

The Origins of Modern Music I: Work song, Spirituals, Country and Ragtime.

A **work song** is a piece of music closely connected to a specific form of work. African American work songs originally developed in the era of slavery, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Because they were part of an almost entirely oral culture they had no fixed form and only began to be recorded as the era of slavery came to an end after 1865. The first collection of African American 'slave songs' was published in 1867. Many had their origins in African song traditions, and may have been sung to remind the slaves of their ancestral homeland, while others were instituted by the slave masters to raise morale and keep slaves working in rhythm. They have also been seen as a means of withstanding hardship and expressing anger and frustration through creativity or covert verbal opposition.

A common feature of African American songs was the *call-and-response* format, where a leader would sing a verse or verses and the others would respond with a chorus. This came from African traditions of agricultural work song and found its way into the spirituals that developed once slaves began to convert to Christianity and from there to both gospel music and the blues. In early slavery drums were used to provide rhythm, but they were banned in later years because of the fear that black slaves would use them to communicate in a rebellion, nevertheless slaves managed to generate percussion and percussive sounds, using other instruments or their own bodies.

Spirituals are religious songs which were created by enslaved African people in America. The term *spiritual* is derived from *spiritual song*. The King James Bible's translation of Ephesians V.19 is: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

Although numerous rhythmical elements of spirituals can be traced to African sources, nonetheless it is a fact that spirituals are a musical form that is indigenous and specific to the religious experience in the United States of Africans transported from Africa. They are a result of the interaction of African religious elements with music and religion derived from Europe. Further, this interaction occurred only in the United States. Africans who converted to Christianity in other parts of the world, even in the Caribbean and Latin America, did not evolve this form.

Country music is a blend of traditional and popular US musical forms traditionally found in the Southern United States that evolved rapidly beginning in the 1920s. The Irish fiddle, the German derived dulcimer, the Italian mandolin, the Spanish guitar, and the West African banjo were the most common musical instruments. The interactions among musicians from different ethnic groups produced music unique to this region of North America. This early country music along with early recorded country music is often referred to as old-time music.

Often, when many people think or hear country music, they think of it as a creation of European-Americans. However, a great deal of style—and of course, the banjo, a major instrument in most early American folk songs—came from African Americans. One of the reasons country music was created by African-Americans, as well as European-Americans, is because blacks and whites in rural communities in the south often worked and played together

Ragtime is an original musical genre which enjoyed its peak popularity between 1897 and 1918. Its main characteristic trait is its syncopated, or "ragged," rhythm, with additional polyrhythms coming from African music. It began as dance music in the red-light districts of American cities such as St. Louis and New Orleans years before being published as popular sheet music for piano. The ragtime composer Scott Joplin became famous through the publication in 1899 of the "Maple Leaf Rag".