LEAD SHEET

FOR OUR MEMBERS

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CONTENTS

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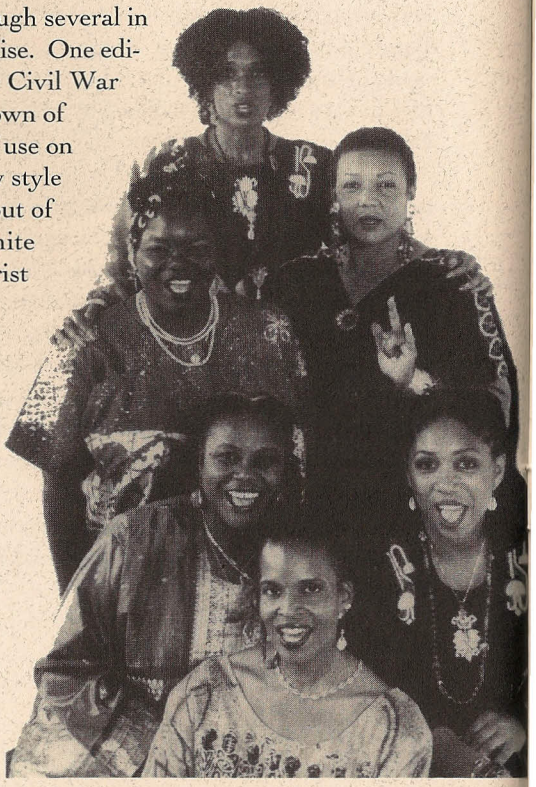
SWEET HONEY: SINGING FROM THE INSIDE

BY PAUL TYLER

Sweet Honey in the Rock is about singing in the Black tradition, or more appropriately, traditions. A Sweet Honey concert offers up hymns, lyrics, and topical songs in older folk styles, as well as in the performance styles of concert spirituals, quartet singing, early and classical gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues, and even rap. Such a wealth of musical styles that have emanated from one people, enriching our larger American and global cultures! Better we should recognize this larger African-American legacy, rather than try to narrow it all down to a single strand of tradition.

Still, an overriding theme stands out in the life stories of the greats of African-American music. They all started out singing in church. This is true of the women of Sweet Honey. In the words of founder, Bernice Johnson Reagon, *"At some point in our concerts we sing to honor the contribution the Black church has made in our lives and in the survival and transformation of our people as a people in this land.... There are elements of the African American church experience that we invite people into whenever we come to a stage. We try to invite people to come to a table and be fed, to learn, to rest, to laugh, to cry."*

The durability of the African-American tradition of sacred song cannot be questioned, though several in the past have wrongly predicted its demise. One editor claimed in the first years after the Civil War that the spirituals, the jewels in the crown of Black folk tradition, were "going out of use on the plantations, superseded by the new style of religious music" (that is, the lining out of hymns, supposedly in imitation of white churches). Seventy years later, folklorist Alan Lomax expressed similar dismay



The Old Tow School welcomes
Sweet Honey in the Rock
to the Skyline Stage
Saturday, August 23 at 7:30 pm.
Call 773-525-7793 for tickets.

A St Paul Federal LIVE concert.

that traditional spirituals (which had in fact absorbed the practice of lining-out into a deep-rooted African pattern of call and response) were again in danger of being silenced.

Such dour predictions to the contrary, the dynamism of the African-American legacy cannot be doubted in the face of its ability to take on many manifestations. Traditional spirituals, classic gospel, and quartet styles all take their place in churches in Chicago and elsewhere, where they stand alongside more modern sounds of gospel. Nevertheless, these traditions have been frequently misunderstood, since most of those who have written about them were outsiders, be they travelers, scholars, or music educators.

Even sympathetic outsiders found it difficult to fully appreciate the exotic sounds of a non-Western music system on American soil. In the 19th century, most Americans believed that songs sung by white actors with faces blackened by burnt cork – songs, such as "Old Dan Tucker" and "Zip Coon" – represented the authentic music of southern slaves. When it was discovered that the slaves had a fondness for religious songs, whether sung by crews of rowers at work or by a ring of shouters in transforming ecstacy, these were identified as songs learned from Methodist or Baptist missionaries, and therefore in some way not Black. And when the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University won international acclaim, a rancorous debate broke out over whether the "Negro" spiritual was an African-American creation or simply an adaptation of European sacred song.

The present writer must acknowledge his own stance as an outsider. Rather than trying to sum up a tradition in my words, I would rather let several inside voices have a say. According to James Weldon Johnson, *"The Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro.... And their production, although seemingly miraculous, can be accounted for naturally. The Negro brought with him from Africa his native musical instinct and talent, and that was no small endowment to begin with."*

A predominant feature of Black singing is its structure as call and response. Johnson again: *"The solitary voice of the leader is answered by a sound like a rolling sea. The effect produced is strangely moving."* The polyphony that results does not follow the European rules of harmony. The 19th Century editor quoted above tried to unravel the unfamiliar tapestry of sound he heard:

> *"The leading singer starts the words of each verse, often improvising, and the others, who 'base' him, as it is called, strike in with the refrain or even join in the solo, when the words are familiar. When the 'base' begins, the leader often stops, leaving the rest of his words to be guessed at, or it may be that are taken up by one of the other singers. And the 'basers' themselves seem to follow their own whims...hitting some other note that chords, so as to produce the effect of a*

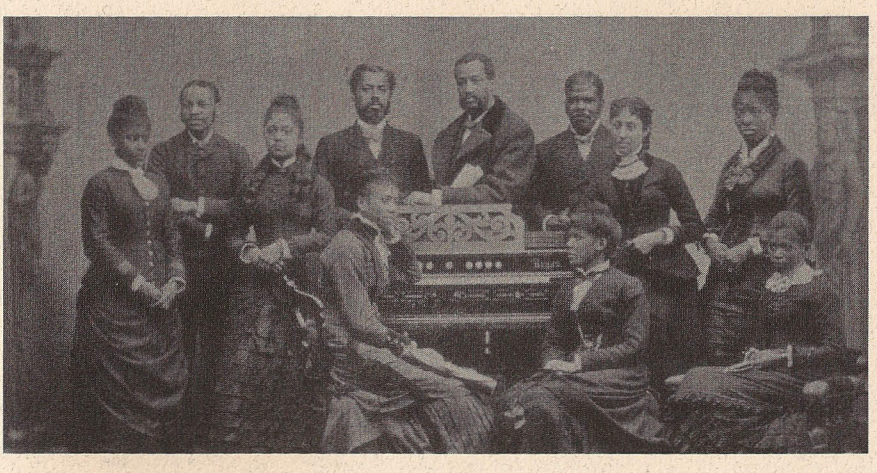
marvelous complication and variety, and yet with the most perfect time, and rarely with any discord...they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented by the gamut."

There is a system at work here, as rich and complex as that achieved by the great composers of the Baroque and Classical periods. According to Johnson, the African-American singers further developed the African pattern so that the response line evolved into a true chorus that became the most important part of the song.

Yet the composers in African-American folk tradition were not celebrities who received patronage or other economic support. From his youth, James Weldon Johnson recalls one such folk composer: *"Singing was* Singing Johnson's *only business. He was not a fixture in any one congregation or community, but went from one church to another, singing his way.... A maker of songs and a wonderful leader of singing. A man who could improvise lines on the moment. A great judge of the appropriate song to sing; and with a delicate sense of when to come to the preacher's support after a climax in the sermon had reached by breaking in with a line or two of a song that expressed a certain sentiment. When he warmed to his work it was easy to see that he was transported and utterly oblivious to his surroundings.* Singing Johnson *was of the line of the mightier bards of an earlier day."*

Two other essential elements of Black singing motion (or *soul*) and rhythm (or *swing*) may prove to be inextricably intertwined. In the words of Bernice Johnson Reagon: *"In singing songs in a Black style, you have to be able to change the notes with feelings before the sound comes out of your body. It's like the feelings have to be inside the sound. So you are not singing notes and tones, you are giving out pieces of yourself, coming from places inside that you can only yourself visit in a singing. It is having what is inside you ride the air in the song you are singing. With mature Black singing, you can't sound like a feeling, you can't act like you're feeling, you have to feel, be in the feeling, and have the feeling establish the quality of your sound."*

Such a difference from that approach many of us have encountered in music lessons. "Now play it with feeling!" as if feeling were something to be added after the notes were learned and the tones were mastered. Perhaps the secret of Black style, of this soul, is in use of the physical body that produces the feeling sound. Johnson again: *"In all authentic American Negro music the rhythms may be divided roughly into two classes: rhythms based on the swinging of head and body and rhythms based on the patting of hands and feet. Again, speaking roughly, the rhythms of the Spirituals fall in the first class and the rhythms of secular music in the second class. The 'swing' of the Spirituals is an altogether subtle and elusive thing. It is subtle and elusive because it is in perfect union with the religious ecstasy that manifests itself in the swaying bodies of a whole congregation, swaying as if responding to the baton of some*



Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, circa 1880

extremely sensitive conductor. So it is very difficult, if not impossible, to sing these songs sitting or standing coldly still, and at the same time to capture the spontaneous 'swing' which is of their very essence."

One further important point is suggested by these inside voices. The African-American tradition of sacred song is based on a unity of embodied feelings and lived experience. The role of sacred song in the survival and transformation of African-Americans manifested itself clearly during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Reagon's account of finding her own true self during this troubled time suggests a historical connection with such bards as Singing Johnson: *"The singing seemed to connect people, and I was perceived as one of the leaders... In jail I found out that I had already been trained to lead songs, to choose songs, and to teach songs.... Things that I had learned by growing up in church, where you had to select from the inside, on a spiritual and intuitive level, were being tested and I was ready. In jail, I practiced a kind of singing that has stuck with me. It is the kind of singing where the song and singing are used to say who you are and what you think, and to confront and be an instrument for getting through the world. It was not the kind of singing that had 'profession' written on it. It was the kind that was seamless with your existence."*

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Sources: All quotes from Bernice Johnson Reagon taken from *We Who Believe in Freedom: Sweet Honey in the Rock*, Anchor Books, 1993. All quotes from James Weldon Johnson taken from *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, Viking Press, 1969 [1925, 1926]. See also William Francis Allen & c., *Slave Songs of the United States*, Dover Books, 1995 [1867]; Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Delta Books, 1993.