

Spiritual and Work Songs

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There are diverse types of songs that exist in different communities and thus the significance varies from one community to another. Work songs in the African American community signify a period of pain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries whereby they were used by slaves in their activities of hard labour. The work songs had their origins in this environment and thus they are always a reminder of a period of slavery for the African American people.

To understand the relationship between the spiritual and the work song, the focus will be kept on the use of the songs in the African American community and the effect of the songs on the people of this community (Alan and John Lomax, 2). The definition of the spiritual songs differs from that of the work songs in African American society majorly due to the place of use. The spiritual songs are songs used in the places of worship to complement the use of the Bible in worshipping. The archive of American Folksong refers to these songs as the Negro Spirituals and describes them as passionate songs that gave the singers hope for the heavenly reward. Spiritual songs were also used by the African American people to spread hope, as shown by the two prisoners who sang “Lead me to the rock” (Alan and John Lomax, 14).

Work Songs

Work songs in modern times are described as a group of songs that reflect on the period of slavery where they were associated with harsh working conditions. The songs have been passed down from this period and thus they hold the greatest significance among this specific community of people. In the 21st century, the songs help in keeping the history of the African American people as the work songs have a great connection to slavery. The songs are reminiscent of the time when a large number of Africans were transported over the Atlantic to work in tobacco and cotton fields that were owned by white people. In the traditional African community, songs were generally associated with every aspect of life and thus the culture of singing during work was upheld by those who worked in the cotton fields as slaves.

As stated in the book ‘Looking up at Down, The Emergence of Blues Culture’, the work songs became an integral part of slavery and were even encouraged by the white masters (Barlow, 48).

Interestingly, the slave owners thought that it was important for the slaves to sing as it improved the amount of work done by the slaves. For the slaves, however, the songs were not a source of morale but rather an expression of the sorrows attached to the black person working in the fields. The inhumane working conditions in the fields were a major inspiration to the composition of the work songs, a process that happened spontaneously by a group of people. After the end of slavery which ushered in the Reconstruction Period, the work songs continued to be used by the liberated slaves.

The work songs had embedded themselves in the African American culture and they were continually sung by those who had migrated to the urban centres or those who ventured into agricultural practices (Work, 26). Essentially, it can be stated that the work songs were the first genre of music that was developed by African Americans. Eventually, the work songs evolved into a music genre that is referred to as Blues. The work songs used by the slaves in the pre-emancipation period were characterized by the solo initiation that turned into a choral response by the other slaves, and they were usually slow with reflective and sad lyrics that revolved around the activity that they were performing.

The blues genre that is based on these slave work songs maintains the single syllable lines and the musical inflexions are also similar (Alan and John Lomax, 11). The musical characteristics of the work songs are that they had short phrases which were sung with a rhythmic beat that kept the slaves systematized and working at a particular pace. The method of singular initiation with the choral response is the most notable characteristic too, with the style based on the traditional West African work songs. Even after the reconstruction period, the work songs continued to be used in the black families and the country blues were born out of this practice. Work songs in modern times can be found in some recordings, for instance, the musical collection by John and Alan Lomax who recorded several albums in the early 20th century.

The spiritual songs

The spiritual songs are a genre of music that is used in places of worship, and it too differs in different religious settings. In continuation of the theme of African American culture, this paper will focus on the roots of the culture's spiritual songs. Various publications have explored the Afro-American spiritual songs and black writers referred to them as the Negro spirituals (Lovell, 641). To understand these songs, an examination of their emergence is necessary. As expected, the emergence of the Negro spirituals is rooted in the slave periods. In this period of tribulations, the slaves were thought of as having no soul by the slave owners and thus their religious practices were prohibited. Eventually, though, the slaves started engaging in religious practices and created songs of worship. The Negro spirituals had many of the characteristics of the work songs and the difference lay on the places that they were sung. On top of that, the lyrics contained Christian references and the themes of the songs were mainly of deliverance from sorrows after the myriads of trials (Faithful, 8).

The structure of the early Negro spirituals is similar to that of the slave work songs in that there is an initiation by a lead singer that is followed by a choral response from the congregation. Whilst the structure of both types of songs is similar, the content differs greatly as the spiritual songs have Biblical references and they impart feelings of hope rather than resentment. The early periods of the Afro-American religious practices infused the religious songs with the West African practices of dancing to the spiritual songs (Alan and John Lomax, 8). The characteristic of the Negro spirituals is that they accommodated many aspects of the daily life of the slaves and thus they contained messages from the Bible that are related to their daily life. Another characteristic of these songs is

that they held subliminal political messages in the early periods. The spirituals incorporated aspects of communication that also enabled worshipping in the slave plantations where worshipping was prohibited (Lovell, 638). Apart from sending a message of hope for a better future, spirituals served many purposes in this period and these include serving as signals for meetings, sending political messages, enabling the slaves to have a communal experience and sharing each other's joy in those times of tribulations.

Works cited

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