

the drum, was the bulafou or balafo, the forerunner of today's xylophone or marimba. Jobson carefully described it and remarked upon its unusual construction. Two gourds suspended from each key, afforded extraordinary resonance when this wooden slat (key) was struck by a stick swathed in "...some soft stuff to avoid the clattering noise the bare stick would make."

Drums, of course, were the most important instrument and were indigenous to all communities or tribes. They were formed from hollowed out logs, gourds or calabashes, which were covered by stretched animal skins. The instrument ranged in size from one to seven feet high and from two or three inches to several feet wide. Different pitches were achieved on the same drum when the drum was struck by a stick, fist, foot or elbow.

Accompaniment to the drum was afforded by wooden flutes, horns from elephant tusks, *dududen* a sort of clarinet; trumpets fashioned from wood and tusks; various percussive instruments constructed of iron; and rattles made from gourds or other dried vegetables. So, too, were the stringed instruments commonly formed from large gourds with strings stretched across the opening and attached to a long neck without frets. One of these stringed instruments was specifically noted by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on Virginia*. He stated "The instrument proper to them (African slaves) is the banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four lower chords of the guitar." It later became known as the banjo.

Women used the thumb piano, a wooden box with varying lengths of thin silvers of wood or metal fastened over an opening. This was the only instrument that was allowed them, generally they were singers and dancers; men were the instrumentalists, and thus enjoyed higher status. Essentially, all were participants, for onlookers clapped, stamped and shouted their approval or disapproval and communal activity was therefore emphasized.

Thus we see that when the African crossed the Atlantic as a slave, it was inevitable that with him came some of his instruments, if not physically, at least in memory, awaiting the time when they could be fashioned from materials at hand in the New World. So, too, came a rich history of his past in song.

The log of the English ship "*Hannibal*" recorded in 1664 that captive Africans were forced to dance and sing on board for the dual purpose of exercise for themselves and entertainment for the crew. A similar report was made in 1788. If reluctance or resistance was offered, the slave was flogged. An early Portuguese writer wrote that the singing of a captured group of slaves aboard ship indicated that, although the language was unintelligible, the lament was clearly understood by the listener.

--COLONIAL AMERICA 1700 -1800--

Adjustments by the slave to his new "home" included differences in language, customs, music, religion, instruments, and the ways of his white master.

Memories of his former home were maintained in the field through work songs; he received sustenance through his religious songs and expressed joy through his dance and secular music. Therefore, music afforded him some modicum of ease in his transition.

Little primary documentation exists to indicate how the slave became a musician able to render American or European songs to entertain himself and others with some skill. Newspapers of the time carried listings that refer to slaves for sale, hire or runaways who possessed the ability to perform well on various instruments. These ads indicate that the violin, fiddle, French horn, drum, fife and flute were the most common instruments employed by the slaves. One such listing in the *Virginia Gazette*, May 14, 1772, ruefully states:

RUNAWAY...a Negro named Derby, about 25 years of age, a slim Black fellow, and plays on the Fiddle with his left hand, which he took with him.

Much of the dance music was performed by Black musicians, for dancing was the chief diversion for the aristocracy; however, here again, meager documentation does not present a definitive picture as to how a slave acquired the necessary skill to perform in a band. To be sure, there are records that refer to this "slave fiddler," or that "Black musician," and an occasional diary will give a glimpse into how some were actually trained. Army records indicate that there were more than a few Blacks who played the fife or drum and the distinction of being the earliest Black musician of



The Bamboula. Reproduction of a drawing by E. W. Kemble, included in an article by George Cable, "The Dance in Place, Congo," *Century Magazine* 31, (1885-86). African-type instruments were generally used in the slaves' own jubilees.

record belongs to a slave named Nero Benson who served as a trumpeter with a Captain Isaac Clark of Franingham, Massachusetts in 1723; but only conjecture can lead one to conclude that they continued their musical career after the Revolutionary War was won.

In the southern colonies, it is evident that some household slaves learned through being present when itinerant musicians taught the children of the wealthy. In more specific cases the more accomplished Virginia musicians may have gained virtuosity by attending classes with their young masters at the College of

William and Mary at Williamsburg, Virginia.

Fiddlers such as Sy Gilliat, owned by the Royal Governor of Virginia, and John Stokes, who belonged to Charles Carrol of Annapolis, provided the call and music for reels, jigs and the like. Their abilities were such that they, and others, often provided additional income for their masters through being "hired out" for glittering affairs. Some were fortunate enough to receive monies independent of the stipend paid to their owners. The more frugal saved until they could purchase their freedom.

ALBERTSONS SALUTES BLACK HISTORY WEEK

AND THE BLACKS WHO ARE NOW MAKING THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO BLACK HISTORY.



Florence Mills

1895-1927

Singer, dancer, actress, musical comedy star of the 20s.

On May 23, 1921 Florence Mills' big break came when she starred on Broadway in "Shuffle Along". Florence Mills was a natural, with an uncanny power of projecting her personality and talent. She starred in "The Plantation Revue" in 1922, renamed "From Dover to Dixie". She played in this show and in "Blackbirds" in London. She died at the age of 32. "I'm just a little blackbird looking for a bluebird" had become her theme song.



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