

Framing the Black Atlantic: Slave Music to Modern Rap

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Introduction

When thinking of songs which refer to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, many today may think of more modern musical interpretations. Tupac Shakur and Kanye West are only two examples from a plethora of African American musicians whose music harkens back to the chained past of their ancestors through cunning lyrical talents. However, before the 21st century there are fewer instances of African American music that refer to the past.

One song, created by a small R & B group, in 1973 stands out: “Ship Ahoy” by the O’Jays. The song opens with the sound of a creaking ship and emits the feeling of being on board a wooden ocean vessel. With gospel notes and what sounds like a violin playing heart wrenching sounds, the song makes the listener feel as if they are themselves the cargo of a vessel coming from Africa across the Atlantic to the Americas. The first verse is incredibly poignant:

*As far as your eye can see,
Men, women, and baby slaves
Coming to the land of Liberty,
Where life’s design is already made
So young and so strong
They’re just waiting to be saved¹*

This song is an important reminder of the impact that the slave trade had on African American music. It demonstrates one of the first instances where lyricists that were producing for a white audience finally broke a taboo. Songs like “Ship Ahoy” were important reminders in times like the 60s and 70s where social movements were rampant. Songs like those written by the O’Jays are the remaining legacy of the Black Atlantic and demonstrate the lasting cultural ramifications. The Atlantic slave trade forced a cultural and social group to emerge that was new to the Americas. “Ship Ahoy” demonstrates many aspects of the Black Atlantic that rolled forward into modern

¹ The O’Jays, “Ship Ahoy,” *Ship Ahoy*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 1958, Track Two, Genius Music, <https://genius.com/The-ojays-ship-ahoy-lyrics>.

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society. Its emphasis on the size of masses that arrived in the Americas is rarely seen in music other than historical slave songs:

*They're coming by the hundreds
Coming by the thousands, too
Look over the horizon, see the sun
Shining down on you*²

By looking at songs such as 'Ship Ahoy', this paper will analyze the effects of the Black Atlantic on Music created by descendants of the slave trade. It will also look at the African songs that followed the slaves to their new lives on plantations. As well, there will be a discussion of the sea songs that were sung by sailors, who were a main key for knowledge transfer in the Atlantic at that time. When looking at the music that comes from sailors, this paper will seek to illustrate the importance part that sailors played in weaving the cultural fabric of the Atlantic.

These slave songs from the past will reveal the cultural net the Black Atlantic had become. The Black Atlantic was not just a body of water connecting landmasses, but it was also a mesh connecting a plethora of ethnic groups and social strata. The culture that emerged within plantation life was a product of the Atlantic trade. The Atlantic Ocean was a place of equality when on the seas, all ethnicities meshing, however it was also a place of violent upheaval and the birthplace of the African slave trade.

This paper will assert that the music that came from the experiences of Africans stolen from their homeland lent to the creation of a unique Black American culture. Along with this, the music demonstrates the unique mesh that was the Black Atlantic and the cultural trade that occurred within it, to create new unique subcultures.

Keywords

Trans-Atlantic slave trade, music, African American musicians, rap

Music Across the Atlantic: Sea Shanties

When looking at music in the Atlantic, interpretations can be very ambiguous. Similar to when one uses poetry as a primary source, lyrics can be interpreted in different ways, especially with songs written by slaves which were often small in verse length and rhythmically repetitive. Moreover, words can be shaped to fit one's own ends and not necessarily accurately reflect historical context.

With this said, the music within the Atlantic is still a useful source for unpacking the impacts of the Black Atlantic. The music found in the Atlantic is similar in many ways; much of the music that arises from it is purely vocal with no background instrument. Sea shanties are a prime example of this. The music sung by sailors

² The O'Jays, "Ship Ahoy," *Ship Ahoy*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 1958, Track Two, Genius Music, <https://genius.com/The-ojays-ship-ahoy-lyrics>.

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occurred within the centre of the Atlantic space. Sea shanties are easily comparable with the music that came from the slave colonies. Sea shanties often have to do with returning home to a loved one, finding a port near by, or sometimes the beauty and love they have for the sea.

There are multiple threads that connect the two types of musicality. One comparable aspect is that they are often call and response. When a song was sung on ocean one sailor would take the lead by singing the main lyrics and the rest of the crew would come in chorus after them.³ There are subtle differences between the songs sung above deck, and the songs later created by those below in the cargo decks. Sea shanties were often fully memorized by all crew, as they was repeated every time the song was sung.⁴ However, the leader would often improvise his own lyrics as he sang, bringing forth his own emotion and energy forward.

The leaders were often renowned for their musical abilities. John Nicol was a mariner who often found his way to America with his fellow sailors. He recounted one instance of his fellow companion singing in Hawaii with other comrades:

We had a merry facetious fellow on board called Dickson. He sung pretty well. He squinted and the natives mimicked him. Abenoue, King of Atooi, could cock his eye like Dickson better than any of his subjects. Abenoue called him Billicany, from his often singing 'Rule Britannia'. Abenoue learned the air and the words as near as he could pronounce them. It was an amusing thing to hear the king and Dickson sing. Abenoue loved him better than any man in the ship, and always embraced him every time they met on shore or in the ship, and began to sing, 'Tule Billicany Billicany Tule,' etc.⁵

Song and musicality was a way of bonding between nations on the Atlantic through an interconnected musical understanding. All cultures have a musical history, and Dickson in this instance demonstrates the sailor's ability to use music as a form of connection between nations. This sort of contact with other cultures is a prime example of how the Atlantic transferred knowledge. The sailors and boats that arrived on new lands did not just bring resources for trade, but also traded knowledge they unknowingly brought with them. Even the simplest of interactions, like singing together, could transfer profound amounts of intellectual data, both good and bad. In this instance the interaction was purely positive, with music being a common thread. It is important to note that these positive interactions were not the majority, and that the Atlantic was not

³ Gibb Schreffler, *Boxing the Compass: A Century and a Half of Discourse about Sailor's Chanties* (Lansdale, PA: CAMSCO Music, 2018), 45-47.

⁴ Gibb Schreffler, *Boxing the Compass: A Century and a Half of Discourse about Sailor's Chanties* (Lansdale, PA: CAMSCO Music, 2018), 45-47.

⁵ Nicol, John, *The Life and Adventures of John Nicol, Mariner*, edited by Tim Flannery, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997, page 83.

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always so peaceful. These interactions do divulge the nature of the Atlantic, and how the sailors were a medium for cultural trade.

Specific songs that were common within brigadiers reveal important information about the lifestyles of the men that lived within the waters of the Atlantic. “Homeward Bound” was a commonly sung shanty when the men were returning home to port. The following verse was sung by the leader and was often shaped to his own liking:

*From Liverpool docks we bid adieu, To Suke, and Sal,
and Kittie too, the anchor's weighed and the sails unfurl,
We're bound to cross the watery row*⁶

After the leader would sing the previous lyrics, his companions would return with a call of chorus: “For we know we're outward bound, Hurrah, we're outward bound.”⁷ These sea shanties reveal aspects about the lifestyles of sailors on the Atlantic.⁸ Sailor lifestyle is a subculture of its own, existing within the emerging trade with new cultures. Sailors were the historical adventurous, struck against a backdrop of the ocean, slavery, piracy, and the treasures of new lands. They emerged not wholly dissimilar to the cultures that arose in the colonies, and in slave communities.

There is, however, a difficulty in comparing both sailors and slaves. The majority of sailors came across the Atlantic as low-level members of the crew. This often times left them with little money to send home to their families and felt the abuses of their captains. Many sailors felt the pressure to join in with pirate brigades which promises them free will and a search for success and the possibility of adventure. However, even the sailors that were feeling the strain of sea life still had opportunities to leave the brigadier life and return home. This contrasts the life of a slave, who came as cargo.

Nevertheless, the music of both of these groups is strikingly similar in nature. It can be postulated that this is in part due to the conditions each group was under in the Atlantic sphere. The music created by the Atlantic sailors were songs that would predominantly be sung during work, similar to the songs of the slaves working on plantations.⁹ This is due to the fact that both groups worked long hours in the day. Both communities of sailors and the communities of slaves revolved around a workday. Slaves were bound to their masters and work, while sailors were land locked to their boats and captain.

There are, of course, unique difference between these two versions of work songs. Often the songs of slave workers were used to coordinate the end of day, or lunch times. A specific song would thus signal that the slaves could return to their

⁶ Andrew Draskoy, “Homeward Bound,” Sea Shanties, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://shanty.rendance.org/lyrics/showlyric.php/homeward>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gibb Schreffler, *Boxing the Compass: A Century and a Half of Discourse about Sailor's Chanties* (Lansdale, PA: CAMSCO Music, 2018), 45-47.

⁹ William M Doerflinger, *Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman* (Meyerbooks Publishers, 1990), 1-5.

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homes. For sailors, their songs were often used to coordinate their movement during arduous tasks. Sailing was not an easy task, and many parts of a sailor's daily life were a threat to their person. Weighing anchor is a prime example of this; the sailors would have to coordinate the movement of the anchor. This type of work had to all be done without any extra tools other than their hands. To combat disaster, the sailors would make song like sounds to determine when to move their hands and heave the anchor in or out.¹⁰

Often, slave songs were also used to coordinate a rhythm of work, whether at the end of the workday or the beginning. This contrasts with sailors who also used this sort of song like coordination during monotonous tasks, for example, hauling the bowlines. While coordinating the haul, they would sing tune like grunts that allowed them to stay in rhythm.¹¹ Though music and grunts are not equivalent, these grunts were performed in a way that elicits a rhythmic tune to help aid in their task.

Sea shanties were the epitome of Atlantic music. They existed in the centre of the Atlantic network. They demonstrate the culture of those that lived on the strands that connected each continent in the Atlantic sphere. As one conceptualizes the Black Atlantic, it is important to think of these cultures as a product of their surroundings. Trade is a historical way of communication and amicable understanding. The men that sailed these trade vessels are a perfect place to look while analyzing the Atlantic. The sailors were in contact with a large array of cultures and presented the opportunity for the Black Atlantic to create subcultures. Before one can move onto the songs that are integral within slave life, one must first look at the homeland of the slave trade, Africa, and the cultural trade that occurred within it.

Music Across the Atlantic: African Music

All the historical music that had its birthplace in the Atlantic had similar themes and produced an interesting spectrum of information. The Atlantic space was a vector of knowledge that shaped the cultures that lived within it. In the analysis of sea shanties, it is apparent that their life on the sea, and their contact with new societies affected their own understandings. Sea shanties, however, were not the only music on the Atlantic that shaped the slave songs that emerged. Sea shanties and traditional African music both impacted the songs that developed within plantation life.

The impact of African music on slave songs are blatant when one looks at the basic structure of traditional slave songs. Thus, African music is integral in understanding slave music as slaves in the Americas came from different parts of Africa. At the time of cultural mixing within the Atlantic there were two distinct types of African music. One was the traditional tribal music, and the other was the music created for Europeans by Africans. There are many examples of Africans who managed to

¹⁰ William Falconer, *Universal Dictionary of the Marine* (S.I.: Outlook Verlag, 2020), 338.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 491.

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adapt to the musical standards of the Europeans, though such stories are often excluded from historical interpretations.

A key example of an African artist who learned European music was Ignatius Sancho. Ignatius Sancho was born in Africa but eventually moved to England to seek a better life. When there, he fully embraced his musical talents and interpreted them to the European conventions.¹² His main form of musical prowess was composing music for symphonies. The music of black artists in England were greatly affected by the Atlantic. Many of the black individuals arriving were from colonized areas of Africa, or former slaves that had escaped to Britain.¹³ Their music was shaped by their experiences on the Atlantic Ocean, and they had learned to adapt to the white way of life.

Ignatius Sancho was a key individual in breaking headway for black artists in the Atlantic. He was an individual who used his experiences to create popular music in a white dominated culture. Sancho's music compositions were interesting as they took influence from common British writers.¹⁴ He had the knowledge to relate to white ideals and thus used famous writers to aid in his compositions. In his music, he particularly enjoyed relating back to Shakespeare, who he used as influence on multiple occasions.¹⁵

In his early life in England, Sancho was a servant for a Duke and so his influences were not perhaps somewhat less traumatic than those who had once been slaves.¹⁶ This made his appetite for the validity of white society more palatable. Many people who escaped the slave trade felt anger towards their white counterparts. Instead of this, Sancho used his skills as a composer to make a place for himself in white society.¹⁷ His music is thus unique in that it takes mainly from British influence.

Many white individuals saw Africans as some sort of different species, and thus dubbed them as lesser.¹⁸ There was a myth of the "African genius", which was a black individual who was on the same level as the white men. It was Sancho that was dubbed the "African genius" that so many white men thought was just a myth.¹⁹ Many white individuals believed that only white men were capable of being great composers, Sancho proved them wrong. The music that Sancho participated in was European of distant and he demonstrates the movement from cultural music to popular music.

¹² Josephine Wright, "Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), African Composer in England," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 2 (1979): pp. 132-167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1214319>, 134.

¹³ Ibid, 132.

¹⁴ Josephine Wright, "Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), African Composer in England," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 2 (1979): pp. 132-167, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1214319>, 137.

¹⁵ Ibid, 137.

¹⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹⁷ Ibid, 137.

¹⁸ Ibid, 134.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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Sancho used the Atlantic to his advantage and became a key member of the European musical scene. Through the study of Africans like Sancho, one can see the exchange of ideas, musical culture, and even people from Africa to the European scene.

European musical concepts slipped their way into African tribal music as well, not just into the music of the newly emerging African populations in England. As stated, African tribal music had the most profound effect on slave songs, but African music has changed drastically throughout its history. Music constantly changes due to politics, changing taste, and changing ideas within a community. African music has had one key influence implanted in it; like most black music there had been a profound mixing between their native cultures and the often-forced assimilation into white colonized culture.²⁰

The Atlantic's ability to transfer knowledge created an interesting spectrum of music within Africa. With shifting ideas of instruments, and even lyrics. With colonization of Africa, came the movement of new technologies into the continent. When thinking of technologies, one rarely thinks of instruments as a new idea. However, when Europeans came to Africa, there were often individuals who brought instruments with them. Bugles had been the first instrument from white culture with which African tribes had come in contact.²¹ Most colonization missions to Africa contained buglers as part of their troop. Similar to most historical military endeavours, music played a large part in conquest. Music was a sign of arrival, and the bugler would announce the arrival to those being colonized.²²

The brass tone of the bugle was a strange noise to African populations, who had no instrument similar to it, but this new musical sound was only the beginning of profound change for folk music. African tribes had also never heard the sound of a violin before. Violins or fiddles were brought by men arriving with missionary groups, or sailors and, in time, began to find a place within African music, though they did not always appear in the same sort of form as the traditional violin.²³

Tube-fiddles were invented by the African people as a crude version of what the Europeans had brought with them. A violin and fiddle both have four strings whereas a tube-fiddle was often made with only one or two strings of fiber. Along with this, instead of having the same type of body as a violin, the sound box was made of whatever was at hand to help with sound resonance.²⁴ This fusion of ideas and technologies shows the way in which the Black Atlantic impressions itself on those within it. Each society took away something new from each interaction.

²⁰ Klaus Wachsmann, "A Century of Change in the Folk Music of an African Tribe," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 10 (1958): 52–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/835975>, 52.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Klaus Wachsmann, "A Century of Change in the Folk Music of an African Tribe," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 10 (1958): 52–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/835975>, 53.

²⁴ Ibid.

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Notably, African music had long had intricate instruments before contact with white Europeans. In specific, tribes used a type of stringed instrument that was used to make a sound that would be similar to a violin. After the contact with white musical instruments, these old African musical instruments took on new shapes and they now mixed with the new musical instruments.²⁵ This fusion of ideas is very blatant at early colonization. There was not a sudden change within African society, but a more subtle one which led to more drastic change. This fusion is evident in the music of the slaves that were transported to the Americas.²⁶ The Atlantic allowed for a fusion to embed itself within many subcultures; and in Africa this was a fusion of old folk music ideas, mixing with the new music of the white conquerors.

The Atlantic was in essence a force of change. It created a space in which economies flourished and created a plethora of bounty for the empires that took control over it. The effects of the Black Atlantic shaped not only the music of the far past, but it also shaped more modern music. The societies of the Atlantic were all effected by the trade of resources and ideas that flowed within the space. This exchange continued to shape modern thinking and while looking at the continent of Africa, their music still continues to shift to this day.

African folk music has been shaped in the modern day by the immense shifts of the Atlantic superpowers. Historically, there were two strikingly different groups that sought to cling to the traditional music that was present when Europeans arrived, namely tribal communities and a newly emerging youth culture.²⁷ The tribal communities never forgot the past history that they had with folk music.

The youth on the other hand were reinvesting in their history. During this time, the African educational system began to bring out programs to engage the youth in traditional African music. The educational board attempted to do two things in their programs:

1. To encourage Folk Music Concerts in schools both as campfire recreation and for public occasions of a more formal kind.
2. To organize African Folk Music Festivals. These should be run on a regional basis so as to save big transport costs. They could include entries from villages, from youth clubs and from schools; and also, solo performances.²⁸

These were attempts to reemphasize the cultural perspectives of the Black Atlantic that were subdued by the Europeans. Through the use of music, it is apparent that the Atlantic created a vector of not only knowledge, but also perhaps pressure on

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 56.

²⁷ A. M. Jones, "Folk Music in Africa," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 5 (1953): p. 36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836146>, 36.

²⁸ Ibid, 38.

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the cultures of Africa to musically assimilate into European ideals. Thus, folk music began to turn towards European stylization. When gaining autonomy from European colonizers, Africa began to put measures in to rejuvenate their past cultures. Again, this shows direct relationship between music and the trade occurring within the Black Atlantic.

Though Africans began to put in measures to reinstate old folk music, they were still profoundly changed by the trade that had brought new ideas to their cultural practices. The same assimilation of ideas can be seen within the slave communities. Slaves incorporated a plethora of different cultures into their own songs, but arguably no influence was greater than the one found while sailing across the Atlantic.

Slave Songs

William Dickson was originally from Scotland but moved to the West Indies to become the Secretary to the Governor of Barbados in 1772. He would hold this position for thirteen years and while there, he took note of how horrific slavery was and the brutality that the slaves endured.²⁹ Dickson saw the horrendous lifestyles that those who were in bounds had to endure. He witnessed the torturous work that they did everyday and also their emergent culture. At the end of his time as secretary he joined the abolitionist movement and would end up being a force against slavery.³⁰

During his time in the West Indies and Barbados he documented a plethora of information about slave lifestyle. Among his documents were a few slave songs that he had managed to hear while touring a plantation. There is one particular song documented by Dickson that he left unnamed. While many of his notes were handwritten and difficult to ascertain they do mention a song was meant to be sung as a group.³¹ One person would take the lead while the others would come in as a chorus at the end. This song can be seen as a darker shadow of the songs found in sailor life.

The Atlantic shaped the songs of the slaves, but their songs primary inspiration was their torturous lives. From Dickenson's notes were learn that the song is only two verses long and each verse repeats four times: "Massa buy me he won't kill me".³² While analyzing this text from a historical perspective the first thing that stands out is the word massa. This is not a word that is commonly found in modern vocabulary. Massa was a common word among slave colonies and was a word they used for master. This is an example of a unique dialectic difference that occurred in many slaves' language

²⁹ William Dickenson, "An African Work Song, Barbados, Ca. 1770s-1780s," An African work song, Barbados, ca. 1770s-1780s · Slavery Images, 1772, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1002>.

³⁰ William Dickenson, "An African Work Song, Barbados, Ca. 1770s-1780s," An African work song, Barbados, ca. 1770s-1780s · Slavery Images, 1772, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1002>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

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and can be found in American slave colonies as well. These language differences are also a product of the cultural transference that was occurring in the Atlantic.³³

Music is an arguably critical method in which one can analyze the language of a select group of people. Language differences, especially when songs are not in the native tongue of those singing it, can demonstrate the new cultural transference that is occurring.

Contemporary “Black language” or vernacular evolved from the slave trade, as well. Slavery created the conditions that only if one fully submitted to it, could they survive.³⁴ This survival was only allowed if the individual disposed their self respect. Thus, black language that was taught to slaves is a language of demoralization.³⁵ The English language was taught to the black slaves by non native English speakers, thus demoralizing the slave further.³⁶ Giving them broken English only made them seem smaller in status. This historical act of creating a set of conditions in which the slave had no way to recover their language ability allowed for the subjugation to continue.³⁷

The Atlantic space is intriguing in how it created the pretexts for both economic growth, and human subjugation. The slave music shows the intricacies of the language that was in essence created by slave masters. Along with the presence of the word ‘massa,’ this aforementioned song also reveals the torment that came from master and slave relationships. The second verse goes on with this theme of fear; “for I live with a bad man oh la”.³⁸ This song was usually sung while working and is a plea from the slaves to be bought by a more benevolent master. The slaves singing in the song are owned by a “bad man” or bad master and thus pleading for a new master to purchase them.

Historically, slaves were under full control of their master, with no autonomy whatsoever. Masters were able to maim, sexually assault, or kill their slaves without penalty.³⁹ While common law was brought over at the onset of colonization, the new world was under the old order which had not created precautions to check the

³³ J. Mitchell Morse, “The Shuffling Speech of Slavery: Black English,” *College English* 34, no. 6 (1973): 839, <https://doi.org/10.2307/375045>.

³⁴ J. Mitchell Morse, “The Shuffling Speech of Slavery: Black English,” *College English* 34, no. 6 (1973): 839, <https://doi.org/10.2307/375045>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid* 840.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ William Dickenson, “An African Work Song, Barbados, Ca. 1770s-1780s,” An African work song, Barbados, ca. 1770s-1780s · Slavery Images, 1772, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1002>.

³⁹ Andrew Fede, “Legitimized Violent Slave Abuse in the American South, 1619-1865: A Case Study of Law and Social Change in Six Southern States,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 29, no. 2 (1985): 93–150 <https://doi.org/10.2307/844931>, 94

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relationship between slaves and masters.⁴⁰ Slaves were referred to as “chattels personal” meaning they were property in every way. They were treated in the most inhumane ways, as they were bartered with, sold, and even given away at lottery.⁴¹

These short lyrics written down by Dickenson give historical context to the slave life. The Atlantic created the conditions for the slave trade to fully flourish within the new world. It gave the opportunity for slaves to intermingle with other cultures, and thus the opportunity for non-English speakers to be chosen by masters as linguistic teachers. These conditions facilitated by the Atlantic demonstrate how it was both a space of good and evil endeavors, all brought together through its network or trade.

Slave music took on the form of folk music. It was attempting to take on the traditions of its predecessors from Africa.⁴² Music was the one outlet that was allowed to slaves under the control of their masters, thus their communities thrived on it.⁴³ They had to adapt under some stressed conditions, meaning that slave songs ended up being unique. They were unique, as their only instrument was their voice. With only their voices as instruments, they had to adapt to using patterns and multiple people to create different levels of musicality.

Some songs were in the form of call and response, where one lead slave would sing one verse and the rest of the group would sing in response to the verse. This would either be in repetition, or in some instances it was a direct response to their lyric.⁴⁴ Some songs were meant to be sung in repetition, and others needed larger groups. This unique way of singing developed from their enslavement yet pulled from traditional songs typical to Africa. Though slave songs are folk in nature, they have a few particular differences that emphasize the historical facets which make them different from traditional African folk music.

Slave music has an absence of drums or other musical instruments which, as discussed, is traditionally used in tribal music.⁴⁵ These differences come from the nature of plantation life for those enslaved. Slaves' lives were under the whim of their masters, not just during the workday. They had little opportunity to gain possessions of their own as they had no monetary income, their person was property and thus they obtained no wage. Musical instruments, if used, were made out of scraps, or were old versions of European instruments, similar to those used by early African musicians.⁴⁶ Instruments,

⁴⁰ Andrew Fede, “Legitimized Violent Slave Abuse in the American South, 1619-1865: A Case Study of Law and Social Change in Six Southern States,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 29, no. 2 (1985): 93–150 <https://doi.org/10.2307/844931>, 94

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴² Cimbala, Paul A. “Black Musicians from Slavery to Freedom.” *The Journal of Negro History* 80, no. 1 (1995): 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717704>, 15-16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-22.

⁴⁵ A. M. Jones, “Folk Music in Africa,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 5 (1953): p. 36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836146>, 36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

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as seen with African tribal groups were a significant part of cultural trade. Though many of the instruments transformed into new versions of the traditional instruments, they shaped the way in which music was created.

The life of a slave on a plantation can only be characterized by two things, monotonous, and abusive. Life was continuously miserable, and solace was only had during social times. A slave from the West Indies named Mary Prince gave her firsthand account of life as a slave. Her words rang from her own truth that “[she had] been a slave, [she had] felt what a slave feels and [she knew] what a slave knows ... hear from a slave what a slave has felt and suffered.”⁴⁷ With this oppressed lifestyle, a unique culture emerged from the slaves shipped across the Atlantic to plantations. Song became a way of communication for slaves working on the fields. The slave songs that came from this oppressed culture revolve around religion, work, and only rarely had to do with leisure activities.

Religion in particular played a key role for slaves. There is a paradox between religion and slavery. Christians saw slaves as having souls, yet they were not seen as people.⁴⁸ Masters were not allowed to absolve their slaves of the opportunity to save their souls. Their work had to be honoured with time spent in their religious life.⁴⁹ The Christian creed brought through the Atlantic trade, labeled the slaves as the poor that were written about in the bible. Thus, Christianity took a hold in slave communities and allowed for them a moment of respite.⁵⁰

The break that religion allowed made the suffering less demeaning if their souls were saved for the afterlife. Religious traditions that arose within these communities became an integral part of plantation life. Within the Atlantic framework, unique sets of traditions emerged, and this is apparent within the slave life. A small example that created its own place in slave lives was jumping the broom.⁵¹ This was a social marriage that is seen in many areas of slave life in the Americas and West Indies. It was only a wedding in social terms as legal slave marriages were rare.⁵² With these unique traditions within slave life in the Atlantic, music often turned back to these religious traditions. A common religious song was called “Look Down that Long, Lonely Road”

*My time, time so long. (hah) Look down, (hah) look down,
That long, lonesome road, where you (hah) and I, I must go.*

⁴⁷ Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018).

⁴⁸ Haven P. Perkins, “Religion for Slaves: Difficulties and Methods,” *Church History* 10, no. 3 (1941): pp. 228-245, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3160252>, 228-230.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Alan Dundes, “‘Jumping the Broom’: On the Origin and Meaning of an African American Wedding Custom,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (1996): 324–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/541535>, 324-325.

⁵² *Ibid.*

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*Stand back, stand back All you five [and] ten cent men:
Dollar man knocking on, on my door. Hattie Bell, Hattie Bell,
O she's my own, own true love, Darlin', what have, have I done?*⁵³

This song was traditionally sung by a woman and was meant to be a plea to the afterlife, where the enslaved would finally be free. These themes are a product of the conditions that the Atlantic presented to slaves. The slave trade created a compact array of European ideas, and Christianity was one that took hold within these communities. Christianity thrived within the Atlantic; one can even see that those who were under the whim of their masters created space for the European religion within their own sociality. Religion and music ties together deeply within Christianity. Song plays a key part in worship and thus, as the slave communities began to adapt to their new religious beliefs, song took a prominent place within it.

Along with religious songs, work songs are intriguing to study as many have to do with mealtimes and the end of the day. Work songs help to piece together the daily life of a slave and what their communications with one another was like. In all slave communities, mealtimes and end of day were commemorated with a song, usually headed by the lead slave. The songs were often a plea of hope for those working and encouraged that the day was almost done. A specific song that was used by slaves was the “Quittin’ Time Song”. It has many different versions, but one goes as follows:

*Ooooh, the sun going down, And I won't be here long,
Ooooh, the sun going down, And I won't be here long.
Ooooh, then I be going home.
Ooooh, I can't let this dark cloud catch me here.
Ooooh, I can't stay here long, Ooooh, I be at home.*⁵⁴

This song demonstrates the eagerness to return to their homes, the one place where they could find respite from their masters. The words are simple and repetitive, but the imagery is obvious. The black cloud was most likely the master’s eye, as one could not stay long after work was done. Along with this, this particular song shows an instance of carry over of musical ideas that came directly from African traditions. The hands and feet were commonly used in African music.⁵⁵ Not only were they used for rhythm, but they were adapted to make different sort of instrumental sounds. This was adapted by slaves, as they had a lack of instruments available to them. This made them innovate and return to their African roots; they had to use what they had on their person.⁵⁶

⁵³ PBS, “Look Down That Long Lonesome Road,” Music in Slave life, Religious songs, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/feature1.html>.

⁵⁴ PBS, “Quittin’ Time Song 2,” Music in Slave life, Work songs, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/feature7.html>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

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Thus, this song would be accompanied by the stomping of feet and clapping, to create a rhythm and ambiance for the slaves finishing their work. The Atlantic transferred with it slaves and the culture that they had on the African coast. There was a constant flow of knowledge, yet these cultural practices withstood the pressures of Atlantic cultural trade.

The final example of song found in the transcripts of slave music are songs that have to do with recreational activities. While lesser known, as religious songs and work songs were often documented by plantation owners or visitors to the plantation. While religion was the major leisure activity that slaves engaged in, one popular theme within leisure songs were songs about love.

There were multiple, popular slave songs that revolved around love. One of note was titled “Rosey”. The song is romantic in nature, with many tones relating to dancing, or walking with a loved one. The song goes as follows:

*Rosey, babe, little Rosey,
Hah-a Rosey.
Grab you a pardner an' promenade around,
Hah-a Rosey.
Pin my true love by my side,
Hah-a Rosey.
You do that now, you do that again,
Hah-a Rosey.
Rosey, babe, little Rosey,
Hah-a Rosey.
Let us do like the possum done,
Hah-a Rosey.
Hid his head in the hollow stump,
Hah-a Rosey.⁵⁷*

These romantic slave songs depict the emotions of the slaves which is often exempt from historical record. Pain taints the study of slavery, yet the momentary joys that slaves felt within their families can be glimpsed in primary sources like “Rosey”. When studying a group that was enslaved, finding their true voices at the time of enslavement is hard to come by. Thus, to find songs that demonstrate the raw emotions of the slaves is integral in determining their true agency.

While one engages in the framing of the Atlantic, it is important to look at the many perspectives that exist within it. Literature, and music all have varying places within society. However, by looking at the use of music by sailors, Africans, and slaves in turn, the effects of the Atlantic on slaves is apparent. It also emphasizes the forces that existed within the Black Atlantic, a force of knowledge, power, and pain. The songs

⁵⁷ PBS, “Rosey,” Music in Slave life, Recreational Songs, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/feature13.html>.

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analyzed within slave communities are reminiscent to the sea shanties that the slaves most likely heard on their way across the seas. This horrible journey also gave them contact with the style of sailor songs. Knowledge transference can occur under the strangest of conditions, and none is stranger than knowledge gained while being prisoner.

The Atlantic was unique in that it was a vector for ideas and cultural practices. Music is a small and simple way in which culture can mix. Though the songs of sea shanties are simple, they are often meant to bring joy to those singing it. This was the same for those bound in chains, that wished to bring some sort of joy to their workdays.

Framing the Black Atlantic through Music

The Black Atlantic was a space of knowledge transfer, trade, and economic growth, which added up to a collection of emerging cultures. On their own, Oceans provide many resources particularly when mixed with rich continents, and military superpowers, the transfer of knowledge was exponential. One key area, that gives interesting insight into the lives of those during this time is the medium of art.⁵⁸ Music, like poetry and other literature, gives a great deal of knowledge that can aid those researching the past and is useful in analyzing cultural shifts and shifting societal ideals.⁵⁹ Musical texts are representative artifacts of the events that existed within, offering personal experiences of the individuals, as well as information on how they responded.⁶⁰

The music that has been analyzed, from the songs of the sea, to the folk music of the African tribes were all affected by the swaying notions brought to them by the Atlantic. The Black Atlantic was a vector for change, both good and bad. It is ineffective to merely frame the Atlantic as a body of water if one truly wishes to analyze its effects. Rather, it is useful to view the Atlantic as a continent of its own, one that while affected by those that controlled it, was nevertheless a more immovable and critical force than simply being a space of transportation.

The Black Atlantic effected no group more than the people of Africa and the slaves that came from its shores. If one truly wishes to understand what changes occurred within these groups due to the emergence of the trade network, music is integral. As T. W. Adorno said:

“Since the mid-nineteenth century a country's music has become a political ideology by stressing national characteristics, appearing as a representative of the

⁵⁸ Shirli Gilbert, “Music as Historical Source: Social History and Musical Texts / Glazba Kao Povijesni Izvor: Socijalna Povijest i Glazbeni Tekstovi,” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 36, no. 1 (2005): 117–34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30032162>, 118.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

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nation, and everywhere confirming the national principle. Yet music, more than any other artistic medium, expresses the national principle's antinomies as well.”⁶¹

In concluding this paper, there must be a final discussion revolving around Paul Gilroy's book *Black Atlantic*, where he first coined the term and first discusses 'double consciousness' among other black phenomenon. Double consciousness is a product of the slave trade and occurs in the United States when an individual identifies as both black and American, creating in essence a sort of cognitive dissonance.⁶² In short, the individual African American is required to put conflicting ideas of Europeanness on the inside, while also presenting as Black outwardly.

Gilroy also discusses the use of music as a form of social relationship. Music was one thing that was allowed to the slaves -their own voices were the single property that they still owned on their person. They were excluded from all other aspects of normal society; however, they were allowed this one mode of communication.⁶³ Music is, in essence, a form in which individuals can communicate emotion. Those within the slave trade held fast to this idea, and used music as a communal activity, that gave them a sort of freedom.⁶⁴

The ramifications of these musical freedoms appear in more modern forms of music, like Jazz. Jazz is a key modern interpretation of the conflicting ideas of the black American individual. Jazz works in opposition to everything around it - a pure black expression of the conflict between living in American society and being African.⁶⁵ Music is a form of freedom and escape from society, that brings communities together and allows for information to be passed across cultures, and generations. With the Atlantic as its backdrop, African American music flourished under pressure, and became a popular choice for everyday listeners.

A Final note on the Legacy of the Black Atlantic: Modern Rap

The legacy of the Black Atlantic has carried through the 21st century. The popularity of Black dominated music industries has made the slave trade come full circle within American society. Artists like Little Nas X, Kanye West, and Snoop Dog, all live in the legacy of the historical music of the Atlantic. Many artists have begun to reinvent themselves, and revisit their past, similar to the O'Jays. As Tupac Shakur said in his song "Panther Power":

*As real as it seems, the American Dream
Ain't nothing but another calculated scheme
To get us locked up, shot up or back in chains*

⁶¹ Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (S.l.: Verso Books, 2022), 72.

⁶² Ibid, 1-40.

⁶³ Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (S.l.: Verso Books, 2022), 76.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 79.

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*To deny us of the future rob our names
Kept my history a mystery, but now I see*⁶⁶

Tupac's song is a prime example of a modern reinterpretation of the trauma of the slave trade. Lyrics have historically been used to place individuals within society, and this is now being done by black artists.⁶⁷ Modern music created by African Americans often brings to light the issues that they face due to the slave trade. With America's bloody past, the new emergence of a sort of counterculture is effective in giving historians fodder on the changing times. The trauma of America is based in the domination of the Atlantic by Europeans who ruled over all other races.⁶⁸

The Atlantic was a framework of trade and cultural change, yet the slave trade was a forced vector of change. Slaves were forced to change their ways of life drastically while in bonds. Their language was stripped from them, instead replaced by broken English. Slaves are a key example of a culture emerging because of the Atlantic fabric. Slaves were in contact with a many different cultures and ideas, unfortunately while in chains. In the modern context, the Atlantic created the culture we see today in the United States and Canada, with rap music dominating the music charts.

The Black Atlantic created the perfect combination of trade, cultural transfer, and new knowledge. These conditions would end in the culmination of a unique black culture that would come from the slave trade. When one looks at modern interpretations of the slave trade, there is a large array of differing views and cultural ramifications. Sifting through these, music is an easily accessible and interpretable medium that demonstrates simple cultural trends. Modern day interpretations of the slave trade can be seen within the music of American black culture which has evolved from the trauma of its past. The freedom that music gave to those within bonds was integral for the survival of their culture.⁶⁹

Religion still plays predominantly within rap music and other genres like Jazz and gospel music. The legacy of masters producing Christian slaves was integral in creating the conditions for modern day gospel life.⁷⁰ Southern musical traditions in the United States were affected greatly by the music that was created within the slave trade.⁷¹ These modern musical ideas give life to the unique framework that was the Black Atlantic and its legacy today.

⁶⁶ Tupac Shakur, "Panther Power," *Static: A Tupac Shakur Story*, Universal Music Corp., Funky Network Publishing, 1997, Track Two, <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/2Pac/Panther-Power>.

⁶⁷ Natalie Graham, "What Slaves We Are," *Transition*, no. 122 (2017): 123–32, <https://doi.org/10.2979/transition.122.1.18>, 125.

⁶⁸ Theresa A Martinez, "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap as Resistance," *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 2 (1997): 265–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1389525>, 266.

⁶⁹ Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (S.I.: Verso Books, 2022), 76.

⁷⁰ Alan Dundes, "'Jumping the Broom': On the Origin and Meaning of an African American Wedding Custom," *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (1996): 324–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/541535>, 324–325.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, the music that came from the slave trade is a key example of black agency during a time of slavery and the way in which the trade networks transferred knowledge along with culture. Music was the key source that brought many cultures together within the Atlantic. When one traces the music of the sailors, Africans, and slaves that resided within this network, there is an obvious mesh of culture. Along with this the Atlantic space created the perfect conditions for the slave trade to survive. With the legacy of the slave trade comes interesting historical interpretations of the past sung by the descendants of it. As the O'Jays said in their song "Ship Ahoy" "I'm your master and you're my slave, and you're my slave I'm your master."⁷²

Their music was a key form of activism, that has begun to resurface today in newer musical mediums. The study of music texts can help to divulge the issues that each individual song writer had seen. In comparison to historical texts, it gives a personal perspective from those effected, instead of the view that was seen by outsiders. The music created by slaves, and free African Americans was a fight back, which in turn was a way to gain a sort of autonomy at a time of great distress. This fight was done by connecting the traditions of the Black Atlantic music with the newly emerging traditions of slave culture.

It is apparent that the research the Black Atlantic produces and unfurls has problematic undertones. The slave trade is at the forefront of problematic research, with contentious issues effecting the research. These problematic tendencies are a historian's battle with being true to the research, and the persons being studied. While researching the Black Atlantic, the culture that arose from it is unique and worth in-depth study. Historical events that effect not only their present time but have especially large ramifications on present day are always worth study. When studying it, there must be a level of decorum that allows the research to speak for itself.

Music has and always will be a product of its time. It manifests the feelings and issues within a cultural group. When one listens to slave music, they can hear the impacts of White Europeans and plantation lifestyles. The inequality of not being a person under the law is always painfully reminded in music of the past. The influence of the Atlantic is continuously apparent within these songs. The music of those in African tribes, the music of the African slaves, and the music of African Americans all reveal a fascinating cultural spectrum. The effects of the European sailor's music are also visible within slave songs. The legacies of music are two-fold; they present historical context and emotional context.

The tones within all these musical stylings all have similar motifs and help in demonstrating that the Black Atlantic was not just a body of water but was a mass of

⁷² The O'Jays, "Ship Ahoy," *Ship Ahoy*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 1958, Track Two, Genius Music, <https://genius.com/The-ojays-ship-ahoy-lyrics>.

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knowledge transfer and trade. This trade of knowledge affected the cultural practices and transformed physical modes of culture, like music. The horrors of being cargo did not make slaves exempt from this transfer. They obtained a cultural mesh between master and slave. This was an unwanted transfer but is present within music practices we see with both stealing musical practices from the other. Along with this there was a transfer between their homeland and their new land. We see this within the traditional music tones that come through with African slave music.

In close, this paper has attempted to assert that music demonstrates the transfer of knowledge present in the Black Atlantic, and the impacts it had on black culture.

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