

Across the Color Line: The African South

A Teacher's Study Guide

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In this varied performance program featuring the calabash gourd banjo, a one-string diddley bow, acoustic and slide guitar, Scott Ainslie tours and teaches the music of the American South where European and African musical traditions cross-pollinated to make the powerful hybrids that have long dominated popular music in our nation and, subsequently in the world. Picking up the banjo Scott Ainslie brings his broad musical and scholarly expertise forward in a program that profiles the broad impact of African musical and cultural traditions found in Old-time mountain music, Blues, and Gospel music in the American South.

America as a Melting Pot?

America is often described as a melting pot when a more apt and accurate description may be that of a salad bowl, where each element retains its character and particular history as it combines with other elements in a harmonious blend.

Trauma and Cultural Survival

For many centuries, slave holders and apologists have advanced the ideas that Africa had no culture worthy of the name, or that what culture it had was destroyed in the infamous 'middle passage' – that torturous journey that began with being captured, bought, or kidnapped into chains and ended, after months of captivity and a six to eight week ocean voyage packed into the hold of a slave ship in frightening conditions, with one's being sold into a lifetime of servitude on the auction block in the New World.

The first corporations of the world were founded to establish and control the African slave trade. They were organizations designed to diffuse the moral responsibility for this particular horror while concentrating capital and profits – work they did well, but at a devastating human cost.

Separating a people from their families, relatives, tribal and language group and subjecting them to the brutality of the corporate slave trade did have a traumatic effect on the individuals bought or stolen out of Africa.

But, imagine yourself torn from your family and your culture. You go walking down the street to the river for a swim or to get some water and are set upon by strangers. You are captured, beaten, chained together and force-marched away from everything you have ever known.

The reports we have from contemporary people who have been kidnapped and held for long periods of time against their will, in seclusion from everyone and everything they have know,

tell us that when every physical connection to what we love and hold dear is taken from us, we hold tightly to every detail of what has been lost. Religious details and practices, cultural beliefs and practices, the faces and every remembered detail of our loved ones – how they sit, talk, cook, eat, sing, dance, and worship becomes precious.

The parts of our lives that cannot be invaded, parts that cannot be taken from us, remain inside us and become a bastion of our own identities and our own histories. Whatever is done to the body, wherever the body is taken, a part of the spirit, soul, memories and history of a strong person will survive within them.

Clinging to this internal part becomes a survival mechanism. When we lose our history, our memories, our culture, our families, we can lose our will to live. When we survive whatever they have done to us, there is no question that an important part of our history, our memories of our families, and our culture survives with us. We are not a solitary species. We survive together. We die when isolated.

It is this precious, strongly held memory of African family, language, and culture that conveys the African *retentions* – the raw materials out of which African American culture is built – into African-American and then American culture.

African Retentions

Some of the ingredients of American music come from Europe, some were indigenous to the Native Americans, and there are elements from Africa, as well. The African elements are recognized as African *retentions* – parts of African tradition that survived the dreaded 'Middle Passage' – and are retained in American and African-American music and culture today.

African retentions in American music include:

Call & Response: a structure rooted in communal singing in which a solo call is answered by a group response – adapted to include instrumental responses in Delta Blues, a change that led to the musical conversations' evident in Jazz, Black (and subsequently, White) Gospel, Rock 'n' Roll, Heavy Metal guitar solos and much more.

Rhythmic Variation: used as an expressive element in much the same way that European musicians vary harmony and melody for expressive effect. African musicians vary meter and beat sub-divisions (especially 3:2 contrasts) in a complex layering of simple rhythmic patterns to create highly complex sound scapes.

Syncopation: the placing of rhythmic pulses off the established beat---an extension of the rhythmic variations that drive African-American music and dance styles.

Emotional Singing: which can include shouting, crying, screaming and other speech sounds not typically found in European singing prior to the 1950's and 60's, when African-American based vocal styles began to be heard more widely and crossed the color line to be employed by white performers. [In your mind, compare Julie Andrews and Aretha Franklin; Perry Como and Ray Charles; Pat Boone and Little Richard, etc.]

Timbre/Tonal Variation: within the voice of the singer or an instrument. Tonal variations to engage the emotions of the listener play an important roll in African-based musical cultures. The employment of distortion and the incorporation of a noise element (with loosely nailed bottle caps or ring-fans on the lead drums [djembe], for instance), as

well as, the shift in timbre between a chest voice, falsetto and a more nasal facial resonance all become expressive elements to be employed and varied according to the instincts and skill of the performer. Each shift awakens a different emotional response in the listener.

Even the youngest students can identify these characteristics after they are explicitly presented to them. Kindergarten students have readily brought in music from home that demonstrates some of these African characteristics, and, as you might expect, the genres that show up include Gospel, Country, Heavy Metal, Hip-Hop, Jazz, Rock, Folk, Contemporary Ballads, Reggae, Ska, World Beat and Funk.

Work Songs

In the central Sub-Saharan West African cultures from which most American slaves were pulled, there were songs to accompany almost every repetitive daily activity: for harvesting, for grinding corn, for washing clothing, for walking, for carrying fire wood, for threshing wheat. It was natural for song to be transferred from the harsh physical environment of Africa to the harsh social and physical environments that awaited Africans caught up in American slavery.

These songs could coordinate communal labor tasks by establishing the pace at which the work progressed as well as coordinate the movements of different members of the work force. They also lighten the psychological burden of repetitive tasks and provide social relief from the isolation such labor can require.

An Axe or Chopping Song: The Walking Blues

First recorded as *My Black Mama* by first generation blues musician Eddie 'Son' House in 1932 and popularized as *The Walkin' Blues* by Robert Johnson's recording of essentially the same piece in 1937, this song has its roots squarely in the work song traditions of America and West Africa.

Axe or Chopping Songs were used to pace and coordinate any overhead swinging motion – from driving railroad spikes, to chopping logs or chopping weeds out of cotton.

If we were chopping logs in a gang or slave labor situation, the log would lie on the ground between us. You would stand right in front of me with the axe you had sharpened before day break. Five feet away, I would stand directly in front of you with my axe.

You swing your axe to your right side, typically, and sink it into the log. You break it free and get it, your hands and head out of my way and then I swing on my right side. We take chips out of the log by alternating strokes of different sides of the same cut.

This is insanely dangerous. No one is supposed to stand within 180 degrees in front of you when you're swinging an axe. The heads can come off, you may lose your grip on the handle. You can kill someone.

But life was cheap, especially after the Civil War in leased convict labor settings which persisted legally in the South up until the 1940s and informally up into the 1960s and the Civil Rights Era. It was up to the workers to protect themselves and they did it with songs.

The songs provided a rhythm by which we could coordinate the timing of our chopping. The song also paced how fast or how slow the work would proceed, while maintaining the safety of coordinated chopping. This is how it worked.

The music, in 4/4 time, has four quarter notes per measure. The downbeat, the first quarter note was left empty and the pick-up notes from the measure before led up to that unsung downbeat. You chop on beat #1 and sing 2, 3, 4 then your partner would chop on the next downbeat, alternating as you go.

There are written accounts in the *Land Where The Blues Began* by Alan Lomax, as well as video in the DVD program associated with the book, that demonstrate songs like this at work. On the infamous Mississippi State Penitentiary, Parchman Farm, there are accounts of four convicts, all armed with axes, chopping down one live oak tree, chopping in tandem, working in alternate pairs. You don't replace one of these guys without teaching him the song! Someone will get killed.

This way of organizing a song, with the strongly rhythmic downbeat empty, moves up into rock and roll and heavy metal music on the back of this one song, *The Walkin' Blues*. In this piece, we can hear the vestiges of this old work song rhythm and the roots of rock and roll.

The Different Musical Scales of Europe and Africa

Two scales from different continents collide in the American South where Africans and Europeans lived intimately, if uneasily and violently, for hundreds of years.

In Blues, Gospel, and Spirituals, the seven note major scale of Europe eventually provides the harmonies while the melodies are sung in a five note scale which depending on where you start provides either a major or a minor cast to the music.

The notes of this Minor Pentatonic scale in E are:

E G A B D.

(A 12-Bar Blues in E Major would be sung in this minor pentatonic scale.)

Using these same notes but starting the scale on G yields a Major Pentatonic:

G A B D E.

(The contemporary melody for Amazing Graces lays out easily here).

Major or Minor?

The tonal major-minor ambiguity created by using major harmonies from Europe and a minor pentatonic melody from Africa in some ways signifies these two cultures competing for space in American music. It also has made it a powerful cultural hybrid that has dominated more than a century of popular music in America and around the world.

The old Spirituals, Blues, and much of the later Gospel Music (a combination of Blues music with spiritual words and themes) are all sung in the pentatonic scale of West Africa.

See the relationships of these two scales in the PDF document below.

If you are not a musician, your music teacher or a colleague who is a musician, will be able to demonstrate these scales to the class.

I have often put sticky notes on the keys of a piano or keyboard and allowed students to solo over a 12 bar blues progression, playing any of these five notes, shaping a melody or motive

by repeating notes, leaping and moving step by step through the marked notes. The results are instructive.

MAJOR SCALE IN KEY OF E [EUROPEAN SCALE]

E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#
I		III	IV	V		VII
E	G		A	B	D	

MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE IN KEY OF E [AFRICAN SCALE]

The Blues are a hybrid music that results from the collision of a minor pentatonic scale out of Africa (in which most spirituals, blues, and traditional gospel are sung) with the standard major scale and its instruments and harmonies from Europe.

First perceived by Whites as 'weird' harmonies and melodies have become very much the stock and trade of American music where Black and White people have been living intimately—if uneasily—for nearly four hundred years.

The familiar major scale is the Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti scale. The minor pentatonic scale contains the harmonically important I, IV, and V scale tones upon which so much of western harmony depends, but differs from the major scale by having a 'flatted third' and 'flatted seventh'.

In other common keys, for instance, this African scale would be:

A	C	D	E	G
G	B \flat	C	D	F
D	F	G	A	C
C	E \flat	F	G	B \flat

The First Gospel Song

Modern Gospel is distinct from the old Spirituals because it is a hybrid of Blues rhythms and musical settings with the themes and lyrics of the Spirituals. It is part Church and part Juke Joint, and as such, was rejected by much of the Church when it first appeared and performances of it were forbidden in various congregations all over the country.

Thomas A. Dorsey (1899–1993), known as Georgia Tom in his Blues recordings and Reverend Thomas A. Dorsey on his Gospel recordings is commonly accorded the first Gospel song, *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*.

Dorsey wrote the song when he learned that his wife and the child she was bearing were both lost in childbirth in August of 1932. He settled to the piano, inconsolate, and the song poured out of him: half blues, half spiritual.

Mr. Dorsey can be seen telling this story in the 1981 gospel music documentary *Say Amen, Somebody*.

Over time, Gospel with its vibrant rhythms, expressive instruments, drums and guitars, entered the mainstream black church and its earlier injunctions against clapping, dancing, and movement fell away. The so-called ‘Devil’s Music’ of Blues entered the church bringing all the passion of the Friday and Saturday night juke joints into the heart of the Sunday services.

It is Gospel, this powerful hybrid of Blues and Spiritual music, that provided the breeding ground for every great black, female vocalist of the 20th Century – from Mahalia Jackson to Aretha Franklin to Whitney Houston.

Dorsey’s song, *Precious Lord* was Dr. Martin Luther King’s favorite hymn and Mahalia Jackson sang it at his funeral service. It is a song of profound loss – and profound hope:

*Precious Lord, take my hand.
Lead me on. Help me stand.*

*I am tired. I am weak.
I am worn.*

*Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light.*

*Take my hand, Precious Lord,
lead me home.*

African Influences in Old-Time Southern Appalachian Fiddle & Banjo Music

If you travel from New England, listening to the fiddling traditions, south along the Appalachian Trail, as you cross the Mason-Dixon Line exiting Pennsylvania at the northern border of Maryland and over into West Virginia, you will notice the music is dramatically

different. The same melodies may be played, but the performance of them will be dramatically different.

Our Southern Fiddling traditions were literally *Africanized* by black musicians and the repertoire was shaped in the later part of the 19th Century by the wholesale adoption of the Banjo – with its African structure and playing technique – as the favored accompaniment instrument for the old Irish and Scottish pipe and fiddle tunes brought to the mountains by immigrants from those nations, who like the Africans brought their culture with them and found ways to practice it in a new land, among different people.

The fiddling traditions of the North were passed down to succeeding generations with little input from any other cultures. In the South, the traditions, instruments and tunes were taken up by black musicians who shaped and influenced the performance and style of the delivery of the melodies of Scotland and Ireland with their own culture's sensibilities.

The impact on the music is very pronounced. Anyone can notice it.

In the North, hewing close to the inherited dance styles and strictures of Irish and Scottish music and culture, the music has a pronounced rhythmic emphasis on the first and third beats of the measure. The ornamentation of the music is typically melodic rather than rhythmic and the tone sought is that of a clear, singing amateur violinist replete with vibrato.

There is no quicker way to ruin a Northern fiddle music session than by introducing a Southern fiddler.

The Southern fiddler's emphasis is on the second and fourth (back beat) beats of the measure. The variations within the tunes tend to be highly syncopated rhythmic variations including shifts from a duple meter to a triple meter (3:2 like in African drumming), and all the tonal variations are welcome in the Southern tradition where, like in black singing styles, every noise the voice can make to express itself is 'legal.'

Mix these traditions together and you get a musical train wreck with the emphasis of the performance practices being on almost exactly the opposite sets of elements throughout.

The Origins of the Banjo: The Akonting

Often referred to as a 'banjar' in early writings, white scholars and musicians have long thought the banjo to be an African instrument. We have had early descriptions, drawings and paintings of the banjo in African hands. In short, we have had a lot of circumstantial evidence, but few actual observable facts.

In the mid-1980s, a traditional musician and MBA-educated Gambian, Daniel Jatta, chased down the relationships between both the structure and playing styles of the *akonting* a traditional instrument of his Jola tribe and the American 5-string banjo.

A dutch musical researcher heard Daniel Jatta speaking on this connection and wrote a long article profiling Daniel and the Akonting for The Old Time Herald, a journal devoted to Old-Time music published in Durham, NC.

Some of that material can be found here:

<http://www.oldtimeherald.org/akonting/index.html>

Other resources on-line include:

<http://www.myspace.com/akonting>

You can go on YouTube.com today and find Daniel Jatta and other akonting players demonstrating and performing on these instruments. You will see their picking hands doing what I learned to do from elderly white mountain musicians in the 1970s: play claw-hammer style.

The Akonting is a three-string version of the American banjo, which during the minstrel show's heyday had only four strings – a short drone string on top of the neck and three melody/chording strings below it.

The fifth string was added to the banjo late in the 19th Century in America, but because the strings are numbered from the ground up on contemporary instruments, this has caused confusion among those who don't know the instrument's history. The short drone string (the contemporary 5th string) has always been a part of the instrument and is integral to its structure and playing. The added string was a chording/melody string that runs the entire length of the neck.

The Banjo's Influence on Fiddling Repertoire

As a young man, at 19, I met and learned to play Old-Time music from many senior masters of the Southern Fiddle & Banjo tradition, including Tommy Jarrell, Fred Cockerham, Kyle Creed, and the Hammons Family of West Virginia (Lee, Burl, Maggie, Sherman) as well as other significant senior musicians, most of whom were born in the late 19th Century and were in the seventies and eighties when I met them in 1971.

One of the significant impacts of the wide-spread use of the banjo as an accompaniment instrument is rhythmic. The African claw-hammer style of playing the banjo is perfectly suited to playing duple rhythms – songs in two or four. It has been adapted to play in triple time for waltzes and jigs by some committed and inventive players, doing so is awkward and takes considerable adaptation to become facile at this. And, while admirable in some ways, such playing lies outside the scope of the tradition.

The banjo is great at playing *reels* – dances in 4/4 time. And as it became the available and preferred accompaniment instrument, waltzes and jigs seem to have fallen out of the repertoire of many Southern fiddlers.

Tommy Jarrell noted on one particular evening that his father had played jigs and waltzes, but his repertoire had only one or two waltz songs left in it and he played no jigs (6/8 time signature) at all. A part of the *Africanization* of this tradition was the abandonment of pieces that did not fit well with the African playing technique favored by traditional Claw-Hammer banjo players.

In the North, where guitars, pianos, mandolins (and their relatives the four-string tenor banjo) were the primary accompaniment instruments the jigs and waltzes survived this pruning that took place in Mt. Airy, North Carolina and its environs where Tommy Jarrell grew up as the repertoire of his father's generation was passed to the son.

Resources

On iTunes

Old-Time Music: Comparative versions of the fiddle tune Soldier's Joy by Fiddle Fiddle Fiddle in the Northern Style on their album *Turkey in the Straw*; and in the Southern more Africanized style of the iconic Tommy Jarrell on his *The Legacy of Tommy Jarrell* CD.

Work Songs: Recordings of Son House's My Black Mama to compare with versions of The Walkin' Blues by Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Bonnie Raitt, and others.

Spiritual and Gospel Music: Contrasting versions of Wade In the Water by the Badgett Sisters of the North Carolina mountains in an old spiritual singing tradition where clapping, moving the body, and percussion were strictly forbidden, and by The Staple Singers on their *Freedom Highway* CD.

Also, in memory of the loss of Dr. King to a sniper's bullet in Memphis on April 4, 1968, listen to Take My Hand, Precious Lord sung by Mahalia Jackson.

Notice that the rhythms of the piece float and her phrasing is entirely free, the piano player is following her carefully, not pushing or confining her with any conventional notion of meter. The emotions of each line are free to be expressed as the singer leads the accompanist through the song, not the other way around.

African Rhythmic Retentions: Listen to Jin-Go-Lo-Ba by African master drummer Olatunji and compare it with Jingo by Santana; and to Hey, Hey (Indians Coming) by The Wild Tchoupitoulas, mardi gras Indians from New Orleans featuring the Neville Brothers and the Funky Meters on their self-titled album.

On YouTube.com

12 Bar Blues Backing Tracks: Are available on YouTube.com in a variety of keys and settings, both major and minor for free streaming in the classroom. Search YouTube.com for SulliBackingTracks.

EX: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIUNr6cF0gk> 12-bar in A Major

EX: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubLHalA53ck> 12-Bar in A minor

The Akonting/Banjo connections: Look up 'akonting' or 'ekonting' in an internet search or YouTube.com search. You will find Daniel Jatta, Sana Ndiaye, among others.

Old-Time Music: Search for **Tommy Jarrell: Let Me Fall (1983)**. This is a fine example of young and senior old-time musicians playing together, recorded three years before Tommy's passing. (Full disclosure, I'm on this recording – and on a track playing with Tommy Jarrell.)

Folk Archival sites: Alan Lomax's American Patchwork collection can be accessed at: <http://research.culturalequity.org>.

A number of videos of African music and dance may be viewed at:

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/video/africa.aspx>

Also, my friend and colleague, the late Mike Seeger introduces and performs a Thomas Clarence Ashley song, **Walkin' Boss**, that Clarence learned from black railroad workers. This is a good example of how low the barrier was between black and white musicians when it came to the music, at least:

http://www.folkways.si.edu/explore_folkways/mike_seeger.aspx

Other BluesRoots Resources for the Classroom

Books:

Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History of the Mississippi Delta (Robert Palmer, 1982) A highly readable, anecdotal tour of the Delta's geography, personalities, customs and history told from a musician's perspective.

The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America (Nicholas Lemann, 1992) The best analysis of America's own Black Diaspora that took place between 1940 and the early 1960's. Lemann follows specific Black families out of the deep South and into the urban North with remarkable insight and compassion. A classic of contemporary history, this book is vivid, heartfelt and features a brilliant analysis of the social, political and cultural forces at work.

Roll, Jordan, Roll (Eugene D. Genovese, 1976) A comprehensive interdisciplinary examination of "the world that the slaves made". This book presents an eloquent look at black and white power dynamics in the slave period and the forces they set loose in Southern culture and society.

Slave Nation: How Slavery United The Colonies and Sparked the American Revolution (Alfred & Ruth Blumrosen, 2006) An impressive documentation of slavery's role in drawing Southern states into the Revolution, following on a 1772 legal ruling in England rejecting slavery as an insult to British Common Law traditions – a ruling that all slave holders knew would eventually apply, not only to Britain, but to all her colonies. Understanding that Americans fought two wars to protect the institution of slavery will change how we see ourselves and our place in the world. In early drafts of the Declaration of Independence the document read: "All men are born equally free and independent..." This was changed by Thomas Jefferson to "All men were created equal..." to prevent any implication that slaves should be free.

Robert Johnson/At The Crossroads (Scott Ainslie, 1992) Guitar transcriptions, annotated lyrics, historical introductory notes to each of Johnson's songs and a biography highlight this ground breaking work on Mississippi's most famous blues legend. Praised for its scholarship, as well as the accuracy of its transcriptions, this book has a place on the shelves of historians and musicians, alike.

Rising Tide: The 1927 Flood of the Mississippi and How It Changed America (John Barry, 1998) This is another epic cross-disciplinary study of events in the Mississippi River valley that stretches across two centuries and cultures. One of the most influential and readable books I have read in the last decade.

Discography:

Roots 'n' Blues (Columbia/Legacy) white and black roots for American Blues including mountain string band, early country, gospel, primitive blues, cajun music and early rhythm and blues.

Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings (Sony/Columbia) all 41 surviving takes of the twenty-nine songs recorded by this Mississippi Blues legend in the 1930's which upon their re-release in 1962 literally changed the direction of rock through the work of Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and others.

Other artists:

Deep South/Delta - Chicago: Son House, Muddy Waters, Blind Blake, Jimmy Reed, J.B. Lenoir, Bukka White, B.B. King, Leadbelly.

Upper South/Eastern Piedmont - Rev. Gary Davis, Blind Boy Fuller, Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee; Libba Cotton and Etta Baker (NC); W. C. Handy, Vera Hall, Johnny Shines (AL); Blind Willie McTell, Peg Leg Howell, Barbecue Bob (GA).

Magazine Articles:

North Carolina Blues, Parts 1 & 2 (Living Blues Magazine, February and April, 1993) Profiles of living blues musicians from all across the state, a valuable resource! Available from Living Blues, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677.

Interview: Scott Ainslie (Acoustic Musician, October, 1995) An interview that exposes much of the background and social context of blues and addresses some of the issues that Blues music faces today.

Videos:

The Land Where The Blues Began (Alan Lomax) An unequalled video introduction to the American musical and cultural background of Mississippi Delta Blues (a companion to Lomax's book by the same name).

Searching For Robert Johnson (John Hammond) A video tour of the Delta with blues artist John Hammond, Jr. as your host, examining the haunts and few existing acquaintances of this blues legend.

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