

Information Cards—18th-Century African American Music

Group One

Celebration of an event (wedding, birthday, life):

- In Africa, music was involved in every activity in the life of individuals or the community in Africa. This tradition was continued by enslaved Africans in America.
- There was music for agricultural rituals, births, funerals, and other rites of passage (example: “**Wasulu**”).

Heritage:

- Africans who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage may have arrived empty handed, but they brought with them their culture, music, and songs.
- African dances, instruments, and songs were extensions of Africa—expressions of the spirit of people who had been stolen from their homelands.
- Music provided a common thread for enslaved Africans and became a communal activity for people who came from many different African nations, but found themselves on the same plantations.
- Traditional African music is polyrhythmic, call-and-response, group-centered, and improvisational (example: “**Wasulu**”).

Group Two

Entertainment (games):

- Slave children had to generate their own amusements. Games involving music and dancing required no equipment.
- **Ring game songs, or ring shouts**, were shuffling circle dances that involved clapping, rhyming, body movements, and several players, usually with one person standing in the middle of the circle.
- “**Patting Juba**” was a popular pastime involving slapping the hands on the knees then together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left shoulder with the other hand, while also singing and keeping time with the feet.

Entertainment (listening):

- After a long day working the fields, slaves often gathered in the evening to sing and dance.
- Everybody participated. There was seldom an audience.
- Many eighteenth-century African Americans became skilled performers who also mastered European instruments and music styles. Primary sources, such as runaway slave advertisements indicate that they played a variety of instruments, including violins, flutes, and fifes.

Group Three

Education / Learning:

- Through song, children often learned to count or name parts of their bodies (“**Kye Kye Kule**”).
- Some African American slave songs featured story characters such as Brer Rabbit, a clever animal who could outwit the bigger, stronger Mr. Wolf. Listening to and singing these songs taught life lessons.

Communication:

- Drum signals or vocal “field hollers” sent messages based on tone, length, and patterns to other Africans located miles away. Slaveholders soon realized this and banned playing certain instruments for fear they could incite rebellion.
- Enslaved Africans also used the double language of **spirituals**, which were often songs of freedom cloaked in hidden language, to communicate information.
- Examples of coded language: the Jordan River was code for the Ohio River, which meant freedom if crossed over. Moses, who took his people out of bondage and into “the promised land,” was honored as slaves hoped for another savior to deliver them from bondage in the South to the “promised land” of the North. “Travelin’ shoes,” “wading in the water,” and chariots mentioned in spirituals often referred to modes of transportation and ways to escape to freedom.
- While slaveholders may have thought the music of spirituals indicated an acceptance of slavery, the words in that secret tongue actually indicated a deep desire for the end of cruel bondage.

Group Four

Hope / Faith:

- Through music, African Americans kept hope alive and eased the burdens of their labor.
- Spirituals captured the essence of Christianity in that they contained no hints of hatred or revenge and showed a belief in a better day.
- They found joy in their religion and hope in their sacred songs. They knew if they remained faithful to God, in the end they would receive their reward.
- African Americans who had lost children and parents through sale sang of hoping to see their loved ones again in Heaven. One could bear burdens because there would be freedom – in Heaven or on earth – by and by.
- Their Christian faith told them that God would pass judgment on those who enslaved them. For the believer, it was not so much of a question of *if* slavery would end, but *when*.

Protest:

- Through music, African Americans also resisted bondage.
- Spirituals told of trials and tribulations and helped slaves to feel united in their common struggles.