How American Folk Songs Started

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A recent issue of The Chicago Defender printed an article that quoted John Powell, noted white composer, as saying that Negro "spirituals were not original in the true sense of the word, and that they were probably based on Methodist hymns.

John Powell is one of those white musicians who has appropriated to his own use for financial reasons, some Negro folk songs, spirituals, and incorporated them in his compositions, and who a decade ago issued a hinted tirade through the white press about the origin of them.

Inasmuch as there may be a few readers who may believe such falsehoods are negligible, and are not interested in the origin of the other race, I would greatly appreciate sufficient space to quote several authorities on the origin of the spirituals.

"That the spiritual is a spontaneous outburst of intense religious fervor, and springs into life ready-made, untaught, untaught, the primitive, and in the simple, but is of great significance for the study of Negro song.

Negro songs could not have been derived from white folks' music of any kind, but came with the Negro mind from the life as the original. The first spirituals of Dr. H. T. Burleigh, noted composer and singer.

MELODIES WERE "GENUINE AMERICAN FOLK SONGS"

George P. Upton in his book, "The Songs," says: "The Negro melodies before the period of the Civil war were the genuine American folk songs. They were either original or derived from the English minstrel shows.

The songs were the products of a race to whom, under the edicts of slavery, education was forbidden, hence they were simple and expressed in the emotions, the longing, the sadness, as well as the joy of the slave.

All conditions were favorable to the Negro producing a folk song. Heaven and nature worked in harmony with the soul to generate the spiritual atmosphere. Slavery was the starting point and heaven was the goal of life. The sorrows of slavery pierced his heart and it poured itself out in such lamentations as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" and "I'm Troubled in Mind." The thought of heaven winged his soul to flights of imagination and then he sang of "Satan Slippers" and "Starry Crown." His soul was either with Satan in pain or God in joy.

DIXIE PLANTATIONS HOME OF FOLK SONGS

Damrosch says: "The Negro music isn't ours; it is the Negro. It has been a musical expression and is very interesting, but it is not ours. Musical and literary authorities through scientific investigation have established the fact that while there is no American folk song in the sense of expressing American life as a whole, still there is a folk song in America, and that is the music of the Negro."

I now quote Krohnheld, who states in his authoritative writings on folk songs: "Nowhere save on the plantations of the South could the emotional life which is essential to the birth of true folk song be developed. Nowhere else was there the necessary meeting of the spiritual cause and the simple agent and vehicle.

The white inhabitants of the cotton belt have never been in that state of genuine ingenuity which prompts spontaneous emotional utterance in music. It did not exist in the nature of the segregated agricultural life of the white pioneers who came to America from Europe and from which sprang these songs, the only songs in America that answer the spiritual de

fendent from any other music in the world.

America has come to realize the wealth of our folk material. In our songs, the spirituals, may be found the most interesting and unique expressions ever contributed to literature and music by a primitive folk. We have only to preserve and encourage the tendency to set them to jazz. They are our sacred heritage and should be spared this prostitution.