Slavery, Freedom, and the Blues
Music in Black Communities Before and After the Civil War

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A mere three months before the United States entered World War II, scholar Charles Johnson visited the town of Mount Bayou, Mississippi, to record an interview with George Johnson, a former slave.[1] On that September day, George Johnson (of no known relation to his interviewer) spoke for over seventy-five minutes about his life, including his experiences as a musician during slavery and freedom. After discussing the songs that slaves sang, of which George Johnson performed several examples, Charles Johnson inquired if his interviewee liked blues music. "Don't like the blues," George responded. "It's too wild for me. I'm scared of it." The interviewer followed up with another question: "You all didn't play any of that kind of music for your dances?" Once again, the answer was negative.[2]

As is the case for many interviews with freed slaves, the Charles Johnson interview suffers from some reliability concerns, if only because he recorded his memories some seventy-five years after freedom came. Still, his remarks are valuable, for they comprise perhaps the only commentary of a former slave on blues music. It is unclear whether his description of blues as "wild" is a remark upon its lyrical content or its performance style. One thing, though, is certain: to Johnson's ears, the music of his

1. The Library of Congress provides helpful biographies of interviewers who made audio recordings with former slaves. See "Charles S. Johnson (1893-1956)," Library of Congress, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.loc.gov/item/n50038921/charles-s-johnson-1893-1956/.

2. George Johnson, interview by Charles Johnson, part 3, *Library of Congress and Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection, 1941-1943*, September 1941, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1941002_afs04778a/. The interview is split into six parts, presumably due to the space limitations of 1940s recording formats. In these time estimates, I have assumed that minimal time elapsed between each section of the interview. For each part of the interview, consult the entry for Johnson in the bibliography below.

younger days was altogether different from the blues music that he heard as he grew older.[3]

Modern scholarship unanimously agrees that blues music owes many of its defining features to the music of Black American slave communities. However, by the estimate of most researchers, blues did not emerge as a genre until sometime around the end of the nineteenth century, several decades after slavery had ended.[4] As Johnson's strong reaction to blues indicates, there was a period of substantial musical evolution between the end of slavery and the beginning of the blues. Unfortunately, that transitional period is not well-documented, especially among the rural folk musicians who developed the genre. The late 1870s through the 1890s are a particular period of silence. The goal of this project is to identify key changes that occurred during that period by comparing the music of slave communities to early blues music, especially rural blues. Many scholars have studied the similarities between the music of slaves and the music of early blues musicians. This project takes a different approach, also emphasizing the differences between those musical cultures. Most key characteristics of blues music were indeed well-established in the spirituals, works songs, and other musical pieces familiar to slaves, but the social and economic realities of slavery prevented blues music from emerging. Blues music did not and *could not* emerge under the conditions of American

3. George Johnson, interview by Charles Johnson, part 3.

4. William L. Ellis, "Mississippi Moan: The Blues Music Legacy of the Delta," In *Defining the Delta: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Lower Mississippi River Delta*, edited by Janelle Collins (University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 161, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ffjg6m; Peter C. Muir, *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America, 1850-1920* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 3, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jj.11033227; Jas Obrecht, *Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt17xx5pz.Obrecht places the origin of the blues roughly at the start of the twentieth century, while Ellis and Muir and emphasize the late nineteenth.

slavery. Instead, the post-slavery development of three key musical traits—guitar-based instrumentation, solo singer-songwriters, and public performance of songs about heartbreak—were necessary steps in the emergence of rural blues.

This paper is divided into three primary sections. The first examines defining traits of rural blues music, the type of blues probably most closely related to the music of slaves. I select eight key musical characteristics to compare against the music of enslaved communities. The second part begins with a discussion of available sources before examining key songs of the music of slaves. The third analyzes major ways the music of slaves differed from blues music, as well as the post-slavery social factors that drove the evolution of blues music.

A Note on Musical Terminology

Throughout this paper, I use the technical terminology of the Western musical tradition. The overwhelming majority of enslaved people, even enslaved musicians, did not receive formal training in music theory. Nevertheless, American slaves experienced and often embraced Western music like hymns and folk songs, and Western traditions influenced the spirituals and other songs that Black musicians themselves composed. However, just like everyday speech, there is no universal language for music, and Western terminology may not always reflect the ways that Black musicians conceptualized music. Sometimes, it is best to think of Western terminology as a translation, not a transcription, of slave musical traditions.

To explain music on paper, it is occasionally necessary to resort to some jargon. This paper frequently discusses scales and chord progressions. Scales are groupings of notes that Westerners perceive as being "in the same key." Two of the most common

scales, the major and minor scales, contain seven notes each. Most listeners perceive the major scale as happy, while they interpret the minor scale as sad. An abbreviated, five-note scale, the pentatonic scale, also exists. It can be either major or minor. In other words, all notes in a particular major pentatonic scale are contained in the major scale of the same key, but not all notes in the major scale are contained in the major pentatonic scale (and the same goes for the minor scales). Chords are built from the notes in scales, typically the major scale. Each note in a major scale is given a number from I through VII (always indicated here with Roman numerals). Each numbered note corresponds to a chord that, once again, Westerners perceive as being "in the key." For example, a G major scale is composed of the notes G, A, B, C, D, E, and F#. The I chord is G, the IV chord is C, and the V chord is D, corresponding to each note's place in the scale. Thus, a I-IV-V chord progression in the key of G major would use the G, C, and D chords. For a fuller introduction of many of these concepts, including an introduction to reading musical notation, Charles Brooks's *A Practical Approach to Understanding Music Theory* is an excellent and accessible starting point.[5]

5. Charles Brooks, *A Practical Approach to Understanding Music Theory* (LibreTexts, 2023), https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Music/Music_Theory/A_Practical_Approach_to_Understanding_Music_Theory_(Brooks).

Chapter 2: Key Traits of Rural Blues

Before examining how the music of American slaves anticipated the development of blues music, it is necessary to establish the defining traits of early blues. Defining folk genres is not an easy task. Even in the early years of blues recordings, the genre was incredibly diverse. The sparse rural (or "county") blues of 1930s Mississippi Delta musicians like Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton is decidedly different from the jazzlike recordings of 1920s urban artists like Ma Rainey.[6] The urban artists entered the recording studio first, though. In 1920, Mamie Smith recorded her hit song "Crazy Blues," a particularly influential track in establishing blues as a marketable genre. Smith's recording marked the first time an all-Black singer and ensemble recorded a blues song, although several white artists had already recorded the blues by that time.[7] "Crazy Blues" is recognizably a blues song, but its relatively complex wind and brass ensemble is a far cry from the sparser rural forms of the genre.[8] In fact, as Jas Obrecht notes in *Early Blues* (2015), the first blues guitar recording was not even made until 1923, when Sylvester Weaver played accompaniment on "Longing for Daddy Blues." That same year, Weaver would become the first known person to record slide guitar for a blues song, his own instrumental "Guitar Blues."[9]

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6. See, for example, Robert Johnson, "Cross Road Blues," Vocalion Records, recorded 1936, originally released in 1937; Charley Patton, "Pony Blues," Paramount Records, originally released in 1929; Ma Rainey "Bo-Weavil Blues," Paramount Records, recorded 1923, originally released in 1924.

7. Adam Gussow, "W. C. Handy and the 'Birth' of the Blues" *Southern Cultures* 24, no. 4 (2018): 44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26554512 and Obrecht, *Early Blues*, 5.

8. See Mamie Smith, "Crazy Blues," OKeh records, recorded and originally released in 1920.

9. Obrecht, *Early Blues*, 9.

Even further removed from rural blues are the many published pieces of the 1910s that Adam Gussow aptly describes as "blues-themed."[10] Gussow writes that W.C. Handy, an early proponent and publisher of "blues-themed" pieces, was sometimes prone to writing "breezy, overblown pop songs" that included *blues* in the title but had no meaningful connection to the genre. Some of these early "blues" songs did borrow from the blues tradition; Gussow himself is more inclined towards viewing Handy's famous "St. Louis Blues" (1914) as an authentic work of blues. [11] Featuring a complex ensemble and brass instrumentation, even this piece is scarcely like the acoustic guitar playing so often associated with rural blues. It does, however, emulate the typical twelve-bar pattern.[12]

An unintuitive but essential point is that these earliest blues *recordings*, especially the urban blues recordings, might not be representative of the earliest blues *music*. As David Brackett noted in 2016, scholars have long favored that view that blues music first emerged in rural communities.[13] Gussow is sympathetic to Harriett Ottenheimer's argument that blues music originated in midwestern urban centers, rather than more rural areas like the Mississippi Delta. The theory is not accepted by most scholars, by Gussow's admission, and scholarly consensus stills favors a rural, Southern origin for the

10. Gussow, "W.C. Handy," 44.

11. Gussow, Adam. "W. C. Handy," 56.

12. The assessment that "St. Louis Blues" is relatively dissimilar to rural blues is my own. See Handy's Memphis Blues Band, "St. Louis Blues," by W.C. Handy, Paramount Records, originally released in 1922.

13. David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2016), 70-71, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1c84fg2.

blues.[14] William Ellis provides another perspective, arguing that the blues emerged "somewhere in the Deep South" without taking a strong view on whether blues first arose in urban or rural communities.[15] The point of this discussion is not to take a side on the urban-rural origin debate. It is important simply to note that records of urban blues artists like Mamie Smith might not reflect the characteristics of blues when the genre first emerged.

For the purposes of this project, rural blues is the appropriate comparison point for the music of enslaved communities. The reasoning is twofold. First, at this stage of scholarship, there does not seem to be conclusive evidence to overturn the longstanding consensus that rural musicians originated the genre. If rural blues did emerge first, then it stands to reason that it is more closely related to the music of enslaved communities. Second, the slave population of the American South was overwhelmingly rural. The themes, instruments, and performances of rural musicians can differ substantially from those of urban musicians. Even if urban blues emerged at the same time as rural blues, one would expect rural blues to be a more useful point of comparison for the music of slaves, although naturally the urban and rural forms of the genre do share many characteristics.

Steven Tracy, writing in 2024, provides one of the most recent scholarly attempts to define the blues. In his work's second chapter, fittingly titled "Defining Blues," Tracy lists several common elements of "folk" (i.e., rural) blues, including twelve and eight-bar verses, repeated lyrical phrases or concepts, "statement-and-response" lyrical structures,

14. Gussow, "W.C. Handy," 48, 50-51.

15. Ellis, "Mississippi Moan," 161.

and tales of personal experiences. [16] Tracy cautions against pigeonholing the blues by claiming that it is universally sad (or for that matter, claiming that any other lyrical subject matter is universal within the genre).[17] It is undeniable, though, that blues lyrics frequently emphasize themes of sadness and isolation, especially in the context of romantic failures.[18]

Tracy speaks little to the tonal language of blues music, but other scholars have studied the common tonal features of blues melodies. In 1974, D.J. Hatch and D.R. Watson published an essay attempting to establish guidelines for identifying blues songs, particularly rural blues. Naturally, they began by first describing some of the key traits of rural blues.[19] In a study of the tonal traits of 400 rural blues songs, they concluded that rural blues pieces typically employed minor pentatonic scales, often adding two "blue notes," the flatted third and flatted seventh of the relevant major scale.[20] Tallmadge similarly observes that blues music frequently utilizes notes that fall outside of traditional

16. Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 59, 76-77, 84-85, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jj.13944081.

17. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 75.

18. For a discussion of blues musicians' depictions of romance, including romance as a form of bondage, see Adam Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 155-157, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469633671_gussow.

19. D.J. Hatch and D. R. Watson, "Hearing the Blues: An Essay in the Sociology of Music," *Acta Sociologica* 17, no. 2 (1974): 162, 166-167, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4193994.

20. Hatch and Watson, "Hearing the Blues," 166, 169-170. Hatch and Watson prefer Solfeggio notation (the popular "do re me" system) because it expresses the general intervals between notes, rather than the notes of specific keys. For the sake of simplicity and to align with the common vocabulary of blues scholars like Jonah Katz (see Katz, "Harmonic Syntax of the Twelve-Bar Blues Form: A Corpus Study," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 35, no. 2 (2017): 169, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26417389), I have converted their Solfeggio notes to standard scale names. Note that Hatch and Watson do refer to blue notes by their standard position within the major scale. In my conversation from the major scale to its relative minor pentatonic, Hatch and Watson's flatted third thus becomes a flatted fifth.

western scales. He emphasizes the importance of the flatted third but acknowledges that many notes are commonly used as blue notes. He also writes that another common feature of blues music is microtonality. In other words, blues musicians often purposefully sing or play notes that are slightly flatter or sharper than the traditional twelve Western notes.[21] Harmonically, blues music tends to rely on the first, fourth, and fifth chords of the key. Jonan Katz, writing in 2017, describes the twelve-bar blues following a I-IV-I-V-IV-I chord progression as the "canonical form of early blues genre recordings."[22]

Call-and-response structures and improvisation are key and closely linked elements of blues music. As far back as 1980, gospel singer and musicologist Richard Smallwood noted that instrumental improvisations often serve as a response to a singer's initial statement in blues music.[23] Tracy similarly identifies the "interplay between music and lyrics" as a common manifestation of the call-and-response form in blues music.[24] While not specifically addressing call-and-response traditions, Eric Rothenbuhler writes that performing at street corners or dances, as many early blues artists did, demanded a flexible approach to melody and structure. Unlike the studio recording artist, who could decide when the song should end, live blues musicians might have needed to extend a

21. William Tallmadge, "Blue Notes and Blue Tonality," *The Black Perspective in Music* 12, no. 2 (1984): 155-157, 159, https://doi.org/10.2307/1215019.

22. Katz, "Harmonic Syntax," 169. Katz's phrasing is ambiguous; it is unclear whether he is calling the twelve-bar form as canonical or if he intends to say that the progression given here (derived from the songs of blues musician Robert Johnson) is the canonical version of the twelve-bar form. In either case, he describes this specific twelve-bar chord pattern as "ubiquitous in rock and other popular genres."

23. Richard Smallwood, "Gospel and Blues Improvisation," *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 5 (1980): 100, https://doi.org/10.2307/3395785.

24. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 77.

song until an audience began to lose interest in it.[25] Of course, improvisation was not limited to instrumental melodies. As David Evans notes, improvised lyrics also appear in recordings of early blues music, especially in rural blues.[26]

In addition to its structural and melodic distinctives, rural blues favors certain arrangements and instrumentation. Hatch and Watson write that the individual singer-guitar player dominates popular conceptions of rural blues musicians.[27] There is at least some truth in the stereotype. Guitar is not the only instrument of country blues, but it is the defining one. As John Troutman notes, slide guitar playing—lightly pressing a bottle or other cylindrical object against the strings to effectively create a fretless guitar—was a particular favorite technique of rural blues musicians.[28]

Blues vocals also has a unique style. Tracy notes that microtonality (a characteristic discussed above) and note slurring (sliding between notes) were common in early blues vocals. The "holler" of slavery, according to Tracy, influenced the intense vocal style of some blues artists.[29] It takes no musical training to hear the unique vocal style of early rural blues musicians. Far from the polished expectations of classical Western singing, recordings from artists like Jefferson and Johnson anticipate the yells

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25. Eric W. Rothenbuhler, "For-the-Record Aesthetics and Robert Johnson's Blues Style as a Product of Recorded Culture," *Popular Music* 26, no. 1 (2007): 70-71, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4500300.

26. David Evans, "Formulaic Composition in the Blues: A View from the Field," *The Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 478 (2007): 489, https://doi.org/10.2307/20487579.

27. Hatch and Watson, "Hearing the Blues," 167. Many of the famous country blues players of that era, such Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charlie Patton, and Robert Johnson, were primarily or exclusively solo recording artists.

28. Hatch and Watson, "Hearing the Blues," 167; John W. Troutman, "Steelin' the Slide: Hawai'i and the Birth of the Blues Guitar," *Southern Cultures* 19, no. 1 (2013): 27, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26216194.

29. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 70-71, 75.

and screams of later rock musicians.[30] Here, Hatch and Watson's emphasis on solo performers appears again relevant; Jefferson, Johnson, and many other blues performers sang by themselves.[31]

The work of these scholars is representative of the general consensus of blues researchers. Combined, their findings reveal eight key traits of rural blues music:

1. Lyrics about deeply personal, emotional experiences, particularly romantic heartbreak
2. Repeated lyrics, either in the refrain or the beginning of each verse
3. Chord progressions that utilize the I, IV, and V chords, particularly in twelve or eight-bar verses
4. Pentatonic melodies
5. Tonality that falls outside traditional Western conventions (microtones, blue notes)
6. Solo vocals with (by Western, classical standards) "unpolished" or intense vocal styles
7. Improvisation and call-and-response forms
8. Use of guitar, especially slide guitar

These traits are far from the only hallmarks of rural blues, and a reasonable person could probably argue for subtracting or adding some characteristics. Not all these features, or even a majority of them, appear in every blues song. These eights traits do, however, provide at least a starting point for understanding the sorts of patterns and techniques that characterize the blues. With these musical traits established, it is possible to compare them to the characteristics of music in American slave communities.

30. See, for example Blind Lemon Jefferson, "That Black Snake Moan," Paramount Records, recorded and originally released in 1926, and Robert Johnson, "Sweet Home Chicago," Vocalion Records, recorded 1936, originally released in 1937.

31. Hatch and Watson, "Hearing the Blues," 167.

Chapter 3: The Music of Slaves

Nineteenth-century sources rarely discuss the music of slaves in detail, and enslaved people left few direct records of their music. Most slaves were illiterate, and even most literate slaves lacked the training to read or write musical notation. White slaveowners and their families, who had better access to the music of slaves than perhaps any other free demographic, had little interest in recording the music of the people they enslaved; the topic barely appears in plantation diaries. The white journalists who wrote for Southern newspapers had a similar disinterest in slave musical culture. Nobody in the nineteenth century (Northern or Southern, white or Black) ever systematically catalogued the music of slaves. As such, much of the nineteenth-century evidence about slave music comes from ad-hoc observations in the journals and memoirs of non-slaveowners.

Fortunately, the witness accounts that do exist come from diverse backgrounds. Plantation visitors Fanny Kemble and Thomas Wentworth Higginson separately recorded their observations of music that slaves sang. On the eve of the Civil War, architect Frederick Law Olmsted published a three-part narrative of his journeys through the entire American South, occasionally discussing the music he heard. At least two former slaves also left commentary on the music they witnessed in the South. Solomon Northrup, a Northern Black man who was kidnapped and enslaved for twelve years, described the musical cultures he experienced. Perhaps the most famous former slave, Frederick Douglass provided unique insights about the psychology of slaves' music in his autobiography. Each of the witnesses makes valuable observations, and some record specific lyrics they recall hearing. None, however, were primarily interested in documenting the music of slaves. They provide snippets and vignettes of a rich musical

culture, not a comprehensive overview of it.

The best nineteenth-century catalogue of enslaved people's music is from 1867, when William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published *Slaves Songs of the United States*. The collection contains music and lyrics for 136 songs that slaves wrote or performed. It is an ambitious work, and an invaluable one for studying the music of enslaved people. Allen, Ware, and Garrison were sympathetic to the people whose music they recorded, and their introduction helpfully compared slave singing to the broader musical culture of the 1860s.[32] Published only two years after the war ended, the material in *Slave Songs* draws upon direct witness accounts of music in Black communities, including the editors' own field work.[33] There is little reason to doubt the authenticity of its contents.

However, the collection has its limits. The work's introduction notes that most of the songs in the project are spirituals. Spirituals were undeniably popular in the Black communities that invented them, but the genre may be overrepresented in *Slave Songs*. Geographical representation is also a weakness of the collection. Nearly two-thirds of its songs originated in South Carolina, Georgia, or adjacent islands. It appears that many of the songs were attested by only one witness, so the collection's association of songs with particular states may not even be entirely accurate.[34] Furthermore, the editors purposefully excluded songs that they believed were the product of non-Black communities. The work does not include songs that were popular among slaves but were

32. William Francis Allen et al., *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867), i-xlii, https://archive.org/details/slavesongsofunit00alle/mode/1up.

33. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, iii.

34. Allen et al., *Slave Songs,* xx, xxxix-xlii.

written by non-slave songwriters.[35] Preserving the music written by enslaved people was a noble goal, but the exclusion of other music means that *Slave Songs* may not fully represent the types of songs that were prevalent in slave communities.

To gain a better sense of what music was popular among slaves, this paper leans heavily on the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews with former slaves. As part of its Federal Writers Project, the WPA interviewed more than two-thousand former slaves between 1936 and 1938.[36] The WPA interviews contain hundreds of references to specific pieces of music. Many of these songs are mentioned only once or twice, but some pieces appear in numerous interviews. Former slaves from every state in the Confederacy and every border state except Delaware are represented in the narratives, although some states are better documented than others. In addition to specific musical references, hundreds of interviews discuss the instruments, themes, and social events that defined the musical life of Black Southerners.[37]

The WPA interviews are a fascinating but controversial source. Many historians have emphasized the shortcomings of the interviews, while many others have argued for the careful use of them. There is no need to repeat seventy-five years of historical debate here. Suffice to say that modern scholars typically agree that the interviews are useful but

35. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, vi.

36. For a general history of the WPA narratives, from which I have drawn these numbers, see Jeff Strickland, "Teaching the History of Slavery in the United States with Interviews: Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 4 (2014): 4, https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerethnhist.33.4.0041.

37. The Federal Writers Project, *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, 17 vols. (Library of Congress, 1941), https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/?fa=online-format%3Apdf&st=list&c=50.

require careful interpretation.[38]

Scholarly works on the origin of blues music have underutilized the WPA interviews, no doubt because they remain such a controversial source. Samuel Charters, for instance, did not consult the narratives in his 1959 history *The County Blues*, a pioneering work in blues scholarship, and even more recent scholarship often continues the trend.[39] For example, in David Evan's 2008 collection *Ramblin' on My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, only one of the book's eleven contributors—John Minton—makes any reference to the WPA narratives.[40] Peter Muir's 2009 work *Long Lost Blues: Popular Blues in America* studies the influence of slaves' music and "proto-blues" without once referencing the WPA narratives.[41] Within the last decade, some cultural scholars have begun to show more attention to the narratives. Gussow's 2017 work *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* incorporates evidence from the interviews, albeit not in any systematic way.[42] Ronald Baker, in his work on the Indiana interviewees, calls the WPA narratives "essential reading" for any study of folk history, a discipline in which he includes music.[43]

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38. For a general overview of historiographical debates on the interviews see Strickland, "Teaching the History of Slavery," 41-43. For some additional perspectives on the interviews, see Norman R. Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1984): 181–210, https://doi.org/10.2307/2712724; and Ronald L. Baker, *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless: The WPA Interviews with Former Slaves Living in Indiana* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 56–56, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005wbk.

39. See Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1959), https://archive.org/details/countryblues00char/mode/1up.

40. See John Minton, "Houston Creoles and Zydeco: The Emergence of an African-American Urban Popular Style," in *Ramblin' On My Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, ed. David Evans (University of Illinois Press, 2008), 391, ProQuest Ebook Central.

41. Muir, *Long Lost Blues,* 103, 181, 221-242.

42. Gussow, *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition*, 61-62, 114.

43. Baker, *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless*, 56.

Recent studies from clinical psychologists may support the judgement that the interviews are particularly well suited to the study of music. At least one overview of memory among dementia patients has found that musical memory is sometimes "relatively preserved" in otherwise cognitively impaired patients. More clinical data is probably needed to be certain, but the tentative consensuses among both historians and psychologists would indicate that the WPA interviews are a viable source for studying music.[44]

The WPA collection provides a uniquely humanizing window into the musical culture of the Black South, but interpreting its musical content also poses some unique limitations. Most obviously, the interviews are written, not recorded, so the melodies of songs are not always apparent. Only one interview includes any musical notation, a hand-written melody line for a song called "Lord Be with Us."[45] Sometimes, other sources, like hymnals or published sheet music, provide insight into the melodies associated with lyrics. However, it is not always possible to use contemporary sources to confirm the melody of spirituals that emerged in enslaved Black communities, which did not tend to appear in antebellum hymnals.

One of the most significant difficulties of working with the interviews is the lack of consistent song titles. A single song might go by multiple titles, and many songs share

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44. Rohani Omar et al., "Semantic Memory for Music in Dementia," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 29, no. 5 (2012): 469, 474, https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2012.29.5.467; Baker, *Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless*, 41-42, 56.

45. Catherine Scales, interview by Nancy Watkins, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XI: North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of North Carolina (Library of Congress, 1941), 248-249, https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn112.

similar titles without necessarily being related. It is therefore difficult to know how often a particular song is referenced or whether two similarly titled songs are even related. Take, for example, "Hark from the Tomb a Doleful Sound," one of the most commonly referenced songs in the interviews.[46] The song is referenced in many interviews. Some former slaves refer to the hymn by its traditional title, or at least the first four words, but other interviewees use variant names for the song.[47] At least four former slaves from Georgia, all interviewed by Grace McCune, refer to a song called "Harps from de Tomb."[48] One former slave from Tennessee recalled a song titled "Hark fum de Ground Dis Mournful Sound."[49] Another interviewee, living in Missouri at the time of his interview, referenced a song called "Heart from the Tombs Mournful Sound."[50] Given the

46. For an assessment of the hymn's popularity among slaves, see John Minton, *Folk Music and Song in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives* (University Press of Mississippi, 2024), 355-356, 373, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.24215707.

47. Aleck Woodward, interview by W.W. Dixon, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XIV: South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of South Carolina, (Library of Congress, 1941), 254, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.144; Willis Cofer, interview by Grace McCune, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume IV; Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Georgia (Library of Congress, 1941), 208, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.041

48. Robert Shepherd, interview by Grace McCune, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume IV: Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Georgia, (Library of Congress, 1941), 252, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.043; Nancy Smith, interview by Grace McCune, in *Volume IV: Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 300; Julia Larken, edited by Grace McCune, in *Volume IV: Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 43; Cordelia Thomas, interview by Grace McCune, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume IV: Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Georgia (Library of Congress, 1941), 20, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.044. Note that throughout this paper, I have standardized the capitalization of song titles, but not their spelling.

49. Frances Batson, interviewer unknown, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XV: Tennessee Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Tennessee (Library of Congress, 1941), 2, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.150.

50. Lewis Mundy, interviewer unknown, in in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume X: Missouri Narratives*, collected by the Federal

metrical and thematic similarities between these titles, it is almost certain that they refer to variations of the same song. No doubt regional and local improvisations are responsible for some of these differences. It is also possible that the interviewers, attempting to capture the dialects of their subjects, may have inadvertently created the false impression of title variations. John Minton's recent work *Folk Music and Songs in the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives* has proven invaluably helpful in assessing how often individual songs occur; except where otherwise noted, all such counts in this paper are derived from his work.[51]

Because the WPA interviewees were not always reliable, even references to music need to be examined critically. Here, I have adopted three primary criteria to assess whether a song mentioned in the WPA interviews was likely popular in slave communities. First, the song must appear in multiple interviews. I have not selected any arbitrary cutoff number, but if a song appears in only a small handful of interviews, I avoid using the song to make broad judgements about the music of slave communities. Second, the song must be attested in multiple states. This criterion applies both to the state where the interviewee was enslaved, as well as the state where they were interviewed. The rule services a twofold purpose. It ensures that a song's popularity was more than a local phenomenon, and it also reduces the influence of individual WPA writers' interests. Third, the song must appear in some other source roughly

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Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Missouri, (Library of Congress, 1941), 260, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.100.

51. See, for example, Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 347–84. Minton does not always provide exact counts for how many times each song appears, but instead sometimes lists every interview that, in his assessment, references the song. All references to specific interviews, and any analysis of them, are my own work, except where otherwise noted.

contemporary to the Civil War. The following pages examine the songs that best meet those criteria.

Nine pieces of music stand out as the most widely referenced songs in the WPA narratives. They are "Run, Nigger, Run" (fifty-plus references), "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" (forty-four references), "Hark from the Tomb a Doleful Sound" (thirty-four references), "Amazing Grace" (thirty-four references), "The Good Old Time Religion" (thirty-one references), "Dixie" (twenty-nine references), "John Brown's Body" (twenty-five references, including several incarnations of the song)," "Am I Born to Die to Lay This Body Down" (twenty-four references), and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (eighteen references).[52] Because songs titles were inconsistent, it can be hard to determine exactly how often individual songs appear in the WPA interviews.[53] However, these nine songs appear to be the only musical pieces in the collection that are clearly attested about twenty times or more. The twenty-reference standard is not a hard cutoff point (as evidenced by the inclusion of "Swing Low"). No hard threshold could ever be entirely fair, but the gap in attestations between these songs and others in the collection is generally substantial. These songs also represent a broad range of genres, including spirituals, hymns, and political songs.

More than fifty WPA narratives reference "Run, Nigger Run," a song about slaves fleeing from patrols. By Minton's count, it is the most popular song in the collection, and WPA interviewees from across the South recall hearing it.[54] Former slaves do not

52. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 232, 364, 366, 373, 380, 405, 624, 634, 643.

53. For examples of these difficulties, see Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 625n4, 641-642n37.

54. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 232.

consistently identify the song with a particular context or social occasion, although some interviewees recall hearing it at slave dances.[55] The song's origin and authorship are unclear, but the version found in the WPA interviews is attested as early as 1867, when a fragment of it appeared in *Slave Songs of the United States*.[56] The song does not appear in other publications from that era, but its subject matter and frequent occurrence in the WPA narratives provide strong evidence that the song was already popular by the end of the Civil War.

In fact, predecessors of the song mentioned in the WPA interviews may have existed well before the Civil War. John and Alan Lomax, writing in 1934, cite evidence that the song's refrain first emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion.[57] At least one recent scholar of the Lomaxes, Jonathan W. Stone, accepts their claim.[58] However, the Lomax book does not provide any evidence from Nat Turner's

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55. Dora Franks, interview by Mrs. Richard Kolb, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume IX: Mississippi Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Mississippi (Library of Congress, 1941), 53, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.090; Cecilia Chappel, interviewer unknown, in *Tennessee Narratives*, 8; William Curtis, interviewer unknown, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XIII: Oklahoma Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Oklahoma (Library of Congress, 1941), 48, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.130; Anthony Dawson, interviewer unknown, in *Oklahoma Narratives*, 65; Callie Elder, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 311; John Moore, interviewer unknown, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XVI; Texas Narratives; Part 3*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Texas (Library of Congress, 1941), 126, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.163.

56. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 89.

57. John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (The Macmillan Company, 1934, repr., The Macmillan Company 1967), 288-229. https://archive.org/details/americanballadsf00loma/mode/1up.

58. Jonathan W. Stone, *Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of African American Folksong in the 1930s* (University of Michigan Press, 2021), 86, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.9871097.7.

time to indicate the song existed. In fact, it cites no antebellum evidence at all. Instead, the book attributes the story to a 1911 letter by one George B. Elliot, who was in turn citing a letter written to him by O.B. Smith, a resident of North Carolina. It is conceivable that "Run, Nigger, Run" originated in the post-Nat Turner crackdowns, as the Lomaxes suggest. It is just as possible that Smith, writing over seventy-five years later, was mistaken.[59]

Still, the subject matter of "Run, Nigger, Run" strongly indicates the song was written before the Civil War ended. Patrols and surveillance were pervasive realities of enslaved life. While the song may have been especially personal to slaves who dared to stray off the plantation without a pass, the physical boundaries of the master's property and the punishment for transgressing those boundaries were relevant to every slave. Racial discrimination and extralegal violence maintained some of those boundaries even after the war, but the song's vocabulary suggests a slave-time origin. The Ku Klux Klan and patrollers may have used similar tactics of intimidation and violence, but the specific reference to "pattyrollers," not the Ku Klux Klan, is telling. A Reconstruction-era variant of the song did exist; one interviewee referred to a song with lyrics "Run nigger run, the Ku Klux get you."[60] However, that interview is the only reference to the Reconstruction

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59. John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads*, 228-229. Newman Ivey White, writing in 1928, claims that the 1851 minstrel collection *White Serenaders' Song Book* contains a pre-war version of "Run, Nigger, Run." However, examination of the collection reveals no such song. It is unclear if White was simply mistaken or if he had access to a different edition than the one used for research here. See Newman I. White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Harvard University Press, 1928), 168, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951001728860q and Charles White, *White's Serenaders' Song Book: Illustrated with Numerous Engravings* […] (Philadelphia, 1851), https://digital.library.temple.edu/digital/collection/p16002coll5/id/3261.

60. Aleck Trimble, interview by Fred Dibble and Rheba Beehler, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XVI; Texas Narratives; Part 4*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Texas (Library of Congress, 1941), 114, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.164.

version of the song in the WPA narratives. It apparently never achieved the popularity of the version of the song that references slave-time patrollers, which suggests that the patroller version was older and better established. The song's portrayal of slaves attempting to return home without getting caught best reflects the pre-Civil War world. Indeed, the expression "run, nigger, run" in association with patrollers was apparently well known by the time of the war, although not necessarily in a musical context. An 1863 correspondent to the *Fayetteville Observer* quoted the expression "run, nigger, run, patrol catch you," parodying it with a similar expression about escaping conscription agents. The correspondent clearly expected his audience to be familiar with the saying.[61]

The earliest reliable evidence for the song itself is its appearance in *Slave Songs of the United States*. Even if the song originated much earlier, *Slave Songs* marks the earliest version of the song as it later appeared in the WPA interviews. In *Slave Songs of the United States*, the following lyrics appear:

> Oh some tell me that a nigger won't steal,
> But I've seen a nigger in my corn-field
> O run, nigger run, for the patrol will get you
> O run, nigger, run, for 'tis almost day[62]

The final two lines of the song appear to be the chorus, as they are frequently quoted by themselves in the WPA collection. For example, James Singleton of Mississippi, born in 1856, recalled the song's lyrics as "Run nigger run, the pattyrollers ketch you, run nigger run, it's breakin' days."[63]

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61. "From Eastern North Carolina," *Fayetteville Observer*, June 8, 1863, Gale Nineteenth Century Newspapers.

62. Allen et al., *Slave* Songs, 89.

63. James Singleton, interviewer unknown, in *Mississippi Narratives*, 126. For a similar account see Dora Franks, interview by Mrs. Richard Kolb, in *Mississippi Narratives*, 53.

Besides the titular phrase ("Run, Nigger, Run"), which was a nearly ubiquitous part of the song, the lyrics may have varied considerably. The sardonic claim that "a nigger won't steal" appears in a WPA interview *with ninety-year-old former slave Hannah Jones, who recalled the lyrics "*White folks says a nigger won't steal/But I cotched six in my cawnfiel." However, she made no clear reference to slave patrols or the "Run, nigger, run" lyric.[64] Two additional interviewees included the stealing lyrics, both times in conjunction with references to "Run, Nigger, Run." *Both interviewees were born around 1860, however, which raises questions about whether they truly had wartime memories.*[65] *While all available evidence suggests that* the stealing lyric was an established part of the song by the end of the Civil War, it remains possible that it was a regional variation that only later became a widespread part of the song. It is likewise uncertain whether the phrase was part of a verse or the chorus.

A possible candidate for an additional "Run, Nigger, Run" verse appears in two WPA interviews. The first, from former Alabama slave Penny Thompson (aged eighty-six), contains the following lyrics:

> Up de hill and down de hallow
> Patter rollers cotched nigger by de collar;
> Dat nigger run, dat nigger flew,
> Dat nigger tear his shirt in two[66]

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64. Hannah Jones, interview by Pigie T Hix, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume I; Alabama Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Alabama, 239, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.010.

65. Kitty Hill, interview by T. Pat Matthews, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XI: North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of North Carolina (Library of Congress, 1941) 424, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.111; John C. Bectom, interview by T. Pat Matthews, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 95.

66. Louis Fowler, interviewer unknown, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XVI; Texas Narratives; Part 2*, collected by the

The second interview, from former Georgia slave Louis Fowler (aged eighty-four), provides nearly identical lyrics, with "white man" substituted for "Patter rollers" in the second line. Fowler did, however, note that the song was about the patrollers.[67] This set of lyrics roughly matches the structure and syllable count of the lyrics attested in *Slave Songs*.[68] Considering the shared subject matter of escaping patrollers, a relationship between "Up de Hill and Down the Hollow" and "Run, Nigger, Run" is extremely likely.

Consistent with their belief that slaves did not employ harmony parts, the editors of *Slave Songs* included only a melody line for "Run, Nigger, Run." The melody primarily draws from an E minor pentatonic scale (essentially a E minor scale with two notes removed), but it briefly includes a note from the natural minor scale (C natural) at the end of the refrain.[69]

With forty-four mentions, "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" appears more often than any other song in the WPA collection, besides "Run, Nigger, Run."[70] If publication frequency is any indicator, "On Jordan's Stormy Banks" was extremely popular among general American congregations, appearing in over 150 hymnals from around the time of the Civil War.[71] The song's textual history, and even its title, are

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Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Texas (Library of Congress, 1941), 52, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.162.

67. Penny Thompson, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 4*, 105.

68. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 89.

69. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 89.

70. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 380.

71. Instance data for "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," Hymnary.org, accessed March 18, 2025, pages 5-9, https://hymnary.org/search?page=4&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eon_jordans_stormy_banks_i_stand%24%22&sort=publicationDate,

complicated. At least one hymnal refers to the song as “Heavenly Canaan” and includes a chorus that consists of a sole repeated line: “Let us never mind the scoffs.” In a different hymnal, the song is titled “Prospect of the Promised Land.” Yet another hymnal retains the “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks” title but includes a refrain that begins with “There’ll be no more sorrowing there.” An 1864 version of the hymn uses the title “The Promised Land,” while retaining the usual first verse and a chorus referencing “that happy shore.” In the 1865 hymnal *Hallowed Songs*, the song appears under the title “The Promised Land” but contains no mention of being bound for such a place. Notably, the song’s initial verse remains largely stable across all of these versions.[72] Minton writes that

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https://hymnary.org/search?page=5&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eon_jordans_stormy_banks_i_stand%24%22&sort=publicationDate, https://hymnary.org/search?page=6&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eon_jordans_stormy_banks_i_stand%24%22&sort=publicationDate, https://hymnary.org/search?page=7&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eon_jordans_stormy_banks_i_stand%24%22&sort=publicationDate, https://hymnary.org/search?page=8&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eon_jordans_stormy_banks_i_stand%24%22&sort=publicationDate. Unless otherwise noted, all references to hymnals are taken from the Hymnary.org project, a searchable database of songs and hymnals, including scans of original texts. When using the database to estimate the number of published instances of a song, I have included only instances where a page scan was available to confirm the presence of the song in a given hymnal. I have manually excluded any non-American hymnals whenever publication data indicated a non-American place of publication.

72. Samuel Stennett, “Heavenly Canaan,” in *Bradbury’s Golden Chain of Sabbath School Melodies*, ed. W.M. B. Bradbury (New York, Chicago, 1861), 53, https://hymnary.org/hymn/BGCS1861/page/i; Samuel Stennett, “Prospect of the Promised Land” in *The Gospel Psalmist; A Collection of Hymns and Tunes for Public, Social, and Private Devotion*, ed. J.G. Adams and S.B. Ball (Boston, 1861), 667, https://hymnary.org/hymn/GP1861/page/i; Samuel Stennett, “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks,” in *The Polyphonic; or Juvenile Choralist; Containing a Great Variety of Music and Hymns Both New & Old*, ed. A.D. Fillmore and C.L. Fillmore (Cincinnati, 1863), 10, https://hymnary.org/hymn/P1863/page/i; Samuel Stennett, “The Heavenly Canaan,” in *Vestry Chimes; A Choice Collection of Sacred Music, Adapted to All Occasions of Social Worship*, ed. Asa Hull (Boston, 1864), 109, https://hymnary.org/hymn/VC1864/page/ii; Samuel Stennett, “The Promised Land,” in *Hallowed Songs*, ed. Theo E. Perkins et al. (New York, 1865), 149, https://hymnary.org/hymn/HS1865`/page/i; see also Samuel Stennett, “The Promised Land,” in *Pocket Hymns, Original and Selected, Designed for the Use of the Regular Baptist Church and All Who Love Our Lord Jesus Christ*, ed. Isaac N. Vanmeter (Illinois, 1867), 227-228, https://hymnary.org/hymn/PHOS1867/page/cover; Samuel Stennett, “The Promised Land,” in *The Centenary Singer* (New York, Cincinnati, 1867), 287, https://hymnary.org/hymn/CS1867/page/ii; Stennett, Samuel. “The Promised Land.” In *Hymns for All Christians*, ed. Charles F. Deems and Phœbe Cary (New York, 1869), 141-142, https://hymnary.org/hymn/H4AC1869/page/i; Samuel Stennett, “The Promised

former slaves referred to the song either as "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" or as "I am Bound for the Promised Land."[73] The first title is drawn from the lyrics of the hymn's initial verse.

> On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
> And cast a wishful eye
> To Canaan's fair and happy land
> Where my possessions lie.

The lyrics here are taken from the 1859 edition of *The Baptist Hymn Book*, but they are largely identical across hymnals from the era. Hymnals provide a variety of melodies for the song.[74]

Theodore Seward and George White's 1872 collection *Jubilee Songs* provides some evidence for a melody that slaves might have associated with the song. White was the faculty overseer of the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, a Black vocal ensemble whose repertoire included spirituals; Seward, an interested observer, was the editor a New York music magazine. Their collection of transcriptions contains both music and lyrics for dozens of spirituals.[75] Seward writes that "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand,"

Land," in *Hallowed Songs. (Newly Revised.)*, revised edition, ed. Philip Phillips (New York, 1870), 228-229, https://hymnary.org/hymn/HS1870/page/i.

73. Here, I owe a very great debt to Minton's work for establishing these two titles as belonging to the same song. See Minton, *Folk Music and Songs*, 380.

74. Samuel Stennett, "The Promised Land," in *The Baptist Hymn Book, Comprising a Large and Choice Collection of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, Adapted to the Faith and Order of the Old School, or Primitive Baptists, of the United States of America*, second stereotype edition, ed. Gilbert Beebe (New York, 1859), 760-761, https://hymnary.org/hymn/BHB1887/page/i. See also Samuel Stennett (lyrics) and Josiah Lowe (music), "Canaan," in *Devotional Melodies; Or, a Collection of Original and Selected Tunes and Hymns, Designed for Congregational and Social Worship*, 3rd edition, ed. A.S. Jenks (Philadelphia, 1859), 195, https://hymnary.org/hymn/DM31859/page/i. For a version of the song that substitutes "rugged" for "stormy," see Samuel Stennett, "On Jordan's Rugged Banks I Stand," in *The Baptist Hymn and Tune Book: Being "The Plymouth Collection" Enlarged, and Adapted to the Use of Baptist Churches*, ed. John Stanford Holme (New York, 1858), 412, https://hymnary.org/hymn/BHTB1868/page/i.

75. Theo. F. Seward and George White, *Jubilee Songs: Complete. As Sung by the Jubilee Singers, of Fisk University, (Nashville, Tenn.) Under the Auspices of the American Missionary Association* (New

or at least is titular phrase, was "sometimes" associated with the tune of the spiritual "Children, We All Shall Be Free." According to Seward's notation, the Jubilee Singers performed "Children, We All Shall Be Free," in the of E♭ major. However, the chord progression primarily employs the E minor and A minor chords, and the melody line uses the notes B, C, G, F, E, and A. These notes suggest that the melody instead was in the key of C major, or that it heavily employed blue notes that fell outside the E♭ *major scale*.[76] Of course, it is possible that the "Children We All Shall Be Free" melody only sporadically accompanied the lyrics to "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." Like many other popular songs form the WPA narratives, the tonal and harmonic structure of "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" as slaves sang it ultimately remains unclear.

John Newton's famous hymn "Amazing Grace" appears at least thirty-four times in the WPA narratives.[77] The song is also remarkably well-attested in hymnals from the Civil War Era, appearing in one-hundred American publications from 1855 through 1870.[78] WPA interviewees, including at least one who remembered singing "Amazing

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York, 1872), 2-3, 8, https://archive.org/details/jubileesongscomp00sewa/mode/1up. Note that only Seward is formally credited for authorship of *Jubilee Songs*, but White provided lyrics for the book. For basic background information on Seward and White, which I used in writing this footnoted material, see E.M. Cravath, introduction of *Jubilee Songs*, 4. For further reading, see G.D. Pike, *The Jubilee Singers and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston, 1873), https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/jubileesingersth00pike.

76. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 13.

77. Minton, *Folk Music and Songs*, 364.

78. Instance data for "Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound," Hymnary.org, accessed March 18, 2025, pages 4-6, https://hymnary.org/search?page=3&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eamazing_grace_how_sweet_the_sound%24%22&sort=publicationDate, https://hymnary.org/search?page=4&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eamazing_grace_how_sweet_the_sound%24%22&sort=publicationDate, https://hymnary.org/search?page=5&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eamazing_grace_how_sweet_the_sound%24%22&sort=publicationDate.

Grace," sometimes recall being encouraged or required to attend their white slaveowner's church.[79] It is likely that some slaves learned "Amazing Grace" and other such hymns at white church services, but no doubt the song was also passed on by word of mouth within slave communities. Many enslaved people forged their own relationship with the song at funerals and baptisms, where "Amazing Grace" was sometimes sung.[80]

The freed slaves in the WPA interviews often do not specify which verses of the hymn they sung. Given that several slaves refer to the song by the title of "Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound," at least the first verse must have been popular.[81] The first verse, as it appears in the 1859 edition of *The Baptist Hymn*, reads:

> Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound!)
> That saved a wretch like me;
> I once was lost but now am found
> Was blind but now I see.[82]

The text of the song appears to have been largely stable by this time. The 1860 hymnbook *Baptist Chorales* provides all the same lyrics, although it adds a sixth verse.[83]

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79. Aleck Woodward, interview by W.W. Dixon, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 254.

80. For examples of "Amazing Grace" associated with baptisms, see James Bolton, interview by Sarah H. Hall, in *Georgia Narratives; Part I*, 97-98; Melvin Smith, interview by Elizabeth Watson, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 291. For an example of its association with funerals, see Manuel Johnson, interview by Minnie Branham Stonestreet, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume IV: Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Georgia, (Library of Congress, 1941), 340, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.042.

81. See, for example, Charles Gabriel Anderson, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 22; James Bolton, interview by Sarah H. Hall, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 98; Susan Castle, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 180; Aleck Woodward, interview by W.W. Dixon, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 254. Note that Anderson claimed to have attained the improbable age of 119, but his memories seem otherwise reliable. See Charles Gabriel Anderson, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 20.

82. John Newton "Amazing Grace! (How Sweet the Sound!)," in Beebe, *The Baptist Hymn Book,* 301.

83. John Newton, "Amazing Grace—How Sweet the Sound," in *Baptist Chorals: A Tune and Hymn Book Designed to Promote Generational Congregational Singing; Containing One Hundred and*

Hymnals from around the time of the Civil War do not provide a consistent melody for *Amazing Grace*.[84] As Harry Eskew notes, Newton did not compose the iconic melody for "Amazing Grace" that Christians still sing today. In 1835, composer and hymnal editor William Walker became the first known publisher to associate "Amazing Grace" with the now-common tune "New Britain." Slaves likely heard the pentatonic tune that appeared in Walker's *Southern Harmony* hymnal, but it remains unclear if "New Britian" was popular in slave communities by the time of the war.[85]

The WPA narratives widely associate "Hark from the Tomb a Doleful Sound" with funerals.[86] Minton notes that the hymn was written and composed by Isaac Watts in the eighteenth century. A hymn, not a spiritual, the song was popular in both Black and white communities.[87] "Hark from the Tomb a Doleful Sound" appears in at least thirty-

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Sixty-Four Tunes, Adapted to About Four Hundred Choice Hymns, ed. B. Manly, Jr. and A. Brooks Everett (New York, 1860), 83, https://hymnary.org/hymn/BCTH1860/page/2

84. See Newton, "Amazing Grace—How Sweet the Sound," in *Baptist Chorals*, 83; John Newton, "Amazing Grace," in *The Revivalist: A Collection of Choice Revival Hymns and Tunes, Original and Selected, By Joseph Hillman, Author of "Sunday-School Hymns and Revival Choruses*," ed. Joseph Hillman and L. Hartsough (New York, 1868), 159, https://hymnary.org/hymn/RCCR1868/page/i.

85. Harry Eskew, "A Bicentennial Tribute to William Walker," *Choral Journal* 50, no. 1 (August 1, 2009): 55, 58, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=c985fa12-633d-34be-a816-38b4d44dac98. For Walker's version of "Amazing Grace" set to the tune of "New Britain," see John Newton (lyrics) and William Walker (arrangement), "Amazing Grace! (How Sweet the Sound)," in *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion: Containing a Choice Collection of Tunes, Hymns, Psalms, Odes, and Anthems* […] *Also, an Easy Introduction to the Grounds of Music, the Rudiments of Music, and Plain Rules for Beginners*, revised edition, ed. William Walker (Philadelphia, 1854), 8, https://hymnary.org/hymn/SHMC1854/page/2.

86. See, for example, Mittie Freeman, interview by Beulah Sherwood Hagg, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume II: Arkansas Narratives; Part 2*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Arkansas (Library of Congress, 1941), 352, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.022; Robert Shepherd, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 252; Nancy Smith, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 300; Addie Vinson, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgie Narratives; Part 4*, 106.

87. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 355.

four separate WPA interviews.[88] In total, at least twelve of these attestations come from former Georgia slaves, but former slaves from other states (including Missouri, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina) also reference it.[89]

Among former slaves, the song went by several titles. Several interviewees refer to a song called "Harps from the Tomb," "Harps from the Tomb this Mournful Sound," or some similar variation. The sentence structure of "Harps from the Tomb…" and "Hark from the Tomb…" are identical, and both lyrics carry essentially the same meaning. Unsurprisingly, former slaves associate both songs with funerals. [90] The "mournful"

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88. For the source of these song counts, see Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 373. Individual interviewees that reference variant titles are cited below.

89. The count of Georgia references is my own. See James Bolton, interview by Sarah H. Hall, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 100; Willis Cofer, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 208; Alice Green, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, 42; Carrie Hudson, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, 215; Georgia Johnson, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, 331; Manuel Johnson, interview by Minnie Branham Stonestreet, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, 340; Julia Larken, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 43; Robert Shepherd, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 252, Nancy Smith, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 300; Cordelia Thomas, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 20; Addie Vinson, edited by Sadie B. Hornsby, *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 106; Emma Virgel, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 118; Frances Batson, interviewer unknown, in *Tennessee Narratives* 2; Emma Grisham, interviewer unknown, in *Tennessee Narratives*, 30; Lewis Mundy, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 260; Tishey Taylor, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 344; Slyvia Cannon, interview by Annie Ruth Davis, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XIV: South Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of South Carolina (Library of Congress, 1941), 180, 196, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.141; Aleck Woodward, interview by W.W. Dixon, *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 254; Fannie Moore, interview by Marjorie Jones, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 133; Parker Pool, interview by T. Pat Matthews, *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 187. One interviewee, Sylvia Cannon, references a song apparently titled "On Canaan Happy Shore," which includes the lyric "Hark from the Tomb" as its third line. The song, associated with funerals, does not include any other lyrics comparable to either the content or meter of the hymn by that name. It is thus possible that some of the interviewees who discussed "Hark from the Tomb" were actually referring to "On Canaan's Happy Shore," but it is unlikely that this was common. The overwhelming preference in the interviews is to derive song titles from either the initial lyric of either the first verse or chorus, or in some cases the last lines of a verse or chorus. The phrase "Hark from the Tomb" appears to have occupied none of these positions in "On Canaan Happy Shore." In all likelihood then, most or all of the references to "Hark from the Tomb" refer to the hymn by Isaac Watts, not the song that Cannon quoted. See Sylvia Cannon, interview by Annie Ruth Davis, *South Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 196.

90. Reid Richardson, interviewer unknown, *Oklahoma Narratives*, 264; Emma Grisham, interviewer unknown, *Tennessee Narratives*, 30; Julia Larken, interview by Grace McCune, *Georgia*

variation even appears in at least one contemporary hymnal.[91] Furthermore, both titles have the same number of syllables and thus can be fit into the same meter. "Harp/Harps from the Tomb" is almost certainly a variation of "Hark from the Tomb" and is included here among the interviews referencing it.

"Hark from the Tomb" is well-documented in hymnals from the Civil War era. Between 1855 and 1870, the song appears in dozens of publications associated with numerous church denominations. Although the WPA interviews usually refer to the song by its initial lyric, nineteenth-century publishers identified the hymn by various titles, including "A Voice From the Tomb/Tombs," "Funeral Thought," and "A Voice From the Grave."[92] The text of the hymn, however, remained largely constant, some minor punctuation differences and occasional synonyms aside. A representative set of lyrics, taken from the 1860 collection *Baptist Chorals*, reads:

Hark! From the Tombs a doleful sound

Narratives; Part 3, 43; Robert Shepherd, interview by Grace McCune, *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 252; Nancy Smith, interview by Grace McCune, *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 300; Cordelia Thomas, interview by Grace McCune, *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 20. Notably, four of these instances appear in interviews with former Georgia slaves, while a fifth appears in the adjacent state of Tennessee, perhaps suggesting a regional variation.

91. See Isaac Watts, "Hark from the Tombs a Mournful Sound," in *The Lecture-Room Hymn-Book: Containing the Psalms and Hymns of the Book of Common Prayer, Together with a Choice Selection of Additional Hymns, and an Appendix of Chants and Tunes Suited for Congregational Use*, ed. Dudley A. Tyng (Philadelphia, 1855), 65, https://hymnary.org/hymn/LRHB1855/page/1.

92. Isaac Watts, "A Voice From the Tombs," in *Hymns for Schools and Families, Specifically Designed for the Children of the Church*, ed. Thos. O. Summers (Nashville, 1859), 163, https://hymnary.org/hymn/HSFS1857/page/1; Isaac Watts, "A Voice From the Tomb," in *Church Psalmist; Or, Psalms and Hymns, Designed for the Public, Social, and Private Use of Evangelical Christians. Containing, Also, Directions for Musical Expression. With Supplement.* 53rd edition (Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, 1857), 587-588, https://hymnary.org/hymn/CPPH1847/page/i; Isaac Watts, "Funeral Thought," in *The Choice; In Two Parts. Part I. Containing Psalms and Hymns. Part II. Containing Spiritual Songs. Designed for Public and Private Worship*, sixth edition, ed. William Dossey (Philadelphia, 1856), hymn 500, https://hymnary.org/hymn/C2P61836/page/1; Isaac Watts, "A Voice From the Grave," in *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the United Brethren in Christ; Taken From the Most Approved Authors, and Adapted to Public and Private Worship*, ed. W.J. Shuey et al. (Dayton, Ohio, 1858), 643-644, https://hymnary.org/hymn/CHUU1858/page/i.

Mine ears attend the cry:
"Ye living man, come view the ground
Where you must shortly lie

Princes this clay must be your bed
In spite of all your towers
The tall, the wise, the reverend head
Must lie as low as ours"

Great God, is this our certain doom
And are we still secure
Still walking downward to our tomb,
And yet prepared no more?

Grant us the powers of quickening grace
To fit our souls to fly:
Then when we drop this dying flesh,
We'll rise above the sky.[93]

Contemporary hymnals associate the hymn with numerous melodies.[94] It is unclear which of those melodies, if any, was most popular in slave communities. Other contemporary sources provide little insight into how slaves sang the hymn.

"The Old Time Religion" appears under several names in the WPA interviews, including "Give me dat good ole time religion," "Ole Time 'Ligion," "Old Time Religion's Good Enough for Me," and other titles essentially similar to the one given above.[95] Seward and White provide the earliest published music and lyrics for the song,

93. Isaac Watts, "Hark! From the Tombs a Doleful Sound!" in Manly and Everett, *Baptist Chorals*, 80.

94. Isaac Watts (lyrics) and I. Smith (music), "Funeral Thought," in *The New Congregational Hymn and Tune Book, for Public, Social, and Private Worship*, ed. Elias Nason (Boston, 1859), 57, https://hymnary.org/hymn/NCHT1859/page/2; Isaac Watts, "Hark, From the Tombs," in *Sacred Melodies for Social Worship*, ed. H. Mattison (New York, 1859), 311, https://hymnary.org/hymn/SMSW1859/page/2.

95. Morgan Scurry, interview by G.L. Summer, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 90; Naisy Reece, interviewer unknown, in *Tennessee Narratives*, 65; Sam Miller, interview by Thomas Elmore Lucy, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume II: Arkansas Narratives; Part 5*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Arkansas, (Library of Congress, 1941), 95, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.025

which they title “This Old Time Religion.”[96] As they appear in *Jubilee Songs*, the lyrics of the song’s refrain read:

> Oh! This old time religion
> This old time religion
> This old time religion
> It is good enough for me

The first verse introduces a new potential participant in the old-time religion, the mourner:

> It is good for the mourner
> It is good for the mourner
> It is good for the mourner
> It is good enough for me

The refrain occurs again after this verse, followed by a third verse (“It brought me out of bondage”), another refrain, a fourth verse (“It is good when you are in trouble”), and a final refrain. Each verse follows the pattern of singing the initial line three times over and concluding with “It is good enough for me."[97]

Although the WPA interviewees gave differing titles for the songs, there is little doubt that the songs in the WPA interviews are the same as the one Seward and White transcribed. The title variations in the WPA narratives are consistent with the meter and subject matter of the 1873 song. For example, “Give Me Dat Good Ole Time Religion,” a title that at least one WPA interviewee gave the spiritual, does not appear in *Jubilee Songs* but is clearly compatible with the lyrics in it.[98] Enslaved singers could have easily

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96. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 41.

97. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 41.

98. Morgan Scurry, interview by G.L. Summer, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 90. For an interviewee who referred to the song with the similar phrase “Give me dat old time religion,” see Charley Waton, interview by W.W. Dixon, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*,189.

squashed a quick "good" together with "old" to create a lyric that still fit the length of the meter. The "Give Me" variation is likewise easy to explain, since the phrase could easily be added between the verse and chorus without disrupting the meter found in *Jubilee Songs*. Quick embellishments, like the phrase *give me*, are altogether unsurprising and are no cause for doubting a relationship to Seward and White's song. In fact, in a predominantly oral musical culture like that of freed slaves, small variations are to be expected; it would be more surprising if they were *not* present. It is possible that *old time religion* was a stock phrase that wound its way into many songs, but in all likelihood, none was ever so well known as the Seward and White one.

Seward and White's sheet music indicates that the Jubilee Singers performed the song in the key of G major. The melody (presumably the soprano line) does in fact use a G major pentatonic scale. Curiously, however, the vocal harmonies suggest that the song employed G major and D minor chords, the latter of which does not fit neatly into the key.

Ubiquitously popular in the South, "Dixie" appears no fewer than twenty-nine times in the WPA interviews.[99] Interviewees rarely provided lyrics from the song; presumably, they assumed it was already familiar to their interviewers.[100] Published sheet music copyrighted in 1860 credits minstrel artist Daniel Emmett as the song's composer.[101] Minton notes that Emmett's authorship is disputed and argues convincingly

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99. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 634.

100. Eda Harper, interview by Bernice Bowden, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume II: Arkansas Narratives; Part 3*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Arkansas, (Library of Congress, 1941), 164, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.023.

101. Dan. D. Emmett, "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land," arranged by W.L. Hobbs (New York, 1860), cover page, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/aa_sheet_music/209.

that the piece was adapted from a black folk song, as was the case for some other minstrel pieces.[102] He identifies several WPA interviews that claim a pre-war date for the song, but as he notes, in 1862 journalist Henry Hotze became the first extant source to claim that the song originated among Black communities.[103] Hotze wrote that free Black boatmen from the North often sang the piece during river journeys, calling the story of song's minstrel origins "only partially true." He did not provide any lyrics for the song's verses, only for the chorus, which differs from the version that Emmett wrote.[104] Emmett probably deserves credit for popularizing "Dixie," or at least an especially prominent version of it, but in any case, the song had spread far beyond the minstrel stage by the end of the Civil War. WPA interviewees recalled both Union and Confederate soldiers, and even slaves, singing it.[105]

As they appear in Emmett's 1860 music, the lyrics of the first verse and chorus

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102. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 487, 500-501.

103. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 487, 500-501.

104. Henry Hotze, "Three Months in the Confederate Army. The Tune of 'Dixie,'" *The Index: A Weekly Journal of Politics, Literature, and News; Devoted to the Exposition of the Mutual Interests, Political and Commercial, of Great Britain and the Confederate States of America*, vol .1, no. 9 (1862): 140, https://archive.org/details/indexweeklyjourn01hotz/mode/1up; Emmett, "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land," 2-4. I was first made aware of this source by Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 501, although note that he confuses several details about Hotze.

105. Eda Harper, interview by Bernice Bowden, *Arkansas Narratives; Part 3*, 164; William Little, edited by Thomas Elmore Lucy, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume II: Arkansas Narratives; Part 4*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Arkansas, (Library of Congress, 1941), 262, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.024; Ann May, interview by Sallie C. Miller, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 5*, 67; Kattie Rye, interview by Sallie C. Miller, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume II: Arkansas Narratives; Part 6*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Arkansas, (Library of Congress, 1941), 112, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.026; David White, interview by Samuel Addison, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 191; Hannah Murphy, interview by Ruby Lorraine Radford, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 343.

read:

> I wish I was in de land ob cotton
> Old times dar am not forgotten
> Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.
>
> Den I wish I was in Dixie
> Hooray! Hooray!
> In Dixie's land I'll take my stand
> To lib an die in Dixie,
> Away, Away, Away, down south in Dixie,
> Away, Away, Away, down south in Dixie.

As written, the song's melody utilizes the C major scale, primarily over the C major (I) chord and F major (IV) chord. The G dominant seventh (V) chord also appears briefly during the penultimate bar of the verse, and again during measures five, nine, eleven, and fifteen of the chorus. Some minor variations on these chords aside, this progression forms the harmonic basis of the song.[106]

"John Brown's Body" is one of the most storied songs in the WPA narratives. The interviews reference numerous variations of the song, some with different lyrics, but the tune is referenced at least twenty-five times.[107] In their monograph on the history of "Battle Hymn of the Republic," John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis identify the origins of the melody in Stith Mead's 1807 hymn "Say Brothers."[108] The lyrics of Mead's hymn were almost entirely different from "John Brown's Body," but the third verse did include an enduring lyric: "Glory! Glory Hallelujah!"[109] By 1861, United States soldiers would

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106. Emmett, "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land," https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/aa_sheet_music/209/. Note that in this case, *seventh* refers to a note added to the V chord, not a chord based on the seventh note of the scale.

107. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 541-543, 643.

108. John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song That Marches On* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 17-18, ProQuest Ebook Central.

109. Stith Mead, "Say, Brothers, Will You Meet Us?" in Jenks, *Devotional Melodies*, 59.

write a new set of lyrics for the melody, titled "John Brown's Body," at least one version of which included a verse threatening to "hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree." In late 1861, Julia Ward Howe would author a poem that quickly became associated with the tune of "John Brown's Body," creating perhaps the most well-known variation of the song, "Battle Hymn of the Republic."[110]

"John Brown's Body" and its variants originated in the North, but the song was familiar to some Black communities, including in the occupied South. *Anglo-African* editor Robert Hamilton began a visit to the South in 1863, narrating his trip in letters to the newspaper. He referenced singing "The John Brown Song," apparently a reference to "John Brown's Body," with a Black congregation in Beaufort, North Carolina.[111] The WPA interviews provide further support for the argument that wartime cultural exchange facilitated the song's popularity. Numerous interviewees in multiple states recalled learning the "Hang Jeff Davis" variant of the song from "Yankees" who were passing through slave states.[112] Additionally, some former slaves or their children recalled a song that referenced hanging Abraham Lincoln on a sour apple tree. Most likely, this variation

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110. Stauffer and Soskis, *The Battle Hymn*, 17, 47-49, 81-84.

111. Robert Hamilton, "Beaufort, N.C. Editorial Correspondence," *The Anglo-African*, January 2, 1864, 2, https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/r43t9qs8j.

112. King, Martha. Robertson, Betty. White, John. Battle, Alice. Note that John White, who claimed to be 121 years old, may be a less reliable source than the other former slaves listed here. Even if he is excluded, however, half of the WPA interviewees who recall the "Hang Jeff Davis" lyric associate it with US military forces. Allice Battle, interview by Elizabeth Watson, *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 58; Martha King, interviewer unknown, in *Oklahoma Narratives*, 169; Betty Robertson, interviewer unknown, in *Oklahoma Narratives*, 269; John White, interviewer unknown, in *Oklahoma Narratives*, 327; Ellen Brass, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume II: Arkansas Narratives; Part 1*, collected by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Arkansas, (Library of Congress, 1941), 247, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.021; Evelina Taylor, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 5*, 136.

was a secessionist response to US soldiers' ridicule of Davis.[113]

An 1861 music sheet for "John Brown's Body," perhaps the earliest extant publication of the song, provides six verses and a chorus. Each verse begins with a statement, repeating it twice more before ending with a lyric referencing the cause of freedom "marching on." Take, for example, the first verse:

> John Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave
> John Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave
> John Brown's body lies a mould'ring in the grave
> His soul's marching on!

The fifth verse in the sheet music would have been familiar to many WPA interviewees.

> They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree
> They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree
> They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree
> As they march along!

The song's chorus, apparently sung after every verse except the first, follows a similar pattern.

> Glory, glory Hallelujah!
> Glory, glory Hallelujah!
> Glory, glory Hallelujah!
> His soul's marching on!

The final line of the chorus sometimes varied, replacing "His soul's marching on" with the final line of the preceding verse. As written, the song's melody employs a C major scale in the verses and choruses. Some passing chords aside, the song's chord progression uses almost exclusively the C major (I) and F major (IV) chord, with an occasional minor

113. See, for example Alfred Sligh, interview by Stiles M. Scruggs, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 4*, 92; Alice Baugh, interview by Mary A. Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 83, 86. Note that Alice Baugh was born after the war. She learned the "We'll hang Abe Lincoln" verse from her mother.

second chord (in this case, a D minor).[114]

Twenty-four WPA interviewees reference "Am I Born to Die and Lay This Body Down."[115] Former slaves from most Southern states recalled hearing the Charles Wesley hymn. They usually associated the song with funerals, but despite the morbid subject matter, some interviewees also described it as a work song.[116] The hymn does not appear in *Slave Songs,* although the twenty-sixth song in the collection, "Lay this Body Down," uses a similar lyric and may be related.[117] The song does appear in at least thirty-three hymnals from around the time of the Civil War.[118] While the number of verses differs by hymnbook, the lyrics of the first verse are always the same:

> And am I born to die,
> To lay this body down?
> And must my trembling spirit fly
> Into a world unknown?

The song contains no chorus.[119] Civil War-era hymnals provide differing melodies for the

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114. Phillip Simonds (music), "John Brown's Song" (Boston, 1861), 1-2, https://www.loc.gov/item/2023783905/.

115. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 366

116. Ann Ulrich Evans, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 118; Millie Ann Smith, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 4*, 43; Callie Elder, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 311; Jefferson Franklin Henry, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2,* 187.

117. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 19.

118. Instance data for "And Am I Born to Die," Hymnary.org, accessed March 18, 2025, pages 2-3, https://hymnary.org/search?page=1&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eand_am_i_born_to_die%24%22&sort=publicationDate, https://hymnary.org/search?page=2&qu=in%3Ainstances%20textAuthNumber%3A%22%5Eand_am_i_born_to_die%24%22&sort=publicationDate.

119. See, for example, Charles Wesley, Hymn 419 ("And Am I Born to Die?"), in *The Lecture-Room Hymn-Book: Containing the Psalms and Hymns of the Book of Common Prayer, Together with a Choice Selection of Additional Hymns, and an Appendix of Chants and Tunes Suited for Congregational Use*, ed. Dudley A. Tyng (Philadelphia, 1855), 449-450, https://hymnary.org/hymn/LRHB1855/H419; Charles Wesley, "And Am I Born to Die?" in *The Revivalist: A Collection of Choice Revival Hymns and Tunes, Original and Selected, By Joseph Hillman, Author of "Sunday-School Hymns and Revival*

song, and it is unknown which tune was most popular among Black communities.[120]

Although "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is absent from antebellum or wartime sources, the song probably originated during slavery.[121] A significant number of WPA interviewees—eighteen in total—remember hearing the song.[122] The song also appears in written sources shortly after the war ended. By 1869 at the latest, freed slaves enrolled in a reformer school at Hampton, Virginia, were singing an early version of the song. A Hampton correspondent for the *Springfield Weekly Republican* witnessed a student musical performance that included a song with the lyric "Swing low, old chariot, and take us all home," a line thematically and metrically consistent with a more complete version

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Choruses," ed. Joseph Hillman and L. Hartsough (New York, 1868), 135, https://hymnary.org/hymn/RCCR1868/268; Charles Wesley, "And Am I Born to Die," in *Baptist Chorals: A Tune and Hymn Book Designed to Promote Generational Congregational Singing; Containing One Hundred and Sixty-Four Tunes, Adapted to About Four Hundred Choice Hymns*, ed. B. Manly, Jr. and A. Brooks Everett (New York, 1860), 125, https://hymnary.org/hymn/BCTH1860/291. While, as mentioned above, the words of the first verse are consistent across hymnbooks, the grammar sometimes varies slightly; the text here is copied from *The Lecture-Room Hym-Book*.

120. See Charles Wesley, "And Am I Born to Die?" in *Selah: A Collection of Psalm and Hymn Tunes, Introits, Anthems, Chants, Motetts, Choruses, &c., Adapted to the Use of Classes, Private Circles, and Worshipping Assemblies*, ed. Thomas Hastings (New York, 1856), 168, https://hymnary.org/hymn/S1856/168c; Wesley, "And Am I Born to Die?" in *Baptist Chorales*, 125; Wesley, "And Am I Born to Die?" in *The Revivalist*, 135. Minton also does not identify a specific tune typically associated with the song. See Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 360-361.

121. A popularly repeated story holds that enslaved couple Wallace and Minerva Willis authored the song. See Melanie Eversley "Story Behind Spiritual 'Swing Chariot' Emerges," *USA Today*, August 15, 2008, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/printedition/life/20060815/d_sweetchariot.art.htm and Karen A. McClintock, *Trauma-Informed Pastoral Care: How to Respond When Things Fall Apart* (1517 Media, 2022), 88-89, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1x67d28.10. I have found no evidence to support the claim in primary source documentation, and in fact contradicts the recollections of some WPA interviewees (see, for example, Squire Dowd, interview by T. Pat Matthews and Daisy Bailey Waitt, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 269; Essex Henry, interview by Mary A. Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 395-396; Bob Jones, interview by Mary A. Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 25). The modern version of this story, which I have not seen repeated elsewhere by academic historians, appears to have first appeared in Mabel H. Alexander's *Via Oklahoma: And Still the Music Flows* (The Oklahoma Heritage Foundation, 2004). The book, which is out of print and difficult to obtain, appears to have been a posthumous work that was completed after her death. If indeed the book is mistaken about the origins of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Alexander may not be at fault for the error.

122. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 405.

of the song that appears in Seward and White's 1872 publication.[123]

The year of composition is uncertain, but the song's imagery is consistent with other spirituals that were popular in slave communities, suggesting a slave-time origin. The chariot image was a common motif of Black spirituals. The chariot appears in the *Slave Songs* spiritual "Little Children, Then Won't You Be Glad," as well as another spiritual from *Jubilee Songs*: "Gwine to Ride Up in the Chariot."[124] At least one other example existed by early 1869, when a Hanover County, Virginia, correspondent of the *Alexandria Gazette* described a church service where Black congregants sang in "exultation and ecstasy" of the heavenly vehicle:

> Swing low chariot in the North
> And let God's people all come cross.[125]

The subject matter and meter of this song differs from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," but both songs draw upon similar traditions of chariot imagery. Given how widespread the motif was by the late 1860s, it almost certainly predated freedom. Thus, even though the exact date of authorship remains unknown, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" fits neatly among spirituals that were popular among slave communities.

The Jubilee Singers themselves provide a final piece of evidence that "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" first emerged during slavery. According to an 1872 *Oneida Circular* article, the Jubilee Singers maintained that the authorship of their songs was

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123. A.H., "The Negro Problem. Examination of the Normal School of Hampton, Va," *The Springfield Weekly Republican*, July 17, 1869, 7, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83020847/1869-07-17/ed-1/seq-1/; Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

124. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 87; Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 20.

125. "Letter from Hanover Co., Virginia," *Alexandria Gazette*, March 3, 1869, evening edition, 2, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1869-03-03/ed-1/seq-1/.

unknown. The Jubilee Singers did not take their music from a particular source, but instead slaves had passed down the songs "from generation to generation."[126] By the time of the Jubilee Singers, then, spirituals like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" were products of an already-forgotten past.

According to Seward and White, the song begins with the refrain:

> Swing low, sweet chariot
> Coming for to carry me home
> Swing low, sweet chariot
> Coming for to carry me home[127]

Four verses follow, apparently with a refrain after each one. The first verse invokes a common theme in the music of enslaved people, the River Jordan.

> I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?
> Coming for to carry me home?
> A band of angels coming after me,
> Coming for to carry me home

Each verse follows a similar format, with "coming for to carry me home" always serving as the second and fourth line of the verse.[128]

The melody line, as it appears in Jubilee Songs, draws upon a D minor pentatonic scale (essentially the F major scale). Generally, variants of the F (I) and C (V) chords are the most common chords in the song. Frustratingly, the sheet music does not include any harmony parts for several bars in verse and chorus, apparently indicating that only the melody was sung. The B♭ (IV) chord fits harmonically with the given melody notes, but apparently the Jubilee Singers did not sing it. It remains possible that other performers

126. "Jubilee Singers," *Oneida Circular*, April 15, 1872, ProQuest.

127. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

128. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

did include the chord, since the melody strongly suggests it.129 If indeed the B♭ was a common part of the song, then "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" perfectly mirrors the later twelve-bar blues form.

The earliest appearance of the song in a hymnbook is the 1886 *Highway Hymnal*. In place of the usual authorship information, the hymnal credits the song simply as a "Negro melody."[130] There, the lyrics are largely identical to Seward and White's transcription.

129. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

130. Geo. L. Brown (arrangement), "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," in *The Highway Hymnal, A Choice Collection of Popular Hymns and Music, New and Old. Arranged for Work in Camp, Convention, Church, and Home*, ed. Isaiah Reid and Geo. L. Brown (Nevada, Ia, 1886), 20, https://hymnary.org/hymn/HHR1886/29. The Hymnary.org entry gives 1886 as the publication date for *The Highway Hymnal*, but the text itself contains no publication date. I have been unable to locate a copyright record for the work. However, Reid and Brown published a revised edition of *The Highway Hymnal* in 1888, so the first edition must have appeared sometime before the late 1880s. See Isaiah Reid and Geo. L. Brown, eds., *The Highway Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Nevada, Ia, 1888), https://hymnary.org/hymn/HHRR1886/page/iv.

Chapter 4: Slaves' Music and the Blues

The following pages compare the eight key themes of rural blues music to the characteristics of the music of slaves. Wherever possible, I use the most popular songs of the WPA narratives as the comparison point for rural blues, but in some cases other sources on slave music provide stronger evidence. For all characteristics of blues music, I use songs from other sources to supplement the evidence of the WPA interviews.

Characteristic 1: Lyrics About Romantic Heartbreak

None of the most popular songs in the WPA interviews are about romantic heartbreak. Grief, sadness, and despair do appear in the WPA interviews, including in some frequently cited pieces, although they rarely occur in a romantic context. "Old Black Joe," which appears at least five times in the collection, is one such song that speaks to themes of grief. The lyrics, written by Stephen Foster, reflect upon aging and loss:

> Gone are the days when my heart was young and gay
> Gone are my friends from cotton fields away
> Gone from the earth to a better land I know
> I hear their gentle voices calling "Old Black Joe"[131]

These lyrics, although composed by a white man for a minstrel song, would not be out of place in a blues song. However, like many other slave songs about sadness, it does not

131. Stephen C. Foster, "Old Black Joe" (New York, 1860), 1, 3, https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735061832683/viewer. The sheet music referenced here lists only a copyright date of 1860, not a publication date. The University of Pittsburgh's online collection lists the date of the item as 1860 (https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735061832683). The Library of Congress likewise estimates the date of the music (or an identical copy) to 1860; see Stephen C. Foster, "Old Black Joe" (New York, 1860), https://www.loc.gov/resource/music.musihas-200197359/?st=gallery. The count of appearances here is my own, not Minton's; "Old Black Joe" is one of the few songs in the collection that Minton provides little comment on. My count of five references is likely an underestimate.

examine the topic of romantic heartbreak.

Of the hundreds of songs in the WPA interviews, only a handful definitively involve romantic failures, and none of those songs appear more than once or twice. Former slave Annie Bridges of Missouri provided one of the best examples of slave songs about romantic heartbreak. She gave lyrics for a song that was untitled but was apparently a "love song." The lyrics read:

> My pretty little pink,
> I used to think that you and I would marry
> But since you told me so many faults
> I care nothing about you[132]

The song ends with the narrator going off to war "to relieve the broken-hearted."[133]

"My Pretty Little Pink" is an obvious case of a song about heartache, but some songs in the WPA narratives have more complex, ambiguous relationships with that topic. Take, for example, "Miss Liza Jane," which appears in an interview with former Georgia slave Dosia Harris:

> Oh! Miss Liza, Miss Liza Jane!
> Axed Miss Liza to marry me
> Guess what she said?
> She wouldn't marry me,
> If de last Nigger was dead[134]

Lina Hunter, formerly enslaved in Georgia, gave lyrics for an identically titled song:

> Steal 'round den corners Miss Liza Jane.
> Don't slight none, Miss Liza Jane.
> Swing your partner, Miss Liza Jane.[135]

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132. Annie Bridges, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 46.

133. Annie Bridges, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 46.

134. Dosia Harris, interview by Sadie B. Hornsby, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, 104, 109-110.

135. Lina Hunter, interview by Grace McCune, in *George Narratives; Part 2*, 268.

From these lyrics, it is not immediately clear whether these two songs are the same. Both former slaves referred to the pieces as dance songs, possibly suggesting a collection. Two other songs, titled "Old Liza Jane" and "Little Liza Jane" also appear in Georgia interviews. The first is associated with corn shucking, the second with "frolics," which probably did include dancing.[136] Unfortunately, neither interviewee provided lyrics, so it is unknown whether those songs referenced romantic heartbreak. Of all these "Liza Jane" variants, only the Harris song is clearly about romantic failures. Even then, the song's tone is unclear. Is it an expression of heartache, or a lighthearted commentary on sexual rejection? Its association with dances might suggest the latter. In any case, the song's examination of romantic heartbreak, a topic that may not have been universally present in the song's lyrics, is decidedly more upbeat than "My Pretty Little Pink."

On the whole, the WPA interviews provide comparatively weak evidence for songs about romantic heartbreak among enslaved people. The pattern continues among older sources. Contemporary writers on slave music, like Higginson and Northrup, provided no insight into the romantic songs of slaves. *Slave Songs of the United States* is also quiet on the topic. Of the 130 English-language songs in the collection, only seven deal at all with romance, and that estimate is a generous one. Some of the "romantic" songs make only indirect references to love, such as the allusions to Adam and Eve in "What a Trying Time."[137] In the entire collection, there is only one obvious reference to romantic heartbreak, the first verse of "Poor Rosy." It reads:

Poor Rosy, poor gal

136. Alice Hutcheson, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 2*, 284; Marshall Butler, interview by Joseph E. Jaffee, *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 163.

137. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 74.

Poor Rosy, poor gal
Rosy break my poor heart,
Heav'n shall-a be my home

The remainder of the song discusses the general troubles of life; even this song only examines romantic failures within the broader promises of a better life in heaven. [138] It is not a romantic song in the same way as rural blues songs like (for example) Robert Johnson's "Kind-Hearted Woman Blues."[139] Songs about romantic heartbreak are simply not well-attested in sources on slave music.

Characteristic 2: Repeated lyrics

Of all the characteristics of blues music, repeating the initial line of a verse is probably the best-attested in the music of slaves. Many of the most common songs in the WPA narratives repeat lyrics or key phrases. The lyrical form of "John Brown's Body," for example, strongly resembles a common blues lyric pattern. The verse begins with a statement made three times, followed by a response to that statement, and the choruses of the song follow the same structure.[140] "The Old Time Religion" demonstrate the same type of repetition in the verses and choruses.[141] The chorus of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" similarly anticipates a blues lyrical pattern, repeating the initial lyric once before concluding with "coming for to carry me home."[142]

The texts in *Slave Songs* overwhelmingly follow repetitive lyrical patterns. Of the

138. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 7.

139. Robert Johnson, "Kind-Hearted Woman Blues," in *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, vol. 2, Columbia Records, recorded 1936, originally released in 1937, rereleased 1961.

140. Simonds, "John Brown's Song," 1-2.

141. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 41.

142. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

collection's 136 songs, over 80 repeat the initial lyric of a verse or chorus, while some 25 others repeat a key phrase of the initial lyric.[143] Some of these songs only repeat the initial lyric once or twice, leaving out a final statement. One such song is "I an' Satan Had a Race," which reads:

> I an' Satan had a race
> Hallelu, hallelu
> I an' Satan had a race
> Hallelu, hallelu[144]

More frequently, though, the initial thought appears three times rather than twice, and an additional statement appears after the final repetition. One example is the chorus of "Come Go with Me," which reads:

> O come, go wid me
> O come, go wid me
> O come, go wid me
> A walkin' in de heaven I roam[145]

Since outside observers formatted the music in *Slave Songs*, the lyrics given above may not accurately reflect the way slave musicians conceptualized lines, but the placement of lyrics on the printed pages of *Slave Songs* is less important than the underlying content of the lyrics. It is conceivable, for example, that slave singers interpreted the chorus of "Come Go with Me" as having two lines, not four. Even if that was the case, though, the

143. Analyzing lyrical repetition in *Slave Songs* requires some judgement. I have counted as "true repeats" lyrics that are identical or almost identical to the one that preceded it. When a similar phrase or only part of a line is repeated, I have counted a song as containing a key repeated phrase. There are probably a handful of cases that could be counted either way, but the numbers I provide reflect the general trends of the music.

144. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 40. For similar examples, see Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 39, 46, 49, 68.

145. For other examples, of which there are many, see Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 50, 69, 70, 73, 86, 93, 105.

lyrics of the song clearly make a statement, repeat it multiple times, and then add an additional statement. The repeated concept, followed by a response to it, is a key trait of blues lyricism.

The repetitive structure that appears in songs like "John Brown's Body" and "Come Go with Me" is not completely identical to the blues statement-response form that emerged later. In "John Brown's Body" and "Come Go with Me," the initial statement occurs three times.[146] However, the more common blues pattern is repeating the statement only once, adding a unique (although related) statement after the first two lines.[147] This pattern is less common in attested slave music, but it does appear in several songs, including "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."[148] The lyrics to "Poor Rosy" also provide an example of the blues pattern.

> Poor Rosy, poor gal
> Poor rosy, poor gal
> Rosy break my poor heart
> Heav'n shall be my home[149]

Even the statement-response structure of "John Brown's Body" did appear occasionally in early rural recordings, though. Blind Lemon Jefferson's "One Dime Blues" mirrors the

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146. Simonds, "John Brown's Song,"Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 40.

147. For descriptions of common blues lyrical patterns, see Evans, "Formulaic Composition in the Blues," 482, 492-493; Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 76-84. As Tracy notes, blues lyricists employed a variety a stanza structures; many blues stanzas did not follow the statement-statement-response structure described above. See Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, 76-77.

148. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

149. For other examples see Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 73, 94. Some scholars, including Evans and Tracy, express the blues lyric formula as two short lines, both carrying the same general meaning, followed by a longer third line. In contrast, here I have followed Allen's example by dividing stanzas of "Poor Rosy" into four lines consisting of a statement made twice, followed by a response that contains two separate lines. However the lines of the stanza are divided, the underlying pattern remains the same: the singer makes a statement twice and then responds to it with a longer statement.

form exactly:

> I'm broke and ain't got a dime
> I'm broke and ain't got a dime
> I'm broke, ain't got a dime
> Everybody gets his hard luck sometime[150]

Characteristic 3: The Twelve-Bar Form and I-IV-V Progressions

Cross-referencing the most popular songs in the WPA interviews with nineteenth-century sources reveals a few patterns about the common chord progressions of slave songs. Out the nine most popular songs in the collection, at least four have chord structures that can be identified with reasonable confidence: "Dixie," "John Brown's Body," "The Old Time Religion," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."[151] Of these, only "John Brown's Body" and "The Old Time Religion" clearly employ chords other than the I, IV, and V chords. In both cases, a minor II chord appears to break the pattern. Even this chord, however, is nearly identical the major IV chord, and in many cases the chords can be substituted for each other. For their part, "Dixie," and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" lean heavily on I-IV-V patterns. In fact, the progression of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" fits almost precisely into a classic twelve-bar form.[152]

The harmonic patterns of these songs do not provide strong enough evidence to claim that the specific twelve-bar form of later generations was already a recognized songwriting pattern during slavery. They do, however, suggest that the types of chord patterns common to blues music already existed by about the end of the Civil War.

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150. Blind Lemon Jefferson, "One Dime Blues," Paramount Records, originally released in 1926.

151. Of course, other popular songs in the collection used chords, but the many variations of those songs make it virtually impossible to determine which chord progressions were popular.

152. Simonds, "John Brown's Song," 1-2; Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 41; Emmett, "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land," 2-4; Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

Furthermore, none of these songs employ chord progressions obviously at odds with the later blues tradition.

Characteristic 4: Pentatonic Melodies

Pentatonic melodies were familiar to Black musical communities throughout the South. Of the most popular songs listed in the WPA interviews, only one draws exclusively on a pentatonic scale for its melody: "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."[153] "Run, Nigger, Run," is also primarily pentatonic, although the melody briefly includes a sixth note.[154] Two songs alone are not enough to confidently assert that pentatonic scales were especially popular during slavery. However, many of the songs in *Slave Songs of the United States* also use pentatonic melodies. Take, for example, "My Body Rock 'Long Fever," which the editors describe as one of the most popular spirituals. The melody line uses the notes E, G, A, B, and D, a typical E minor pentatonic scale.[155] "Bell da ring," which the editors call a "most characteristic" song, employs the same scale.[156] A derivative of the G minor pentatonic scale provides the melody for "The Good Old Way" (a close ancestor to the modern "Down to the River to Pray"). Uniquely, however, the tune omits the B♭ of the standard pentatonic scale, replacing it with a blue note, B natural.[157] Pentatonic melodies like these were common in inland and seaboard states alike. At least four WPA interviewees recall hearing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" in

153. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

154. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 89.

155. Allen et al., *Slave Songs,* 32-33.

156. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* 34.

157. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 84.

North Carolina during the time of slavery or its immediate aftermath, and *Slave Songs* attributes "The Good Old Way" to Nashville.[158]

Although the most widely attested WPA songs are not especially reliant on pentatonic melodies, the number of five-note melodies in *Slave Songs* is enough to establish their popularity among slaves. The evidence is not strong enough to suggest that pentatonic melodies were dominant in the music sung by slaves (they probably were not), but they were certainly a familiar part of slave musicians' tonal vocabulary.

Characteristic 5: Non-Western Tonality

Non-Western tonality appears rarely in transcribed notation for the most common WPA songs. Only "The Old Time Religion," as it appears in *Jubilee Songs*, includes a vocal line that falls outside typical Western conventions. Transcribed in the key of G major, the song's harmonies regularly use an F natural note, a note absent from the Western G major scale.[159] This F natural note is the only transcribed instance of a blue note appearing in the most-cited WPA songs. It is not surprising that notation for the most popular WPA songs so rarely includes non-Western scales; most of these songs were written by white composers who were trained according to Western conventions. Of course, those songs may still have featured non-Western tonality when performed by slaves. Microtonality is difficult to transcribe in Western sheet music, so it is conceivable that in actual performance many of the WPA songs featured non-Western tones. In fact, as discussed below, the introduction of *Slave Songs* indicates that microtonality was a

158. Squire Dowd, interview by T. Patt Matthews and Daisy Bailey Watt, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 264, 269; Essex Henry, interview by Mary Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 394-396; Bob Jones, interview by Mary Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 24-25; Anna Mitchel, interview by Mary Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 114-115; Allen et al., *Slave Songs* xli.

159. Seward and White, *Jubilee Songs*, 29.

distinctive element of Black vocal performance.[160] Furthermore, improvisational traditions were a key feature of Black musical communities, so it is possible (even probable) that slaves embellished the written melodies with microtones.

Fortunately, non-Western tonal traditions are recorded in other sources on slave music. Songs that utilize blue notes, or other notes that fall outside the key, appear frequently in *Slave Songs of the United States*. Take, for example, "Roll, Jordan, Roll," which appears no fewer than eight times in the WPA interviews; the editors of *Slave Songs* describe it as one of the most famous spirituals. The song primarily uses the D major scale, but its melody also includes a flatted third note (F) and flatted seventh (C) note.[161] Another popular song described in the collection, "O'er the Crossing," primarily uses an F# minor pentatonic scale, but it also includes two characteristic blue notes: C (the flatted third) and F (the flatted sixth).[162] "The Hypocrite and the Concubine" follows a comparable pattern. The melody primarily draws upon the G minor pentatonic scale

160. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* iv-v.

161. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* 1. My own research has uncovered at least eight mentions *Roll, Jordan, Roll* in the WPA narratives, while Minton puts the number of references at "fewer than a dozen." See Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 406; Frank T. Boone, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 1*, 209; Lewis Mundy, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 260; Squire Dowd, interview by T. Pat Matthews and Daisy Bailey Waitt, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 269; Robert Shepherd, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 252-253; Georgia Smith, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 282; Nancy Smith, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 299; Georgia Telfair, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 3-4; Cordelia Thomas, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 18. Note that Telfair's memories may be from the early postwar era. A disproportionate number of WPA interviews that mention "Roll, Jordan, Roll," were conducted by Grace McCune. Perhaps the song was simply extremely popular in slavery-era Georgia, but even if that was the case, McCune's interviews are still overrepresented compared to the work of other Georgia interviewees that mention "Roll, Jordan, Roll." The anomaly may be the result of pure chance, but it could speak to a bias in the WPA selection or interview process.

162. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* 72. "O'er the Crossing" does briefly include a D natural note, technically placing it in the key of F# minor or A major, but the melody is overwhelmingly pentatonic. Note that *Slave Songs* gives the key song's key as A♭ major, but this is certainly an error. The notes are of the song are almost entirely the ones associated with a major, and the song as written resolves to A natural, not A♭.

with an occasional B natural, a flatted second note that falls outside the traditional major scale. The D major scale primarily forms the melody for "Little Children, Then Won't You Be Glad," but the flatted third (an F) also appears in the music.[163] Once again, the technique appears in multiple states throughout the South. The editors of *Slave Songs* drew the music for "Roll, Jordan, Roll" from a version sung "from South Carolina to Florida," whereas witness accounts place "O'er the Crossing" and "The Hypocrite and the Concubine" in Virginia.[164] On the other hand, Allen reported hearing "Little Children, Then Won't You Be Glad" as far west as Helena, Arkansas.[165] By all accounts, then, blue notes were popular among Black communities throughout the South.

Considering white audiences' struggles to accurately transcribe the music of slaves, the blue notes explicitly transcribed in *Slave Songs* probably represent a bare minimum of the ones actually present in slave music. Contributors to the collection might have failed to recognize blue notes as a distinct part of the tonal vocabulary, instead interpreting and transcribing them as slurs between other notes. Take, for example, "We Will March Through the Valley in Peace," which includes a slur between the first and second notes of the scale. If it easy to imagine Black performers singing a note they intended as a flatted second, only for a white witness to misunderstand the note as a slur. It thus possible that *Slave Songs* understates the popularity of blue notes in slave music. A more detailed study of when slurred notes appear in the collection would be a valuable contribution to understanding the tonality of slave music, but such an endeavor is outside

163. Allen et al., *Slave Song*s, 70, 87.

164. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, xli, 1.

165. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 87.

the scope of this project.

Notably, songs that use both pentatonic scales and added blue notes appear in *Slave Songs*. "Round the Corn Sally," as written in the collection, uses the D minor pentatonic scale with an added B (the flatted fifth), a note that falls outside either the natural major or minor scale. "Sabbath Has No End," as it appears in *Slave Songs*, primarily uses the notes D, F, G, A, and C, a complete minor pentatonic scale. However, the melody also includes a D♭, a flatted third (one of the common blue notes). Appearing three times in each verse, the flatted third is a key part of the melodic structure, not a trivial passing note.[166] If these songs are any evidence, the pentatonic scale and blue notes were not disparate traditions, but instead two parts of a cohesive conception of tonality. Later blues musicians did not invent the blues scale by tacking a handful of notes to the minor pentatonic scale. Really, blues musicians did not invent the blues scale at all. Instead, the tonal foundation of blues was already established in some Black musical communities by the end of the Civil War.

Characteristic 6: Vocal Styles

The vocal styles of enslaved communities are difficult to study, since there are so few recordings of former slaves singing, especially as soloists. The Library of Congress's *Voices of Freedom* collection, which contains nearly twenty audio interviews with former slaves, is a rare exception. Recorded in the 1930s and 1940s, several of these interviews include vocal performances. Unfortunately, the vocal styles in these recordings may not accurately represent the singing of Civil-War era communities. The voices of the recordings are noticeably frail; old age likely impacted the timbre, sustain, and pitch

166. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 69.

control of the interviewees' voices. Indeed, several of the interviewees suggested that their voices were no longer as strong as they used to be (although perhaps those claims were partly motivated by shyness).[167] Furthermore, the interviewees were seven decades removed from the Civil War. A lifetime of musical experiences may well have influenced their singing. Even if the audio recordings are representative of enslaved peoples' singing, they still provide too small a sample size to make general claims about singing in slave communities, which must have varied across time and place. Perhaps the only reliable trend in the recordings is that the interviewees retained their local accents while singing. Unlike classically trained singers, whose training emphasizes standardized pronunciation, the singing and speaking accents of the interviewees tended to be similar, although sometimes slightly weaker when sung.[168]

Civil War-era documentation of slave vocal styles is likewise rare. In an era that predated audio recording devices, slaves' voices could only be captured indirectly through descriptions. Since most slaves were illiterate, those descriptions were almost always written by white observers. These witnesses may have been sincerely interested in slave musicianship, but they remained outsiders to the musical culture they studied and may have been prone to sweepingly broad statements. Nevertheless, a few consistent

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167. Fountain Hughes, interview by Hermond Norwood, June 11, 1949, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1950037_afs09990a/. "Uncle" Billy McCrea, interview by John Lomax and Ruby Lomax, part 1, *John and Ruby Lomax 1940 Southern States Recording Collection*, 1940, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1940003_afs03974a/. Wallace Quarterman, interview by Zora Neale Hurston, Alan Lomax, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, part 1, *Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Expedition Collection*, June 1935, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1935001_afs00342a/.

168. For an example of an interviewee with an unusually stronger singing accent than speaking accent, see George Johnson, interview by Charles Johnson, part 3. For interviewees with stronger speaking than singing accents, see Quarterman, interview by Hurston, Lomax, and Barnicle, part 1; McCrea, interview by John Lomax and Ruby Lomax, part 1; "Uncle" Bob Ledbetter, interview by John Lomax and Ruby T. Lomax, *John and Ruby Lomax 1940 Southern States Recording Collection*, 1940, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1940003_afs03992a/.

trends emerge among both white witnesses and the small handful of Black writers who documented the music of enslaved people.

Strangers to enslaved communities described the vocalizations of enslaved people in exotic, othering terms. Allen referred to "wild and strangely fascinating" songs of steamboat workers.[169] The timbre of Black voices was also strange to Allen, who attributed to them a "peculiar quality that nothing can imitate," as well as "intonations and variations" that "cannot be reproduced on paper."[170] Garrison, after visiting liberated slaves in South Carolina, commented on the "odd turns made in the throat" that Black singers made.[171] Plantation visitor Frances Anne Kemble described the songs of enslaved boat workers as "wild and unaccountable," although she expressed admiration for their "barbaric chants and chorus."[172] More complimentary to the music of enslaved people, often to the point of flattery, was Olmsted, who asserted that "sweet musical voices" were more often found in Black singers than white ones.[173] Even Olmsted, however, referred to a song at a Black person's funeral as "wild and barbarous."[174] White observers like Allen and Olmsted measured Black singing against the Western musical traditions in which

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169. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, viii.

170. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, iv-v.

171. Lucy McKim, "Songs of Port Royal 'Contrabands,'" Letter to the editor, *Dwight's Journal of Music*, August 11, 1862, American Antiquarian Society (AAS) Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 4; Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, vi. Both *Slave Songs* and the *Dwight's Journal* article credit the author of this quote as "Miss McKim," evidently in reference to the maiden name of Lucy Garrison. See Samuel Charters, *Songs of Sorrow: Lucy McKim Garrison and Slave Songs of the United States* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 4-5, 8, ProQuest Ebook Central.

172. Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York, 1863), 218, https://www.loc.gov/item/01007670/.

173. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York, 1856), 552, https://www.loc.gov/item/07035036/.

174. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 2.

they had themselves been raised. It is true that their descriptions were biased, but dismissing their observations on those grounds would miss a key point. The fact that white listeners found the vocal style of enslaved singers to be so exotic is evidence that slaves often employed a vocal approach that was unfamiliar to white observers.

The field holler, or shout, of enslaved workers was both a well-attested genre of work songs and a unique vocal style of slave communities. Many scholars emphasize the importance of the holler genre as an ancestor of blues music. Samuel Charters even seems to suggest that "the music of the fields" was the most important predecessor of blues music.[175] Charters probably overstates the case, undervaluing the important of spirituals in favor of work songs, but more recent scholarship still acknowledges the importance of the field holler genre. Ellis, writing in 2015, lists field hollers alongside sermons, ballads, and string ensembles as a key contributor to blues music.[176] But close examination of antebellum music reveals that "hollering" was an approach to singing, not just a type of song. In the WPA interviews, former slaves sometimes associated singing and hollering even when not discussing field music.[177] Observers of slave music had already begun to recognize the holler as a vocal style in the antebellum era, well before music scholars had conceived of the field shout as a distinct genre. English plantation visitor Thomas Wentworth Higginson refers to a song of enslaved children—importantly,

175. Charters, *The County Blues*, 19. For additional references to the field holler as a predecessor of blues, see Charters, *The Country Blues*, 29, 48, 266.

176. Ellis, "Mississippi Moan," 161.

177. See, for example, Jim Allen, interview by Mrs. Ed Joiner, in *Mississippi Narratives*, 6; Cornelia Robinson, interview by Preston Klein, in *Alabama Narratives*, 332. Allen's reference to "hollering and singing" (see *Mississippi Narratives*, page 6) could be a reference to yelling, rather than a specific vocal style. The more powerful evidence is Thomas Higginson's; see footnote 168.

a spiritual and not a work song—as a "shout." Higginson himself places *shout* in quotation marks, which suggests that he was borrowing from an established vocabulary for the singing of Black slaves.[178]

Despite the association between hollering and field labor, the vocal style of the holler was not unique to work songs. Slaves performed Olmsted's "wild and barbarous" song at the graveyard, not the cotton field.[179] Likewise, the "shouting" described by Higginson was from a religious song:

> What makes old Satan for follow me so?
> Satan ain't got not'in' to do wid me
> Hold your light! Hold your light!
> Hold your light on Canaan's shore.

Higginson records a second shout following a similar theme, this time describing Satan in disguise:

> He call he name Jesus
> Glory Hallelujah!
> But I know him by he *clump-foot*!
> Glory Hallelujah!

This song also ends with a supplication to "Hold your light," but both Higginson and the meter of the lines indicate that they are different pieces. According to Higginson, slave children sang both of these shouts purely for recreation, not in conjunction with labor. In fact, the enslaved children performed the second song by night, close enough to Higginson's quarters for him to overhear it.[180] The "shout" was not just a specific type of

178. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Mary Thacher Higginson (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1921), 219-220, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044051727055.

179. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 2.

180. Higginson, *Letters and Journals*, 219-220.

work song confined to the fields. It was also a style of singing, apparently popular among both juvenile and adult slaves.

The terms *holler* and *shout* suggest an aggressive and energetic vocal style, but later recordings of work songs, as performed by freed slaves, provide frustratingly little evidence about the vocal styles of hollers. Take, for example, Billy McCrea's 1940 recording of a work song apparently titled "Ju Rawsy Raw Raw, Don't Come to My House."[181] McCrea's vocal performance is engaging, but his aging voice lacks the strength to sing many powerful or sustained notes. His performance of the song perhaps gives the impression of a once vibrant, forceful vocal style, but for more certainty it is necessary to turn to written descriptions of the shout. Olmsted gave a vivid description of the shout, writing, "Suddenly, one [slave] raised such a sound as I never heard before; a long, loud, musical shout, rising, and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods."[182] Sometimes, the written lyrics of slave songs obviously lend themselves to an energetic approach. Frederick Douglass quoted such a song, an improvised piece that slave sang on their way to collect rations:

> "I am going away to the Great House Farm!
> O, yea! O, yea! O!"

Even if Douglass had not included his description of slaves singing "most exultingly," the grammar and interjections of the lyrics would still suggest an intense vocal style.[183]

Of course, not all slave singing employed the same style. Vocal approaches varied

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181. McCrea, interview by John Lomax and Ruby Lomax, part 1.

182. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 394.

183. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* (Boston, 1845), 13, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.69015000003307.

even within the broad genre of work songs. Limited as his voice was, Billy McCrea's rendition of the boat song "Blow, Cornie Blow" suggests a much gentler vocal approach than his performance of "Ju Rawsy Raw Raw."[184] The mood of the song, the context of the singing, and the emotional state of the singer all must have influenced vocal stylings.

Witness accounts of slavery consistently associate the shout and other slave singing with group vocal performance. According to Higginson, multiple slaves sang the spiritual about Satan, and Olmsted similarly reported on group vocal performance at the funeral he witnessed.[185] Accounts of solo vocalists are extraordinarily rare in sources on slave music, suggesting that group vocals were the dominant form of performance.

Even though vocal music was a group endeavor, it was union singing, not harmony parts, that defined the music of slaves. Allen, Ware, and Garrison included no harmony parts in their notation, on the grounds that such harmony did not exist. They stated bluntly that "the negroes have no part singing."[186] They did claim that Black singers would occasionally sing individual harmony notes, but in their view, such harmonies were sporadic and did not constitute a fully developed harmonic part.[187] Similarly, writing in 1839, Kemble remarked that slaves "all sing in unison, having never, it appears, attempted or heard anything like part-singing."[188] These claims may smack of racial stereotyping, but it is possible that complex harmonies would have

184. McCrea, interview by John Lomax and Ruby Lomax, part 1.

185. Higginson, *Letters and Journals*, 219-220; Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 2

186. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, xxi-xxii.

187. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* v.

188. Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 127.

developed only with significant difficulty in communities where the ability to read sheet music was extremely rare.

Even if they could not read harmony parts in sheet music, surely some enslaved people learned to sing harmony by ear. If nowhere else, many slaves witnessed harmony singing on a regular basis at their owner's church services, and surely some of those slaves learned harmony singing through observation. Olmsted's recollections support the idea that at least some slaves knew harmony singing. He claimed to have witnessed "common plantation-negroes, or deck-hands of the steamboats…fall to singing, each taking a different part, and carrying it on with great spirit and independence, and in perfect harmony, as I never heard singers, who had not been considerably educated, at the North."[189] Still, it is difficult to entirely ignore the combined testimonies of Kemble, Allen, Ware and Garrison, especially in light of their genuine interest in Black musical cultures. Perhaps Solomon Northrup's reference to the "simple but melodious" songs of slaves is the fairest description of the musical culture of enslaved people, a culture where complex harmony parts were not a mainstay technique, although they perhaps existed.[190]

Characteristic 7: Call-and-response and improvisation

Improvisation and call-and-response forms appear in the music of slaves, both independently and in conjunction with each other. There is not enough evidence to definitively associate either of those musical techniques with any of the most frequent WPA songs. By virtue of being written down, sheet music and transcribed lyrics cannot

189. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 552-553.

190. Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northrup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana* (Auburn, Buffalo, and Cincinnati, 1853), 285, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/miun.abt6874.0001.001.

provide much direct evidence for improvisation. Additionally, call-and-response structures require at least two people, or at minimum one person and an instrument. The WPA workers typically interviewed only one former slave at a time, most of whom sang without accompaniment. Without specific commentary from the interviewees, which was rare, it is impossible to know if the most common WPA songs were ever performed as a call and response. It is therefore necessary to look beyond the most popular songs to determine the popularity of improvisation and call-and-response structures among slaves.

Former slaves, both in the WPA narratives and Civil War-era sources, did occasionally reference improvised tunes and lyrics. Frederick Douglas provided one of the clearest references to improvisation among slaves, writing that they would "compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune." Rather than being completely random or meaningless, however, their improvisations reflected the rhythms of slave life. Douglass recalled that going to the "Great Farm House," a particularly desirable assignment, was a frequent topic in the improvised songs of his fellow slaves.[191]

Indeed, slaves often improvised within the framework of a preexisting song. Many spirituals incorporated lyrics that singers could easily modify to suit the audience. Songs like "The Good Old Way" were highly flexible. As the editors of *Slave Songs* noted, the piece calls for "mourners" to go "down in de valley to pray," but singers could conceivably substitute any other two-syllable word ("sister" is the example substitution given in the text).[192] The spiritual "Lord, Make Me More Patient" could likewise be freely modified. According to the notes in *Slave Songs,* any other positive adjective could

191. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 13.

192. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 84.

be substituted for "patient" in the repeated title phrase.[193] At times, slaves must have improvised completely new lyrics and melodies, but without the ability to record these songs in writing, many of those spontaneous pieces have been forgotten.

Because federal workers typically interviewed only one former slave at a time, the WPA interviewees provide limited information about call-and-response traditions. Many interviewees quoted or sang lyrics from the days of slavery, but without multiple performers it is difficult to tell which lyrics, if any, followed a call-and-response format. Occasionally, however, interviewees would specifically describe call-and-response songs, perhaps most notably in the context of corn shucking. WPA interviews frequently portrayed music as an integral part of the shucking. Typically, one slave would be appointed the "general" to lead the singing. The general would sing a verse, which the other slaves would in turn sing back to him. Call-and-response singing helped keep energy levels high at the shucking, providing (in conjunction with liquor) entertainment for the slaves and a boost in productivity.[194]

Witness accounts of slavery invoke the call-and-response tradition in a variety of contexts. Kemble described rowing songs that alternated between solo melody lines and unison choruses sung by the group.[195] Olmsted documented a similar musical structure in the "wild and barbarous" funeral song discussed above. One enslaved person led the

193. Allen et al., *Slave Songs*, 52.

194. For examples of the association between music and corn shucking, see Joseph Holmes, interview by Illa B. Prince, in *Alabama Narratives*, 193; Everett Ingram, interview by Preston Klein, in *Alabama Narratives*, 216; Georgia Telfair, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 6-7; H.B. Holloway, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 3*, 291.

195. Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 218. Kemble remarked that enslaved boatmen had the "rhythm of the rowlocks for accompaniment."

singing, delivering one short line at a time, and in response other mourners would either echo his words or reply to them.[196] Olmsted also related a strikingly unique example of the call-and-response tradition associated with corn shucking. One night, when the steamship he rode lay at rest on the Cumberland River, he heard the distant sound of slaves singing during what he believed to be a shucking. He wrote that "the performers seemed to love their own song, and to wait for its far off echo. It was long before we discovered that this was artificial, and came in response from the next plantation."[197] Here, the call-and-response transcended even the boundaries of the slaveowner's property.

Characteristic 8: Use of Guitar, Especially Slide Guitar

Although slave instrumentation is generally well documented, the guitar is largely absent from sources about slave music. The defining instrument of rural blues, the guitar, appears only a handful of time in the WPA interviews. Even among those interviews, it is unclear in several cases whether the recollection of guitars is from before or after the Civil War.[198] At least one interviewee, Liza Mention of South Carolina, directly claimed

196. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 26.

197. Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas*, 27, 30, 34-35.

198. See Tinie Force and Elvira Lewis, interview by J.R. Wilkerson, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume VII: Kentucky Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Kentucky (Library of Congress, 1941), 115-116, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.070; Austin Pen Parnell, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 5*, 262, 268; Jane Thompson, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 353; Harriet Jones, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 2*, 234; Mary Anngady, interview by T. Pat Matthew, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 33, 35, 37; Old Tim, interview by Ruby Lorraine Radford, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 335-336. Parnell, who claimed as his birthday the day of Lincoln's assassination is one such former slave who recollected hearing guitars as well as banjoes in his youth. If that was the case, his memory of guitars must be from the late 1860s at the earliest, and possibly much later than that. On the other hand, Anngady (born in 1857) was old enough to have remembered slavery well, but she only mentions playing guitar in a postwar context; it is unclear when she learned to play the instrument.

that Black musicians still did not have guitars in the immediate aftermath of the war.[199] Guitars are also absent in the writings of Olmsted, Kemble, Higginson, Northrup, and Douglass, all of whom described either violins or banjoes in detail.[200] At the risk of resorting to an argument from silence, it is hard to imagine that so many sources on slave music would have failed to mention guitars if they were popular among slaves during slavery.

In fact, the WPA interviews and other sources provide voluminous evidence about other instruments that slaves played. The WPA interviewees extensively referenced banjoes and fiddles. Former slaves from nearly every slave state recalled Black musicians playing fiddles or violins. Many interviewees also mentioned banjoes, although perhaps not as frequently as fiddles.[201] A handful of former slaves also recalled quill instruments,

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199. Liza Mention, interview by Leila Harris and John N. Booth, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 122, 124. Mention was born after the war and thus could not speak directly to Black musicianship during slavery.

200. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 74; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 97. Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 79, 216.

201. See, for example, John Cameron, interviewer unknown, in *Mississippi Narratives*¸ 18-19; Fanny Smith Hodges, interview by Mrs. W.F. Holmes, in *Mississippi Narratives*, 69; Jake Green, interview by Ruby Pickens Tartt, in *Alabama Narratives*, 168; Mingo White, interview by Levi D. Shelby, Jr., in *Alabama Narratives*¸413; Katie Arbery, interview by Bernice Bowden, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 1*, 64-65; Alice Dixon, interview by Pernella Anderson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 2*, 155; Millie Evans, interview by Carol Graham and Pernella Anderson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 2*, 243; Mittie Freeman, interview by Beulah Sherwood Hagg, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 2*, 352; William Gant, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 3*, 11-12 (Gant was enslaved in Tennessee); William H. Harrison, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 3*, 185-188 (Harrison was enslaved in Virginia, learned to play fiddle in North Carolina, and apparently performed in eight states as a slave); Abbie Lindsay, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 4*, 255, 258 (Linday was enslaved in Louisiana); Ida Ridgely, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 6*, 44 (Ridgley was enslaved in VA); Douglas Dorsey, interview by James Johnson, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume III: Florida Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Florida (Library of Congress, 1941), 97, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.030; Louis Napoleon, interview by J.M. Johnson, in *Florida Narratives*, 244; James V. Deane, interviewer unknown, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume VIII: Maryland Narratives*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Maryland (Library of Congress, 1941), 7, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.080; Richard Macks, interviewer unknown, in *Maryland Narratives*¸56; Henry Dant, interviewer unclear, in *Missouri Narratives*, 99; Gus

hollow reeds that slaves blew into to produce a flutelike sound.[202] Both stringed instruments and percussion are also documented in witnesses accounts of slavery. Northrup mentioned slaves playing both violins and banjoes, particularly at dances. Himself a talented violinist, Northrup would provide music for these occasions.[203] Like Higginson, Olmsted appeared more interested in the singing of Black Southerners than in their instrumental ability, but he repeated a claim that banjoes and fiddles were the common instruments of slave dances.[204] For percussion, slaves used both improvised instruments and their own bodies. Some former slaves recalled using pans or skillets as percussion. Slaves also used bones to create music, sometimes as makeshift drumsticks and sometimes (apparently) for their own percussive qualities when hit together.[205] Stomping and clapping to music also appear frequently in the interviews, especially in the case of dances but also in general recreational or religious contexts.[206] Northrup

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Smith, interviewer unknown, in *Missouri Narratives*, 323; C.B. Burton, interview by G.L. Summer, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 152; "Mom" Louisa Collier, interview by Annie Ruth Davis, in *South Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 222-223; Agatha Babino, interviewer unknown, in *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, *Volume XVI: Texas Narratives*; *Part 1*, collected by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Texas (Library of Congress, 1941), 37-38, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mesn.161 (Babino was enslaved in Louisiana); Amos Clark, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 1*, 221; Campbell Davis, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 1*, 286; Bill Crump, interview by Mary A. Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 1*, 209; Richard C. Moring, interview by Mary A. Hicks, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 139; Neal Upson, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 64; Rhodus, Walton, interview by Adella S. Dixon, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 124.

202. Hammett Dell, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 2*, 138; Ellis Jefson, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 4*, 44; Claiborne Moss, interview by Samuel S. Taylor, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 5*, 161.

203. Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 79, 216.

204. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York, 1860), 146, http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gdc/scd0001.00143699493.

205. Harriett Barrett, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 1*, 50; Fanny Randolph, interview by Mattie B. Roberts, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 3*, 196; Bob Maynard, interviewer unknown, in *Oklahoma Narratives*, 224.

described slaves engaging in a dance called "patting." The dance consisted of "striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing."[207] In this case, bodily percussion was an integral part of the dances, not just an accompaniment to it. Higginson did not mention any formal instruments that slaves employed, focusing primarily on their singing. He did, however, describe slave children clapping their hands to songs or keeping time by stomping their feet.[208]

The point is clear: extant sources provide copious information about the instruments of slaves. There is no reason to think that former slaves or other sources would have purposefully avoided talking about guitars, and chalking it up to coincidence is ludicrous in light of the vast body of available evidence. If guitars were widespread in slave communities, the sources would have mentioned them.

Slavery and the Blues

Three major characteristics of early rural blues music had minimal or no recorded presence in slave music: solo vocal performances, guitar playing, and lyrics about romantic heartbreak. It is not a coincidence that those musical characteristics would not emerge in the music of Black communities until after slavery ended. Slavery actively prevented the popularization of those traits. However, the musicals traits that slave music and the blues share were compatible with the conditions of slavery and in some cases

206. See, for example, Silvia King, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives, Part 2*, 294; Lucindy Jurdon, interview by Preston Klein, in *Alabama Narratives*, 243; Martha Jackson, interview by Ruby Pickens Tartt, in *Alabama Narratives*, 223. See Hamp Kennedy, interviewer unknown, in *Mississippi Narratives*, 86 for an account of stomping and clapping at funerals.

207. Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 219

208. Higginson, *Letters and Journals*, 219-220.

were the direct result of the enslavement of Black communities.

The musical culture of slaves borrowed substantially from music that originated in broader American communities, including white communities. Many of the popular songs of slaves were at least partially the products of white songwriters. Of the nine most-cited songs in the WPA collection, white authors penned at least four: "Amazing Grace," "Hark from the Tomb," "Am I Born to Die to Lay This Body Down," "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand."[209] In addition, "John Brown's Body" evolved from the song of a white hymnist.[210] Presumably, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Run, Nigger, Run" were the product of Black authors, while "Dixie" likely evolved through the contributions of both Black and white musicians.[211] Ironically, given its association with the Confederate, pro-slavery cause, "Dixie" remains some of the best evidence that "Black music" and "white music" did not and could not evolve independently. Of course, antebellum Black songwriters deserve recognition for their contributions to American songwriting. In addition to their individual talents and experiences, enslaved musicians also drew upon decidedly non-Western musical traditions. Captured slaves brought African tradition across the Atlantic with them. It is no coincidence that in 1858, following the capture of an illegal slaving ship, a writer in *The Charleston Mercury* wrote that the singing of the kidnapped Africans had "a great resemblance to some of our negro spirituals."[212] African traditions were a real and important part of slaves' musical culture,

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209. Minton, *Folk Music and Song*, 364, 366, 373, 380.

210. Stauffer and Soskis, *The Battle Hymn*, 17-18.

211. Hotze, "Three Months in the Confederate Army," 140; Emmett, "I Wish I Was in Dixie's Land," 2-4.

212. "The Slaver-Her Crew and Cargo," *The Charleston Mercury*, August 30, 1858, morning edition, Gale *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

although they were indeed only one element of it.

Given the deep connections between the music of slaves and the broader American musical culture, it is no surprise that many characteristics of the blues were able to emerge during slavery. Chord progressions that used the I IV and V chords, repeated lyrics, and many of the other characteristics of enslaved people's music were prominent in broader American culture. What then, of the three major traits that did not emerge in the antebellum music of Black communities? How did slavery restrict their development?

Unlike later practitioners of blues music, slave musicians rarely performed as solo vocalists. Nineteenth-century accounts of slave performances overwhelmingly indicate that music, especially vocal performance, was usually a community endeavor, not an individual one.[213] The WPA narratives generally tell a similar story.[214] The social and physical limitations of slavery help explain the apparent absence of solo vocalists in public slave performances. Unlike the itinerant buskers of later generations (a common mode of operation for early blues musicians), slave musicians obviously did not have the

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213. See, for example, Higginson, *Letters and Journals*, 219-220; Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 127-129, 218-219; Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas*, 34; Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 551-552. Although he does not address solo and group vocals specifically, Northrup's recollection of singing at slave dances almost certainly refers group singing; after all, it is difficult to imagine a crowd of people dancing at the same time but singing different songs. See Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 219-220. Douglass's accounts of slave music seem to reference group performance when he describes slaves singing during their visit to the farmhouse, but it is unclear whether they were singing separately or together. See Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 13.

214. See, for example, Fannie Moore, interview by Marjorie Jones, in *North Carolina Narratives; Part 2*, 133 and Hamp Kennedy, interviewer unknown, in *Mississippi Narratives*, 86. Note, however, that my conclusions about the portrayal of group singing in the WPA narratives depend upon the overall impression given by the narratives, not any individual narrative.

freedom to participate in regular circuits or visit new locales, with rare exceptions.[215] Slaves were so often in close proximity to each other that their musical culture inevitably tended towards group performance. The singing boatmen that Kemble described are a particularly keen example of how physical closeness encouraged group performance. For the enslaved rowers, all working within earshot of each other and the rhythmic beating of the oars, and moreover lacking any diversion besides singing, group music performance was a natural product of their collective talents and shared environment.[216] Consciously or not, slaves probably experienced social pressure to engage in group performance. While talented musicians undoubtedly enjoyed showing off their abilities, an aloof soloist probably would have made few friends in such an environment where group musical participation was one of the few available recreational activities. Whether they sang to pass the time during a hard days' work in the field, or to mourn the passing of a friend, slaves' music was often the product of shared experiences.

Enslaved people surely sang or played music on their own, but the solo public performer did not exist as a recognizable archetype. Dances were one of the few public occasions that might feature solo vocalists. At dances, one slave would sometimes (but not, it seems, universally) call the dance or sing a piece, accompanied by banjoes or fiddles, but even then, the singing supported the dance, rather than being a solo

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215. For an iconic account of early travelling blues musicians, see W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, ed. Arna Bontemps (MacMillan, 1941, reprinted in 1947), 73-75, https://archive.org/details/fatherofbluesaut00wcha_1/mode/1up. Handy famously describes encountering a solitary singer-guitarist at a train depot in Tutwiler, Mississippi. Northrup was one of the rare slaves who sometimes labored as a travelling musician, but even his musical opportunities were limited to local parties. Presumably, like all other slaves, Northrup could only travel when his master was willing to grant him a pass. See Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 196, 216, 217.

216. Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 218-219.

performance piece that existed in its own right. The dance caller also always performed with the support of multiple instrumentalists, unlike the solo guitarist-singer of later generations.[217] Call-and-response songs included a sort of "lead singer" (for somebody had to issue the call before the response), but even then, the caller performed only to stimulate a group response.[218] In more private settings, enslaved people certainly sang by themselves. Lullabies like "Rock-a-bye Baby," which appear in multiple slave interviews, were probably the domain of individual vocalists.[219] Slaves had little time apart for themselves, but surely in their relatively infrequent moments of solitude they sang to pass the time or (to borrow Douglass's phrase) to relieve "an aching heart."[220] Even these private acts of solo singing, though, are distinct from public solo performance that often typifies non-slave music—including later blues.

Another defining feature of blues music, lyrics about romantic heartbreak, is conspicuously absent from documentation of slave musicianship. The simplest explanation for this data is that songs about romantic heartbreak were not popular among slaves. There is some evidence to support the claim. The contents of *Slave Songs of the United States* are overwhelmingly religious. Of the 136 songs listed in the collection, at least 120 are spirituals. In their introduction, Allen, Ward, and Garrison even wrote that

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217. For an example of a solo vocalist at slave dances in the WPA narratives, see Harriett Jones, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 2*, 234-235. For an example of group singing at dances, see Amos Clark, interviewer unknown, in *Texas Narratives; Part 1*, 221-222.

218. See, for example, Benny Dilliard, interview by Grace McCune, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*; "Uncle" Everett Ingram, interview by Preston Klein, in *Alabama Narratives*, 216; Olmsted, *A Journey Through in the Back Country*, 195.

219. James Bolton, interview by Sarah H. Hall and Maude Barragan, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 1*, 100.

220. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 15.

they originally intended the book to contain separate parts for religious and nonreligious songs, but they apparently did not uncover enough secular pieces to warrant an additional section for them.[221] Most former slaves interviewed in the WPA narratives did not provide generalizations about Black musical cultures, preferring instead to speak about their own musical experiences. However, some former slaves who did comment on the general content of the music of their youth indicated that spiritual songs were the most popular. Take, for example, the testimony of George Braddox, who remarked that "most of the old songs were religious."[222] It is possible that, in contrast with the modern popular culture, songs with Christian themes dominated the music preferences of slaves, while songs about romance were only marginally popular.

Although many slaves probably favored religious music over other genres, a more complete explanation for the apparent absence of songs about romantic heartbreak is that slaves were hesitant to perform those songs in front of white audiences. Kemble recalled learning that many slaveowners forbade slaves from singing "melancholy tunes or words," allowing their slaves only to sing "cheerful music and senseless words."[223] *Slave Songs* provides further evidence that Black singers were hesitant to perform songs about romantic topics (not just ones about heartbreak) in front of white listeners. When US General James Wilson asked a group of Black boat workers to explain a particularly cryptic work song, they evaded the question, leading Wilson to conclude that the song was about "negro courtship." Interestingly, the boat workers did not object to performing

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221. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* xx.

222. George Braddox, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 1*, 226. See also Henrietta Isom, interview by Irene Robertson, in *Arkansas Narratives; Part 3*, 392.

223. Kemble, *Journal of a* Residence, 129.

the song in front of Wilson, but only to explaining it.[224]

Some slaves may have disguised heartbreak behind coded lyrics. Douglass wrote that slave songs contained "words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves."[225] He criticized a widespread misconception in the North that singing was proof that slaves were happy, instead arguing that, however joyful the songs might have seemed, "slaves sing most when they are most unhappy."[226] In Douglass's experience, the singing of the slave "represents the sorrows of his heart." His phrasing—*represent*—is important. The words of these songs may have been "incoherent" to a casual listener or even other slaves, but the music was still a cathartic response to the trials of slave life.[227] Other witness accounts of slave music also mention seemingly vacuous lyrics. Kemble wrote that she rarely heard in songs "any words that could be said to have any sense."[228] Likewise, Olmsted described the shucking song he overhead while travelling the river as "wordless."[229] As an outsider to the community, Olmsted and other observers might have perceived the lyrics as nonsense, but the words may not have been so meaningless to the slaves who performed those songs.

However, the ambiguity of slave lyrics does nothing to *prove* that songs about

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224. Allen et al., *Slave Songs* 115.

225. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 13.

226. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 15.

227. Douglas, *Narrative of the Life*, 14-15.

228. Kemble, *Journal of a Residence*, 128.

229. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas; Or, A Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier: With a Statistical Appendix* (New York, 1857), 34, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/AAW3927.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext.

romantic heartbreak were popular in slave communities. Douglass interpreted the incomprehensible evidence of slaves' lyrics as evidence of their unhappiness, but other former slaves differed. Northrup suggested that slaves would sometimes perform a self-aware nonsense song, one "composed rather for its adaptation to a certain tune or measure, than for the purpose of expressing any distinct idea."[230] Where Douglass identified catharsis, Northrup found an absence of specific meaning. Of course, both men were only describing their personal experiences, and perhaps both musical assessments were accurate interpretations of the music each man heard. In the end, though, the inclusion of nonsense lyrics in a song is not conclusive proof that the song was about sadness or romantic heartbreak.

At most, it is safe only to conclude that slaves *may* have had songs about romantic heartbreak, but those songs were either heavily disguised or rarely sung for white audiences. There is no evidence, direct or otherwise, for such songs reaching the popularity of pieces like "Amazing Grace" or "Run, Nigger, Run." In fact, if romantic heartbreak songs did exist, the secrecy surrounding them probably would have inhibited their popularization. There were apparently no public occasions, like funerals, baptisms, or church services, where slaves had general approval to perform romantic heartbreak songs. It is hard to imagine that songs performed in secret could ever become a regional phenomenon like "Dixie" or "Run, Nigger, Run." If they existed (and they probably did in some form), most songs about romantic heartbreak probably only achieved local popularity.

In any case, the direct acknowledgement of romantic troubles in blues music is an

230. Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 219.

entirely different approach from disguising lyrics about romantic heartbreak. Even if slaves privately performed songs that dealt with romance, away from the prying ears of slaveowners, such a musical culture is still a far cry from blues music's straightforward and public examination of romantic troubles. Blues-like themes may have been present in the music of slaves, but they did not go public until after slavery ended. The driving forces behind this change, an essential step in the emergence of blues music as a recognizable genre, warrant further scholarly examination.

The guitar is the final key trait of rural blues that appeared only infrequently in the music of slaves. Before the war, most Black musicians in the United States did not have access to guitars. In fact, guitars were generally not accessible to members of lower socio-economic classes, and enslaved Americans fell at the lowest rung of them all. Peter Danner argues that the guitar was popular among neither "the rural poor" nor "upper-class society" in antebellum America. Instead, it was a firmly middle-class instrument.[231]

In his monograph on the history of American guitar playing, David Noonan acknowledges that guitars appeared in the United States before the end of the eighteenth century.[232] For nineteenth-century Americans, though, it was a well-known fact that fiddles and banjos, not guitars, were the primary instruments of lower-class musicians. Printed collections of minstrel songs prominently featured images of Black or blackface

231. Peter Danner, "The Guitar in Nineteenth-Century America: A Lost Social Tradition," *Soundboard Scholar* 7, no. 1 (2021): 3-4, 8. https://digitalcommons.du.edu/sbs/vol7/iss1/10/. Originally published in *Soundboard* 12, no. 3 (1985).

232. David Noonan, *Guitar in America: Victorian Era to Jazz Age* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 8-9, ProQuest Ebook Central. According to Noonan's research, Spanish colonists may have brough the instrument to modern Florida as early as the 1500s.

musicians with banjos.[233] The minstrel shows may have been a mocking parody of Black musicianship, but the reliance of minstrel artists on banjos is evidence for a widespread cultural association between Blackness and banjos. Southern newspapers also associated banjos and fiddles with slave musicians. An 1858 Christmas Day piece in the Savannah *Daily News and Herald* describes slave musicians playing the fiddle and banjo during the holiday; a correspondent travelling in Savannah wrote to the D.C. *National Intelligencer* that slaves would play fiddles and banjos by night; and in 1859, the *Charleston Mercury* republished an English newspaper article claiming that slaves would play the instrument for recreation after their day's work was over.[234] The list could go on. An 1886 editorial piece in the *Boston Globe* directly described the social hierarchy of instruments: "Like the fiddle, the banjo got into disrepute because it was played by people whom the aristocracy do not usually associate with…in the mind of people, the banjo became associated with the negro."[235] The *Globe* article goes on to suggest that the banjo may

233. See, for example, White, *White's Serenaders' Song Book*, cover, 50, 62; E.P. Christy, *Christy's Plantation Melodies* (Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Baltimore: Fisher & Brother, 1851), iii, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951002084213c.

234. "The Christmas Holidays," *Daily News and Herald* , Savannah, GA, December 25, 1858. Gale *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3010917784/NCNP?u=wash74137&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=56eb7786; "A Winter in the South," *National Intelligencer*, March 1, 1854. Gale *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3017774409/NCNP?u=wash74137&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=87395fd3; Wiltshire County Mirror. "Interesting from America." *Charleston Mercury*, September 26, 1859. *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers* (accessed March 23, 2025), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3005513067/NCNP?u=wash74137&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=4aac423e.

235. *Boston Globe*, "The Banjo," reprinted in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* March 17, 1886, p. 8, Gale *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3004292938/NCNP?u=wash74137&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=a19f93bb.

have been developed as a less expensive substitute for the guitar.[236] Unlike the more affordable banjo, slaves would not have been able to access a guitar unless a slaveowner purchased it for them. If the WPA narratives are to be believed, it was rare for slaveowners to do so. More often, they allowed their slaves to access fiddles or banjos.[237]

In the post-slavery South, Black Americans had more access to guitars. According to Danner's research, guitars became increasingly popular after the war with the advent of mail-order catalogues, finally becoming generally accessible to Black musicians in the late nineteenth century.[238] Noonan repeats Danner's findings, noting that by 1880 the guitar had become "a less expensive stand-in for the piano" that was more accessible to musicians from lower economic classes.[239] Two economic factors drove the guitar's surge in popularity among Black Americans. First, obtaining a guitar became more affordable after the war ended. In 1859, the Jacobs company, headquartered in New York, offered guitars for sale for $2.50.[240] The Jacobs guitar appears to have been exceptionally inexpensive, though. In 1860, a Martin guitar might range from $7.50 to $75.00.[241] An 1866 *Baton Rouge Try-Weekly Gazette & Comet* advertisement from

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236. *Boston Globe*, "The Banjo," 8. Modern scholarship tends to emphasize the banjo as a descendant of African instruments. See Shlomo Pestcoe, "Banjo Ancestors: West African Plucked Spike Lutes," in *Banjo Roots and Branches*, ed. Robert B. Winans, 21-22 (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 21, https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctv80c9r6.5. See also Christopher Johnson, *Musicians' Migratory Patterns: The African Drum as Symbol in Early America* (Routledge, 2019), 4, ProQuest Ebook Central.

237. For a WPA interview that briefly discusses how slaves obtained instruments, see Henry Wright, interview by E.D. Riskell, in *Georgia Narratives; Part 4*, 200.

238. Danner, "The Guitar in Nineteenth-Century America," 3, 8.

239. Noonan, *Guitar in America*, 11-12, 19.

240. *New York Herald*, advertisement, August 8, 1859, p. 7, Gale *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

241. *The Semi-Weekly Mississippian* (Jackson, MS), advertisement, January 3, 1860, p. 2, Gale *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*.

Beal's Book and Variety Store offered "cheap" guitars for "only $10."[242] By 1899, though, the John M. Smyth company was advertising guitars that cost as little as $2.65.[243] Similarly, guitar prices in a 1902 Sears and Roebuck Catalogue started at $2.45, with the most expensive costing $23.00.[244] In nominal dollars, the least expensive antebellum guitars cost roughly the same as the cheapest postwar instruments, but inexpensive guitars appear to have been more common by the end of the nineteenth century. Even if the retail price of a guitar remained stable between 1859 and 1902, there were more guitars in America than ever before, and thus more opportunities for resale. Unfortunately, data on private resales is extremely limited, but as the instrument became more popular and retail sales of guitars rose, a used guitar market must have emerged, enabling poorer musicians to obtain instruments at a lower cost.

There was a second reason that guitar became more accessible to Black Americans; after slavery ended, more Black Americans had greater access to discretionary income. In his autobiography, W.C. Handy recounts his early aspirations of becoming a musician, a story that likely mirrors the experience of many other young Black musicians of his era. Growing up in Florence, Alabama, a young Handy dreamed

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242. *Baton Rouge Tri-Weekly Gazette & Comet*, advertisement, April 24, 1866, morning edition, p. 2, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86053661/1866-04-24/ed-1/seq-2/.

243. *The Republican* (Oakland, MD), advertisement, December 14, 1899, p. 7, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88065202/1899-12-14/ed-1/seq-7/; Classified advertisement, *The weekly Corinthian.* (Corinth, MS), October 25, 1899, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87065046/1899-10-25/ed-1/seq-2/.

244. Sears, Roebuck, and Company, *Sears, Roebuck, and Co.*, no. 111 (spring 1902): 194-195, https://archive.org/details/sears-roebuck-catalogue-111/mode/1up. The catalogue itself contains no specific date of publication, although several dates within introductory text, including a sample order form, include references to 1901 and 1902 (see *Sears, Roebuck and* Co., no 111, 12-13). Furthermore, the Clothing and Textile Division of the Texas Tech University Libraries dates Sears Catalogue 111 to 1902. See "The 1902 Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue," Texas Tech University Libraries Clothing and Textile Division, accessed April 13, 2025, https://hdl.handle.net/2346/91548.

of buying a guitar to impress girls, so he worked odd jobs to be able to afford the purchase. It took him many slow, painful months, perhaps even years, to afford the guitar, but he was eventually able to obtain a new instrument (sadly for Handy, his parents forced him to exchange the "sinful thing" for a dictionary).[245] At first glance, Handy's story appears to suggest that Black Americans struggled to obtain guitars even in the late nineteenth century. No doubt many did. But under the conditions of slavery, virtually no enslaved children would have had access to the discretionary income needed to obtain instruments. Handy's story is proof that, however harsh economic conditions may have been for many Black Americans, there was more economic opportunity for many Black Americans in the postwar era, and thus greater access to musical instruments.

245. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 1, 7-10.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The emergence of blues music was not just a post-Civil War development, but a uniquely post-slavery one. Throughout the 1800s, American musicians, particular enslaved Black Americans, had been laying the melodic and harmonic groundwork for the blues, but it was not by chance that the genre only emerged at the end of the century. Analyzing the eight key traits of rural blues reveals that most, but not all, of them were present in the music of slaves. The most striking differences are in musical performance. Enslaved musicians lacked access to the guitar, the characteristic instrument of rural blues, and the solo vocalist was a rarity in the community-driven music of slaves. The apparent absence of songs about romantic heartbreak among slaves is likely a result of slavery-era censorship (whether imposed by slaveowners or self-imposed by slaves themselves). On the other hand, the structural and theoretical underpinnings of slave music largely anticipate rural blues music. The chord progressions, tonal sensibilities, lyrical patterns, and improvisational traditions of rural blues appear to have deep roots in the music of American slaves.

This evidence does not suggest that blues existed as a fledgling genre by the time of the Civil War. Pentatonic scales, blue notes, and I-IV-V progressions may have all existed, and even been popular, but they were not necessarily present in the same songs at the same time. It is tempting to identify songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as proto-blues pieces, and on tonal, structural, and harmonic grounds the comparison would be apt. However, one song is hardly evidence for a recognizable genre. Strongly blues-like songs, such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” remain the minority in surviving evidence about slaves’ music. Furthermore, structural and theoretical approaches are only one part

of defining genre; performance style is equally important in identifying the genre of a song. Charles Johnson's strong reaction to hearing the blues was probably not a unique experience.[246] Even if the tonal approach and call-and-response patterns of blues were familiar traits of the music of his youth, the unique performance style of blues was probably enough to distinguish the two categories of music in his mind.

Of course, much research remains to be done. If, as some more recent scholarship suggest, blues music did indeed originate in urban communities, some of the arguments made here may need to be reconsidered.[247] On the other hand, perhaps the strong similarity between the music of slaves and rural blues is itself evidence that urban blues was not the earlier form of the genre.

Establishing that blues music and the music of slaves had substantial differences is just as valuable as studying the similarities between blues and its predecessor genres. Future scholarship would do best to continue examining *why* certain traits—namely, guitar playing, solo vocalists, and romantic heartbreak—do not appear in the historical record of Black musicians until well after the war. It is regrettable that former slaves like Charles Johnson so rarely had the opportunity to record their views on the rise of blues music, but despite the sparse evidence available, there is room for more discovery. Music is part of society, not separate from it. When a society changes, people change. The postbellum experiences of people like Johnson, for whose life the Civil War and the Second World War served as rough bookends, might provide new evidence for understanding how music in Black communities evolved. By examining widespread

246. Geroge Johnson, interview by Charles Johnson, part 3.

247. See Gussow, "W.C. Handy," 48, 50.

changes in Black life after the end of slavery, historians might get a little closer to solving the mystery of the origin of blues music.

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