St. Agnes Black History Month: Week 1

Reflecting on the spirituals in "O Black and Unknown Bards" (1917), poet and author of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” James Weldon Johnson asked, "Heart of what slave poured out such melody?" Folklorists, musicologists, and historians have also pondered the origin of the spirituals, but most accept poet and scholar Sterling A. Brown's assertion that regardless of their birthplace, the spirituals are ''the Negro's own." The spirituals constitute one of the earliest, largest, and best- known bodies of American folk song that have survived to the twentieth century. In *Slave Religion* (1978) scholar Albert Raboteau identifies several kinds of antebellum spirituals, including shouts, anthems, and jubilees, each serving different occasions and reflecting different moods. Although the spirituals are principally associated with African American church congregations of the antebellum South and the earlier, more informal and sometimes clandestine gatherings of enslaved people known as “hush arbors,” most scholars now agree that a process of mutual influence and reciprocal borrowing credit the following as all contributing to the creation of the spirituals: evangelical sermons and hymns, biblical stories, traditional African chants and praise songs, and the combined experiences of enslaved people in the South. A debate over African and European musical contributions was once quite contentious and consumed the bulk of scholarly attention devoted to the spirituals, but in *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (1977) musicologist Dena Epstein has established that African influences account for many of the elements of spirituals. How they were subsequently acculturated can only be projected theoretically as a syncretic merging of African and Christian forms and beliefs.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois's examination of African American culture led him to the "sorrow songs" in which "the soul of the black slave spoke to men" as providing a model for survival and an interpretive framework for that culture. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) foregrounds the issue of African survivals and features the music and message of the spirituals as related to the history of black people striving for humanity in a society of oppression. As the "singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people," the spirituals fascinated Du

Bois because of their tension between polarities of joy and sorrow. He came to see them as reflections of the African American struggle to merge a double self into "a better and truer self" that held out "a faith in the ultimate justice of things . . . that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins." As the preeminent interpreter of spirituals, Du Bois's influence is borne out by the subsequent role the spirituals have played in providing a foundation for the development of a distinctive African American aesthetic articulated in many nonmusical genres. Key distinguishing terms by which we have come to evaluate this tradition have derived from the spirituals, including the pattern of call and response and the act of signifying. Reinforcing the importance of oral traditions, the spirituals give compelling testimony to the presence and influence of retained African elements in the development of African American culture. The history of their reception and appreciation also reveals aspects of broader cultural currents, including the positions African Americans assumed in relation to their enslaved past, and the roles played by representatives of the dominant culture who either aided in the preservation and promotion of the spirituals or exploited and appropriated them.

Most important for interpreting the meaning of the spirituals is an appreciation of the context—social and religious—in which they were performed and the insight they lend into the extraordinary power of music to shape the experience and conscious identity of a people. The spirituals created by enslaved people became a unique means to "keep on keeping on" under the physical and psychological pressures of daily life, testifying to the belief that the supernatural interacted with the natural and the whole world rested in the hands of God. As one contemporary reviewer described them, the spirituals were "God's image in Ebony." In creation as well as performance they exhibited the essential characteristics of spontaneity, variety, and communal interchange. The form of the spirituals was flexible and improvisational, thereby able to fit an individual slave's experience into the

consciousness of the group, creating at once an intensely personal and vividly communal experience. Capable of communicating on more than one level, as noted by Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass in their autobiographies, on occasion the spirituals functioned as coded songs to communicate information between enslaved people. Washington affirmed that the freedom in their songs meant freedom in this world and Douglass insisted that references to Canaan implied the North. But formally and thematically spirituals were open to change and improvisation as a spiritual in one situation might mean something else in another. In nearly every instance, however, there is reflected an intertwining of theological and social messages, borne out in Douglass's description of how "every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains."