The Evolution of African-American Music

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Early African-American Music

The earliest forms of African-American music were imported with the slaves themselves. Slaves brought knowledge of West African musical instruments like drums, zithers, xylophones, and the banjo.

Tribal dances from West Africa morphed into “step” dances, and tribal melodies became song styles like the “shout” and the “echo”.

Later Songs from Slavery

As slavery settled into the entrenched “peculiar institution” in the South, slaves used music to ease the drudgery of their lives, and sometimes to send messages.

Christianization brought the onset of Spirituals, and Gospel music is still very important to the African-American community. Spirituals allowed slaves to think about a new world where there would be freedom from toil and strife.

“Message songs” were also common – songs designed to send a message to other slaves without the “massa” catching on. Examples include “The Blue Tail Fly” and “Follow the Drinking Gourd”
Birth of The Blues

The end of the Civil War freed the slaves, but the cotton glut after Reconstruction left most of the South desperately poor.

A new form of music, born in depression and poverty, swept the country — The Blues.

The very first reported Blues show was in 1916, on Ashley Street in Jacksonville. The performer was Ma Rainey (right). She and Bessie Smith were the forerunners of this new style.

The Blues was next picked up by Minstrel Shows, and spread up and down the Mississippi River. St. Louis was known for their shows.

Male Blues singers next made their mark with simple melodies and plaintive songs, like the great Muddy Waters (right).
Heavenly Harmony – the Barbershop Quartet

At the turn of the century, a more upbeat sound was heard from, believe it or not, barbershops.

James Weldon Johnson believed that the Barbershop Quartet had its beginnings in Jacksonville, and noted that almost every shop had its own chorus.

Barbershop Quartets had exuberant tunes done in four-part harmony and a cappella. “Echo” songs were common.

Barbershop Quartets were almost exclusively black. Why? Because at the turn of the century, virtually all barbers were black. It was an occupation that was open to African-Americans who didn’t want to work in the fields.

So what happened? Minstrel Shows picked up the melodies, and Norman Rockwell (right) popularized the image of white barbershop quartets.
All That Jazz

In the depths of World War I, a new sound began sweeping the world. Originating in New Orleans, jazz was the instrumental equivalent of the barbershop quartet. Smooth harmonies and teamwork still are the focal point of New Orleans Jazz, as personified in the Preservation Hall Jazz Band (right).

Jazz was played from coast-to-coast, and exported to Europe with American soldiers, where it quickly became the toast of Paris.
Jazz expands

Any phenomenon as popular as jazz would surely spawn variations and themes.

In Kansas City, Charlie Parker introduced brass to jazz — bringing in swing rhythms and saxophones and trumpets.

In Chicago, the first jazz soloists appeared. Many, like Louis Armstrong, would become famous in their own right.

In New York, the jazz swing rhythms were amplified into full scale orchestras, ushering in the Swing Era. Duke Ellington (right), Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, and Count Basie all had bands, and the Cotton Club in Harlem became a chic destination.
During the war, up until the 1930s, the Great Migration found many African-Americans moving to northern cities. Unfortunately, the North was not the Promised Land to many, who still faced poverty, unemployment, and racism.

Beginning in Detroit, (also called “Motor City”), a new sound emerged. The Swing Era sound picked up a faster beat, more bass, fewer instruments, and burst onto the music world as “Rhythm and Blues” or R&B.

This was pioneered by a small record company in Detroit called “Motown”. Motown signed groups like the Supremes and the Chi-Lites, and solo stars like Ray Charles (right) and the incomparable Ella Fitzgerald.
Rap and Hip Hop

By the 1980s, problems in urban living had reached a climactic level. Poverty, crime, drugs, and violence threatened to tear apart the fabric of African-American life.

In this emotional maelstrom, a new form of music was born. It was a lament against urban poverty, like the Blues had been a lament against rural poverty. Also like the Blues, it touched a chord and quickly spread everywhere. Early rap skipped instruments entirely, just using lyrics and a bass beat.

It became most popular when it morphed into hip-hop, and returned some instruments to the mix.

Some hip-hop is still raw and vulgar, reflecting the hard life on the streets, but many artists have moved more mainstream.