

BLACK MUSIC OF THE ATLANTIC WORLD

by Dr. Richard A. Long

I

Since Zora Neale Hurston exhibited in her life and work a profound interest both in the connections between Africa and Black Western hemisphere cultures and in music as an autonomous topic of inquiry, it is appropriate that the humanities focus of Festival '02 should explore the topic, Black Music of the Atlantic World.

A complex of musical elements and performance practices characteristic of wide areas of sub-Saharan Africa have been transmitted to areas of African settlement in the Western Hemisphere, and to settlements of immigrants from those areas to other parts of the Atlantic world, notably Western Europe. Parallel to these population-based manifestations of musical practice, there has been the worldwide spread of African-derived musical genres, particularly, jazz and blues, by means of recording. Thus we may comfortably speak of the nexus of the Atlantic World and Black Music.

Two examples will illustrate the extent of this phenomenon. Jazz emerged in the early twentieth century in the United States and was exported both by recording and in live performance to France in the 1920's. Soon there were native-born French musicians who were recording under such rubrics as "Le Jazz Hot". In the 1930's a set of recordings of music developed among Cubans of African descent was heard in the then Belgian Congo by African musicians who assimilated its sonorities and created a genre which in turn traveled both east and west in Africa to become the dominant dance music of many African urban conglomerates.

The humanities program of Festival '02 will provide exposition and illumination of the topic Black Music and the Atlantic World by presentations on:

- (1) Afro-Cuban music and its trajectory in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere in the Atlantic world;
- (2) patterns and trends in the study of African music and the music of the diaspora; and
- (3) experiential narrative on the performance and pedagogy of Black music.

II

During the last half-century, there has been a developing interest in the cultural connections between homelands and their dispersed communities; this interest has been especially strong in respect to Africa and the general trend may be said to have been set in decisive motion by the pioneering synthesis of Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). As applied to the music of Africa and its cultural continuation in the Western World, certain landmarks both before and after Herskovits should be noted:

- R. Nathaniel Dett, *Religious Folksongs of the Negro* (1927)
- Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (1963)
- LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (1963)
- Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (1968)
- Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* (1995)

Samuel Floyd is the founder-director of the Center for Black Music Research (CBMR) at Columbia College, Chicago, which has become the major agency for the study of the music of Africa and the African diaspora in the United States.

It is interesting to observe that Hurston had contact with several of the authors listed, including Herskovits, Dett, Locke, and Lomax.

