

THE NEGRO'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN ART

OUR ONLY ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS to the domain of American art have come to us through our negro population. If this proposition is doubted one is asked to mention what, besides the rag-time of the modern dance and the *Uncle Remus* stories of Joel Chandler Harris, has as yet "sprung from American soil and out of American life." The originality and power of these artistic creations, declares Mr. James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, have influenced and appealed not only to America, but the world. He places the most importance upon the *Uncle Remus* stories and the spiritual or slave songs to which the Fisk Jubilee Singers made the public and musicians of the United States and Europe listen. The stories constitute the only folk-lore that America has produced, says Mr. Johnson in the *New York Evening Post*, and the slave melodies the only folk-songs, "for in them the negro sounded the depths, if he did not scale the heights, of music." Mr. Johnson also mentions the "cakewalk" and ragtime and points to the fact that we need not go very far back to remember when cakewalking was the rage of the United States, Europe, and South America. "Society in this country and royalty abroad spent time in practising the intricate steps. Paris pronounced it the poetry of motion." The popularity of the cakewalk passed away its influence remained, a fact which this apologist goes on to examine:

James Weldon Johnson on the Unique Contributions of the Negro



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~page 26~

"The influence which the negro has exercised on the art of dancing in this country has been almost absolute. For generations, the clog and the jig, which are strictly negro dances, have been familiar to American theater audiences. Several years ago the public discovered the turkey-trot, the eagle rock, and several other varieties that started the modern dance craze. Half the floor-space in the country was then turned over to dancing, and highly paid exponents sprang up everywhere. The most noted, Vernon Castle, and, by the way, an Englishman, never danced except to the music of a colored orchestra, and he never failed to state to his audiences that most of his dances had long been done by your colored people, as he put it.

"Any one who witnesses a musical production in which there is dancing can not fail to notice the negro stamp upon all the movements, a stamp that even the great vogue of Russian dances could not affect. That peculiar swaying of the shoulders which you see done everywhere by the blond girls of the chorus is nothing more than a movement from the negro dance referred to above, the 'eagle rock.'

"Just at this point it would be interesting to trace the origin and development of ragtime, but that we must pass over. I go straight to the statement that ragtime is the one artistic production by which America is known the world over. It has been all-conquering, and is everywhere hailed as 'American music.'

"Of course, there are those who will deny that it is an artistic production. American musicians, especially, instead of investigating ragtime, dismiss it with a contemptuous word. But that has always been the course of scholasticism in every branch of art. Whatever new thing the people like is pool-pooled; whatever is popular is spoken of as not worth while. The fact is, nothing great or enduring, especially in music, has ever sprung full-fledged and unprecedented from the brain of any master; the best that he gives to the world he gathers from the hearts of the people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius.

"In spite of the bans which musicians and teachers have placed upon it, the people still demand and enjoy ragtime. One thing can not be denied: it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness; it appeals universally; not only the American, but the English, the French, and even the German people, find delight in it.

"In fact, there is not a corner of the civilized world in which it is not known, and this proves its originality, for if it were an imitation, the people of Europe at least would not have found it a novelty. And it is proof of a more important thing; it is proof that ragtime possesses the vital spark, without which any artistic production, no matter how approved its form may be, is dead."

In spite of the amount of "worthless, vicious imitation," Mr. Johnson contends that there is enough that is genuine, mentioning "The Memphis Blues" where he thinks "the musician will find not only great melodic beauty, but a polyphonic structure that is amazing." Continuing:

"I have spoken of 'The Memphis Blues' as a composition. Strictly speaking, it is not a composition. The name of the composer printed on the copies is Handy, who is a negro musician of Memphis; but 'The Memphis Blues,' is one of those negro songs which, like *Topsy*, 'just grew.' However, that is another story.

"We are all familiar with the great influence that ragtime has had on music in America. Most people will recognize that influence on the musical comedy stage, but not many know that ragtime has even influenced our religious music. I do not know how many of us here are familiar with Gospel hymns, but if you are, you can at once see the great difference between the songs of thirty years ago, such as 'In the Sweet Bye and Bye,' 'The Ninety and Nine,' etc., and the up-to-date, syncopated tunes that are sung in Sunday-schools and like meetings to-day.

"Now, these dances which I have referred to in passing and ragtime music may be lower forms of art, but they give evidence of a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms. Even now we need not stop at the negro's accomplishment through these lower forms. In the spirituals or slave songs the negro has given America not only its only folk-songs, but a mass of noble music. I never think of this music but I am struck by the wonder, the miracle, of its production. How did the men who originated them manage to do it? The sentiments are easily accounted for; they are mostly taken from the Bible; but the melodies, where did they come from, some of them so weirdly sweet, and others so wonderfully strong? Take, for instance, 'Go Down, Moses.' I doubt that there is a stronger theme in the whole musical literature of the world."

Mr. Johnson expresses his wonder that "this greatest gift of the negro" should have been the most neglected of all that he possesses:

"Money and effort have been expended upon his development in every other direction except this. This gift has been regarded as a sort of side-show, something for occasional exhibition, whereas it is the magic thing; it is the touchstone; it is that by which the negro can bridge all chasms. No class of persons, however hostile, can listen to negroes singing this wonderful music without having all their hostility melted down. Any one who can hear negroes sing from their hearts 'Nobody Knows de Trouble I See' without shedding tears must indeed have a heart of stone. This very music can be used as bond.

"I believe the negro possesses a valuable and much-needed gift that he will contribute to the future American democracy. I have tried to point out that the negro is here not merely to be a beneficiary of American democracy, not merely to receive. He is here to give something to American democracy. Out of his wealth of artistic and emotional endowment he is going to give something that is wanting, something that is needed, something that no other element in all the nation has to give."