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THE GLORY FIELD

American Music

By Sharon Fabian

American music, in most of its various forms, can be traced back to the music of the earliest African-Americans. Even though these Americans came here under the worst of circumstances, they still brought with them traditions, and developed new traditions of their own, that have grown into what is recognized around the world today as American music. Musicians, like other artists, are usually quick to give credit where credit is due. Just as a writer quotes his sources, a musician credits those musicians who inspired him. In the case of the early African-Americans, that is not always easy. Many of the slaves who brought musical traditions from Africa will never be known by name. No one wrote their history. Many of the slaves who sang work songs in the fields will never be known by name. No one wrote their history either. However, there is a lot that we do know.

The first well-recognized form of African-American music was spirituals. Spirituals are religious songs. They are songs that tell a story or express emotions. Spirituals have a strong rhythm. They are often sung by a group, sometimes with a leader who sings a line or two alone and a chorus that sings the refrain. Spirituals originated in the Southern United States. Spirituals sung by slaves often expressed the hope for freedom that was so important in their lives. Well known spirituals include "Go Down Moses," "Deep River," and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." After slavery ended, spirituals began to spread to other parts of the United States. Harry Thacker Burleigh was one of the first singers to perform spirituals on stage in a concert. Marian Anderson, well known for her classical singing, helped spirituals to gain a wider audience too. Spirituals influenced the development of another well-known form of American music - the blues.

The blues were a more individual style of music than spirituals. Blues were often sung solo, and sometimes they were accompanied by guitar music. As the name suggests, the blues were often about sadness and facing troubles. However, the blues could also be funny, positive, and even defiant. One blues singer, loved for her strong, beautiful voice, was Bessie Smith. Another early blues musician was W. C. Handy. Handy was not only a musician, he also wrote music, promoted concerts, and published blues songs. During the time that the blues were spreading across the country, another style of music was also quickly gaining in popularity. Ragtime was energetic music with a complicated, syncopated beat. Often played on the piano, ragtime was the latest and most sophisticated in American popular music. The best-known ragtime musician was probably Scott Joplin, who wrote many hit ragtime pieces for the piano including "Maple Leaf Rag."

Eventually, elements from all of these forms of music and more came back together. In their own kind of melting pot, African rhythms, slave work songs, spirituals, blues, ragtime, and other influences recombined to form the beginnings of that truly American art form - jazz. In the late 1800's jazz was just beginning, but not long after the turn of the century, it would be the most popular American music. It would go on from there to worldwide popularity. Jazz would branch out into many forms, and it would influence future styles of American music.

Many musicians today credit earlier musicians such as Scott Joplin or Bessie Smith with inspiring their music. It's a shame that they can't also name the earliest African-Americans who really began the traditions that led to the American music of today.