



DEEP RIVER

MUSIC AND
MEMORY
IN HARLEM
RENAISSANCE
THOUGHT

PAUL ALLEN ANDERSON

DEEP RIVER

NEW AMERICANISTS

A Series Edited by Donald E. Pease



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Music and Memory in

Harlem Renaissance Thought

PAUL ALLEN ANDERSON

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To Gilbert and Lucille Anderson



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INTRODUCTION

Deep River, my home is over Jordan;
Deep River, my home is over Jordan.
O don't you want to go to that Gospel Feast
That Promised Land where all is Peace?
Deep River, I want to cross over into camp
ground.

—traditional African American spiritual¹

The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro. . . . The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.

—Alain Locke²

Alain Locke's introduction to *The New Negro* (1925) recognized the ongoing black migration to "northern city centers" as a turning point in American history. World War I had sparked new industrial labor demands, thus aiding the exodus of African Americans eager to escape rural peonage and nakedly enforced white supremacy in the South. However, as the explosive antiblack violence of 1919 made clear, Northern cities remained a distant cry from the "Promised Land where all is Peace." The persistence of white hostility and economic inequality in the North demonstrated to black migrants that their hopes for democracy in the United States would not be fulfilled any time soon. As editor of the landmark *The New Negro* anthology, Locke optimistically set his sights on a "new vision of opportunity" appropriate to his sense of the New Negro's demands for equal rights, cultural recognition, and uninhibited social mobility.

Locke insisted that the forthright self-possession of America's New Negro was already having worldwide consequences; the New Negro had "the consciousness of acting as the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with Twentieth Century civilization."³ The Howard University professor of philosophy savored an image of breakneck modernization where black migrants hurdled "several generations of experience at a leap" in a "deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern." Cultural inheritances from the past merged with modernist dreams for a transformed future in the turn from false and externally enforced images of the "Old Negro" to a "New Negro" agenda of unlimited opportunity. *The New Negro* anthology, like the mid-1920s Renaissance movement it helped define, explored what it meant to be an American Negro reaching for "the more democratic chance" of individual and collective self-definition.

Many artists and critics associated with the Harlem Renaissance or Negro Renaissance agreed that the exploration of deep streams of black social memory and expressive practice would only aid black advancement in the modern world. (In accordance with the preferred usage of Alain Locke and his eminent colleague at Howard, Sterling Brown, this book will characteristically refer to the broader interwar moment as the Negro Renaissance.) The progress of the New Negro depended on a successful recuperation and elucidation of the long-maligned black cultural inheritance. Arthur Schomburg, a West Indian immigrant, scholar, and archivist, gracefully captured the point in "The Negro Digs Up His Past," his essay for *The New Negro*. "The American Negro," Schomburg wrote, "must remake his past in order to make his future. History must restore what slav-

ery took away.”²⁴ The reconstruction of black history and social memory that Schomburg advocated was neither a connoisseurial nor an antiquarian project. Instead, a recuperated black inheritance would give voice to a daring “advance-guard” project of liberation barely imaginable in the racist world of 1920s America. Fixing the ideal equation for the relationship between African American political action, institution-building, and art-making was, however, a subject of intense debate in the interwar years. Indeed, the artistic and political successes and failures of the Renaissance era remain topics of the most vigorous debate to this day.

The black folk music inheritance played a central role in Negro Renaissance debates about history, social memory, and cultural transmission. The present book, *Deep River*, offers a window into those debates. “The Harlem Renaissance has been treated primarily as a literary movement,” the musicologist Samuel Floyd has noted, “with occasional asides, contributed as musical spice, about the jazz age and performances of concert artists. But music’s role was much more basic and important to the movement.”²⁵ To agree with Floyd as heartily as I do is to anticipate a whole series of historical and critical treatments of music’s role in the Renaissance. *Deep River* does not aspire to a panoramic synthesis but instead trains its sights on reconstructing and elaborating a set of critical turns in Renaissance debates about the folk music inheritance, black nationalism, and the cosmopolitanism of the New Negro. The book approaches its goal through a series of intellectual portraits that focus attention on no more than a dozen figures. Needless to say, the selection of a cast of characters in a project like this one—where the historian or critic could have focused attention on another dozen or more important figures—has everything to do with whatever claims to representativeness the book’s arguments can aspire to make. Readers already conversant with the intersection of literary, historical, and musicological approaches to the Harlem Renaissance comprise only one intended audience. Readers new to the Harlem Renaissance might also find this book a useful introduction to intellectual life in the period and to broader American debates about music, culture, and racial ideologies in the first half of the twentieth century.

By necessity, digging up the African American past is an interminable and unavoidably controversial project, for reasons Arthur Schomburg knew well; eager to share his resources, Schomburg donated his vast book collection to the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library at 103 West 135th Street. Many of the questions addressed here about the intersection of class stratification and ideologies of racial and ethnic difference are

ones that continue to haunt our society at an everyday level. This book aspires to present a fresh understanding of certain cultural dynamics in the interwar years and, it might be hoped, a renewed kind of enthusiasm for digging up the musical past—not least for the sake of making, and remaking, the future. It is a truism to say that our present is haunted by the past or ideas of the past in ways we can only begin to recognize. Repeated to the point of meaninglessness, the truism is a blunt commonplace in our therapeutic culture; its hard kernel of truth, however, remains no easier to master or overcome. For many of the African American intellectuals and artists encountered in this book, the half-understood haunting of the present by the racial traumas of the recent past was a reality too deeply felt to be considered banal. With that in mind, this book explores how musical performances (and literary evocations of them) provided especially haunting and portable sites for the staging of social memory. In the case of music—which may be the expressive form most frequently associated with experiences of spirit possession, contemplative reverie, and wistful or violent nostalgia—our most striking experiences often take place at moments of half-understood hauntedness. Therefore, the intersection of music and social memory constitutes an especially propitious site for cultural analysis, not least in the study of Harlem Renaissance intellectual life.

Alain Locke's essay on the "Negro spirituals" in *The New Negro* addressed the slave spirituals as representative fragments of a rural folk culture quickly fading into obsolescence. He encouraged the hybridization of classic folk spirituals into formal art songs and long-form, scored-through concert music. Black folk song, he argued, could undergo, "without breaking its own boundaries, intricate and original development in directions already the line of advance in modernistic music."⁶ Idiomatic evolution struck Locke as a fitting musical analogue to the "advance-guard" responsibilities of the elite New Negro and to the black migrants' modernizing flight away "from medieval America." Locke's call to transform black folk music materials into formal art music crystallized his vision of elite cosmopolitanism as the highest measure of New Negro cultural progress. "Negro folk song is not midway its artistic career yet," he argued, "and while the preservation of the original folk forms is for the moment the most pressing necessity, an inevitable art development awaits them, as in the past it has awaited all other great folk music."⁷

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, the leading senior voice of black intellectual life in the interwar era, had long supported the folk spirituals' canonization as central monuments of African American culture. His in-

fluent essay on the “sorrow songs” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) went far in foreshadowing the ideological terrain of the Renaissance debate about the spirituals. Du Bois’s and Locke’s perspectives on the spirituals as vessels of black social memory were not identical on many details. Nevertheless, their conceptions of music and African American cosmopolitanism faced related criticisms in the 1920s and 1930s. As we shall see, the terrain of the debate over the spirituals stretched beyond specifically musical concerns to broader social questions about the tempo and consequences of African American cultural modernization and the cosmopolitan leadership of an educated “advance-guard.”

The first chapter, “Unvoiced Longings,” explores the uses of music in Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* in the context of broader philosophical commitments explicated there and elsewhere in his early black nationalist thought. The “sorrow songs” figure prominently in *The Souls of Black Folk* as haunting and prophetic monuments of the black folk inheritance. As such, the songs bear directly on Du Bois’s call for black liberation. His approach to music and folk culture wedded a late Victorian ideology of aesthetic idealism and a romantic, quasi-Hegelian strain of black nationalist thought. Du Bois’s legendary depiction of alienation and disalienation in black “double-consciousness” crystallized his intellectual and existential aspiration to dialectically reconcile a number of contradictory impulses. On the one hand, his romanticization of the “sorrow songs” reinforced ideas of unmediated expressivity and emotional sublimity as characteristics of authentic folk music. On the other hand, Du Bois upheld ideals about cultural evolution—where Western European high culture figured as a leading model of advanced civilization—as appropriate to African Americans and other “colored” peoples. His application of evolutionary civilizationist ideals to African Americans combated white racist prejudices about black culture as immutably undeveloped, imitative, and inferior. There had been great black civilizations in the past, he later argued, and there would be again in a liberated future. The elevation of the “sorrow songs” through cosmopolitan practices of formalization spoke to the folk romanticism in Du Bois’s black nationalism as well as his urgency about pushing African American culture further along toward his developmental goals of high civilization. He imagined this double agenda not as self-contradictory but as reconcilable through a transformative synthesis. Music offered itself to Du Bois’s imagination as not only a haunted site of memory but as an energizing site of utopian anticipation. Du Bois’s primary concerns as an intellectual were always political rather than aes-

thetic. My analyses look to broader ideological contexts of Du Bois's aesthetic and philosophical thought but also attempt to delineate some of the surprisingly idealistic philosophical implications of his explicitly political and this-worldly agenda as an intellectual and social activist.

Du Bois's formulations about the folk roots of the "sorrow songs" and his idealism about the elite "kingdom of culture" called for a dynamic musical synthesis of folk-based black nationalist content and idealist European forms. His interpretation of the "sorrow songs" as vessels for transmitting black social memory paralleled the logic of dialectical overcoming active in his notion of black "double-consciousness." First, the cancellation of racial hierarchy, its alienating consequences, and the merely contingent residue of so-called black "backwardness"; second, the preservation of certain essential cultural differences; and, finally, the elevation of a hybridized African American identity. "In this merging," Du Bois wrote, the American Negro "wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."⁸ Du Bois's approach to the social function of art and the meaning of cultural evolution came under tremendous pressure in the 1920s Jazz Age milieu of the "Negro vogue," interracial modernism, newly glamorized notions of the primitive, and the mixed blessings of increased white patronage toward black writers and artists.

Deep River's second chapter, "Swan Songs and Art Songs," focuses on several careers in the 1920s that unfolded within the long shadow of Du Bois's interpretation of the "sorrow songs." Jean Toomer's literary experiment *Cane* (1923), a book Toomer referred to as a "swan song" to African American folk culture, contributed an arresting modernist vision of ruptured continuity, cultural disenchantment, and deracination. "The folk-spirit," Toomer wrote, "was walking in to die on the modern desert. . . . Its death was so tragic."⁹ Toomer admired the African American folk spirituals tremendously, but he rejected Du Bois's ideal of a hybridic "double-consciousness." Instead, Toomer interpreted black modernization as a fundamentally traumatic and irreparable rupture between traditional folk culture and modern urban culture. His artistic and personal response to the fate of black culture in twentieth-century modernity was utterly distinct from Du Bois's frankly "propagandistic" sense of art's liberatory function and Locke's more formalist vision of steady cosmopolitan evolution and developmental continuity.

The second chapter's contrasting "art song" narrative emerges in a discussion of the pioneering African American concert singer Roland Hayes. Hayes attended Fisk University in the first decade of the twentieth century and toured with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. By the 1920s, he was widely appreciated as a solo concert performer of European art songs. Hayes added another dimension to his solo concerts by programming several spirituals along with his traditional concert repertoire. "Before my time," he noted in his 1942 autobiography, "white singers had often been in the habit of burlesquing the spirituals with rolling eyes and heaving breast and shuffling feet. . . . It pleased me to believe that I was restoring the music of my race to the serious atmosphere of its origins, and helping to redeem it for the national culture."¹⁰ Du Bois, Locke, and many others championed Hayes as an icon of artistic cosmopolitanism and racial pride. Nevertheless, Hayes's comparatively Europeanized renditions of the spirituals inspired skeptics to fault his interpretations as inauthentic and untrue to the very folk practices he intended to commemorate.

Such criticisms expanded at times into a broader skepticism about musical syntheses of black folk idioms and European-based formal idioms. The mixed reception of Hayes's cosmopolitanism and concert spirituals replayed some of the conflicting, if not contradictory, impulses of Du Boisian "double-consciousness." How was folk authenticity to be preserved in the concert spirituals and simultaneously reconciled with European techniques of formal art music? The aesthetic debate found its solo concert exemplars in the contrasting styles of Hayes and Paul Robeson. One of Robeson's most influential patrons in the mid-1920s was Carl Van Vechten, a white associate and patron of many African American artists. Van Vechten's involvement in the "Negro vogue" and the Harlem Renaissance may have been as indispensable as it was controversial. Van Vechten's championing of Robeson's "traditional, evangelical renderings" of the spirituals over Hayes's "more refined performances" offers an occasion for reconsidering the cultural politics of racial authenticity, exoticism, and patronage in an era "when the Negro was in vogue" (to quote Van Vechten's friend Langston Hughes).¹¹ Du Bois's famous condemnation of Van Vechten's best-selling novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) made public his long-simmering worries about the "decadent" and counterprogressive influences of racial exoticism and aestheticism in a politically suspect "Negro vogue." Nevertheless, some other African American writers and artists welcomed Van Vechten's celebration of jazz and the blues and his "bohemian" willingness to fly in the face of black and white bourgeois expecta-

tions for morally instructive and idealistic art. The debate over Van Vechten's patronage exposed some of the definitive generational, political, and temperamental fissures marking the African American intelligentsia of the interwar period.

Chapter 3 of *Deep River* tracks "the key of paradox" in Alain Locke's writings about music and culture.¹² One of Locke's central goals as a theorist of black art was to resist static or antihybridic notions of black cultural difference and the assimilatory pull of traditional European cosmopolitanism. The best New Negro art, he argued, brilliantly fused black particulars with cosmopolitan universals, thereby merging and expanding multiple horizons of aesthetic possibility. Locke championed many modernist developments in African American music, literature, and visual art through a synthesis of cosmopolitanism and pluralism that shared traits with Du Bois's dialectical ideal of disalienated black "double-consciousness." Locke wrote of himself as a "philosophical mid-wife to a generation of younger Negro poets, writers, [and] artists," and he rationalized his aesthetic vision as that of "a cultural cosmopolitan, but perforce an advocate of cultural racialism as a defensive counter-move for the American Negro."¹³ His music criticism espoused folk nationalism in African American concert music as the ideal reconciliatory glue for a synthesis of the local and vernacular with the universal and classical.

Locke contended that jazz began as a folk music whose "often wholly illiterate" originators were "humble troubadours [who] knew nothing about written music or composition." In the 1920s, however, jazz had begun to develop into something else entirely, especially through the vaguely defined concert idiom of "symphonic jazz." No longer a folk music of the "Mississippi headwaters," jazz had become a cosmopolitan and multiracial affair. A music, according to Locke, rooted in folk spirituals like "Deep River" had met its cosmopolitan destiny by enlarging itself to meet the full dimensions of an "international ocean."¹⁴ At the same time, many white intellectuals and artists of the Jazz Age endowed the new popular music with a countercultural aura of erotic liberation. The exoticism of the "Negro vogue" provided a modernist gloss to old habits of romantic racism, habits that stereotyped black musicians as racially characteristic ciphers of desublimated expressivity. Locke argued in response that "the Negro, strictly speaking, never had a jazz age."¹⁵ He chose not to celebrate jazz, or any musical idiom, as a therapeutic refuge from aesthetic or psychic discipline or the developmental challenges of musical formalization. Instead, Locke elaborated the centrality of sublimation in advanced cul-

tural production and contested interpretations of black music that implicitly or explicitly enforced a racial double standard.

The reigning double standard especially neglected or denied the hard-won advances and vindicating potential of black concert music. On the one hand, the popular music marketplace too often cultivated the lowest common denominator in musical production, according to Locke, and reinforced racial stereotypes anathema to Locke's New Negro agenda. Racial vindication, he believed, would emerge instead in more elite realms of cultural production, hence the symbolic importance of the concert spiritual idiom. On the other hand, institutionalized racism blocked African American progress in the elite realms of fine arts and concert music. One reason why Roland Hayes became famous as a solo performer was his inability to find employment in white opera companies in the United States. Likewise, Marian Anderson, the world-acclaimed African American contralto, did not win passage onto the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House until 1955 at the age of fifty-seven. Facing the grim barriers blocking the development of black musical freedom, Locke clung to New Negro cosmopolitanism as a "new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom."

Dissenters challenged many of Du Bois's and Locke's ideas about folk-to-formal musical development and the "advance-guard" responsibilities and privileges of the black middle-class elite. Chapter 4 of *Deep River*, "Beneath the Seeming Informality," focuses on the revisionist agendas of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston regarding the blues, spirituals, and vernacular strategies of formalization. Hughes and Hurston challenged dominant cosmopolitan assumptions in the interwar years about long-form concert music as the ideal toward which all music should aspire. In contrast to Du Bois and Locke, Hughes pointed out limitations of evolutionist schemes that rigidly stratified elite and popular musical idioms. Thus, he explicated the easily overlooked sophistication of expert blues singers and musicians and demonstrated the poetic force of the blues idiom. Hughes also parted from curatorial and folkloric approaches toward the "sorrow songs" as vessels of black folk memory. He emphasized instead the poetic and musical power of the blues, a genre he regarded as both an urban folk music and a proletarian art form rich in political implications. Hughes's blues advocacy, especially during the 1930s, eschewed Du Bois's folk romanticism and directed attention instead to the social significance of contemporary vernacular forms.

Zora Neale Hurston interpreted the formal concert spirituals of Ro-

land Hayes, Marian Anderson, and other classically trained concert singers as assimilationist and untrue to the authentic values of the black folk inheritance. She instead celebrated the pleasures and overlooked sophistication of vernacular practices among black folk in the South. Hurston's polarizing revisionism about the spirituals indicted Du Bois's depiction of the "sorrow songs" as a corollary to his elite black nationalist vision of overcoming alienation and injustice through racial solidarity and collective action. Hurston charged that the "idea that the whole body of spirituals are 'sorrow-songs' is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossipers to Death and Judgment."¹⁶ Hurston pushed sorrow away from the center of the spirituals' legacy and likewise decentered themes of bitterness and alienation in her interpretation of black folk culture. She elaborated an alternative to the developmental dialectic undergirding Du Bois's aesthetic and social thought. Hurston's challenge to Du Bois refigured the hybridizing aesthetic of "double-consciousness" and black musical cosmopolitanism according to a nondialectical model that preserved rather than resolved tensions between disparate elements and expectations in a musical performance or composition. The latter-day influence of Hughes and Hurston's New Negro revisionism is hard to overestimate. Hurston, for example, inspired prominent postmodernist elaborations of black vernacular practices with her often-cited discussion of the "will to adorn" in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934). The analysis in chapter 4 suggests that the ideal of a truly pluralistic cosmopolitanism might only be approached when residual Eurocentric assumptions about scored-through concert music and the intellectual trap of overvaluing the mercurial quality referred to as folk authenticity are brought to light and overcome.

The fifth and final chapter of *Deep River* approaches the history of African American musical cosmopolitanism from a comparative perspective. "Saving Jazz from Its Friends" crosses over from the Harlem Renaissance debate about the spirituals and the folk inheritance to implicit refractions of that debate in jazz criticism during the Swing Era. Sympathetic white partisans variously interpreted jazz as a blissful escape from the sobering realities of the Depression and war, a symptomatic interracial battleground of industrialized cultural production, or a fragile vessel of social memory and "premodern" authenticity threatened by commercialization and misplaced artistic ambitions. John Hammond's 1938 "From Spirituals to Swing" concert is used in chapter 5 as a perch from which to compare Hammond's celebratory narrative of jazz's development against the less

jazz-focused narratives of Locke and Du Bois. Hammond's was the central voice of American jazz criticism in the 1930s, and "From Spirituals to Swing" reinforced his sense of developmental continuity and folk artistic legitimacy in jazz. The radical magazine *New Masses* sponsored Hammond's first "From Spirituals to Swing" concert, which contributed to the magazine's Popular Front project of constructing narratives of American folk music as proletarian harbingers of social democracy and multiracial pluralism in American life. This chapter also discusses Roger Pryor Dodge's classicist theories of improvisation and long-form development in "hot jazz." The golden age of jazz, Dodge argued, preceded a profound aesthetic decline into symphonic jazz, commercial swing music, and the modern jazz of the 1940s. Hammond came to share aspects of Dodge's elegiac swan song narrative of decline in jazz.

Deep River concludes with an overview of early reactions to the formal concert ambitions of Edward Kennedy Ellington. Duke Ellington's achievements as a composer, bandleader, pianist, and public figure encompassed key tenets of New Negro thought regarding concert music and the commemoration of the folk inheritance. "We are not interested primarily in the playing of jazz or swing music," Ellington once explained, "but in producing musically a genuine contribution from our race. . . . We try to complete a cycle."¹⁷ Although they admired Ellington's genius, Hammond and Dodge were among the most vociferous critics of Ellington's longer compositions in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly "Reminiscing in Tempo" and *Black, Brown and Beige*. Unfortunately, Hammond, Dodge, and like-minded hot jazz partisans reinforced debilitating double standards about black musical ambition, even as they attempted to shore up the general public's appreciation of virtuosic artistry in jazz. The Swing Era music and commentary of Duke Ellington suggested a jazz composer's revision of the folk nationalist concert ideal propagated by Du Bois and Locke. Ellington's 1943 concert suite, *Black, Brown and Beige*—in which an original spiritual "Come Sunday" was a high point—brings the cycle of music and ideas investigated here to a close. The dramatic rise of modern jazz in the 1940s, simultaneous transformations in the worlds of popular music and concert music, and new visions of African American cosmopolitanism and black nationalism offered fresh challenges to imagining the traces of social memory in music.

Many contemporary artists, scholars, and scientists are interested in how the felt realities of individual memories are transmuted into, experienced as, or misrecognized as collectively shared or social memories. As a

work of intellectual history, this book makes no strong reality claims for the musicalized traces of social memory that captured the imaginations of many Harlem Renaissance figures. Neither does it pursue a critical or philosophical agenda of thoroughgoing disenchantment with and de-idealization toward notions of social memory and claims about music as a site of social memory. My more basic goal is to understand how certain intellectuals, writers, and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance period pieced together, suggested, asserted, and argued for distinctive interpretations of music and social memory. That said, it seems to me that we can neither resurrect nor exorcise the recent past. We might instead work to recognize its simultaneous distance and proximity to us and consider its bearing on the present and on the possible futures we allow ourselves to imagine. In other words, more than a few of the questions addressed by the figures of the Harlem Renaissance remain with us.



ONE

*“Unvoiced Longings”: Du Bois
and the “Sorrow Songs”*

The price of culture is a Lie.
—W. E. B. Du Bois¹

The authentic utopia is grounded in recollection. “All reification is a forgetting.” Art fights reification by making the petrified world speak, sing, perhaps dance.
—Herbert Marcuse²

In 1933, Olin Downes noted a recent Fisk University Choir concert at Carnegie Hall. The music critic for the *New York Times* found the concert a disappointment and compared it unfavorably to the performances of African American singers in Broadway’s *Porgy* or the Hall Johnson Choir’s work in *Green Pastures*. Downes recommended that readers contrast the restrained Fisk concert with an event guaranteed to be out of the ordinary, “a real religious revival in Harlem, as the writer has done.” Describing the peculiar charms of the experience, he explained that a visitor “will hear hymns and spirituals, but they will have an emotion that was not to be felt last night. That was one thing. Quite another thing is the wildness, the melancholy, the intense religious feeling communicated when Negroes sing in the sacred spirit and the uncorrupted manner of their race.”

Downes’s comments on black performance reinforced stereotypical assumptions about the “uncorrupted manner” of informal black musical expression, whether secular or religious. His remarks on the Fisk University Choir led W. E. B. Du Bois to respond by critiquing a latent agenda of those critics who held forth on the hazards of formal African American

musical aspiration. Insulted by Downes's comments, Du Bois wrote in the NAACP journal, the *Crisis*, that what Downes's assessment

really means is that Negroes must not be allowed to attempt anything more than the frenzy of the primitive, religious revival. "Listen to the Lambs" according to Dett, or "Deep River," as translated by Burleigh, or any attempt to sing Italian music or German, in some inexplicable manner, leads them off their preserves and is not "natural." To which the answer is, Art is not natural and is not supposed to be natural. And just because it is not natural, it may be great Art. The Negro chorus has a right to sing music of any sort it likes and to be judged by its accomplishment rather than by what foolish critics think that it ought to be doing.³

The Fisk University Choir disappointed Downes's expectation of African American music delivered with "the wildness, the melancholy, the intense religious feeling . . . of their race"—music in other words, foreign to formal concert venues. The musicologist Jon Michael Spencer has repeated Du Bois's charge in arguing that Downes's conclusion "repudiated renditions of the spirituals that did not reflect the 'real' Negro with his 'natural' emotivity, sensuality, and inferiority."⁴ Du Bois used the occasion to express his frustration with a tradition of criticism favoring informal and "primitive" black musical expression. It was a tradition, he insisted, that continued to have a debilitating effect on the careers of African American musicians and composers, including Harry Burleigh and Nathaniel Dett, both of whom had become prominent for their formal arrangements of spirituals.

If Downes preferred the black "frenzy of the primitive, religious revival," Du Bois countered that the Fisk University Choir had performed a program of carefully rehearsed music and not a concert facsimile of sanctified church styles. "Art is not natural and is not supposed to be natural," he stressed. "And just because it is not natural, it may be great Art." The abstract formulation implied that the naturalness of folk expression was altogether different from the artfulness of formal concert music. Downes, however, had found the music of a "primitive, religious revival" aesthetically superior to that of the Fisk University Choir. His comment on the "uncorrupted manner" of Harlem church singing reinforced dubious assumptions about naturalness or unself-consciousness in black musical performance. The basic problem, as Du Bois saw it, was that Downes seemed to imagine African American vernacular music as wholly other in its folk authenticity and black formal ambition as tantamount to racial corrup-



1. W. E. B. Du Bois, 1946. Photo by Carl Van Vechten. Courtesy of Carl Van Vechten Trust.

tion. Du Bois responded as he did because Downes's insinuating charge against the Fisk group—namely, the charge of betraying “the uncorrupted manner of their race”—was far from unprecedented.

Many reviewers of Fisk University's various touring singers had reacted to performances in ways that raised troubling questions about the ideological markers of racial difference and the shifting aesthetic borders between presumably natural and artistic expression. These reviewers reinforced an ambivalently complimentary tradition of romantic racialism found, among other places, in abolitionist commentaries on the slave songs in the antebellum era.⁵ Such ambivalence informed many friendly reactions to Fisk University's first and most famous troupe during its historic American and European tours in the 1870s. As we shall see, the brief comments of Downes and Du Bois carried with them a century's worth of implications about African American musical performance and much else besides.

To appreciate the force of Du Bois's rejoinder that “art is not natural and is not supposed to be natural” one needs a clear sense of how the nature/art binary operated in his thought. His polemical riposte to Downes notwithstanding, Du Bois more often treated the relationship between nature and art as dynamic, indeed dialectical, rather than polar and absolute. His early writings reveal how he married a romantic theory of black folk expressivity as unself-conscious (and revelatory of black identity's authentic core) to an elite developmental ideal of formal self-consciousness in art. On the one hand, the polarizing distinction that Du Bois made between nature and art in 1933 privileged art as self-conscious artifice over the supposed naturalness of romanticized folk expressivity. On the other hand, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published when Du Bois was thirty-five years old, anticipated a dialectical reconciliation of art and nature. The prospective reconciliation of black “nature” with cosmopolitan art constituted a tacit aesthetic corollary to Du Bois's intertwining of high cultural idealism and folk romanticism throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*. Both anticipations of reconciliation resonated with that book's influential notion of black “double-consciousness.”

The folk legacy of the “sorrow songs,” according to Du Bois, would provide a passage into the “kingdom of culture” where distinctively black expressive content might find sympathetic expression in idealist cosmopolitan forms. Alain Locke and others among a younger generation of New Negro commentators elaborated variations of Du Bois's perspective, although they would not always earn Du Bois's full approval. Du Bois main-

tained a very brisk rate of scholarship and public writing throughout the decades between the world wars and closely monitored cultural trends as the chief editor of the *Crisis* during most of that period. Newer trends in the interwar years threatened his aesthetic vision with obsolescence as assorted modernist and populist challenges in intellectual discourse echoed transformations in popular culture. Some of the most striking alternatives to Du Bois's aesthetic vision decisively turned away from his synthesis of cultural idealism and folk romanticism. Among the most important symptoms of interwar cultural and intellectual change was the vast public appetite for jazz—including the “hot jazz” made famous by African American musicians—which spread like wildfire across the commercial circuits of the industrialized world.

The analysis offered here approaches Du Bois's views on music and aesthetic thought during the Harlem Renaissance through the formative contexts of *The Souls of Black Folk* and related early writings. These texts allow us to trace how he appropriated the Fisk Singers' legacy in terms of its relevance to his black nationalism and his cosmopolitan dialectic of “double-consciousness.” A short survey of reactions to the original Fisk singing tours provides a backdrop for an inquiry into Du Bois's representation of the “sorrow songs.” Du Bois's elaboration of the “sorrow songs” concept brought together his ideas about the relationship between formal art, folk expression, and social memory.

The “Puzzle” of the Fisk Jubilee Singers

Various distinctions between nature and art animate J. B. T. Marsh's *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1880), the most prominent account of the singing group's early tours. Marsh's discussion of the singers' critical reception highlights their evangelical religious appeal. The book recounts the uplifting success story of the group's tours in the early 1870s and its initial project of raising \$20,000 for Fisk, a freedman's school founded by the American Missionary Association in 1866. Marsh notes in the course of his celebratory narrative that the group's music “was more or less of a puzzle to the critics; and even among those who sympathized with their mission, there was no little difference of opinion as to the artistic merit of their entertainments.”⁶ The singing group raised more than \$100,000 in three years and endured any number of racial humiliations and insults along the way. Although they usually sang in churches or concert halls, some in the audience expected comedic minstrelsy entertainment and ridiculed

the college students for refusing to gratify white expectations for black self-mockery. As the music historian Eileen Southern explains: “The students were not minstrel singers; their program included no jokes, no dances, no catchy tunes. . . . The format of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ concerts was similar to that of concerts presented by white artists of the time, except that a large number of spirituals were included.”⁷ Not least on account of the group’s novel concept, the singers’ presentations inspired various reactions. One could map these reactions across a broad discursive terrain: The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performances could be interpreted as informal, blessedly innocent of artifice, natural, formal, stiff, pretentious, self-consciously artistic, or refined to the point of a higher naturalism. Evading the question of musical value altogether, at least one critic simply dismissed them as a Barnumesque “humbug,” a popular entertainment precisely aimed at puzzling audiences through elaborate fictions.⁸ The “puzzle to the critics” who at least heard the singers as *musicians* was about how and where their music intersected with prevailing aesthetic categories. Upon which scale of value was their music to be measured?

On its first trip outside Nashville in October 1871, the student group of five women and four men (originally named “The Colored Christian Singers”) and George White (Fisk’s white treasurer and choir leader) dealt with basic issues of repertoire and style. The group adjusted its repertoire over time, based on the reactions of audiences. Singing the spirituals before predominately white and uninitiated audiences of outsiders raised concerns about what kind of framing procedures and concert-oriented refinements should be made to the folk songs. Above all, the group wanted to distinguish its mission of university development and religious and aesthetic edification from demeaning minstrel entertainment. It therefore took the route of self-conscious refinement and worked to burnish the “dirty” tonality and improvised arrangements of the folk songs to match the polished, round-toned style cultivated in formal European vocal music. An early white account identified the group as “a band of negro minstrels . . . genuine negroes,” while one newspaper headline described their innovative presentation as “NEGRO MINSTRELSY IN CHURCH—NOVEL RELIGIOUS EXERCISE.”⁹ The early months of the Fisk group’s first tour were not financially successful; however, the tour took on a remarkable second wind during a five-week stay in the New York City area in December 1871.

After receiving a letter from his brother praising the college group, Henry Ward Beecher, the nation’s best-known clergyman, became a proud

supporter of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their school's affiliation with the American Missionary Association. Beecher sponsored a large benefit concert by and for the singing group in his Brooklyn church. The event's success and Beecher's connections led to a month of engagements in the metropolitan New York area and to important contacts for the group's later European tour. Beecher once explained the students' grisly qualifications for singing the spirituals with full emotional authenticity: "only they can sing them who know how to keep time to a master's whip."¹⁰ The novelty of the spirituals became the group's calling card and its claim to fame. Theodore Seward's notes for a collection of transcriptions likewise suggests that "the excellent rendering of the Jubilee Band is made more effective and the interest is intensified by the comparison of their former state of slavery and degradation with the present prospects and hopes of their race, which crowd upon every listener's mind during the singing of their songs."¹¹

According to the Reverend Theodore Cuyler's report to the *New York Tribune* about the group's effect on his Brooklyn congregation, "the wild melodies of these emancipated slaves touched the fount of tears, and gray-haired men wept like little children." The group, in this view, was tremendously affecting, utterly sincere, and free of artifice. Their repertoire included "a fresh collection of the most weird and plaintive hymns sung in the plantation cabins in the dark days of bondage." Such music was "the very embodiment of African heart music." "The harmony of these children of nature and their musical execution," Cuyler exclaimed, "were beyond the reach of art."¹² The Fisk Jubilee Singers' music, it would seem, "touched the fount of tears" and could generate in sensitive listeners foreign to the personal experience of chattel slavery a queer mixture of pain and rapturous pleasure. Both "weird and plaintive," the execution of the native songs of "these children of nature" transcended the confines of ordinary hymn singing and moved to a rarer destination "beyond the reach of art."¹³ Cuyler's evaluation bore witness to impressions of an overpowering, indeed sublime, listening experience at a performance perceived as raw to the point of naturalness and thus "the very embodiment of African heart music." As the musicologist Ronald Radano explains, "only rarely did writers depict the spirituals according to conventional musical images of perceptible beauty. Rather, the songs seemed to test the limits of white comprehension, expressing a transcendent musical perfection born out of some uncharted realm."¹⁴ Generalizations about emotionally affecting music as sublime or as inducing an experience of the sublime, though in-

tended as high praise, could also turn into a trap of racial exoticism in the case of folk musics judged in terms of their unself-conscious authenticity. How, after all, was one to distinguish musical expression (especially when outside the frameworks of European concert music) that went *beyond* art from that which took place *below* art? Deep stereotypes fueled debilitating judgments about black culture in general, even when the performances of prominent black musicians were romanticized and interpreted as taking place outside the reach of self-conscious artistry. Du Bois's retort to Olin Downes in 1933 was, in short, a protest against an interpretive tradition that celebrated black musical performances as emotionally transparent and without artifice.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers had to adjust their original repertoire in order to showcase "Go Down, Moses" and other spirituals that Cuyler referred to as "the most weird and plaintive hymns sung in the plantation cabins." Those distinctive songs generated the most enthusiastic audience reactions. But in contrast to Cuyler's gushing comments that the music constituted something "free of artifice" and therefore was "beyond the reach of art," hostile reactions suggested an entirely different assessment of what the singers and their "wild melodies" were up against. The *New York Herald's* reviewer reduced the group's performances to the comedic genre of minstrelsy: "BEECHER'S NEGRO MINSTRELS . . . THE GREAT PLYMOUTH PREACHER AS AN END MAN . . . A FULL TROUPE OF REAL LIVE DARKIES IN THE TABERNACLE OF THE LORD." The reviewer also lampooned white audiences as "people of a superior race, or [people that] fancy they belong to a superior race, who like to patronize those whom they fancy to be of an inferior or docile race." A reviewer for the *New York World* derided the group's mixed repertoire of hymns, spirituals, and art songs and insisted that "this amateur group of Negro Minstrels should sing camp meeting and nigger melodies rather than opera."¹⁵ Sixty years later, Du Bois interpreted Olin Downes's critique of the Fisk Choir as belonging to this tradition of exoticism and limitation. As Du Bois ventriloquized the discourse: "Negroes must not be allowed to attempt anything more than the frenzy of the primitive, religious revival." The Jubilee Singers' mixed reviews demonstrated that the college students won neither universal praise nor universal respect. Nevertheless, the group's American and European tours during the hopeful era of Reconstruction raised an unexpectedly large amount of money for their school. Latter-day commentators, Du Bois not least among them, would memorialize the early tours as vindicating triumphs.

To Hear "*The Music of a Nation*"

The European tour of 1873 and 1874 constitutes the high point of Marsh's *Story of the Jubilee Singers*. In contrast to the blatant indignities of American racist customs, elite European hosts and audiences offered more respectful recognition to the visiting artists. Marsh relishes the chance to count among the group's audiences the highest political and social leaders. In a private performance for Queen Victoria, they sang the spirituals "Go Down, Moses" and "Steal Away to Jesus" and chanted the Lord's Prayer. A polite breakfast with Britain's Prime Minister William Gladstone, according to Marsh, constituted nothing less than a "rebuke to the caste spirit of America."¹⁶ The sociologist Paul Gilroy suggests that seeing and hearing the Fisk Jubilee Singers presented liberal British patrons an "opportunity to feel closer to God and to redemption." At the same time, "the memory of slavery recovered by [the singers'] performances entrenched the feelings of moral rectitude that flowed from the commitment to political reform for which the imagery of elevation from slavery was emblematic long after emancipation."¹⁷ The Jubilee Singers' performances inspired feelings of righteous vindication for both the visiting African Americans and their hosts, though the groups' feelings were hardly interchangeable. The same had undoubtedly been true in the United States with sympathetic whites who aligned the singing group with the American Missionary Association and its controversial project of black education and evangelical uplift in the South.

Marsh notes the appraisal of Colin Brown, a Glasgow music professor, as an especially insightful commentary. After enjoying a local performance, Brown argued that the Fisk Singers' greatness resided in their attainment of a quality of seamless naturalness that only results from extraordinary discipline and rehearsal. "The highest triumph of art," Brown wrote, "is to be natural." "The singing of these strangers is so natural," he continued, "that it does not at once strike us how much of true art is in it, and how careful and discriminating has been the training bestowed upon them by their accomplished instructor and leader, who, though retiring from public notice, deserves great praise." Any simple distinction between art and nature would not do, regardless of whether George White or the singers deserved the greater share of praise. The singers' triumphant performances only became natural, Brown was suggesting, through the elevating mediations of stylization and artifice. The Scottish commentator thus eschewed the typical remarks about emotional sublimity and natural-

ness in analyzing the singers' effectiveness. His review instead emphasized that only painstaking practice made the breakthrough into seemingly transparent expressivity and artlessness possible. Brown rounded out his assessment by reminding readers that the singers' "careful and discriminating" mastery of artifice in their production of naturalness was hardly their only laudable attribute. The evangelical message at the heart of the singers' precisely modulated performances also commanded attention: "how strange it is that these unpretending singers should come over here to teach us what is the true refinement of music, make us feel its moral and religious power."¹⁸ The greatness of "these unpretending singers" rested not only in a calibrated replication of the presumably unself-conscious attributes of folk singing but in a capacity for grand "moral and religious power."¹⁹ The labor of artifice, the aura of folk authenticity, and an "unpretending" moral sincerity worked together (however paradoxically) to elevate the performance's power, according to Brown.

Evidencing the ongoing "puzzle to the critics," a German minister opined that "these are not concerts which the negroes give; they are meetings for edification, which they sustain with irresistible power."²⁰ Marsh notes the Fisk group's humble background and reports how in Germany "thoughtful people said with surprise, 'We could not take even our German peasantry and reach such results in art, and conduct, and character, in generations of culture, as appear in those freed slaves.'²¹ The comparison, juxtaposing the musical inheritances and social manners of the "freed slaves" and the "German peasantry," reveals another layer of the "puzzle to the critics." A comment attributed to "thoughtful people" in Germany suggests how strangers to the African American spirituals and to their performance could interpret them through general preconceptions about folk cultural practices. Johann Gottfried von Herder's influential writings from the late eighteenth century constituted one context for reactions in Germany and elsewhere, including the United States, to the aura of folk authenticity in the Fisk Jubilee Singers' performances. According to Herder, a pioneering German folklorist and former student of Immanuel Kant, the communal expressive forms of the peasantry (music and language most especially) promised powerful seed material for national cultural expression and icons of organic communal creativity.²² Herder was responding to the limitations of a French-dominated model of universal cosmopolitanism. Each "nation," Herder contended, was to find its unique expressive identity in the humble and peaceable roots of its native folk culture. The purest voice of music was also "the voice of nature" and

thus “the power of tone, the cry of the passions, belongs sympathetically to the whole species, to its bodily and mental constitution.”²³ Herder’s romantic and nationalist conception of folk poetry and music sheds light on the Fisk Singers’ reception and on considerations of music and social memory in the work of Du Bois and others:

But Nature has conferred another beneficent gift on our species, in leaving to such of it’s [*sic*] members as are least stored with ideas the first germe [*sic*] of superiour sense, exhilarating music. Before the child can speak, he is capable of song, or at least of being affected by musical tones; and among the most uncultivated nations music is the first of the fine arts, by which the mind is moved. The pictures, which Nature exhibits to the eye, are so various, changeable, and extensive, that imitative taste must long grope about, and seek the striking in wild and monstrous productions, ere it learns justness of proportion. But music, however, rude and simple, speaks to every human heart; and this, with the dance, constitutes Nature’s general festival throughout the Earth. Pity it is, that most travellers, from too refined a taste, conceal from us these infantile tones of foreign nations. Useless as they may be to the musician, they are instructive to the investigator of man; for the music of a nation, in it’s [*sic*] most imperfect form, and favourite tunes, displays the internal character of the people, that is to say, the proper tone of their sensations, much more truly and profoundly, than the most copious description of external contingencies.²⁴

Music and cultural expression in general, according to Herder’s organicist model, can be measured comparatively and developmentally in terms of group maturation and national distinctiveness.²⁵ More specifically, particular forms of music express the soul of a people qua nation: “the music of a nation, in its most imperfect form, and favourite tunes, displays the internal character of the people.” Nature had granted those “most uncultivated nations” that were “least stored with ideas”—among whom Herder counted sub-Saharan Africans—a compensatory developmental gift for song: an immature nation’s “infantile tones” would necessarily “seek the striking in wild and monstrous productions, ere it learns justness of proportion.” The values of poise, balance, and a formal “justness of proportion” always came late in artistic development.

If audiences appreciated the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ music for its “rude and simple” qualities, the precepts of Herder’s 1784 book *Outline of a Philosophy*

of the History of Man implored them to understand “that imitative taste must long grope about” before it reaches modern European ideals of classic beauty. Thus, “wild” and sublime musical artifacts developmentally predated mature attainments of aesthetic rigor. Additionally, if audiences heard in the Fisk Jubilee Singers “the infantile tones” of a different nation, they may have imagined the “music of a nation” that was black. Some fifteen years later, W. E. B. Du Bois heard the stirrings of self-conscious black nationhood in the legacy of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

In his 1888 graduating address at Fisk University, Du Bois celebrated the autocratic German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck for making a nation “out of bickering peoples.” Du Bois’s prophetic and implicitly self-referential address explained that “the life of this powerful Chancellor illustrates the power and purpose, the force of an idea.”²⁶ The relevant political idea in question was, of course, modern nationalism. It would be inaccurate and misleading to conflate the altogether distinct nationalist agendas of Herder and Bismarck, but for a college-age Du Bois an interwoven conception of an underdeveloped “folk” with a rising “nation” proved irresistible: “American Negroes” also needed to march “forth with strength and determination under trained leadership.”²⁷ The puzzle of the Fisk Jubilee Singers occasioned questions among some listeners about emotional sublimity, Christian edification, and moments of naturalistic expression that transcended “the reach of art.” For Du Bois, the Fisk Singers and their legacy raised political questions as well. Although far from the first black nationalist intellectual in the United States, Du Bois adapted Herderian folk nationalist themes to his intraracial aspirations for top-down Bismarckian leadership. As the literary scholar Arnold Rampersad notes: “Du Bois accepted Herder’s basic terms for the evolution of culture.” “But beyond his deep admiration for the religious songs,” Rampersad continues, “Du Bois was no champion of folk expression. . . . His definition of ‘folk’ is primarily a political one and should be understood as interchangeable with the more daring term ‘nation.’”²⁸

We can now turn to how the impulses to aestheticize “nation” and “race” and to politicize the concept of the “black folk” energized Du Bois’s thought in the late nineteenth century. A driving question for Du Bois was how to rethink black cultural riches inherited from slavery and earlier in relation to black longings for liberation and recognition. Scholars have long recognized that black nationalism and folk romanticism informed his reading of the “sorrow songs.” Some historians and literary scholars have argued further that a dialectical and quasi-Hegelian interpretation of