

NOTES ON NEGRO MUSIC.

DURING May and June of 1901 and 1902 I was engaged in excavating for the Peabody Museum of Harvard University a mound in Coahoma County, northern Mississippi. At these times we had some opportunity of observing the Negroes and their ways at close range, as we lived in tent or cabin very much as do the rest of the small farmers and laborers, white and black, of the district. Busy archæologically, we had not very much time left for folk-lore, in itself of not easy excavation, but willy-nilly our ears were beset with an abundance of ethnological material in song, — words and music. In spite of faulty memory and musical incompetency, what follows, collected by Mr. Farabee and myself, may perhaps be accepted as notes, suggestions for future study in classification, and incidents of interest in the recollecting, possibly in the telling.

The music of the Negroes which we listened to may be put under three heads: the songs sung by our men when at work digging or wheeling on the mound, unaccompanied; the songs of the same men at quarters or on the march, with guitar accompaniment; and the songs, unaccompanied, of the indigenous Negroes, — indigenous opposed to our men imported from Clarksdale, fifteen miles distant.

Most of the human noise of the township was caused by our men, nine to fifteen in number, at their work. On their beginning a trench at the surface the woods for a day would echo their yelling with faithfulness. The next day or two these artists being, like the Bayreuth orchestra, sunk out of sight, there would arise from behind the dump heap a not unwholesome *μυγμός* as of the quiescent Furies. Of course this singing assisted the physical labor in the same way as that of sailors tugging ropes or of soldiers invited to march by drum and band. They tell, in fact, of a famous singer besought by his co-workers not to sing a particular song, for it made them work too hard, and a singer of good voice and endurance is sometimes hired for the very purpose of arousing and keeping up the energy of labor.

This singing in the trenches may be subdivided into melodic and rhythmic; the melodic into sacred and profane, the rhythmic into general and apposite.

Our men had equal penchants for hymns and "ragtime." The Methodist hymns sung on Sundays were repeated in unhappy strains, often lead by one as choragus, with a refrain in "tutti," hymns of the most doleful import. Rapid changes were made from these to "ragtime" melodies of which "Molly Brown" and "Goo-goo Eyes" were great favorites. Undoubtedly picked up from pass-

ing theatrical troupes, the "ragtime" sung for us quite inverted the supposed theory of its origin. These syncopated melodies, sung or whistled, generally in strict tempo, kept up hour after hour a not ineffective rhythm, which we decidedly should have missed had it been absent.

More interesting humanly were the distichs and improvisations in rhythm more or less phrased sung to an intoning more or less approaching melody. These ditties and distichs were either of a general application referring to manners, customs, and events of Negro life or of special appositeness improvised on the spur of the moment on a topic then interesting. Improvising sometimes occurred in the general class, but it was more likely to be merely a variation of some one sentiment.

The burden of the songs of the former class were "hard luck" tales (very often), love themes, suggestions anticipative and reminiscent of favorite occupations and amusements. Some examples of the words and some of the music are:—

They had me arrested for murder
And I never harmed a man.

(A Negro and the law courts are not for long parted.) Other songs had a refrain of "going down the river" (possibly a suggestion of the old slave market at New Orleans), or a continuous wail on "The time ain't long," or hopes for "next pay-day."

Referring to occupations or amusements:—

Some folks say preachers won't steal;
But I found two in my cornfield.
One with a shovel and t'other with a hoe,
A-diggin' up my taters row by row.

Old Brudder Jones setten on de log,
His hand on de trigger and his eyes on de hog.

Old Dan Tucker he got drunk,
Fell in de fire and kicked up a chunk.

I don't gamble but I don't see
How my money gets away from me.

When I look up over my head
Makes me think of my corn and bread.
(Possibly meteorological.)

If one would complain of the heat, another would sing out:—

Don't bother me.
The hotter the sun shines the better I feel.

Love ditties :—

The reason I loves my baby so,
'Case when she gets five dollars she give me fo'.

Say, Sal, don't you powder so
We 'll be too late for de party, oh.

Oh we 'll live on pork and kisses
If you 'll only be my missus.

A few with the notes :—



Went down town 'bout a quar-ter to eight this morn-ing.
Met my hon - ey at the kit - chen gate this morn - ing.



O - h bé - bé, do yo' love me - ee?



Ba - by, take a look on me.



O - h let's get drunk and ga - am - ble.

Some pronunciations were noted. Murder came out plainly as "muddo" and baby as "bébé;" the latter may be from Creole influence, but I am at a loss to explain the former. No preference otherwise for "o" sounds was evinced.

Coming to more apposite ditties, the cover of this quasi-music was used to convey hints to us up above. One Saturday, a half-holiday, a sing-song came out of the trench,

Mighty long half day, Capta-i-n,

and one evening when my companion and I were playing a game of mumble-the-peg, our final occupation before closing work, our chorasus shouted for us to hear,

I 'm so tired I 'm most dead,
Sittin' up there playing mumblely-peg.

These are only a few. It is impossible to remember and it was impossible to put down all. The men were not good on parade. Asked to sing for my wife while she was with us on a visit, they suddenly

¹ This line with a slight difference of notation.

found it too hot, and as a whole a request performance got no further than very poor "ragtime," "Goo-goo Eyes" with any number of encores, and "Nigger Bully" and others quite as original probably with Miss May Irwin as with them. Their rhymes were not necessarily more than assonance. Consonants, as seen above, were of little importance.

There was some jealousy among them as to leadership. A handsome fellow named Ike Antoine had been undisputed leader for three months and enjoyed besides a county-wide reputation as a dancer; we imported a burley jail-bird for the last few weeks; he was a capital worker with a voice comparable to the Bashan Bull and Tamagno. He out-bawled Antoine, not altogether to the improvement of the music.

As regards execution, the men's voices, with the exception of Antoine's, were mediocre, but their tempo was singularly accurate. In their refrains ending on the tonic, they sometimes sang the last note somewhat sharp. So frequent was this that it seemed intentional or unavoidable, not merely a mistake in pitch. Otherwise their pitch was fairly true.

Their singing at quarters and on the march with the guitar accompaniment was naturally mostly "ragtime" with the instrument seldom venturing beyond the inversions of the three chords of a few major and minor keys. At their cabin the vocal exercise was of a Polyphemic nature, causing congratulations at its distance. Occasionally we would get them to sing to us with the guitar, but the spontaneity was lacking and the repertoire was limited. They have, however, the primitive characteristic of patience under repetition, and both in the trench and out of it kept up hours-long ululation of little variety.

As to the third division, the autochthonous music, unaccompanied, it is hard to give an exact account. Our best model for the study of this was a diligent Negro living near called by our men "Five Dollars" (suggestive of craps), and by us "Haman's Man," from his persistent following from sunrise to sunset of the mule of that name. These fifteen hours he filled with words and music. Hymns alternated with quite fearful oaths addressed to Haman. Other directions intoned to him melted into strains of apparently genuine African music, sometimes with words, sometimes without. Long phrases there were without apparent measured rhythm, singularly hard to copy in notes. When such sung by him and by others could be reduced to form, a few motives were made to appear, and these copied out were usually quite simple, based for the most part on the major or minor triad. Some of these, picked up from various sources, including one or two of similar nature from the trenches, are:—



The long, lonely sing-song of the fields was quite distinct from anything else, though the singer was skilful in gliding from hymn-motives to those of the native chant. The best single recollection I have of this music is one evening when a negress was singing her baby to sleep in her cabin just above our tents. She was of quite a notable Negro family and had a good voice. Her song was to me quite impossible to copy, weird in interval and strange in rhythm; peculiarly beautiful. It bore some likeness to the modern Greek native singing but was better done. I only heard her once in a lullaby, but she used sometimes to walk the fields at evening singing fortissimo, awakening the echoes with song extremely effective. I should not omit mention of a very old negro employed on the plantation of Mr. John Stovall of Stovall, Mississippi. He was asked to sing to us one very dark night as we sat on the gallery. His voice as he sang had a timbre resembling a bagpipe played pianissimo or a Jew's-harp played legato, and to some indistinguishable words he hummed a rhythm of no regularity and notes apparently not more than three or more in number at intervals within a semi-tone. The effect again was monotonous but weird, not far from Japanese. I have not heard that kind again nor of it.

The volume of song is seen to be large and its variety not spare; they are in sharp contrast to the lack of music among the white dwellers of the district; their life is as hard as the Negroes', with some added responsibility; they take it infinitely harder and for one thing seem not to be able to throw off their sorrows in song as are the true sons of the torrid zone, the Negroes.

Charles Peabody.