

GULLAH SPIRITUALS

By John H. Tibbetts



Alfred Heber Hutty, *Voodoo Ritual*, undated, Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, Georgia

Some of the most beloved American spirituals emerged from the talents of the Gullah people of coastal South Carolina. Slave songs such as “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore,” “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Had” and “Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel” were first written down in the Port Royal area or near Charleston during the Civil War but later transformed and popularized worldwide.

In 1862, an educational mission of concerned Northern whites and blacks was sent to Port Royal and nearby islands after the area had fallen to Union troops. These missions were designed to aid newly freed slaves. At this time, few Northerners — or inland Southerners — had encountered antebellum Gullah language and culture.

Working on St. Helena Island, a pair of young Northern teachers, one white and one black, contributed to a historic book, “Slave Songs of the United States,” published in 1867, which codified the lyrics and melodies.

The person most responsible for bringing Gullah music to national attention was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a white abolitionist who served as a colonel in the United States’ first regiment of African Americans, the First South Carolina Volunteers.

In an *Atlantic Monthly* article in June 1867, Higginson described returning to army camp at night on horseback and hearing groups of freedmen “chanting, often harshly, but always in the most perfect time.” He wrote down the words and melodies, hoping to capture the varied songs. “Almost all their songs were thoroughly religious in their tone. Nothing but patience for this life — nothing but triumph in the next.”

Later, a group of young black singers from Fisk University in Nashville, TN, known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, brought many of these spirituals to the attention of the American public and eventually to Europe.

But the spirituals popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers are different from those that the Gullah people have sung for generations, says Marquette L. Goodwine, an activist, author and performer also known as Queen Quet, chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation.

Northerners who documented Gullah spirituals misunderstand some of the lyrics and the spontaneous nature of the songs, says Goodwine. While slave songs were religious, they also served as ways for slaves to communicate plans to escape and the level of danger that escapees would face at any particular time. The songs could be both warning signals and outlets to express the horrors of slavery.

The rhythms and musical structure of Gullah spirituals are also different from the popularized versions. “Go Down, Moses,” is almost always sung in a grand, stern legato in the Americanized version. But in the Gullah tradition, songs often change during the performance to reflect the changing mood or meaning of the piece. A somber, dirge-like melody can be transformed in mid-song, building into rapid meter, accompanied by “sea-island claps” and foot stomping as the sing-shouting turns ecstatic and percussive.

Today, three South Carolina groups — the Hallelujah Singers (www.islandpacket.com/man/gullah/singers.html), Aunt Pearl Sue Productions/The Gullah Kinfolk (www.knowitall.org/gullahnet) and The Voices of El Shaddai (www.thevoicesofelshaddai.com) — are dedicated to preserving the African rhythms of the Gullah culture through their music. Pick up CDs of their music or catch one of their many performances throughout the state.

Find out more...

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