

# Understanding This Music

Afrofuturism asks us to imagine a future grounded in Black culture. As writer/ musicians whose work is deeply grounded in history, we're also reconsidering a past that is deeply centered in Black culture. How can we understand our collective history (and present, and future) differently if we start to imagine, as fully as possible, the rich tapestry of American culture that Black Americans wove? We might imagine a past where the dynamic sound of different African cultures meeting each other and European cultures in the Americas was actually made part of the historical record. Where people cared about African-derived musical forms and wrote down songs, asked people what lyrics meant, and saved instruments born of the African diaspora. Where people of African descent could write down records of their own music, rather than just having it filtered through the ears of people of European descent. This book will ask you to open your ears to that possibility, to imagine something broader than the scant historical record we have of Black American music before emancipation in the United States, and to make this music live again in new, interesting ways.

In 1867, three abolitionists asked something similar in the wake of the Civil War. Lucy McKim Garrison, William Francis Allen, and Charles P. Ware compiled *Slave Songs of the United States*, the first collection of Black music in the US. In their introduction, they questioned “why no systematic effort has hitherto been made to collect and preserve” the music of Black Americans. Slavery, racism, prejudice, and the withholding of education from Black people were the answers before 1865.<sup>1</sup> They were then entering a post-slavery era with hopes of equality for Black Americans and the editors of the collection hoped to make that systematic effort. However, they could only transcribe music they heard, or songs they received from friends and

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, Ware, and McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States*, i.

correspondents. A compiled historical record of Black music from before *Slave Songs* was missing then and has been missing—until now. In this book, we want to carry on the tradition of Allen, Ware, and McKim Garrison, and bring the sources of pre-Civil War Black music together as fully as possible.

However, our systematic effort still faces limitations. For one, almost all of the songs in the book you now hold—except the ones in *Slave Songs* and a few others—people saved almost by chance. They are brief illustrations in larger books that might not be about music at all; a scrawled notation in a manuscript that has been tucked away in an archive; a singular example of Black music standing alone in a published collection of material from the white canon; or a curiosity in a personal, hand-transcribed music manuscript. They were never collected to prove a point or preserve Black music, as *Slave Songs* did.

We know that people of African descent so visibly and frequently made music that musicality became one of the stereotypes of Blackness. Yet the lack of historical material is another major limitation we have in trying to uncover what music people of African descent played in the Americas. And the paucity is striking. In European countries like Sweden or Ireland, you might find tens of thousands of folk tunes that date to before the mid-19th century. But besides *Slave Songs*, we only know of less than ten songs definitively from the African American tradition transcribed in the United States before 1865. We can imagine that each community of enslaved and free Black people had their own musical culture—songs and variations of songs—just as each community in Sweden has their own songs and variations of songs. What we are attempting becomes like musical archeology—using a piece of an object, a fragment of material culture to reconstruct a whole civilization.