

THE EDITOR ON TOUR IN AMERICA

by

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Carved in bold Roman letters over the stone façade of the Central railway station in Washington D.C. is the famous Spanish proverb quoted by Dr. Samuel Johnson "He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies with him". It brought home to me with a wry twist shortcomings in my own reading about the United States, at whose invitation, through the State Department, I now stood enjoying the clear autumn colours along the great vista of noble buildings between the Capitol on the one hand and the Washington Memorial on the other.

It was my first visit and, one after another, long familiar names of towns and rivers had begun to take shape in reality, names that were so much a part of an English-speaking heritage, clothing themselves in new meaning and substance.

Whatever my shortcomings in reading might have been, I had not realised the extent to which I had absorbed America in song until the cadence of an Indian name such as Alabama or Oklahoma or the melody of an ancient ditty leapt into life at the prompting of a signpost. Here in Washington, for example, there was a road sign which read 'To Virginia' and immediately I was humming "Carry me back to old Virginny" with all the homespun nostalgia of a James Bland or a Stephen Foster.

America, as everyone knows, is a land of song, of mountain music, of folk spirituals and the country blues as well as the ballads of Broadway. It is a land of choirs and music teachers, of brass bands and drum majorettes, a gay and prosperous land with a great highlight and a persistent shadow. In spite of its gaiety it is still a country at war with itself and its conscience, still fighting the war of Independence with anti-colonialism, still fighting the War between the States with school integration, still fighting the last war with the fear of the bomb.

Where then did African music fit into this picture? How could it make sense in this far country, except in the light of the current anti-colonialism, anti-segregation and anti-communism? Here was one of my problems in lecturing on this subject at the kind invitation of over twenty American universities which had been placed on the schedule of appointments by the State Department agency, the Conference Board of Associated Research Councils. At each of the major Universities which had an African studies section there was little need for long explanations. Both the Faculty and students connected with this division had already a sound grounding in the physical and political realities of Africa and several of my general observations do not apply to these alert groups of well informed men and women. My task, as I understood it, was to suggest a new approach to the study of African people and personality in the present day, through the recording of their indigenous aural arts, and the careful study of the data obtained in this way.

The records I played spoke for themselves to anyone who was musically sensitive. My explanation of the circumstances which surrounded the recordings was interpreted by the students in the light of my apparent social position, national background and occupation in Africa vis-à-vis the native African people, tempered by their keen American sense of mission. This humanistic attitude was especially noticeable among the undergraduates of several colleges, many of whom were burning to be of use to Africa, if not in a religious capacity then in some worthwhile secular activity, however much or little they comprehended the facts and realities of life on this continent. Few of the enthusiasts appeared to relate the social position and general character of American Negroes with that of indigenous Africans who, on account of their remoteness on another Continent, were viewed as the ideal dark persons to be saved from either heathendom, insanitary habits or colonial rule. To the average white American student

with whom I spoke Negroes presented only a minor if persistent domestic problem, with the normal headaches connected with their housing, schooling and social services. As it was only one in every ten Americans who sprang from Africa they could be left to look after themselves provided Federal legislation took the appropriate measures to ensure their proper treatment. It was the distant hordes of "suppressed tribesmen" who were considered to be the perfect and romantic recipients of revolutionary 'freedom', "men with ideas of liberty much the same as ours (American) but who differ in the ways these goals are achieved", as one writer has recently put it in a masterly piece of simplification.

What then of the reaction to African music on the part of Negro Americans who, it would seem, might be calculated to have more in common with present day Africans, so many of them being separated from their countries of origin by only three or four generations? One continually hears of the so-called African contributions to jazz. Would the Negroes not rejoice in the fountain head of that music which is supposed to have provided the dominant characteristics of Mississippian music from New Orleans to St. Louis?

The answer seems to be an emphatic negative. Not only is jazz less African than it was popularly supposed to be but its steady 'creolising'* had led inevitably towards the prevailing musical taste of the majority of the participators, nine-tenths of whom are calculated to be in no way directly connected with Africa.

The heavy social pressures which the Negro endures in his struggle to achieve what is called "100% American" citizenship leave little room for any nostalgic considerations of his distant connection with Africa. In any case, the popular misconceptions of native Africans as wild and primitive savages (which the behaviour of immoderate African politicians has done little to correct) militate against his active alignment with that branch of his family tree. His endeavours are calculated to be directed towards the emulation of the majority of the American people in his struggle for equality in the face of the reality of present day colour prejudice which legislation alone cannot cure. It was not surprising to find that among the Negroes it was only a few intellectuals who could afford to contemplate the arts of Africa as a subject of academic study divorced from any political considerations of 'liberty' for a distant relative. The pursuit of social happiness lay for them in their absorption and acceptance by the majority of Americans, and to draw attention to any residual African quality would be considered a hindrance rather than a help. Consequently, I was not surprised to find that my lectures at the Negro Universities aroused little interest among Negro students, although several Negro professors whose social position was assured proved to be as much if not more appreciative of African musical artistry than most of their white American countrymen. Perhaps some still small voice spoke to them out of their heritage.

Several American professors have studied and written about residual African traits in the New World including that of music-making, but the subject appears to be unpopular with many Negroes with the notable exception of such writers as Richard Wright and Franklin Frazier. The possibility that recognition of the musical achievements of Africans might enhance their own Negro personalities does not appear relevant and in some instances might even be noted with dismay. They adopt the common Western viewpoint that it is a remote study, broadly related to all humanity; of aca-

*The word 'creolising' is used in the linguistic sense . . . the simplification of the European music for the benefit of the African who thereupon un-Africanises his musical style to meet what he considers to be the European model. The result is a crossbred or mulatto product, neither truly European nor truly African but a mixture of both.

demic, sociological and political interest only, and not to be permitted to stand in the way of their integrational objectives.

Reservations of this kind do not invalidate the interest and importance of the subject, however socially uncomfortable they may be in some quarters. The fact remains that Negro people the world over undoubtedly have a special contribution to make to world culture which is innate and special to themselves. The unfortunate circumstances under which the first Africans migrated to the New World must not be allowed to cloud the issue. It would appear that sheer ignorance of the wide scope of African musicianship coupled with old fashioned academic jargon and religious bias has prejudiced opinion in some quarters almost beyond recall. It is clear from my brief experience in America that the subject properly presented from the humanistic standpoint without any unnecessary trimmings and far-fetched analyses can do more than anything else to establish friendly personal relations between the races concerned with Africa. It removes from African studies the common stigma of appearing to be in pursuit of knowledge and information concerning inferior and primitive specimens of man. Phonographic evidence is what is urgently needed coupled with a capacity to underscore common human phenomena which are expressed in uncommon ways. Accent needs to be placed on the validity both of the personality and of the art forms of African peoples if we are to avoid the unnecessary violence of those whose sense of inferiority encourages them to the easy path of revolution rather than the more difficult one of evolution.

My four months in America, which involved a busy schedule of talks to widely separated audiences of students, were hardly enough to gain more than a superficial impression of American attitudes towards Africa. The great size of the country alone tended to create widely differing opinions on almost every subject, from the eastern seaboard to western California, and from the Yankee north to the Deep South. In every conversation I felt that the presence or absence of Negroes modified private reservations when Africa was under discussion. One strong impression however has emerged. That certain intangible characteristics of African personality as I know them in Africa seem to have persisted in the heterogeneous peoples known as Negroes. These characteristics defy definite classification by any but the most perspicacious psychological standards and there is an understandable antagonism to such classification by those whose devolutionary tendencies tend to make them close their eyes to any theory which does not serve their pursuit of social equality.

Nevertheless, my American journey has tended to reinforce my impressions that the quality of Africanness which can be detected in the musical arts of Africa is not only valid in itself but in other circumstances may even provide a dominant characteristic in some of their progeny far removed from the shores of the dark Continent.

Africa has so much to offer towards the contentment of her related peoples at home and abroad through the genius of her authentic music-makers that it would be folly in these troubled days to overlook the musical potential of her composers, either through the common tendency to magnify the value of their creolised products or by failing to discover, collect and perpetuate on tape or disc the real source of that genius while this present generation is still in touch with genuine artistic and musical continuity. Their cultural recognition among nations will only come through thoughtful appraisal and encouragement of their own artistic worth for, as so many writers and philosophers have said: 'The world knows itself through its arts'.