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My Soul has Sung Deep Like the Rivers: How the Abolishment of Slavery Birthed Generations of Music

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My Soul has Sung Deep Like the Rivers:

How the Abolishment of Slavery Birthed Generations of Music.

The world of music is vast; there are songs that tell thrilling stories of love or loss, and stories of the ways in which love affects people. The history of such songs is just as immense. Many people may want to know the hidden meaning in Elvis' "Hound Dog," but not many think of asking where the rock genre came from. People would love to know how Frank Sinatra came to dominate the jazz industry, yet they rarely think of asking where jazz originated. There are many genres that originated from one background, some include folk and country, and the three genres I will be focusing on are blues, jazz, and rock. One can say blues and rock are somewhat similar in the sense that rock came from the blues genre – yet, jazz is a totally different genre of music! The rhythms, the instruments, they differ across genres; one can wonder how can blue's, rock, and jazz come from the same origin? When thought about a little more, these differences emerging from the same origins make sense. These three genres come from the oppression brought on by slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. I believe today's genre of blues, jazz, and rock and roll are the results of the abolishment of slavery.

The genres of jazz and rock come from the same father – blues. The only difference between each is the “feeling” of the music, the rhythms, and a few of the instruments. Michael J. Morgan quotes an old saying in his essay “Rock and Roll Unplugged: African-American Music in the Eighteenth Century in America,” “The blues had a baby and they called it rock and roll” (Morgan, 649). Morgan goes on to mention the realistic side to this quote in stating, “rock and roll’s ancestry includes grandparents called work songs and spirituals, great-grand-parents called field holler and ring shouts, and great-great-grand-parents called La Calinda and Patting Juba...performed and perfected by our African-American Ancestors” (Morgan, 649). The origin of rock comes from the blues, and blues roots down to the songs of enslaved Africans that were sung on boats and on fields. Even the instruments used in rock and blues date back to African American roots. Africans had their own version of a guitar called the banjar, which resembles the banjo (Morgan, 651). The Africans also brought over various drum types including congo’s and an African instrument resembling a tambourine (652). As most people know, the two main instruments in a rock band are guitar and drums, as is the same with blues, but the drums are most essential to jazz. Eventually, the African Americans adapted to American culture and started replacing their banjars with guitars and congo’s with standard drum kits. This evolution of playing music led to the creation of Rhythm and Blues, as Morgan put it, “The banjo and the fiddle – the most popular stringed instruments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – would give way to the guitar as the instrument of choice among African-American folk musicians and their rock and roll descendants.” (Morgan, 651).

While music of today took elements of field songs and Banjars, African Americans took singing elements from Christian songs. Morgan states:

When African Americans encountered Christian songs of worship they easily assimilated those musical elements that fit into traditional African singing styles. One such element was the practice of “Lining out” the words and melody of a psalm or hymn: the leader would sing a line and the congregation would repeat it, thus learning the song in the process of singing it (654).

The changes to these Christian hymns and psalms became what are known as spiritual, and the basis of blues vocals.

In his book, *The Devils Music: History of the Blues*, Giles Oakley corrects a common misconception about the blues. A man named W.C. Handy is thought to be the father of the genre but that isn't actually true. Oakley states, “there was no one person who gave birth to the blues, and if there was, it was certainly not W.C Handy... The blues were emerging all over the Southern States of America simultaneously” (Oakley. 6). The blues grew and grew and eventually stars such as Muddy Waters, Ray Charles, Buddy Guy, Billie Holiday, became the main source of entertainment for Americans. One star is proclaimed the “King of Blues” by many including Ulrich Adelt, who wrote about the King of Blues himself – B.B. King. In Adelt's article “Black, White, and Blue: Racial Politics in B.B. King's Music from the 1960s” he states, “King has earned himself the undisputed title... after scoring a number of hits on the R&B charts in the 1950's and despite a few failed attempts managed to cross over to a mainstream pop audience in the late 1960s” (196). B.B. King was a sensation for the black audience; Adelt writes “In the 1950s, King became a recording star, topping the R&B charts with “Three O'Clock

Blues” in 1952 and scoring an impressive nineteen top ten hits for RPM...”(Adelt, 198). King was surely making a name for himself, undoubtedly becoming the face of the blues genre. After awhile, King’s reign over the blues started to fall. In Adelt’s article, he notes, “In the 1960s, King’s career was on a downward trend. He had failed to cross over to a “white” market in the 1950s....and he failed again in the 1960s” (198). There is a probability that the reason for this was because the genre came from a mixture of black and white cultures, and white people were not fond of that. This racist mindset of people completely rejected a beautiful music genre. Though blues didn’t earn an attention of white people, one genre that did would be jazz.

Most people are familiar with the Jazz era, a time where every day people would sneak into speakeasies and drink alcohol illegally while swinging each other to the music of jazz. Jazz was everywhere. During its era, jazz impacted society greater than most genres do today. Bruce Mitchell refers to Jazz as a “multicultural phenomenon” in his essay with the same title, “Jazz: A Multicultural Phenomenon” The irony of it all is jazz came from blues, yet jazz was much more widely accepted by white people. Mitchell states, “Jazz in the United States is actually a three-hundred year-old blending of two great musical traditions: the music of West Africa and the music of Europe” (Mitchell, 236). Blues did have blendings of white Christian music but the music held more African aspects while jazz was a perfect blend for all races to enjoy. Mitchell agrees African music catered the basic theme of jazz, writing, “African music – which came to the United States via slaves from Senegal down to the Congo – supplied an important ingredient for American jazz, namely the rhythmic patterns” (Mitchell, 236). The drums were essential for these particular rhythmic patterns, which were was the back bone of

the genre. Jazz had such an impact on society, no one could imagine America these special rhythms.

Mitchell states, “Because drums could be used for communication, their use was forbidden to American slaves on many plantations. It wasn’t until the end of the Civil War in 1865 that the drum was able to be used in an unrestricted manner by African Americans” (236). This supports the theory that if slavery was not abolished, the history of America would be far different than it is. It is amazing how a generation of music could change a generation of history. With the rhythms of jazz on drums being played everywhere, white artists caught on to performers such as Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and turned jazz into their own music – appealing more to a white audience. During the Jazz era, artists like Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra dominated the industry. Jazz became the genre to listen to; it was the icon of the 20s, 30s, 40s, and is still prominent today, with artists like Michael Bublé and Harry Conick Jr. While jazz became the social norm during the prohibition period, the great depression, and the start of WWII, rock and roll was on its way to creating a new generation of history.

In the 1950s, rock and roll was but a spec in the vast world of music. It became more infamous with Elvis Presley and his “hip thrusting” and “gospel sounds.” Rock is widely accepted today, but in the 50s it was a different story. In a book review of *Rockin’ in Time: a Social History of Rock-and-Roll* written by David P. Szatmary, Michael Jauchen writes in his intro an accurate description of what the view of rock and roll was. Jauchen states, “The history of rock-and-roll is the history of menace... [it] includes the “dangerous” – as many whites considered...rhythm-and-blues music that gave voice to African American oppression and anger” (162). In this sense, rock and roll is very similar

to blues, especially early rock. The feel of “Heartbreak Hotel,” sung by Elvis Presley, is no different than most blues music of African Americans. That being said, it is not hard to see why most white folks did not like the social bending of rock-and-roll. Hip thrusting may have something to do with it because those movements symbolized sex which was not romanticized as much as it is now. That racist ideal transferred through out the years, and the original hatred of rock changed when more people started singing rock.

Preachers, parents, teachers, and other adults of the 50s named rock the “Devils Music.” One reverend from 1957, Reverend Jimmy Snow, agreed with this notion, once stating, “I know the evil feeling that you feel when you sing it... if you talk to the average teenager of today and you ask them what is it about rock and roll music that they like, the first thing they’ll say is ‘The beat, the beat, the beat!’” (Morgan, 650). That “beat” that is craved by teenagers comes from African American roots, and because African Americans were able to spread the blues, rock found a way to form into the living world. Rock and roll became a plague, and it grew more once the Beatles arrived in America. “Beatle Fever” was everywhere; there was no stopping its incredible force, yet the older generation started hating the music. This is why the rock music in the 70s through 80s started focusing more on sex and drugs. It was this idea that listening to rock is rebellious and sinful that turned rock into songs the devil would listen to. This 70’s rock music is the reason why people colored their long strands of hair darker colors, wearing fishnet leggings or leather jackets and ridiculously sized pumps. AC/DC, Guns N Roses, Aerosmith, the Doors, all had a very trippy feel to songs, the word sex was not uncommon in the lyrics, and the music changed minds and fashion fads. Like most

music, rock evolved and today there are sub-genres of rock, including punk rock and hard-core rock.

The impact of blues on society was the birth of jazz and rock. One of the first things that is thought of when discussing the 1920s is either jazz or a topic that relates to jazz, and the same goes with the 50s and 70s regarding rock and roll. The reason these genres came to be was a result of the abolishment of slavery and the fact that freed slaves could finally spread their culture across America, creating a domestic cultural diffusion. America is founded on the basis of other philosophies and government – a trend that did not stop with its establishment, including the development of music. By taking Africans to America, Africans diffused the country without even knowing it. The roots of these influential singers and musicians are extensive and run deep like African Rivers.

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