Falk Seminar papers in Research in Music History

2007

"Captivated" Music of Louisiana State Penitentiary

by Sarah Wall

Falk Seminar
Dr. Brockett
April 25, 2007

Popular music is sometimes viewed as a fleeting phenomenon that has little musicological-historical significance. However, American society is obsessed with this "music of the masses" and has historically utilized the music's wide-spread influence as a method for expressing social and political issues. Popular music artists and songwriters, like any other artists or writers, are influenced dramatically by their own lives and environments. One type of environment, that remains largely unpublicized and unexplored, exists in the prisons of the United States.

Prison music has long been of interest to ethnomusicologists for the simple reason of its isolation from the major influence of popular culture. Within the confines of prison walls, musical development flourishes, uninhibitedly resonating from the mouths of unlikely lovers of the aural art. America's southern penitentiaries were the specific source of such interest for ethnomusicologists Harry Oster, and John and Alan Lomax. These three specialists, who conducted their work during the first half of the twentieth century, were all intrigued by the musical culture that developed without knowledge or permission from the outside world.[1] The Louisiana State Penitentiary was one of the

[1] Despite the efforts of the government after the American Civil War to reconstruct the southern states, Louisiana remained in poverty. The African American population remained oppressed and were frequently "sent to the penitentiary for misconducts that would only have brought a lashing in the slavery days,"(Taylor *Louisiana A Bicentennial History* 136).

prisons that gained the interest of all three previously mentioned ethnomusicologists.

Louisiana State Penitentiary, located in Angola, Louisiana, has influenced a number of popular-music artists and songwriters who especially contributed to the development of African American folksongs, work songs, and spirituals into blues and rock'n'roll. Such artists include Huddie William Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, Robert Pete Williams, a blues singer and guitarist, and jazz pianist, James Booker.[2] Because of the prison's influence on the music of these artists, the facility established itself as an institution of interest.[3]

Originally, the area that occupies the 18,000 acre prison consisted of four plantations; Panola, Belle View, Killarney, and Angola[4]. Slave trader Isaac Franklin purchased the four plantations in the 1830s but it was his wife who, after Franklin's death, merged the land before selling it to Samuel Lawrence James in 1880. Under James's ownership, Angola began its early formation as a prison for Louisiana's miscreants.

---

[2] It should be noted, some inconsistency exists in sources mentioning Huddie Ledbetter's name. For example, Jas Obrecht, author of the article, "Lead belly: King of 12-string blues," refers to him as Lead belly.

[1] Dorough, Prince. Popular-Music Culture in America. 1992.

[4] The unfortunate connection between the former Angola plantation and the country in Africa that is also so named is intentional. Reportedly, many of the slaves who worked the original plantation were displaced from Angola, Africa. It is from this plantation that the Louisiana State Penitentiary retains one of its better-known nicknames, Angola. It should also be noted that many of the local Louisiana citizens and inmates refer to the Louisiana State Penitentiary as Angola or "The Farm." It is in this context that the penitentiary is frequently referenced in popular music. (Nelson Interview)

In order to maintain operations and efficiency on the farm, James utilized a loan of convicts from the state of Louisiana. The rise of African Americans in the Louisiana penal system led the state to employ a "convict-lease system" that allowed farmers to borrow convicts for a period of time.[5] Although the farm workers were convicted criminals, prior to the 1960s they were treated more as slaves than as wards of the state.

The inmates were regularly assigned strenuous manual labor for long hours under deplorable conditions. In an interview with ethnomusicologist Harry Oster, Roosevelt Charles, a prisoner, commented, "The boss would tell him (the water boy), "Ya can carry him water if ya wanta, and if you don't, ya don't hafta because they get water outa the tools," [6] In 1901, Louisiana officially established ownership of the Angola Plantation and formed what is known today as the Louisiana State Penitentiary.[7]

Louisiana State Penitentiary, after its official formation, continued to exist as an operating, self-sufficient farm. The land is surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River with a swamp acting as a natural boarder on the third. The simple geography of the area perhaps explains why most of the prison's average of 6,000 inmates rarely

---

[5] Taylor *Louisiana A Bicentennial History* 136.

[6] Louisiana State Penitentiary. Prison Worksongs. Arhoolie Publications, Inc., 1997.

[7] "History of Angola." Louisiana State Penitentiary. <http://www.corrections.state.la.us>

attempt to escape and are even less frequently capable of succeeding in such endeavors.[8] In addition to the natural deterrents the Louisiana State Penitentiary's location provides, armed members of the prison's approximately 1,000 employees supervise the plantation work of any inmates who are so occupied.[9]

Although conditions in the penitentiary have improved over time, the institutionalized confinement perpetuated a desire in the inmates to continue to use African American spirituals and work songs to ease the pain, not only of daily physical labor, but the emotional pain caused by the persistent oppression of the African American people as well.

Of the many prisons in the south, Louisiana State Penitentiary's musical tradition has, since the early 1900s, been a subject of interest to ethnomusicologists. One notable ethnomusicologist, whose attention was drawn to the prison, was John Lomax. Lomax's investigation into the music of African American prisoners can be attributed to his specific interest in American folk music. Lomax was disturbed by the

---

[8] This portion of the Mississippi is reported to be the habitat for eight-foot long catfish that have been known to attack swimmers who are brave enough to attempt to cross the river without watercraft. If these catfish do not, in truth, exist, the legitimacy of this information is at least believed by Louisiana's local people. The psychological fear alone may be attributed to the prisoners' self-imposed prevention of escape. The swamp also houses a number of alligators and snakes (Nelson Interview).

[9] In general, three guards monitor the inmates while they work in the gardens, sometimes on chain gangs. Two guards are placed in elevated positions, armed with shotguns and pistols. The third guard stands by the watering area, unarmed, to monitor fights between the inmates and to observe early indications of mutiny or attempted escape. According to Damien Nelson, former prison guard at the penitentiary, if an inmate crosses the visual line between the armed guards, he is mortally shot instantaneously. It should be noted that inmates are warned when they stray within close proximity to the visual line. This situation mostly serves as a deterrent, as this type of discipline is rarely necessary (Nelson Interview).

willingness of African American musicians to forsake the more emotional, uncultivated music of their heritage for the sake of assimilation. After realizing the unfortunate tendency of most of the African American musicians of their time to attempt to recreate the popular music of upper class white society, Lomax and his son, Alan, decided to explore various prisons of the South.[10]

Lomax aspired to create a collection of what he viewed to be, "the best Folk Songs indigenous to this country and to include certain Ballads from other sources, to which have been added words and music such as to give them a distinct American flavor." This passion motivated him to search for material for his project in southern prisons. Lomax viewed the white influence on African American music as an undesirable and unacceptable contaminate, therefore, he sought to discover the best preserved examples of African American folk songs. Lomax believed that the isolation, or forced segregation, that the prisons enforced provided the truest preservation of the quality of African American folk music he was meticulously to find.[11]

In the early 1930s, John and Alan Lomax traveled to various prisons of the South recording any music performed by the prisoners to whom they were introduced. These prisons

---

[10] Porterfield *Last Cavalier*
[11] Porterfield *Last Cavalier*

include Texas State Penitentiary, Mississippi State Penitentiary, and Louisiana State Penitentiary. Frequently, even at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, the African American musicians Lomax attempted to record were either unwilling to cooperate or were inhibited by Lomax's presence. During this time, the prisoners were not allowed to sing during certain times of the day in the fields of the penitentiaries and were given precious little free time after the conclusion of their work days. Typically, the prisoners worked in the fields from sunrise to sunset and were given only small breaks for food. By the end of the day, the tired convicts were allowed only a few hours between dinner and bedtime before they were faced with another day of the exact same schedule. This general situation caused many of the prisoners that John and Alan Lomax encountered to be disinclined to spend spare time singing into a primitive recording mechanism.[12]

The original recordings of John and Alan Lomax, survived and have been recirculated on compact disk. "Negro Prison Blues and Songs," a CD comprised of Alan Lomax's recordings of the Louisiana and Mississippi State Penitentiaries, features prisoner renditions of various blues songs. The sound quality has been digitally remastered for clarity, but some of the characteristics of the original acoustics of the venues in which they were recorded remain discernable. The listener can

---

[12] Porterfield *Last Cavalier*

hear the rawness of the inmates' voices, even fluctuations in pitch, preserved on the modern release. In the background of many of the songs, listeners can detect rhythmic clicks that might be identified as clapping or, perhaps, the reverberation of farm tools as the workers labor in the cotton and sugar cane fields of the penitentiaries. The musical selections, as described by the CD's recording company,

> are as American as the Mississippi River. They were born out of the very rock and earth of this country as black hands broke the soil, moved it, reformed it, and the rivers of stinging sweat poured upon the land under the blazing heat of Southern skies.[13]

It is the belief in this ideology that motivated John and Alan Lomax to study the songs of the inmates in southern prisons with such careful notice.[14]

(Musical Example #1) fn

Similarly, Harry Oster(1924-2001), an ethnomusicologist who taught for thirty years at the University of Iowa, sought the universal preservation of American folk music. He felt that the general folk music tradition across the nation was in jeopardy of fading into oblivion and dedicated his life to recording and documenting the corresponding stories that accompanied the various types of American folk music that he

---

[13] Louisiana and Mississippi State Penitentiaries. Negro Prison Blues and Songs. Legacy International.
[14] Porterfield *Last Cavalier*

studied.[15] Although his interests were varied, he traveled in the 1960s to record the remaining musical tradition at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Like John and Alan Lomax, Oster faced opposition in his attempts to record the music from Louisiana State Penitentiary's prisoners. He noted that the younger inmates ridiculed the work-song tradition of the older generations because of the genre's relationship to slavery. However, the older convicts were cooperative and eager to assist Oster in the preservation of their songs. Oster commented,

> The songs recorded of the prisoners have a lot of commentary and expression of tragic irony in relation to the lives they led in the past and the confinement they're still leading. Some of the songs which I collected from singers in the outside world are also reflected this feeling that life was a prison and the music was a way of adapting to the imprisonment, and of converting the experience, their frustration into a work of art, into a song, into a story that had rich language, high eloquence, beautiful figures of speech: a kind of wonderful folk poetry.[16]

When examining the similarities between modern blues, jazz, and rock'n'roll, and the African American work songs and spirituals of the Louisiana State Penitentiary, the question arises as to the purity of African or black influence on the development of these musical styles. How much of the general musical styles developed as a result of African assimilation into white culture? When examining the general American folk music tradition, African American folk traditions developed

---

[15] University of Iowa website
[16] Louisiana State Penitentiary. Prison Worksongs. Arhoolie Publications, Inc., 1997.

simultaneously with those of their Euro-American counterparts. John Storm Roberts, author of Black Music of Two Worlds, commented, "There is black music and there is white music, but they are brothers, or perhaps cousins."[17] However, the unmistakable rhythmic presence of African music can be easily understood and derived from listening to the recorded work songs and spirituals.

In general, work songs and spirituals are characterized by their "casuality" and their reflection of the type of work or experience with which its creators are occupied. As in blues, rock'n'roll, and jazz, there is a significant reliance upon improvisation and syncopated rhythm, often heard in a call and response form.[18] The songs cover a wide variety of subjects, ranging from motivation, reflection upon committed crimes, love, and inspiration under oppression. Like the songs of their African influence, work songs and spirituals also often employ the use of texts and rhythms that contain messages that expand beyond the obvious subject matter that appears on the surface.

Alan Lomax further elaborates on the connection by stating, "The listener will notice the same use of falsetto stops, the same drop of the voice at the end of lines, that

---

[17] Roberts Black Music of Two Worlds. 1972.
[18] Epstein Sinful Tunes and Spirituals. 1977.

characterize the blues."[19] Many of these similarities may be discerned from Harry Oster's recording of Roosevelt Charles singing "Let My People Go," at Louisiana State Penitentiary. In his rendition of this well-known spiritual, Charles varies the basic phrasing and tempo of the original version, with each verse of the song. The listener can also notice some improvisation of the melodic structure as well. In addition to the variations featured in this recording, a point of great interest and significance lies in the remarkable range, body, tone color, and presence of the singer's voice.[20]

(Musical Example #2)

Today, the Louisiana State Penitentiary allows special privileges to serve as additional incentives for the inmates to maintain good behavior. Regardless of the crime each individual is incarcerated for, the time the inmate must serve, or level of security, any inmate may obtain trustee status for good behavior and thereby secure special privileges from the guards. One of the most coveted of these privileges is membership in the Angola Traveling Rodeo Band.

The Angola Traveling Rodeo Band is constituted of seven to nine inmates who have all obtained trustee status within the parameters of the Louisiana State Penitentiary's standards. The number of band members is maintained and

---

[19] Roberts Black Music of Two Worlds, pg. 148
[20] Angola Prison Spirituals. Arhoolie Publications, Inc., 2003.

limited to approximately nine members at any given time. Admittance into the Angola Traveling Rodeo Band is highly selective and competitive. Although it is reported that the general inmate population of the Louisiana State Penitentiary still possess some notable musical ability, the band rarely admits new members. The consistency in the band's individual membership ensures that the band preserves its intimacy.

According to authorities at the prison, at minimum, the band features a bass guitarist, rhythm guitarist, lead guitarist, a keyboardist, a percussionist, and vocalists. Other instruments, such as the saxophone, have also been featured in the past. In general, the Angola Traveling Rodeo Band performs their own arrangements of early 1980s country music and classic rock'n'roll. In addition to covering popular songs, the band frequently performs songs of their own composition.[21]

The members of the Angola Traveling Rodeo Band enjoy many unusual special privileges, owing to the highly desirable incentive of gaining initiation to the group's membership. Some of these privileges include private rehearsal time and permission to travel for performances. Although some concern may arise at the prospect of a group of seven to nine convicted criminals who are all serving sentences for severe

[21] Nelson Interview

and violent crimes having such access to guitar strings and other instruments that could be used as weapons, behavioral problems within the band are minimal.[22]

Membership in the band is highly coveted. The individual members of the band govern each other and prevent incidents from surfacing, resorting to physical intervention if necessary.

The trustee status required to maintain membership in the band is highly fragile. Although any undesirable behavior could result in the prison forcing an individual's dismissal from the band, the Angola Traveling Rodeo Band members typically discharge any problematic members before the prison's involvement.[23]

In addition to the privileges of rehearsal time and outside performances, the band members receive a nominal stipend as payment for any gigs they may secure. The majority of the profits obtained through ticket and record sales belong to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Because the prison directly benefits from the monetary gains of the band, the penitentiary provides the band with any equipment or instruments that exceed $500. This provision can include, but is not limited to, the purchase of instruments, instrument maintenance, and the purchase of sound or technical equipment.

---

[22] Nelson Interview
[23] Nelson Interview

Although the musical tradition of the Louisiana State Penitentiary has evolved, the prison population has maintained sympathies for musicality. An example of this continued tradition may be exemplified by a memory related by former prison Officer Damien Nelson.[24]

If a deceased inmate has no family or funeral arrangements, the inmates of the Louisiana State Penitentiary construct a pine box for the burial. The coffin is then loaded onto a horse-drawn hearse for its procession to Point Look Out, the cemetery for the penitentiary. Reportedly, at the average funeral of this nature, approximately one hundred inmates follow the hearse on foot and can be heard singing hymns in five-part harmony. As these inmates are presumably untrained musicians, it can be speculated that this remarkable general ability is a result of the inmates' similar familial cultures and church influences.[25]

The unusual musical tradition of the Louisiana State Penitentiary continues to be a subject of interest to explorers of both music in confinement and American popular music. The subject opens numerous avenues for further study ranging from the influence of prison musical traditions on popular music to the history of African American spirituals and work songs. Especially for lovers of music, the

---

[24] Nelson Interview
[25] Nelson Interview

remarkable connection between African American folk music can be easily heard and the passion of John and Alan Lomax and Harry Oster can be easily understood.

Bibliography

Brooks, Tilford. America's Black Musical Heritage. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984.

Castagna, JoAnn. "Faculty Memorials: Harry Oster." University of Iowa. 2006. Retrieved: April 16, 2007. <http://www.clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/memorials/oster.shtml>

Charles, Roosevelt. "Let My People Go." Angola Prison Spirituals. Arhoolie Publications, Inc., 2003.

Courlander, Harold. Negro Folk Music, U.S.A. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991.

Dorough, Prince. Popular-Music Culture in America. New York: Ardsley House, Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Epstein, Dena J. Sinful Tunes and Spirituals. Chicago: University of Illinois Press., 1977.

"History of Angola." Louisiana State Penitentiary. Retrieved: March 1 2007 <http://www.corrections.state.la.us/lsp/history.htm>

Louisiana and Mississippi State Penitentiaries. Jumpin' Judy. Recorded by: Alan Lomax. Negro Prison Blues and Songs. Legacy International.

Louisiana State Penitentiary. Prison Worksongs. Arhoolie Publications, Inc., 1997.

Martin, Sherrill V., and George R. Keck, eds. Feel the Spirit Studies in Nineteenth-Century Afro-American Music. Westport: Greenwood P, 1988.

Nelson, Damien. Personal interview. 4 Mar. 2007.

Obrecht, Jas. "Lead belly: King of 12-string blues." Guitar Player. San Francisco. 1996. 55-65.

Porterfield, Nolan. The Last Cavalier. Chicago: University of Illinois Press., 1996.

Roach, Hildred. Black American Music. Boston: Crescendo Co., 1973.

Roberts, John Storm. Black Music of Two Worlds. Tivoli: Original Music., 1972.

Taylor, Joe Gray. Louisiana A Bicentennial History. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976.

White, Newman I. American Negro Folk Songs. Hatboro: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1928.