

"NEGRO RHYTHM IN THE AMERICAS"

—being extracts from an article originally written in Spanish.

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Since remote times, the drum has been the most popular instrument of Negro musical art, as much in Africa as in the New World, to which it came in the slave ships. Numerous books written by travellers, naturalists and anthropologists certify this undeniable fact. The Arabian traveller, Ibn Batouta, who may have been the first writer to mention Negro music, wrote a report during the 14th century, in which he refers to the drums employed by the Sudan Negroes.

There are numerous ways in which drums are employed by Negroes. They use them to keep in rhythm the movements of their dances; to accompany vocal choruses, or soloists; to incite warlike activities; as an accompaniment to work performed in social groups; to call people together upon important occasions; to form orchestras which are traditionally associated with the activities of totemic societies; to transmit news from one place to another by means of the drum language, and also in funeral rites.

It is interesting to note that the drum language was imported to the New World by Negroes. Fernando Ortiz, the great Cuban scholar, in his book entitled 'Los Negros Esclavos' (La Habana, 1916) writes "During the conspiratorial days, the Negroes could understand each other by transmitting their rebellious ideas from one zone to another by means of the sound of their drums".

Moreover, in African and Afro-American music, drums are not only rhythmical instruments. Cultural anthropologists and ethnologists have long accepted their melodic character. Twenty five years ago the well-known musicologist, Dr. Erich Moritz von Hornbostel noted the fact that striking upon different parts of the drum head produced different notes and created a certain degree of polyphony. And more recently Dr. Melville Herskovits, in his book entitled "Man and his Works" (Nueva York, 1948) wrote that drums never completely lack tonality.

In the Afro-Bahian *Candomblés* (the religious ceremonies of the Brazilian Negroes whom I have recently studied in Brazil) I have observed passages played by three drums, the *Rum*, the *Rumpi*, and the *Lé*, and the Yoruban *agogó*, all of which were undoubtedly melodic. I feel sure that such passages could be played upon other instruments as well.

The importance of drums in Afro-American music, as well as in West African music, from which it came, is due to the rhythmic element in Negro music. There is little or no Negro music without a well sustained rhythm. This element is pre-eminent not only in dance music and work songs, but also in cradle and religious songs, and even in funeral music, which is marked by the rhythm of strongly beaten drums.

One of the most important characteristics of Afro-American music in all three Americas is close relationship between the melody and its rhythmic accompaniment.

One certainly cannot deny the influence of Negro rhythm in the music of the Americas, nor the extraordinary vitality with which it has survived in different forms of folk and popular music, both religious and secular. Even in those countries where the melodic ground shows the impact of Occidental cultural patterns, the unmistakable Negro rhythm pulsates in full strength.

The Negro element can be clearly discerned in such examples as the Cuban religious music, the work and dance song, the *Rumba* and the *Son*, the Trinidadian music for the Shongo cults and even the Calypso; the North American *Shout*, *Spirituals*, *Work Songs*, *Blues*, *Ragtime* and *Jazz*, the *Candomba*, *Semba* and *Milonga* of the Argentinian Negroes; the *Bomba* dance of Puerto Rico; the *Bamboula* of the Virgin Islands; and also the religious and secular music of Suriname.

We cannot ignore the obvious relationship to West African music to be found in the *Charleston* and *Ragtime* rhythms of North American Negroes; the *Bamboula* of the Virgin Islands and the Rio de la Plata; the Argentinian *Milonga*, the Brazilian *Samba* and *Batuque*; as well as the Calypso of Trinidad. This relationship is sometimes so close that we find identical features in several different countries.

Juan Valera, the Spanish writer, writing about Negro music during the 19th century, pointed out the strong similarity between the musics of Cuba, Brazil and the United States, which shared a common "musical inspiration of the Negro race."

In Brazil I have heard authentic *Sambas* which, in rhythmical aspects, differed little from the Afro-North American Ragtime. In the Negro music of Curazoo and Trinidad we also find reminiscences of *Ragtime*.

However, the influences of the music of the African continent upon that of the Americas has not been universally accepted by reason of a certain prejudice against the Negro, in spite of so many typically African names for many of the Afro-American songs and dances, such as *Batuque*, *Samba*, *Conga*, *Rumba*, *Semba*, *Bembé*, *Fandango*, *Zarambeque*, *Candombe*, *Malambo*, *Milonga*, *Macumba*, *Yambú*, *Caringa*, *Congo* and *Gayumbe*.

That Negroes are the masters of rhythm is a fact that nobody, not even their most passionate foes, would deny. This element governs all the phases of Negro life and art, as much the arts of space as those

of time. Not one agricultural collective work, not one group of oarsmen, not one group of stone cutters is complete without the drums that give them rhythm and co-ordination. Drums play a very important rôle in religion, so much so that each god in West Africa has his own rhythm pattern, by means of which they are "called". As soon as the first symptoms of mystic possession are observed during religious ceremonies, the percussion instruments intensify their playing to hasten the "coming" of the *Orishas* or African gods.

I have observed this phenomenon in the Afro-Bahian Candomblés. It is interesting to add that, precisely at that moment in which the *Orishas* are about to seize or possess the *filhas de santo* or the priestess of the cult, both the music and the dance attain their highest level of excitement. They are 'extra-mundane'. They are, in fact, the music and the dance of the gods.

Both in Africa and Afro-American communities, drummers are admired for their virtuosity, to achieve which they dedicate their lives, and in consequence they are the recipients of special treatment. This indicates the importance of music in Negro cultural patterns.

"Is it not true that even the smallest of our visages is full of rhythm"? wrote the Haitian ethnologist, Dr. Jean Price-Mars . . . "Is it not true that this is the law and the essence of our Negro lives?"

In the *Sbouts*, the tapping of feet and hand clapping were responsible for keeping the rhythm regular and so contributed to mystic possession in African and Afro-American religious ceremonies. Work songs, as well as the Blues, Ragtime and Jazz, are distinguished by their regular rhythms.

Of indubitably Negro influence is the accompaniment which, in Brazil, is commonly played to the *Samba*. It involves the use of a straw hat, a match box and a dish beaten with a knife. Moreover, in the streets of Sao Paulo, the writer has heard Negro shoeshine boys making rhythms and singing to the accompaniment of their wooden boxes and brushes played as if they were drums with their tin cans of shoe polish played as *agogós* or *adjás*, both of them similar to African instruments of the Candomblés of Ewe-Yoruba origin or of the Gegé-Nago, as several of these African people are called in Brazil.

Among American Negroes, drum playing has attained a high level of development, complexity and originality. William E. F. Ward was not mistaken when he wrote in his study of Gold Coast music that in the matter of rhythm Western peoples were fifty years behind.

In all the New World's music it is rare to find folk instrumental groups in which the drums do not have an important rôle to play. Even in those instrumental groups in which Indian influences are evident because of the *Quenas* and flutes, drums are always present.

The superimposition of cultural patterns is clearly found, for example, in some of the musical expressions of Puerto Rico, Columbia, Venezuela and British Honduras, and in other American countries in which Negroes have adopted pre-Columbus *Quenas*. They still beat their drums in an African manner as their ancestors did on the Dark Continent.

I saw recently in Brazil a dramatic dance called *Bumba-Meu-Boi*, in which a drum made in a local Indian style was beaten in the best West African manner. Unmistakably "Negro" ways of playing instruments still survive in certain musics of Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. For when Negro music came into contact with Indian music, the Indians not only accepted the *Marimba*, but also played their drums in an African manner.

Fernando Ortiz mentions that the Aymaras of Yugas have a type of drum called *Tundiki*, which, they maintain, was taken from the Negro. They use it in a dance in which they paint up their faces to look like negroes. And Karl Gustav Izikowitz says that the Indians have adopted certain Negro ideas in the construction of musical instruments, especially in attaching the ligature of the drum head to the edge of the body.

Here in Argentina it is easy to find features which are obviously African, especially in songs and dances such as the *Malambo* (an African name) and the *Milonga*. In the *Chacarera* and the *Gato* (two Argentine dances) African styles of polyrhythms remind us that the Negro has also gravitated into the culture of our country. In both dances binary and ternary measures are commonly played simultaneously. It is also an old custom of our *bombo* (bass drum) players to beat alternately on the drum head and on the rim of the instrument, unconsciously perpetuating an old West African tradition. And African ancestry can also be detected in the syncopated rhythms of the Afro-Uruguayan *tamboriles* (little drums) which even now are played by the *Negros Lubolos* during the Carnival.

In all three Americas, notwithstanding the fact that in some places the Negro has yielded ground in other cultural patterns, his rhythms and in particular his drums have survived and provided us with an anthropological subject which we may study with growing interest.

Buenos Aires, May, 1956.