

The Arabic Roots of Jazz and Blues

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Black Africans of Arabic culture

Long before the beginning of what we call black slavery, black Africans arrived in North America. There were black Africans among Columbus's crew on his first journey to the New World in 1492. Even the more militant of the earliest Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, such as Cortes and Pizarro, had black people by their side. In some cases, even the colonialist leaders themselves were black, Estebanico for example, who conducted an expedition to what is now Mexico, and Juan Valiente, who led the Spaniards when they conquered Chile. There were black colonialists among the first Spanish settlers in Hispaniola (today Haiti/Dominican Republic). Between 1502 and 1518, hundreds of blacks migrated to the New World, to work in the mines and for other reasons.

It is interesting to note that not all of the black colonists of the first wave were bearers of African culture, but rather of Arabic culture. They were born and raised on the Iberian Peninsula (today Spain, Portugal, and Gibraltar) and had, over the course of generations, exchanged their original African culture for the Moorish (Arabic) culture. Spain had been under Arabic rule since the 8th century, and when the last stronghold of the Moors fell in 1492, the rulers of the reunified Spain – King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella – gave the go-ahead for the epoch-making voyages of Columbus.

Long before, the Arabs had kept and traded Negro slaves. We can see them in old paintings, depicted in various settings of medieval European society. Throughout the Middle Ages, black slaves came from the markets of Alexandria, Tunis, and Tripoli, where Arabic caravans arrived after crossing the desert. Another marketplace was Sicily. Scandinavian Vikings travelling west also encountered these

“blåmän” (blå, blue, meant black in Old Norse). Groups of black Africans of Arabic culture can still be found amongst the light-complexioned Berber peoples in Northern Africa.

The Arabs had a special view of slavery. Their slaves could be liberated on festive occasions, especially if they could play music and dance. In this way, a free class of black Africans emerged beside the enslaved. Many dark-skinned Spaniards in Spain today resemble Arabic and African peoples.

The outstanding cultural life of the Moors

Of all the conquerors who contributed to Spanish culture, the ones generally considered to have had the greatest impact are the Arabs. Much of what we view today as typically Spanish is in fact a residue of Arabic culture. In Cordoba, the capital during the reign of the Moors, a dazzling cultural scene developed. Artists and philosophers, as well as science, were favoured. The court in Cordoba pulsed outwards, reaching the rest of Europe and offering reacquaintance with the forgotten learning of Greek and Alexandrian classical antiquity.

Other areas where the Arabs were forerunners, were architecture and structural engineering; trade and commerce; production of textiles, paper, and arms; and mining, farming, and breeding. They brought rice, cotton, oranges, apricots, and peaches to Europe. They developed a high level of education, with libraries, bookstores, general literacy, etc. We should remember the Arabs especially as pioneers in the areas of hygiene and medical care. They possessed knowledge of anaesthesia, gynaecology, mental care, hospital case sheets, the prevention of disease transmission, pharmacy construction, and the need for rehabilitation. They were also most tolerant towards different religious denominations and types of cultural expression. Jews as well as Gypsies could feel safe in Moorish society, which was exemplary in creating a multicultural society.

The Arabic roots of European music

There were a number of important Arabic contributions to European art and music as well. Sven Berger, expert in early music and lecturer at the School of Music and Musicology at Göteborg University, points out that many of our instruments have been developed from Arabic predecessors. This applies especially to plucked string instruments such as the lute and the zither. Some stringed bow instruments, appearing later than the plucked string instruments, including the lira, rebec, and rebab, are also considered to have been brought to Europe by the Arabs. These Arabic influences reached Europe principally via Spain.

The Arabs introduced frets, enabling simultaneous playing on several strings in simple triads. Paradoxically enough, the essentially monophonic Arabic culture may, in this way, have led the Europeans into a vertical mode of playing and listening, i.e., they may have initiated the development of homophonic music in Europe. Arabic music theory described intervals as mathematic relationships – for example

5:4 for a major third and 6:5 for a minor third.

It is also likely that the Italian monk, music theorist, and music pedagogue, Guido of Arezzo, often called the father of the solfeggio system, actually took essential influences from the corresponding Arabic system. There, we even find names with striking resemblance to the ones used by Guido: dal (do), ra (re), mim (mi), fa (fa), sad (sol), lam (la), sin (si). In Europe, it has usually been said that these syllables derive from a Latin hymn.

To sum up these facts, we have to ask ourselves: is it not time to reconsider our view of the roots of European musical culture and perhaps culture as a whole? In addition to the ancient Greeks and the Romans we should also acknowledge the vital contributions Arabs have made to European social history.

The Spanish-Arabic culture survived best in the New World

The first black colonialists thus brought their Arabic music culture with them to the New World, as did the Spanish and Portuguese colonialists to a large extent. Even if from that point on we have designated their culture as Spanish, there are strong Arabic components. Instruments such as the castanets, the tambourine, and to a certain extent the guitar, are Arabic by origin. In the same way, flamenco music is based on Arabic modalities, the “Spanish-Frygian mode”, for example. Flamenco singing technique also bears a strong resemblance to the Arabic way of singing.

Consequently, we can now readily claim that the music played by the first black Africans in America (“Afro-American music”) was mainly Spanish-Arabic music. The Spaniards dominated all of the New World except Brazil, and the Spanish-Arabic culture could cling tight onto virtually all of the colonised Americas.

Around 1530, the Spaniards began to import Negro slaves directly from Africa. The Portuguese did the same for their colony, Brazil. The Spaniards did not transport slaves themselves. The management of the profitable slave trade was taken over from the Portuguese by the French and then by the British. It is estimated that around ten million black Africans were moved from Africa in the cruel slave trade until the abolition of slavery around 1870.

So, was it not the cultures of western and central Africa – and not the Spanish-Arabic culture – that came to dominate the development of Afro-American culture? We cannot say for certain.

Islamic and Arabic cultures have had far greater significance in Africa than most people imagine. The slaves taken from West Africa came from countries with distinct Arabic cultural patterns. The falling thirds, characteristic of both West African singing and of the blues, should be related to the Arabic song tradition. The countries in the savannah belt are Islamic and show clear influences from Arabic culture. The countries along the Slave Coast are directly bounded by this Islamic savannah belt. The Swahili culture, stretching far down to eastern Africa south of the equator, also shows significant Arabic influences.

The culture in Africa generally considered to have had the greatest impact on

the beginning and development of Afro-American culture is that of the Yoruba people. They live in western Nigeria and in Benin. Nigerian author Ben Okri writes in his book, *A Way of Being Free*, that the Yoruba culture has its roots in the Middle East.

The Spanish-Arabic culture had already left a distinct and lasting imprint on the New World. Furthermore, most slave owners and their families were bearers of the same tradition. They were often afraid of what was genuinely African and non-Arabic. It was perceived as threatening and frightening. Therefore, the European colonists tried in different ways to wipe out all forms of this cultural heritage, in everything from religion to music. The elements of African culture that were Arabic surely survived more easily because they were familiar to the Spanish slave owners.

African culture is not uniform

The greatest threat to the survival of African culture may have been the fact that it is highly fragmented and pluralistic. In fact, it is really a vast number of smaller cultures different from one another. For a long time, the African societies south of the Sahara had the character of family federations. The centralised and class-divided societies we find in Europe and the Orient cannot be found in this part of Africa. Kinship relations were connected to languages and dialects, architectural style, clothing, ornamentation, scar tattoos, manners and customs, etc.

At this time, over a thousand languages were spoken in Africa, and instruments, music, and dance could similarly show great variations. There was little common ground for the Africans to feel a sense of community about in the New World, seen from a cultural perspective. Through slave auctions, the slaves were haphazardly scattered and cultural bonds were difficult to maintain. The transposition of the slaves also meant that they were uprooted, time and again, into new social and cultural environments. It is likely that the most enduring, reciprocal fact about the slaves' new lives were its Spanish-Arabic culture patterns, left by the first black colonialists in large parts of the New World, and partly shared by the slave owners.

African heritage survived most in the West Indies, least in the US

African culture survived mainly in large slave groups on plantations in the West Indies. In some of these groups, many of the slaves had the same origin. One example is the Yoruba people from present-day Nigeria, whose descendants in the New World have managed to preserve parts of their original music and religion to this very day. Furthermore, the slaves in the West Indies were controlled for long periods by black foremen, who were loyal to their slave-owners. At times, this foreman visited his family in the home country, Spain, for example. The black foreman was not less harsh and demanding than was the white slave owner, but he was not afraid of the African culture. In this way, songs, dances, drumming,

construction of instruments, religion, food, etc., could be allowed to carry their distinctly African imprint.

The strongest oppression of African culture took place in the colonies in North America. The slave groups were small and their cultural heritage was more easily eroded. At the same time, North America was in the middle of dramatic cultural turbulence of its own with a large number of immigrants in movement, all coming from different cultures. The environment on the West Indian islands, in comparison to that of North America, was clearly quite favourable in terms of preserving the African culture. The most important reason for this, however, can be found in religion. The West Indies and the rest of Latin America were Catholic. Catholicism emphasised the fact that the slave was a human being, and that the institution of marriage was ordained by God. There was resistance to separating husbands from their wives and children from their parents. African culture – and Spanish-Arabic culture as well – were therefore more easily passed down from generation to generation.

Among the North American Protestants this kind of tolerance was not found. On the contrary, they regarded as desirable the eradication of African culture patterns through systematic separation of slaves who had shared elements of the African culture, those who spoke the same language, for example. Drumming was periodically prohibited since it was perceived as rebellious.

Because of this attitude, the black people in the US have been subjected to a systematic reduction of their African roots during the last few centuries. Unfortunately, this has been a very efficient process.

It is striking how few traces of the original African culture can be found in the 20th century. An odd exception was the “African” dance and music at Congo Square in New Orleans on Sundays in the early 19th century. Slaves could be rewarded with permission to participate in the music and dance. This tradition went way back and can be regarded as a unique source of inspiration for the development of Afro-American music in New Orleans, leaving traces even into the 20th century.

African culture felt like nothing to be proud of

It is tempting to believe the black population of the New World valued the preservation of their African roots. But instead there are numerous examples of how the slaves, and later the liberated slaves, abandoned their African roots and in different ways imitated the cultural patterns of the whites. They saw no point in maintaining their cultural heritage, but wanted their share of western economic prosperity and influence. Their African heritage was regarded as primitive and a burden. One can unfortunately encounter the same attitude today in many African contexts.

The first black brass bands in New Orleans were the result of sincere efforts to, as best they could, recreate a white military band with its instruments, repertoire and playing in parts. They even dressed in old Confederate uniforms, having

removed the badge of rank. In religious hymns the slave dreamt of having an estate like that of their slave owner: “The Lord is preparing a mansion for me, mansion for me, over the sea”.

Spanish-Arabic roots survived

The Spanish-Arabic roots were not as controversial, however. Several factors have contributed to these roots becoming a vital prerequisite for the beginning and development of modern Afro-American music. The emergence of early jazz in the Mississippi area and New Orleans is undoubtedly related to the geographical proximity of and communications with Cuba and the West Indies. The history of New Orleans thus shows evident Spanish influences in addition to the French. This is the only region the US designated as Catholic. New Orleans and parts of Louisiana were also Spanish territories during one period (1763-1800). The proximity to Mexico also brought with it some Spanish influence, and Mexican bands played in Storyville. Texas (not incorporated into the US until 1845), situated between Louisiana and Mexico, has been permeated by Spanish culture as well. In this context, the term “Creole” includes Spanish culture as an important component. When one of the great pioneers of New Orleans jazz, Jelly Roll Morton, speaks about the importance of “that Spanish tinge” for jazz, this is an important statement, the deeper implications of which have not yet been revealed to posterity.

From an African viewpoint

Since 1991, I have been going to South Africa, generally several times a year. Development aid is one of my jobs at the School of Music and Musicology at Göteborg University. I convey support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) to music schools, competence development work, and in-service training for teachers. During these years I have heard a lot of African music, from South Africa as well as from other parts of the continent. I have discussed music with many Africans. I have visited Cuba three times. Gradually the picture has become clearer to me, and I would like to describe some crucial encounters and discoveries.

Tiger jazz and bear jazz

At one concert with a prominent South African artist, an instrumental number was about to be played, and a fine rhythm section chose to pay tribute to Cuba with an Afro-Cuban song. It did not sound very good. One would think that the Africans would easily be able to perform music claimed to have African roots. Instead, there was something qualitative and very decisive distinguishing the African version from the Cuban. It has something to do with lightness, flight, high pitch, a quick pattering touch of the Conga drums – all of which were missing in the African version. The Africans got nothing for free there; on the contrary, I think that Swedes and other Europeans can perform Afro-Cuban music just as

well. Later I saw a ballet performance at the “Playhouse” music theatre in Durban, accompanied by a single percussionist. Here, I suddenly heard that Afro-Cuban flight, touch, and bright pitch I had missed in the rhythm section at the other concert. I found the percussionist after the show and expressed my impressions and that I had heard crucial differences between African and Afro-Cuban drumming. He laughed and told me he had studied drumming in Cuba for six years. He gave me a long “lecture”, and I very much regret not being able to capture it on tape or video.

He argued that there are decisive differences between the two drumming schools. The Cubans play with smaller beats – not lifting their hands as high as the Africans. The Cubans play more with their hands, making for a faster technique and a more pattering sound. The drum skin of the conga drum also contributes to the bright pitch by being tightly stretched. Ever since, I hear a distinct affinity between Cuban drumming and Arabic – which also has a bright, pattering character. At the same time, the difference between Cuban and African drumming appears more clearly. African drumming has a more physically tangible character; not the same ethereal volatility, but instead a base, a core. This could perhaps be compared to the movements of a tiger and a bear. They are both excellent hunters, but the cat-like smooth movement pattern of the tiger is different to the bear’s more physical and seemingly slow way of moving.

Both of these rhythmic “genes” can still be found in today’s Afro-American music. Percussionists Tony Williams and Elvin Jones – the founders of modern jazz drumming – can be “generalised” and regarded as representatives of the two different genes. Williams is more Arabic while Jones is more African.

One of the best educational programmes in jazz in South Africa can be found at the University of Natal, Durban. The director is Darius Brubeck, son of Dave Brubeck. The teaching is obviously Americanised. I asked him what kind of guest lecturers they would wish for in an exchange with Sweden. He answered, without hesitation, ‘percussionists’, which might appear more comprehensible against the background described above.

Arabic melisma in the blues

I overheard some teachers at a jazz school in Johannesburg discussing the ornaments and falling thirds in blues. They were surprised to hear that I did not immediately notice how all this had obvious roots in the Arabic art of singing. To them, it was clear that slaves from the Islamic countries in West Africa had taken this vocal style with them to the New World.

I must confess that I do not hear a single trace of the sliding vocal style of blues in those parts of Africa situated south of the areas directly influenced by Arabic culture. I do, however, perceive the melismas of the Islamic prayer callers very clearly in the blues phrases of both Aretha Franklin and Louis Armstrong.

If my observations are correct, we could expect the view of the roots of

Afro-American music to gradually shift in favour of Arabic culture. That this did not happen earlier could be due to the unwillingness in European culture to acknowledge Arabic and Islamic influences in our social history. This unwillingness goes way back to the age of the crusades, when Christians and Moslems regarded each one another as “infidels” to be converted or destroyed.

I have myself been taught that the Moors “penetrated” Europe, but were then “driven out”, without understanding how valuable and fruitful their presence has been to our own European culture.

This inability of the Westerner to see the positive sides of Arabic culture, or to take an interest in the Koran, may, in the worst-case scenario, cost us a great deal in the future. Such a polarised standpoint breeds an irreconcilable fundamentalist reaction in the rapidly growing Islamic part of the world.

Another delicate issue in this context is the collective European guilt about the slave trade and colonial oppression. We are keen to recognise Afro-American music as an irrepressible expression of the black slave’s protest and his right to claim his African origin. In this we feel that the Arabic roots complicate the picture, and we have a hard time accepting this.

I want to make it clear that I have accounted for my opinion on this matter, without scholarly claims. The first, historic, section, however, is based on scientific research sources. If someone would like to grapple with this subject from a musicological perspective, I would be the first to welcome such an initiative.

References:

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And others