

Hearing Slavery: Recovering the role of sound in African American slave culture



While wandering home to his lodgings in New Orleans, early in the evening of May 4, 1819, Benjamin Latrobe, the famous architect, happened upon some two hundred African Americans taking part in the funeral procession of a very old Congo-born woman. Curious and with time on his hands, the Frenchman tagged along to the cemetery and secured a vantage spot very close to the grave. The chanting, the prayers, and even the "very loud lamentations" of the "great croud of women press[ing] close to the grave" were all familiar enough; sounds to be expected on an occasion such as this. But what followed soon after was alien to the visitor's experiences. The deceased's grandsons and great-grandsons picked up bones and even skulls lying around the graveyard and pelted them at the simple casket, making "a loud report on the hollow Coffin." By the time the service was completed the "noise and laughter was general" amongst the mourners. For Latrobe, the funeral had degenerated from tragedy into "a sort of farce."

Some two years later, on October 18, 1821, before a crowd of some seven hundred whites and fifteen hundred blacks, the sheriff of Princess Ann, in Somerset County, Maryland, executed Jenny, a seventy-year-old African American woman. Seconds before Jenny was hung, a bemused white observer recorded that "several hundreds of the colored people" turned their backs to the gallows, squatted on the ground, "covered their faces with their hands, and uttered a simultaneous groan, which while it expressed their feelings, added not a little to the horror of the scene."

In these two almost random cases, the sounds created by African Americans induced in white observers a sense of cultural dissonance, prompting feelings of confusion, disgust, and even horror. This study aims, as far as the sources will allow, to turn up the volume on such sounds, to "hear" the world as the slaves heard it, and in so doing, to gain deeper insights into the culture African Americans created in these years. Here, we aim to begin the necessarily speculative process of examining the role of sound in African American slave culture, to show how we can begin to recover some of the ways in which slaves experienced their environment differently from their Euro-American owners.

Although most scholars teaching or writing about slavery at least mention the fact that slaves often sang, our concern is to use not only song, but all manner of other sounds as well, to gain new insight into African American culture. Frederick Douglass, easily the most famous survivor of the horrors of the "peculiar institution," was well aware of the importance of such culturally evocative sounds. He observed that "apparently incoherent" slave songs actually held "deep meanings." In saying this, Douglass was not alluding primarily to their lyrics. The meanings to which he referred were to be found, rather, in what he termed the "wild notes" of the singers, the "tones, loud, long and deep," every one of which constituted "a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains." Those who wished "to be impressed with a sense of the soul-killing power of slavery," Douglass suggested, should "go to Col. Lloyd's [Douglass's Maryland owner's] plantation, and, on allowance day," as the slaves, singing all the while, passed by on their journey to collect their rations, "place [themselves] in the deep, pine woods, and there . . . in silence, thoughtfully analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of [their] soul."

Unfortunately, of course, we cannot take Douglass's advice. But every now and again, we have come across the writings of someone who has, metaphorically at least, stood in those woods and listened, an observer particularly attuned to the sonic world. Perhaps the best example is Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an idealistic New England abolitionist who took command of the First Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers, the Union's first black military unit, and who possessed an unusual sensitivity to sound. Higginson's memoir entitled *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, and the diary and the letters to his mother on which it is based, are saturated with detailed and sharply observed depictions of the strange and intriguing soundscape of black camplife. On one of his "evening strolls among my own camp fires," Higginson came upon black soldiers "telling

stories with laughter over the broadest mimicry," mimicry in which the unit's white officers were "not always spared." Somewhere in the distance "the everlasting 'shout'" was underway, "with its mixture of piety & polka." And here and there "quieter prayer meetings" were in progress, "with ardent & often touching invocations; & slower psalms deaconed out . . . by the leader . . . in a wailing chant." At one fire, men danced to the accompaniment of "a quite artistic fiddle." At another, a "stump orator perched on his barrel, pour[ed] out his mingling of liberty & Methodism in quaint eloquence." Details such as these eluded the ears of virtually every other observer of black military life.

Higginson listened keenly not merely to this aural world of shouts and song, but to the ways his men spoke. Though bemused by certain peculiarities of syntax, he admired his troops' ready eloquence, their striking use of imagery, their pithily expressed abstract thought, their sheer verbal facility and power. One night he heard one of his soldiers deliver a "perfectly thrilling" impromptu speech which contained "the most impressive sentence about the American flag I ever heard," a sentence he went on to render in dialect: "Our mas'rs dey hab lib under de flag, dey got dere wealth under it, & ebery ting beautiful for dere chil'en & under it dey hab grind us into money & put us in dere pocket; & dat minute dey tink dat ole flag mean freedom for us dey pull it down & run up de rag ob dere own; but we'll nebber desert it boys, nebber; we hab lib under it for 1862 years (!!!) & we'll die for it now." Higginson doubted that any of his officers "could have spoken on the spur of the moment with such easy eloquence and such telling effect." Again and again, the New Englander would be struck by his men's verbal inventiveness, their ability to invest images drawn from everyday life with deep and pertinent meaning. In July 1863, as he left the regiment for a twenty-day furlough to recover from war wounds, Higginson was especially touched when a soldier told him, "You's a mighty big rail out ob de fence, sa."

Yet for every Higginson or William Francis Allen and the other compilers of *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, 1867), there were scores if not hundreds of observers journeying through the South who were seemingly oblivious to, or laconically dismissive of, all that they heard. And even had these travelers been as aurally sensitive as we might wish, there is the obvious problem that sound does not reduce well to the printed page. There is, however, another possible source. As part of the documentary impulse of the 1930s, a number of collectors, most notably John and Alan Lomax, travelled through the South recording all manner of African American sounds for the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk-Song. The fruits of these collecting trips are still deposited in the Library of Congress, indeed some of the material is available [online](#).

The African Americans whom the Lomaxes auditioned and then recorded on their "portable" tape recorder—on the 1933 trip the machine weighed 350 pounds—were the children and grandchildren of slaves. Unlike earlier collectors, whose transcriptions of performances depended on the transcriber's skill and judgement, the Lomaxes relied on technology to secure what they believed was

the unmediated original. After one field trip, John Lomax described the 150 tunes with which he had returned as "sound photographs of Negro songs, rendered in their own element, unrestrained, uninfluenced and undirected by anyone who has had his own notions of how the songs should be rendered."

But like the photographs to which Lomax compared his recordings, these tapes too contain ambivalences. Recordings, too, can strike a pose. For, even though the Lomaxes used machines, they saw themselves as being in pursuit of subjects whom modernity had passed by. And this vision, in turn, shaped both their journeys and the sounds they enshrined. In search of an older, more "authentic" African American culture—in our terms, one closer to the time of slavery—the Lomaxes rummaged through the "eddies of human society" in remote cotton plantations, lumber camps, and, most famously, segregated southern prisons. Part of the reason why they were so excited by their "discovery" of the talent of Lead Belly was that they felt his "eleven years of confinement had cut him off both from the phonograph and from the radio"—the fact that the black singer felt differently was beside the point. What is exciting about listening to the tapes from the field trips into the South of the 1930s is that the folk artists whose voices one hears revealed ways of singing and talking that had been learned from the lips of former slaves. It most definitely is not as if a tape recorder had been left on in the woods near the plantation on which Frederick Douglass toiled as a slave, but listening to these tapes brings us about as close as we are ever going to get to hearing some of slavery's familiar sounds.

In some ways, the songs recorded by the Lomaxes, and the manner in which they are sung, are familiar enough—the music of artists such as Lead Belly and Robert Johnson is still listened to today. But what is most interesting in the material these collectors gathered is the other sounds they were able to record—occasionally without trying. When Minerva Grubs, an ex-slave from Mississippi, was interviewed in the 1930s, she recalled that she and the other slaves went to the white church on Sundays but "didnt jine in de worship." The problem was that "de white folks dont git in de spirit, dey don't shout, pray, hum, and sing all through de services lak us do." On his 1939 trip through the South, John Lomax recorded a [prayer](#) given by the Reverend Henry Ward, at the Johnson Plains Baptist Church, Livingston, Alabama, and if you listen carefully what is obvious is a constant undercurrent of noise from members of the congregation—foot-tapping, moaning, responsive cries—noise of precisely the type that Minerva Grubs was describing to her WPA interviewer at almost the same time in nearby Mississippi.

In addition to letting us eavesdrop on the sonic background behind "slave" songs, the Lomax recordings also captured a type of slave vocal music that frequently assumed the character of "pure sound," music that contained no words at all. Since at least the nineteenth century, many of the calls, cries, and hollers that echoed throughout the rural and urban South wherever African Americans were held captive had been of this broad type. Eight decades earlier Frederick Law Olmsted heard one of these hollers. In the course of his journey through South Carolina in the years before the Civil War, Olmsted encountered a

group of African American slaves, members of a railroad work gang gathered around a fire. Suddenly, one of the men "raised such a sound as I never heard before, a long, loud, musical shout, rising and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle call." The cry sounded, Olmsted would later write, like "Negro jodling." Sounds of this general type, which persisted even into the Lomaxes' day, were ubiquitous throughout the slave South, certainly from the mid-eighteenth century.

Not surprisingly, the West African practice of using a variety of calls to announce important events, greet friends, summon meetings, and so on, was carried over to the New World. As deployed by North American slaves, these elemental kinds of musical expression took various forms, ranging from the relatively simple to the complex, and served a range of purposes not all of them readily appreciated by outsiders. Particularly when African influences were strong—in the early years of slavery, for example, or wherever groups of newly-arrived slaves were kept together—calls functioned as an alternative communication system, conveying information through the medium of sounds that whites could neither confidently understand nor easily jam. Calls constructed from the languages of the slaves' homelands were, of course, unintelligible to whites. Moreover, just as West African drums could "talk" by imitating the rhythmic and tonal characteristics of speech, so too, in all probability, could the wordless calls of North American slaves.

As slaves became acculturated, their calls incorporated English-language words, a development that would have made them intelligible to whites, at least in some degree. Such calls were often simple expressions of loneliness, pain, or despair. The call might be a phrase like "I'm hot and hungry," or could, as in the case of the following Alabama cry, noted in one of the WPA interviews with ex-slaves, contain a more detailed, even if inconsequential, message:

Ay-oh-hoh!
I'm goin' up the river!

Oh, couldn't stay here!
For I'm goin' home!

Other calls had a more obvious practical purpose. Yach Stringfellow, formerly a field slave in Texas, told his WPA interviewer how, "ef de oberseer wuz comin," a slave named Ole man Jim, the possessor of "a big boom voice," would "wail out loud like an say: 'Look-a long black man, look-a long; dere's trouble comin shore.'" Calls were also commonly used to aid work routines. Soon after the "strange cry" of the black railroad worker whom Olmsted encountered had died away, Olmsted heard another member of the work gang "urging the rest to come to work again, and soon he stepped towards the cotton bales, saying, 'Come, brederen, come; let's go at it; come now, eoho! roll away! eeoho-eeoho-weeioho-i!'—and all the rest taking it up as before, in a few moments they all had

their shoulders to a bale of cotton and were rolling it up the embankment.”

But even after slaves had become relatively well acculturated, they continued to employ calls that contained either no or very few English words; if a few such words were included, they tended to function as do syllables in scat singing, as pure sound, rather than as vehicles for the conveying of information. The former slave Julia Frances Daniels revealed that her brother, a skilled hunter, used a celebratory but wordless call to broadcast his success. “We would know when we hear him callin’, ‘Oooooo000ooo-da-dah-dah-ske-e-e-e-t-t-t-ttt,’ that he had sumpin’. That was just a make-up of his own, but we knowed they was rabbits for the pot.” The boastful Hector Godbold incorporated some English words into the call he reproduced for his WPA interviewer, but those words were obviously valued for sound rather than sense. “I was one of de grandest hollerers you ever hear tell bout . . . Here how one go: O – OU – OU – O – OU, DO – MI – NICI – O, BLACK – GA – LE – LO, O – OU – OU – O – OU, WHO – O – OU – OU. Great King, dat ain’ nothin.”

It is important to realize here that contemporary white observers of the peculiar institution, as well as those who managed later to interview former slaves, were able to give only a very imperfect representation of the calls they heard. On many occasions, interviewers appear to have recorded only or mainly the words of a particular cry. African American voices could, however, transform such words into richly detailed patterns of sound. As visually represented by Yach Stringfellow’s interviewer, Ole man Jim’s warning call, “Look-a long black man, look-a long; dere’s trouble comin shore,” seems simple in form and straightforward in meaning, but rich melismatic embellishment (by which one syllable of a word is carried over several notes), which the interviewer may have lacked the time or ability to represent, could easily have translated this call into a complex, vocal utterance. Again, the wordless “plantation holler” that ex-Texas slave Jeff Calhoun performed for his interviewer, was merely written down as “Uh, Uh . . Uh UhUh . . Uh.” However, as Harold Courlander points out, apparently simple wordless calls of this type—he instances a call consisting merely of a long “Hoo-Hoo”—could be “filled with exuberance or melancholy,” and “stretched out and embellished with intricate ornamentation of a kind virtually impossible to notate.” Of course, this was not the kind of detail that most interviewers employed by the WPA were seeking.

It is the impossibility of rendering these calls and hollers onto paper, combined with the fact that very few scholars nowadays would be familiar with anything quite like them, that makes the Lomax tapes so useful, that helps us understand what “Uh, Uh . . Uh UhUh . . Uh” could have sounded like. On their swing through Alabama and Arkansas, in May 1939, John and Ruby Lomax recorded several field and levee hollers, some of which we have included here: [sample holler one](#), [sample holler two](#),[sample holler three](#). Usually only a minute or two in length, these short sound bites provide us with a link back to slave times, and potentially, can help us flesh out our understanding of an important dimension of African American slave culture.

In fact, wordless or near-wordless slave calls were often elaborate vocal creations which drew heavily, as Ashenafi Kebede points out, on “many African vocal devices, such as yodels, echolike falsetto, tonal glides, embellished melismas, and microtonal inflections that are often impossible to indicate in European staff notation.” In Willis Lawrence James’s estimation, these more complex or “coloratura” calls rank “among the most amazing and remarkable vocal feats in folk music.” It was a coloratura call that had attracted Olmsted’s attention as he came upon the group of African American railroad workers; the yodeling sounds that so intrigued him originated with the rainforest Pygmies of Central Africa, whose musical styles influenced, in turn, the Kongo peoples of West Africa, and, ultimately, broad segments of the North American slave population. As we have seen, Olmsted had been puzzled by the lone railroad worker’s richly filigreed cry; the more interesting issue, however, is what meanings that cry had communicated to those African Americans who heard it.

At the deepest cultural level, coloratura slave calls were emblematic African (and African American) sounds, and deeply evocative on that account. Robert Farris Thompson’s comment that “[t]he textlessness of [Pygmy] yodeling, unshackling sound from words, unlock[ed] extraordinary freedom of voice” is applicable to many of the more complex New World calls as well. These, too, were free musical forms, allowing virtually limitless scope for improvisation, for the admixture of the vocal leaps, glides, moans, yells, and elisions that gave to African American musical expression its characteristic rhythmic and tonal complexity, its perennial inventiveness and love of surprise. Slave calls exemplified, that is to say, what Olly Wilson has termed “the heterogeneous sound ideal,” defined by Wilson as an “approach to music making” that deploys “a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound [which is to say, timbres],” qualities that characterized the West African tonal languages from which that music was derived.

In this article we have tried to tease the meaning out of just a few of the sounds that have either been ignored or dismissed as relatively unimportant. The raucous sounds that so shocked Benjamin Latrobe at the New Orleans funeral in 1819 meant something very different to the black participants. What had horrified the traveler was in fact a ritual moment now known as “cutting the body loose,” a process which, as Joseph Roach has pointed out, “joyously affirm[ed] the continuity of community” and triggered a “wave of lively music and motion.” As far as the blacks who attended the burying were concerned it was the appropriate way to bury the African-born matriarch. Similarly, although slave hollers were simply background noise for whites, for African Americans these cries were emblematic and evocative, a familiar and reassuring part of the soundscape that they had created, as they tried to survive the brutalities of slavery.

In a brief piece such as this all we can really do is try and make a few points about the usefulness of material such as the Lomax field recordings. We have concentrated on hollers, because they were a part of the Southern soundscape that seems to have slipped through the cracks. In a fashion that parallels the

way scholars failed to exploit the WPA ex-slave interviews, for the most part the material collected by the Lomaxes and others has been left undisturbed, mentioned in passing as a curiosity rather than being closely analyzed. It is not the easiest material for scholars to use, but it can offer an imaginative way forward to those who are attempting, in some measure, to reconstitute the auditory environment of slavery's hitherto largely soundless world.

Further Reading:

On Higginson, see the excellent Christopher Looby, ed., *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (Chicago and London, 2000). On the collections made in the 1930s, see Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, 2000). Other works used include Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, 1984); Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African American Music," in Josephine Wright, ed., *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern* (Warren, Mich., 1992); Ashenafi Kebede, *Roots of Black Music* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1982); and the Roach essay is at Joseph R. Roach, "Deep Skin: Reconstructing Congo Square," in Harry J. Elam Jr. and David Krasner, eds., *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (New York, 2001): 111-14.

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