

# Preface

THE SUBJECT OF Negro folk music has been with us for a long while now, and, when I began to put this book together, I entertained the thought that perhaps there was really nothing new to say about it. There had been, and continues to be, a tremendous effort in the direction of collecting Negro folk songs and analyzing them, in relating them to their environment, and in searching for prototypes and comparable oral materials in non-Negro cultures. Musicologists and, more recently, ethnomusicologists have probed relentlessly into the musical structure of Negro songs. Collectors in the past few years, if they were seeking undiscovered songs, have had to be content, in the main, with finding variants of already-known themes. Even the seemingly spontaneous, improvised tunes often contained familiar elements of words or melody, or both. What, then, was left to be said about Negro folk music in the United States? Merely that it was one of the prime sources of jazz?

In looking at Negro folk music as a whole, however, rather than just at spirituals, work songs, cries, or pentatonic scales, it seemed to me that quite a bit remained to be said about the subject to put it in a larger framework. For there is more to it than haunting melodies, humor, and plaintive themes. Among many other things, there is a cultural continuity, often only dimly perceived, and a relationship with other existing traditions. Running through American Negro folk music and lore there is unmistakable evidence of a large and significant oral literature. If we look at any single spiritual as just a "song" or an "example" we are missing the larger picture altogether, for it is in fact only a single point of contact with a rich and integrated religious view of life. And that view is not naïve or quaint unless all other religious views are naïve or quaint. It may safely be said, I think, that Negro folk music today is the largest body of genuine folk music still alive in the United States, and this alone justifies an effort to see it in the round.

I want to acknowledge here the assistance of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, which made grants available for the collection and transcription of Negro folk songs, a number of which appear in this book; and of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation which supported a project to study the relationship between American Negro musical tradition and the traditions of the West Indies. Among the many individuals who helped me greatly in my collecting work in the South were Ruby Pickens Tartt of Livingston, Alabama; the late Thomas M. Campbell, who was field agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture at Tuskegee Institute; S. W. Boynton, who was county agent for the Department at Selma, Alabama; C. J. Hurston, who was principal of Dallas County Training School at Beloit, Alabama; Rev. E. D. Tuckey and Mrs. Rebecca Anderson of Shiloh P. B. Church at Bogue Chitto, Alabama; and my wife, Emma Courlander, who assisted me on my 1950 recording expedition.

I also want to thank the various singers who provided me with many of the songs appearing throughout this book, especially Rich Amerson, Earthy Anne Coleman, Dock Reed, Vera Hall Ward, and Annie Grace Horn Dodson—all of whom gave very generously of their time. To Folkways Records and Moses Asch, I express appreciation for making their recorded materials available to me for use in this project. And to Alan Lomax and Harry Oster, thanks for their permission to notate several examples from their collections.

Most of the music transcriptions appearing here were prepared by John Benson Brooks and Mieczyslaw Kolinski from my own tape recordings, and other examples have been taken from selected pressings and Library of Congress recordings. Transcriptions by Dr. Kolinski are signed M. K., and those by Mr. Brooks are signed J. B. B.

*May, 1963*

HAROLD COURLANDER

# Contents

I	The Setting	1
II	Negro Folk Music in the United States	13
III	Anthems and Spirituals as Oral Literature	35
IV	Cries, Calls, Whooping, and Hollering	80
V	Sounds of Work	89
VI	Blues	123
VII	Ring Games and Playparty Songs	146
VIII	Louisiana Creole Songs	162
IX	Performers' Corner: Ballads and Minstrelsy	175
X	Dances: Calindas, Buzzard Lopes, and Reels	189
XI	Instruments: Drums, Gutbuckets, and Horns	204
	The Music	221
	Notes	289
	Bibliography	299
	Discography	302
	Sources of Notated Songs	309
	Index	313

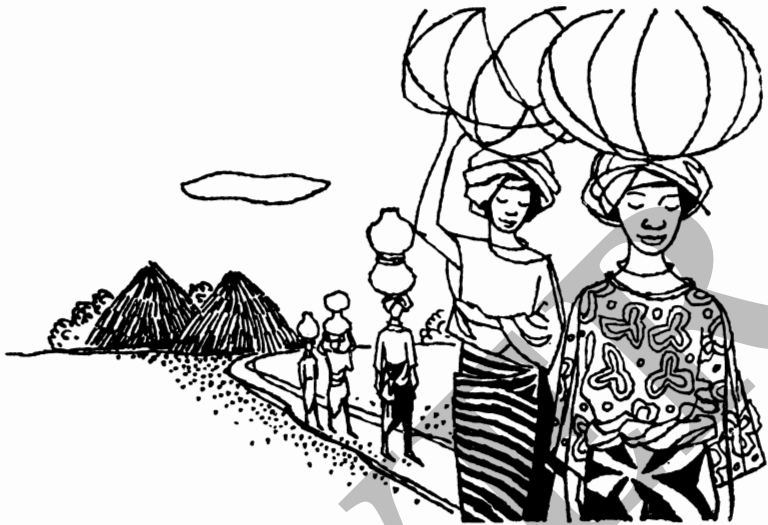
# The Music

- 1 Wake Up Jonah 223
- 2 Job, Job 225
- 3 Rock Chariot 227
- 4 Wonder Where Is My Brother Gone 228
- 5 This May Be Your Last Time 229
- 6 Move, Members, Move 230
- 7 Traveling Shoes 233
- 8 It's Getting Late in the Evening 234
- 9 King David 236
- 10 The Sun Will Never Go Down 238
- 11 When You Feel Like Moaning 238
- 12 Didn't You Hear 241
- 13 My Name's Been Written Down 244
- 14 What Month Was Jesus Born in 245
- 15 Noah, Noah 246
- 16 Everywhere I Go My Lord 247
- 17 Israelites Shouting 248
- 18 Let Me Ride 250
- 19 Dark Was the Night 251
- 20 When Jesus Met the Woman at the Well 252
- 21 Way Bye and Bye 253
- 22 Precious Lord, Take My Hand 255
- 23 I'm Crossing Jordan River 258
- 24 Russia, Let That Moon Alone 260
- 25 Long John 261
- 26 Rosie 262
- 27 She Done Got Ugly 263
- 28 Captain Holler Hurry 265
- 29 Black Woman 266
- 30 Motherless Children 269
- 31 I'm Going Uptown 271

viii THE MUSIC

- 32 Careless Love 272
- 33 Look Down 273
- 34 Meet Me in the Bottoms 274
- 35 Old Lady Sally Wants to Jump 275
- 36 Green Green Rocky Road 277
- 37 Little Sally Walker 278
- 38 Just Watch That Lady 278
- 39 Mary Mack 279
- 40 John Henry (Version I) 280
- 41 John Henry (Version II) 282
- 42 John Henry (Version III) 285
- 43 Old John Booker 287

DOVER



## I. The Setting

IT IS A LITTLE LATE in the day to apologize for reference to African traditions in discussing Negro folk music in the United States. Whether a large number of Negro spirituals developed out of white spirituals or not is of minor importance when one considers American Negro folk music in its entirety. The field is vast, and it is difficult to explore it or understand it properly without recognizing the African heritage. This is not to say that United States Negro music is African, but that many characteristics of African musical styles persist to this day. Some of those characteristics are melodic or rhythmic concepts. Some are to be found in the relationships between voices, and between voices and instruments. Others are in the instruments themselves, and in the use of those instruments. Still others are found in concepts of vocal and instrumental sound, in accidental conflicts with traditional Western scales, in motor actions associated with singing and dancing, and in attitudes toward music and music making.

That Negro folk music in the United States is preeminently "American" is all too evident. It could have come into being only in the United States, where elements of specific cultures

were brought together under conditions that were not exactly duplicated anywhere else. European and African elements mingled to produce one result in the Spanish islands of the Caribbean, another in the English islands, a third in the French islands. The result was still different in Brazil and Venezuela. In all of those places, the process of cross-fertilization of musical styles continues, but elements of European and West African tradition survive, sometimes in pure form. In the days when analysis of Negro music in the United States depended on comparison with notated European and West African tunes, it was perhaps easy to accept the notion that European traits—primarily English, Irish, and Scottish—had almost obliterated the last vestige of African musical tradition. We are aware now that the evidence for a considered conclusion was inadequate. Among other things, African samplings were relatively sparse, and our conventional system of notation was not adjustable enough to properly set down various characteristics of African music. And finally, it is doubtful that the American Negro examples then analyzed represented a true cross section of the repertoire, spirituals being the choice exhibits.

Since the days of earliest interest in this subject, our knowledge of both the American and the African scenes has increased tremendously. We now have a vast reservoir of recorded folk or traditional music from Africa, the Caribbean, and Negro communities of the American mainland. Much work has been done in the field by ethnomusicologists, and anthropological observations have added a new frame of reference. We know that there is a wide range of styles in West African music, with differences within specific cultures as well as between regions. Some traits of Negro music in the United States that were once believed to be exclusively European have been found to exist also in Africa. Furthermore, certain heretofore unnoticed traits of United States Negro music have come to be recognized, and can now be related to specific African ways of doing things.

When it is appreciated that other elements of West African life and thinking have survived in the United States until recent times—and, indeed, even to the present moment—the surprise at finding a modest number of African musical traits is less, and it is easier to understand why American Negro folk music is dif-

ferent from American white folk music. Some of the resistance shown toward the fact of African survival has had a social rather than an intellectual character. There have been members of the Negro community who felt that the existence of African survivals was a disparagement of their group, that mention of such matters only served to belittle the cultural accomplishments of the Negro American. Conversely, there were whites who held tenaciously to the view that when the African came to the New World he was without significant values and traditions, and that everything the Negro knew was gleaned from the white society around him. But various elements of African-derived custom, including attitudes and values, which are visible today in the United States, even in subtle or disguised forms, contradict both of these positions.

The Negro slaves of the New World came from many regions of West and West-Central Africa, and were recruited from some cultures whose accomplishments have only recently come to be fully appreciated. The Yoruba, the Fon people of Dahomey, the Ashanti, and various other tribes of West Africa had highly developed religious systems, complex systems of law and equity, pride of history and tradition, a high order of arts and crafts, music and dance, a vast oral literature ranging from proverbs to epics, moral and ethical codes in large part comparable to those of Asia and Europe, and complex systems of social organization. It is only in recent years that the true significance of West African achievements has come to be fully appreciated. African sculptural art emerged only in this century into the full light of day as a powerful tradition; it deeply affected Western painters and sculptors, and art collectors and dealers have set a high price on their African wood carvings, ivory carvings, and brass castings. More recently, the true nature of African musical accomplishment is being comprehended as a far cry from "monotonous chanting" and tom-tom playing described by early visitors to the Dark Continent.

It is difficult to imagine that huge numbers of African exiles, gathered together in a new setting, would forget everything they knew and become a vacuum into which the attributes of another culture could be poured at will. In the ordinary course of ad-



justment, the African and his descendants absorbed and learned from the dominant culture in which they found themselves. Those attributes of the master culture which were essential to their survival, or which were congenial to their past learning, were taken over most quickly, while they clung to those aspects of African life for which they found no satisfactory substitutes. The tenacity man has shown for clinging to old values is a constant source of wonder. Witness the presence of the Christmas tree, inherited, we are to understand, from pre-Christian rites, standing as a symbol in the midst of rituals dramatizing the birth of Christ. When we recall that African slaves were imported into the United States legally until early in the nineteenth century, and as contraband virtually until the Civil War, we realize that African motifs have been injected into this setting within the lifetime of some persons still living.

The nature of some of these motifs has been made clear by anthropological studies of the past two or three decades. Additional validity has been given to such studies by work done in other Negro communities in the Americas, providing a new base for comparison. Acculturation in the islands of the West Indies, in Brazil, Venezuela, and Surinam, for example, had one common element—African cultural inheritance. Certain muted, disguised, or filtered African survivals in the United States become more apparent when they are discovered to exist also in Jamaica, Haiti, or Trinidad in less disguised form. Our enlightenment on this score becomes more swift as we recognize the clues given so amply in these neighboring Negro communities.

In his book, *The Myth of the Negro Past*,<sup>1</sup> Melville Herskovits some years ago provided us with some valuable insights into New World African survivals. Some of those survivals are isolated phenomena; others are aspects of clustered phenomena which are held together by a central concept, for example, religious belief. Many are so commonplace as to go virtually unnoticed. The carrying of bundles on the head, the manner in which a young child is sometimes held so that it straddles the mother's hip, the woman's head wrapped in a kerchief or headcloth—all characteristic of the old South, and frequently seen today—are African patterns.<sup>2</sup> Hairdressing styles for girls—the plaiting into

small designs and the binding or wrapping of tiny pigtaails—so common until recently in the South, are characteristic of Africa and the West Indies. In Haiti, with its essentially African background, these hair designs are called “gardens.” In the Georgia Sea Islands, rice was, and still is, winnowed in baskets or trays in the African manner, and at various places in the southern states, grain is pulverized in hand-hewn wooden mortars of the African type.<sup>3</sup> The way in which the mortar is used in the Sea Islands, with two or three women working together with long pestles, is clearly an African concept, as is demonstrated in photographic documentation in a book by Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*.<sup>4</sup>

A complex code of what we might be inclined to dispose of as “polite behavior” is noted by Herskovits<sup>5</sup> as having special significance in relation to African tradition. The conventionalized respect for elders, the aversion to “sassing” an old person, the turning of the head to demonstrate respect, the covering of the mouth when laughing, all are explained as manifestations of African attitudes. So are the interjections of “Ah-hah,” “Do, Jesus,” and other similar exclamations by a congregation in the course of a sermon, and of “Aint it so,” “It’s the truth,” and “Yeah, man” by someone listening to a secular statement or narration. These exclamations are a reinforcement of, or applause for, the words of the speaker and are comparable to similar usage elsewhere in the Negro communities of the New World as well as in Africa.

The importance of fraternal orders, burial societies, and secret societies has been cited by Herskovits and others as having special meaning to Negro communities in the United States. With the breakdown of more ancient forms of social organization in the American setting, these organizations have been able to play a special role in assuring proper burial of deceased persons—a paramount consideration in West African life.<sup>6</sup>

Recent studies of the Gullah dialect of the Georgia Sea Islands have suggested that a significant part of the vocabulary has an African origin, rather than being, as stated by some earlier observers, a mispronouncing or corruption of English, or merely the survival of an early English dialect.

One spokesman for the earlier view, Guy B. Johnson, wrote that "the charm of the folk stories of the Sea Island people is inseparably bound up with the staccato tones of their speech and the quaintness of their idiom. . . . The first impression of the newcomer upon hearing the oldtimers talk is apt to be that he is listening to a foreign language. There are older Negroes in the Sea Islands who speak in such a way that a stranger would have to stay around them several weeks before he could understand them and converse with them to his satisfaction. . . . But this strange dialect turns out to be little more than the peasant English of two centuries ago, modified to meet the needs of the slaves. . . . From this pleasant speech and from the 'baby talk' used by the masters in addressing them, the Negroes developed that dialect, sometimes known as Gullah, which remains the characteristic feature of the culture of the Negroes of coastal South Carolina and Georgia." <sup>7</sup>

However, a study of the Gullah dialect by Lorenzo Turner found in the vocabulary of this region approximately four thousand words which appeared to be of West African derivation, in addition to many survivals in syntax, inflections, and intonations.<sup>8</sup> In Georgia, he recorded some songs with African word texts and others with mixed African and English words. He found that many African phrases had been rendered in English, while there were "whole African phrases . . . without change either of meaning or pronunciation." For comparison with his own findings, Turner referred to some earlier evaluations which dismissed African vocabulary survivals as negligible. He found that a considerable number of words that had been written down as though they were English or bizarre corruptions of English appeared to be Vai, Mende, and Wolof.

Not only workaday words but also many personal names have been demonstrated to have West African origin. Such names as Coffee (Ashanti: Kofi), Bilah, and Kwako (all heard at one time or another by this observer), and a number of others of West African provenience may be encountered almost anywhere between the East Coast and the Mississippi. In addition, many personal names in English, such as Tuesday, Thursday, Foreday, and Earthy, carry on a West African practice of calling children

after special days or phenomena associated with circumstances of birth or other traditional considerations. Turner found that all twelve months of the year and all seven days of the week are used as names, in addition to Wind, Hail, Storm, Freeze, Morning, Cotton, Peanut, Hardtime, Easter, and Harvest.<sup>9</sup>

African vocabulary and grammar patterns have survived elsewhere in the Americas, as indicated in various studies of New World pidgin English (in Surinam) and Creole (the West Indies). Even tonal aspects of African speech may prove to have left their mark on Negro speech in the New World. The traditional "musical" quality of the Negro dialect, so-called, may well be related to African use of tone for semantic purposes.<sup>10</sup>

American Negro folk tales, which make up a large part of the oral literature, include animal stories, human tales, tales of magic, moralizing stories, and some tales that verge on the heroic or epic. A great portion of them stem from European oral tradition, some are from the Bible, and many derive from daily life in slavery and postslavery days; but in the view of this writer and a number of other investigators, an overwhelming number of the stories have prototypes in West and Central Africa. The African affinity is seen most readily in the animal tales first popularized in the white segment of the population by Joel Chandler Harris in his Uncle Remus series, but it is also apparent in stories of other kinds. Some tales have been found in which a king or another notable person replaces West African sky deities or culture heroes. Anansi, the Ashanti trickster hero (originally a spider), as well as his son Intikuma, is called by name in a large cycle of tales told in the United States and other New World Negro settings.<sup>11</sup>

Religious life, also, is marked by retention of persistent concepts and attitudes that were originally developed in the West African cultures. Among the more conspicuous retentions are the Negroes' regard for baptismal or water rites, their view of the ecstatic seizure as an orthodox expression of faith, and the unusual importance of music and—except where it has gone out of style through the desire to conform to white practices—rhythm. All of these elements are essentially a part of West African religious ritual, and are found to have persisted strongly in either

pure or disguised form in a large part of Negro America, notably Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, the Guianas, Carriacou, Cuba, Venezuela, and Brazil. The ecstatic seizure—getting of the “spirit”—fundamental in African religious experience, is a commonplace characteristic of religious worship, “pagan” or Christian, throughout Negro areas of the Western Hemisphere. Water rites, sometimes called “baptising,” pervade almost every aspect of Haitian religious practice. The significance of this aspect of worship has been set forth in a number of anthropological studies.<sup>12</sup>

If one goes back just beyond the turn of the century, he finds that Negroes in the Louisiana area were familiar with the names of a number of West African deities, such as Limba, Agoussou, Dani (Dan), Liba (Legba or Limba), and others, all of whom had become syncretized (as in Haiti, Jamaica, and Trinidad) with Christian saints.<sup>13</sup> Numerous rites concerned with burials, wakes, and other occasions for memorializing the dead have been shown to retain certain characteristics of African practice which are generally not present in Euro-American tradition. Not more than fifty or sixty years ago drumming and African-style dancing in church, at wakes, and at funerals were known at least in the Georgia Sea Islands, and probably elsewhere on the mainland. Remnants of the religious dance are found today in the shout, in which shuffling and handclapping are an echo of the common scenes of a few generations ago.

Having recognized the presence of specific African traits in Negro life in the New World generally, and in the United States in particular, we are in a somewhat better position to examine and evaluate non-European, seemingly African characteristics of American Negro folk music. That there was African influence is not to be doubted, and if the music reflects that influence it is difficult to reject the evidence out of hand.

To state the proposition another way, if we were to find in the body of our folk music a trait that was found elsewhere only, say, in Tibetan singing, we could not lightly attribute it to Tibetan origin in the face of what we know about our history. There was no Tibetan immigration to this country. Few, if any, of our immigrants had any contacts with Tibetans. Look as we might, it would be extremely difficult to find even a slim bridge

between Tibetan culture and our own. Our newly discovered "Tibetan" musical trait, therefore, would in common sense have to be attributed to another source or to independent invention. But inasmuch as Africans came to the New World in great numbers, had a deep-rooted tradition of music and dancing, both secular and religious, and preserved many details of their home cultures, it would be something of a miracle if no vestige of their musical tradition remained.

The European elements that have gone into the making of Negro folk music in the United States are many. English, Scottish, and Irish folk tunes, sea chanteys, hymns, and white spirituals have made a deep impact. In Louisiana, various types of French influences were felt. French folksongs, folk dance music, and salon dance music must have been ubiquitous, first among the white population and then among the Negro freedmen and slaves. By the time of the Civil War, they were the common property of all. Cajun (Acadian) folk music, originally from rural France, arrived in Louisiana with the Acadian refugees from Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century. Though the Cajun style of singing is quite distinctive, and though it remains essentially the property of the Cajun community in or near the Louisiana bayous, Negro neighbors of these people have been much influenced by it.<sup>14</sup> Additional French influences came from the Caribbean area, along with a hybridized African style. There was a continual coming and going of French planters and their families between Louisiana and the French West Indies, and slaves were transferred from the islands to the mainland as required. The result was a Creole culture with a more or less unified character embracing Louisiana and the French Caribbean. The slaves of the West Indian and Louisiana plantations spoke a common language (Creole), shared common traditions of music and dance, and had a common folklore. Some songs are still sung in Louisiana that would be more readily understood and appreciated in Haiti and Martinique than in France or Alabama. Musicological studies are yet to be made to show the extent of Spanish influence on the folk music of the Louisiana region.

Although Africans or slaves of African ancestry had numerous contacts with Indians in various parts of the country (there were

a number of Indian slave owners), there is no substantial evidence that Indian musical elements were absorbed by the developing mainstream of Negro folk music. Curiously enough, a study by an outstanding ethnomusicologist, George Herzog, indicated that at least one group of Cherokee Indians took over elements of African musical style from the Negro slaves.<sup>15</sup>

Even when the basic historical influences have been accounted for, however, the story is not complete. Various regional musical phenomena such as the so-called hillbilly style of the southeastern mountains, the western and cowboy styles, and the ever-changing "new style" music of the cities infiltrated, or at least affected, Negro folk music. Evidence of these tributary cultural streams is to be found in the repertoire of many a Negro singer. With the advent, first, of the phonograph and, second, of the radio in the twentieth century, an almost imponderable number of influences came to bear on all American folk music—Negro and white alike.

Records and radio introduced into the development of Negro musical tradition a new element which might be termed "feedback." A traditional type of folksong was picked up by a recording artist and sung in a new way. If the record became popular, a new generation of singers began to utilize some of the personalized contributions of the recording artist. In time, the new version, or elements of it, became, once more, folk music. When we become aware that the folk music of our day is drawing heavily upon records and radio, and that records and radio are in turn using folk music as a basic source, it is possible to comprehend in a dim way the permutations and combinations of the changes at work in the "feedback" process. One result of this activity is that we may hear cowboy tunes that are reminiscent of Negro blues; blues that sound like songs of the Golden West; hillbilly tunes and instrumental combinations that gallop through mountainized versions of John Henry or John the Revellator with jugs, jew's-harps and washtubs; jazz-like treatments of old religious songs; Calypsoish skiffle bands in New Orleans and Mobile; and gospel songs with a suggestion of "Moon Over Indiana" in them. This sort of thing is, of course, not essentially new. Musical acculturation between deep sea sailors and Negro stevedores, between Negro churches

and white churches, and between Negro and white railroad workers has been going on for a long time. But the pace and acceleration of cross-fertilization in recent years probably never have been equalled.

In any discussion of Negro folk music the question of inborn musical talents is sure to come up. It has been a cliché, not altogether dispelled, that the Negro's sense of music is instinctive, or at least biologically inherited from his African ancestors. The nearest thing to an instinctive sense of music is the natural capacity that all men share, in greater or lesser individual degree, to make and to respond to music. An individual may inherit a capacity of this kind biologically, but there is no available evidence that any large ethnic group possesses a native talent for music greater than that of any other group. There is no racial or national monopoly on the art of music making. That there is a Negro inheritance is undeniable, but the inheritance is not biological but cultural. Negroes who have grown to maturity out of reach of Negro cultural influences may have no more sense of counterpoint and blue tonality, and no more ability to give a field cry, than the average Hudson Bay Eskimo. A Negro trained in France from early youth to choir-style church singing will give no hint that his forebears had any other tradition. Some Negroes in Louisiana sing in pure French or Cajun style. Negroes who are born and raised in a social setting which places no value on, or rejects, traditional Negro musical values may demonstrate only the most commonplace musical aptitudes. And clichés to the contrary, some Negroes are totally unable to keep time, dance, or sing anything but a sour note. In all of these respects they do not differ from people of any national or racial origin. It is not genes or blood, but social tradition—in short, culture—which is the carrier. In a setting where everyone sings, where music is found in some aspect in almost every important religious and secular situation, and in which group participation is a deeply rooted custom, the individual absorbs and becomes to some extent capable in the musical idiom of his culture. A non-Negro raised in a Negro community could be expected to have at least average awareness and feeling for Negro music.

Some years ago I was present at an Afro-Cuban secret society



meeting a short distance from Havana. The activities of the society were remarkably African. African-style dances and rituals were accompanied by African-style drumming and singing. The membership was predominantly Negro, but participating were a number of white Cubans who had been admitted to the organization. Their dance postures and movements were in no way distinguishable from those of the Negroes, nor was their singing. Their voices had even acquired the peculiar timbre which is identified with the Negro voice. Living in close proximity to Negro esthetic values, these white Cubans found no difficulty in accepting such values and making them their own.<sup>16</sup>

All Negroes do not shuffle, boogie, sing spirituals and blues, and move with the beat. But where Negro cultural values have survived as a result of social factors, Negro musical traditions remain strong and dynamic.