

## African American music

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A term applied to distinct configurations of sound organization linked historically and socially to people of African descent living within the United States. While scholarship has identified a shared body of conceptual approaches to sound among the numerous idioms of African American music, musicians have employed them across various functional divides in American culture such as written and oral, sacred and secular, art and popular. Although African American people have been the primary innovators among these idioms, due to mass mediation, the contiguous nature of culture sharing among American ethnic groups, an ever developing and sophisticated global market system, technological advances, and music's ability to absorb the different meanings ascribed to it, people of all backgrounds have shaped, contributed to, and excelled in this fluid yet distinct body of music making. In addition, many historians of African American music have included the activities of blacks that participated as performers and composers in the Eurological concert tradition under this rubric.

### 1. Slavery, culture, and the black Atlantic.

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Between the 15th century and mid-19th century close to 12 million Africans were captured and transported to the New World, with the greatest number imported to Brazil and other locations in the Caribbean sugar industry. Reaching its apex between 1700 and 1820 when 6.5 million Africans were taken, the Atlantic slave trade represented one of the largest forced migrations in world history. Only 6% of the total number exported came directly to what is known now as the United States. These captured Africans were distributed along the eastern seaboard from New England to the mid-Atlantic colonies to the Southeast, but the greatest concentration landed in the South.

The nature of slavery in the United States was a singular enterprise, categorically different from various iterations of the "peculiar institution" throughout South America and the Caribbean. These distinct qualities shaped the development of African American cultural forms in dance, literature, visual culture and especially music. Despite the ingenious and hideous development of laws and social practices designed to keep black slaves subservient they nonetheless asserted their aspirations, senses of beauty and the sublime, their frustrations, pain, and humanity through sound organization.

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North America began its philosophically “Western” existence as commercial and religious extensions of European powers. As such early black music making in this context must be understood in its relationship to European-derived musical practices. Although early religious music in the colonies represented a direct transplant from the Old World it was soon indigenized by the Pilgrims, whose music became rooted and influential. Musically simplistic and textually derivative, early American religious music would through a series of sonic and ideological developments become wholly “American,” though in a persistent relationship—adaptations, rejections, and importations—with European models.

African American musical traditions mirrored these processes with respect to their relationship to the growing musical practices of the larger culture. These traditions constituted a confluence of broad African-derived approaches to sound organization and European-derived song structures and musical systems in a constant state of dynamic and historically specific interactions. What emerged is a composite: an indigenized conceptual framework of music making that has functioned through the years as a key symbol of an African American cultural identity.

The paradox of living as slaves and later as second-class citizens in a society founded on the principles of democracy and freedom produced a social structure in which black cultural production was mapped on a continuum between participation in what the scholar George Lewis has conceptualized as Eurological traditions and those reflecting Afrological aesthetic and structural priorities. Blacks who received training in Colonial-era singing schools are part of a long tradition of participating in Eurological practices that continues into the 21st century. Black music scholarship has generally included such musical activities by African Americans under the rubric “African American music.” From New Orleans to the mid-Atlantic to New York the historical record indicates a robust and varied musical culture among a new people created by forced mass migration, social domination, and heroic cultural resilience.

In letters from missionaries, slave advertisements, runaway slave notices, personal travel journals, and memoirs, white observers noted both the musical talents of and the distinct body of music making taking place among the slaves. Their writings, permeated in some instances with the desire to sensationalize what was considered “barbaric” in these practices, described the sounds they heard in rich and colorful detail. An 1867 account of a Pinkster Festival held in the 1770s describes an annual days-long celebration among slaves in Albany, New York. A conglomeration of dance, drum, and song, the musical components of the event provides a telling example of the cultural priorities of a people enjoying themselves during a rare time of repose from their lives as the “nonhuman” tools of their masters:

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The dance had its peculiarities, as well as everything else connected with this august celebration. It consisted chiefly of couples joining in the performance at varying times, and continuing it with their utmost energy until extreme fatigue or weariness compelled them to retire and give space to a less exhausted set; and in this successive manner was the excitement kept up with unabated vigor, until the shades of night began to fall slowly over the land, and at length deepen into the silent gloom of midnight.

The music made use of on this occasion, was likewise singular in the extreme. The principal instrument selected to furnish this important portion of the ceremony was a symmetrically formed wooded article usually denominated an *eel-pot*, with a cleanly dressed sheep skin drawn tightly over its wide and open extremity. ... Astride this rude utensil sat Jackey Quackenboss, then in his prime of life and well known energy, beating lustily with his naked hands upon its loudly sounding head, successively repeating the ever wild, though euphonic cry of *Hi-a-bomba, bomba, bomba*, in full harmony with the thumping sounds. These vocal sounds were readily taken up and as oft repeated by the female portion of the spectators not otherwise engaged in the exercises of the scene, accompanied by the beating of time with their ungloved hands, in strict accordance with the eel-pot melody. (James Eights, 1867)

Researchers have historically stressed the “functionality” of black music in comparison to that of the larger society and as a viable link to its “African past.” Nonetheless, Anglo-Saxon Protestant religious expression was functional as well in Colonial America and as such became an important structural space for the development of African American music. As early New Englanders debated the value of oral and written modes of pedagogy and dissemination in their churches and singing schools well into the 19th century, African Americans codified their own musical sensibilities within the framework of their gradual acculturation into American Christianity. These qualities included performance practices with a predilection for antiphonal response, timbral heterogeneity, rhythmic variety, improvisation, corporeal activity, and open-ended structures encouraging endless repetition as well as oral dissemination. In 1819, John F. Watson, a black Northern minister, criticized integrated camp meetings in which black musical practices were absorbed into the white church world, and his comments pointed toward a long-term pattern of cultural interdependence:

In the blacks’ quarter, the coloured people get together and sing for hours together, short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition choruses. These are all sung in merry chorus-manner of the southern harvest field or husking frolic method, of the slave blacks. (Watson, 1819)

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These practices made sonically porous the boundaries separating secular and sacred realms as slave festivals, holidays, and even revolts were accompanied by similar musical components, although the degree of “Africanisms”—those musical qualities with analogous connections to the historical (and in some cases, recent) homeland of the slaves—varied according to regional differences determined by the density of the black population in relation to that of the white ruling classes. Music became an iconic symbol of black difference and a recognized source of communal identity and, thus, inspired the passing of laws in selected states to control the social environment for fear of white safety.

Between 1650 and 1750, the idea that African peoples formed a unified racial unit flourished in Europe as plantation slavery and its cultures shaped race ideology, trade economies, and social practices on both sides of the Atlantic. This construction of African identity was further entrenched in North America as black people founded churches, schools, and fraternal institutions during the decades surrounding 1800, many including the term “African” in their designations. The 1816 founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia formally established a black religious tradition in the United States that would continue to develop within the institutional and structural systems of the larger society. The publication of an ex-slave, Reverend Richard Allen’s hymnal *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns* in 1801, affirms that the desire to engage in musical practices of their own making was part of the reason for the establishment of separate denominations. Following the tradition of printed metrical psalters of the New England compilers, Allen’s hymnal contains songs by Isaac Watts and others whose forms encourage antiphonal response among participants.

## **2. Black cultural diversity in the North and the South.**

Among free blacks in the North, black brass bands that played popular songs of the day could be found in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston as well as in the Midwest and in New Orleans. Some of the music performed by these groups was their own and, thus, a school of composition written for popular consumption emerged employing the styles, tastes, and conventions of their white counterparts. Nonprofessional black itinerant musicians and vendors also roamed public urban spaces peddling their wares with street cries and song fragments analogous to those heard in the fields of Southern plantations. The African Grove Theater in New York City began as a private tea garden in 1816 and opened its doors to the public in 1821. In spite of constant hostility from the neighboring whites, the theater nonetheless remained open until around 1829, mounting productions that typically included overtures, ballad operas, ballets, and intermittent dances and “fashionable” songs or marches.

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Francis Johnson, another pioneer Philadelphian, was central in establishing a black instrumental band tradition as a composer, virtuoso musician on the violin and keyed bugle, a bandleader, music instructor, entrepreneur, community organizer, a master music promoter, and the first African American to have his musical works published. He was among the first American musicians to take a band to Europe. Johnson received music instruction from a white teacher who thoroughly grounded him in music theory, composition, and performance. He formed his ensemble between the years 1819 and 1821, playing for many occasions among Philadelphia's white elites. He traveled with equally talented black musicians whose performance practices surely set them apart because of their ability to "distort" the notes on written page into a dynamic style that was drawn from musical traits from black culture. The overwhelming popularity of Johnson's contribution to the various traditions of American band music in his time foreshadowed that of John Philip Sousa, another towering giant in this realm.

During the first 60 years of the 19th century, the United States continued its expansion across the continent, and slavery continued even though an 1808 Congressional Act officially ended the lawful importation of slaves. The demand for slaves in the interior South increased with the dramatically growing plantation economy, solidifying the interdependence of both institutions. Communities of both free and enslaved blacks, the numbers of which rose from three quarters of a million in 1790 to well over 4 million by 1860, continued their resistance to their status in American society. The formation of the Free People of Color, the courageous slave revolts, the establishments of black newspapers, and the growth of independent black churches affirm the presence of a vital black cultural agency.

In the South, the internal slave trade destabilized traditional familial and communal ties but cultural practices such as music making became crucial sites of resistance and community building. With the overwhelming majority of blacks living in the plantation culture of the South in the 19th century, it was natural that their musical practices would become widespread and recognized for their extraordinary qualities. The music of slave religious expression and secular work songs reveal their preferred sonic ideals. In their public working and festival settings sanctioned by the masters, the slaves were encouraged to perform "cultural difference" according to practices from their African cultural heritage and as such expressed their own perspectives toward time, work, and their status as human beings. The new cultural formations that emerged had a tremendous impact on white Southern culture as well, a pattern that would continue in subsequent centuries.



"Contraband Children Dancing the Breakdown," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, January 31, 1863.

Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

Non-religious music making flourished among slave populations and free blacks in all regions. Documentary evidence shows that the talented fiddlers, and players of the banjo, an instrument of African origin, provided dance music for both black and white populations. Reports of musicians "pattin' juba," a rhythmic technique involving striking the hands on various parts of the body while stamping the feet and singing, detail a propensity for rhythmic complexity. Dancing and drumming often went hand-in-hand in various festivals or weekend occasions for leisure. Work songs, children's game and ring songs, corn husking songs, and songs of protest offer convincing evidence of the rich variety of secular music making taking place in slave populations. Broadly speaking, the creative processes underlying these widespread and varied musical practices operated on a continuum between newly composed materials and that which transformed existing material into something uniquely African American.

During the antebellum period, local customs and laws, black population patterns, and the distinct political histories of various regions determined the shape and geographic diversity of African American musical expression. Where free blacks were in the minority, such as they were in the North, a musician such as Johnson could get training and compete in an integrated, though still unequal, environment. In some regions of the slave-holding South, where blacks were subjected to more harsh and extreme control measures, Christianity strongly shaped the development of a distinctive system of black musical expression. Some areas restricted black music making by suppressing drumming at various historical moments. In New Orleans, part of a larger region with strong French and Spanish cultural roots, a rich heritage of Creole of color, black, and white cultural mixing distinguished the city's

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musical profile. The Marigny Theater, for example, opened in 1838 for Creoles of color to enjoy light comedies in French together with other kinds of variety shows that included music. New Orleans' black musical life was among the most vibrant in the nation, boasting special seating for free blacks and slaves at opera houses, freelance instrumentalists, brass bands and orchestras, and the Negro Philharmonic Society, formed during the 1830s to present concerts by local and visiting musicians.

### **3. The new popular culture.**

As new musical expressions continued to emerge among black populations during the 19th century, a process through which musical practice embodied the social energies of black historical actors. In the larger world of popular entertainment, blackface minstrelsy emerged as a complex set of performance genres—songs, sketches, dances, novelty acts—whose conventions and functions changed over time and whose influence remained intact for many years. (*See* Minstrelsy .) At the peak of its popularity between 1850 and 1870, it featured white men in blackface executing caricatures of expressive practices observed among slaves, black street vendors, and roving musicians in cities. Minstrelsy's sensational stereotypes and popularity became a paradigm with which black performers would have to contend publicly well into the 20th century. Understood as a uniquely American form of entertainment at a time when the country's cultural elite still looked to European performers, repertoire, and practice as the measure of "good" music, 19th-century periodicals ran articles that disparaged minstrelsy's popularity among the masses. Important to black music history is the fact that contemporary audiences collapsed minstrelsy with musical styles developed by African Americans themselves. Minstrelsy set the tone for "black" performance as a "guilty pleasure," an act of transgression against established social mores for an expanding white middle class with anxiety about upper mobility and distinguishing themselves from those lower on the social ladder.

By the middle of the 19th century, Americans could pursue a number of occupations in the music industry such as performing, composing, teaching, concert management, and publishing. While black amateur musicians abounded, professional opportunities that appeared after Emancipation offered rapid advancement for these musicians whose talents became a growing component of the nation's musical profile. As the century proceeded, musical practice began to settle into categories of valuation: art, mass or popular, and traditional or folk. Issues of repertoire, training, heritage, patterns of consumption, and venue were factors determining the pedigree of a musical practice. As blacks made their socio-political transition from slavery to freedom, their musical culture continually transformed and was transformed by the structures that governed the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of artistic production in America.

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For the African American performer after the Civil War participation in theater could involve three related forms: musical theater, minstrel shows, and vaudeville. The black musical theater tradition began when the Hyers Sisters, two women who had already built careers on the concert stage, created together with the white writer Joseph Bradford, the musical comedy *Out of Bondage* in 1876. The first of many such productions, their plots included plantation scenes and topics of racial progress within a format that featured plantation songs, ballads, operatic numbers, and folk dances.

In the realms of performance and composition, the minstrel show became a crucial route to financial security for many black musicians, even those trained in classical music. What was often billed as Ethiopian minstrelsy created the most ample opportunities for African Americans to break into show business with over 100 black minstrel troupes formed between 1865 and 1890. Their entertainment comprised a traveling one hour and 45 minute variety show consisting of three general categories of songs: ballads, comic songs, and specialty numbers. Representative shows featured singers and a small ensemble of instrumentalists and performed the works of such black songwriters as James Bland, Gussie Davis, and Samuel Lucas, as well as Stephen Foster, a white writer. The repertory of the typical black minstrel show also included religious songs and operatic arias.

It was perhaps because of this range of stylistic possibilities on the minstrel stage that black female concert singers such as sissieretta Jones (popularly known as Black Patti) and others of her ilk could transition from the concert stage to the minstrelsy trope circuit when “black prima donnas” fell out of vogue around the turn of the century. Nonetheless, the years after the Civil War saw the rise and popularity of many black women on the concert stage singing European art music. Touring widely in the United States and Europe, Black Patti, soprano Marie Selika Williams, and the Hyers Sisters, among others, maintained active careers with good management and engagements in prestigious concert halls.

Black male instrumentalists achieved significant popularity during this time. Born a slave, the unsighted pianist and composer Thomas Bethune (1849–1909), known as “Blind Tom,” received musical training from his masters, learning thousands of works of the classical repertory by ear. Routinely subjected to tests of his powers of extraordinary musical memory, Bethune toured Europe, the United States, and South America for 30 years under the aegis of his owners, who continued to manage his career even after slavery ended. Other black male pianists, organists, and violinists trained as concert artists, breaking new ground first by obtaining formal training in conservatories and next by building reputations in the art world.



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## 4. Spirituals, black culture, and the art idea.

A musical development that countered the pervasiveness of black cultural stereotypes in minstrelsy occurred when the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a group of 11 men and women under the directorship of George L. White, began performing art songs designed for the concert stage. (See Jubilee singers .) Founded in 1866, six months after the end of the Civil War, Fisk University was established to educate newly freed slaves. White, being charged by the school's administration to provide music instruction to promising students, provided lessons that included musicianship, classical repertory, and music from the own culture: spirituals. (See Spiritual.) With the melodies of the "folk" spirituals as an emotional focal point, these songs were arranged into strict part-singing and performed vocally in bel canto style. A new American genre was born. When White took the group on a tour in 1871 to raise funds for the struggling institution they performed a program similar to that of white singers but that also included spirituals.

Other black colleges would follow suit, using singing groups to raise funds, a tradition that has continued to the present. The Fisk Jubilee Singers and subsequent groups created a new framework for understanding black musical performance. The creation and popularity of the concert spiritual fit into the larger functions of commercialism, religion, and structural integration through education that has long defined African American culture. It also represented another example of the indigenization of culture seen in the initial "invention" of the spiritual in which Eurological poetic and song forms were transformed into a new genre through Afrological performance practice. In this latest turn, however, the Eurological ideas about the fully composed and bounded musical "work," bel canto singing techniques, and concert decorum and praxis was applied to an African American body of song, producing a new form of indigenization that would become an important symbol of history, progress, and the idea of an expansive African American identity.

As awareness of black music continued its surge into the public sphere, it inspired numerous responses across the American culture industry. The anthology *Slave Songs of the United States*, published in 1867, compiled 136 melodies with lyrics collected and edited by Northern abolitionists William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim. Transcribed from songs collected from various geographical locations in the South, the book was the first of its kind, designed to share with readers the mostly religious songs heard by the book's authors. According to the editors, standard notation could not capture all of qualities of performance of these sacred and plantation songs. Represented in print as monophonic melodies, they in fact were performed as improvised heterophony. The compilers desired to capture slave culture's "difference" in written form, an act that for them would at once save a sonic world for posterity and represent the nobility of an enslaved people in the contemporaneous moment.

James Monroe Trotter's *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (New York, 1878) represented another approach to disciplining black musical activity in the United States through literary means. Written

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by a black amateur musician and impresario, Trotter's book, although focusing exclusively on 19th-century African American musicians, is the first general survey of American music of any kind, making it a landmark in American music historiography. The book contains an appendix with the scores of compositions by black writers, the act of which intended to instill race pride, a sense of cultural nationalism, and "relations of mutual respect and good feeling" between the races.

In the concert world, the pursuit of establishing a language of American musical nationalism came to an apex among composers, patrons, and institutions in the 1890s. This goal was explored along many lines— aesthetic, historical, political, and stylistic. When Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák visited America as director of the National Conservatory between 1892 and 1895, he created a stir when he pronounced that composers could use African American and Native American melodies to build an indigenous art music culture because of their beauty.

Henry T. Burleigh (1866–1949), one of Dvořák's black students, published *Jubilee Songs of the United States* (1916), arranged for piano and voice, a landmark collection that created the genre of solo black art song. A concert artist, arranger, music editor, and composer, Burleigh wrote more than 300 works, many of which were popular in their time among singers of all backgrounds. While the largescale impact of Dvořák's proclamations may be debated, the fact that Burleigh and many other composers—both black and white—responded creatively to his admonition and wrote music that began an important tradition, confirms its importance.

The last years of the 19th century saw the rise of "public amusements," an explosion of commercialized leisure that indexed America's turn from Victorian sensibilities. Advances in technology, the emergence of cultures of consumerism, and unprecedented black mobility together with increasing educational opportunities created a social milieu in which black musicians became a strong presence in the culture industry. As the specter of minstrelsy still prevailed, many black musicians would have to engage its practices in order to gain opportunities in the newly emerging mass-market enterprise.

## **5. Black music and the modern pop culture industry.**

The new technology of recording, pioneered by Thomas Edison in 1877, began as an experiment to reproduce the spoken word and soon became a way to disseminate music. When George W. Johnson, a former slave, recorded "The Whistling Coon" in 1890 for the New Jersey Phonograph company, it made him the first African American recording artist. As a child he was assigned to be the "bodyservant" to his master's young son to whom he was close in age. Johnson sat in on his young master's flute lessons, imitated the notes, and could eventually whistle any tune he heard. He was "discovered" as an adult by the New Jersey Phonograph Company which was looking for

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something “cheap and loud.” Johnson recorded a Coon song written by the white vaudevillian Sam Devere and filled with lyrics poking fun at physical stereotypes of African Americans.

Close to a decade later black musicians countered these coon song stereotypes when Bert Williams and George Walker recorded songs from the new tradition of the black musical theater for the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1901. The jubilee and quartet singing tradition, made popular by the touring Fisk singers a generation prior, also attracted the attention of the company the following year as they recorded Dinwiddie Colored Quartet and the Fisk Jubilee Quartet. Nonetheless, distancing themselves from the coon aesthetic of minstrelsy and at the same time riding the crest of its popularity for financial gain proved to be an arduous balancing act for the black musician.

As African Americans became an increasing presence in the popular sphere, traveling troupes began to produce bona fide stars that gained international fame. Bob Cole (1868–1911) and Billy Johnson (c1858–1916) both left Black Patti’s Troubadours to produce *A Trip to Coontown*, which debuted in 1898 and toured successfully for two years. That same year, will marion Cook (1869–1944), violinist, composer, choral and orchestral director, and organizer debuted his *Clorindy; or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (co-written by poet Paul Laurence Dunbar) on Broadway, a landmark in the history of black musical theater.



Robert Nathaniel Dett’s opera *The Ordering of Moses*, performed by the National Negro Opera Company, Washington, D.C., 1950.

National Negro Opera Company Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

Cook had already established himself as a presence as early as 1890 while directing a touring chamber orchestra and composing for *Scenes from the Opera of Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1893. Like Burleigh,

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he was a student of Dvořák and wrote numerous works for voice and chorus, some of which was published in the 1912 anthology *A Collection of Negro Songs*. Cook belonged to a group of institutionally trained nationalistic composers devoted to using materials from black vernacular culture in a wide range of music from the concert stage to theater. Others included James Rosamond Johnson, R. Nathaniel Dett, Charles Cameron White.

## **6. Black musical worlds in art and pop.**

Musical activities among concert musicians during this period moved in two directions: attempts to break the color line in the established art world and numerous acts of institution building among African Americans for their own constituents. Black singers and instrumentalists continued to make inroads through their artistic endeavors by touring and concertizing in prestigious venues throughout America, the West Indies, and Europe. Emma Azalia Hackley (1867–1922), R. Nathaniel Dett, Carl Diton (1886–1962), Hazel Harrison (1883–1969), and Helen Hagan (1891–1964) were among the pioneers who toured extensively and built careers of which both the black and white press took notice. Although their careers were progressive in many ways, these artists met many obstacles because of the racial climate. As such, together with teaching at historically black colleges, they began to build their own institutions—concert series, music schools and studios, opera companies, chorale societies, symphonies—that perpetuated the performance and study of art music in African American communities.

The combination of commercial markets, individual innovations, and communal sensibilities continued to produce a rich variety of musical forms beyond the concert stage from the 1890s onward. Circulating through written and oral means of dissemination and gathering stylistic coherence gradually over time, ragtime, blues, and early gospel music can all be considered products of eclectic heritages and performance practices. Each would prove to be foundational to many forms of 20th century music making.

## **7. Expanding the black vernacular: ragtime, blues, jazz, and gospel.**

In the 1890s, the term Ragtime embraced a wide range of music, including syncopated coons songs from minstrelsy, arrangements of these songs for large ensembles, any syncopated music for dancing, and solo piano music. As early as 1876 one finds reference to a stylistic precursor named “jig time” in the musical theater production *Out of Bondage*. Describing an energetic music played on the piano, it was also known as “jig piano,” which simulated the rhythms and melodic phrasings of banjo and fiddle dance music. It was the coon song, however, that was more ubiquitous in American society due to minstrelsy’s popularity and its association with the

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cakewalk dance. The publication of William Krell's *Mississippi Rag* (actually a cakewalk) and African American composer Thomas Turpin's *Harlem Rag*, both in 1897, promoted a definition of ragtime as a solo piano composition that codified in score form the elements of the improvised versions. However, the idea of "ragging" an improvisation of a popular song still remained a living tradition along side the new "classic ragtime." Scott Joplin became particularly well known as a composer of piano ragtime, writing syncopated pieces with multiple strains or themes similar to the march. Sheet music and piano rolls allowed ragtime composers to reach a broad swath of the American public.

The melodic sources of the Blues grew from the same moans, field hollers, and timbral qualities upon which the spirituals were built. Popular ballads from the Eurological tradition provided the song form models, and they were performed in a variety of non-religious venues and public spaces such as cafes, saloons, streets, theaters, and railroad stations, among other places where money could be earned for performances. The lyrics of the blues, usually performed in first person narrative form, address a large variety of specific everyday experiences often with irony and humor. Guitars, pianos, and small ensembles with a variety of instruments provided the accompaniment for singers in a tightly interactive manner. The genre's codified poetic structure (A-A-B) and the repeating 12-bar harmonic form that became convention has become one of the most important practices of 20th-century American music. Like "ragtime," the term "the blues" once denoted a variety of expressions although it was first developed in the interior South. Women performers like Mamie Smith, who became the first black singer to record the blues with "Crazy Blues" (1920), pioneered the new Race record phenomenon, which targeted African American consumers. It should be noted as well that sheet music by individuals like W.C. Handy (1873-1958) and touring vaudeville stage shows also played a large role in circulating the blues widely.

While the African American church remained the principal venue for early Gospel music in years leading up to the 1930s, it shared with ragtime and blues similar relationships to vernacular cultural sensibilities and to the culture industry. Many rural and urban churches maintained the energetic, kinetic, and vocally dramatic conventions established in the spirituals tradition. A shift occurred when composers such as Minister Charles A. Tindley, began to write and publish religious songs made specifically for his own services, innovating the gospel hymn with accompaniment, verse/chorus structure, and improvisation. Recordings began to circulate other forms of early 20th-century religious music as well, including the energizing blues-shouting vocals and "jig time" piano of Holiness singer Arizona Dranes and rural church music for solo vocalist and guitar accompaniment. All three streams would inform the genre of gospel music which emerged in Chicago in the 1930s.

American involvement in World War I, a boom in Northern industry, and the restriction of foreign immigration from Europe created unprecedented opportunities for African Americans living in the South. During the so-called "Great Migration" up to 1 million southern blacks left for the urban north. This mass movement

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created a cultural milieu in which new musical forms appeared and older styles continued to transform as a result of this move from rural to urban and agrarian to industrial lifestyles. In all aspects of the culture industry—recording, publishing, performance, teaching, and composition—an African American presence made an indelible mark.

One of the most dramatic developments occurred in the continued ascendancy of instrumental improvised music, as the ragtime era led into the jazz age. Jazz, also a genre developed through black musical innovation, grew from many sources, including jig or ragtime piano, the blues, popular song, wind bands, and social dance music. New Orleans, the site of most early jazz activity, supported a strong tradition of wind bands and dance orchestras, many of which emphasized a wide range of styles fully scored arrangements that included “hot” improvisational techniques. Charles “Buddy” Bolden (1877–1931), a popular bandleader, was legendary in his highly idiosyncratic approach on the cornet. From these beginnings, jazz would continue to develop into a dynamic amalgam of tributaries from a continually evolving range of sources, including blues, various popular song forms, marching band instruments together with electric and non-Western ones, other contemporaneous genres from the popular sphere, and art world conceptualizations that when taken together would come to symbolize both African American ingenuity and a broader American sensibility that privileged the notion of cultural crosscurrents.

By the 1920s New York had become the center of the music industry, drawing black musicians to its numerous cabarets, dance halls, nightclubs, and recording opportunities; its lively community of musicians forged new ideas that would attract worldwide attention. Musicians such as bandleaders James Reese Europe (1881–1919), composer and arranger Will Vodery (1885–1951), and William C. Handy, together with many others, had laid the foundation in the preceding decade for the sharp, subsequent demand for black entertainment. Many of the most influential musicians moved between activities in the black theater and the creation of syncopated music for large orchestras that became America’s dance soundtrack. Improvising ragtime pianists such as Eubie Blake, Jelly Roll Morton, Willie “the Lion” Smith, Luckey Roberts, and James P. Johnson wrote and performed piano dance music that became foundational to what would be known as the “Jazz Age.” Although they have been up until recently largely written out of this history, female musicians such as Hallie Anderson (1885–1927) and Marie Lucas (1880s–1947) were abundantly present on the scene.

Something labeled “jazz” made its debut on recordings in 1917 when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a group of white musicians from New Orleans, released “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixie Jass Band One-Step.” Teeming with novelty sounds—including simulated animal noises—these recordings managed to excite enough from the public to usher in an era of recording that encompassed a wide range of idioms grouped under the rubric jazz. The music of black musicians such as King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, and Louis Armstrong—all from New Orleans—introduced a culturally commingled sound into the musical landscape, one grounded in

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blues, robust polyphony, and based on various dance forms. Indeed, the words jazz and “modern” became linked and stretched at this time to describe many idioms. Paul Whiteman, a popular white bandleader who once claimed that jazz “sprang into existence ... from nowhere in particular,” infused his music with jazz feeling. A notable contribution was George Gershwin’s stylishly grand *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), a work commissioned by Whiteman that channeled referents from an array of musical tributaries, including jazz.

Between World War I and II, jazz grew from a localized phenomenon and into an internationally known genre. Musicians on both sides of America’s racial divide—Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman, Mary Lou Williams, and many others—became well known jazz figures, and in some cases, true icons. Ellington’s career, in particular, was symbolic of jazz’s ascendance on many levels. His idiosyncratic approach to composition, arranging, and orchestration demonstrated the artistic potential of popular music. The impact of jazz could be measured not only in record sales—it would become by the late 1930s America’s popular music choice—but also by its emergent (and international) written criticism, which over time bloomed from discographical surveys for collectors to record reviews, essays, and book-length studies.

With the rise of modernism in the United States, black music, particularly in the hands of black musicians, became a point of debate and speculation. Its value in the public sphere took on a variety of non-mutually exclusive configurations: as an expression of cultural nationalism; as an avenue for commercial gain; as propaganda in the fight for equal rights; and in a variety of other ideas imposed by record companies, critics, “slumming” white audiences, and black intellectuals. Similarly to other expressive arts—film, photography, and literature—during the 1920s and 1930s, black music informed and was influenced by large, sometimes incongruent, cultural movements such as primitivism, the Harlem Renaissance, and Negritude. This, together with the overwhelming popularity of popular dances like the cakewalk, the charleston, the jitterbug, and the lindy hop—all of which became international sensations—worked to saturate the sensibilities of black popular music into all sectors of global society—in mind, body, and spirit.

## **8. Black classical music in the art world.**

In the concert world, other ideas about musical modernism beyond the jazz revolution were taking shape. The establishment of first-rate schools of music in America, the growth of urban, in-residence symphony orchestras and opera companies, and a new avant-garde musical language that turned away from diatonicism, all created a larger chasm between art and popular realms. Some black performers with designs on concert careers responded by specializing in art music and by dabbling less in the popular arena as in years past. Some continued to make a living in both realms. From 1921, when Eubie Blake’s and Noble Sissle’s production *Shuffle*

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*Along* premiered, black musical theater produced an aesthetic middle ground as its conventions embodied a mixture of popular song, blues, ballads, choral number, expert arrangements, and symphonic orchestrations. Duke Ellington's *Symphony in Black: a Rhapsody of Negro Life* (1935) extended this musical language of entertainment that was shared by composers across racial lines.

The National Association of Negro Musicians, chartered in 1919, has up to the present, provided a haven of institutional support for black performers, teachers, and composers whose work remained primarily situated in the art world. Singers Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Dorothy Maynor built careers that took them to concert stages around the world in recitals, opera companies, and before symphony orchestras. They developed a large following among black audiences and therefore developed repertory that featured art songs based on black thematic materials. The Negro String Quartet, the National Negro Opera Company, the Negro Symphony Orchestra, and professional choruses formed by Hall Johnson and Eva Jessye continued the legacy of institution building among musicians who continued to face varying degrees of discrimination in the concert world. In 1935 Jessye was appointed the choral director for Gershwin's iconic opera *Porgy and Bess*, a work that would become a major platform for black opera singers for decades to come. Dubbed "An American Folk Opera," the opera's embodiment of the spirit of black vernacular music, evocations based on Gershwin's research in South Carolinian black communities, could be interpreted in the legacy of the black cultural nationalism espoused by earlier composers.

The 1930s saw the emergence of full-fledged symphonic works based on thematic material derived from black culture. William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* premiered in 1931 and made history as the first work of its kind by a black composer to be played by a major symphony orchestra, the Rochester PO. Still's prolific output spanned popular music, orchestral work, film and television work, opera, and chamber works, all contributing to his designation as "Dean of Afro-American composers." Florence Bea(trice) Price (1888–1953), one of the few female composers at this time to find acclaim, wrote pedagogical pieces, radio commercials, and serious concert works, including the *Piano Concerto in One Movement* and *Symphony in E minor* (1932). Many of the pieces written by black composers during this time expressed what might be called an "Afro-Romanticism"—works that used black thematic materials couched in the language of 19th-century Romanticism. William Levi Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*, which premiered in 1934 with The Philadelphia Orchestra, was such a work. Shirley Graham, the versatile and dynamic musician who later married W.E.B. DuBois, composed and wrote the libretto for *Tom-Tom* (1932), an opera in three acts that made history as the first of its kind by an African American woman.



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## 9. Music in the black church.

Within the community theater of the black church, one of the most vibrant and autonomous institutions in African American communities, publications such as *Gospel Pearls*, first appearing in 1921, served to canonize the “on the ground” musical tastes of congregations. The collection is drawn from several origins: standard Protestant hymns, hymns from the lining-out tradition, spirituals, songs by Charles Tindley and other black writers. From the 1930s on, songwriters Lucie Campbell (1885–1963), W. Herbert Brewster, Sr. (1897–1987), singer and music publisher Sallie Martin (1896–1988), and pianist, singer, and publisher Roberta Martin (1907–69) all contributed to creating gospel music, a newly formed genre that combined the melodic inflection of the blues, the ragged rhythms of “jig” piano, the fervor and intensity of the ring shout, and the entrepreneurial instincts of popular music. At the center of this creative force was Tommy Dorsey (1899–1993), a preacher’s son, who moved to Chicago from Atlanta in 1916 while pursuing an active career in show business. Dorsey maintained performing and songwriting activities in both the church and entertainment worlds but by 1931 he had organized two firsts: a “gospel” choir and a publishing company the following year devoted to original gospel compositions. Dorsey also accompanied a singer who became arguably the first gospel performer to become a star outside the church, Mahalia Jackson (1911–72), a performer whose blues-based vocal singing style became the gold standard of the genre for decades.



Singing at demonstration at Bethel AME Church, Cambridge, Maryland, led by Stanley Branche (NAACP), Reginald Robinson (Student Non-Violent Coordinating), Gloria Richardson (Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee), and Phillip H. Savage (NAACP) , 1963.

AP Photo/William A. Smith

Since the codification of ragtime piano, pianists developed highly idiosyncratic approaches to solo and ensemble-based improvisation that constituted key elements in the generic codes of various black popular musics. The stride piano of James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, the boogie-woogie style of Meade “Lux” Lewis, and the rollicking “keyboard style” of Roberta Martin’s gospel piano would come to define genres and also supply rhetorical gestures for subsequent styles. Likewise, the conventions of both male and female quartet singing styles moved across the porous boundaries of secular and sacred contexts. Not only did quartet singing continually expand its conventions, groups like the Soul Stirrers, Swan Silvertones, Dixie Hummingbirds, Original Gospel Harmonettes of Birmingham, Southern Harps Spiritual Singers, the well-known Five Blind Boys of Alabama, and the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi stood as paradigms for popular singing groups across genres and up to the 1990s.

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## 10. New amalgamations: bebop and rhythm-and-blues.

Although commercial markets thrived on strategies of categorization and containment—"race records" for blacks, country or "hillbilly" music for southern whites, and Hit Parade for middle class whites—musicians and audiences, in truth, borrowed and listened across these social and sonic categories, creating new styles and extending audience bases as a matter of course. The steady migration of southerners to the North exploded once again during the years surrounding World War II and together with a surge toward the abandonment of Jim Crow practices and laws new social patterns emerged, and with them, new musical forms. The infectious swing music of the 1930s, perhaps best personified in the bands of Count Basie, would influence and be supplanted by two new musical styles—bebop and rhythm-and-blues—each articulating various, though not competing, views about leisure, entrepreneurship, art practice, modernism, and identity.

Bebop, also known as modern jazz, emerged in the early to mid-1940s as an instrumental approach to the swing dance aesthetic, an innovation that abstracted some of swing's core conventions. (See Bop .) Drummers disrupted the steady dance beat by dropping offbeat, dramatic accents called "bombs." In order to sidestep paying copyright fees, musicians wrote compositions by writing new, more challenging melodies on the harmonic structures of existing popular songs. The harmonic structures themselves featured a sophisticated approach that exploited the upper partials—9ths, 11ths, and 13ths—and a strong emphasis on the tritone relationships and flatted fifths. The virtuosic improvisations of instrumentalists Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Max Roach set jazz on a new artistic and demanding course. Vocalists Sarah Vaughan and Betty Carter influenced legions of singers with their command of bebop techniques. Pianist Thelonious Monk's idiosyncratic compositional approach and acerbic solo approach emerged as the quintessential voice of new era in jazz.

If bebop abstracted swing and popular song then early Rhythm-and-blues—an umbrella label for a constellation of black vernacular styles that appeared somewhat contemporaneously—took swing aesthetics and intensified its dance feeling with a heavier backbeat, a proclivity for 12-bar blues form, repetitious and riff-based melodies, and lyrics whose subject matter comprised all of the earthiness and humor of traditional blues, though, with an urbane twist. Perhaps best exemplified by Ruth Brown and Louis Jordan, the style was sonically related to rock and roll, which emerged in the 1950s as a way to market the new dance music to white teenagers during the beginning years of the Civil Rights Movement and fears of desegregation. Although black performers such as Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Fats Domino certainly counted among early Rock stars—many believed it to be another strain of rhythm-and-blues—as the style became codified as a genre with its own race-specific social contract, it became understood as primarily "white." The mainstream of rhythm and blues styles featured elements from gospel, blues, and jazz, an imaginative repertoire of lyrics employing

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vivid imagery from black life together with qualities derived from specific locations such as the “urban blues” sound from Chicago and Los Angeles. Independent record labels were primarily responsible for recording and disseminating early rhythm and blues.

## **11. Black music in the academy.**

An important generation of black composers would benefit from opportunities that opened up in education for African Americans as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. As a result of this shifting tide, many would secure professorships at American universities in addition to securing major prizes and commissions. Their works, ranging from neo-classical styles to uses of more avant-garde materials, were written for chamber groups, opera, solo singer, and symphonies, among other settings. Howard Swanson, Ulysses Kay, George Walker, Hale Smith, and T.J. Anderson were among those who led the way, establishing reputations within the academy and the larger art music world. In the realm of performance, black musicians continued to build active careers, although relatively fewer inroads were gained in the nation’s symphony orchestras, still the most prestigious vehicles for concert instrumentalists. African American conductors found greater success abroad, securing positions in Europe after obtaining rigorous training in American institutions. By contrast, the opera and concert stage proved more generous to singers such as Robert McFerrin, Leontyne Price, George Shirley, Grace Bumbry, Shirley Verrett, and Jessye Norman, all of whom made history by singing roles traditionally assigned to white singers. The predominance of black male composers in this period was striking. Julie Perry, despite formidable forerunners such as Florence Price and Shirley Graham, was singular in her prominence as a black female composer of her generation.

## **12. Post-World War II: black music into the mainstream.**

Guthrie P. Ramsey

From the mid-20th century on, stimulated in part by another south-to-north mass migration during and after World War II, black music with roots in the popular sphere—jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues and all their multifarious sonic iterations—defined, for many, the aesthetic core of what was singular about American music culture. Despite their divergent social functions in the public sphere, they shared qualitative and conceptual characteristics. Independent record labels were key in disseminating the music as their owners sought to maximize profits as major labels initially ignored these styles. Ultimately, major labels would seek out, record, and distribute the music, and by doing so, facilitate their dominant national and international impact. Black popular music came to be seen as an important expressive force for the richness of African American culture, as a metaphor for the processes of creativity in

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such fields as literature, visual arts, and dance, and as a key symbol for the structural integration of black people into the mainstream of American society.

These genres moved along a trajectory that combined a sturdy grounding in historical traditions as well as a perpetual avant-gardism, the latter describing how musicians constantly pushed stylistic conventions into new configurations. Gospel music, while continuing its relationship to the aesthetics of the spiritual and the blues and to the combination of religion and entrepreneurialism that characterized the colonial and antebellum eras, developed into an important incubator of talent for other genres. Gospel singing techniques developed in the black church proved especially impacting as by the end of the 20th century they defined how many “pop” singers would approach a song. As the decades progressed, innovators such as Rosetta Tharpe, James Cleveland, Edwin and Walter Hawkins, and Albertina “Twinkie” Clark, among others, built on the earlier contributions of pioneers Lucie Campbell, Willie Mae Ford Smith, and Roberta Martin to establish gospel music as a bastion of cutting-edge creativity, marketing savvy, and stylistic influence. It is important to note the centrality of female musicians in gospel music, which in many ways remains singular in the realm of modern African American music production. Beginning in the 1990s, other cities beyond the recognized centers of Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia became important producers of gospel music, including Houston, Charlotte, and Atlanta.



Aretha Franklin, 1960s.

D. Hunstein/Lebrecht Music and Arts

Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, James Brown, and Aretha Franklin were all important throughout the 1950s and 1960s in infusing the techniques of gospel into the mainstream. Their contributions to the emergent styles dubbed Soul music and Funk defined an era that might be considered the “Afro-Americanization” of global pop culture as their conventions shaped music making internationally in styles ranging from West African High Life to Trinidadian “Gospelypso.”

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Like gospel and rhythm and blues, jazz also continually regenerated itself, sometimes by absorbing the qualities of other styles, including rock and funk. Developments such as free jazz and fusion—both representing the reframing of improvisation in rhythmic and harmonic structures and qualities of interaction that departed significantly from previous conventions in the genre—inspired intense debates about the stability of the art form. The various bands of drummer Art Blakey and trumpeter Miles Davis proved to be incubators for an impressive string of performers who became leading figures in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

Beginning in the 1960s academic research on African American music laid the groundwork for the explosion of university-sponsored work appearing throughout the 1990s and into the millennium. Writings by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Dena Epstein, Charles Keil, Portia Maultsby, Albert Murray, Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Olly Wilson, Josephine Wright, and especially Eileen Southern, all contributed to a literature that considered the historical, ethnological, and sonic dimensions of black music. Wilson's dual career as an experimental composer and author of key writings on black musical aesthetics was exemplar of the "observing participant" that would define many scholars of African American music of the last 25 years.

If early rhythm-and-blues began its existence in the margins of the music industry, by the 1960s and 1970s its family of idioms had moved to the center of the mainstream. Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, rhythm-and-blues, soul, and funk addressed on the levels of both style and message many of the ideals, aspirations, and urgent sense of socio-political efficacy that marked the moment. At the same time, mass mediation also played a key role in the ubiquity of black popular music in the public sphere as television shows from *American Bandstand*, *Soul Train*, and later the appearance of *BET* broadcast the music into American homes on a large scale. Black films in the early 1970s such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* contained scores by Issac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield respectively, thus providing another platform for the dissemination of the music. The output of record labels such as Curtom and Chess (Chicago), Stax (Memphis) Motown (Detroit), to name but a few, demonstrated the continued significance of regional difference in the styles despite the potential for homogenization in the mass mediation context.

Subsequent to the high years of protests and legal challenges for equal rights by African Americans, urban centers decayed into post-industrial spaces fraught with poor educational systems, drug epidemics, and widespread economic depression. Even as superstars such as Michael Jackson, Prince, Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, and others had careers that "crossed over" into the pop charts, a growing disaffection and creative surge within urban communities spawned new forms of music directed at their own communities. Hip hop, a popular genre appearing in the late-1970s and coming of age in the 1980s and 90s, represented a dramatic sonic development based on the inventive manipulation of previously recorded music and semi-to-non melodic oral declamation as its emotional focal point. Attention to and understanding of the genre has benefitted from a generation of scholars who grew up as fans and wrote about

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it within a paradigm of literary and cultural studies, a framework that moved easily among journalistic, ethnographic, and scholarly modes of discourse.



Jay-Z and Beyoncé, 2006.

Reuters/Mario Anzuoni/Landov

The digital age of musical creativity and dissemination, of which hip hop is perhaps most emblematic, triggered debates about the relativism of musicianship, ownership and copyright, and cultural authenticity. Despite these tensions, musicians have continued to mix genres: hip-hop symphonies, jazz inflected hip hop, and gospel’s “holy hip hop” demonstrate the inter-musicality of black musical practices. At the same time, contemporary musicians—whether jazz neoclassicists, revivalist black string bands, or neosoul artists—continue to turn to musical practices of previous decades to both honor the past and to cultivate new audiences.

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