JAZZ

A HISTORY

SECOND EDITION

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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

INTRODUCTION

AMERICA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC

Jazz is an American art form, a music that came into being in the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. This music is no longer new or experimental; it has endured the test of time. Like all classical music, it conforms to established standards of form and complexity, contains a large repertoire of recognized masterworks, and requires standards of musical literacy of both its artists and its listeners. The embryonic music developed from the traditions of West African, European, and American music as they were brought together by African Americans in the southern United States. It continued to evolve from the marriage of African-American sacred and secular music with American band traditions and instruments as well as with European harmonies and forms. Improvisation is a crucial feature of jazz, and the spontaneous creation of new works within its stylistic parameters is the key to jazz performance. The post–Civil War American black musician was the most prominent creator of jazz; still, this new art form does not owe its existence entirely to any one culture or race, for many disparate elements fused to make a new sound, one never before heard in Africa, Europe, or America. Today, all the countries of Europe, Great Britain, the former Soviet Union, Japan, Africa, Canada, and several South American countries can claim musicians on the roster of significant jazz artists. Jazz is becoming a world music.

When the scholar William W. Austin viewed the music of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the 1960s, he concluded that the West had produced four outstanding styles, three European and one American: those of Schoenberg, Bartók, and Stravinsky, and that of jazz. Of jazz, he writes:

It is . . . profoundly continuous with older music; its continuity with the past may be more important than its obvious novelty. . . .

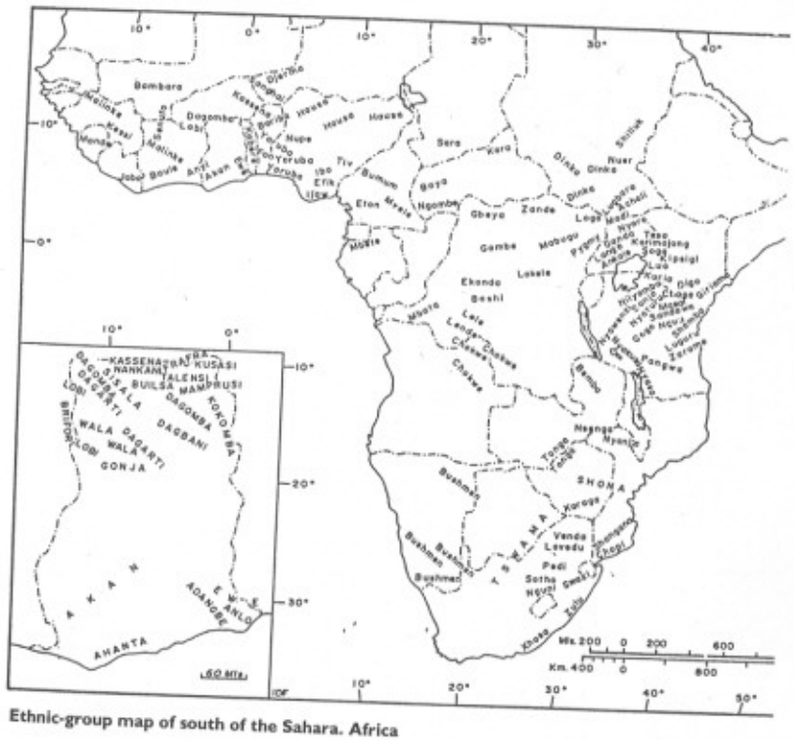
The new styles also, to be sure, are both alike and different. The differences among them, when scrutinized with sympathy, prove to be more important than any similarity. . . . But the similarity, however superficial, is important in a broad historical perspective.[1]

PRECURSORS

Although black slaves were brought to America from many regions of Africa, most were torn from clans and tribes that populated the west coast of the African continent south of the Sahara. This region, variously called the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, and the Slave Coast, is populated by such tribes as the Yoruba, Ibo, Fanti, Ashanti, Susu, Ewe, and others. Since these are, for the most part, oral societies, written evidence from these cultures does not exist from as far back as the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—the worst years of the slave trade, when most African blacks were imported to the Americas. Except where foreign visitors—missionaries, colonizers, adventurers, and the slave traders themselves—wrote down their observations in journals, letters, ledgers, and the like, we have little documentary proof about the customs of these men and women. However, current research by anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and Africanists has provided a wealth of information about most of these societies. Even where written evidence is lacking, Africa's strong oral tradition has enabled these cultures to preserve their past.

When blues scholar Paul Oliver visited northern Ghana in 1964, in the area near the upper Volta River and south of the Sahara, he recorded Fra-Fra musicians playing and singing an ancient Yarum Praise Song. In this performance we can note some arresting parallels—musical, literary, cultural, and formal—with music found in North America among many black communities. Very similar music has been performed on the Georgia Sea Islands, and we can compare the two styles. Sea Island music is American music with pronounced African retentions, reflecting the widespread phenomenon of black American customs retaining African characteristics. The ritual use of insult in humor, the use of dance and musical improvisation in worship services, and the incorporation of thousands of words and names from African languages in "Black English" are but a few of many examples.

[1] William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century from Debussy through Stravinsky*, p. 178 f. [NOTE: Complete bibliographic information for items cited briefly in footnotes may be found in the bibliography.]



Ethnic-group map of south of the Sahara. Africa

New Orleans holds a special place in the history of jazz: it was the most important center of jazz in the early days of its history, and the city is usually considered the fountainhead of this new music. In most areas of the South, specific legislation outlawed drumming, so black slaves substituted hand clapping and foot stomping in their own private gatherings. African rhythms could thus be practiced and perpetuated without offense to the white masters. One important exception to the drumming ban was the Place Congo, a square in New Orleans known today as "Congo Square." There, until the Civil War, slaves were allowed to gather to dance, sing, and play percussion instruments. Instruments of all kinds were heard there, including several types of drums, pebble-filled gourds, jew's-harps, jawbones, thumb pianos (African sansa), and the four-string banjo.

Dancing the *bamboula* in Place Congo.

Through the first half of the nineteenth century, black musical traditions in America included voodoo dancing and ritual. They encompassed ring-shout, ceremonial dancing, and singing; music of the banjo, drums, fifes, fiddles, and other instruments; dancing to the patting of juba; singing of work songs; and a vast repertoire of spirituals. Certain elements were common to many of these activities while others were not. Some elements transferred to the post–Civil War period, others did not. Some of these many traditions readily incorporated Western music and proceeded with a rapid transformation, while others lingered on in an unchanging, basically African mode. The drummers of Place Congo were not jazz drummers, and the singers of the cotton fields were not jazz singers. Still, their heritage profoundly influenced music in America at the turn of the twentieth century, and jazz did emerge.

It is interesting and instructive to observe the process of transportation, translation, and transformation that African and African-American music underwent in locales far from New Orleans, the traditional birthplace of jazz. We can find evidence for this metamorphosis in many locations, and a clear example may be heard in the music of black Americans isolated on the Georgia Sea Islands.[2]

Along the eastern seaboard of the United States, from Maryland to Florida, there are a series of islands separated from the mainland by rivers and

[2]The following description is taken from the author's study, "Music of the American Dream: Brass Traditions and Golden Visions" in Josephine Wright, ed., *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992).

swamps. Many are fertile and were once the sites of large cotton plantations worked by slaves. The islands are inhabited by Gullahs (sometimes called Geechies), descendants of ex-slaves who spoke a black-English dialect called Gullah and who were among the last group of blacks brought to this country in bondage from West Africa. Even today, these islands maintain many African customs and a spoken dialect that blends African languages and English.

In anecdotal reports, James P. Johnson, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and others on the New York scene (p. 107) attest to the connection of Gullah customs and music to jazz. Gullah music is related to the development of "shout" stride piano as well as ragtime and blues. Its connection to the music and customs of tribal West Africa is also clear, and we can observe some of these direct ties.

The black residents of St. Simons Island, a remote and isolated area off the Atlantic coast of Georgia, maintained many African traditions well into the twentieth century and preserved both African and slave song repertoires—shout songs, fiddle songs, the ring-shout dance, the buzzard lope (a solo dance), and more.

When Lydia Parrish began her investigation of these people and their music in 1912, many of the freed slaves were still alive. She discovered them to be secretive, and that—in addition to their having been left alone, for the

The slave's dance was often a test of physical endurance. From an engraving c. 1800, artist unknown.

most part, by post–Civil War whites—accounted for a remarkable environment in which they were able to develop and preserve their own life styles. To a certain degree, the same is true today, but the situation is changing:

> Such is the precarious position in which the slave music finds itself today (1942). While it is not hopeless, it is none too encouraging. Jaunts up and down the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, to the out islands of the Bahamas, and to Haiti, in search of African art survivals of all kinds give proof that they still exist, but the white man's drive against illiteracy is enabling the Negro schoolteachers to make a drive, at the same time, against all things African.[3]

Their relatively self-sufficient circumstances allowed these people an opportunity to nourish and preserve African cultural survivals in the New World. A musical tie to West Africa is certain, but it is partly speculation that links the music of Fra-Fra tribesmen of Ghana directly to music of black Americans living on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Still, it is true that the blacks on St. Simons Island are the most recent descendants of tribal Africans brought to America as slaves from the same general area in Africa, both cultures employ Praise Songs as part of their musical tradition, and Praise Songs from the two cultures have striking similarities, as exemplified by the Yarum Praise Song[4] and its counterpart, *Daniel* (*NW* 278, I/5),[5] sung by Willis Proctor and seven companions.

The Yarum Praise Song is performed by two Fra-Fra musicians, one a player of a gourd rattle and the other a player of a bowed, two-string fiddle. Both performers sing while creating their own accompaniment, the gourd player establishing the beat, and the fiddle player sounding a complex ostinato. These African musicians are singing traditional verses of praise for their chief, although at one point they interpolate an improvised jibe at white people who pay them for making music.

> *In the village they call me a fool when I sing,*
> *But the white man gives me money to hear my music.*[6]

[3] Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*, music transcribed by Creighton Churchill and Robert MacGimsey (New York: Creative Age Press, 1942), p. 11.

[4] *The Story of the Blues* (Columbia Records CG30008), side 1, band 1, *Yarum Praise Songs*. Some recorded examples are necessary to illustrate the discussion but are not available on either the old or the revised releases of the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*. Where possible, recordings have been selected that are commonly found in college libraries and are likely to remain available by special order from the manufacturer (although such availability cannot be guaranteed). Transcriptions in the text cite the source performances.

[5] *Georgia Sea Island Songs* (New World Records *NW* 278), side 1, band 5, *Daniel*.

[6] Quoted by Paul Oliver on the liner notes of *The Story of the Blues* (Columbia Records CG 30008).

This African fiddler both sings and improvises on his instrument.

The primary literary tradition of West Africa is not written but preserved in memory and transmitted orally through the griot, an official poet-historian whose mission is to preserve and pass on the tribal heritage of history, epic, myths, tales, riddles, proverbs, and lyric poetry. The most common and widespread genre in West Africa is the praise poem, and with it the musician will extol kings, courtiers, important personages, and the gods. The musical storyteller, who is always a male, would often begin with several verses establishing his own credentials as a son of a master of eloquence descended from a long line of men who were the repositories of secrets of royal houses many centuries old, and so on. Then, after assuring the listeners that his words are true, he would begin to unfold an elaborate and fanciful tale of the exploits and powers of great men, beasts, and gods. Much of the performance would be traditional, but there would also be spontaneity and a sense of community among the singers and the other participants gathered around.

In America, black slaves fused many of their West African traditions to the newly imposed Protestant Christianity and surrounding European-American music—Jesus replaced king, prophet replaced courtier, the lining of Psalms replaced leader-chorus responsorial patterns, and so on. Ezekiel and the "dry bones" or Daniel and the lions' den served in the New World where "Maghan Sundiata, Lion of Mali, against whom sorcery could avail nothing," served as story material in Africa. Lawrence W. Levine, in his study of *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*,[7] lists several factors that were important in this fusion process:

1. the rich West African musical tradition common to almost all of the specific cultures from which the slaves came;

2. the comparative cultural isolation in which large numbers of slaves lived;

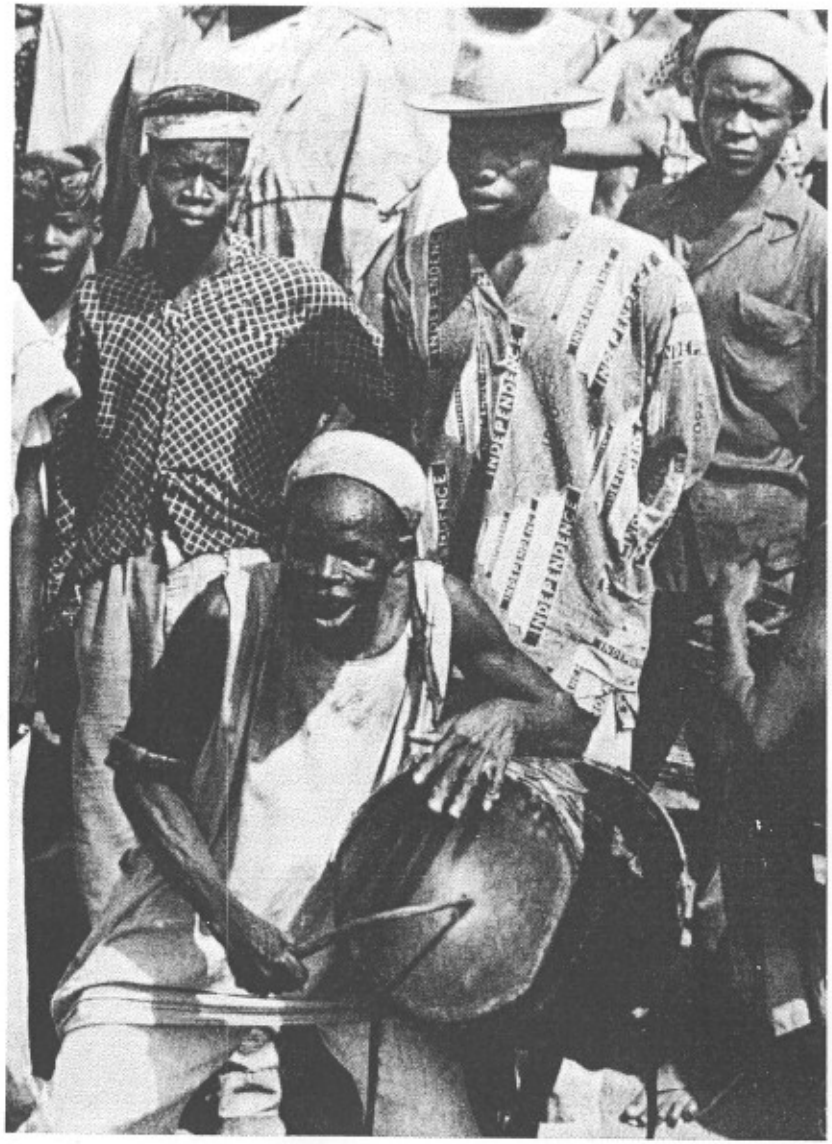
3. the tolerance and even encouragement which their white masters accorded to many of their musical activities;

4. the fact that, for all the divergences in rhythm, harmony, and performance style, nothing in the European musical tradition with which the slaves came into contact in America was totally alien to their own traditions while a number of important features, such as the diatonic scale, were held in common and a number of practices . . . were analogous.

He concludes,

> All of these conditions were conducive to a situation which allowed the slaves to retain a good deal of the integrity of their own musical heritage while fusing

[7] Page 24.



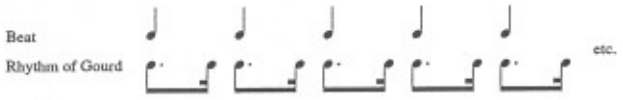
An African griot (praise singer) collects passersby as an American blues artist might on payday.

to it compatible elements of Euro-American music. The result was a hybrid with a strong African base.[8]

Black Americans singing praises of Daniel have created just such a hybrid. The identification of the black slave in the American South with Daniel in the lions' den is one example from the slave song repertory of black Americans' sense of identification with the Children of Israel—an example of the persistent image of the chosen people during a time of affliction. It was Daniel's faith that preserved him from the beasts, and it would be their faith too that would preserve African Americans during a period of suffering and suppression.

LEADER (Willis Proctor)	*REFRAIN (Chorus)*
Walk, believer, walk.	*O Daniel!*
Walk, I tell you, walk.	*O Daniel!*
Shout, believer, shout.	*O Daniel!*
Give me the kneebone bend.	*O Daniel!*
On the eagle wing.	*O Daniel!*
Fly, I tell you, fly.	*O Daniel!*
Fly, believer, fly.	*O Daniel!*
Rock, believer, rock.	*O Daniel!*
Etc.	

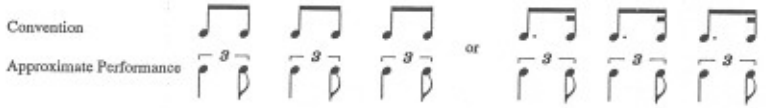
Many aspects of this music could be studied in greater depth, but our primary concerns are the musical relationships of American to African music and slave song to jazz. For example, the Yarum Praise Song has a steady, unwavering pulse that underlies the entire performance and measures the time so that irregular patterns and syncopations can be added and perceived. The sound of the gourd shaker establishes and slightly embellishes the beat.



The actual rhythm of the gourd is closer to:

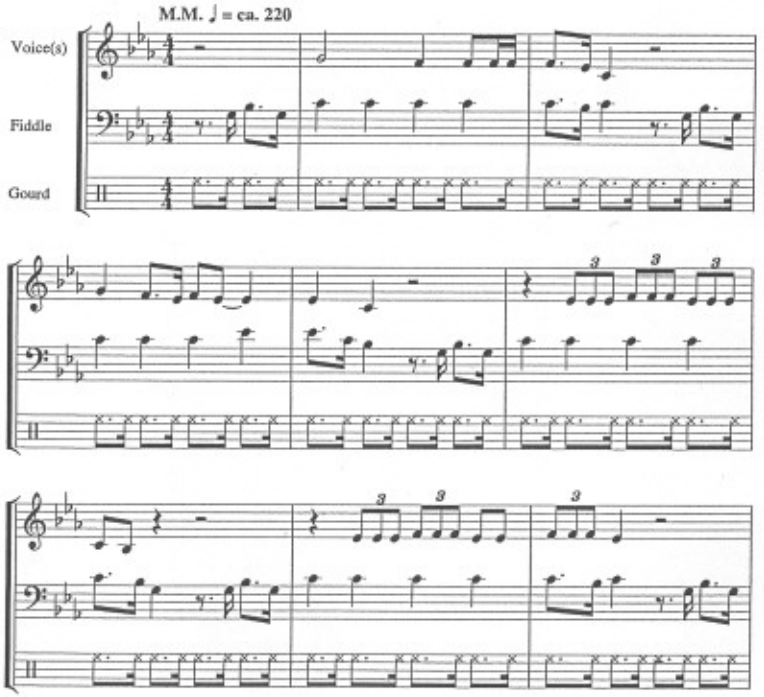
[8]Ibid.

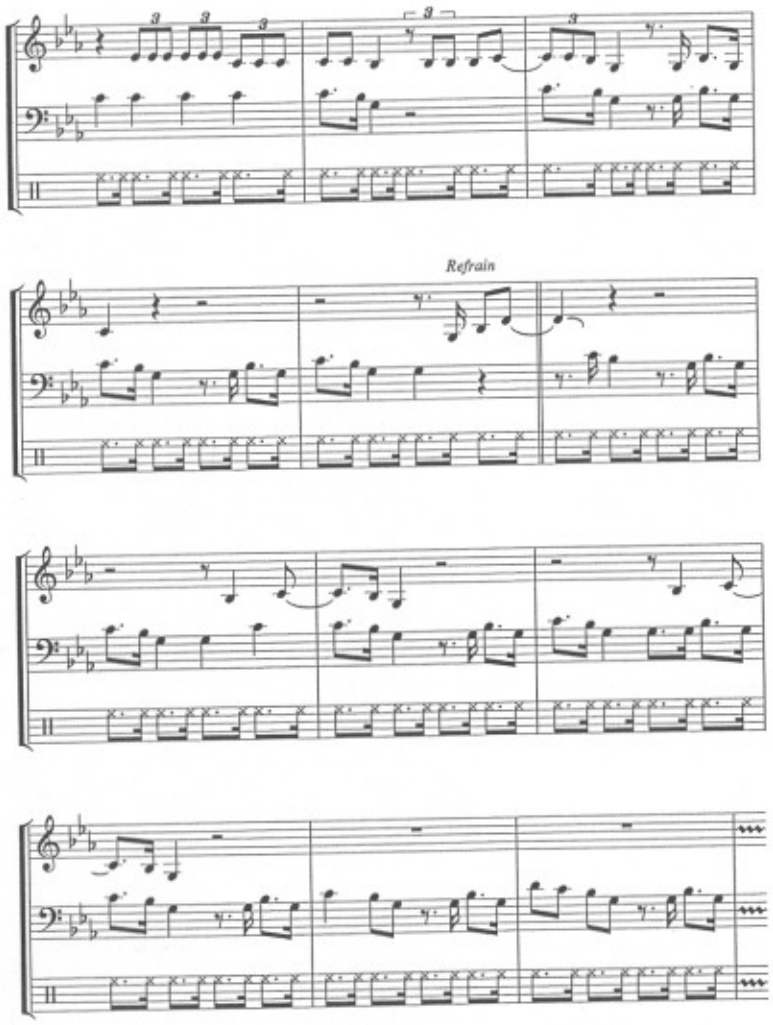
Triplets, however, are clumsy to notate and more difficult to read in a complex score or during performance. Also, they are seldom used in notated jazz music. The convention for jazz arrangers and composers is to notate even eighth-notes or dotted figures and allow performers the freedom to divide the beat unevenly in a manner suitable to the tempo.



An accurate transcription of this recorded excerpt is virtually impossible to achieve, but the following score of the opening measures will serve as a useful guide.

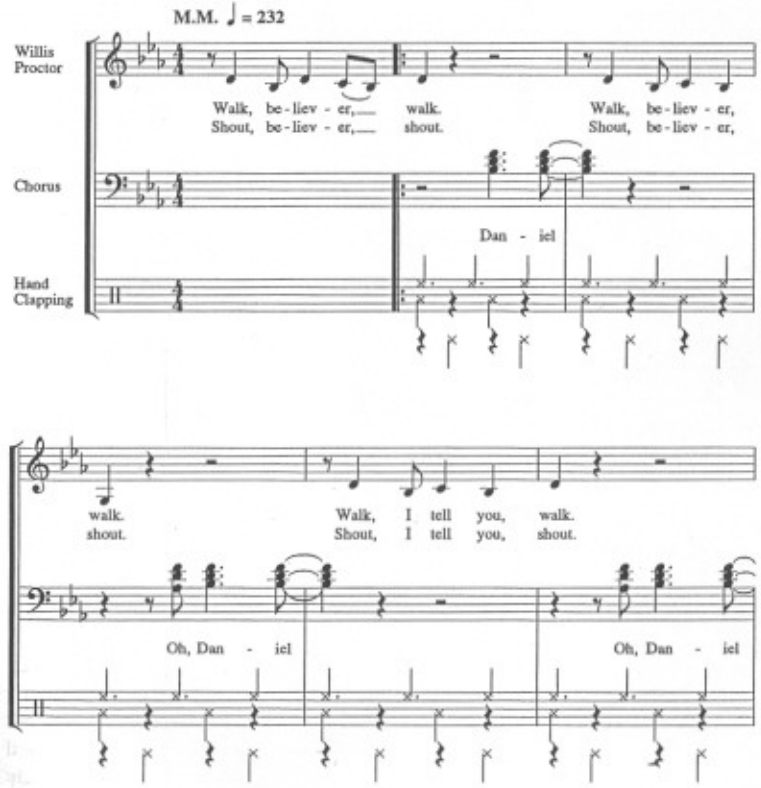
Yarum Praise Song

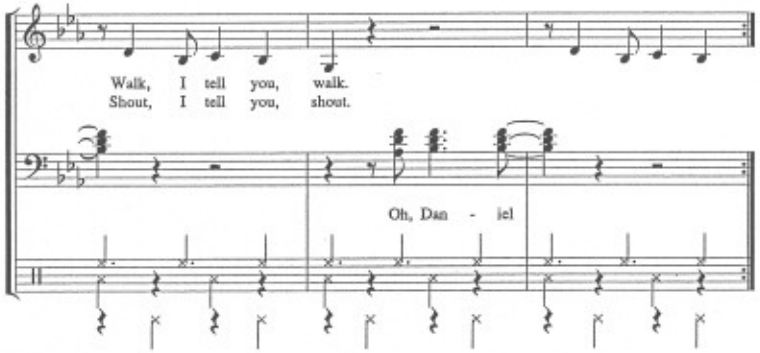




During this portion of the piece, recurring patterns seem to divide the stream of music into four-beat patterns, so a 4/4 time signature was chosen for convenience in the transcription. But this, along with all other conventional signs of Western musical notation, must be accepted with skepticism when used to represent a performance of non-Western music. The above notation is an approximation and a guide for study only; it is not a performance score! The same is true of the following score for *Daniel*. Rhythms and pitches are only approximate. In fact, the performance is a quarter-tone off our standard pitch, and G minor, rather than F♯ minor, was selected mainly to facilitate comparisons with the Yarum praise song.

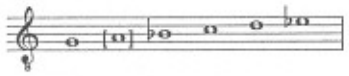
Daniel, Sung by Willis Proctor and Companions



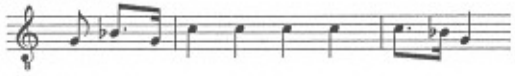


Both patterns skip the second step of the scale. The Fra-Fra pattern stresses the G and C while Willis Proctor stresses the G and D, but both praise songs are unified by a similar ostinato and identical modal configuration.

Scale of Ostinato



Fra-Fra Fiddle



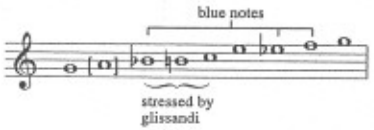
Willis Proctor

Both pieces move to a similar beat (a pulse in the metronome range of 220–232 beats per minute). They both display syncopations and complex rhythms, the latter often resulting from the leader's insertion of extra text syllables.

Important differences should be noted too: ostinato accompaniment versus ostinato lead; distant refrains versus regular choral interruptions; even gourd performance versus syncopated clapping; and so on. One outstanding and significant difference is the use of harmony in the Georgia excerpt, and another is the challenge to the G-minor mode of Willis Proctor's lead posed by the B♭-major chord of his singers. These pieces are different but clearly related. Both share elements with music in the jazz tradition, the Georgia

Sea Island song more so than the African piece. Some of these elements are: metronomic underlying pulse, syncopated melodies, rhythmic instrument accompaniment (gourd and hands), a performer-composer aesthetic, performance techniques common to jazz (such as glissandos and special vocal articulations), and reliance on a melodic mode that is compatible with, if not identical to, a blues scale.

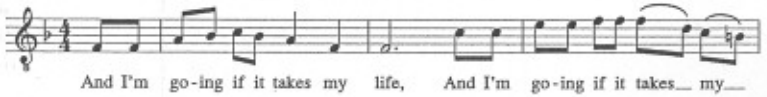
Melodic Mode



Neither performance offers much in the way of musical improvisation, although no two performances of these pieces, even by the same musicians, would be completely identical. It is important to note that the melodic and rhythmic patterns are fairly inflexible. Also, where the African piece employs no harmony, the Georgia Sea Island Praise Song uses but a single repeated chord.[9]

Another step in the transitional process can be seen if we observe the music of a black church meeting recorded in New York in 1926.[10] The Reverend J. M. Gates leads his congregation with a sermon that moves from speech to chant to song. As he intones the message, a soprano in the congregation begins to sing an improvised descant melody. One man, and then another, join in quietly while the Reverend Gates continues with a chanted patter that both sets the mode and almost establishes a beat. Gradually, the congregation tunes up in anticipation of the change from recitative to song, and the Reverend does not disappoint them. He sings:

Music at a Black Church Meeting, 1926



[9]Alan Lomax pairs a Louisiana work holler with a field song from Senegal on *Roots of the Blues* (New World Records *NW* 252). This is but another example showing African-American musical relationships.

[10]*History of Classic Jazz* (Riverside SDP 11), side 1, band 4, *I'm Going to Heaven if it Takes My Life* (originally recorded on Gennett 6034).