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## **On The Legacy of Slavery in American Music**

### How the Note Carries

In 1619, a slave ship brought the first slaves to America. In 2021, slavery still exists. The legacy of slavery exists in words and actions. But one of the greatest legacies it left behind, was the legacy of music. Through music, families were knitted together and still even now as songs are passed through the years. For generations, music has been an artistic freedom for many people, specifically for the enslaved people of early America who used music as a way to face difficult conflicts and break free. Music was the way that people stuck together through the hardships they faced. But though it can be considered a freedom, it has been used as the start of a cruel evil; the start of a new kind of racism.

Music is a freedom in itself. Music was the way people were freed in two ways: by mind and by escape. Music led people away and led people to safety both literally and figuratively; both in a physical way and a way that could free the mind. Heroes of the antebellum era such as Harriet Tubman used music as something more, “As abolitionist Harriet Tubman guided Black people to freedom along the Underground Railroad, she sang certain spirituals to signal it was time for escape” (Morgan).

And though we think about the world as separated, we can look at music at the genres and see that even in song there is separation. But that kind of thinking is the difference between glass half full and glass half empty because really, “The purity that separation struggles to maintain? This country’s music is an advertisement for 400 years of the opposite: centuries of “amalgamation” and “miscegenation” as they long ago called it, of all manner of interracial collaboration conducted with dismaying ranges of consent” (Morris). Music is proof that not everything was about separation, rather, it was used as a way to unify people, as it has for hundreds of years. Music brought people to safety, it warned people of danger, it united people with the things and people they lost. Music is the one thing that people could thrive on solely because it holds us together even when there's the threat of falling apart.

Music has held families together and continues to today; as slaves worked on the plantation they had work songs and such songs were passed on from generation to generation. Because of the situation, because of the circumstances, the music that slaves sang were remembered and passed on. Part of the style was improvising; “Without improvisation, a listener is seduced into the composition of the song itself and not the distorting or deviating elements that noise creates. Particular to black American music is the architecture to create a means by which singers and musicians can be completely free, free in the only way that would have been possible on a plantation: through art, through music — music no one “composed” (because enslaved people were denied literacy), music born of feeling, of play, of exhaustion, of hope” (Morris). Said circumstances were the denial of education. But in being so, without the pressure of having to have a composition, it gave slaves full artistic flexibility and freedom to shape their music however they wanted.

Even though music is widely remarked as a positive thing, music and entertainers in the 1830’s created a new form of racism. Music is a beautiful way that you can express yourself; a way you can be free. But one man who wanted power and money and saw himself above others, created a new type of racism that was undoubtedly harsh in its own cruel way. This man was T.D. Rice, an entertainer in the 1830’s. At this time, there was no American music; Nothing completely original for the relatively young country. There were types, genres and styles from other countries that were but Americans wanted American music. They craved a song

that wasn't a soap opera or an English play. One day, Rice saw an enslaved man cleaning a horse and singing on a property owned by a white man called Crow. There must have been something about the music that had Rice intrigued because later on, instead of doing his usual routine, he painted his face black and acted like the man cleaning the horse and sang. Rice called the song Jim Crow. Everybody in the audience loved it and of course, because of this new and popular thing, everybody wanted in. People who performed in these performances did the worst thing they could have, assumed. The entertainers assumed what black people were like and made unfair judgments about people. Soon this music that everybody wanted to hear and perform, this new type that wasn't one from another country but something that was made into American music. Today, the music we hear is "not just the sound of Black America, but the sound of America" (Morris). But sadly, this new kind of racism evolved into the Jim Crow Laws later on.

In conclusion, music holds a strong legacy of slavery because of the music that was stolen by white people; and white people stole more than that. But, even though there was a lack of freedom, there was never a lack of spirit or of music or of hope so long as powerful words were passed down from person to person, mother to daughter. Because even though it may not seem like it at times, freedom is and always will be a freedom in itself so long as we continue to allow it to be. My hope is that music will stand strong for the hopeless and the hopeful for years to come just as it did 402 years ago.

#### Works Cited

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