

GEORGE W. CABLE AND TWO SOURCES OF JAZZ

by

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The effect of the Creole song on jazz has been noted in nearly every historical jazz study. Goffin, Borneman, Blesh, and Finkelstein are among those who have treated the matter, while Marshall Stearns' comment in *The Story of Jazz* is a recent example: "As might be expected, the French influence is perhaps the greatest European influence on New Orleans jazz. It merged with rumba rhythms to produce Creole songs . . ."¹

George Washington Cable, the great New Orleans novelist, was a literary figure who sought out Creole songs with a collector's zeal and used them repeatedly in his novels; he also sang them from the lecture platform in just about every section of America and even in England. Cable showed as well an avid interest in a better known jazz source, that of slave songs, rhythms and dances. Employing the transcendent powers of observation necessary to an important novelist, he wrote of Creole and slave music in both fiction and magazine articles in such a way as to suggest, and even stress, musical qualities which were later to become of interest to jazz as inherent elements of jazz.



THE FRENCH SLAVE

Cable was a writer who in his time was thought by some critics to be the equal of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and he still enjoys a prominent position among the local colorists of American literature. Recent biographical studies by Arlin Turner and Philip Butcher indicate, in fact, a resurgence of interest in Cable.

Cable's observations of the early musical performance by slaves in New Orleans' Congo Square, as they appeared in his 1886 *Century* magazine article "The Dance in Place Congo", are a commonly quoted source in jazz scholarship. He also wrote a study of slave songs for *Century* in which he divided this genre into love songs, voodoo songs, the lay, the dirge, and songs of the woods and water. The article reproduced the music to several of these songs and even went so far as to comment on the social implications of the lyrics, which in one instance contrasted the octoroon mistresses of white gentlemen with the slaves who served and played music for their entertainment:

¹ Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 73.

Yellow girl goes to the ball;
Nigger lights her to the hall.

Fiddler man!

Now what is that to you?

Say what is that to you,

Fiddler man!

"It was much to him; but it might as well have been little. What could he do?" Cable adds, going ahead to explain that such lyrics were looked upon by whites as meaningless nonsense.² It has become commonplace for jazz writers to acknowledge and discuss the ambiguous social criticism in jazz (especially blues) lyrics as evolved from the songs of the Southern Negro. Cable's section on voodoo songs furnishes another example of his interest in a characteristic area of New Orleans music which is still to be felt in jazz today, for voodoo terms like "goofer dust" and "root man" (one who sells roots to cast spells with) have continued to appear in songs, particularly blues again, by such unsophisticated performers as Cripple Clarence Lofton and such business-like units as the Buddy Johnson band. Voodoo, of course, is still a power in New Orleans and Harlem at least.

The spell, whether voodoo or not, that early New Orleans music cast over Cable is apparent in his fiction. *The Grandissimes*, most highly regarded of Cable's novels today, presents one scene based upon the Calinda, a voodoo dance which Stearns says was connected with the zombiism of Haiti. Cable was fascinated by these musical dances with their Creole-French lyrics, and he pictures them as being performed by both slaves and their Creole masters, connecting the Negro and French musical cultures. In this instance the song accompanying the dance is being employed to satirize the younger Honoré Grandissime, who has been guilty that day of publicly associating on friendly terms with the United States-appointed "Yankee governor" who is to rule New Orleans under the Louisiana Purchase. Cable actually employs the Calinda as a kind of Greek chorus in the structure of this section of the novel to dramatize the unreasoning displeasure of the Creole reaction to the doings of the afternoon:



THE BAMBOLA.

"Certain of the Muses were abroad that night. Faintly audible to the apothecary of the Rue Royale through that deserted stillness which is yet the marked peculiarity of New Orleans streets by night, came from a neighbouring slave-yard the monotonous chant and machine-like tune-beat of an African dance. There our lately met *marchande* . . . led the ancient Calinda dance and that well-known song of derision, in whose ever multiplying stanzas the helpless satire of a feeble race still

² George W. Cable, "Creole Slave songs", *Century Magazine*, XXXI (April, 1886), p. 808.

continues to celebrate the personal failings of each newly prominent figure among the dominant caste. There was a new distich to the song tonight, signifying that the pride of the Grandissimes must find his friends now among the Yankees: Miché Hon'ré, allé! h-allé!

Trouve to zamis parmi les Yankis.

Dance calinda, bou-joum! bou-joum!

Dance calinda, bou-joum! bou-joum!³

It is an amusing oddity that Cable goes on to describe the effect of the music on the listener, his protagonist Joseph Frowenfeld, with a term that has come to be synonymous with jazz: "The cathedral clock struck twelve and was answered again from the convent tower; and as the notes died away he suddenly became aware that the weird drowsy throb of the African song and dance had been swinging drowsily in his brain for an unknown lapse of time".

When the young apothecary Frowenfeld visits the Grandissime mansion Cable uses the African song and dance once more. Before Frowenfeld's departure some gesture of hospitable entertainment is felt to be necessary, and Cousin Raoul, the artistic member of the family, chants while the ill-fated slave Clemence performs an African dance:

"Raoul began to sing and Clemence instantly to pace and turn, posture, bow, respond to the song, start, swing, straighten, stamp, wheel, lift her hand, stoop, twist, walk, whirl, tip-toe with crossed ankles, smite her palms, march, circle, leap—an endless improvisation of rhythmic motion to this modulated responsive chant . . ."⁴

There follows a series of calls and replies between Raoul and Clemence, reproduced by Cable in the Creole dialect, which suggest something of the folk-mythology of the African leader and group response shouts, often mentioned as an influence on jazz solo and ensemble patterns.

The same scene stresses the African rhythmic force in this performance: "Frowenfeld was not so greatly amused as the ladies thought he should have been, and was told that this was not a fair indication of what he would see if there were ten dancers instead of one".

It is Raoul's custom to entertain his family with both Creole and Negro songs, and Cable repeatedly includes the lyrics in Creole dialect. There are even two instances in *The Grandissimes* in which Cable the musician takes precedence over the novelist. Raoul is asked to sing a Negro boat song "which they sing as a signal to those on shore" when they go out "into the bayous at night, stealing pigs and chickens"⁵ Cable furnishes the actual musical notation to this song as well as the lyrics. Rudi Blesh and others have made a good deal of the negro's use of ambiguity in his songs for purposes of communication, signalling, and protection to himself.

The notation device is used again in chapter XXIX when Don Jose, suffering bad crops, receives the cheering news that a new crop—sugar cane—has just been introduced into Louisiana, and that it is immune to the worms that have been destroying his indigo.

"Oh, Senor, it will make you strong again to see these fields all cane and the long rows of negroes and negresses cutting it, while they sing their songs of those droll African numerals, counting the canes they cut", and the bearer of good tidings sang them for very joy.⁵

This time Cable divides the lyrics into syllables below each note as in ordinary sheet music.

³ George W. Cable, *The Grandissimes* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), pp. 121-122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Cable applies this same unusual technique in another novel, *Bonaventure*, in which he reproduces a wedding song of the Acadian district of Louisiana.⁶ His readers can thus perform his novels on the piano to some small extent, reproducing for themselves some of the musical atmosphere he tries to convey. But it is through his interest in the poetic ambiguity of the Negro's songs, in the music and rhythms of his dances, and in the Creole contribution to New Orleans music that we are reminded of a captivating novelist who was clearly aware that original music was churning in New Orleans during the nineteenth century. Though Cable died a very old man in 1925 before he began to be quoted by jazz critics, it seems doubtful that he would be at all dismayed by the attention that has been lavished on New Orleans music since his day, however sophisticated it may have become since the times of which he wrote.

⁶ George W. Cable, *Bonaventure* (New York: International Association of Newspapers and Authors, 1901), p. 63.