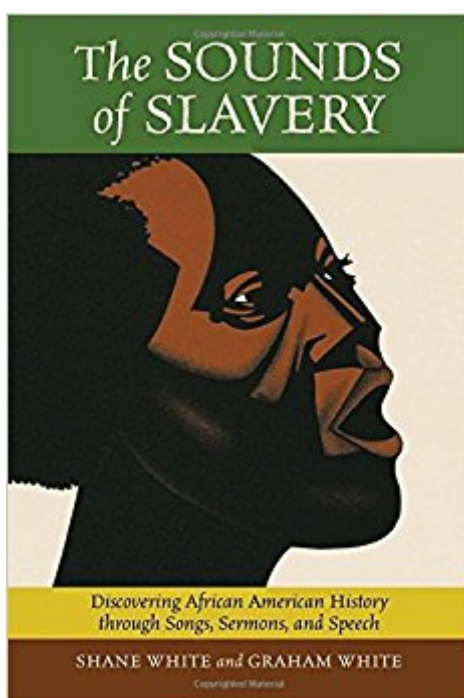


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# The Sounds Of Slavery: Discovering African American History Through Songs, Sermons, And Speech



## Synopsis

This exploration of African American slavery through sound is a groundbreaking way of understanding both slave culture and American history."A work of great originality and insight."-Ira Berlin  
"Shane White and Graham White's book is a joy."-Branford Marsalis  
"A fascinating book . . . that brings to life the historical soundscape of 18th- and 19th-century African Americans at work, play, rest, and prayer . . . This remarkable achievement demands a place in every collection on African American and U.S. history and folklife. Highly recommended."-Library Journal  
"The authors have undertaken the difficult task of bringing to contemporary readers the sounds of American slave culture . . . [giving] vibrancy and texture to a complex history that has been long neglected."-Booklist  
"The book's strongest point is its attention to detail . . . [it] will not only be valuable to young scholars, but . . . to young performers and composers, especially with the explosion of interest in 'roots music,' looking for new sources of original and searing music."-Ran Blake  
"A lyrical and original treatment of the musical and spoken culture of American slaves. This book is moving testimony to how scholarship can penetrate the transcendent spirit once considered exotic or unknowable, how historians can trace social survival to the human voice in slavery's heart of darkness."-David W. Blight, professor of history, Yale University, and author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*  
"A seminal study of a neglected aspect of Southern and African-American culture . . . and the approach to the topic is both creative and resourceful. The book is highly recommended."-Michael Russert  
"The Multicultural Review  
Shane White and Graham White, who are not related, are professor and honorary associate, respectively, in the history department at the University of Sydney, Australia. They are the coauthors of *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginning to the Zoot Suit*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

With no recordings of slave songs and narratives, the authors have undertaken the difficult task of bringing to contemporary readers (and listeners, via the CD that accompanies the book) the sounds of American slave culture. The impressive work songs, spirituals, and prayers were compiled from tracks recorded in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. Drawing on WPA interviews with former slaves, slave narratives, and other historical documents from the 1700s through the 1850s, the authors provide the context for the field calls, work songs, sermons, and other sounds and utterances of slaves on American plantations. The authors also focus on recollections of the wails of slaves being whipped, the barking of hounds hunting down runaways, and the keening of women losing their children to the slave block.... The Whites, history professors who are unrelated, also explore the sounds of slavery within the broader scope of American music and speech, forever influenced by the contributions of African Americans. Vanessa Bush Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A work of great originality and insight.--Ira Berlin " Shane White and Graham White's book is a joy."--Branford Marsalis"A fascinating book . . . that brings to life the historical soundscape of 18th- and 19th-century African Americans at work, play, rest, and prayer . . . This remarkable achievement demands a place in every collection on African American and U.S. history and folklife. Highly recommended."--Library Journal"The authors have undertaken the difficult task of bringing to contemporary readers the sounds of American slave culture . . . [giving] vibrancy and texture to a complex history that has been long neglected."--Booklist"The book's strongest point is its attention to detail . . . [it] will not only be valuable to young scholars, but . . . to young performers and composers, especially with the explosion of interest in 'roots music,' looking for new sources of original and searing music."--Ran Blake, Christian Science Monitor"A lyrical and original treatment of the musical and spoken culture of American slaves. This book is moving testimony to how scholarship can penetrate the transcendent spirit once considered exotic or unknowable, how historians can trace social survival to the human voice in slavery's heart of darkness."--David W.

Blight, professor of history, Yale University, and author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*"A seminal study of a neglected aspect of Southern and African-American culture . . . and the approach to the topic is both creative and resourceful. The book is highly recommended."--Michael Russert, *The Multicultural Review*

The book did not give much in line of reasoning for the Sounds of Slavery. Long but little information on reason for songs. Don't know if there is much in the line of African American History told through songs

In West African tradition, sound making is functional, part and parcel of daily life, integral to most activities: working, celebrating, praying, mourning, placating, criticizing or just passing time. It's a tradition that was carried to the New World on slave ships, a tradition which enthralled, amused, repelled or even terrified white listeners...often simultaneously. This book goes beyond the music created by enslaved Africans/African Americans (such as work songs and spirituals) to explore other forms of sound expression (including sermons, drumming, field hollers and storytelling) placed within a historical context to create a soundscape of African American slave life from the 1700's to the 1850's. The written sources generally fall into two broad categories: the written observations of whites (letters, journal entries, and newspaper articles by travelers, missionaries, even slave owners themselves) and the testimony of former slaves collected by the WPA Federal Writer's Project during the 1930's. With only three exceptions, the sound sources on the 18-track CD are field recordings by John, Ruby and/or Alan Lomax from the late 1930's. By that point, the sounds had been "tainted" by pop culture (many are the times I have tracked down one of my father's rural childhood favorites from the 1920's, only to discover that this "old folk song" his grandma sang was actually an 1890's parlor tune) but alas, this is as close as we're going to get to listening in on a time which preceded sound reproduction devices. And as there are few things more frustrating than trying to understand sound by reading about it, the CD alone would be worth the price of the book. The book is written in a nonlinear style, perhaps reflecting the subject matter which is itself quilt-like: slaves were constantly creating and recreating from the sound materials at hand, materials which often were not even recognized as such by white listeners. This nonlinear style could make the book a bit difficult to use for reference purposes, but fortunately it is well indexed. This fascinating soundscape is recommended for anyone interested in African American music in general, or the era of slavery in particular.

White and White provide a great and useful book not only about slavery, but about African American culture as it emerged, developed itself and extended itself during the years of bondage. Using sound as their guide, they explore not just music, but speech, not just speech, but cries of agony and protest, about the noise instruments, dance, work, love, and death bring. As such they provide many explanations of how the variety of African cultures contributed to the growth of African American culture, how that culture has enabled us to survive, thrive, and contribute mightily the African, North American, and world culture. This is a useful and practical book. As I type, I am in the home of a friend who is an accomplished jazz and blues singer who is working out a blues to sing at a memorial meeting for the songwriter who wrote it. Serious stuff. The ideas about the nature of African American expression in general, musical and vocal expression in particular, and even what we do when people pass here, animate both the ideas that come to me, to her, and her sister, and memories on how to do this both from musical sources and our grandparents. This is that kind of book. The level of scholarship here is excellent. Everything is noted well, as such it provides an entryway to folks looking to get into serious sources on African American history, culture, and life. I like the fact that they refer to the 1930s WPA interviews with survivors of slavery as the "ex-slave" interviews instead of slave narratives as others do. Finally, as a writer myself, I am completely bowled over by their ability to present such a full exposition of these questions, clear in the issues of Black studies, cultural studies, music, and the growing discourse of "everyday life," while using clear and vibrant language. You need not be a scholar or have a dictionary handy to read it and understand it. It is a compelling book that I could not put down and finished the day I started it. I know I will read it again and again. The book comes with an 18-track CD of source material chiefly taken from 1930s recordings by Lomax and other folklorists, although there is some material from as late as the 1970s. The CD focuses on aspects of African American folk expression that are usually not known to those who claim to be knowledgeable of African American culture: field hollars, sermons, work songs. I emphasize that this book is not just about music, but about African American being and life. I emphasize that this book pictures the horror and devastation of slavery and our resistance and triumph of it, but illustrates what and how we do things now. If you can't buy this book, get one from the library and save your money until you can have one of your own.

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