

Aperture magazine, 1962 Storefront Church series introduction by W. E. B. DuBois

“I have been looking over the photographs of Negro church-goers in Buffalo taken by Milton Rogovin. They are astonishingly human and appealing and they take my mind back to what I wrote in Chapter 10 of “Souls of Black Folk” fifty-eight years ago.

‘Those who have not thus witnessed the frenzy of a Negro revival in the untouched backwoods of the South can be dimly realize the religious feeling of the slave: as described, such scenes appear grotesque and funny, but as seen as awful. Three things characterized this religion of the slave,-the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy. The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss’, an intriguer, an idealist, -all these he is, and ever, too, the center of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it. The type, of course, varies according to time and place, from the West Indies in the sixteenth century to New England in the nineteenth, and from the Mississippi bottoms to cities like New Orleans or New York.

The music of Negro religion is the plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpoint can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.

Finally the Frenzy or ‘Shouting’, when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more devoutly believed in than all the rest. It varied in expression from silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor, -the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance. All this is nothing new in the world, but old as religion, as Delphi and Endor. And so firm a hold did it have on the Negro, that many generations firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of the God there could be no true communion with the Invisible’.

“It is astonishing and yet easily understandable that this description of the religion of the slaves still fits the practice of present conditions among the poor, black workers recently come to cities like Buffalo. It shows how little the church of America and other institutions of our culture have reached these people, and yet how alone and segregated they live and worship.”

W. E. B. DuBois

April 5, 1961 Brooklyn, N. Y.