Chapter I: History – Old and New Slave Music

Blacks have a uniquely American musical tradition. Their songs were neither strict emulations of European music, nor simply a hold-over from African tradition. Rather, American blacks began their music fresh after a forced migration to the New World. The "Peculiar Institution" of slavery provided an environment of deep emotion, in which slaves resorted to humor, spirituality, and protest in song. Although outright slavery was abolished in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment left a loophole which permitted slavery, "as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted…."[1] This created a continuation of enslavement where songs of the black oppressed would continue to flourish.

In the words of Pete Daniel, "Out of the ashes and ruins of the Civil War the shadow of slavery once more crept over the South."[2] Beginning in the late 19th century soon after emancipation planters, mine owners, and railroad tycoons began developing "legal" ways to maintain large, low cost labor forces. Southern states outlawed poverty, illiteracy, and vagrancy, of which virtually all black Southerners were guilty. Peonage and convict labor were established from Texas to the Carolinas in the late 19th century with turpentine camps, cotton picking, railroad construction, farming, and factory work.[3] There were a few subtle differences between the two institutions of forced labor. While peons were men indebted to their employer that had to work their way out of debt before they could be free, convict labor saw men who were arrested for some illegal activity and sentenced to a penitentiary or farm labor unless they could pay a fine. Convicts might then be rented out to business owners for use in their respective industry. In addition to free blacks being defenseless in a society in which

1 *Amendments to the Constitution*, Article XIII, Section 1, <http://www.house.gov/Constitution/Amend.html>
2 Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901-1969* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. ix.
3 Robert Reps Perkinson, *The Birth of the Texas Prison Empire: 1865-1915*, Ph.D. Thesis, Yale University, 2001, pp. 27-40.

whites retained all the economic and political power, "both Southern planters and the federal government believed that blacks needed close supervision."[4] In peonage, blacks and poor whites would be coerced into signing a contract where they would owe their boss or captain labor in exchange for a salary they might never receive. Sharecropping, the system where mostly blacks gave a large portion of their produce to pay for the land of wealthy whites from whom they rented, could easily lead to peonage. Since sharecropping rested on a debt and credit system it was open to manipulation by landowners. Blacks would live on the land of their employer and produce a quota of grown goods and were not allowed to leave unless some insurmountable fee was paid off. As bosses cheated their workers more and more, peons fell deeper and deeper into debt until they were entrapped for life.[5]

Many Southern industries were transient – moving from one area to the next leeching resources or laying down structure for the industries themselves. Mines, brick yards, turpentine camps, and road construction were often solely male industries, unlike sharecropping. In an environment devoid of families, where aggression often overtook reason, a host of rhythmic songs accompanied the beat of the hammer and clang of the hoe.[6] Convict labor and peonage are so closely related in spirit that it is no surprise that the songs of both are barely separable. These were often artistically veiled songs of protest against "bosses" and wardens about the prisoner's or peon's plight. As slaves had done with spirituals, African-American prisoners used song to create a culture separate from the oppressors where bad men were heroes. Soon after World War I, struggles against worker abuse began, starting with a 1919 attempt at unionization by black Arkansas cotton sharecroppers, which was likely connected to worker protest songs.[7] Since the union sprang from the workers receiving unfair

4 Daniel, *Shadow of* Slavery, p. 19.
5 Harold D. Woodman, *New South, New Law: the legal foundations of credit and labor relations in the postbellum agricultural South*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 5-27.
6 Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1977), pp. 202-221.
7 *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History 1919-1929.* Philip S. Foner and James S. Allen

settlements for their cotton from white plantation owners, the traditional "Pick a Bale O' Cotton" would be an only fitting cadence.[8] This early active attempt at forming a union resulted in the massacre of hundreds of African-Americans by local officials afraid of the impetus of a black political voice. Additionally, despite the fact that many blacks had fought in Europe during World War I, Southern blacks were still being lynched by angry white mobs in the American South. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a Northern association, published an essay on the history of lynching, a Southern black problem, and attempted to bridge the North-South gap of black activism in the 1920s.[9]

Following World War I, the 1920s and 1930s saw metropolises of the North thriving, and the scant big cities of the American South grew, while the rural areas continued to be dominated by white land-barons. Poverty and coercive labor arrangements continued to degrade African Americans. A renewed struggle against convict labor and peonage with the help of the NAACP and the Communist Party (CP) was a promise to activist groups themselves as much as it was to laborers. During the Great Migration, many blacks who had experienced the horrible oppression of the South moved north, bringing with them stories of the poor man's plight there. Leftist activist hubs like Chicago and New York saw the growth of the NAACP and the CP during the 1920s. While the NAACP often pointed to the CP as not worrying enough about the black man, and simply using him for political progression, the CP pointed out that the NAACP supported only the middle class blacks, at the expense of the working class.[10]

With this competitive discourse in hand, both groups set out to prove the other

eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 4.

8 Leadbelly, *When the sun goes down: take this hammer [sound recording]*, (New York: Bluebird, 2003), "Pick a Bale O' Cotton."

9 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States: 1889-1918*. (New York: Arno Press, 1919), pp. 1-40.

10 Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 41.

wrong through taking charge of the black man's plight in the South. The documents of the NAACP speak to their concern for black rights violations by peonage camp owners in the South.[11] Of course, as their hubs were in the North, there was not as much personal interaction with the oppressed population as expressed by members of the CP willing to work in the South. Workers' unions were established throughout the American South to provide a voice to peons and hope to convicts that the system might be overcome.[12] Near the end of the 1920s authorities of the CP like Cyril Briggs were fighting to unify black and white laborers in the American South, to fight for all laborers' freedom. Bigotry still existed even from poor whites with the same plight as Southern blacks. This would be a rift quite difficult to overcome throughout the 1930s. During the CP's insistence on "self-determination" from 1928-1935, providing the "Black Belt" establish its own Communist nation, separate from the North.[13] Also, the Communists so often rejected black religion and spirituality as a means of organized protest, rarely publishing opinions in favor of churches and God.[14] And since people generally act in their own self interest, most activist groups were as concerned with showing the world they were helping the underprivileged as they were with actually helping them.

Folk music collection from emancipated slaves, rural workers, convicts, and peons began on many fronts: the abolitionist tradition; the regionalist tradition; the left and the NAACP; and the Library of Congress. It had already seen the activism of abolitionists in William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison in the 1860s. Motivated by an authentic desire to unearth some of the fading culture of the old South, in

11 *Papers of the NAACP*, Part 10, "Peonage, Labor, and the New Deal: 1913-1939," eds. John H. Bracy and August Meier, (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1990), Reels 1-23.
12 Mark I. Solomon, *The Cry was Unity: Communists and African-Americans, 1917-36*, (Jackson, Miss.: University of Mississippi, 1998), pp. 52-59.
13 Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*, pp. 68-91.
14 *American Communism and Black Americans*, eds. Foner and Allen, pp. 109-130.

the 1920s, scholars like Howard W. Odum and Newman Ivey White began to universities and the government to fund expeditions of folk preservation. For example, Howard Odum wrote a dissertation, while at Columbia in 1910, on black folk life, and would continue his research more deeply after making his final academic move to the University of North Carolina.[15] During the early 20th century, the federal government was also interested in music collection and preservation. In 1928, the Archive of Folk Culture was established at the Library of Congress, which began the library's repository of American Folk Music.[16] At the same time that blacks and their white allies began to focus on the plight of convicts and peons, the Library of Congress sent folk song collectors to the American South to document the folk music of a vanishing rural America. Though the aim of the government was not necessarily to elucidate the pain of the downtrodden, their suffering would show through as more recordings were made.

Leftist activists sought a means to show that they identified with the oppressed. Often songs bridged this gap. Beginning in 1919, Lawrence Gellert collected a myriad of this music and made some of it available for Northern intellectuals and even published a regular column in the *New Masses*.[17] John and Alan Lomax were sent out by the United States government to collect folk songs of the American South that typified the situation of rural people in the 1930s.[18] During the Great Depression, an effort to provide the poor with jobs brought many workers to the American South via the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to build

15 George Tindall, "The Significance of Howard Odum to Southern History: A Preliminary Estimate," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Aug., 1958), pp. 285-307;
Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard M. Odum's Folklore Odyssey: transformation to tolerance through African American folk studies*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp. 5-17.
16 Paul Angle, *The Library of Congress: an account, historical and descriptive*, (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1958), pp. 53.
17 Lawrence Gellert, "Negro Songs of Protest," *New Masses*, (November, 1930), pp. 10-11;
-----, "Negro Songs of Protest," *New Masses*, (January, 1931), pp. 16-17;
-----, "Negro Songs of Protest," *New Masses*, (April, 1931), pp. 6-8;
-----, "Negro Songs of Protest," *New Masses*, (May, 1932), pp. 22;
-----, "Negro Songs of Protest," *New Masses*, (May, 1933), pp. 15-16.
18 *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, Ronald D. Cohen. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-5.

highways, parks, collect historical information, and even music. This political move renewed an effort at making the improvements that Reconstruction had failed to do. For example, New Dealer Harry Hopkins appealed to the WPA in 1935 on behalf of a no-discrimination clause in the administration of government contracts. This continued to provide jobs to Northern and Southern blacks. Thus, some New Deal administrators sought to use the federal government to help blacks. A spin off of the WPA, the National Youth Administration continued the effort to provide jobs to young blacks and proclaimed itself, "at the forefront of New Deal efforts to insure fair treatment for blacks."[19] Nevertheless, race relations were in shambles and the poor were getting poorer. At this time, both the Communist Party and the NAACP associated the struggle of black convicts with this tangible expression of their strife and protest.

Travelers to the South who sought out black self-expression in the 1920s and 1930s found a deep well to tap. From the trade route to the plantation, whites participating in the enslavement of Africans for hard labor purposes had sought from the beginning to strip blacks of their ability to fight back. Aside from brutalizing them with whips and quarters not fit for wild beasts, there were mentally damaging ways in which ship captains and slave owners prevented black slaves from protesting. During the 18th and 19th century, blacks were prevented from having drums and were not allowed to read for fear that this could instill the spirit of fight in them.[20] These means of expression, communication, and unification were outlawed, and so blacks had to find new means of self-expression that would not be silenced by their masters. Christianity was introduced into African-American religious thought. While influenced by white religion, blacks still maintained a semblance of African religion, with the

19 Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 281.

20 Georgia Writers' Project, Work Projects Administration, *Drums and Shadows: survival studies among Georgia coastal Negroes*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), pp. ix-xxiv.

use of medicine men and a close connection with nature.[21] Then, when slaves would sing during their work, they did not need drums to keep rhythm as they had their hoe or pick, and they would sing many songs imbued with their own brand of spirituality. Despite white slave owners' best efforts to hold blacks back from understanding their situation and rebelling against it, human beings are living thinking creatures with a knack for recognizing when they are being cheated.

Not only was a song a way of communication, it served to make work go faster. There is a famous Nigerian proverb that states, "If the trees are to be cut, you must sing. Without song the bush knife is dull."[22] Essentially song is necessary for work to go fast. Within this work song environment, there would often be a black leader of the songs. This allowed for a hierarchy completely separate from the white slave master. All workers responded to and had their rhythm set by the black song leader.[23]

Examining early slave spirituals reveals the protest, God-consciousness, and sorrow present in the black folk song. Also, Levine writes, "There is no reason to doubt that slaves may have used their songs as a means of secret communication."[24] While masters imposed Christianity upon their slaves, songs spontaneously arose within the community. Despite Christianity's major tenet of Christ being the lord and savior of the world's people, black slaves often took Moses to be their savior in worship and song. Given that Moses was an African that had led the Israelites out of enslavement by the Egyptians and built up a prosperous kingdom despite continual hardship, this seems like a logical selection.[25] Other Old Testament figures fought enslavement as well, including Samson and Jacob. Therefore,

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21 Levine, *Black Culture and Black* Consciousness, pp. 55-80.
22 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 208.
23 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 209-211.
24 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 53.
25 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 50.

there are as many slave spirituals about Old Testament heroes as there are about Jesus Christ. While it is questionable whether or not slaves truly sang the proportion of Christian songs collected by folk collectors, we would suspect that they comprised a large majority of those suitable for white ears.

For white Northern abolitionists who had fought against slavery, these songs became important in the first years of freedom during the 1860s. Abolitionists sought to give a voice to those they helped. In one of the earliest efforts at collecting slave songs – which occurred during the Civil War – William Allen, Charles Ware, and Lucy Garrison trudged through South Carolina and Georgia to collect songs indicative of black culture. Examining the collection of slave spirituals published by Allen, Ware, and Garrison one finds plenty of references to the work of Moses and Jacob including "Wrestle On, Jacob;" "My Army Cross Over;" "Brother Moses Gone;" "Wake Up Jacob;" and "O Daniel."[26] While one could suppose the following lyrics of "O Father, How Long?" describe the woes of sinners on earth, it is clear that slaves singing it wish to be free:

> My Father, how long, My Father, how long,
> My Father, how long poor sinner suffer here?
> And it won't be long, And it won't be long,
> And it won't be long, poor sinner suffer here.[27]

Blacks wished to be free from slavery and would express it in song. The metaphor of a sinner stuck on earth, or an Israelite incarcerated by Egyptians were common in describing the plight of a slave owned by whites.

Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the South was devastated by the loss of slave labor in the Reconstruction years and needed a substitute. Blacks were often displaced from the sharecropping system that most mimicked slavery by railroad tycoon or mine owners

26 William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States*, (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867), pp. 1-2.
27 Allen, Ware, and Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States*, p. 146.

paying off their debts so they could come lay track or mine coal.[28] Following imprisonment, convicts were leased out to plantation owners or did work for state owned plantations. Slavery was recreated in an environment now devoid of the care that white Southerners may have once had for blacks. Before slavery was outlawed, masters felt the need to keep their slaves healthy because they were their property. Under a system where a convict may have only belonged to a farm owner for a year, it mattered little how battered a prisoner was by the end of his service as long as the owner had maximized his labor. Therefore, black convicts were dehumanized through starvation and beatings as the slaves before them had been all in the name of white Southern profit.

Families were difficult to maintain under this system. Although slavery had slighted blacks marrying, there was positive population growth in the American South for which childbirth was responsible, unlike in Caribbean countries.[29] Though families may not have existed in the same way that upper class white families existed, there were monogamous unions and offspring that resulted from black-black sexual relations. However, in the post-emancipation forced labor systems this was not the case. Black men were picked up off of the streets and countryside in their late teens and early twenties and sent to an environment where other black males lived under the domineering presence of white male oppressors.[30] As a result, the music developed under these conditions was not as focused on familial concepts of salvation and the love and care of a supernatural father. Also, there were fewer prayer houses than there had been in slavery or sharecropping. Captains and bosses did not preach Christian subservience to blacks as slave-masters had. More secular songs developed.

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28 Daniel, *Shadow of Slavery*, pp. ; Perkinson, *Birth of the Texas Prison Empire*, pp. ;
Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*, (New York: Verso, 1996), pp.

29 Robert Conrad, *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 55-110;
Dale W. Tomich, *Through the prism of slavery: labor, capital, and world economy*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 79-93, 147-151.

30 Perkinson, *Birth of the Texas Prison Empire*, pp. 98-108.

We can delineate several themes apparent in the secular songs of the black convict. First there is the ballad theme that uplifts a famous black man as a hero that is known for fighting authority or even just breaking the laws of the white man. Second, collective protest is the theme that emphasizes shared struggle of all convict laborers who seek retribution for the wrongs done to them. They were often voiced directly to the captain or boss. Third, self-pity songs present a theme of mourning for the bad state of affairs in which a convict must reside. They usually do not offer much of a solution or direct a complaint at any particular person but bemoan the sad state the singer is in. Fourth, sexuality songs sung about love, lust, and everything in between. Fifth, the traditional spiritual still appeared in work songs. Rather than being the voice of a religious slave, they were now sung by an institutionalized worker.[31] We will begin with a discussion of the ballad.

He would steal from his boss; he shot men in the back; and he spoke out against authority. The prototypical resilient black man was a departure from the piety of Moses and Christ to a more worldly man that fought physically rather than spiritually. Though not all men of ballads were evil, this more secular savior always fought authority. Black man ballads advanced the theme of the hero in black song; this was the protest of an individual willing to stand up to authority. Stagolee was made famous in the convict song of the same name for shooting his black nemesis in the back in a bar in the back country and then fleeing the scene of the crime.[32] Despite the song being about a criminal that had killed one of his own race, it became to convict laborers anyone who would defeat an enemy, for example the shack bully who roused convicts with a shotgun to get them out of bed in the morning.[33] The following is a version collected by Howard Odum from a convict in Georgia in 1911:

31 Howard W. Odum, "Folk Song and Folk Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes (Concluded)," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 24, No. 94 (Oct.-Dec., 1911), pp. 378-393;
Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest [sound recording]*, (New York: American Music League, 1936).
32 Cecil Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy*, (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 21-25.
33 Brown, *Stagolee Shot Billy*, p. 128.

I got up one mornin' jes 'bout four o'clock;
Stagolee an' big Bully done have one finish' fight:
What 'bout? All 'bout dat raw hide Stetson hat.

Stagoleee shot Bully; Bully fell down on de flo',
Bully cry out: 'Dat fohty-fo' hurts me so.'
Stagolee done killed dat Bully now.

Sent for de wagon, wagon didn't come,
Loaded down wid pistols an' all dat gatlin' gun,
Stagolee done kill dat Bully now.

Some giv' a nickel, some giv' a dime,
I didn't give a red copper cent, cause he's no friend o' mine,
Stagolee done kill dat Bully now.

Carried po' Bully to cemetery, people standin' round,
When preacher say Amen, lay po' body down,
Stagolee done kill dat Bully now.

Fohty dollah coffin, eighty dollah hack,
Carried po' man to cemetery but failed to bring him back,
Ev'y body been dodging' Stagolee.[34]

Creating songs that are odes to black heroes, convicts created a world in which they could physically fight back, which was influential in formulating a spirit and ideal of protest. Poor Lazarus, despite his deprecating name, stole from his boss' commissary and fled a prison plantation to escape the bondage under which he had been placed.[35] Ballads did not have to be about men who had broken the law; they could very well describe a man who had simply spoken out against authority. John Henry was given superhuman strength that manifested itself through the phallic symbol of a large hammer. He was so strong that rather than using dynamite to dig a tunnel through a mountain, he used his hammer and his brute strength to burrow a hole to build a train track through.[36] Despite the retorts of his boss he pursued this ironic rebellion to death. Ballads could be sung by single men or large groups during the

34 Howard W. Odum, "Folk Song and Folk Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 24, No. 94 (Oct.-Dec., 1911), pp. 255-294.
35 Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson. *Negro Workaday Songs*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), pp. 47-50.
36 Louis Chappell, *John Henry*, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968), pp. 61-79

course of daily work. Though they did not make the work any easier, these songs gave hope to laborers that their protest could change the system as these colloquial heroes had.

Much as slaves upon a plantation had sought to speed along the work day and speak out against their masters through song, so too did convicts. Chain gangs could keep time with the clang of a hammer upon a track line, or the sound of a rock pick upon stone, the pluck of prickly cotton tufts off a plant, or the crunch of a hoe into hard dirt. Each beat would coincide with some action of their work. Although this, in a sense, enslaved their rhythms to their work, it turned the tables by offering their work in the spirit of protest. Their songs were often in the vein of collective protest. While chants would often focus on some black hero, many chain gang songs focused on the work at hand and how laborers despised it as this song from the Gellert collection denotes:

> Cap'n don' you think I
> ever gets tired
> cap'n don't you think I
> think I ever gets tired
> if drivin' steel lawd
> tired of drivin' steel
>
> I been adrivin'
> Drivin' six months or longer
> I been adrivin'
> Drivin' six months or longer
> Done get tired, lawd,
> I done get tired….[37]

Sung by a railroad worker driving steel ties into track lining, this song clearly elicits the spirit of protest and the idea that he wishes to work no longer. Beyond this, this is a man tired of the oppression under which he must live. As represented in the cover art of Lawrence Gellert's seminal sampling, *Negro Songs of Protest* (1937), (see **Figure 1**) this drawing by brother Hugo Gellert shows the black convict as a symbol of black oppression at large in the

37 Lawrence Gellert papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Box 1, "Song Lyrics," Folder 3, p. 49.

America.[38]

Figure 1: Hugo Gellert's illustration of a weary black convict resting in the midst of his work. Note the ball and chain as well as his muscular features signifying strength.
<http://www.wirz.de/music/gellefrm.htm>

On the other hand, not all songs advocated protest. In opposition to theories of a progressive, forward thinking protest song, we see the appearance of a self-pity song that may have exaggerated the emotions of defeat collected by the likes of early white folklorists like Lomax, Odum, and White. However, there is an apparent sorrow in this type of song in which less hope lies than the ballad or protest song. Take for example "Early in the Morning" collected by Odum:

> Well, I woke up this mornin' – couldn't keep from cryin',
> For thinkin' about – that babe o' mine.
>
> Well, I woke up this mornin' – grindin' on my mind,
> Goin' to grind, honey, -- if I go stone blind.[39]

He sings a sad song of no hope. These tended to be the songs many early folk collectors

38 Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest [sound recording]*.
39 Odum, "Folk Song and Folk Poetry (Concluded)," p. 381.

would emphasize in their studies of black American folk song, as we will see in Chapter 2.

While often linked to self-pity, songs about sexuality could be happy in addition to being sad. Of course, if one lived in an all male environment there was little room for sharing love with the opposite sex. As a result, many songs developed which protested the forced separation between a laborer and "his" woman:

> Ahm gwine 'way baby
> Just to worry off mah min'
> 'Cause boss treat me low an' dirty
> Worry me all de ime
>
> Ahm gwine 'way baby
> Cryin' won' make me stay
> De mo' you cry baby
> De further you drive me 'way
>
> Boss man tol' me
> Ah has to leave dis town
> Ef ah don' git any further
> He break mah backbone tryin'[40]

In addition to physical imprisonment, the sexual drive of laborers was imprisoned by the call of work that forced them to leave their loved ones.

Finally, the spiritual resurged with new meaning in convict songs. For, in fact, slaves had been freed by law, but the loophole of the Thirteenth Amendment had allowed former slave masters to reclaim labor in the name of justice. Mixed in with social commentary about poverty and unfair criminal justice, an example of this spiritual is employed by Odum in his 1911 essay as a show of humor. Beneath this thin skin of humor, however, is a sorrowful state of affairs for the black in the American South:

> …Two barrels apples, three barrels cheese,
> When I git to heaven, goin' shout on my knees,
> Shout to glory, Lord, you shall be free.
>
> With the crocus sack you shall be free
> With the crocus sack you shall be free,
> Shout to glory, Lord, you shall be free,
> *When de good Lord set you free!*

40 Gellert papers, Box 1, "Song Lyrics," Folder 2, p. 89.

A nigger went up town actin' a hoss,
De jedge he found him ten an' cost,
Shout, mourner, you shall be free,
When de good Lord shall set you free![41]

Despite a spiritual theme present in this song, there does not appear the solemnity and authenticity once apparent in the way Allen, Ware, and Garrison had presented the Negro spiritual. The realism is clear in that the Lord is sung about so haphazardly as to imply that faith has been lost in prayer and song with no action.

African American forced labor songs utilized one or more of these themes of the ballad, protest, self-pity, sexuality, or the spiritual. Ultimately, the songs expressed a message whether the singer intended it or not. We could further subdivide these themes – for example splitting ballads into those about men like Stagolee that actually broke the law and those that retorted against authority – but the message is similar in each of these categorical themes. Ballads hailed men that struck out against authority, usually white, that were uplifted as heroes. Protest songs spoke out against the conditions under which the black oppressed lived and sometimes even proposed change, non-violent or otherwise. Self-pity songs sorrowfully portrayed the downtrodden condition of the black man and often ended in hopelessness. Sexuality songs sung of emotional and physical love of which the black male laborer had been deprived. Finally, spirituals praised God and claimed He was the answer to problems, but with a twinge of humor they were not always convincing.

There is a substantive collection of existing literature that categorizes black labor songs and analyzes their impact in the 20th century. Lawrence Levine, in his text *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, focused on the role of this music in portraying and redefining black identity, but he does not address the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Bruce Harrah-

41 Odum. "Folk Song and Folk Poetry (Concluded)," p. 371.

Conforth, in his 1984 Master's Thesis review of Lawrence Gellert's work entitled *Laughing Just to Keep from Crying* proclaims Gellert as the original folk collector that focused on a protest theme.[42] Harrah-Conforth sticks mainly to the impact of songs in the 1930s, however, and does not follow their role through to the 1960s. Black poet and folklorist, Sterling Brown, in an essay on folk literature, described black work songs as professing bitterness that had existed in slave songs, but came to light more obviously through its collection than slave songs had provided.[43] Alan Lomax spent many years in the field, and as an academic, he spent many years writing about his experiences. Though never quite explicit about the protest present in black folk songs, he did write much about how their plight was well exposed in their song.[44] Writers and reviewers in the realm of black folk song have been influential from the moment they started collecting this music. They recognize one of the only avenues the American public formerly used to view the opinions of black laborers was through presentation of folk songs, in whatever form they were provided. Without writers and reviewers, this music would have remained hidden for the most part. To carefully address the question of what impact the songs of forced black laborers have had on society, we must analyze not only the music itself, but its collectors' opinions and presentations of the material they have collected.

Ultimately, a rich musical tradition grew out of a people horribly oppressed from day one in America. From their forced migration to the shadow of slavery that still looms today blacks have never received treatment equal to whites. Black expression and identity has long been tied to the songs that resulted from these different environments of subservience. For a people that were long illiterate, the best mode of recording history was to compose a song about it. During and prior to Emancipation in the 1850s and 1860s, abolitionists were

42 Bruce Harrah-Conforth, *Laughing Just to Keep from Crying: Afro-American Folksong and the Field Recordings of Lawrence Gellert*, Master's Thesis, Indiana University, 1984.
43 Sterling Brown, "Negro Folk Expression: Seculars, Spirituals, Ballads, and Work Songs," *A Son's Return*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), pp. 243-264.
44 *Alan Lomax: Select Writings, 1934-1997*, pp. 69-76.

interested in preserving and presenting the art form of slave songs for the people of America to hear the voice of the downtrodden. Regionalist collectors like Howard W. Odum, Newman Ivey White, and Howard Courlander recognized black expression in folk song, but often misinterpreted it. Lawrence Gellert and the Lomaxes, who cooperated heavily with the Library of Congress, were the first to provide recordings of black folk music to the American public. Left activists of the 1920s and 1930s had similar intentions, but not all gave accurate uplifting descriptions of the performers they recorded. Of course the CP and NAACP had their own interests in mind when they utilized this art form for political activism. Meaning in music is always open to interpretation, but it can be used for good if offered in the right light. We now turn to folk collectors to see how their motives influenced their ultimate conceptualization and presentation of the black labor songs they collected.