

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 only themes from these folk songs or spirituals, and incorporated them in his compositions, and who a decade ago issued a bitter tirade through the white press about the origin of them.

Inasmuch as there may be a few readers who may believe such false propaganda by prejudiced musicians 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 sprang into life ready-made during some camp meeting or revival, and is the simple ecstatic utterance of wholly untutored minds and that the distinctive traits of Negro songs could not have been derived from white folks' music of any kind, but came with the Negro mind from its own native lair," is the opinion of Dr. H. T. Burleigh, noted composer and singer.

MELODIES WERE "GENUINE AMERICAN FOLK SONGS"

George P. Upton in his book, "The Song," says: "The Negro melodies before the period of the Civil war were the genuine American folk songs. They were either original or based upon African tradition. They were the products of a race to whom, under the edicts of slavery, education was forbidden, hence they were racial and savored of the soil. They picture the emotions, the longings, 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 souls of the simple heathen to generate the spiritual atmosphere. Slavery was the starting point and heaven was the goal of his life. The sorrows of slavery pierced his heart and it poured itself out in such lamentations as "Nobody Knows Li' Trouble I See" and "I'm Troubled in Mind." The thought of heaven winged his soul to flights of imagination and then he sang of "Golden Slippers" and "Starry Crown." His soul was either with Satan in pain or God in joy.

DIXIE PLANTATIONS HOME OF FOLK SONGS

Danrosch says: "The Negro music isn't ours; it is the Negro's. It has become a popular form of 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 Krehbiel, 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 continent have never been in that state of cultural ingenuousness which prompts spontaneous emotional utterance in music. It did not lie in the nature of the segregated agricultural life of the white pioneers to inspire folk songs. Their occupations lacked the romantic and emotional elements which existed in the slave life of the plantations of the South and from which sprang these songs, the only songs in America that answer the scientific definition of folk songs. They are the original and native product of the slaves. They contain idioms which were transplanted hither from Africa, but as songs they are the product of the social, political and geographical environment within which the slaves were placed in America, and of the joys, sorrows and experiences which fell to their lot in America."

Writing in "The Folk Songs of the American Negro," Dr. John W. Werk says: "Civilization wears away the spirit and conditions which give birth to folk songs. It is not difficult to understand why there are no folk songs which express the soul of America; America, settled by people whose civilization was centuries old and who brought their institutions, customs, music, etc., with them. They were stronger than their surroundings. The Englishman, Frenchman, Scotchman, German and Spaniard all with wondrous power welded their common interests into one, but the beginnings were far too advanced for song creation; each brought their own song. There is, however, a real indisputable folk song in America, an American production, born in the hearts of slaves—expressing a part of the life of our country."

Even no less an authority than John Powell, who composed a "Negro Rhapsody," with its emotionalism and gripping hints of atavistic strains, must admit (at least to himself) that the spiritual is just dif-



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ferent from any other music in the world.

America has come at last 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 them and discourage the tendency to set them to jazz. They are our sacred heritage and should be spared this prostitution.