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A MÚSICA ENTRE ÁFRICA E AMÉRICA
MUSIC BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS

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RECLAIMING DIASPORA IN AFRICAN POPULAR MUSIC IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ¹

African American music in the United States of America (USA), as a global phenomenon, has been appropriated and used as a cultural resource in the creation of international popular music styles such as Highlife and Hiplife (Ghana), Nederhop (The Netherlands), Reggaetòn (Caribbean), Bongo flava (Tanzania), and Northern Soul and Grime (England). Removed from its original context, African American music has acquired multiple identities, meanings, and functions. The production of this music as a mediated, mass disseminated commodity has overshadowed its creation as social practice – a process shaped by social traditions and cultural values of an African legacy. My paper centers on the production of Black popular music as social practice and the ways in which this practice is negotiated and preserved when the music enters the commodity system for mass dissemination. The first section examines the similarities in music-making process in Sub-Saharan Africa (the region in West and Central Africa from which the majority of Africans were taken as slaves to the United States and in African American communities. The second half explores how African-derived social practice and cultural values inform musical creativity of African Americans participating in the post-World War II popular music tradition.

1 Many people in Latin America believe that the common use of the term “American” means “of the United States of America” and that this interpretation is an inappropriate reduction of the meaning of American, which should encompass residents in the Americas as a whole, not just one country within it. To avoid confusion, I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably throughout this paper to identify Africans brought to the United States of America (USA) as slaves, and their descendants born in the USA.

Music making as a social practice

The fundamental relationship between Sub-Sahara African and Black music in the USA is defined by the context for musical performance and the approach to making, interpreting and experiencing music. In Africa, music-making is associated with all aspects of daily life – occupational, recreational, ceremonial, and ritualized activities – and it is conceived as a communal/participatory social event that eliminates distinctions between performer and audience associated with European- and European-derived cultures.² In daily occupations of the Pygmies, for example, “Men and women, young and old alike, contribute to the collective enjoyment by singing, clapping, stamping, and other rhythmic actions.”³ The African approach to music-making also intertwines the arts. As ethnomusicologist Ruth Stone observes, “Singing, playing instruments, dancing, masquerading, and dramatizing are part of the conceptual package that many Africans think of as one and the same.”⁴

Africans, as slaves in the Americas, preserved the collective and integrative approach to music-making because the institution of slavery did not erase their cultural legacy or their memories of an African past. In the USA, the nearly four million Africans and their descendants resisted cultural imperialism of the larger society by retaining fundamental ideals from the past. They adapted to and survived an oppressive existence by preserving and creating new expressions out of African traditions. They also brought relevance to European American customs by reshaping them to conform to African models and aesthetic ideals.

After the conversion of the slave masses to Christianity in the 1800s, for example, some slaves were allowed to conduct their own religious services. In these spaces, they reinterpreted and transformed English Psalms into

2 J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa*. New York, 1974 and J.H. Kwabena Nketia, “African Roots of Music in the Americas: An African View,” *American Musicological Society, Report of the 12th Congress*. London, 1981, 82-88. Reprinted in J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Ethnomusicology and African Music: Collected Papers*. Volume I. *Modes of Inquiry and Interpretation* (Accra, Ghana, Afram Publications, 2005), 318-336.

3 Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People's Art*. Translated by Josephine Bennett. (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1975), 18. Originally published as *Musique de l'Afrique*, 1969.

4 Ruth Stone, “African Music in a Constellation of Arts” in *The Garland Handbook of African Music*. 2nd ed. Ruth Stone, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7.

a unique form of African-derived expression as witnessed by English musician Henry Russell, who toured the United States from 1833 to 1841:

When the minister gave out his own version of the Psalm, the choir commenced singing so rapidly that the original tune absolutely ceased to exist – in fact, the fine old psalm tune became thoroughly transformed into a kind of negro melody; and so sudden was the transformation, by accelerating the time, that, for a moment, I fancied that not only the choir but the little congregation intended to get up a dance as part of the service.⁵

The Reverend Robert Mallard describes how slaves transformed the entire worship service into an African-styled ritual when they led their own religious services in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1859:

I stood at the door and looked in – and such confusion of sights and sounds! [...] Some were standing, others sitting, others moving from one seat to another, several exhorting along the aisles. The whole congregation kept up one monotonous strain, interrupted by various sounds: groans and screams and clapping of hands. One woman especially under the influence of the excitement went across the church in a quick succession of leaps: now [on] her knees [...] then up again; now with her arms about some brother or sister, and again tossing them wildly in the air and clapping her hands together and accompanying the whole by a series of short, sharp shrieks. [...] Considering the mere excitement manifested in these disorderly ways, I could but ask: What religion is there in this?⁶

Even though missionaries sought to eliminate all aspects of African cultural practices among slaves by converting them to Christianity, they were unsuccessful. The participatory character of the service allowed for various forms of expression, including bodily movements and dance, to which missionaries vehemently objected. The ideological and cultural references of the missionaries for acceptable religious practices differed

5 Quoted in Henry Russell, *Cheer! Boys, Cheer! Memories of Men and Music* (London: J. Macqueen, 1895), 84-85.

6 Quoted in Robert Manson, ed. *The Children of Pride* (New Haven, Conn., 1972), 482-483.

from those of slaves, especially the incorporation of “secular” expressions in the religious ritual. Olaudah Equiano, an African slave in the USA, who purchased his freedom, explains the presence of dance and other practices that the missionaries deemed unacceptable in the sacred and secular activities of slaves:

We [Africans] are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion...⁷

John Howison, a European traveler in Africa in 1834 noticed that dance is interwoven into the daily activities of the people: “The amusements which the negroes [Africans] most esteem next to conversation, are music and dancing [...]”⁸ A passenger on a boat in New Orleans in 1799 made a similar observation: “[...] we saw vast numbers of negro slaves, men, women, and children assembled together on the levee, drumming [sic], fifing, and dancing, in large rings.”⁹ The intrinsic and reciprocal relationship between music and dance, according to Ghanaian dancer Patience A. Kwakwa, “inevitably creates a similar type of interdependence between dancers and musicians.”¹⁰ A.M. Ipoku, former Director of the Ghana Dance Ensemble, describes this interdependence as one “can see the music and hear the dance.”¹¹

A century after slavery ended in the USA, African Americans remained isolated from the mainstream of society as second-class citizens. On the racial margins of society, they created new musical genres that preserved “residual strains” of African traditions. J.H. Kwabena Nketia describes the latter as “rhythmic and melodic organization, form, musical processes, and the role of dance in music-making.”¹² Conducting field research in

7 Quoted in Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 6.

8 *Ibid.*, 7

9 *Ibid.*, 84.

10 Patience A. Kwakwa, “Dance in Communal Life” in *The Garland Handbook of African Music*, 61.

11 Quoted in Ruth Stone, “Exploring African Music” in *The Garland Handbook of African Music*, 13.

12 J. H. Kwabena Nketia, “The Study of African and African American Music” *The Black Perspective in Music*, Vol.1 No. 1 (Spring 1973), 9-11.

the Delta region of Mississippi in the 1940s and 1950s, folklorist John Lomax, observed an event that resembled an “important African pattern.”

The Young Brothers [a fife and drum band] were surrounded by their audience and were dancing with them, dancing as they played. An electrifying rhythmic exchange was going on between the musicians and the others – a dancer breaking out and a musician responding, and then the reverse. [...] There is constant interplay within the whole group, with the musicians picking up hot rhythmic licks from the dancers nearby them so that everyone is dancing.¹³

This form of community music-making inspired innovation among African American professional songwriters, who developed formulas for the creation of contemporary dance music derived from the interplay between the musicians and dancers. In the 1950s, this music was known as rhythm and blues, and in the 1970s, funk.

African residual strains in USA African American popular music

Rhythm and blues is a musical genre that evolved during World-War II era (1939-1945) from a fusion of blues (12 bar form, harmonic and melodic structures, and the boogie-woogie bass line) and swing (horn riffs – repetitive, syncopated three- and four notes pattern of the horn section). The early rhythm and blues styles catered to the musical tastes of African American adults. A decade later in the 1950s, teenagers became the new consumer group for popular music. Record companies sought to tap into this market. Atlantic Records was one of the first labels to target African American teenagers, the majority of whom resided in the south. In search of new musical ideas, the founders and creative staff of Atlantic Records travelled from New York to Mississippi, Georgia and Louisiana in the early 1950s to study Black music and culture. Jazz musician Jesse Stone, the African American songwriter-arranger-musical director for the company recalls:

We figured a buying public was a dancing public, and the dancing public was mostly Black. [...] What we needed to do was to go south and see

13 Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (New York: Delta Books/Dell Publishing, 1995), 331. First published in 1993.

what kind of music was being done there, and pattern something on the style and improve on it, whatever we could do to offer a dance type of music that the young people would like.¹⁴

In the South Stone and Atlantic's executives observed teenage dances, where they discovered that the blues, especially boogie-woogie, were popular among this group. They also noticed that the musicians often performed without bass and drums. In Louisiana, the dance steps of the Louisiana shuffle provided the rhythmic foundation for songs. Stone explains:

The Louisiana shuffle was a dance where everybody on the dance floor moved at the same time and made the same rhythm with their feet...It had a rhythmic pattern that was of interest to me. I thought if I could write some music that could fit this rhythm they [teenagers] were doing, I knew it would sell. I decided to take this rhythmic pattern and try to use it with the string bass.¹⁵

The traditional boogie-woogie bass line, according to Stone, "was too busy and it didn't fit the dances kids were doing at that particular time [...]" To forge a closer relationship between music and dance, Stone adapted this bass line to conform to the rhythms of the Louisiana shuffle. He also doubled the bass line in the horn section to provide more depth and to minimize harmony because the horn arrangements of jazz swing bands had become too top heavy and "didn't give the kids the type of expression they were looking for."¹⁶ Combining elements from the boogie-woogie with the rhythms from the Louisiana shuffle, Stone created a musical formula that became the signature sound for Atlantic Records. Known as the "Atlantic Sound," Stone's formula produced several hit records for Ruth Brown ("5-10-15 Hours" 1952), Clovers ("One Mint Julep" 1952), and Joe Turner ("Shake Rattle and Roll" 1954).

The role of social dance in the creation of rhythm and blues songs is further illustrated in the making of "Do the Dog" (1963) by blues/rhythm and blues singer Rufus Thomas during a club performance in Millington, Tennessee (15-20 miles North of Memphis). Thomas explains:

14 Jesse Stone, Interview by author. Jamaica, New York, 30 November 1982.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

I was in this club, and there was no song for the dog. The dance was out and I saw this girl. She was kind of slender with a black leather dress on. We had a little riff going, playing on “oo-poo-pa-do” [preparing for a break] and this girl got in front of the bandstand and started doing the dog [a popular dance at the time]. And I just started to jiving at her, saying “Do the Dog, Baby?” She was really getting down! I mean getting down. I just started to sing because we were playing what we call ‘twelve-bar blues changes’ and I set the pattern and it fitted right in. I couldn’t think of but three dogs and I just started singing: “do the dog/ do the dog,/ do the dog/do the dog.” First verse – “do the Hound dog/ do the Hound dog,/ do the Hound dog/ do the dog. Now the third verse – ‘do the Bulldog, yea/ do the Bulldog, yea/ do the Bulldog, yea/ do the dog.’ Then I had everybody in the band barking like dogs for a chorus and I was the lead dog, had a little break on the end of the twelve-bars where my boys went up, way above that, then I came back, with all three of the dogs in one: ‘Do the Hound dog,/do the Bulldog/ do the Bird dog/ just any kind of dog / just do the dog/ Do the Dog, everybody do the dog/do the dog. And that’s the song! That’s the way it came out and it was a hit. I couldn’t go anywhere unless I played that song constantly. So we decided to record it.”¹⁷

“Do the Dog” landed in the #22 position on the *Billboard’s Rhythm and Blues* charts. Thomas followed-up “Do the Dog” with “Walking the Dog” released the same year, which climbed to the #4 position on *Billboard*. The commercial success of “Do the Dog” and “Walkin’ the Dog” inspired Thomas to write a series of dance songs including: “(Do The) Push and Pull” (1970), “The Funky Penguin” (1971), “Do The Funky Chicken” (1969), “The Break Down” (1971), “The Funky Bird” (1974), and “Do The Double Bump”(1975).

Similar to the collaborative creative processes of Jesse Stone and Rufus Thomas, the rhythmic patterns of dancers inspired new songs by the funk musicians Roger and Larry Troutman: “A lot of times, we’ll watch people in discothèques and say now, we need to make a song to make

17 Rufus Thomas, Interview with author. Memphis, Tennessee, 6 September 1984.

people dance. And we'd make comments to each other as we watch people moving in discos. That's how "Dance Floor" [1982] came about."¹⁸ The interplay between musicians and dancers also generated bass lines and polyrhythmic patterns heard in the music of other funk bands. Marshall Jones, bass player for the Ohio Players explains: "I'd always find somebody on the dance floor and I would watch how they moved. I would watch them flowing with the hips and then move. And I would get in sync with that pattern."¹⁹ Jones' bass lines that synchronized with the polyrhythmic movements of dancers resulted in the song "Skin Tight" (1974), which became a hit for the Ohio Players. The accounts of Jones and other musicians about the creative process provide a framework from which to interpret the dominance of polyrhythmic structures in Black music as well as the role of dance in defining the hierarchical positioning of rhythm over melody in this tradition.

The intrinsic relationship between dance and polyrhythmic structures in African American popular music is best illustrated in live performances of soul singer and funk pioneer James Brown. Brown's music is organized around a polyrhythmic foundation created by the laying of different riffs played on the bass, drums, guitar, keyboard, and horns. Woven into this foundation are Brown's short percussive vocal lines and the syncopated rhythms of his bodily movements and dance routines, accentuated by the instrumentalists.

Brown's studio recordings, however, do not capture the rhythmic complexity of his live performances. He explains: "What most people don't realize is that I had been doing the multiple rhythm patterns for years on stage, but... [on the studio version] I had agreed to make the rhythms on the records a lot simpler."²⁰ Even though Brown's recordings were targeted to Black consumers, the entrenched conventions of recording studios modified the aesthetic of his songs. Conforming to these conventions, Brown shortened the length of songs and decreased the level of intensity generated through his screams, shouts, and call-response interplay between

18 Roger and Larry Troutman, Interview with Karen Shearer Productions. Los Angeles, California, 8 August 1982.

19 Marshall Jones, Interview by author. Dayton, Ohio, 19 August 1991.

20 James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown: The Godfather of Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 149.

the band and audience, among other African residual strains. Despite these modifications, Brown did not comprise the core aesthetic values that defined the uniqueness of his performances. They, however, do reveal the type of aesthetic negotiation that occurs in musical practice when vernacular expressions are removed from the context of community life and placed into the commodity system.

Performing and negotiating blackness on record: a case study

Recordings of live performances became the platform for African American musicians to circumvent the creative restrictions imposed on their studio recordings and to preserve the organic character of music as social practice in Black community life. Similar to African traditions, these productions represent a kaleidoscope of music, dance, Black oratory, and drama. This approach to musical performance characterizes the worship services of the Black folk church (also known as the Black gospel church). For over two centuries, this institution has served as the repository for African American culture and as the conservatory for budding musicians who learn and master their craft by singing in gospel choirs and serving as instrumentalists. They also learn the art of performance by imitating Black preachers, whose style incorporates oratory, music, bodily movement, and drama. Critiquing this influence, gospel music scholar Pearl Williams Jones observes that gospel singers are lyrical extension of Black folk preachers and they replicate their theatrical performance style.²¹ Performers of popular music, most of whom served their musical apprenticeship in the Black folk church, also are influenced by these preachers.

Many of the practices which we commonly associate with the gospel church, such as dance, the emotional, and musical delivery style of sermons, and the spontaneous verbal and non-verbal responses by preachers and congregations, have been appropriated and often emasculated by secular performers who seek to recreate what is essentially a genuine spiritual element in an authentic gospel performance.²²

21 Pearl Williams-Jones, "Afro-American Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic," *Ethnomusicology*. Vol. XIX, no. 3 (September 1975), 382-84.

22 *Ibid.*, 375.

As a youth, James Brown was captivated by the theatrical style of Black folk preachers:

At the churches there was a lot of singing and handclapping and usually an organ and tambourines [...], and then the preacher would really get down. I liked that even more than the music. I had been to a revival service and had seen a preacher who really had a lot of fire. He was screaming and yelling and stomping his foot and then he dropped to his knees. The people got into it with him, answering him and shouting and clapping time. After that [...] I'd watched the preachers real close. Then I'd go home and imitate them because I wanted to preach.²³

Similar to folk preachers, Brown's live performances are high energy theatrical productions. He juxtaposes fast and slow songs, creates a musical dialogue with his band and "audience" using call-response structures, and builds the intensity of songs through the manipulation of timbre, texture, and rhythm.²⁴ He weaves grunts, moans, hollers, screams, and shouted phrases such as "are you ready," "help me out," and "are you feeling alright" into his quasi-sung vocals, which generates shouts of approval from the "audience." As the intensity and rhythmic complexity increases, Brown dances around the microphone, pushing it forward and backwards, spinning it around, and catching it before it falls to the ground. He then glides across the stage shuffling his feet in quadruple time, falls on his knees, rises up again. He claps his hands behind his head, lifts one leg, slides to the microphone on the other foot and begins singing again.²⁵ The response of the participants ("audience") is one of pure emotion. They scream and holler, talk-back, wave hands, jump out their seats and run down and dance in the aisles throughout the venue and end up on stage with Brown. This level of interaction indicates that Brown and the "audience" united as one through a shared experience – one that met their social, cultural, and aesthetic expectations.

23 *Ibid.*,18.

24 James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown*, 149.

25 Doon Arbus, "James Brown is Out of Sight" in *The James Brown Reader: 50 Years of Writing About The Godfather of Soul*. Nelson George and Alan Leeds, eds. (New York: A Plume Book, 2008) 27. Originally published in *The New York Herald Tribune* (March 20, 1966); author's observations of James Brown performances for over thirty years.

When Brown proposed recording a live album to Sid Nathan, the founder-owner of King Records, he responded with an emphatic NO. Nathan didn't believe that Brown's fans would buy a live recording of previously recorded songs. To counter, Brown explained that the live recording would differ from the studio version since the audience would be active participants. Nathan responded: "I am not going to spend money on something where a lot of people are going to be screaming. Who wants a lot of noise over the songs?"²⁶ Nathan might have responded differently had he understood the interactive character of live performances in Black communities where "noise over songs" contributes to and even enhances, rather than ruin, the musical aesthetic.

In an article by music critic Albert Goldman for the *New York Times*, he describes the differences in the way whites and African Americans interpreted the aesthetic merit of Brown's performance: "To whites, James is still an off-beat grunt, a scream at the end of the dial. To Blacks he's boss..."²⁷ These different views underscore Nathan's opposition to Brown's live recording and the opposing aesthetic ideals held among Blacks and whites. Whites didn't understand the cultural meaning of Brown's grunts, screams, and hollers, which African composer Francis Bebey interprets through African aesthetic lens:

The objective of African music is not necessarily to produce sounds agreeable to the ear, but to translate everyday experiences into living sound. In a musical environment whose constant purpose is to depict life, nature, or the supernatural, the musician wisely avoids using beauty as his criterion because no criterion could be more arbitrary.²⁸

Similarly, Brown's grunts, moans, screams, and hollers convey joy, excitement, sadness and disappointment as well as other sounds associated with life in African American communities. Despite Nathan's objection to the proposed live recording at the Apollo Theater in Harlem (The Black Mecca in New York City), Brown refused to compromise his cultural

26 James Brown with Bruce Tucker, *James Brown*, 130.

27 Albert Goldman, "Does He Teach Us the Meaning of 'Black is Beautiful?'" in *The James Brown Reader*, 39-42. Originally published in *The New York Times* (June 9, 1968).

28 Francis Bebey, *African Music*, 115.

values and aesthetic ideals for Nathan's approval. Instead, he took control of the project by making all of the arrangements and financing the production. The rest is history. *Live at the Apollo* (recorded in 1962 and released in 1963 by King Records) became one of Brown's best selling LPs because it captures the energy and the organic quality of a Black music as a lived experience. As such, the recording is more than a mere musical performance; it was a well executed theatrical production that has both cultural and social relevance among the critical mass of African Americans.

During Brown's fifteen year tenure at King Records, he refused to negotiate the core values that shaped his raw southern and percussive vocal aesthetic and his interpretation of song. His organic southern sound resulted in seventy-seven Federal/King recordings making the *Billboard* "Top Singles R& B" charts, fourteen of which reached the #1 position and thirty-eight placed in the top ten. This level of success suggests that Brown's recordings held social, cultural and aesthetic meaning among African Americans. In essence, his live stage performances and the live character of his studio recordings preserved various African residual strains that were understood and appreciated by African American audiences. The character of Brown's performances as well as those and the creative processes of rhythm and blues and funk musicians discussed earlier, further support the premise that slavery in the USA did not erase the cultural legacy of an African past and that this past provides the reference for musical creativity and innovation in the USA and throughout the Diaspora.

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