

chanted were directly traceable to their former homes in Africa in their rhythms. Because the rough workers sang songs that were not likely to interest "genteel" people, the intellectual snobbery of the aristocracy, as evidenced in the Jubilee, again prevented them from recognizing any irreverencies directed toward them from the fields. The only factor that was important was that a singing slave was likely to produce more. Frederick Douglass noted that, "slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers... This may account for the almost constant singing heard in the southern states." He refuted the philosophy erroneously held by many that the singing indicated contentment. Hundreds of documented slave revolts and thousands of runaways also bear witness to this.

The apologist historian U.B. Phillips painted plantation life as idyllic as did the movie *Gone With The Wind*. Phillips stated: "The plantation was pageant and variety show in alternation... the bonfire in the quarter with contests in clogs, cakewalks, and charlestons whose fascinations were as yet undiscovered by the great world; the work songs in solo and refrain..."

The "solo" part that Phillips mentioned was sung by a leader who was an important, if not the important member of the field hands; and, as such, often commanded a higher price on the market. Because of the mood of the workers and the work to be done dictated the timing and rhythm of the music, the leader had to intuitively determine what to sing. Reminiscent of the bards in far-off Africa, he improvised and created lyrics and melodies as needed.

So, to, were messages disseminated in this fashion. Whenever Harriet Tubman was in the area, a special song was sung: "Dark and thorny is de pathway, where de pilgrim makes his ways; but beyond dis vale of sorrow, lie de fields of endless days."

Specifics, as to meeting places and departure times,



The "Jubilee," a traditional slave celebration of many southern plantations, produced a music that was to have a dominant influence upon American musical expression. (The Bettman Archive)

might be extemporaneous verses added to work, secular or religious songs to alert potential runaways.

Other songs that served to inform listeners that there was an escape plot being planned were: *Steal Away to Jesus*; *Oh Sinner, You'd Better Get Ready*; *Good News, de Chariot's Coming*; and *I Hear from heaven To-Day*. *Follow the Drinking Gourd* alluded to the Big Dipper Constellation as a way of traveling north.

Although both slave and freeman had been exposed to white church music, it often was too stilted or unsatisfactory to express their needs. Noticing the dichotomy between the master's Sunday piety and his godless manners from Monday to Saturday, the southern Black was never more attuned to a need for music and rhetoric that not only nourished his soul, but also helped to dispel the malaise of slavery.



**MARY
MCLEOD BETHUNE,
(1875-1955)**

Educator and administrator,
she devoted a lifetime
to the improvement
of educational and vocational
opportunities for black youth.

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