other aspects of their society and culture, creating a new fusion of African-American culture.

**Overview of African Music Traditions**

**African Diversity**

Africa is a huge continent, roughly four times the size of the United States. At the time of the slave trade, it consisted of a vast number of "village states" and "family states," forming at least two thousand tribal groups who spoke somewhere in the vicinity of eight hundred distinct languages divided into twenty-four hundred dialects. Each of these social units had its unique history, language, pastimes, customs, and music traditions. Although most of the slaves were taken from the relatively confined coastal areas around the Gulf of Guinea, thousands of separate tribal constituencies existed, including the Ashanti, Wa, Twi, Akan, Ga, Ewe, Kwa, Yoruba, Mandingo, Tshi, and Ibo. Acknowledging this incredible diversity, there also were several areas of commonalities.

**Integration of Music with Life**

Music was thoroughly integrated into all aspects of society, serving as an important component in the observation and celebration of nearly every activity of the life cycle from birth to death, work to recreation, sowing to harvest, and hunts to feasts. Music also played an essential role in providing cultural cohesion, as most tribes used songs, stories, and dances to transmit important historical and social information from one generation to the next. Music was an essential and inseparable part of African life, heard in conjunction with other activities rather than separately as entertainment.

These elements were prescribed by tradition but blended according to the needs of the occasion.

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**Break-Out One**

**INSIGHT "African Americans" or "Blacks"?**

African Americans have been identified by a series of names, many assigned to them by whites. "Blacks" replaced the earlier appellations "Negro" and "colored" in the civil rights era of the 1960s as a term of pride and in conjunction with the Black Power movement. Many people eventually objected to the designation "black" because they felt it concentrated on racial characteristics and did not address their ethnic heritage. Furthermore, it was generally inaccurate in terms of skin color hue. The term "Afro American" followed, but was eventually displaced because of the association with the "Afro" hairstyle. The current most popular term is simply "African Americans." This term is still somewhat inaccurate, as in terms of ethnic background, the vast majority of contemporary African Americans possess a mixture of ethnic heritages. Although some African ethnicity is a common denominator, throughout the Americas there was substantial mixing with people of European and Native American (particularly Cherokee and Seminole) heritage. Thus, most African Americans today share a combination of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

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taking into account the age, sex, and status of the participants. The mixture of these elements was so thoroughly melded that excising a single element would render that element meaningless. For example, a master drummer might call people together to celebrate a successful harvest by beginning with a specific rhythmic pattern based on the inflection of words describing the harvest. This would then serve as the inspiration for participants to dance, sing, and act out the meaning of the words that the pattern conveyed. Music was such an integral part of being human that, in some of the languages, there is no indigenous word for "music"; there was no reason to give it a separate name.\(^2\)

**Close Relationship between Performer and Community**

A second common characteristic was the close relationship between the performer and the community. In Western traditions, it had been most common for specially trained musicians to perform for passive (though appreciative) audiences. In Africa, although there were professional or semiprofessional musicians and, for example, Ewe and Yoruba master drummers were highly skilled musicians who had spent years practicing and perfecting their art, there was not the strong separation between musician and audience. Most members of African societies took part in the musical activities. The master musicians might provide the drumming or singing leads, but everyone else participated in the musical performance by singing choral parts, dancing, or adding to the general rhythmic texture with their own drums or handclapping.\(^3\)

**Based in Oral Tradition and Improvisation**

A third shared characteristic was the importance of oral tradition. Although written language existed, most Africans depended on oral and aural tradition for the transmission of music. This means that the music is taught through performance and learned through hearing, as opposed to taught and learned through notation. This method of transmission encourages change. As the music passes from one generation to the next and is transported from one locale to another, the probability increases that song lyrics are misunderstood, melodies misremembered, or there are conscious attempts to change the music to make it more locally relevant. Perhaps more important in the context of African music, however, is a different concept of the function of performance and methods for creating music.

The European tradition values composition of "masterpieces" with precise directions conveyed in notation that ensure that the music can be accurately reproduced in the future and in different geographic locations. In West African traditions, oral transmission was used to preserve the general elements of the music, but what was valued was the "master" improvisations that appropriately fulfilled the function and met the aesthetic needs of the particular moment. Hence, unlike Westerners, Africans had no intention of reproducing precisely that specific music or performance at another time or in another location. Thus, it was expected that musicians and participants would improvise melodic ornamentation, rhythmic accompaniment, song forms, and dance movements that reflected the inspiration of the moment.

**Importance of Text**

An additional commonality was the importance of the text in music. One of the reasons is that African languages themselves are musical, based on inflection and requiring a specific relation of pitches for correct communication. The importance of language was reflected in African drumming. In fact, there is a Dogon legend that it was through the drum that God gave man the gift of speech.\(^4\) Drum idioms imitated speech patterns through the use of high and low drum timbres performed on female and male instruments whose

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 6.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 7.
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 6.
relative size produced different levels of pitch sounds. In this manner, drums could convey something as complex as a poem or as simple as a warning that a lion was near. For example, the phrase “Wo ho te sen?” (How do you do?), which consists of four tone levels in a specific rhythmic pattern, could be conveyed as follows:⁵

Tone Levels:   Wo  ho  te  sen?
               Low  High  Low  High
               Short  Long  Short  Long

In this manner, rhythm and pitch were used to effectively communicate text and convey messages, and these messages then served as the basis around which were formulated other musical elements such as harmony, form, and timbre.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF RHYTHM

Rhythm provided the very foundation for African music, and it flowed out of the words and the movement of human activities. Consequently, it was very fluid and could be either simple or complex. On a simple level, the short-long combination evident in the “Wo ho te sen?” example was a favored rhythmic pattern. But these and other patterns could be combined in such a manner as to create richly complex rhythmic textures. Following are examples of some of the most common rhythmic devices familiar to African-American slaves.

- **Multimeter** is a style in which the overall metric pattern consists of a series of measures that are each heard as having a different meter.
- **Polymeter** consists of two or more meters occurring simultaneously.
- **Prolongation** is a technique in which the duration of the beats gets progressively longer, obscuring the metric pulse.
- **Additive** is a technique in which there is no regular metric pulse because beats are continually added.

Prolongation and additives represent what some consider to be the essential difference between African and Western rhythm: in traditional Western rhythm, there is a consistent regular pulse that is organized into a recurring pattern (meter), which is then subdivided into smaller beats. In African rhythm, there is a consistent pulse, but it is organized into more fluid patterns that are perceived as accumulating rather than being subdivided.

**PREDOMINANCE OF HUMAN VOICE AND PERCUSSION**

A further commonality was the predominance of human voice and percussion. The human voice was used extensively and in a great variety of styles. For example in Ghana, the Akan used an “open” vocal quality that is similar to Western European styles, whereas the Frafra used a more intense tone, and others preferred falsetto.⁶ Additionally, when singing melodies, singers would employ different techniques to provide variation and ornamentation, such as extending vowels over several different notes, waver the pitch in a manner which resembles trills or vibrato, treating pitch as a continuum in slides and glissandos (like a siren as opposed to discrete notes), and using “grace” notes which are very short notes preceding the main note. Hence, the human voice was used in a great variety of ways to create music. In addition to voice, West Africans relied heavily on percussion instruments. Of the many different kinds of percussion instruments, some were instruments in the conventional sense, including many different drums, bells, gongs, rattles, and xylophones. But West Africans also used other means to contribute to the percussive texture, such as rhythmic use of vocal sounds and handclapping.

**USE OF CALL-AND-RESPONSE**

Another common tradition was the reliance on an antiphonal performance practice termed “call-and-response.” In this practice, a leader sings (or “calls”)
LISTENING GUIDE “Drum Rhythms”

Performing Artist: Field recording in Té village, Canton de Gan, Sous-Préfecture de Biankoura

This was recorded during a circumcision festival in the north of the Dan country. The Dan inhabits the western part of the Ivory Coast, and at the time of this recording the area included about two hundred thousand individuals of the Yakouba tribe. TheDan are skilled drummers who provide a rhythmic ostinato.

Instrumentation:
Variety of percussion instruments, including membranophones and idophones; some voice in background. The “master drummer” plays a drum that is a single-skinned main drum to which are attached four smaller drums so that the musician can play rhythms at various levels of pitch.

### Rhythm
- Complex polyrhythms

### Melody
- Not applicable

### Harmony
- Not applicable

### Texture
- Dense texture of layered rhythmic patterns

### Form
- The drummer begins alone and is joined by two others

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**Tuning and Tonal Systems**

A shared approach to tonality in African systems was the use of microtones within a tonal framework. Let us look at microtones first. In Western music, the octave has been divided into twelve equal parts, using eleven different pitches. This “equal temperament” tuning system is the basis for Western scales and harmonies. But in African music, the approach to the octave could be described as a continuum in which the entire span of frequencies is used. These microtones were used primarily by vocalists, who would use them to embellish and ornament melodies.

The African tonal framework used heptatonic scales (seven-toned scales that were modal rather than Western major or minor), hexatonic scales (sounding like major or minor scales but with one of the scale degrees absent, usually the fourth or fifth),

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and pentatonic scales (scales that use five tones). Several theorists have suggested that the superimposition of African scales on European diatonic scales resulted in two ambiguous tonal areas that, in turn, created the “blue notes” popular in blues and jazz. Musicians achieve these notes through “bending” the pitch either higher or lower. These blue notes may be the result of attempts to preserve the microtonal West African traditions within the equal temperament tuning context of Western music.

**African-American Music Within a Historical and Social Context**

**Colonial America**

Africans resisted enslavement from the time of capture in Africa and throughout slavery in the Americas. Estimates of the number of Africans that were exported in the slave trade range from ten million to twenty million, but that does not take into account the Africans who died resisting capture or who managed to commit suicide during the journey. About sixty thousand slaves successfully escaped over the three-century period of bondage. Slaves also fought back through feigning illness, destroying crops, animals, machinery, and houses, and even poisoning or killing their masters. There also were organized revolts. Beginning as early as the seventeenth century, the number of revolts exceeded 250 before the U.S. Congress abolished the slave trade in 1808. But, rather than leading to freedom, revolts generally led to death and bloody reprisals, and escapes led to recapture and often brutal punishment. Hence, most Africans were forced to resign themselves to a life of slavery. There were three main kinds of vocal music that were maintained or developed during the period of slavery.

Male and female African Americans, accompanied by some children, carry large loads of cotton that they have picked in the fields in this photograph from the 1860s. G. N. Bernard *Returning from the Cotton fields in South Carolina*, © 1860. Stereograph. Source: © Collection of the New York Historical Society, negative number 47843.
WORK SONGS

Slaves were used to meet the labor needs of the specific colony, such that in the northern colonies, slaves were used for domestic work and in trade, and in the South, slaves were used for domestic and agricultural work. Slaves did have some rights granted them by both law and by custom. For example, there were legal rights for support in age or sickness, limited instruction in religion and, in special cases, the right to file a suit and provide evidence. Custom also awarded slaves the rights to private property, marriage, free time, and, for females, the right to work in domestic areas or do lighter work. But masters were not bound to respect these rights and, in actual practice, slaves lived an unbearably harsh life. Furthermore, although atrocities such as branding, mutilation, chaining, and murder were forbidden by law, masters were not in much danger of prosecution if they broke the law, and instances of cruelty were common.

Because slaves’ lives were centered on labor, some of the earliest African-American songs were work songs developed to accompany labor. Typically sung in a responsorial manner between a leader and the rest of the workers, these songs served the function of motivating laborers, providing a sense of community, ensuring that the work progressed at a steady pace, and coordinating movements so that when axes or hoes were used, accidents were avoided.

Work songs had been an integral part of African culture long before Africans were forcibly brought to America as slaves. In both West and Central Africa, large and informal labor groups gathered together for mutual assistance, and music was used in a variety of ways to enhance and coordinate everyone’s work. When Africans were brought to America as slaves, this tradition was deeply embedded in their culture. Of course, working voluntarily within one’s native culture is quite different from working as a forced laborer in a foreign land, and hence the work song tradition of Africa was altered to adapt to the new environment. For example, references to gods and the religions of West Africa were suppressed, and there was no drumming, as drumming was generally prohibited because of its communicative powers.

But the African tonal language and the traditions of melodic ornamentation, improvisation, and call-and-response were retained. Additionally, the slaves’ work songs continued to serve the same basic function that they had in Africa. These responsorial work songs died out when the plantation system broke up and was replaced by small farms after the Civil War, but they were retained in the prison system to coordinate the labor of work gangs, and their influence can still be heard in prison work songs and in the work drills of military groups.

CRIES, CALLS, AND HOLLERS

Hollers, calls, and cries are terms often used synonymously to describe a melodic tradition that was used as a means for communicating across the fields and even to nearby plantations. This tradition was common in West Africa and it was also used with the slaves to convey a great variety of messages, from calling people to work to bringing them in from the fields, from conveying news to attracting attention of a girl. Field hands did not usually need to coordinate their movement with other workers (as, for example, did laborers who were wielding axes and hammers) and hence cries were sometimes used spontaneously to express a range of emotions from loneliness and homesickness to contentment or exhilaration. Often these chantlike expressions were rhythmically free and began on a high note (because the singer would be able to project over longer distances if he at least began singing at the top of his range) and descended in patterns emphasizing the interval of a third.

SPIRITUALS

Black spirituals include three types of songs: spirituals, jubilees, and shouts. Spirituals acquired their name because they were religious songs that bore a close relationship to the “holy spirit.” The texts focused on the Christian themes of faith, love, humility, and salvation. Jubilees tended to
be more exuberant than spirituals, because their origins were the jubilant expressions of “the heart” rather than “the spirit.” The texts tell God of the singer’s happiness. Shouts are songs used to accompany a specific type of dance in which the “shouters” formed and moved in a circle. Because these three types of songs are often difficult to distinguish from each other, in this chapter they are all discussed under the rubric “spirituals.”

There has been much discussion on whether the black spirituals originated as copies of white spirituals or whether they had their own unique origins in Africa. The American music scholar Gilbert Chase describes spirituals as “the most controversial body of music in the cultural history of America.” Proponents that Black spirituals derived from white Protestant traditions cite evidence that blacks were exposed to Anglo-American psalmody and hymnody as early as the mid-eighteenth century. They offer specific examples of slaves being given religious instruction, which, at the time, would have naturally included singing instruction. They point out that during the first Great Awakening (the religious revival that occurred in the colonies between 1720 and 1750) a Presbyterian minister named Samuel Davies distributed religious songbooks and Bibles to slaves. They provide quotes of whites who heard slaves singing psalms and hymns, such as in the following quote from the southern colonies in the 1760s:

My landlord tells me . . . they heard the Slaves at worship in their lodge, singing Psalms and Hymns in the evening, and again in the Morning, long before break of day . . .

Proponents that black spirituals have independent origins point out that although there is solid evidence that black and white spirituals coexisted, there is no evidence of the preexistence of white spirituals. Furthermore, they emphasize that the conditions of slavery were brutal and African Americans would have naturally sought to express through song their feelings of grief and outrage and their hope for a better life, just as they had expressed the whole gamut of emotions through song when they had not been slaves. Thus, in America, the slaves’ songs became the spirituals, field hollers, and other works songs that expressed their feelings in a wide variety of everyday endeavors. Advocates for this interpretation also cite accounts that demonstrate the differences between slave singing and white singing:

The voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate; and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper.

Recent scholarship, especially by African-American researchers, suggests that black spirituals were in existence by the end of the seventeenth century, earlier than the systematic exposure of slaves to white hymns and almost a century before the development of white spirituals.

Some scholars also have suggested that many of the spirituals were actual African melodies that were brought to the American shores. Kolinski has demonstrated that thirty-six of the spirituals he examined are identical to, or resemble closely, songs of West Africa. As an example, the spiritual “No More Auction Block” is almost identical to an Ashanti song of Ghana. New spirituals developed out of the spontaneous singing tradition and were “composed” by talented individuals. If these spontaneous songs were particularly effective, they were remembered and passed on through oral transmission. But there was little interest in slave music until after the Civil War, and black spirituals were not known to the outside world generally until the second half of the nineteenth century.

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10 Ibid., p. 39.
**Break-Out Three**

**INSIGHT The Double Language of Spirituals**

The African-American leader Frederick Douglass (c. 1817–1895), born and educated as a slave, recalled spirituals in his autobiography:

I did not, when a slave, fully understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs... They breathed the prayer and complaint of souls overflowing with the bitterest anguish...  

He and other former slaves such as Sojourner Truth also indicate that the language of the spirituals, in addition to conveying sincere emotional grief and spiritual piety, also held concealed meanings. Douglass recalled,

A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of "O Canaan, Sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan" something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North and the North was our Canaan.

Hence, the texts of the spirituals were replete with double meanings: "de Lord" could serve as a collective embodiment of the North that might intercede and help save the slaves from their bondage; "Heaven" (the North) or "Canaan" (Canada) also might refer to the location to which slaves hoped to escape; "Go down in the lonesome valley" might inform slaves to gather together in a secret meeting.

There is evidence that Nat Turner (1800–1831), a slave who served as the leader for a revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, may have written the spiritual "Steal Away" and that he intentionally imbued it with double meanings. Whether or not Turner actually wrote it, it is known that he used the spiritual to convene the meetings at which his rebellion was planned. The lyrics, which urge people to "steal away to Jesus," to "steal away home," and that "I ain't got long to stay here" may have conveyed the message to come to a meeting, to take a risk to acquire freedom, and perhaps even to return to Africa, and that the meeting was illegal and dangerous and must understandably be kept short. Turner's rebellion lasted several days. Fifty-seven whites were killed and sixteen of the conspirators were killed during the insurrection or hanged afterward, as was Turner himself. In the suppression that immediately followed, at least one hundred blacks were killed.

Turner's rebellion was one of several that occurred throughout the years of bondage. But, rather than resulting in freedom, such rebellions typically resulted in bloody reprisals. Hence, slaves were forced to continue to find solace in religion and in the singing of spirituals. Whether or not the lyrics of spirituals conveyed precise double meanings, there is no question that the vast majority of texts (e.g., "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home," "Deep river, my home is over Jordan" and "I am a poor wayfaring stranger, wandering through this life of woe . . .") reflect the sorrow and sense of displacement Africans felt as slaves in America.

This tradition of double meanings in African-American spirituals is evident in many forms of African-American music. For example, the lyrics of early blues and work songs also carried hidden meanings, asking about family and members and providing information that was helpful in planning escape. Finally, the use of musical lyrics to disguise communication continues to be evident in the double entendre sexual language and multilevel messages in blues, rhythm 'n' blues, jazz, and rap.

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12 Rouch, p. 5.
13 Groves