

Celebrating African American Music Appreciation Month

The Importance and Influence of African American Music

Try imagining what the American music scene would sound like if all African American musical influence was removed. It would be really quiet. And boring. There would be no jazz, no rhythm and blues, probably no rock and roll as we know it ... the list goes on.

As a nod to the importance of Black artists in the music world, President Jimmy Carter designated the month of June as Black Music Month in 1979. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed an official proclamation and changed the name to African American Music Appreciation Month.

The African American influence on American music can be felt across a broad range of musical styles. Africans were among the first non-indigenous peoples in North America and their rich musical heritage eventually mixed with those of Europe and the Americas to create a unique sound tapestry. In the early days of enslavement, Africans incorporated work songs, dance tunes, and sacred music into their daily lives. Singing and playing music were among the only activities they could engage in freely.

Religion and Spirituality Play a Major Role

Spirituals and gospel music (grouped together as Sacred music) show the central role that music plays in African American spiritual and religious life. Spirituals were probably the earliest form of black musical expression in America. As Black people were converted to Christianity, spirituals arose as a combination of Christian psalms and hymns merged with African music styles.

From those roots of spirituals came Gospel music, which originated in churches and has become a globally recognized genre of music. In its earliest forms, gospel music functioned as an integral religious and ceremonial practice during worship services. Call and response, a musical pattern in which a leader sings a line and a group responds, is often heard in gospel music. Hand clapping and foot stomping are frequently used as rhythmic accompaniment.

Ragtime – the Precursor to Jazz

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a new musical style was evolving, known as ragtime. This was certainly the precursor of jazz, as ragtime involved improvising (or “ragging”) a tune while maintaining its harmonic structure. Scott Joplin is often referred to as the father of ragtime. Irving Berlin was influenced by Joplin’s music, and films such as *The Sting* from 1973 attest to the popularity and endurance of the ragtime style.

The Blues Take Over

The next dominant musical style to emerge in the early 1910s was the blues. Most blues compositions consisted of a twelve-bar structure with three chords and incorporated call and response rooted in songs sung by enslaved people on plantations.

Female blues singers became popular and took the genre into the mainstream. Among the most famous were Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Male musicians including Muddy Waters and B.B. King further developed and enhanced the blues. Although segregation was still firmly in place, the allure of “Black music” began to bring the races together.

Jazz – the First Truly American Musical Genre

Jazz, sometimes referred to as America’s original art form, was the next musical style to take center stage, becoming popular after World War I. The music known as jazz most likely got started in New Orleans with the style known as Dixieland.

Louis Armstrong is considered the father of modern jazz. His brilliant trumpet playing inspired countless other musicians to develop their own styles of improvisation. The invention of the microphone in the mid-1920s made it possible to add new instruments, such as the guitar, and vocals, all of which could be heard over the band with the amplification provided by the microphone. The 1920s and 1930s were an exciting time for music, especially jazz. Clubs were sprouting up in all of the major cities and white musicians began to emulate their black counterparts.

Jazz continued to expand over the next two decades and included styles such as swing and bebop. The 1950s brought the world rock and roll, and this genre changed everything.

Rebellious Rock & Roll

Early rock and rollers included Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino and Bo Diddly. These musicians were to have a profound influence on rock and roll music being played in other countries, most notably the United Kingdom (The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Animals and so many more).

Doo-wop, soul, and Motown sounds came next as musicians experimented with new styles of rock and roll. The roster of famous rock and roll musicians of African American descent contains some of the best-known names in music including Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, Tina Turner, and Prince. Rock and roll simply could not have existed without the influence of African American music.

The New Generation of Black Music

More recently, rap and hip-hop have become the musical symbols of urban Black culture. With influences from Caribbean immigrants, this music’s electronic instrumentation is often coupled with references from soul, R&B, and funk from previous decades.

Although Black Americans today still face unquestionable racial inequalities and prejudice, there remains a unifying thread that can be felt in aspects of music and culture — a determination to be heard. Our world is a better place because of the elements of African American music that have shaped so much of our history.