



They Bear Acquaintance

African American Spirituals and the Camp Meetings

NANCY L. GRAHAM

Peter Lang

Identifying the roots of African American spirituals and other religious folk music has intrigued academics, hymnologists and song leaders since this genre came to the public eye in 1867. The conversation on origins has waned and waxed for over eighty years, sometimes polemical, sometimes compromising. *They Bear Acquaintance* looks at this discussion through the output of various well-regarded researchers from the twentieth century. The effects of cultural distinctions, immigration patterns and class structure have all left their imprint on the anatomy of the music. No one living has ever heard a spiritual performed in an authentic setting, so misconceptions abound. Pre-dating the American Civil War and achieving global attention in the Civil Rights movement, the spirituals soften the edges of difficult situations, and speak gently, yet poignantly, to human struggles. The book also pinpoints new material from a wide range of sources in the twenty-first century that will preserve and affirm this music for many years to come.

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Series Editor

JUNE BOYCE-TILLMAN



PETER LANG

Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Wien

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JUNE BOYCE-TILLMAN (SERIES EDITOR)

Foreword

This is an exciting book showing how the fluidity of music enables fusions and mergers of traditions, and how emotion, theology, and culture interact within the concept of spirituality, especially when it is expressed in musicking. In particular, it focuses on the way in which spirituality in the US is built out of a merger of European and African traditions. Nancy investigates how a dominant culture tried to make stories simple; she disentangles the strands and demonstrates how complex the stories are. It is a carefully researched book and a welcome addition to the series, exploring a particular tradition in a painstaking way and restoring the place in the story of the sacred and secular traditions from Europe alongside the spiritual traditions coming from Africa via the slave trade. Spirituality is most easily expressed in music because of its multi-faceted nature, which speaks to body, mind, emotions and social context, as I explore in the second volume in this series, *Experiencing Music – Restoring the Spiritual* (Boyce-Tillman 2016), and these songs and traditions certainly deserve our attention and bear our acquaintance.

The Rev. Dr June Boyce-Tillman, MBE

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Abbreviations

AAL	African American Lives (PBS)
AFC	American Folklife Center
BB	Billboard Magazine
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BJ	Bruce Jackson
DS	<i>Documenting the American South</i> (UNC)
CAS	<i>A Conjoining of Ancient Song</i> (Willie Ruff)
CDH	<i>The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology</i>
CRH	Centre for Reception History of the Bible
GMU	George Mason University
GPJ	George Pullen Jackson
GT	<i>The Gospel Truth?</i> (Channel 4, UK)
GTG	<i>Glory to God</i> , Hymnal
MHS	Maryland Historical Society
NASB	<i>New American Standard Bible</i>
NPR	National Public Radio
OHS	Ohio Historical Society
OMO	<i>Oxford Music Online</i>
PBS	Public Broadcasting System
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church USA
Ruff	< http://www.willieruff.com >
SS	<i>Siubhal nan Salm</i> (Eyeline Film)
UMC	United Methodist Church
UNC	University of North Carolina
WN	<i>White and Negro Spirituals</i> (GPJ)
YFN	Yoder Family Newsletter
YT	< http://www.youtube.com >

Introduction

This book traces the development of both the early research and ensuing criticism of the conclusions reached as concerns religious folksong of the American South, African American spirituals in particular. New methods of untangling roots of the music and winnowing out the intercontinental connections with the help of digital technology are also examined.

During the last third of the twentieth century much was written about the origins and purpose of African American spirituals. The songs had captured global attention during the US Civil Rights Movement. After the 1960s, many newly enfranchised scholars of black history, James H. Cone (b. 1938), Eileen Southern (1920–2002), John Lovell, Jr. (1907–1974), and Dena Epstein (1916–2013) to name but a few, produced historical accounts of African American music. Often their writing seems to be stacked with an understandable longing for the possession of space in the elusive records and story of slavery. These academics listed often repeatedly ignored the evidence presented by the research of the first half of the twentieth century, or criticized it to the point of irrelevance. The work of one man in particular, George Pullen Jackson (1874–1953), bore the largest and most derogatory share of their judgment.

Jackson, a professor of German at Vanderbilt, had an insatiable interest in folk hymnody of the American South. He gathered an enormous and impressive collection of song, through the many volumes of hymns, spirituals and *Sunday School songs* released in the American hymnal-publication explosion of the late 1800s. Jackson examined the music relative to the waves of immigration from colonial times into the twentieth century. He frequented religious campgrounds, meeting houses, community sings, churches, individuals and any other venue, black or white, to further his research. Early on, Jackson found unmistakable connections between the folk cultures of Great Britain and the United States. As his study progressed into the 1950s, he acknowledged an African, Caribbean, German and Eastern European influence as well. Often, traditions overlapped. In

North America, not surprisingly, the lore from all of the colonists and enslaved Africans mixed with that of the natives.

The American Civil War was waged on United States soil from 1861–1865. Eleven States withdrew from the Union over issues of slavery and its extension into the Western territories. The Confederate States of America were formed with Jefferson Davis as President. No other country officially recognized this formation, though there were several sympathizers, including Great Britain. Essentially this was a division between the industrialized northern states and the southern plantation culture. Both factions raised forces – the Union and the Yankees versus the Confederacy and Johnny Reb. The battles were fierce, costing more lives than those lost in the combined World Wars. In April 1861, the Confederates struck first at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and in retaliation, the Yankees captured the string of islands off the coast of the Carolinas by November. Upon news of the imminent take-over, the plantation owners on the islands fled to the mainland, leaving their plantations to ruin and their slaves to fend for themselves. The Union Army sent a plea north for teachers and agriculturalists to help these new freemen become self-supportive. The result established the Port Royal Experiment. One Charles Pickard Ware (1840–1921), of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was stationed on St. Helena Island. He was a civil administrator during the war, and an educator and musician back home. A strong abolitionist, Ware recognized the unique opportunity at hand to observe and record the songs and dances of these former slaves.

One of his friends, William Francis Allen (1830–1889) a Harvard-educated classics scholar and his wife, Mary Lambert Allen came to St. Helena to run the school. Lucy McKim Garrison (1842–1877), a Philadelphia musician and daughter-in-law of William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) and another friend of Ware's, also responded to the call. Together, they collected, transcribed and notated full songs and segments of songs. In the final volume prepared for publication, 136 Negro spirituals are introduced, many with annotations and alliterated with the dialect of the island. (Allen 1867) This book, *Slave Songs of the United States*, served as the introduction of spirituals to the rest of the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Afrocentrism, the concept of a common African link to all civilization, ran strong in the United States. Across the