

# Spheres of Autonomy: Music Under Slavery

自由の空間：奴隷の音楽

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## 要 約

北米やカリブ海に発生した奴隷制度による黒人の圧迫は非常に厳しかったが、完全な圧迫ではなかった。奴隷制度の下でも、黒人は一生懸命に努力して、特に音楽を使ってどうにかして限定的だが自由の空間を作った。とりわけ奴隷の踊りの集会、黒人音楽家が演奏する白人の踊りの集会、畑の労働、宗教的な集会などの際に、音楽を通してある程度の自由や自己表現が可能になった。

## ABSTRACT

Within the overall universe of oppression created by slavery in North America and the Caribbean, African-Americans were occasionally able to carve out spheres of autonomy: times and places in which a degree of independent action and experience were possible. Music was an essential feature of this process. In particular, (1) slave dances, (2) dances held by whites, (3) work in the fields, and (4) religious meetings were some of the contexts in which slaves were able to create limited spaces of freedom and self-expression, with the help of music.

## Introduction

The oppression of African-Americans under the institution of slavery was severe and pervasive, but it was not total. Slavery was a framework of power created to serve the interests of the white masters, but those interests did not require total control over every aspect of the lives of slaves, and in fact were sometimes served by allowing slaves some limited autonomy. Blacks were often able to create a degree of autonomy, furthermore, even within the large areas of their lives that whites sought to control, and often through their interactions with whites. "Spheres of autonomy," as I am using the phrase here, does not necessarily imply areas of complete freedom from contact with whites or their power, but rather areas in which slaves, individually or collectively, with or without the involvement of whites, were able to free themselves from the oppressions of slavery enough to pursue self-fulfillment and creative expression. Music was one of their most vital tools in this process.

The various ways in which spheres of autonomy were created through music can be conceived in terms of places: spaces given meaning by the symbols and symbolic interactions of the people occupying them. These places were created through various kinds and degrees of interaction and negotiation between blacks and whites. We can identify a number of types of place in which slaves interacted with each other and with their white masters, and in which musical activity was possible. Each of these types of place involved constraints on and opportunities for making music, as well as specific meanings for blacks and whites in relation to their different interests and goals. These constraints and meanings varied, as we will see, from place to place in the Americas (I will focus on the North American mainland and the Caribbean islands) and over time. The types of place that I will consider here are (1) slave dances; (2) white dances; (3) work in the fields; and (4) religious meetings. Within each of these contexts, I will discuss some of the different kinds of limited autonomy that African-Americans were able to achieve.

### Slave dances

From the mid-17th century there are reports of large gatherings of slaves, playing music and dancing. Most of these come from the Caribbean islands, but some from the mainland, including a report from Virginia in 1680. Many of the reports from the islands indicate the use of drums, shakers, and other African-derived instruments. These were sometimes used on the mainland as well: drums were reported, for example, at Pinkster, a festival for slaves, in the colony of New York.

The extent to which large dance gatherings were permitted by whites depended on a complex set of concerns. On the one hand dances were a strategy to keep slaves (relatively) happy and preoccupied, i.e. to prevent rebellion and to maintain productivity. On the other hand, the sight of a large crowd of blacks assembled for a dance was alarming to many whites, and slave dances were sometimes feared as places where rebellions could be plotted. Apart from these practical considerations, slave dances were often described by clergymen, especially in the mainland colonies, as "lascivious" and "idolatrous," and to make these offenses even worse, they usually took place on Sundays. Planters were usually less concerned about these matters than ministers, and were often harshly criticized by Christian leaders for permitting slave dances.

The balance among these various fears and concerns determined to what extent dance gatherings would be restricted in a given area at a given time. Religious or moral criticism of dances was more widespread on the mainland, and the suppression of music and dancing intensified there during the Protestant evangelistic movements of the 18th century (except in New Orleans, which was still under French and Spanish, i.e. Roman Catholic, control). Fear of rebellion was apparently greater on the Caribbean islands, where the proportion of blacks to whites was generally higher. Laws restricting dance gatherings, and often forbid-

ding the use of drums or horns that might be used for signalling, were passed in many places, including Martinique, Jamaica, Barbados, and South Carolina; but the laws were not always enforced, and the dances often continued within whatever constraints were imposed.

Dances, then, were a contested issue among whites, viewed by some as a "safety valve" essential to the mechanism of slavery, by others as a potential threat to white control, and by still others as offensive on moral or religious grounds. But to African-Americans themselves, dances were clearly a sphere of autonomy that was highly valued. These dances offered a temporary escape from oppression and an opportunity for fun, self-expression and social life, and in the long term played a crucial role in the formation of African-American communities and cultures. They did this in at least three ways:

1) Dances were places where Africans of different ethnic groups could find or create common ground and where newly arrived Africans could be assimilated into existing African-American cultures. In some cases, especially in the Caribbean, slaves from different African tribes maintained their tribal groupings in the New World, and dance gatherings were one place where these groups could reaffirm the vitality of their language, music, dance, and religion. Dance gatherings may also have helped to keep alive or to recreate the idea of Africa, as a place of common origin and perhaps as an object of hope for an eventual return.

2) The music and dancing at these gatherings provided a means by which blacks could satirize their white masters (as the well-known "cake-walk," for example, was originally a satire of a white dance), thereby imaginatively turning the tables on their oppressors and making their condition more bearable.

3) Finally, dances were one place where social distinctions among blacks, by skin color, status, or degree of assimilation, were defined and reinforced. Blacks or creoles who had been converted to Christianity or otherwise come to identify more with European culture were likely to avoid weekend dances or take part in European dances instead. Reports from the Caribbean islands indicate that European and African dances were often held by different groups of slaves on different parts of a plantation at the same time, with the lighter-skinned group generally being the European-style dancers. The collective autonomy of slave dances, then, was not always enjoyed by a single unified group. In some cases slaves used the relatively free space of the dance to establish unity and a common culture, but in other cases they used it to define social distinctions and different kinds of identity among themselves.

### **White dances**

Given the overall framework of white power in which slaves were compelled to live, they did not always seek limited autonomy by separating themselves from whites; sometimes they sought it by forming individual alliances and connections with whites, and thereby taking advantage of their power. One way to do this was to perform music at white dances. A

white dance gathering was a relatively privileged place, where a slave musician's status as a slave was certainly not forgotten but where the most oppressive aspects of slavery could be temporarily left behind. By gaining the appreciation of white audiences, furthermore, a slave musician could often improve his (or occasionally her) living conditions and performance opportunities. Fiddlers seem to have been especially successful: reports from both the islands and the mainland colonies show that talented slave fiddlers were often able to make extra money, raise their status, and gain valuable friends through their music. Slaves who played music for whites usually played the music of whites, but often incorporated African-derived elements as well if these were appreciated by their audience. These musicians were thus in an ideal position to combine European and African influences, although under constrained conditions.

### Work in the fields

Work in the fields was in many respects the most oppressive of the places or social situations that made up the lives of slaves. It was especially oppressive in the island sugar plantations, where slaves were literally worked to death, to the extent that constant imports of new slaves from Africa were required. On the mainland, slaves often (although not always) worked under overseers, frequently poor whites, who sometimes treated slaves badly but who were also constrained by the possibility of being fired if they did so. As in the case of musicians performing for white dances, slaves who worked in the fields often maintained an alliance with upper-class whites so as to take advantage of their power, in this case to constrain the overseer and make the field a more bearable place to work. At the same time, the tension between blacks and lower-class whites was advantageous to the upper class in that it undermined the possibility of combined resistance.

Another way in which slaves managed to make the field into a liveable place was through work songs. These songs were permitted and even encouraged, since it was clear to all that they made the work go more quickly and efficiently (as well as more safely, if, for example, the work involved coordinated movement with machetes in close quarters). Work songs could and did become a medium for the creation of a sense of community among workers. African-derived musical features were especially strong in these songs, and in particular call-and-response forms, which transformed a group of workers into an actively interacting musical group. Many accounts note the improvisatory nature of work songs. The lead solo singer would make impromptu comments about members of the group or their social acquaintances, about their surroundings, or about whites; the other singers would then reply in chorus with a fixed response part. Like the satirical dances mentioned earlier, satirical work songs aimed at whites were common. Thus work songs were used by slaves to create, in the midst of forced labor, a cohesive social place in which they could share the experience of their surroundings, joke about one another's social lives, and unite in laughter

at their masters.

### Religious meetings

The people who were enslaved and taken from Africa to the Americas generally brought their religions as well as their religious music with them. In the Caribbean and South America, some of these religions have survived, often blending with Christian elements, as in the *condomble* religion in Brazil, *lucumi* in Cuba, and *vodun* (voodoo) in Haiti; or with Amerindian elements, as in the *macumba* and *caboclo* religions of Brazil. The music of these neo-African religions played a major part in their ceremonies, which often involved spirit possession and specific drum rhythms used to invoke specific deities. Even more than dance gatherings for entertainment, these religious gatherings must have been crucial for many slaves in preserving their sense of autonomy, community, and tradition amid the hardships and disorientation of their lives in the New World.

In the North American colonies, however, where African-derived religions were more thoroughly suppressed (together with the drums that played a central role in many of them), it was Protestant Christianity that eventually became the focus of an autonomous religious life for African-Americans. The outdoor meetings of the "Great Awakening" at the end of the 18th century were one setting in which blacks and lower class whites united, on more or less equal terms, in the creation of a semi-autonomous place. The gospel preached at these meetings was an egalitarian one, in which heaven was accessible to everyone (not just to the elect few, as in New England Puritanism). These gatherings may in some cases have represented a united stand by blacks and poor whites against the planter class, who often disapproved of them: some planters were reported to oppose having their slaves attend Christian religious meetings, for fear that they might acquire dangerous ideas of liberty and equality.

The singing at these outdoor meetings often involved call-and-response forms, derived from New England "lining out" as well as from African-American singing: blacks were, of course, comfortable with this technique, and many observers commented that they were usually by far the best singers present. Expressions of religious fervor at Christian meetings often resembled the spirit possession that was a common feature of many African religions. African-Americans, then, were able to make themselves both musically and spiritually at home in these meetings. Blacks and whites were often divided by a barrier, but could certainly hear one another singing, and on the last day of a meeting, the barrier would generally be removed and the congregation would all sing together. In this way a great deal of musical exchange took place, leading, for example, to the development of spirituals. Thus, just as slaves at times created limited autonomy by allying themselves with upper-class whites, they sometimes did so by joining with lower-class whites. In both cases they found opportunities for musical interaction and creation.

Once slaves had adopted Christianity in large numbers, the black church service became a vital place of autonomy and collective expression within their communities. From the late eighteenth century these services were generally conducted by blacks without white interference. White slaveowners did not always approve, and sometimes attempted to ban prayer meetings by their slaves. But black prayer meetings and church services continued, grew, and prospered, with or without white approval. Christianity, although originally acquired from whites, soon became a refuge from white power and a source of independent strength for blacks.

On the other hand, Christianity also played a role in tensions within black society and culture. As we saw earlier, black Christians on the Caribbean islands would sometimes distance themselves from African-derived music and dancing. Indeed, with the conversion of blacks to Christianity, a division appeared between two types of place where blacks could find autonomy and collective musical expression: the church and the dance. African musical elements remained strong in both types of place, and were passed back and forth between the two, since many people were likely to be enthusiastic participants in both the Saturday night dance and the Sunday morning church service.

#### After slavery

The role of music in creating spheres of autonomy for slaves helped to set the course for the development of African-American music after the end of slavery. The African-derived musical styles of the Caribbean, including both neo-African religious music and secular dance music, continued to thrive and to diversify. In the U.S., the tension as well as mutual influence between sacred and secular musical styles continued, as did the tension between the places and the lifestyles (the church and the dance) with which those styles were associated. Blues, for example, was often condemned by religious blacks as "the devil's music," while at the same time many musicians moved back and forth between blues and religious music. Work in the fields, as well as the tradition of work songs, continued under the sharecropping system that appeared after the Civil War, and many of the work songs were preserved even into recent times by prison chain gangs. The practice of blacks performing for white audiences and adapting their musical styles accordingly also continued, with considerable consequences for the development of American popular music. In short, the ways in which music was used by blacks to create liveable places under slavery were mostly carried on in some form after slavery ended -- partly because of the momentum of cultural practices, and partly because the oppression of blacks by whites, which made the creation of those places necessary, did not end with the abolition of slavery.

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