

The Miracle of Negro Spirituals

By JAMES WELDON JOHNSON



The Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro. And their production, although seemingly miraculous, can be accounted for naturally. The Negro brought with him from Africa his native musical instinct and talent—and that was no small endowment to begin with.

In comparing the Spiritual with African folk song, we note the significant fact that both are sung in *harmony*, and all other folk songs except those of Hungary are expressed in unison. The Spiritual is sung by a leader and answered by a chorus, as in African folk songs. Generally speaking, the European concept of music is melody, and the African concept is *rhythm*. In this respect the African music is beyond comparison with any other music in the world. The syncopated rhythm of the African drumbeat is amazing in its wealth of detail. It has a share in one of the best known musical rhythms—that of the *Habanera*, which is simply a combination of Spanish melody and African rhythm.

What was it which led the Spirituals to rise above the base of primitive African rhythms and go a step in advance of African music through a higher development of harmony? Why did not the Negro in America revive and continue the beating out of complex rhythm on tomtoms and drums while he uttered barbaric and martial cries? It was because, at the precise and psychic moment, there was blown through or fused into the vestiges of his African music the spirit of Christianity, as he knew Christianity.

At the psychic moment, there was at hand the precise religion for the condition in which he found himself thrust. Far from his native land and customs, despised by those among whom he lived, experiencing the pangs of the separation of loved ones, knowing the hard lot of the slave, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion that implied hope for the next world.

The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity—patience—fortbearance—love—faith and hope—through a necessarily modified form of primitive African music. The Negro took complete refuge in Christianity, and the Spirituals were literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor.

It is not possible to estimate the sustaining influence that the story of the trials and tribulations of the Jews, as related in the Old Testament, exerted upon the Negro. This story at once caught and fired the imaginations of the Negro bards, and they sang their hungry listeners into a firm faith that, as God saved Daniel in the lions' den, so would He save them; as God preserved the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, so He would preserve them; as God delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt, so He would deliver them.

Thus it was by sheer spiritual forces that African chants were metamorphosed into the Spirituals; that, upon the fundamental throbs of African rhythms, were reared those reaches of melody that rise above earth and soar into the pure, ethereal blue. And this is the miracle of the creation of the Spirituals.

How, it may be asked, were the Spirituals composed? Were they the spontaneous outburst of a group, or the work of talented song makers?

In the old days there was a definitely recognized order of bards, and to some degree it still exists. These bards gained their recognition by achievement. They were makers of songs and leaders of singing. They had to possess talents; a gift of melody, a strong voice, a good memory and a talent for poetry. There was, at least, one leader of singing in every congregation, but makers of songs were less common. My memory of childhood goes back to a great leader of singing, "Ma" White, and a maker of songs, "Singing" Johnson. "Ma" White was

an excellent laundress and a busy woman, but each church meeting found her in her place ready to lead the singing. And, even as a child, my joy in hearing her sing Spirituals was deep and full. One of her duties was to "sing down" a long-winded speaker, and even to cut short a prayer of undue length by raising a song.

"Singing" Johnson's only business was singing. He went about from place to place singing his way. He composed songs and his congregation joined in his singing with antiphonal responses. He was a great judge of the appro-

priate song for any service and could come to the preacher's support with a line or two of song, after a climax in the sermon.

A study of the Spirituals leads one to the belief that the earlier ones were built upon the form so common to African songs—leading lines and responses. Most of the Spirituals and some of the most beautiful slave songs are cast in this simple form. One of these is "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

But as the American Negro developed melody and harmony, he also went a step beyond in the development of form. The lead and responses are still retained but the response is developed into a true chorus. In a number of songs there are leads, a response and a chorus. In this class of songs the chorus is dominating and comes first, as in "Steal Away to Jesus." In this song the congregation begins with the chorus, singing it in part harmony.

In a few songs this development is carried to a point where the form becomes almost purely choral, as in "Deep River" and "Walk Together Children."

Carl Van Vechten has declared that white singers cannot sing Spirituals. I agree that white singers are, naturally, prone to go to either of two extremes: to sing them as if they are mere "art" songs, or to assume a "Negro unctuousness" that is obviously false, and painfully so. I think that white concert singers can sing Spirituals—if they feel them. And if Negro singers do not feel them, they also fail.

Through the supreme artistry of Roland Hayes, these songs are transfigured and we are transported. By a seemingly opposite method, through sheer simplicity and adherence to primitive traditions, Paul Robeson achieves substantially the same effect. The essential that these two singers have in common is that both feel the Spirituals deeply. Mr. Hayes, notwithstanding all his artistry, sings these songs with tears on his cheeks.

It is not, however, as solo singing that we should think of Spirituals, it is rather as communal music, singing in harmony. The harmonization of the Spirituals by the folk group in singing them distinguished them among the folk songs of the world. It is only natural that Spirituals should be sung in harmony, for the Negro's musical soul expresses itself instinctively in the communal spirit and in rich and varied harmonies.

Of the words of the Spirituals not so much, of course, can be said as of the music. Both the Negro bard and his fellow singers worked under mental limitations that handicapped them. Many of the lines of the Spirituals are trite, and there is monotonous repetition. But there is an appealing simplicity—and in some of the Spirituals, real poetry, the naive poetry of a primitive race—*From the Readers Digest.*

That's Stimson 'Em Some!

Skipper Sam Pinch

On the thirteenth of June rose an awful typhoon

Off the southernmost coast-line of Sulu,

Inky-black was the sky, waves a hundred feet high

As a storm it was truly a lulu.

But our Skipper, Sam Pinch, didn't waver or flinch

He remained at his post, never paling,

Let the mountainous seas rise as high as they please,

He kept to the course he was sailing.

For his courage was stout, not a flicker of doubt

Seemed to trouble or fret or delay him,

All the storms they could boast off the Philippine coast

Never seemed to disturb or delay him.

Many good ships were wrecked in that gale, I expect,

For the fury of Hades was in it,

But Sam Pinch remained cool as was always his rule,

And he brought us to port—on the minute.

Let the wild tempests roar off the Philippine shore,

There was never a one that could faze him,

Let the typhoons arise in the tropical skies

The worst of the lot wouldn't daze him.

Would our Skipper, Sam Pinch, either waver or flinch,

Would he shake, would he quake, would he quiver,

When it's ten thousand miles from the Philippine Isles

To his boat on the Chesapeake River?

—Berton Braley, in *Life*.

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