

WILLIAM EDGAR

A
SUPREME
LOVE

THE MUSIC
OF JAZZ AND THE
HOPE OF THE GOSPEL



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A LONG WAY FROM HOME

SLAVERY AND DIASPORA

*I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having
been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself
for having at one time been ashamed.*

RALPH ELLISON

I f the **jazz aesthetic** moves us from deep misery to inextinguishable joy, we will need to explore the sources of that misery. In this and the next few chapters we want to describe some of the contours of the historical context of slavery and the way music emerged from that experience. Students and scholars of the history of slavery will no doubt find this account incomplete. But its essential delineations must be stated.

EXODUS

African American music was first produced by a people in diaspora.¹ The numbers are sobering and disheartening. Between 1525 and 1866, 12.5 million Africans were captured, enslaved, and shipped to the New

¹See Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., with Melanie Zeck and Guthrie Ramsay, *The Transformation of Black Music: The Rhythms, the Songs, and the Ships of the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

World, including South America, the Caribbean Islands, and North America. Of those, 10.7 million survived the passage. Perhaps surprisingly, only 388,000 landed in North America.²

There is a most poignant monument in Ouidah, in the current Republic of Benin in West Africa, called *La Porte du Non-retour*, the “Door of No Return.” Shaped like a giant gate, it was the last place slaves would cross before being dragged onto shipboard with cruel chains. Never again would they be able to see their loved ones or their homeland. This is one of four such places along the West Coast of Africa where the slaves were put onto the atrocious ships that carried them across the sea to the New World.

It is often forgotten that the continent of Africa had been a significant place for biblical religion well before the modern period. Of course, the people of Israel found a home in Egypt, through Joseph’s enslavement, generations before they entered the Promised Land. We might also think of the Queen of Sheba and her entourage coming to sit at the feet of King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-13). We should not forget that Jesus found refuge in Egypt along with Mary and Joseph before returning to Nazareth (Mt 2:13-23). We also may take note of people of African descent in the New Testament church, including the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), the prophet Niger (Acts 13:1), and later the remarkable theologians among the fathers, including Tertullian (160–220) and Augustine (354–430). Even after the Arab conquests, there were strongholds of Christian faith in places such as Egypt, Algeria, and Tunisia. Yet by the time of modern slavery, Europeans had forgotten this heritage, allowing themselves to caricature Africans as “primitives” or “savages” lacking in civilization—despite the fact that Africa has always been part of the story of Christianity.

For that matter, it is crucial to remember that there has been a long and rich tradition of music-making in West Africa. It was impossible that

²In their remarkable work, authors David Eltis and David Richardson illustrate the hundreds of ways ships journeyed from the Old World to the New: David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Markus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007), 5; and Raymond L. Cohn, “Death of Slaves in the Middle Passage,” *Journal of Economic History* 45, no. 3 (1985): 687.

some retentions of this history would not occur in the New World, despite attempts to cut slaves off from their roots. We do not know a great deal about the forms and practice of music in those countries from which slaves were taken, though a few accounts have come down from observers. We do know that music and dance accompanied every aspect of life, from work to warfare, to weddings and numerous other ceremonies. Olaudah Equiano, in his valuable chronicle of the life of slavery, tells us, “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus, every great event . . . is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion.”³



Figure 1.1. Slaves captured in West Africa begin their long, sad journey

Slaves were captured in West Africa, sometimes the victims of bitter rivalries between African monarchs, often captured by corrupt European colonists and merchants. Many kidnappers raided tribes and traded human chattel for money, commodities, and other goods. The captives were marched in chains down to the coast and held in jails called barracoons. After sales negotiations, they were then forced on to ships which

³Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 34.

carried them to the Americas. Though it is true that sometimes slaves were captured by fellow Africans (exploitation being an equal opportunity disease), without the White man's drive to subjugate the Black person and turn him into a labor machine, modern slavery could not have occurred.

JES' WHERE TO GO I DID NOT KNOW

Not a great deal is known about the middle passage between Africa and the New World, but the conditions were certainly horrific.⁴ Slaves were stuffed into the holds of galley ships that could contain several hundred detainees. Chained together, there was barely any room to move, and conditions were putrid.

Notable for our purposes is the slaver's assertion that the captives were kept "healthy" through song and dance.⁵ In reality, they were forced into these dances and encouraged to smile, which often they did to avoid harassment. Women were particularly vulnerable to abuse from the slavers. The chronicler James Barbot affirmed that "the females being apart from the males and on the quarter deck and many of them young sprightly maidens, full of jollity and good humor, afford us an abundance of recreation."⁶ One does not have to try very hard at reading between the lines. A more honest testimony is from the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, who affirmed the captives were "compelled to dance by the cat" (the cat o' nine tails, a whip).⁷

⁴One of the most instructive studies is Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). A poignant account of slave mutinies is Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009). See also Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007); Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

⁵Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 54.

⁶From George Francis Dow, *Slave Ships and Slaving* (Baltimore, MD: Cornell Maritime Press, Tidewater, 1968), 50.

⁷Thomas Clarkson, *An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered Before a Selected Committee of The House of Commons in the years 1790 and 1791 on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: James Phillips & George Yard, 1791), 37.

One of the most poignant descriptions of the harrowing conditions on the middle passage is in Eric Robert Taylor's *If We Must Die*. Cruelty, torture, near-starvation, rape, and abuse made death for some preferable to life on these ships.⁸ Revolts were attempted, though most failed. Some succeeded, however, giving testimony to the willingness of slaves to resist, even to the point of martyrdom.⁹

What kind of music was heard on the evil boats of the middle passage? A certain Dr. Claxton records that aboard the slave ship *The Young Hero*, "They sing, but not for their amusement. To stave off melancholy that often led to revolt or suicide, the captain ordered them to sing, and they sang songs of sorrow. Their sickness, fear of being beaten, their hunger, and the memory of their country, are the usual subjects."¹⁰ A similar testimony comes from the ship surgeon Alexander Falconbridge: "Their music, upon these occasions, consists of a drum. The poor wretches are frequently compelled to sing also: but when they do, their songs are generally, as may naturally be expected, melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native land." And he adds, "Such were the sad origins of the Negro rhythms which have since conquered the Western world."¹¹ Here we see the roots of the misery, sorrow, and pain that would come to be an indelible aspect of jazz. And we see evidence of the fact that music is not always about that which pleases or brings joy.

Black drama specialist Geneviève Fabre makes the interesting point that some of the dances on shipboard developed into standard rituals practiced once the slaves were on dry land. The limbo, for example, still performed in the Caribbean, is a dance wherein the actors recall their shackles, moving close to the ground, under an increasingly lowered bar,

⁸Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 23-39.

⁹Taylor, *If We Must Die*, 119-63. The book's title is a quote from a poem by Jamaican poet Claude McKay, which has these lines: "If we must die, let it not be like hogs hunted and penned in an inglorious spot . . . pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" See also Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows: The Poems of Claude McKay* (New York: Angelico, 2021), 47.

¹⁰From Daniel P. Mannix with Malcolm Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865* (New York: Viking, 1962), 114.

¹¹James Pope-Hennessy, *Sins of the Fathers: A Study of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 4.

then emerge on the other side. This is a kind of “dance of life” in which “the leap to freedom is dramatized, visualized and narrated.”¹²

Some of the most revealing, if heartbreaking, accounts show how Black people in captivity were conveniently viewed as commodities with customs supposedly different from European standards of decency. Almost all of them are written by White or European slavers, so they are certainly not objective, and yet still the horrors are patent. Various remedies were sought to preserve life, since the cargo represented huge profits. One method was called “jumping,” which held that exercise kept bodies fit. This was nothing if not humiliating. The slaver Theodore Canot described a visit to a so-called slave factory in which he was entertained by a “harem” of half-naked women dancing in a “semi-savage” manner. His language makes it clear that he regarded these dancers as seductresses whose lascivious gestures showed them to be objects for the lusts of European men rather than human beings with any dignity.¹³

One early chronicler, Leo Africanus, comments that African people “addict themselves to nought else but delights and pleasure, feasting often and singing lascivious songs,” which led them to “unlawful and filthy lust.”¹⁴ Africanus, who was himself African, was at the service of the Roman Catholic Church and thought that slavery was a means to bringing Africans to faith, which was a typical view held by a slave-keeper who boasted that he had been an instrument for the salvation of more souls than “all the missionaries in Africa.”¹⁵

¹²Geneviève Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance,” in Diedrich, Gates, and Pederson, *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, 42.

¹³Theodore Canot, *Adventures of an African Slaver: Being a True Account of Captain Theodore Canot, Trader in Gold, Ivory and Slaves on the Coast of Guinea* (New York: Boni, 1928), 70.

¹⁴Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Contained Therein*, trans. John Pory, ed. Robert Brown (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2:464. The author attributes much of this disturbing behavior to gluttony. Translator John Pory seems to have embellished the text for consumption by European readers. An imaginative first-person retelling of Africanus’s adventures is by Amin Maalouf, *Leo Africanus*, trans. Peter Sluggett (Chicago: New Amsterdam, 1998).

¹⁵Quoted in T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1846*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Routledge, 1968), 18. In their powerful book, Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi describe the sadly common argument by

DUST, DUST AND ASHES
FLY OVER MY GRAVE¹⁶

Of course, the passage across the ocean was just the beginning of the suffering of slaves. Once ashore, slaves consistently felt the dehumanizing reality of their condition. This was perhaps most poignantly and heart-breakingly demonstrated at the auction block. Consider just one example: at a racecourse near Savannah, Georgia, a large estate was broken up in 1859. For weeks, the auction was advertised. There were 436 slaves to be sold, including men, women, children, and infants. The slaves were put into horse stalls and were on display for days before the bidding. Although families were not supposed to be separated, separations did occur. The justification for avoiding split-ups was not moral principle but business practice, because when separated from their families, slaves were more discouraged and thus less productive. The auction was big, perhaps the largest ever, and it received such attention that Horace Greeley, editor of the influential *Herald Tribune*, sent a reporter to cover the event. As Greeley was a fierce abolitionist, he had hoped to show the world what a barbaric scene would unfold. During the inspection period, buyers were allowed to pry open the slaves' mouths to see if they had good teeth, to walk them up and down like dogs, and other humiliations. Some of the slaves took the degradation with a smile, hoping for masters who might treat them better.

Although this particular auction was one of the largest recorded, it was typical of the way such transactions occurred. The tragic event of the auction block became known to Black people as the "Weeping Time," the name given by the people who would never see their former home again and would spend their lives weeping over the forced migration to other

pro-slavery advocates that enslavement led to Christian conversion. In an ironic twist, Africanus wrote about his own people as "savages," who could be led to Jesus through their captivity. Reynolds and Kendi name him the first known African racist: Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* (New York: Little Brown, 2020), 8.

¹⁶"And the Lord Shall Bear My Spirit Home" is the resolution. The spiritual exhibits the heart of our thesis: deep misery to inextinguishable joy. See Edith Armstrong Talbot, "True Religion in Southern Hymns, III," *The Southern Workman* 51, no. 7 (1922): 335.

places and separation from their own families.¹⁷ Here is how one former slave, Jennie Hill, described the drama of the auction block:

Some people think that slaves had no feeling—that they bore their children as animals bear their young and that there was no heart-break when the children were torn from their parents or the mother taken from her brood to toil for a master in another state. But that isn't so. They sold one of Mother's children once, and when she take on and cry about it, the Master would say, "Stop that sniffing there if you don't want to get a whipping." She would grieve and cry at night about it.¹⁸

One commonly held belief was that certain slavers purchased slaves in order to save them from greater harm. Admiral Sir Charles Elliott recounts the claim of one Methodist minister who said he purchased slaves under the concept of the "mercy to the slave purchase." This cleric claimed that he purchased ten thousand dollars' worth of slaves in order to save them from a worse fate. Elliott is quick to condemn this as hypocrisy because it allowed the slave owner to perpetuate an evil tradition under the cover of "mercy."¹⁹

Slaves were not allowed to marry legally until 1830 in the North and not until after the Civil War in the rest of the country. It was often the case that a Black male slave was owned by one master and the mother of his children by another. Ceremonies known as "jumping the broom" were concocted to simulate weddings. The long-term effects of breaking families apart have been documented. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, working for the Office of Policy Planning in the Labor department under Lyndon

¹⁷"Slave Auction, 1859," *Eyewitness to History*, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/slaveauction.htm.

¹⁸Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 219-20. Tadman estimates that at least one out of every five marriages were terminated because the spouses were sold to two different slaveholders. One of every two children under the age of fourteen was torn away from home.

¹⁹Charles Elliott, *The Sinfulness of American Slavery* (Cincinnati: L. Swormstedt & J. H. Power, 1850), 2:294.

Johnson, wrote a report in 1965 called “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” which analyzed the sources of urban poverty and unrest. Drawing on the work of African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazer, he concluded that its roots could be found in slavery. The report pointed to “a racist virus in the American bloodstream” that had resulted in three centuries of “unimaginable mistreatment” that continued to plague Black communities.²⁰

How could the music that grew out of the realities of the enslavement of Black people, forced migration, rape, husbands and wives being separated, and children being ripped from their families not reflect this suffering and pain? If, as I will argue, jazz is the story of deep misery that leads to inextinguishable joy, then we cannot ignore the sources of sorrow that are found at the root of this music, from spirituals to blues to jazz.

One of the spirituals, or “sorrow songs” as W. E. B. Du Bois called them, that reflects the depths of this suffering is “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child”:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
 A long way from home, a long way from home
 Sometimes I feel like I’m almost done
 Sometimes I feel like I’m almost done
 Sometimes I feel like I’m almost done
 And a long, long way from home, a long way from home
 True believer

²⁰See Heather Andrea Williams, “How Slavery Affected African American Families,” *Freedom’s Story: Teaching African American Literature and History*, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/aafamilies.htm>.

True believer

A long, long way from home

A long, long way from home.²¹

²¹There are many versions of this classic; among the most haunting is by Bessie Griffin. See “Bessie Griffin—Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child,” YouTube video, 5:22, posted by “Princebb1,” December 22, 2008, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NDwW8onaoA.

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