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Spirituals

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Spirituals. South Carolina can boast a remarkably dynamic musical landscape. Gospel, bluegrass, blues, and string band all have a long history in the state. While these music forms might seem unrelated, they spring from common roots and share many similarities. South Carolina religious music is community-based, learned and played in the family room, church, or community center. With both sacred and secular influences, this music reflects the strong interplay between African American cultural traditions and those of European Americans.

Like other regional traditions, music can be closely tied to migration patterns. Scots-Irish moving into the Appalachians and English and French settlers making their homes on the coast introduced a rich variety of church hymnody. Slaves and freedmen introduced West African music styles markedly different from European forms. These disparate music traditions converged, traditions were shared, and new music styles formed. Most religious music performed in the twenty-first century is a product of this early synthesis.

Spirituals have subsequently influenced a range of contemporary music styles. Gospel and blues draw significantly from early African American spirituals. Most early blues musicians started out playing or singing in a religious context. A fairly recent form of musical expression, gospel emerged in the 1930s as a powerful combination of spirituals and secular forms such as ragtime and blues. In the late 1940s bluegrass incorporated string band, blues, and gospel into a tight, high-energy popular music phenomenon.

One of the primary features of both black and white spiritual music rests with an emphasis on group participation and improvisation. Spiritual music has many stylistic variations: three- and four-part harmony, shape note, common meter hymn choir, call and response, and praise house are all a part of this foundation. Spiritual

music can employ polyrhythms, hand clapping, foot stomping, and the shouting style associated with the call-and-response tradition. An improvisational form of music, call and response involves one person "calling" a verse, with the remainder of the choir repeating the line in unison.

All of these sacred music styles have been practiced in South Carolina into the twenty-first-century. While shape-note, call-and-response, and multiple-part harmony groups can be found throughout the state, few regions in the South retain the vitality of the hymn choir, or common meter, tradition. Emerging in the 1700s from English Calvinist worship and African ritual practices, hymn choir traditions took root in slave communities in South Carolina. The tradition has been fairly localized in the York County area. Likewise, praise-house spirituals were an early form of African American folk music that can be found in the lowcountry and Sea Islands. Praise houses, which were small, single-room structures built by slaves, provided sites for some of the first worship services in the early African American community.

The invention of the shape-note method of reading music was an important thread in American musical history. Introduced at the end of the eighteenth century, shape-note books printed music with a different shaped note for each degree of the scale. Associated with the revivals of the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, shape-note hymnals were printed throughout the eastern United States, and the method was taught by itinerant singing schoolmasters. In the South, shape-note singing was adopted by both European American and African American congregations. Large shape-note singing conventions were still quite popular in several regions of the state in the early twenty-first century.

This music, whether shape-note or praise-house, has deep roots in the religious, social, and economic history of South Carolina. Much of it was forged through untold hardship, and the result is a highly emotional expression that carries intense personal and collective meaning. SADDLER TAYLOR

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