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The True Negro Music and Its Decline

By Jeannette Robinson Murphy

[Mrs. Murphy is, of course, a Southerner. She has therefore been familiar with the negro from childhood. During the past few years she has earned an enviable reputation as a portrayer of negro music and character before Northern audiences, and those of us who have heard her would not hesitate to accord her the very foremost rank of negro folk lorists.—EDITOR.]

SOME day we who are so fortunate as to have been rocked to sleep on the broad, tender bosoms of old black mammies will be the envy of our great-grandchildren. There is a danger that they will clamor in vain for truthful representation of those old days when loving black tyrants ruled and reigned over their broods of white nurslings, and claimed, with the mothers, the hearts and fealty of their confiding charges. These trustworthy old retainers, but a few years ago so universally known and loved throughout our great Southland, are rapidly being replaced by a far less worthy class, and, with them, their quaint customs are fast disappearing and their soul-stirring songs becoming obsolete. It would seem that we of this generation owe it to posterity to see that the genuine African music be handed down in all its purity.

Many people in America to-day, not discerning the wealth and beauty of the

true negro songs, not only tolerate the manufactured "coon songs," but fail to recognize their spurious quality, and permit these attempted imitations with which the country is flooded to pass unchallenged as the true article. Even poets of the colored race are adding to this great wrong, and are creating a false, flippant new song to be put into the mouths of a guiltless people.

There are writers whose vaporings attract attention, and who think nothing of composing so-called negro songs and passing them off on a credulous public, confident that their careless readers cannot tell the counterfeit from the genuine music.

The only plan which will effectually preserve the old slave music in all its beauty, its power, its quaint and irresistible swing will be for the negroes themselves, by the aid of skilled annotists, by phonographs and by every art available, to awaken to the real value of this won-

derful music. They alone can work in every corner of the unique and varied field, creating a new interest among their race alike in their camp meeting "spirituals," the crooning lullabies of the nursery and the roustabout songs of the river.

The sporadic efforts of a few far seeing negroes will avail little. The negro preachers over the entire South should be encouraged to lead in this grand work. Our judicious praise of their "spirituals" might do much to prolong their life, but without united effort on our part

looking to that end, and an increased interest and desire on theirs to sing those songs, they must surely die. Their songs, which need no instrumental aid of any kind, are even now, in our iconoclastic cities, being supplanted by hymns from regular English hymn books, to the accompaniment of an organ—an innovation to be deplored, since this new singing is not to be compared in heart power to their own spontaneous outpourings.

There never yet has been a song which could touch the heart more in evangelistic meetings than their beautiful "Prod-



1. Oh, de Prod - i - gal Son he left home, By him -



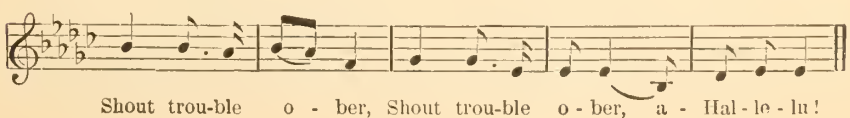
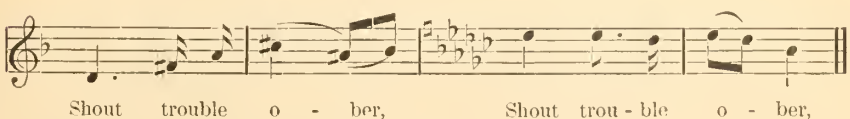
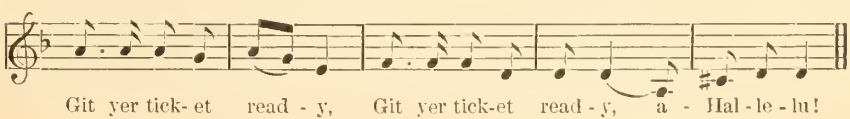
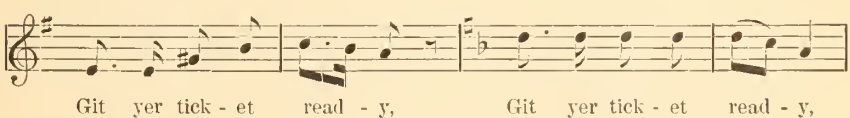
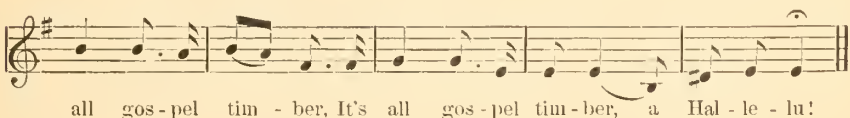
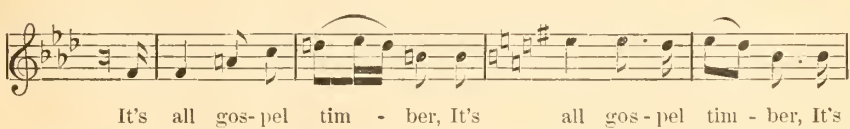
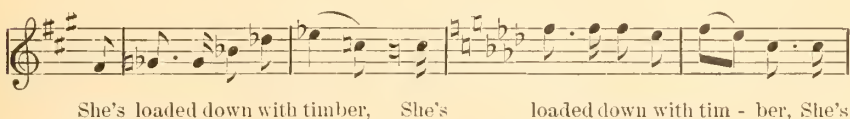
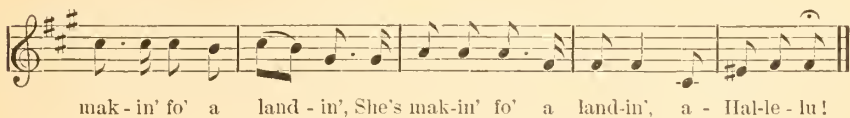
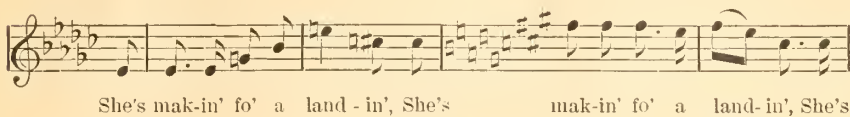
self, . . . by him - self, . . . Oh de Prod - i - gal Son he left



home, Oh de prod - i - gal son he left home, by . . . him - self.

- 2 Fadder, gib me ma portion ob goods, by myself, by myself,
Fadder, gib me ma portion ob ma goods,
Fadder gib me ma portion ob goods, by myself.
- 3 And I'll go into de country, by myself, by myself,
And I'll go into de country,
And I'll go into de country, by myself.
- 4 An' he wasted all he libben, by himself, by himself,
An' he wasted all he libben,
An' he wasted all he libben, by himself.
- 5 An' de Prodigal Son he got hungry, by himself, by himself,
An' de Prodigal Son he got hungry,
An' de Prodigal Son he got hungry, by himself.
- 6 An' de Prodigal Son returned, by himself, by himself,
An' de Prodigal Son returned,
An' de Prodigal Son returned, by himself.
- 7 Wid no shoes upon his feet, by himself, by himself,
Wid no coat upon his back,
Wid no hat upon his head, by himself.
- 8 An' de Prodigal Son made merry, by himself, by himself,
An' de Prodigal Son made merry,
An' de Prodigal Son made merry, by himself.
- 9 Wid de shoes upon his feet, by himself, by himself,
An' dey put de rings on his fingers,
An' dey killed de fatted calf, by himself.
- 10 An' dey crucified my Jesus, by himself, by himself,
An' dey crucified my Jesus,
An' dey crucified my Jesus, by himself.
- * 11 An' de Prodigal Son was lonely, by himself, by himself,
An' my Jesus Him was lonely,
An' de Christian him an lonely, by himself.

* If the leading singer is in a hurry, he will sing three verses in one. This song has an unlimited number of verses.



igal Son," with its winding, appealing measures and soul-satisfying, plaintive words, words which tell out the whole beautiful Bible story. In this song alone there are sometimes rendered fully one hundred different verses, all used, it would seem, according to the mood and the inspiration of the leading singer.

This "spiritual," like all of their others, is sung differently in every locality, and furthermore, no negro ever sings the same song twice in just the same way.

The version of "The Prodigal Son,"

singers hit any note that comes easiest, and the great chorus of worshipers gloriously join in with them, singing the remainder of the tune in a higher or a lower key, generally a higher.

This song has no refrain, which is a rarity, for most of their "spirituals" have very stirring and plaintive refrains.

In the fascinating "Sinners, Yer Walkin' on er Slender Stran'," the words and melody are used for the body of the song and also for the refrain, the words to the first verse being repeated for the latter. (See below.)

1. Sin-nah! yer walk-in' on er slen-der stran' Shall I.....

die?... Sin-nah! yer walk-in' on er slen-der stran',

shall I..... die? Sin-nah! yer walk in' on er slen-der

Ritard.

stran', Shall I..... die? Mos-ter Je-sus, yer made so sweet.

- 2 Wretched man! yer walkin' on er slender stran', etc.
- 3 Backslider man! yer walkin' on er slender stran', etc.
- 4 Mourner man! yer walkin' on er slender stran', etc.

as reproduced on page 1724, is the one generally used at Georgia camp meetings.

All of their hymns lose immeasurably by being taken out of their original settings in the churches and sung as solos, and yet even in this form they produce a miraculous effect upon the emotions of both the learned and the ignorant.

There is a weird, savage "shout," where the same line is repeated four times, as is evidenced in the song, "Ole Ship O' Zion," on page 1725.

The chief beauty in this song seems to lie in getting off the key in each verse. The congregation, as a body, is incapable after the leader sings alone the first verse of getting a secure hold of the difficult diminished seventh occurring in the note used to the first syllable of the word "Zion" in the first line, so the leading

The old aunties say that these songs are so "filled wid de Holy Sperit" that they forget they are working if they just keep singing all the time. No Southerner ever doubts the truth of this statement.

It is quite the fashion among learned Northern men to call this imported African music "the only folk music of America." Why should we not with equal justice call the transplanted Scotch, Irish and the music of other races our American music?

These melodies certainly were brought by the negroes from the Dark Continent along with the customs and traditions and sickening voodooism which are surviving here to-day.

To the majority of people the mention of a negro song brings up instantly visions of "I Want Yer, Ma Honey," or

“Alabama Coon,” or even the lovely “Suwannee River” and “Old Kentucky Home”—all written by white people who are not so constructed mentally as to be able to write a genuine negro song. Some of these imitations are indeed fetching, but it is to be hoped that none

unappreciated negro “spirituals” for fully one-fifth of its contents. The memory and knowledge of the Bible among the negroes of the old school are simply miraculous.

Way down in Kentucky was an old uncle whom every one respected. He was

$\text{♩} = 104$

Dan - - iel,..... Dan - - iel,..... A - hong! A -
 Hyp - o-crite mem - bers, Hyp - o-crite mem - bers, A - hong! A -

hong! In de li - on's den! I ain't gwine a lib in mysins no long-er!
 hong! Oh, God de-spise! I ain't gwine a lib in mysins no long-er!

(hum) 'm..... De
 'm..... De

An - gel flew Ugh! From Gall - i - lee.....
 tongue so keen! Ugh! Dey will tell lies!

Ugh! I ain't gwine a lib in mysins no long - er!

(hum) 'm... .. De Lamb's

blood done a-wash me clean! Lamb's blood done a - wash me clean!

of them will survive to work further havoc with the truth.

In questioning great numbers of ex-slaves I have yet to find one who does not implicitly believe that God himself inspired the words of all their religious hymns. If by any miracle the Bible were lost to us to-day we could look to these

a great singer, and seemed to know, as thousands of them do, countless numbers of these wonderful songs by heart. When asked about the origin of this great and heart reviving music, which does seem to be so imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit, he answered me as follows: “Us old heads used ter make 'em

up on de spurn ob de moment after we wrestled wid de Spirit and come 'thoo,' but de tunes was brung from Africky by our own granddaddies. Dey is jis militiair (merely ear) songs. Dese days dey calls 'em ballotts, but in de old days dey calls 'em 'spirituals,' honey, case de Holy Sperit done teached 'em ter us. Some finks Moss' Jesus teached 'em, an' I'se seed 'em start me myself in de meet-in'. We'd all be at de 'Prayers' House' on de Lawd's Day an' de white preacher, he'd be hired ter 'splain de Word, and he read whar Moss' Zekiel done say 'dry bones gwine er lib ergin,' or 'Daniel in de lion's den' and 'Chile ob Grace;' de Lawd would come a-shinin' thoo' dem pages an' revibe dis old nigger's heart, an' I'd jump up dar and den and holler and shout and sing and pray, and dey would all cotch de words, an' I'd sing it ter some old shout song or war song I'd heard 'em sing fum Africky, and dey'd

see comin' 'long now ain't wuth killin' fer dey don't keer 'bout de Bible nor de old hymns nor nuffin. Dey 'pletely spoiled wid de white blood an' de eddication an' de big orgin an' de white folks' hymn books, till it done tuk all de Holy Sperit outen 'em. Dey ain't no better dese days, wid dere dancin' an' singin' an' cuttin' up dan de shoutin' Mefodist white folks is." (See song on page 1727.)

The negro by some mysterious power does not take a breath at the end of a line or verse, but carries over his breath from line to line and from verse to verse at the imminent risk of bursting a blood vessel. He holds on to one note till he has a firm hold of the next one, and then besides he turns every monosyllabic word into two syllables and places the accent where it does not belong, on the last half of the word. An instance is given immediately below where the voice swings downward a whole octave on the word "yes."



1. Ready fo' de wa - ter? Oh, yes! Ready fo' de wa - ter? Oh, yes!
2. Dis my son? Oh, yes! Dis my son? Oh, yes!
3. Whom I am? Oh, yes! Whom I am? Oh, yes!
4. One more candi - date? Oh, yes! One more candi - date? Oh, yes!
5. Here goes de babe! Oh, yes! Here goes de babe! Oh, yes!
6. Been bap - tized? Oh, yes! Done lef de world? Oh, yes!
7. He dat keeps— Oh, yes! He dat keeps— Oh, yes!
8. Shall I hab everlast-in? Oh, yes! Shall I hab everlast-in? Oh, yes!



- | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Ready fo' de wa - ter? Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| Dis my son? Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| Well pleas'd with? Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| One more candi - date? Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| Here goes de babe! Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| Dat ain't all yit! Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| My Commandments Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |
| Ev - er - last - in' life? Oh, yes! | Bright..... shines de day! |

all take up de tune an' keep long at it, an' each time dey sing it dey keep a-addin' mo' an' mo' verses ter it, an' den dar it would jis natchally be a 'spiritual.' Dese 'spirituals' am de purtiest moanin' music in de whole world, case dey is de whole Bible sung out and out. Notes is good nuff fer you people, but us likes a mixtery. Dese young ladies what we

With great ecstasy they throw their whole souls and bodies into the singing of each hymn, and seem carried away for the time being by the potent spell which each song casts over one and all.

A marked peculiarity of the negro singing is that very often in the heat of their religious fervor they will repeat again and again the same verses.

In studying this music one finds that each verse is usually composed of one statement, frequently a crude attempt at a Bible quotation, repeated three times. Occasionally, however, the same line is repeated but twice at the beginning and again as a last line to each stanza. An instance of this exception occurs in the hymn, 'I Don't Want er be Buried in de Storm.'

in these there is pretty apt to be a change into the major key before the hymn is finished.

Many Northern people think that if they say "Lordy Massa," letting the voice rise at the end, they have made great strides in mastering the negro dialect. There cannot be found many examples of the employment of this rising inflection either in speech or in song.

1. I... don't want er be bur-ied in de storm, in de storm,....

I don't want er be bur-ied in de storm, in de storm.....

REFRAIN.

Some-times my troub-les make me trem-ble, trem-ble,

trem-ble..... I don't want er be bur-ied in de storm.

- 2 I dont want ter cross de red sea by myself, by myself,
I dont want ter cross de red sea by myself, by myself.—REF.
- 3 Dont you heah dem hosses feet,
Slippin' an er slidin' on de golden street?—REF.
- 4 When I gits on ma golden shoes,
Gwine trot about Hebben and shout de news.—REF.
- 5 Some say Peter, an er some say Paul,
Aint but one Gawd sabe us all.—REF.

NOTE.—Frequently sung while washing windows.

Since this hymn is not infrequently employed by servants while washing windows, an interested listener has a fine opportunity to catch every syllable and typical quirk, for we all know that the negro servant, if left alone to "sing and git happy," will occupy an hour or more in the cleaning of a single window.

It is often stated that there is a continuous note of sadness running through all the negro music, and that the songs are usually in minor keys. I should say, on the contrary, that the majority of them are in the major keys, and that there is a ring of jollity, wild abandon and universal happiness in most of them. There are doleful passages occurring occasionally, and some sad minor songs, but even

This seems to be characteristic of the Irish race, while, on the contrary, we find the old aunties and uncles repeatedly dropping the voice even two octaves. An example of this is given on page 1730, in that most fascinating of all their lullabies, "A Christmas Song."

"Mary, What Yer Gwine er Name Dat Purty Leetle Baby?"

The old man my did not quite understand the meaning of that verse in Isaiah (9, 6) where he says: "And the government shall be upon his shoulder." So she reasons it out that some one is riding the baby Jesus on her shoulders and "calling Him dare Governor." It is a pretty conceit, the way she carries out the whole touching song.

We can easily imagine inquisitive shepherds and adoring wise men asking the Virgin Mary what she intends to name her precious little baby. We can see her hesitate, since she had been told he was to be called "Jesus," "Son of God" and also "Son of the Highest." So the mammy thinks, with all these prophecies concerning the naming of the baby, it must be finally left with the

They surely must have some occult telepathy among them, for they never make mistakes—viz., some singing one verse and some another.

The old slave loved best the miraculous points and dramatic passages in the Bible, and if the negro could be trained along his natural lines, and his race blood kept perfectly pure, there would come some day from this people one of the

- 2 Mary, what yer gwine er name dat purty leetle baby?
Um, dat purty leetle baby?
Um, dat purty leetle baby?
Glory be to yer new-bawn King!—REF.
- 3 Some calls 'Im one ting, I fink I'll call 'Im Jesus,
Um, I fink I'll call 'Im Jesus,
Um, I fink I'll call 'Im Jesus,
Glory be to my new-bawn King!—REF.
- 4 Some calls I'm one ting, I fink I'll call I'm 'Manuel,
Um, I fink I'll call I'm 'Manuel,
Um, I fink I'll call I'm 'Manuel,
Glory be to my new-bawn King!—REF.
- 5 Dey's ridin' 'Im on dare shoulders and callin' 'Im dare Governor!
Um, and callin' 'Im dare Governor!
Um, and callin' 'Im dare Governor!
Glory be to my new-bawn King!—REF.
- 6 Mary, what yer gwine er name dat purty leetle baby?
Um, dat purty leetle baby?
Um, dat purty leetle baby?
Glory be to yer new-bawn King!—REF.
- 7 Um, I fink Ise gwine er call 'Im Free Salvation,
Um, Free Salvation,
Um, Free Salvation,
Glory be to my new-bawn King!—REF.

N. E.—Note two peculiarities of negro hymnology; viz. the repetition of the same line three times, and the occasional transposition of a few bars to a lower or higher octave.

Blessed Mary to decide. The negroes will sing a great many answers to this most natural question, giving the innumerable names by which the Son of God was called until the satisfactory name is reached, which distinguishes Christianity from all ther religions.

They all seem to know by the most wonderful instinct every "spiritual" which was ever born. Let a colored stranger from Kentucky go to a Louisiana church and begin to sing a new song; none of those present may ever have heard this song, and yet in a few moments they are all singing and patting it like mad, and the most singular, inexplicable thing about it is that each member of the congregation seems to know almost to a man as quickly as the singer himself exactly what words he is going to sing. No "lining out" is ever practiced in their singing; only with the "hymn book hymns" is this quaint custom followed.

greatest orators, one of the greatest actors, one of the greatest romance writers, and surely the very greatest musician who ever lived.

But side by side with the too highly civilized white race the negro must in time have eliminated from him all his God-given best instincts and so fail utterly. For are they not already ashamed in our large cities of their old African music? They should be taught that slavery, with its occasional abuses, was simply a valuable training in their evolution from savagery, and not look upon their bondage and their slave music with shame. For during that period these songs could develop *because* the negro was kept in such perfect segregation, and his instincts and talents had full play. He received *then* those things which he needed *most*—viz., work for his hands and God's revealed Word for his heart and mind.