

The Guide

A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Collin Lawson & Ryan Mooney for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Black Pearl Sings!

by Frank Higgins

directed by Bill Pennelly

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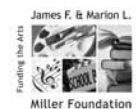
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Race, Gender & Music in *Black Pearl Sings!*

Frank Higgins's *Black Pearl Sings!* touches upon a broad spectrum of themes. Among them are discrimination and injustice, both against women and African-Americans. In the play, we see two women—one black and one white—struggle to overcome the oppression of an unsympathetic society. We also see the many roles that music can play in this world: as a compass pointing towards ancestry, as an educational tool, as a means to garner money and success, as a vehicle of expression,

and ultimately as a symbol of identity. This is a play about roots, exploitation, understanding, perseverance, and legacy. Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression and steeped in the history of minstrelsy, the blues and slavery, *Black Pearl Sings!* offers a memorable glance into the prevailing spirit of music. 🏠

About the Playwright

Frank Higgins, both a playwright and a poet, is the author of two plays for young audiences published by Pioneer Drama Service, Inc.: *Peanutman: A Visit from George Washington Carver* and *Anansi the Spider and the Middle Passage*. Other plays by Frank Higgins include *The Sweet By 'n' By*, *Gunplay*, *Miracles*, *Lover's Leap*, *Never Say Die*, and *The Taste Test*, musical plays *Black Pearl Sings!* and *WMKS: Where Music Kills Sorrow* and plays for young audiences, *The Slave Dancer's Choice* and *The Country of the Blind*. *The Sweet By 'n' By* has been produced around the country, most notably at the Williamstown Theatre Festival with Tony-winner Blythe Danner and her daughter Gwyneth Paltrow. His play *Gunplay*, which was commissioned following the mass murders at the University of Iowa in 1991, has been produced around the country as well, including the reading of several



scenes on Capital Hill prior to Congress's passage of what became known as the 'Brady Bill.' *Never Say Die* was a finalist at the Eugene O'Neill New Play Festival. Higgins has also published several books including a full length collection of poetry titled *Starting From Ellis Island* and a book of haiku titled *Eating Blowfish*. 🏠

Interview with Frank Higgins

by Joel Markowitz

Playwright Frank Higgins takes us on his journey of writing *Black Pearl Sings!* – from researching American folklore, discovering the story that led to creating his characters, finding an African song which would serve as a powerful moment in the play, the workshops, the first production, the endless rewrites, and, finally, the opening at Ford's Theatre.

Joel Tell us about your writing career.

Frank I started off as a poet, then changed to being a playwright after I noticed my best poems seemed to have a story and people in them. My first play was an ambitious though messy piece called *The Great*

War which director Alan Schneider saw at a regional festival of the Kennedy Center/American College Theater Festival. He encouraged me to write for the theater, and at the time of his sudden death, we were looking for a place to work together on what was my ambitious though messy second play.

The other plays I've written include *The Sweet By 'n' By*, which was produced with Blythe Danner and Gwyneth Paltrow, *WMKS: Where Music Kills Sorrow*, which is set in 1935, and uses old time songs from the public domain as does *Black Pearl Sings!* My play *Miracles* was produced at the Barter Theater, the Old Globe and the Fulton Opera House" before coming to NYC. I've just

finished a play with music called *American Delilah*, which is set in the 1920s and uses period music.

Joel Take us on the journey of writing and getting *Black Pearl Sings!* to The Ford's Theatre stage.

Frank I wrote the first draft of the play in 2006. It had a reading, and then a workshop production at the Barter Theater in Virginia. Its official opening was at Stages Repertory Theater in Houston – where by happenstance – the surviving Tuskegee Airmen saw it, and liked it. I thought/hoped the play would be a natural fit for Ford's Theater, so I contacted Mark Ramont at Ford's Theatre about the play. Mark liked the play, and showed the script to Paul Tetreault, the executive director, and also to Jennifer Nelson, who eventually directed the piece.

Joel The show was inspired by the story of the great Huddie Leadbetter, better known as "Leadbelly", and musicologist John Lomax, – who schlepped around with his very heavy recording equipment – collecting, recording, and preserving the folklore of Texas and the Southwest. Tell us how their story inspired you to write *Black Pearl Sings!*

Frank I found the Leadbelly/John Lomax story intriguing for a number of reasons:

Lomax's goal of recording the music of 'common people' was a great goal. Lomax's racial views were not great, or enlightened. And when the two came to NYC in the 30's, Lomax in fact had Leadbelly perform at first in prison stripes. I used that idea in a modified form in *Black Pearl Sings!* For a couple of years, I'd toyed with the idea of writing a play about Leadbelly and John Lomax, but something kept me from doing it. When I discovered the actual African song that appears in *Black Pearl Sings!*, I realized why I never tried to write the Lomax/Leadbelly play. Lomax never seems to have considered that there might be an African song that came to America on the slave ships that might still exist. Susannah, the song collector in *Black Pearl Sings!*, is convinced that there might still be a surviving African song from pre-slavery times, but the clock is ticking, and she must find it before the people die off.

Joel Talk about the Africa song, how you found it, and its significance in the show.

Frank I found the song in a documentary called *The Language You Cry In*. It's the story of a song that a professor recorded in the 30's from a Gullah woman and her granddaughter. Decades later, a professor from



Sierra Leone recognized some of the words from a dialect from his country. The song has been sung for hundreds of years at the graveside of recently dead elders. The lyrics of the song are meant to summon the elders to help bring the soul of the recently dead to the other side. The current day professors finally found a village in Sierra Leone where a woman recognized the song. The song had gone from Africa to America on the slave ships hundreds of years before.

Joel When did you interest in American folklore begin?

Frank I traveled through the Appalachian mountains and fell in love with the region. Most of the old folk songs and ballads there came from the British Isles. The Simon and Garfunkel song "Scarborough Fair" is actually an old time courting song, usually called "The Cambric Shirt." I wish I had gotten more music into my play *The Sweet By 'n' By*, which is set in Appalachia.

Joel You must have gone through a painstaking process of selecting the songs for *Black Pearl Sings!*

Frank When I was researching the music for my play *WMKS: Where Music Kills Sorrow*, I came across some of the songs that several years later would go into *Black Pearl Sings!* I wanted a couple of songs that became well known, though we would hear them in their early – and better – versions such as "Down On Me" and "Kum Ba Yah." (I disliked the folksy "Cumbaya" that we've all heard; but the old time African-influenced version from the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islands is magical). Along with a couple of songs that become well known, I thought the show needed a couple of songs that fewer people would know. There needed to be songs from the Southern Mountains, which the Susannah character is an expert on. The song she sings in the last scene,

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“Six Feet of Earth,” rocks me back in my seat through its simplicity, and I suspected from the outset – that the reveal of the African song would end the play.

Joel Instead of using Lomax and Leadbelly as the characters in *Black Pearl Sings!*, you decided to use two female characters Susannah and Pearl. Why?

Frank It was more likely that a song would be passed on from one generation to the next in a matriarchal situation.

Joel Tell us about Susannah and Pearl.

Frank Susannah is a song collector for the Library of Congress. Pearl has served 10 years in a Texas prison for murder. Susannah is searching through the prisons for old time songs since she believes the inmates will be more likely to know them, since they are not exposed to popular culture.

Joel At the opening of the second act, you removed the fourth wall and invite the audience to sing along on choruses of two songs. What does it add to the play?

Frank On one level it puts a new dynamic into play as the audience becomes the audience at Cooper Union. On another level, we see Pearl gaining

strength and Susannah losing control of Pearl.

Joel What was the most difficult scene to write (and re-write), and which scene is the most emotional for you to watch?

Frank The scene that comes after the Cooper Union scene was the most challenging to write. At first, I had too much stuff in it. When I hit upon the minstrel/dancing chicken idea, the scene began to crackle better. The most emotional section for me is the last page when Pearl prepares for, and then sings the African funeral song for her daughter.

Joel What advice would you give students who are considering becoming playwrights?

Frank Write on a regular basis, read a lot of plays, see a lot of plays, persevere. Take an interest in producing your own work in black box spaces, so that you can see your writing on its feet.

(October 7, 2009)

Approaching Freedom

A History of the Emancipation Proclamation & the 13th Amendment

While Black Pearl Sings! takes place in the height of the Great Depression, the central drama of the play is rooted in struggle for freedom that lasted for decades. The relationship between Susannah and Pearl draws on the history of race relations in the United States. The history of slavery in the United States stems back to the formation of the colonies, and was a major issue in the writing of the Constitution. Until 1865, and the official word on slavery was dubious at best.

THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION: AN ACT OF JUSTICE

by John
Hope Franklin

Thursday, January 1, 1863, was a bright, crisp day in the nation’s capital. The previous day had been a strenuous one for President Lincoln, but New Year’s Day was to be even more strenuous. So he rose early.

There was much to do, not the least of which was to put the finishing touches on the Emancipation Proclamation. At 10:45 the document was brought to the White House by Secretary of State William Seward. The President signed it, but he noticed an error in the superscription. It read, “In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my name and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.” The President had never used that form in proclamations, always preferring to say “In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand...” He asked Seward to make the correction, and the formal signing would be made on the corrected copy.

The traditional New Year’s Day reception at the White House began that morning at 11 o’clock. Members of the Cabinet and the diplomatic corps were among the

first to arrive. Officers of the Army and Navy arrived in a body at half past 11. The public was admitted at noon, and then Seward and his son Frederick, the Assistant Secretary of State, returned with the corrected draft. The rigid laws of etiquette held the President to his duty for 3 hours, as his secretaries Nicholay and Hay observed. "Had necessity required it, he could of course have left such mere social occupation at any moment," they pointed out, "but the President saw no occasion for precipitancy. On the other hand, he probably deemed it wise that the completion of this momentous executive act should be attended by every circumstance of deliberation."

After the guests departed, the President went upstairs to his study for the signing in the presence of a few friends. No Cabinet meeting was called, and no attempt was made to have a ceremony. Later, Lincoln told F. B. Carpenter, the artist, that as he took up the pen to sign the paper, his hand shook so violently that he could not write. "I could not for a moment control my arm. I paused, and a superstitious feeling came over me which made me hesitate. . . . In a moment I remembered that I had been shaking hands for hours with several hundred people, and hence a very simple explanation of the trembling and shaking of my arm." With a hearty laugh at his own thoughts, the President proceeded to sign the Emancipation Proclamation. Just before he affixed his name to the document, he said, "I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper."

When I made my first serious study of this document, several copies of the December 30 draft were in existence. The copies of Cabinet officers Edward Bates, Francis Blair, William Seward, and Salmon P. Chase were in the Library of Congress. The draft that the President worked with on December 31 and the morning of New Year's Day is considered the final manuscript draft. The principal parts of the text are written in the President's hand. The two paragraphs from the Preliminary Proclamation of September 22, 1862, were clipped from a printed copy and pasted on to the President's draft, "merely to save writing." The superscription and the final closing are in the hand of a clerk in the Department of State. Later in the year, Lincoln presented his copy to the ladies in charge of the Northwestern Fair in Chicago. He told them that he had some desire to retain the paper, "but if it shall contribute to the relief and comfort of the soldiers, that will be better," he said most graciously. Thomas Bryan purchased it and presented it to the Soldiers' Home in Chicago, of which he was president. The home was



destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Fortunately, four photographic copies of the original had been made. The official engrossed document is in the National Archives and follows Lincoln's original copy.

It is worth observing that there was no mention, in the final draft, of Lincoln's pet schemes of compensation and colonization, which were in the Preliminary Proclamation of September 22, 1862. Perhaps Lincoln was about to give up on such impracticable propositions. In the Preliminary Proclamation, the President had said that he would declare slaves in designated territories "thenceforward, and forever free." In the final draft of January 1, 1863, he was content to say that they "are, and henceforward shall be free." Nothing had been said in the preliminary draft about the use of blacks as soldiers. In the summer of 1862 the Confiscation Act had authorized the President to use blacks in any way he saw fit, and there had been some limited use of them in noncombat activities. In stating in the Proclamation that former slaves were to be received into the armed services, the President believed that he was using congressional authority to strike a mighty blow against the Confederacy.

It was late afternoon before the Proclamation was ready for transmission to the press and others. Earlier drafts had been available, and some papers, including the *Washington Evening Star* had used those drafts, but it was at about 8 p.m. on January 1 that the transmission of the text over the telegraph wires actually began.

Young Edward Rosewater, scarcely 20 years old, had an exciting New Year's Day. He was a mere telegraph operator in the War Department, but he knew the President and had gone to the White House reception earlier that day and had greeted him. When the President made his regular call at the telegraph office

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that evening, young Rosewater was on duty and was more excited than ever. He greeted the President and went back to his work. Lincoln walked over to see what Rosewater was sending out. It was the Emancipation Proclamation! If Rosewater was excited, the President seemed the picture of relaxation. After watching the young operator for a while, the President went over to the desk of Tom Eckert, the chief telegraph operator in the War Department, sat in his favorite chair, where he had written most of the Preliminary Proclamation the previous summer, and gave his feet the proper elevation. For him, it was the end of a long, busy, but perfect day.

For many others in various parts of the country, the day was just beginning, for the celebrations were not considered official until word was received that the President had actually signed the Proclamation. The slaves of the District of Columbia did not have to wait, however, for back in April 1862 the Congress had passed a law setting them free. Even so, they joined in the widespread celebrations on New Year's Day. At Israel Bethel Church, Rev. Henry McNeal Turner went out and secured a copy of the Washington Evening Star that carried the text of the Proclamation. Back at the church, Turner waved the newspaper from the pulpit and began to read the document. This was the signal for unrestrained celebration characterized by men squealing, women fainting, dogs barking, and whites and blacks shaking hands. The Washington celebrations continued far into the night. In the Navy Yard, cannons began to roar and continued for some time.

In New York the news of the Proclamation was received with mixed feelings. Blacks looked and felt happy, one reporter said, while abolitionists "looked glum and grumbled . . . that the proclamation was only given on account of military necessity." Within a week, however, there were several large celebrations in which abolitionists took part. At Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, the celebrated Henry Ward Beecher preached a commemorative sermon to an overflow audience. "The Proclamation may not free a single slave," he declared, "but it gives liberty a moral recognition." There was still another celebration at Cooper Union on January 5. Several speakers, including the veteran abolitionist Lewis Tappan, addressed the overflow audience. Music interspersed the several addresses. Two of the renditions were the "New John Brown Song" and the "Emancipation Hymn."

A veritable galaxy of leading literary figures gathered in the Music Hall in Boston to take notice of the climax of the fight that New England abolitionists had led

for more than a generation. Among those present were John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Francis Parkman, and Josiah Quincy. Toward the close of the meeting, Ralph Waldo Emerson read his "Boston Hymn" to the audience. In the evening, a large crowd gathered at Tremont Temple to await the news that the President had signed the Proclamation. Among the speakers were Judge Thomas Russell, Anna Dickinson, Leonard Grimes, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass. Finally, it was announced that "It is coming over the wire," and pandemonium broke out! At midnight, the group had to vacate Tremont Temple, and from there they went to the Twelfth Baptist Church at the invitation of its pastor, Leonard Grimes. Soon the church was packed, and it was almost dawn when the assemblage dispersed. Frederick Douglass pronounced it a "worthy celebration of the first step on the part of the nation in its departure from the thralldom of the ages."

The trenchant observation by Douglass that the Emancipation Proclamation was but the first step could not have been more accurate. Although the Presidential decree would not free slaves in areas where the United States could not enforce the Proclamation, it sent a mighty signal both to the slaves and to the Confederacy that enslavement would no longer be tolerated. An important part of that signal was the invitation to the slaves to take up arms and participate in the fight for their own freedom. That more than 185,000 slaves as well as free blacks accepted the invitation indicates that those who had been the victims of thralldom were now among the most enthusiastic freedom fighters.

Meanwhile, no one appreciated better than Lincoln the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation had a quite limited effect in freeing the slaves directly. It should be remembered, however, that in the Proclamation he called emancipation "an act of justice," and in later weeks and months he did everything he could to confirm his view that it was An Act of Justice. And no one was more anxious than Lincoln to take the necessary additional steps to bring about actual freedom. Thus, he proposed that the Republican Party include in its 1864 platform a plank calling for the abolition of slavery by constitutional amendment. When he was "notified" of his renomination, as was the custom in those days, he singled out that plank in the platform calling for constitutional emancipation and pronounced it "a fitting and necessary conclusion to the final success of the Union cause." Early in 1865, when Congress sent the amendment to Lincoln for his signature, he



is reported to have said, “This amendment is a King’s cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up.”

Despite the fact that the Proclamation did not emancipate the slaves and surely did not do what the Thirteenth Amendment did in winding things up, it is the Proclamation and not the Thirteenth Amendment that has been remembered and celebrated over the past 130 years. That should not be surprising. Americans seem not to take to celebrating legal documents. The language of such documents is not particularly inspiring, and they are the product of the deliberations of large numbers of people. We celebrate the Declaration of Independence, but not the ratification of the Constitution. Jefferson’s words in the Declaration moved the emerging Americans in a way that Madison’s committee of style failed to do in the Constitution.

Thus, almost annually—at least for the first hundred years—each New Year’s Day was marked in many parts of the country by a grand celebration. Replete with brass band, if there was one, an African-American fire company, if there was one, and social, religious, and civic organizations, African Americans of the community would march to the courthouse, to some church, or the high school. There, they would assemble to hear the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, followed by an oration by a prominent person. The speeches varied in character and purpose. Some of them urged African Americans to insist upon equal rights; some of them urged frugality and greater attention to morals; while still others urged their listeners to harbor no ill will toward their white brethren.

As the 50th anniversary of the Proclamation approached, James Weldon Johnson, already a writer of some

distinction, was serving a tour of duty as U.S. Consul in Corinto, Nicaragua. His biographer, Eugene Levy, tells us that Johnson for some time had considered writing a poem commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In September 1912, when he read of the ceremonies marking the Preliminary Proclamation, he realized that he had only 100 days in which to write the poem. Using all of his spare time, of which there was little, Johnson hammered out “Fifty Years.” There was not enough time to publish it in one of the major literary monthly journals, so he turned to the *New York Times*, which published it on its editorial page on January 1, 1913.

Addressing his fellow African Americans in the first stanzas, Johnson said:

O Brothers mine, to-day we stand
Where half a century sweeps our ken,
Since God, through Lincoln’s ready hand,
Struck off our bonds and made us men.
Just fifty years—a winter’s day—
As runs the history of a race;
Yet, as we look back o’er the day,
How distant seems our starting place!

Then, in a more assertive tone, making certain that humility did not replace self-confidence, he said:

This land is ours by right of birth,
This land is ours by right of toil
We helped to turn its virgin earth,
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.
To gain these fruits that have been earned,
To hold these fields that have been won,
Our arms have strained, our backs have burned,
Bent bare beneath a ruthless sun.
Then should we speak but servile words,
Or shall we hang our heads in shame?
Stand back of new-come foreign hordes,
And fear our heritage to claim?
No! stand erect and without fear,
And for our foes let this suffice—
We’ve bought a rightful sonship here,
And we have more than paid the price. . . .
That for which millions prayed and sighed
That for which tens of thousands fought,
For which so many freely died,
God cannot let it come to naught.

In the second half of the Proclamation’s first century, the annual celebrations diminished in extent as well as in fervor. Some celebrants, with an eye on a quick

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buck, began to promote June 19, the day on which President Lincoln signed a bill abolishing slavery in the territories. The bill did not apply to Texas, which was a state in the Confederacy, but slick promoters there soon drew attention to that day and persuaded Texans, Oklahomans, and others in the Southwest that this was indeed the day of emancipation. It was never quite clear to me, moreover, why we in Oklahoma celebrated August 4 as well as Juneteenth and January 1, but clearly the summer months had many advantages over a January observance.

Something else was diluting the celebrations of the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. It was bad enough that a casual reading of the Proclamation made clear that it did not set the slaves free. It was also clear that neither the Reconstruction amendments nor the legislation and Executive orders of subsequent years had propelled African Americans much closer to real freedom and true equality. The physical violence, the wholesale disfranchisement, and the widespread degradation of blacks in every conceivable form merely demonstrated the resourcefulness and creativity of those white Americans who were determined to deny basic constitutional rights to their black brothers.

Several years before 1963, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People began to use the motto "Free by '63." Other groups adopted the motto and focused more attention on the drive for equality. Many leaders were especially sensitive to the significance of the Emancipation Centennial in pointing up racial inequality in American life. On September 22, 1962, when Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York spoke in Washington to mark the opening of the exhibit of the Preliminary Proclamation, "the state's most treasured possession," he said, "the very existence of the document stirs our conscience with the knowledge that Lincoln's vision of a nation truly fulfilling its spiritual heritage is not yet achieved."

During the centennial year itself, the United States Commission on Civil Rights presented to the President a report on the history of civil rights, most of which I wrote on contract with the Commission. Knowing that I would be out of the country during most of the centennial year, I published my history of the Emancipation Proclamation as my contribution to the observance.* On Lincoln's birthday in 1963, President and Mrs. Kennedy received more than a thousand black and white citizens at the White House and presented to each of them a copy of the report of the Civil Rights Commission, called Freedom to

the Free. Speaking at Gettysburg later that year, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson said, "Until justice is blind, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact." President Kennedy took note of the absence of equality when he said, "Surely, in 1963, 100 years after emancipation, it should not be necessary for any American citizen to demonstrate in the streets for an opportunity to stop at a hotel, or eat at a lunch counter . . . on the same terms as any other customer."

Although it is now possible for most African Americans to eat at a lunch counter in most parts of the United States, the extension of these civilities has been accompanied by subtle, yet barbarous forms of discrimination. These forms extend from redlining in the sale of real estate to discrimination in employment to the maladministration of justice. In issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and wording it as he did, Lincoln went as far as he felt the law permitted him to go. In subsequent months he went a bit further, inch by inch, until before his death he was calling for the enfranchisement of some blacks. The difference between the position of Lincoln in 1863 and Americans in 1993 is that our leaders in high places seem not to have either the humanity or the courage of Lincoln. The law itself is no longer an obstruction to justice and equality, but it is the people who live under the law who are themselves an obvious obstruction to justice. One can only hope that sooner rather than later we can all find the courage to live under the spirit of the Emancipation Proclamation and under the laws that flowed from its inspiration.

This essay is based on a talk given by John Hope Franklin at the National Archives, January 4, 1993, on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

*Summer 1993, Vol. 25, No. 2, Prologue Mag,
US National Archives*

What is Ethnomusicology?

Susannah wants to archive culture through music; this desire can be classified as Ethnomusicology. This academic pursuit is related to the play's representation of music as something that is both personally and culturally relevant, and sometimes, definitive

Ethnomusicology encompasses the study of music-making throughout the world, from the distant past to the present. Ethnomusicologists explore the ideas, activities, instruments, and sounds with which people create music.

European and Chinese classical musics, Cajun dance, Cuban son, hip hop, Nigerian juju, Javanese gamelan, Navajo ritual healing, and Hawaiian chant are a few examples of the many varieties of music-making examined in ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicology is interdisciplinary—many ethnomusicologists have a background not only in music but in such areas as anthropology, folklore, dance, linguistics, psychology, and history.

Ethnomusicologists generally employ the methods of ethnography in their research. They spend extended periods of time with a music community, observe and document what happens, ask questions, and sometimes learn to play the community's types of music. Ethnomusicologists may also rely



on archives, libraries, and museums for resources related to the history of music traditions. Sometimes ethnomusicologists help individuals and communities to document and promote their musical practices.

Most ethnomusicologists work as professors at colleges and universities, where they teach and carry out research. A significant number work with museums, festivals, archives, libraries, record labels, schools, and other institutions, where they focus on increasing public knowledge and appreciation of the world's music.

From the official website for The Society for Ethnomusicology, <http://webdb.iu.edu/sem/scripts/home.cfm>

A Brief History of the Blues

What Pearl sings can generally be defined as 'The Blues.' Her music carries her family's struggle while simultaneously drawing on the folk tradition of her African heritage.

When you think of the blues, you think about misfortune, betrayal and regret. You lose your job, you get the blues. Your mate falls out of love with you, you get the blues. Your dog dies, you get the blues.

While blues lyrics often deal with personal adversity, the music itself goes far beyond self-pity. The blues is also about overcoming hard luck, saying what you feel, ridding yourself of frustration, letting your hair down, and simply having fun. The best blues is visceral, cathartic, and starkly emotional. From unbridled joy to deep sadness, no form of music communicates more genuine emotion.

The blues has deep roots in American history, particularly African-American history. The blues originated on Southern plantations in the 19th Century. Its inventors were slaves, ex-slaves and the descendants of slaves - African-American sharecroppers who sang as they toiled in the cotton and vegetable fields. It's generally accepted that the music evolved from African spirituals, African chants, work songs, field hollers, rural fife and drum music, revivalist hymns, and country dance music.

The blues grew up in the Mississippi Delta just upriver from New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. Blues and jazz have always influenced each other, and they still interact in countless ways today.

Unlike jazz, the blues didn't spread out significantly from the South to the Midwest until the 1930s and '40s. Once the Delta blues made their way up the

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Mississippi to urban areas, the music evolved into electrified Chicago blues, other regional blues styles, and various jazz-blues hybrids. A decade or so later the blues gave birth to rhythm 'n blues and rock 'n roll.

No single person invented the blues, but many people claimed to have discovered the genre. For instance, minstrel show bandleader W.C. Handy insisted that the blues were revealed to him in 1903 by an itinerant street guitarist at a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi.

During the middle to late 1800s, the Deep South was home to hundreds of seminal bluesmen who helped to shape the music. Unfortunately, much of this original

music followed these sharecroppers to their graves. But the legacy of these earliest blues pioneers can still be heard in 1920s and '30s recordings from Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Georgia and other Southern states. This music is not very far removed from the field hollers and work songs of the slaves and sharecroppers. Many of the earliest blues musicians incorporated the blues into a wider repertoire that included traditional folk songs, vaudeville music, and minstrel tunes.

by Ed Kopp, published August 16, 2005

<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=18724>

“My definition of Blues is that it’s a musical form which is very disciplined and structured coupled with a state of mind, and you can have either of those things but it’s the two together that make it what it is. And you need to be a student for one, and a human being for the other, but those things alone don’t do it.”

—Eric Clapton, interview 1998

African-Americans in Minstrelsy

Susannah’s desire to ‘share’ Pearl with a greater audience carries the cultural context of minstrelsy. The lives of African-Americans were first represented in white-culture through minstrel shows.

Performed by white men in blackface makeup using what they claimed were Negro dialects, songs, and jokes, the minstrel show was the earliest uniquely American popular entertainment form, the first stage in the growth of American show business, and the precursor of vaudeville, burlesque, and other entertainment forms. The show was a microcosm of American race relations for both blacks and whites, and also caricatured the other major social issues of the day—women’s suffrage, immigration, Indians, fashions, urbanization, and morality—always condemning social change and reaffirming traditional values.

In time, African-Americans came to take the minstrel stage, often wearing the same blackface makeup

that their white predecessors had worn, made from burnt cork. “A company of real ‘cullud pussons’ are giving concerts in New Hampshire,” the editor of the *Clipper* observed in November 1858, “we do not see why the genuine article should not succeed. Perhaps this is but the starting point for a new era in Ethiopian entertainments.” However it was intended, this observation proved prophetic. Although troupes of black minstrels appeared as early as 1855, it was a decade before blacks had established themselves in minstrelsy, their first large-scale entrance into American showbusiness.

Emphasizing their authenticity as Negroes and claiming to be ex-slaves, black minstrels became the acknowledged minstrel experts at portraying plantation material. But since they inherited the white-created stereotypes and could make only minor modifications in them, black minstrels in effect added credibility to these images by making it seem that Negroes actually

behaved like minstrelsy's black caricatures. This negative aspect of their shows was balanced, perhaps even outweighed, by the fact that black people had their first chance to become entertainers, which not only gave many Negroes a rare opportunity for mobility but also eventually put blacks in a position to modify and then correct these stereotypes.

Black minstrels tried to legitimize themselves in two ways. In their advertisements, they quoted extensively from favorable reviews stressing that they were at least the equal of whites as minstrels. But realizing that their greatest appeal was their race, they repeatedly stressed that they were "genuine," "real," "bona-fide" Negroes, or as Frank Queen, the editor of the *Clipper*, much less graciously put it, "real nigs." In 1865, Queen sarcastically attacked the very idea of Negroes as entertainers. "Not being so idiotic as Black Tom ["Blind Tom"]," he wrote of a Georgia Minstrel troupe in Detroit, "they are not doing so well as the latter gentleman." Once these troupes became successful and advertised in his paper, however, Queen quickly dropped such denigrating comments. Ironically, even these snide racial slurs helped black minstrels establish their authenticity as Negroes.

Being denied their basic needs and regularly insulted and threatened things like the "Nigger Read and Run" signs they saw throughout the South were everyday experiences for black minstrels. So was violence. The residents of one Texas town, for example, go their target practice riddling black minstrels' railroad cars with bullets whenever they



passed through. During a parade in another Texas town, local "cowboys" lassoed one company while young rowdies bombarded them with rocks.

Despite the difficulties, obstacles, limitations, and exploitation that black minstrels had to endure, many of them probably shared W. C. Handy's overall assessment of his experience in minstrelsy:

It had taken me from Cuba to California, from Canada to Mexico... It had thrown me into contact with a wistful but aspiring generation of dusky singers and musicians. It had taught me a way of life I still consider the only one for me. Finally, it had brought me back after trying days into the good graces of such home folks as my father and the old school teacher. The time had been well spent.

Adapted from *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* by Robert C. Toll

Black Pearl Cites

The Language and References in *Black Pearl Sings!*

Susannah: He's a Politician

Pearl: If he be religious, we should appeal to the better angels of his nature."

On March 4th, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as President of the United States of America. In his first Inaugural address, he called upon a divided nation to unify through 'the mystic chords of memory.' Lincoln desperately wanted to avoid conflict with the rising political opposition in the South. Lincoln closed his speech by invoking Shakespeare's sonnet 114 and the ideal that we might be saved by 'better angels of our nature'

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

—Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address 1861

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“The Higher, The Fewer”

Discrimination Against Women in Academia

Susannah’s desire to be an independent woman in academia reflects a national movement towards women’s rights. While the play takes place a decade after the ratification of the 19th amendment — the right for women to vote — the culture in academia was still largely ruled by men.

During World War II, a number of states passed legislation to combat salary inequities suffered by women workers. Many unions also adopted standards to insure that women employees received the same salaries as

males who performed similar jobs. The Equal Pay Act of 1963, the first Federal legislation guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, prohibited firms engaged in interstate commerce from paying workers according to wage rates determined by sex. It did not, however, prevent companies from hiring only men for higher paying jobs. The following year, Title VII of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 further prevented sex discrimination in employment, but did not include educational institutions. The following testimony to a Congressional hearing in 1970 emphasized the need to extend sex discrimination legislation to the academic world. In 1972, Congress passed the Higher Education Act. Title IX of this Act forbade federal financial assistance to educational institutions that practiced sex discrimination.

WOMEN IN ACADEMIA: SOME NUMBERS

Only 25 percent of full-time faculty at research universities are women (2001); in 1972, the number was 18 percent.

Female professors at UNC-Chapel Hill earn \$1,332 less per year compared to comparable qualified white male professors

For each year after securing a tenure-track job, male assistant professors are 23 percent more likely to earn tenure

For each year after earning tenure, male professors are 35 percent more likely to be named full professors

*As of February 21, 2005 from Kathy Gill
http://uspolitics.about.com/od/electionissues/a/women_science.htm*

SELECTED STATEMENTS OF DR. ANN SUTHERLAND HARRIS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, REPRESENTING COLUMBIA WOMEN’S LIBERATION

“The rule—and it applies to outside higher education as well—the rule where women are concerned is simply this: The higher, the fewer. The higher in terms of level of education, the higher in terms of faculty rank, the higher in terms of recognized responsibility, the higher in terms of salary, prestige and status, the fewer are the women.”

“The word “sex” was added to section 702 of title VII of the Civil Rights Act as a joke, and women will not forget that insult. Equality for women is not a joke. It is a serious issue, although many otherwise



Harvard Hall

fair-minded individuals still refuse to believe that discrimination against women is a serious problem, or is a problem that deserves to be taken seriously.”

“Women’s weaker physical constitution has never exempted them from hard physical labor in the United States in the home, in factories, in the fields. It has long been the most valued forms of human achievement from which men have sought to exclude women, and in this the academic world is no different from other spheres of prestigious professional activity.”

“When President Nathan Pusey of Harvard realized that the draft was going to reduce the numbers of men applying to Harvard’s graduate program, he exclaimed: ‘We shall be left with the blind, the lame, and the women.’”

“What is a man who does not think that women are people, doing as president of a women’s college? Charles de Carlo thinks that women are myths, muses, madonnas, but not human beings with the potential and full range of characteristics ascribed to men.”

“Sexual discrimination is, as has been said before, the last socially acceptable form of discrimination.”

“I am well aware that the universality of this phenomenon means that we are dealing with instinctive, partly unconscious attitudes, and that making laws that forbid sexual discrimination will not solve the problem. Such laws will help, however, to create the kind of social climate in which men and women can learn to respect each other and learn also not to limit the humanity of each other. It will take a long time, but I for one look forward to the end of the battle of the sexes, in academe and elsewhere.”

“At other educational institutions, women who have criticized their faculties for sexual discrimination have been “censured for conduct unbecoming,” a rare procedure in academe normally reserved for actions such as outright plagiarism. As women who may in the future find our problems turned aside by those who refuse to recognize the existence of

sexual discrimination, we cannot turn our backs on the grievances of the oppressed, the powerless, and the dissident, for women are among those people. “

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6462/>

The Great Depression

The play takes place during the Nation’s greatest economic breakdown, The Great Depression.

photography
Library of
Congress

The Great Depression was an economic slump in North America, Europe, and other industrialized areas of the world that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. It was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world.

Though the U.S. economy had gone into depression six months earlier, the Great Depression may be said to have begun with a catastrophic collapse of stock-market prices on the New York Stock Exchange in October 1929. During the next three years stock prices in the United States continued to fall, until by late 1932 they had dropped to only about 20 percent of their value in 1929. Besides ruining many thousands of individual investors, this precipitous decline in

“The Blues? It’s the mother of American music.

That’s what it is—the source.”

—BB King

the value of assets greatly strained banks and other financial institutions, particularly those holding stocks in their portfolios. Many banks were consequently forced into insolvency; by 1933, 11,000 of the United States’ 25,000 banks had failed. The failure of so many banks, combined with a general and nationwide loss of confidence in the economy, led to much-reduced levels of spending and demand and hence of production, thus aggravating the downward spiral. The result was drastically falling output and drastically rising unemployment; by 1932, U.S. manufacturing output had fallen to 54 percent of its 1929 level, and unemployment had risen to between 12 and 15 million workers, or 25-30 percent of the work force.

The Great Depression began in the United States but quickly turned into a worldwide economic slump owing to the special and intimate relationships that had been forged between the United States and European economies after World War I. The United States had emerged from the war as the major creditor and financier of postwar Europe, whose national economies had been greatly weakened by the war itself, by war debts, and, in the case of Germany and other defeated nations, by the need to pay war reparations. So once the American economy slumped and the flow of American investment credits to Europe dried up, prosperity tended to collapse there as well. The Depression hit hardest those nations that were most deeply indebted to the United States, i.e., Germany and Great Britain. In Germany, unemployment rose sharply beginning in late 1929, and by early 1932 it had reached 6 million workers, or 25 percent of the work force. Britain was less severely affected, but its industrial and export sectors remained seriously depressed until World War II. Many other countries had been affected by the slump by 1931.

Almost all nations sought to protect their domestic production by imposing tariffs, raising existing ones, and setting quotas on foreign imports. The



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effect of these restrictive measures was to greatly reduce the volume of international trade: by 1932 the total value of world trade had fallen by more than half as country after country took measures against the importation of foreign goods.

The Great Depression had important consequences in the political sphere. In the United States, economic distress led to the election of the Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in late 1932. Roosevelt introduced a number of major changes in the structure of the American economy, using increased government regulation and massive public-works projects to promote a recovery. But despite this active intervention, mass unemployment and economic stagnation continued, though on a somewhat reduced scale, with about 15 percent of the work force still unemployed in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II. After that, unemployment dropped rapidly as American factories were flooded with orders from overseas for armaments and munitions. The depression ended completely soon after the United States' entry into World War II in 1941. In Europe, the Great Depression strengthened extremist forces and lowered the prestige of liberal democracy. In Germany, economic distress directly contributed to Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The Nazis' public-works projects and their rapid expansion of munitions production ended the Depression there by 1936.

At least in part, the Great Depression was caused by underlying weaknesses and imbalances within the U.S. economy that had been obscured by the boom psychology and speculative euphoria of the 1920s. The Depression exposed those weaknesses, as it did the inability of the nation's political and financial institutions to cope with the vicious downward economic cycle that had set in by 1930. Prior to the Great Depression, governments traditionally took little or no action in times of business downturn, relying instead on impersonal market forces to achieve the necessary economic correction. But market forces alone proved unable to achieve the desired recovery in the early years of the Great Depression, and this painful discovery eventually inspired some fundamental changes in the United States' economic structure. After the Great Depression, government action, whether in the form of taxation, industrial regulation, public works, social insurance, social-welfare services, or deficit spending, came to assume a principal role in ensuring economic stability in most industrial nations with market economies.

<http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/depression/about.htm>



Further Reading

***Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* by Robert C. Toll**

This history of America's first unique form of popular entertainment offers insight and background on a charged subject of race, music, culture, and social power

***Delta Blues* by Ted Gioia**

A highly regarded history of the blues that Jazz Times hailed as “an expertly researched, elegantly written, dispassionate yet thoughtful history that brings a fresh perspective to much-trammeled ground.”

***Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison**

A novel that describes the African-American experience in the '50s in dealing with discrimination

Discussion Questions

Why do you think Pearl kept the African song a secret from Susannah?

How does music allow the two women to connect in this play?

What role does race play in the relationship between Pearl and Susannah?

What does music mean to Pearl and Susannah respectively? How are these meanings similar, and how are they different?

Group Activities

Think about what songs you remember from childhood. Share these songs with your group members. What memories and feelings do you associate with these songs? How do they affect who you are as a person?

With your group, come up with a song that you know that other groups do not know. Teach this song to the others groups. Discuss your experience with sharing music. Was it easy or hard? How did you feel about learning a new song? How did learning this new song affect your ideas about the groups who taught it?