repetition. There is more than a rough similarity, too, between the recollections of Jeanette Robinson Murphy and those of George Pinckard, Whitelaw Reid, and numerous other white observers. As a child during the early post-bellum years, Murphy had listened to the singing of aged former slaves who had either come directly from Africa or whose parents had been born there. A more sympathetic observer, Murphy had been enchanted by the sounds of the former slaves' voices, by 'all the intonations and tortuous quavers of [their] beautiful music' (use of contrasting timbres and tremolo). To her, 'some of the strange, weird, untamable, barbaric melodies' possessed 'a rude beauty and ... charm'. It would, however, be futile for whites to attempt to reproduce these sounds, since, to be effective, a singer's voice needed to be made 'exceedingly nasal and undulating' (harsh tones and yodelling) and 'around every prominent note' there needed to be placed 'a variety of small notes' (use of melisma). It would also be necessary for such a white singer to 'sing tones not found in our scale' (pitch inflection) to 'drop from a high note to a very low one' (possibly yodelling, but more likely octave leaping or swooping to inject an element of surprise) to 'intersperse his singing with peculiar humming sounds' (use of wordless intensifiers) and to 'carry over his breath from line to line and from verse to verse, even at the risk of bursting a blood-vessel' (possibly overlapping call-and-response, but more probably the overlapping, by some of the singers, of the end of one line with the beginning of the next, producing polyphony and cross rhythmic complexity).[66]

What whites who criticized slave music failed to realize was that blacks were listening to different things. Where whites wanted intelligible lyrics, accurate pitch, and purity of tone, blacks needed to hear the complex rhythmic patterns, inflected pitches, and timbral diversity that delighted them, the sorts of characteristics that could create what Olly Wilson has termed 'a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound'.[67] Whites' attempts to discover a clear melody were defeated not only by vagaries of pitch and odd tonal shadings, but by melismatic embellishment and a seemingly inexhaustible repertory of vocal interjections – moans, shouts, grunts, hollers, and screams – used to

intensify musical expression. Listening for harmony, whites heard instead a strange form of heterophony, as many voices sang in unison (often an octave apart), but others wove melodic and tonal improvisations into the fabric of sound. Harmony in slave singing meant not a structured system, as in western music, but moments of blend forever being transformed by vocal improvisation, the intermittent and ever-changing harmonies of singers who refused to be bound. 'I despair of conveying any notion of a number singing together', William Francis Allen had written, since 'no two appear to be singing the same thing', and the basers 'seem to follow their own whims, beginning when they please and leaving off when they please ... or hitting some other note that chords, so as to produce the effect of a marvellous complication and variety'.[68] To the whites who heard him, the St Helena song leader's shrill, cracked notes may have been disconcerting, but in those sounds the African American congregation would have 'heard', in those apparently harsh and discordant sounds, sincerity, intensity, and emotional fervour, meaning expressed, as in West Africa, through timbre and tone.

After listening to St Helena's former slaves, led by a white teacher, sing a conventional hymn, Whitelaw Reid had made no complaint. In all probability, the words of this song, one of the 'ordinary hymns of the church', would have been familiar to Reid and, because of the influence of the island's white churchmen on St Helena's African Americans, easily comprehended by him. (After the hymn had been sung, the white clergyman had the African-American children sing 'My country, 'tis of thee.') The hymn would have been composed by a white, and although the black singers may well have introduced variations here and there to make the song more to their liking, the extent of any changes was probably not great. Reid's only comment on the blacks' rendition of the hymn was an approving one; 'great volumes of sound', he noted with some enthusiasm, 'rang like organ peals [presumably 'harmonious' ones, from whites' perspective] through the arches of the oaks'.[69] How different was all this from the earlier, impromptu musical performance of St Helena's former slaves, with its harsh tones, clashing rhythms, chant-like repetitions and antiphonal style, and from Whitelaw Reid's reaction to it. In all likelihood, many blacks lived this double musical life, conforming to white expectations when it was prudent to do so, but reverting to their own musical performance styles where and when they could.

It was at the slave dances at Place Congo in New Orleans that the sounds of slave music – not just vocal music, as in the singing that Whitelaw Reid and his party heard at St Helena, but instrumental music as well – were broadcast in the most public and uninhibited way. While out walking in the city on a Sunday afternoon in 1819, the architect and engineer Benjamin Latrobe was affronted by a 'most extraordinary noise, which I supposed to

proceed from some horse Mill, the horses trampling on a wooden floor'. Following this sound to its source, Latrobe came upon an area of open ground adjacent to the city, on which some five or six hundred blacks were 'formed into circular groupes in the midst of four of which was a ring'. Within these rings slave instrumentalists were playing while other African Americans danced.

In one of the dancing rings, 'an old man sat astride of a Cylindrical drum about a foot in diameter, and beat it with incredible quickness with the edge of his hand and fingers', and a second man beat an 'open staved' drum in a similar manner, while holding it between his knees. The resulting noise, Latrobe declared, was 'incredible'. Other unfamiliar sounds issued from a 'curious' stringed instrument, which Latrobe felt must have come from Africa, and which was being played by an old man. 'On top of the finger board [of the instrument] was the rude [carved] figure of a Man in a sitting posture, and two pegs behind him to which the strings were fastened. The body [of the instrument] was a Calabash.' To add to the din, some 'women squalled out a burthen [refrain] to the playing, at intervals, consisting of two notes, as the Negroes working in our cities respond to the Song of their leader'.

Two of the other rings contained ensembles of this general type, but at the last and the largest, Latrobe discovered instruments of markedly different design. One resembled 'a block cut into something of the form of a cricket bat with a long and deep mortice down the Center'. Another was 'a square drum looking like a stool'. The noise of the first, which was being 'beaten lustily on the side by a short stick', was 'considerable'; that of the second 'abominably loud'. The ensemble was completed by 'a Calabash with a round hole in it, the hole studded with brass nails', on which a woman beat with two sticks. Meanwhile, as a raucous complement to the sound these instruments made, a man 'sung an uncouth song to the dancing which I suppose was in some African language, for it was not french', and some women 'screamed a detestable burthen on one single note'.[70]

Latrobe's account clearly indicates the strongly percussive and rhythmic character of slave music, but what also distinguishes the instrumental ensembles in evidence at Place Congo, and, indeed, those that former slaves have described, is their ability to create a mix of strikingly different sound qualities (a necessity if the individual rhythms were to be 'heard'). Since they were constructed differently and from different materials, the cylindrical and open-staved drums in the first of Latrobe's dancing rings would in any case have yielded sharply varying tones. But by using a variety of hand and finger movements, for instance, or beating the drum membrane in a different place, the drummer of each would have been able to alter, even more dramatically, his instrument's sonic range. As J. H.

Kwabena Nketia explains, on many drums a broad range of tone quality and pitch may be obtained through a drummer's use of 'the cupped hand, the palm, palm and fingers, or the base of the palm in different positions on the drum'.[71] The player of the open-staved drum, the sides of which appear, from a sketch that Latrobe made, to have been composed of strips of wood, could have achieved additional tonal differentiation by applying pressure with his knees, between which the drum was held, squeezing the sides of the drum to increase tension on the membrane and relaxing such pressure when lower tones were desired. Just such a method is used by players of the Yoruba two-headed hour-glass drum, which is held under one arm and beaten with a curved stick. 'Variations in tension of the skins are obtained', Bebey writes, 'by exerting pressure with the forearm on the longitudinal thongs that connect the skins', a procedure so effective that it 'gives different sonorities which can produce all the tones of speech'.[72] The open staves that formed the sides of the drum that Latrobe described would seem to correspond very closely to the 'longitudinal thongs' mentioned by Bebey, and were almost certainly worked on in the same way.

The 'cricket bat' drum (actually a struck idiophone) in the largest of the Place Congo dancing rings bears at least some resemblance to the African slit drum, which, Nketia tells us, is 'made out of a hollowed log of wood, a section of which is slit open to provide it with a pair of "lips" that can be struck with beaters'. Lips of different thickness produce different tones when struck.[73] But whatever sounds this Place Congo drum was capable of producing, they were certain to have differed considerably from those made by the drum which 'resembled a stool', and even more so from those of the 'calabash with a round hole in it, the hole studded with brass nails which was beaten by a woman with two short sticks'. The singing that Latrobe heard as he inspected the slave dancing rings would have created even more complex sonic textures, 'kaleidoscopic' in their 'range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound'.[74]

Yet something more subtle may also have been going on. According to Robert Farris Thompson, West African dance and musical performance possess 'a dynamic sensibility', both of these artistic forms 'seem[ing] to fuse energy and decorum in a manner that confounds the either/or categories of Western thinking'. Developing this insight, John Miller Chernoff has pointed out that, whereas 'a Westerner might find rhythmic conflict an overwhelmingly intense experience[,] in an African musical context, rhythmic conflict brings coolness to communication'. Coolness 'calls for mediated involvement rather than concentrated attention, collectedness of mind rather than self-abandonment ... In African music, the emphasis shifts from rhythm to rhythm or part to part. Without balance and coolness, the African musician loses aesthetic command, and the music abdicates its

social authority, becoming hot, intense, limited, pretentious, overly personal, boring, irrelevant, and ultimately alienating.' Individual performers may drum, or sing, or dance 'apart' – may improvise – but they must do so without losing touch with the whole. In this context, Thompson writes, call-and-response becomes 'a means of putting innovation and tradition, invention and imitation, into amicable relationships with one another', and 'in that sense, it, too, is cool'. Musical 'conversations' of the type we have been considering at Place Congo –voice with voice, voice with instrument, instrument with instrument, instrument with body, and so on – are 'additive', rather than disruptive, and, as Thompson expresses it, 'cool in [their] expressions of community'.[75]

None of these things could Benjamin Latrobe have appreciated. Exposed to the unfamiliar sights and sounds of Place Congo, he experienced only an overwhelming sense of cultural alienation. The sound of the drums was 'abominably loud'; the singing 'uncouth', 'detestable'; the notes screamed rather than sung. 'I have never', the traveller concluded, 'seen any thing more brutally savage, and at the same time dull and stupid than this whole exhibition.'[76] The hundreds of African Americans who came each Sunday to Place Congo, however, heard not a frenzied cacophony of ear-splitting noise, but an exciting, but at the same time cool, mix of culturally evocative sound.

In explaining to Jeanette Robinson Murphy how spirituals were created, one of the former slave women, to whose singing Murphy had listened appreciatively, pointed to a significant difference between the religious music of African Americans and that of whites. 'Notes is good enough for you people', the woman declared, 'but us likes a mixtery.'[77] It may have been that, in using the word 'mixtery', the woman was referring to the process by which the lyrics of spirituals were composed, a process that often seemed to whites to entail an almost haphazard piecing together of texts drawn from the whole bible – 'fragments, caught here and there, and pieced into mosaic', as Elizabeth Kilham had expressed it.[78] It seems likely, however, that, in juxtaposing the words 'notes' and 'mixtery', the woman had more than lyrical content in mind, that the 'notes' she deemed 'good enough' for whites referred to the sounds of a simple tune sung in a straightforward manner (a style typical of much white hymn singing), whereas the 'mixtery' preferred by blacks was the more complex sonic texture of the slave spiritual, with its overlapping rhythms, sharp timbral contrasts, and liberal tonal embellishment. Whether this was so or not, there are clear indications that North American slaves did like a 'mixtery', and that in so doing they were reflecting West African cultural preferences.

West African musicians also mixed sounds of great range and diversity. In their efforts to replicate the world of sound, Nketia points out, African

singers exploit 'the prosodic features of speech', using 'explosive sounds or special interjections, vocal grunts, and even the whisper'.[79] Players of African musical instruments, Francis Bebey observes, 'experiment with unusual sonorities', seeking 'to produce all manner of weird and complex sounds that often strike Western ears as being impure. Metal jingles may be attached to instruments or dried seeds placed in the sound-box to add their dancing rhythms to the music; drums sometimes have snares. All manner of contrivances are used to produce a variety of sounds – muted, nasal, or strident – that are intended to bring the music as close as possible to the actual sound of nature.'[80]

But the principle of mixing has a wider application, extending to cultural spheres as diverse as textile design, speech, and dance. In textile production, West Africans mix colours and designs in ways that whites often find disconcerting. As Robert Farris Thompson has pointed out, 'African cloth has for centuries, as it is today, been distinguishable by deliberate clashing of "high affect colors," ... in willful, percussively contrastive, bold arrangements.' In the widely influential Mande culture, Thompson asserts, 'visual aliveness' and vibrancy in textile production are achieved not only by the aggressive mixing of colours, but by the apparently haphazard placement of the variously designed narrow strips of which the material is made. In the so-called 'rhythmized' cloth of West Africa, rhythms are irregular, mixing elements of colour and design in ways that disturb white sensibilities.[81]

In the early nineteenth century, when North American slaves became involved in the manufacture of cloth and clothing, they also mixed colours and patterns in ways that whites found strange. Former South Carolinian slave Charlie Meadow explained to his WPA interviewer that, whereas the slaves' winter clothing had been 'drab and plain', 'for our summer clothes we plaited de hanks to make a mixtry of colors'.[82] Lizzie Norfleet, interviewed in Mississippi, remembered that the dresses slave women made for themselves were 'beautiful', with 'one dark stripe and one bright stripe'. 'Folks them days', she averred, 'knowed how to mix pretty colors.'[83] Whites, however, were less impressed. Fanny Kemble, resident on her husband's Georgia plantation in the late 1830s, called the 'sabbath toilet' of the slaves

> the most ludicrous combination of incongruities that you can conceive ... every color of the rainbow, and the deepest possible shades blended in fierce companionship ...; head handkerchiefs, that put one's very eyes out from a mile off; chintzes with sprawling patterns, that might be seen if the clouds were printed with them; beads, ... flaring sashes, and, above all, little fanciful aprons, which finish these incongruous toilets with a sort of airy grace, which I assure you is perfectly indescribable.[84]

Kemble alluded here not just to the propensity of slaves to create seemingly bizarre mixtures of colour and design, but also to combine various items of clothing within the one ensemble in ways that whites often considered wildly inappropriate.

The slaves' creation of such mixed and odd-seeming clothing ensembles reflected not simply privation, a sort of catch-as-catch-can mentality, but a tendency, also observable in West Africa and particularly among the elite, to add to their garb any garment that caught the wearer's fancy or that she or he happened to acquire, without any Westernized sense that such an item should co-ordinate in style, colour, or anything else with whatever else they were wearing. Writing shortly after the end of the Civil War, an anonymous correspondent of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, who had spent several years in Guinea, mocked this very practice. 'What a union of civilized and barbarous costume was here!' he declared, referring to the garb of one 'Hamitic Dandy', who had offset more usual African forms of dress with a European-style hat and cane and a prominently displayed collection of keys. In this writer, the juxtaposition of items of European clothing or accessories, or items of European manufacture, with more recognizably African garments excited feelings of bemusement and disdain.[85]

As we have seen, slave singers also mixed musical sounds in ways that defeated whites' attempt to score their songs. So also did African-American instrumentalists. Slaves on former slave Wash Wilson's Texas plantation, for example, used a variety of substances (animal bone of various types, a piece of iron, a kettle, a gourd, a section of a tree trunk and a barrel, both with animal skins stretched over one end, and a buffalo horn), beaten or otherwise played in a variety of ways (with fingers, hands, feet, sticks, or mouth), to create a combination of sounds of sharply different pitch and timbre.[86]

The kind of apparently haphazard mixing to which whites took bemused objection also characterized some forms of black speech, notably slave sermons. In rural South Carolina in 1863, Charles Raymond, a white clergyman, was invited to attend a 'funeral preaching' for a slave woman who had died two years earlier, the oration to be delivered by a famed slave preacher known as 'Uncle Phil'. Having listened to Phil's address, Raymond readily conceded that, although the sound of the man's voice had deeply affected the large black congregation ('to see Phil and hear him preach', Raymond wrote, 'was to rouse and stir all the tenderest depths of your nature'), intellectually the oration had been 'mere trash', a 'jumble of thoughts', analytically 'ridiculous'. For this reason, any attempt systematically to reproduce one of Phil's sermons, or indeed those of any 'genuine Southern negro', would, prove, Raymond declared, quite futile.[87] (The clergyman's comments recall claims by whites that slave religious

songs were 'a kind of patchwork', and that slave music was impossible to score.)

If Raymond felt alienated by the apparently jumbled content of the funeral sermon and the lack of temporal connection between the death and the preaching, Phil found the expectations of the dominant culture equally strange. Some time earlier, Raymond had given him a book of sermon skeletons, hoping to encourage in him a more structured presentation of ideas, but Phil had merely been nonplussed, reacting with incredulity to the notion that sermons could be planned and delivered in this way. As the slave well knew, he would be judged by different standards. His audience would be listening to the metrics of delivery. They would understand that the repetitive rhythms of the chanted sermon were needed to evoke the necessary audience response, that without the requisite rhythms the Spirit would not come. Phil's audience would be concerned, too, with the aesthetics of his performance, with the way he wove formulaic expressions, whether spontaneously created or drawn from Scripture or the spirituals, into his own metrical style.[88] A representative of a predominantly oral culture, he had stored in his memory a vast repertoire of phrases and ideas which awaited artful use. The success of his performance would be measured not simply for the poetic fit of the expressions he sampled (and mixed together), but for their connotative referencing, the associations those words had conjured, their effectiveness in bringing meanings from other contexts to a particular moment in his address, to the story he was unfolding. Controlled, linear organization was far less important than congregational involvement, imaginative sampling, and cumulative rhythmic and associational effect. As with slave music, so also with slave preaching: the African Americans and whites who heard it were listening to different things.

This discussion illustrates how an aesthetic first identified by Robert Farris Thompson in his studies of African cultures was exemplified in all aspects of slave music, not only in the 'off-beat phrasing of melodic accents', to which Thompson specifically refers, but in the overlapping of rhythmic patterns, the apparently haphazard construction of the lyrics of slave songs, and, in the case of both slave singers and instrumentalists, in the incessant mixing of dramatically contrasting timbres and tones. Our discussion also suggests that this same idiom is observable in other forms of black cultural expression: in the way slaves combined colours and patterns in the quilts and clothing they created, in the odd-seeming way they combined items of clothing within the one ensemble; in the non-linear manner in which slave preachers 'joined the words' as they preached the Christian gospel to their own people. To be sure, we have centred our discussion on best case scenarios; the main sites of our study – the Sea

Islands, Place Congo, and rural South Carolina – were areas of dense slave concentration, where it has long been acknowledged that African influences were strongest. As well, we have written here only of the nineteenth century. For a variety of reasons, sources for this period are comparatively rich. An increased number of travellers criss-crossed the South during these years, whose heightened concern over the nature of the 'peculiar institution', and generally more sympathetic attitude towards the slaves themselves, led them to observe and record closely the details of African-American life. From the early years of the Civil War, various Northerners went to conquered areas of the South to teach or otherwise assist newly freed slaves, and out of their experiences came several lengthy descriptions of the music of the slaves. In addition, for the nineteenth century we have available to us the words of former slaves themselves, as recorded in ex-slave autobiographies and Works Progress Administration interviews conducted in the 1930s.

The temptation may be great simply to assume that African elements in North American slave culture were even more important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, than in the nineteenth, but recent work on slavery has demonstrated that slave culture did not travel in such conveniently straight temporal lines.[89] A fuller examination of the cultural significance of slavery's sounds must await further work not only among other nineteenth century sources, but also among the much more sparse and problematical sources for the colonial period. At this stage we would suggest, however, that much the same underlying principles that have emerged from this study animated slave culture elsewhere in the South, although that may often have been far less obvious.

From our perspective, what is most striking in all this is the links that exist between different cultural spheres, links that are starkly demonstrated by the similarity of whites' reactions to diverse aspects of slave life. Whites' contemptuous dismissal of slaves' colour and clothing preferences, and their criticisms of the apparently analytically chaotic nature of slave sermons, are analogues, in the sartorial and verbal realms, of their disdainful reaction to slave music – to its lack of harmony, seemingly ill-assorted lyrics, bewildering rhythmic complexity, and sharp timbral dissonance. But these reactions are merely a sign, pointing us to something much more significant: the continuing importance of a distinctive cultural aesthetic in the lives of North American slaves. For African Americans who danced to makeshift musical ensembles in the slave quarters or at Place Congo, or joined in the antiphonal singing, or clapped or patted to intensify the basic pulse, the mixed sounds and rhythms of the music they made fit easily into a cultural aesthetic that gave a reassuring sense of unity to their lives and offered a brief respite from the rigours of a hard and often capricious existence.

NOTES

We would like to acknowledge gratefully the generosity of the Australian Research Council for their financial assistance in the form of a Small Grant for the project 'The Sounds of Slavery'. We would also like to thank Ira Berlin, Glenn Hinson, Charles Joyner and Ron Radano for their helpful comments on draft versions of this article.

1. *National Advocate*, 8 Nov. 1821.
2. W. Faux, *Memorable Days in America: Being a Journal of a Tour to the United States* (London: W. Simpkin & R. Marshall, 1823), p.84.
3. Harvey Wish (ed.), Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Slave States* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959 [orig. pub. 1856]), pp.114–15.
4. George P. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, VI: Alabama and Indiana Narratives (41 vols. and index; Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood, 1972–1981), Alabama Narratives, 395.
5. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, VII: Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives, Oklahoma Narratives, p.335.
6. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, VI: Alabama and Indiana Narratives, Alabama Narratives, pp.416–17.
7. Ibid., p.129.
8. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, VII: Oklahoma and Mississippi Narratives, Oklahoma Narratives, p.335.
9. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 1, III: Georgia Narratives, Pt.1, pp.9–10.
10. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969 [orig. pub. 1855]), pp.97–9.
11. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.46.
12. Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), p.85.
13. Ibid., p.82.
14. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 2, IX, Texas Narratives, Pt.8, p.3752.
15. Olmsted, *The Slave States*, Wish (ed.), p.115.
16. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 2, IV: Texas Narratives, Pt.3, p.1022.
17. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, II, South Carolina Narratives, Pt.2, p.146.
18. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 2, IX, Texas Narratives, Pt.8, p.3752.
19. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 2, III, Texas Narratives, Pt.2, p.610.
20. Courlander, *Negro Folk Music*, p.81.
21. Ashenafi Kebede, *Roots of Black Music: The Vocal, Instrumental, and Dance Heritage of Africa and Black America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982), p.47.
22. Willis Lawrence James, 'The Romance of the Negro Folk Cry in America', in Alan Dundes (ed.), *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings and Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), p.438.
23. Robert Farris Thompson, 'The Song That Named the Land: The Visionary Presence of African-American Art', in *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), p.97.
24. Ibid.
25. Olly Wilson, 'The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music', in Josephine Wright (ed.), *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), p.329.
26. Floyd, *Power of Black Music*, p.21.
27. Ibid., pp.8–9.
28. James, 'Romance of the Negro Folk Cry', p.443.
29. C. Vann Woodward (ed.), Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of the Southern States, 1865–1866* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp.100–3.
30. Ibid., pp.104–5.

31. Ibid., pp.108–11.
32. Ronald Radano, 'Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals', *Critical Inquiry*, 22, 3 (Spring 1996), p.507.
33. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison (comp.), *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Oak Publications, 1965 [orig. pub. 1867]), pp.9–10.
34. Winthrop D. Jordan, *Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana University Press, 1993), p.20.
35. Quoted in Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981 [orig. pub. 1977]), pp.227–8.
36. Lucy McKim, 'Songs of the Port Royal Contrabands', in Bruce Jackson (ed.), *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1967), p.62.
37. Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People's Art* (London: Harrap, 1975 [orig. pub. 1969]), pp.2, 115.
38. Quoted in Bebey, *African Music*, p.5.
39. Bebey, *African Music*, p.115.
40. Arthur M. Schlesinger (ed.), *Frederick Law Olmsted, The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopt, 1953), p.36.
41. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.72.
42. Reid, *After the War*, p.523.
43. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.84.
44. William Tallmadge, 'Blue Notes and Blue Tonality', *The Black Perspective in Music*, 12, 2 (Fall 1984), pp.155, 159–62.
45. Allen, *Slave Songs of the United States*, p.10.
46. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.236.
47. Quoted in Tallmadge, 'Blue Notes and Blue Tonality', p.155.
48. Radano, 'Denoting Difference', p.536.
49. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.261.
50. Reid, *After the War*, 103.
51. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.201.
52. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.281.
53. Unsigned review of *Slave Songs of the United States* in *Lippincott's Magazine*, I (Philadelphia, March 1868), pp.341–3 reprinted in Jackson (ed.), *The Negro and His Folklore*, p.107.
54. Elizabeth Kilham, 'Sketches in Color', *Putnam's Magazine*, 5 (March 1870), p.309.
55. *Christian Watchman and Reflector*, 18 July 1867, p.4.
56. Kilham, 'Sketches in Color', p.308.
57. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.276.
58. Quoted in Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York and London: Norton & Co., 1983), p.210.
59. Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture From Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp.5–36, 63–84.
60. Reid, *After the War*, pp.103, 104.
61. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.281.
62. John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.111.
63. McKim, 'Songs of the Port Royal Contrabands', p.62.
64. Radano, 'Denoting Difference', 538; Allen, *Slave Songs*, pp.75, 14.
65. Quoted in Epstein, *Sinful Tunes*, p.10.
66. Jeanette Robinson Murphy, 'The Survival of African Folk Music in America', in Jackson (ed.), *The Negro and His Folklore*, pp.328, 331–2.
67. Wilson, 'Heterogeneous Sound Ideal', p.329.
68. Allen, *Slave Songs*, p.10.
69. Reid, *After the War*, p.108.

70. Edward C. Carter II, John C. Van Horne, and Lee W. Formwalt (eds.), Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *The Journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1799–1820: From Philadelphia to New Orleans*, Vol. 3 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp.203–4.
71. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (London: Gollancz, 1975), p.89.
72. Bebey, *African Music*, p.94.
73. Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, p.73.
74. Wilson, 'Heterogeneous Sound Ideal', p.329.
75. Robert Farris Thompson, 'An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance', *African Forum*, 2, 2 (Fall, 1966), pp.87, 98; Chernoff, *African Rhythm*, p.140.
76. Latrobe, *Journals*, p.204.
77. Murphy, 'Survival of African Folk Music', p.329.
78. Kilham, 'Sketches in Color', p.308.
79. Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, p.178.
80. Bebey, *African Music*, pp.40–1.
81. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African Art and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp.208–10.
82. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Vol. 3 South Carolina Narratives, Pts 3 & 4, Pt 3, 180 (our italics).
83. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Supplement Series 1, Vol. IX, Mississippi Narratives, 1641–42.
84. John A. Scott (ed.), Frances Ann Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* (New York: New American Library, 1975), pp.93–4.
85. 'The Fashions in Guinea', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 37, 218 (July 1868), pp.166–7.
86. Rawick (ed.), *The American Slave*, Vol. V, Texas Narratives, Pt.4, p.198.
87. Charles A. Raymond, 'The Religious Life of the Negro Slave', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 27, 161 (October 1863), pp.677–79.
88. Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988 [1970]), pp.142–4.
89. Ira Berlin's recent work has been particularly disruptive of such linear interpretations of African- American culture. See Ira Berlin, 'From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (April 1996), pp.251–88 and *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). See also White and White, *Stylin'*, pp.5–36.