

Göteborg's University in Africa/Africa at Göteborg's University
Centre for African Studies 2001; 281 – 288 (ISBN 91-631-1348-1)

The Arabic Roots of Jazz and Blues

Gunnar Lindgren

gunnar.lindgren@musik.gu.se
Tel +46 31 7734000

School of Music and Musicology, Göteborg University, Sweden

Box 210, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

Abstract: It is hard to find strong and evident similarities between African music and jazz and blues, even if these African American music styles are regarded as having derived from the meeting between European and African music. But it is possible that the roots of jazz and blues can also be found in Arabic music.

There were black Africans among Columbus's crew on his first journey to the New World in 1492. Even the more militant of the earliest Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, such as Cortez and Pizarro, had black people by their side. For about six centuries, the Moors had been ruling the Iberian Peninsula and they had brought black Africans from Central Africa to Europe. By that time, these black Africans were totally immersed in the Arabic culture.

So the first wave of black Africans was carrying Arabic/Spanish culture and music. The second wave of African slaves came from West Africa, also with an Arabic cultural background. A large part of the northern half of Africa is Islamic.

When the third wave and the largest number of slaves arrived from Central Africa, it was likely that an Arabic music culture had already been grounded in the New World.

But this large number of slaves in the third wave came from a continent with an extremely fragmented and diversified culture. So the slaves on the ships had difficulties in communicating and keeping a common culture. It was probably natural to accept and step into the Arabic/Spanish culture that already existed. This culture was also accepted and shared by the Spanish slave owners, unlike the African culture, which they found threatening with its foreign religions and exotic habits and manners. African culture had to be suppressed.

It is therefore probable that the roots of jazz and blues can also be found in Arabic music, to a much greater extent than has previously been understood.

When comparing the blues melismas in the singing of Aretha Franklin with the Islamic melismas of a singer from Baghdad, the similarities are striking. On the whole, it is hard to find these melismas in African singing south of the Sahara.

But throughout history, there has been tension between the western Christian culture and the Islamic oriental culture. This tension started at the time of the crusades and could be one reason for the unwillingness to acknowledge that European culture has a mother in Arabic culture, as well as in the cultures of Rome and Athens.