

Black Music Month

By MICHAEL JAY FRIEDMAN

Early African American genres influenced American popular music.



It is difficult to imagine American music without the rich and continuing innovations of African Americans. Even as today's hip-hop and rap owe much

to the call-and-response patterns that black slaves brought from Africa, virtually every other American musical form similarly has been leavened by African American traditions and innovations.

Spurred by songwriter and jazz trumpeter Irvin Mayfield plays at the celebration of Black Music Month at the White House.

record producer Kenny Gamble, President Jimmy Carter in 1979 designated June as Black Music Month. President George W. Bush continues to issue an annual Black Music Month proclamation.

The original African Americans were transported across the Atlantic to lives of involuntary servitude. Church-going slaves of the 17th and 18th centuries would repeat, in call-and-response fashion, the hymns and psalms sung by the service leader, a pattern used in music, religion and civic gatherings in West Africa. In the plantation fields of the

American South, they employed these patterns in work songs, field hollers and other kinds of folk music.

The slaves' religious hope spurred development of the "Negro spiritual," often called a "jubilee," in which singers look forward to some day having freedom from work and oppression, in Heaven. Among the most beloved spirituals were *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and *Roll Jordan Roll*.

By the beginning of the 20th century, African American music had evolved into new forms. Composers like Scott Joplin and Eubie Blake pioneered a piano style combining a regularly accented left (bass) hand beat with a highly syncopated right (treble) melody. It was called ragtime, and was one of the genres that later combined to form jazz. Compositions like Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag* (1899) transcended racial divisions.

At about the same time, the work songs and other black music of the South gave birth to the blues. Incorporating a call and response pattern in lyrics or between vocals and instrumentation and unique har-

monic progressions, blues artists sang of sadness and melancholy in love. W.C. Handy's *Memphis Blues* (1912) is a leading example. The blues, in its many regional and other variations, remains popular in its own right, and its influence is apparent in the development of jazz, rock and later musical forms.

The black church remained a rich source of musical inspiration. By 1930, elements of the blues and old Negro spirituals were crystallizing into gospel music. Mahalia Jackson, who performed at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy and the funeral of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., is frequently cited as the finest vocalist of the gospel tradition.

Gospel placed a direct imprint on later, more secular forms of black music, like rhythm and blues (R & B) and soul. Artists like Aretha Franklin (a preacher's daughter), Sam Cooke (a preacher's son) and the Reverend Al Green each incorporated gospel elements into their personal, form-transcending styles.



Michael Jay Friedman is a USINFO staff writer.



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