



Handout 3 - Historical Accounts of Slavery and Slave Music

Document 1 - Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 1807:

BOOK
IV

Of those imitative arts in which perfection can be attained only in an improved state of society, it is natural to suppose that the Negroes have but little knowledge. An opinion prevails in Europe that they possess organs peculiarly adapted to the science of music; but this I believe is an ill-founded idea. In vocal harmony they display neither variety nor compass. Nature seems in this respect to have dealt more penuriously by them than towards the rest of the human race. As practical musicians, some of them, by great labour and careful instruction, become sufficiently expert to bear an under-part in a public concert; but I do not recollect ever to have seen or heard of a Negro who could truly be called a fine performer on any capital instrument. In general they prefer a loud and long-continued noise to the finest harmony, and frequently consume the whole night in *beating on a board with a stick*. This is in fact one of their chief musical instruments; besides which, they have the *Banja* or *Merriwang*, the *Dundo* and the *Goombay*; all of African origin. The first is an imperfect kind of violincello; except that it is played on by the finger like the guitar; producing a dismal monotony of four notes. The *Dundo* is precisely a tabor; and the *Goombay* is a rustic drum; being formed of the trunk of a hollow tree, one end of which is covered with a

sheep's skin. From such instruments nothing like a regular tune can be expected, nor is it attempted.

CHAP.
III.

Their songs are commonly *impromptu*, and there are among them individuals who resemble the *improvisatori*, or extempore bards, of Italy; but I cannot say much for their poetry. Their tunes, in general, are characteristic of their national manners; those of the Eboes being soft and languishing; of the Koromantyns, heroic and martial. At the same time, there is observable, in most of them, a predominant melancholy, which, to a man of feeling, is sometimes very affecting.



Document 2 - Thomas Clarkson, An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, 1786

With respect to their *dances*, on which such a particular stress has been generally laid, we fear that people may have been as shamefully deceived, as in the former instances. For from the manner in which these are generally mentioned, we should almost be led to imagine, that they had certain hours allowed them for the purpose of

joining in the dance, and that they had every comfort and convenience, that people are generally supposed to enjoy on such convivial occasions. But this is far from the case. Reason informs us, that it can never be. If they wish for such innocent recreations, they must enjoy them in the time that is allotted them for sleep; and so far are these dances from proceeding from any uncommon degree of happiness, which excites them to convivial society, that they proceed rather from an uncommon depression of spirits, which makes them even sacrifice their * rest, for the sake of experiencing for a moment a more joyful oblivion of their cares. For suppose any one of the *receivers*, in the middle of a dance, were to address his slaves in the following manner: “*Africans!*” “I begin at last to feel for your situation;” “and my conscience is severely hurt, when—” “ever I reflect that I have been reducing

“those to a state of misery and pain, who “have never given me offence. You seem “to be fond of these exercises, but yet you “are obliged to take them at such unreasonable hours, that they impair your “health, which is sufficiently broken by “the intolerable share of labour which I “have hitherto imposed upon you. I will “therefore make you a proposal. Will “you be content to live in the colonies, “and you shall have the half of every week “entirely to yourselves? or will you choose “to return to your miserable, wretched “country?”—But what is that which strikes their ears? Which makes them motionless in an instant? Which interrupts the festive scene?—their country?—transporting sound!—Behold! they are now flying from the dance: you may see them running to the shore, and, frantick as it were with joy, demanding with open arms an instantaneous passage to their beloved native plains.

Such are the *colonial delights*, by the representation of which the *receivers* would persuade us, that the *Africans* are taken from

their country to a region of conviviality and mirth; and that like those, who leave their usual places of residence for a summer’s amusement, they are conveyed to the colonies—to bathe,—to dance,—to keep holy-day,—to be jovial.—But there is something so truly ridiculous in the attempt to impose these scenes of felicity on the publick, as scenes which fall to the lot of slaves, that the *receivers* must have been driven to great extremities, to hazard them to the eye of censure.



Document 3 - James Kirke Paulding, Letters from the South, 1835

LETTER XI.

DEAR FRANK,

THE blacks form a distinguishing feature in the lowlands of the south; but diminish in numbers as you travel towards the mountains. They are of a great variety of shades,—from jet black to almost white. Indeed I have seen some of them who were still kept in bondage, whose complexions were rather lighter than their masters. I was much puzzled to account for these apparent caprices of nature in bestowing such singular varieties of complexion; but I soon found that she had good reasons to justify her.

The Negroes are in general a harmless race, although they are more apt than their masters to transgress the laws, partly I suppose because a great many things which are lawful to white men, are forbidden to the blacks. Being, in general, more ignorant than the whites of the poorer classes, they are of course more given to petty vices, and are, perhaps, not so honest. They seem, indeed, a gay, harmless, and unthinking race; for those who are likely to have few agreeable subjects for their thoughts, Providence seems kindly to divest, in some degree, of the capacity to reflect long on any thing. They are by far the most musical of any portion of the inhabitants of the United States, and in the even-

ing I have seen them reclining in their boats on the canal at Richmond, playing on the *banjo*, and singing in a style—I dare say, equal to a Venetian gondolier. Then they whistle as clear as the notes of the fife;—and their laugh is the very echo of thoughtless hilarity.

How would it mortify the pride of the white man, and humble his lordly sense of superiority, if it were indeed found, that these poor fellows were happier than those who affect to pity their miseries. And yet it is possible,—and, from my soul, I hope it is so; for then I should be relieved from certain doubts about the equal distributions of Providence, that confound me not a little. They certainly are exempt from many of the cares that beset their masters,—and instead of being in bondage to the future, and slaves to their offspring, have every assurance, that the sons of their old masters will be the masters of their sons, and keep them, at least, from want. Then they dance with a glee, to which the vivacity of French peasants is nothing; and indeed enjoy, with a much keener zest than we, all those pleasures that spring from thoughtlessness of the past, and carelessness of the future. Their intervals of leisure are precious; for to those who labour hard, idleness is perfect enjoyment; and to swing upon a gate all day, is a luxury of which people who have nothing to do can form no conception. After all, indeed, the great distinction between the very idle and the very laborious is, that the first lack leisure and luxuries,—the last, appetite and employment. Don't mistake, and suppose that I am the advocate of slavery. But yet

I am gratified when I can persuade myself, that a race of men which is found in this situation in almost every Christian land, is not without some little enjoyments, that sweeten the bitter draught of slavery, and prevent its being all gall.

Until they can be freed, without endangering the community, infringing the established rights of property, and rendering themselves even more wretched, it is some comfort to see them well treated by their masters. And wo, wo to the man who adds one feather to the weight they are destined to bear. He shall assuredly meet the vengeance of the Being who is all mercy to the weak and the ignorant,—all justice to the wise and the strong. Wo to those who, tempted by avarice, or impelled by vengeance, shall divide the parent from its offspring, and sell them apart in distant lands! A cruel and inhuman act;—for it is seldom we see the ties of kindred or of conjugal affection, stronger than in the poor negro. He will travel twelve, fifteen, or twenty miles, to see his wife and children, after his daily labour is over, and return in the morning to his labour again. If he becomes free, he will often devote the first years of his liberty to buying their freedom;—thus setting an example of conjugal and parental affection, which the white man may indeed admire; but, it is feared, would seldom imitate. Farewell.



Document 4- William Dickson, Letters on Slavery, 1784

But, besides the conviction forced on my mind, by arguments from analogy and by the general behaviour of the negroes, it may be proper to mention some particular facts which have had their weight with me, and may have their weight with others, in proving the natural equality of the Africans to the Europeans. Many similar facts, I must have witnessed, which have slipped from my memory, though the conviction they worked remains; just as a man may forget the demonstration of a mathematical proposition, but may retain and be convinced of the truth of the conclusion.

It cannot be denied that the negroes, when put to a trade which happens to coincide with the bent of their genius, become as good, and, sometimes, better artificers, than white men. I have seen a white carpenter drudging with the saw, jacking-plane, &c. and who could not lay off his work properly, while a black one was employed in making panel-doors, sash-windows, &c. I have known the carpenter's work of a good house of two stories, with a pavillion-roof, king-posts, &c. planned and conducted,

by a black carpenter.—On the doors of some of the negro huts, I have observed wooden locks, at once simple and well contrived, and which it was impossible to open, without the wooden key, which had two or three square, polished prominencies, adapted to the internal parts of the lock, which I have also seen, but it cannot be explained without a model.—In the learned Dr. Burney's History of Music, there are figures of several ancient musical instruments, by a comparison with which, the banjay or coromantin drum would lose nothing. This last is a most ear-piercing instrument; but, being prohibited, is but seldom used, by the negroes, in Barbadoes. The black musicians, however, have substituted, in its place, a common earthen jar, on beating the aperture of which, with the extended palms of their hands, it emits a hollow sound, resembling the more animating note of the drum.—As silver-smiths and watch-makers, the negroes shew no want of genius. I have employed a black watch-maker who was instructed in the art, by a most ingenious mechanic and natural philosopher, in Bridgetown. That worthy person (now deceased) was bred a mathematical instrument maker, in London; and I knew him to be a person of too strict probity to have put people's watches into improper hands.—But, without enumerating such instances, I might, at once, have appealed, for a proof of African ingenuity, to the fabric and colours of the Guinea cloths, which most people must have seen.—By the word *mechanic* is generally meant a person who makes but little use of his rational faculty; but it must be remembered that *mechanical contrivance* is one of the highest departments of reason. Nor can this be otherwise; since, the science of mechanics depends entirely on mathematics, and hath exercised the genius of an Archimedes, of a Galilæo, of an Emerson, of a M'Laurin, and, above all, of that great ornament of this island, and of the human species, the immortal *Newton*.

The fondness of the negroes for music, and the proficiency they sometimes make in it, with little or no instruction, is too well known to need support, from particular instances. This their taste for melody and harmony, if it does not demonstrate their rationality, ought, at least, to be admitted as an argument in proving their *humanity*.