

Primary Sources on social conditions that influenced the origins of the vocal, instrumental, and lyrical traditions

The first part of this document has excellent information on the origins of the traditions (drumming, spiritual music as expressions of freedom and resistance, dance as part of the musical culture)

Great primary sources in there too!

(Paste the URL below into a Google search to access the document)

http://www.arts.cornell.edu/knight_institute/publicationsprizes/discoveries/discoveriesspring2001/03sullivan.pdf

Frederick Douglass describing the slave Spirituals in his book, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass”

While on their way, they would make the dense woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out - if not in the word, in the sound; - and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words: -

“I’m going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, and deep, they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I

have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them...To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds.

“There is no true American music but the while sweet melodies of the slave...”

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois
Harvard PHD
Teacher in the South After the Civil War
From his 1903 book, “The Souls of Black Folks”

“Write Me A Few Of Your Lines: A Blues Reader”

Google online book; great evidence for blues, ragtime, jazz

On the use of the Diddley Bow (and other instruments) in Blues

https://books.google.com/books?id=6DRpU7pU5mIC&pg=PA63&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false

On the influence of field hollers/ work songs in blues

https://books.google.com/books?id=6DRpU7pU5mIC&pg=PA119&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false

On dancing as part of the music

https://books.google.com/books?id=6DRpU7pU5mIC&pg=PA95&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false

Lightnin Hopkins - notable blues musician

Lightnin' Hopkins: His Life and Blues

By Alan Govenar

https://books.google.com/books?id=DTPCoNGYkh0C&pg=PT15&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false