

# Songs of African-American Migration Were Influential Across the Land

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"The Old Plantation" circa 1785-1795, watercolor on paper, attributed to John Rose, Beaufort County, South Carolina. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum, Williamsburg, Virginia. Photo: Public Domain/Wikimedia

By the end of the 18th century, more slaves were coming to the United States directly from Africa. The French were also bringing slaves to work in the Louisiana and Indiana territories. People of African descent in the Bahamas regularly visited Florida and some eventually settled there.

Slaves brought with them songs and musical instruments from their own cultures. African drums, rattles and the banjo were among the ones that are most recognizable today.

The African banjo had a body made from wood or the hard shell of a fruit called a gourd. A West African cordophone was a bow with a single plucked string, sometimes attached to a gourd resonator. It evolved into the American "diddley bow." This is a wire string attached to a wall and played by sliding a bottle along it as the string is plucked. This instrument is still used in blues music today.

## **Written history of the music came much later**

For many years, slave owners did not actively try to convert slaves to Christianity. Slaves devised their own "camp" or "bush" meetings for worship. These combined ideas of Christianity with the religions brought from Africa. Early shouts and spirituals often drew on Old Testament stories as a source. After Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, slave owners started converting slaves to Christianity. They hired white ministers to preach to slaves on such topics as obedience. This introduced slaves to white styles of hymns and psalm-singing. They blended these with their own styles of religious songs.



African-American songs and music were not well documented until after the Civil War. So, the content of songs from the time of slavery is largely based on that later documentation.

Songs from South Carolina and Georgia used English and West African languages called "Gullah" or "Sea Islands Creole Dialect." One example is the song that came to be known as "Kumbayah." The word "yah" is Gullah for "here."

The songs and instruments developed during the slavery era became important to other American styles of music. The banjo developed into a uniquely American instrument and started to be used in many different musical styles.

## Singing in code



In the early 1800s, a network of escape routes and safe houses were organized by abolitionists who wanted to do away with slavery. The routes are known collectively as the Underground Railroad and they assisted slaves escaping to the North and West.

There were "conductors" who led slaves to freedom, such as Harriet Tubman. However, most runaway slaves found their way alone along these routes.

African-American spirituals may have been used as a code to pass information along the Underground Railroad. The organizers used railroad terminology as a code for talking about the escape routes. Safe houses, for example, were "stations" and runaway slaves were "passengers" or "cargo."

Spirituals about trains were likely part of this code. The Underground Railroad was secret and illegal, so there is not much documentation about the use of songs. Harriet Tubman was believed to stand in a field near where slaves were working. She sang the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" or "Thorny Desert." This was a way of signaling to slaves that she was there to help them flee to freedom.

## The "Great Migration" out of the South

After the Civil War, the slaves were freed. Many moved from Southern states to the North, Midwest and West. In time, large numbers of African- Americans settled in cities. Some of the more famous neighborhoods are New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side.

Some of these migrants were aided by former slaves who had already settled or who had recently returned from Canada. Many rural farmworkers became city people.

The "Great Migration" peaked in the 1920s when hundreds of thousands of African-Americans left the South. It caused both conflicts and a demand for equal rights for all people. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded in 1909, partly as a response to the Great Migration.

Blues, gospel, jazz and more



From a musical point of view, the Great Migration brought gospel and blues music to a wider audience. Northern and Western cities became famous for African-American musical innovation. The search for a better life also led to changes in the way performers chose to

present themselves. For example, singer Noble Sissle refused to perform in blackface, which was makeup used for performances predominantly by non-black performers to represent a black person. Marian Anderson, whose grandfather had migrated to Philadelphia shortly after emancipation, studied opera. When she performed traditional spirituals, she did so in a trained vocal style. Composer Spencer Williams is one well-known African-American who migrated from New Orleans to perform and live in Chicago and later New York.

Another wave of African-American migration to the North and West occurred after World War II. Blues singer Honeyboy Edwards left the Mississippi Delta for Chicago in 1950 and became famous with his song "Sweet Home Chicago."

African-American music widely influenced the development of American music. It made an impact on folk music, country music, blues, boogie-woogie, ragtime, bluegrass, rock 'n' roll, rhythm and blues, and jazz that we know today.