

○ CHAPTER THREE ○

"The South" and "the Negro"

The Rhetoric of Race Relations and Real Life

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For Americans born before the 1960s, the very phrase *the South* connects directly to notions of ignorance and violence, usually focused around the enormous and central problem of race. Such connotations grow out of the region's long history of racial oppression, which in the modern era was summed up in the system of racial segregation. The era of legal segregation lasted from about 1890 to the early 1970s, although at the time it seemed to go on forever, defining so much of what we think of as uniquely Southern. Today most Southerners are pleased that the times have changed, for segregation entailed great fear, hypocrisy, and humiliation on both sides of the color line. Desegregation has brought more freedom of thought and association and a new flexibility of identity. Southerners no longer have to range themselves implacably in the two mutually exclusive categories of black and white. Desegregation has allowed whites to forge new, more honest friendships with black equals, and blacks are staking out their claims in the region's history.

Were this a sufficient characterization of the desegregated South, the region would be sunny indeed. But a good deal more remains to be said, for the past is neither forgotten nor done with. Habits of thought and being persist, including the contrast between "the South," on the one hand, and "the Negro," on the other. In this essay I will discuss these entities, the stock-

in-trade of the rhetoric of race relations, then turn to the real-life originality of Southern black people.

"The South," "the Negro," and the Rhetoric of Race

In collections of essays about the South produced during the era of segregation, it was customary to include one piece on blacks—only one. After this one nod toward nonwhites, all further discussion of the various aspects of Southern society read as though the South were lily-white, as though Southerners were white by definition. Even though we have improved lately, the attraction of a monolithic black South lingers, and it remains difficult to integrate black writers into discussions of Southern literature and to include the work of black social scientists in histories of Southern social thought. In this anthology I am straddling old and newer ways of thinking about the South. In one essay I must say everything to be said in this book about black Southerners, which is a shadow of the old singular formula of "the Negro." At the same time, I must recognize the complicated history of the people who have made up about one-third of the population of the South. I will speak here of the fictive, monolithic entity defined by race as well as of selected aspects of black Southern history.

During the era of segregation, discussions of Southern society involved two categories that did not overlap: "the South" and "the Negro." *The South* meant white people, and *the Negro* meant black people; both phrases appeared always in the singular and packed with unstated significance. *The South* meant the polity, the economy, the powerful institutions of the region, summed up in the persons of elite whites whose ancestors had owned slaves (lots of them) and who had wholeheartedly supported the Confederacy. *The South* did not mean the impoverished and uneducated white masses whose racial identity had to be qualified with the economic (and moral) designation of "poor." *The South* did not embrace whites who supported the Union in the Civil War or those who later disliked or opposed segregation.

As if to balance the economic symmetry of meaning, *the Negro* carried the

unstated connotations of poor, rural, and unschooled. Blacks who did not fit this description also needed some sort of modification to their racial designation, such as “middle-class” or “educated.” Within these silent conventions, white Southern writers analyzed their region, as in John Crowe Ransom’s leading essay in the influential 1930 anthology, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners*: “The South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture; and the European principles had better look to the South if they are to be perpetrated in this country.”

By “European principles,” Ransom meant tranquil stability as a good thing, which only made sense from the point of view of someone who was not oppressed. Even Wilbur J. Cash’s 1941 classic, *The Mind of the South*, which is still read as truth by many, speaks of *the South* as opposed to *the Negro*.

Such usage considerably simplified the analysis of Southern society by identifying classes with race, although Cash spoke of two classes of whites in his category of *the South*, which helps explain the continuing attractiveness of his text. By defining economically oppressed whites out of society—disappearing them, so to speak—articulate white Southerners managed to erect a stylized construct of Southern society that seemed appealing. A string of million-dollar movies about the Old South, for example the classic favorites *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, venerated plantation aristocrats who ruled over a society made up principally of people like them and their servants. Despite the allure of the made-up South of popular culture, the reality was harsher and more complicated.

Racism and Class Oppression

From the eighteenth through much of the twentieth century, educated Southerners, the overwhelming majority of whom were white, enjoyed the benefits of life at the top of a society in which many workers were either enslaved or otherwise economically fettered by racist traditions and low wages, and in which there was little need to share political power, especially office holding, with the poor. Stripped down to its bare essentials, such a

system violated the democratic principles said to be characteristic of the United States. Racism made the absence of democracy in the South acceptable, even attractive, to most Americans.

Race justified and obscured ordinary class oppression in the United States, even though anyone who thought about the situation realized that the republican ideal of economic mobility was impossible for a working class that was enslaved. Racism allowed Americans of African descent to be counted out—out of the polity, even out of society. The *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, holding that no blacks, slave or free, could be citizens, generalized an idea that had been gaining impetus nationally since the 1830s.

Few Americans realized that, in barring a race from citizenship, they thereby also conveniently silenced the very poor. In the past and today, nearly all black people work for a living and, as a group, represent the nation’s poorest people. The habit stuck of dealing with economic and political inequities in terms of race, for as Southerners and as Americans we still speak easily of racial differences while stumbling over matters of economic class.

By thinking in terms of race without seeing class, Southerners distorted (and still distort) discussions of labor relations and class conflict. Instead of phrasing the question in terms of employers and employees, Southerners engaged in the murky discourse of race relations, in which the attributes of race could be both irrational and yet supposedly immutable. Almost anything could be said about race and be believed. Educated white men all could be termed natural leaders who, slim and elegant, were excellent horsemen. Speaking of the monolithic “the Negro,” elite Southerners could claim: before the Civil War, that enslaved workers were happy to work for nothing; after the war, that much of the Southern working class was dying out as a consequence of having been emancipated; at the turn of the twentieth century, that raping white women was a racial trait; and, in the 1950s, that because they were black, large numbers of Southerners did not want to exercise ordinary civil rights. Racism made such generalizations seem credible when they were applied to blacks, although they would have seemed ludicrous if spoken about other people.

During the era of segregation, the introduction of race into any discussion

sent most Southern whites into pig-headed denial, as they performed extraordinary (and often unconscious) mental gymnastics to excuse the immobilization and oppression of a large portion of the Southern working class. White supremacists gained a wide audience in the South that seldom challenged their fantasies, which so often involved sex: an insistence on racial purity that ignored white men's abuse of black women; a confusion of voting rights with miscegenation; a stigmatization of black women for their supposed lack of feminine virtues; and hysteria over black male autonomy and sexuality. Racism also created grotesque stereotypes that delighted whites and humiliated blacks—and not only in the South. Mammies, Samboes, Sapphires, Zip Coons, and the rest flourished in American popular culture for well over a century.

Needless to say, blacks did not accept such degradation silently. At every turn, they campaigned against defamation, segregation, and lynching. In the 1890s, for instance, blacks boycotted newly segregated streetcars in Jacksonville, New Orleans, and other cities. Such journalists as Ida B. Wells of the *Memphis Free Speech* challenged white supremacists' explanations of lynching, with the result that in the mid-1890s her newspaper was destroyed and she became a refugee in the North. A similar fate befell Atlanta journalist J. Max Barber in the aftermath of the race riot of 1906.

Any honest evaluation of Southern society must begin by challenging the scheme that separates "the South" from "the Negro" and then recognize that the South has long been a multiracial society divided against itself. The history of race relations is almost uniformly depressing until it reaches the civil rights era of the mid-twentieth century, for the establishment and maintenance of segregation came at an appalling human cost.

The Southern Black Old Country

Emancipation in 1865 served as the great watershed in race relations (by making free people of slaves) and black culture (by permitting an increased level of cultural autonomy). Both processes unfolded during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, during the era

of strict racial segregation. Segregation was a repressive response to emancipation, a means of freezing blacks in a subordinate status and preventing the mobility that had threatened to take place right after 1865. Segregation represented an entire system of economic, social, and political subjugation. The "separate but equal" dictum was never any more than a fiction designed to lend an acceptable rationale to a naked system of oppression. Segregation consigned blacks—the vast majority of whom were poor—to unskilled work in agriculture or domestic service. It denied blacks equal protection under law and barred them from jury service. Segregation posed a threat to the physical well-being of a black person who contested the will of elite whites by attempting to vote or trying to collect overdue debts. Segregation kept black children, most of whom lived in rural areas, in rundown schoolhouses staffed by underpaid teachers during short terms that were measured in weeks rather than months.

Schooling was always more tenuous in the countryside than in towns, a deficiency that was especially hard on black Southerners. Southern blacks were more rural than Southern whites until about 1960, so that the combination of rurality, poverty, and segregation limited black access to formal education. In 1940, 49 percent of Southern blacks (as opposed to 16 percent of Southern whites) had completed less than five years of school. By 1960, 32 percent of Southern blacks (and 10 percent of Southern whites) had completed less than five years of school; by 1975, the latest year for which figures are available, less than 5 percent of both races in the South had no more than a fifth-grade education.

Racial discrimination and lack of education constricted Southern blacks' vocational choices, and this limitation affected them with particular severity because such a large proportion of women were in the work force. On the eve of the Great Depression, 39 percent of black women and 80 percent of black men over ten years of age were working for wages, compared to 16 percent of Southern white women and 75 percent of Southern white men. With the majority of Southern black men and women employed in agriculture, forestry, fishing, or domestic service, parents were likely to have to work for very low wages and often to seek work at a distance from their children. This pattern of low wages persists today, so that families with more than one wage

earner still live in poverty. As late as 1985, 30 percent of African-American families in the South (as opposed to 10 percent of white families and 23 percent of Hispanic families) lived below the poverty level. With 13 percent of its families living in poverty in 1985, the South was still the poorest region in the United States. The median income of Southern black families was \$15,800 (for white families, \$27,100, and for Hispanic families, \$19,000), while the median family income of all American families in 1985 was \$27,750. Blacks are still the poorest group in the poorest region of the United States.

Two very important migrations altered Southern black culture. The first occurred when a people who had been mostly Southern began to move to the Northeast and Midwest and, in smaller numbers, into the West. Even though nearly half a million black Southerners left the South between 1870 and 1910, by the latter date more than 90 percent of African Americans still resided in the Southern states. The out-migration gained momentum in the twentieth century, continuing until 1970. In 1980, only 53 percent of blacks lived in the South, but their culture had taken root in the Southern diaspora: St. Louis, Chicago, Oakland, Harlem, and even Minneapolis.

This vast migration resembles Asian, Latin-American, and European immigration to the United States in that black Southern migrants, like immigrants, moved toward economic opportunity and away from social and economic oppression. But one crucial difference separates the experiences of black Southerners from that of immigrants. The latter think of the United States as a promised land and look across the borders to the bad Old Country. But for African Americans, the United States—at least one region of it—represents the oppression they have fled. Having suffered in the land of opportunity, many African Americans feel an ambiguous patriotism that complicates their relationship with their Old Country, the South.

Contemporaneously with that sweeping interregional migration, there occurred a second migration of black Southerners, one that has great importance for this essay: Rural black Southerners moved to town. Whereas 80 percent of African Americans lived in the country in 1890, by 1970 the

Southern black population was only 19 percent rural (compared with 28 percent rural among Southern whites). Between the 1890s and the end of the era of segregation, the move from the country to the city profoundly affected black religion and black music.

The Real Life of Southern Black Music

Few generalizations about Southern society apply to one race but not the other, and the Sanctified movement of the 1890s that created Holiness (or Holy Roller or Pentecostal) churches is no exception. Sanctified churches grew up among whites as well as blacks, just as the radio and the phonographs that spread black gospel music and blues were no respecters of the color line. (This, however, is a history of blacks in the South, not of all Southerners, and the fascinating story of twentieth-century Southern religion as a whole cannot be told here.) The new sacred and secular black Southern music quickly influenced whites as well as blacks, particularly after radios and phonographs became widespread. Both basic types of mid-twentieth-century black music—blues and gospel—have their roots in nineteenth-century religion.

During the antebellum era, most blacks who were slaves either worshiped along with their masters or had no Christian religion. After emancipation, freedpeople formed their own churches, mostly Baptist or Methodist, often as a consequence of the activities of black and white missionaries from such Northern churches as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, North. Many black Baptists split off from Southern Baptist congregations, causing a crisis in the mother church. Separate churches permitted blacks to elaborate their worship services along African-American lines.

In the nineteenth century, black religion did not include the use of musical instruments. Methodists sang from hymnals based on the songs written and collected by Charles Wesley, brother of John Wesley, the British founder of the Methodist Church. Preferring not to use books, Missionary Baptists and Primitive (meaning fundamentalist) Baptists tended rather to let the preacher

line out the long-meter hymns associated with Isaac Watts, a pioneering eighteenth-century English hymn writer associated with Nonconformist religion in Great Britain and the United States. This style of singing, very much rooted in rural life, was called simply “Dr. Watts.” It generally began slowly and softly, building melismatically toward a high point during which the congregation would clap or clasp hands. Dr. Watts singing was distinctive in style, employing the African-American full-throatedness, nasal tones, falsetto, and interjection of sounds like growls and moans. This style carried over into new forms of Southern black religion.

The new Holiness churches of the 1890s and the early twentieth century were much more congregation-centered and made much greater use of music and dance than the older churches. Beginning with pianos, tambourines, and drums, Holiness or Sanctified churches have employed ever more elaborate instrumentalization over the years. The most striking aspects of Holiness worship are its rhythmic intensity and the spirit possession of members of the congregation, known as “shouting” or “getting happy.” In the 1920s and 1930s the new gospel songs came to be called “Dorseys,” after their most prominent creator and performer, Thomas A. Dorsey, to whom I will return below.

The potency of this church-based music derives from its combination of the older traditions of African-American religious singing—Dr. Watts and spirituals—with the rhythms, instruments, and unsentimental evocations of personal realities associated with the blues, which grew out of work songs and field hollers. Gospel music (including quartet singing) and the blues share certain characteristics that distinguish African-American music. Most obvious is the salience and complexity of rhythm. Blues and gospel music also employ a distinctive scale, in which the third, fifth, seventh, and sometimes sixth notes are altered, either lowered or shaded. These are what are called “blue” notes or “bent” tones. The blues are known for a twelve-bar form in which the first line is repeated, a form found in much black gospel music as well. Here are two examples of the twelve-bar blues form:

I am broke and hungry, ragg’d and dirty too.
I am broke and hungry, ragg’d and dirty too.

Mama if I clean up, can I go home with you?¹

Make your bed up higher, and turn your lamp way low.

Make your bed up higher, and turn your lamp way low.

I’m gonna hug and kiss you, ain’t coming here no more.²

African-American music is an aural, spontaneous music that cannot be set down and captured once and for all in a written score. Blues and gospel music (like white gospel and country music) are emotional idioms, through which singers aim to involve their audience in a performance that appears unrehearsed and sincere. Black singers use falsetto to increase the emotional punch of the music; they also speak certain lines, growl, moan, and shout to reinforce the felt authenticity of their message. Employing a panoply of techniques, each performer and each performance produces a unique version of familiar songs. This continuing elaboration on a microscopic scale is matched by a long-term evolution of instrumentalization in religious and secular music. Whereas in the nineteenth century, neither work songs nor spirituals were accompanied, twentieth-century blues and gospel music have taken on an ever-enlarging instrumental backup. No matter how elaborate the band, however, the human voice remains the model sound.

Southern black culture remained the fountainhead of creativity for countless singers and pickers who invented and reinvented blues and gospel music. The vast majority of these musicians lived and died in obscurity behind the veil of racial segregation, seldom becoming well known very far outside their own locales. But the professionals who toured and made records gained a wider fame. A handful of prominent performers must stand for the generations of inspirational but unknown bards.

Both W. C. Handy and the pioneer blues singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey encountered the blues for the first time in the early years of the twentieth century. A native of Columbus, Georgia, Ma Rainey became the first major blues singer, but she did not discover the blues until 1902, when she heard a

1. Jerry Silverman, *One Hundred and Ten American Folk Blues* (New York, 1958), 214–15.

2. Tilford Brooks, *America’s Black Musical Heritage* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1984), 55.

young woman singing about the loss of her man. Rainey adopted this poignant style and made her career as a classic blues singer in the 1920s.

W. C. Handy, later known as the “Father of the Blues,” was a college-trained musician, born in Alabama, who heard a tired black man accompanying himself on a guitar in a Mississippi train station in 1903. Although the music was not entirely foreign to Handy—he had heard that sort of singing as a boy in Alabama—the overall effect struck him as weird and powerful.

Like gospel singing, blues was at once something old and something new, a twentieth-century novelty that drew on older African-American traditions. Pursuing the invention of the blues leads simultaneously back to Africa and back only as far as 1902. As an old bluesman said of the search for origins: “The blues? Ain’t no first blues! The blues always been.”³

In the absence of phonograph records, tracing the early development of the blues is only possible through personal recollections and sheet music, the latter at best an imprecise gauge of black folk music. Handy’s first blues composition was the 1912 “Memphis Blues”; his well-known “St. Louis Blues” was published two years later. Like many other blues and gospel musicians whose names are still known, Handy moved north. He settled in New York in 1918 and continued writing music and the history of black music.

The first blues songs were not recorded until 1920, when “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” and “This Thing Called Love,” by Mamie Smith, were issued in New York. During the 1920s, the best-known performers of classic blues were women, notably Sippie Wallace (“the Texas Nightingale”), Tennessean Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey (“Mother of the Blues”). Southern born and raised, the stars of the classic blues inevitably migrated from the country, first to Southern and then to Northern cities, and their music differed from what was called the country blues.

Ma Rainey, the first great blues performer, is remembered both for the turbulence of her life and for the originality of her artistry, for as a classic blues singer she incorporated the roughness and spontaneity of Southern

3. Quoted in Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 2d ed. (New York, 1983), 330.

rural (or country) blues. The country blues in the early twentieth century is associated with men like “Texas” Alger Alexander, “Mississippi” John Hurt, “Blind” Lemon Jefferson, and Charlie Patton, whose regional styles varied tremendously. However, country blues singers, who accompanied themselves on guitars, had many techniques in common. They used a raspy, abrasive voice full of falsetto—growling, humming, grunting, and shouting the bent tones and blue notes. Slapping, stomping, and beating, blues performers made themselves and their guitars into percussive instruments.

Singers of the classic blues were more polished and restrained performers, but like country blues artists, they sought to forge links of shared experiences—shared hurts—between themselves and their audiences. A fellow blues singer summed up her memory of Ma Rainey:

Oh Lord, don’t say anything about Ma. All her gold hanging around her tight. Ma was a mess. Ain’t nobody in the world ever yet been able to holler “Hey Bo Weevil” like her. Not like Ma. Nobody. I’ve heard them try to, but they can’t do it. “Hey Bo Weevil.” All right. ’Cos bo weevil he was eating up everything down South. That worm would eat up all the food and everything. And she holler “Hey Bo Weevil you been gone a long time.” Now there was two *meanings* to that. I was such a smart little hip chicken, I knew just which bo weevil she was talking about.⁴

Unattractive by American standards of beauty, Ma Rainey was dark-skinned and full-bodied. Her personal style belonged to old show-business traditions. She had gold teeth and dressed in glittering gowns and diamond tiaras. Rainey straightened her hair and wore light-colored powder, but this did not indicate that she or other women who adopted a similar style wanted to be white. Rainey’s persona was rooted in black culture, but as a performer she sought also to convey an impression of wealth and beauty. Expensive clothes straightforwardly advertised her wealth. But the matter of feminine beauty was (and remains) far more ambiguous.

In the United States of the 1920s, the great majority of the population was

4. Quoted in Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York, 1984), 105.

white. Virtually all rich people were white, and, here as elsewhere, the appearance of wealth is much the same as the appearance of beauty. In addition, white people created and manipulated images of beauty, which had partly been fashioned with the color and shape of black women's bodies as negative examples. Two generations before the Black Power and Black-Is-Beautiful movements, Americans, including most blacks, equated lightness with beauty. Like the black entertainers who followed her decades later, Ma Rainey fashioned a black image that preserved the earthiness of black folk culture but adopted the symbols of American beauty—lightness of skin and straightness of hair.

The classic blues singers of the 1920s toured widely in the South but recorded in Chicago or New York, responding to the imperatives of the music industry. The concentration of the recording business in the North and later on the West Coast affected the long-term reputation of Southern artists. The most familiar are those who, like Bessie Smith, recorded in New York. Bessie Smith even made a film. Her fame—particularly vis-à-vis that of Ma Rainey, who recorded in Chicago—reflects as much New York's prominence as a national media center as it does her particular genius and Southern following.

Race records—records produced primarily for the African-American market—brought classic blues singers a national audience, but the blues stars of the 1920s also toured widely with their own bands. Ma Rainey's pianist in the mid-1920s was a talented bluesman known as Barrelhouse Tom or Georgia Tom, Thomas A. Dorsey, who is remembered today as the "Father of Gospel Music."

Born in rural Georgia—his father was a country preacher—Dorsey grew up in Atlanta, where he encountered the various traditions of blues and black church music as well as white revivalists like Billy Sunday. Having spent his youth in the church, Dorsey strayed into the blues and then, in 1921, was converted back into religion. His songwriting model was Charles A. Tindley, a black minister in Philadelphia who wrote favorites like "Stand by Me" that

combine the folk images of spirituals and biblical allusions with the emotional intensity of Dr. Watts singing. Though Tindley had earlier made use of blues phrasing by repeating the first line of each verse, it is Dorsey who is remembered for bringing together the two great black musical traditions. Fusing the musical conventions of the blues—notably rhythm and instrumental accompaniment—with the drama and feeling of black Pentecostal religion was Dorsey's great achievement. Long after he had become identified with gospel singing, he admitted that "blues is a part of me, the way I play piano, the way I write."⁵

In 1926 Dorsey wrote the first of what he called gospel songs, "If You See My Savior, Tell Him That You Saw Me." The inspiration for the song came to him in a manner that became typical, from personal experience of illness and lack of money—in short, a blues inspiration. Out of the grief that swept over him after the death of his wife and child in 1932, he wrote his most famous song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Had Dorsey merely composed some one thousand gospel songs, many of which have become favorites among whites as well as blacks, he would be remembered. (He wrote "When I've Done My Best," "Hide Me in Thy Bosom," "Search Me, Lord," and "There'll Be Peace in the Valley," among many others.)

But Dorsey was also a creator of the gospel chorus and the mentor of several talented soloists. He organized the first gospel chorus in 1931, and the following year he founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses together with his longtime collaborator, Sallie Martin. Dorsey also formed a gospel music publishing house.

Dorsey's move to Chicago in the 1910s did not prevent him from touring extensively through the South in the 1920s. But with Dorsey anchored in the Midwest, his protégés, all of whom came from the South, also tended to base themselves in the North. Sallie Martin had her own gospel group during the 1940s and 1950s and published "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." (Martin trained a young gospel pianist who later took the name Dinah Washington, under which she is known as a pioneer of rhythm and blues.) Martin grew up

5. Quoted in Tony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York, 1971), 56.

in a small black settlement in Georgia and as a young adult moved to Atlanta, where she encountered the Holiness church. In the 1920s she and her husband and son migrated to Cleveland and then to Chicago.

Mahalia Jackson, more famous today than Sallie Martin, was another of Dorsey's associates. Jackson's idol in her teenage years was the classic blues singer Bessie Smith, much of whose style Jackson incorporated into her own gospel performances. Jackson migrated from New Orleans to Chicago in 1927. She joined Dorsey in the late 1930s, and he wrote "There'll Be Peace in the Valley" especially for her in 1937. In the late 1940s Jackson launched the recording career that made her famous worldwide. That she has been able to reach nonblack audiences without abandoning gospel music is a testament to the attractiveness of the genre.

The choruses associated with Dorsey and Martin's gospel convention quickly became a national force, one whose impetus came from the South but many of whose best-known artists lived in the Midwest. But another tradition of black church music has remained more firmly rooted in the South: that of gospel quartets. During the same years that the Sanctified movement was laying the groundwork for choral gospel singing, blacks also refined quartet singing into an elaborate form of church-based entertainment. Often the quartets were all male, featuring close harmonies, choreographed movements, and careful dress and grooming.

The formation of the Dixie Hummingbirds in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1929 marks the emergence of a form of Southern black religious music that was related to yet different from gospel choruses. Gospel choruses consisted mostly of women wearing choir gowns and singing with instrumental accompaniment. Gospel quartets might have four or five members and were generally all male. Dressed in matching suits and snapping their fingers to keep time, the quartets initially sang a cappella.

Gospel quartets flourished in the 1940s and prospered well into the 1950s with such groups as the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, the Soul Stirrers, and the Spirit of Memphis. With their careful, almost mannered choreography, energetic performances, and medley of lead and backup singers, gospel quartets represented a form of entertainment that incorporated ideals from

the churches and from the streets. Their carefully tailored suits and "conks" (chemically straightened hair) presented a church-based version of Ma Rainey's image of prosperity and beauty. As with Rainey, one secret of the quartets' success lay in their continuing ability to perform in a spontaneous manner that convinced audiences that the groups knew and shared their troubles.

Like choral gospel music, most quartet singing remained on the amateur level. Singers sought to inspire as well as to entertain their friends and families, so that the line blurred between performer and audience. The use of call and response in African-American music served further to bond singers and listeners into a congregational whole. Gospel quartets, gospel choruses, and blues singers (and, incidentally, country-and-western performers) had to seem to testify and preach through their music, not merely to perform.

Sad and ironic, the blues detailed life's tragedies, whereas gospel soared with the joy of overcoming those same griefs. Closely related in rhythm, scale, and vocal mannerisms, both secular and sacred black music grew out of twentieth-century African-American Southern culture and the segregation that characterized contemporary race relations. Most whites—Northern and Southern—ignored black music until the barriers between the races began to fall after World War II.

White supremacy and strict racial separation had never prevented black and white musicians from borrowing from one another, even in the segregated South. Yet their audiences remained largely distinct well into the twentieth century. The movement away from absolute separation of the races in popular culture had begun first in the North in the 1930s. One example of increased racial flexibility was the series of Carnegie Hall concerts produced by John Hammond in 1938 and 1939, entitled "From Spirituals to Swing." These concerts introduced black musicians—blues singers, gospel groups, and jazz players, most of them Southern—to largely white New York audiences. By the mid-1950s, though Southern life remained segregated, blues

and gospel music were making their way into nonblack American culture with rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and jazz. By the 1960s, artists who had hitherto performed on the "chickenbone" circuit—such as Mississippian B. B. King—were performing before white audiences. Aretha Franklin, whose voice and style are filled with the gospel sound of her Mississippi-born preacher father, became an international star, while groups like the Temptations and the Spinners adopted the sounds and mannerisms of the gospel quartets. White performers like Elvis Presley recorded Dorsey's gospel songs, including "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and American popular music of all sorts employed African-American rhythms full of the intensity and drama of gospel phrasing. The period after the 1950s witnessed the Americanization of Southern black music purely as entertainment.

Present-day American popular music, from rock to country to soul, is deeply indebted to a Northern, urbanized version of what, at midcentury, was mostly black and Southern. Although today's popular music gets its infusion of African rhythms via Jamaica as well as Mississippi, the influence of Southern-based blues and gospel styles is still pronounced. With the migration of millions of blacks to cities outside the South, these other places now figure largely in the map of African-American culture. Compared with the recorded popular music of the first half of this century, new black musical forms like rap and disco owe relatively little to the South. At the same time, the crumbling of racial barriers has made it easier for whites to present themselves as performers of black music.

The Civil Rights Era

Something else was going on at the same time that white Americans (and Britons) were discovering and appropriating Southern black music. African Americans were also casting off the timidity and otherworldliness that had protected communities of preachers and their congregations during the worst of the segregation era. Much that affected black Americans changed during and after World War II: unionization, the March on Washington

movement, military service and the desegregation of the military, and increased migration out of the South.⁶

In a postwar world in which colored nations were becoming independent and Soviets criticized Americans for racism, the imperatives of empire and the Cold War discouraged parochial habits like white supremacy. Foreign as well as domestic politics contributed to the watershed 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which struck down racial segregation in public schools and signaled the end of segregation in Southern public life. Other decisions prohibited the white primary and poll taxes, means by which Southern states had disfranchised the mass of black voters. But these changes did not become manifest in the South until black Southerners—most of them associated with churches, often the very churches that had nourished the magnificent tradition of gospel choirs and quartets—took to the streets to demonstrate against racial oppression.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s profoundly altered Southern society and affected many aspects of black identity. On the one hand, the movement galvanized Southern blacks and utilized the racial solidarity created by white supremacy. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), in particular, was able to build the unity implicit in the formula "the Negro" into a potent force for change. On the other hand, the civil rights movement's very success in dismantling the political, economic, and social structure of segregation also undermined black solidarity based strictly on race.

The modern civil rights movement began in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, in what Alabama's license plates call the heart of Dixie. Beginning as a protest against the rough handling of black women by bus drivers, inflexible Jim Crow seating arrangements on public transportation, and a lack of jobs for blacks, the Montgomery bus boycott lasted a year. The boycott led to the

6. Between 1940 and 1950, 1,599,000 black Southerners left the South; from 1950 to 1960, 1,473,000; and from 1960 to 1970, 1,380,000.

formation of the organization that became SCLC and propelled a young preacher from Atlanta, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., into national prominence.

King's talents were many. He was articulate, well educated, and in command of the idioms of Southern black religious culture. His ability to inspire people who had thought themselves powerless was virtually unique. Through organization and inspiration, King and SCLC brought the Southern black churchgoing masses into the streets and the county offices to protest the Southern racial status quo. The protests—the whole movement, in fact—made use of the music of Southern black churches.

The attempt to register poor Southern blacks as voters was the special task of a coalition of organizations led by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was formed, at the behest of SCLC's Ella Baker, at a 1960 conference held at Baker's alma mater, Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Northern and Southern students (now middle-aged) who participated in the Freedom Summer of 1964 think of SNCC as "the movement," seared as they were by the murderous violence that white supremacists were willing to commit. For SNCC volunteers, the 1964 murder of three civil rights workers near Philadelphia, Mississippi, was the great example of how far white supremacists would go to forestall black civil rights. Freedom Summer attracted large numbers of white students, and two of the three Philadelphia victims were white Northerners, which meant that the killings attracted wide media coverage. White newspapers and television had, however, ignored the hundreds of Southern blacks who had been beaten and murdered during the preceding decade in pursuit of the vote.

For the Southern black masses—the people who went to church and sang gospel music or who stayed away from church and sang the blues—the campaigns that SCLC mounted over the years were more important than Freedom Summer. In cities like Albany, Georgia, Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, and Memphis, Tennessee, SCLC organized mass protests aimed at wresting political power away from traditional elites and increasing blacks' access to jobs.

SCLC, SNCC, and the whole civil rights movement persuaded Congress to pass the landmark legislation of the mid-1960s, but an even more immedi-

ate and sensational goad to lawmakers was the nonviolent Birmingham campaign of 1963—with an assist in the same year from the huge, peaceful, interracial March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, led by a coalition of civil rights, religious, and labor organizations. By 1963 SCLC had realized the wisdom of exploiting the violence of white supremacists, who were unmindful of the awful spectacle they presented on nationwide television. Skillfully manipulated by SCLC, media coverage presented starkly contrasting images. Churchgoing, nonviolent black protesters marched, prayed, and sang the intensely moving gospel music they had created over the years. Their adversaries appeared as irrational, bloody-minded bigots bent on refusing upstanding Christians their ordinary citizens' rights, merely because of their color. The rightness of the peaceable black cause and the ugliness of white-supremacist violence pressured Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the most far-reaching piece of civil rights legislation in this nation's history.

SNCC volunteers performed invaluable services in Mississippi: registering blacks to vote, setting up freedom schools, and involving oppressed people in community activities that had seemed forbidden before. In an unofficial freedom vote organized by a coalition of civil rights organizations in 1963, 80,000 disfranchised Mississippi blacks dared to cast votes for the also unofficial Mississippi Freedom Democratic party (MFDP), which sent a delegation headed by Fannie Lou Hamer to the Democratic nominating convention of 1964. The MFDP did not succeed in gaining seats at the convention, but the freedom vote proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that white-supremacist rhetoric about blacks' lack of interest in voting was no more than a tissue of lies. In the following year, SCLC organized a march for the right to vote from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama; the march provoked police violence that was captured on national television. By the time it ended, the protest at Selma had garnered nationwide support, and celebrities flew in from all over the country to join the march for voting rights.

Congress responded to all this positive and negative pressure by passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which provided for federal oversight of elections and a series of safeguards in areas where large proportions of the electorate had been disfranchised. After 1965 Southern blacks began to

register and vote, creating a revolution in Southern politics that faltered during the Reagan years but has not ended. These changes can easily be traced in Mississippi.

After 1964 the MFDP divided seats at Democratic nominating conventions with the officially recognized but lily-white Mississippi Democratic party until the mid-1980s, when the two parties merged. In 1986 Mississippi voters elected Michael Espy as their first black congressman since Reconstruction. Espy's election depended on the votes of many whites, but without the Voting Rights Act of 1965, blacks might never have cast the votes that made Espy's election feasible.

The civil rights movement of 1955–65, which was marked by popular participation in nonviolent demonstrations, revolutionized Southern society in numerous ways both subtle and obvious. Certainly the participants entertained very high hopes for what the movement could achieve, and certainly its results fell short of their expectations. But just as segregation was a system of racial subjugation with social, economic, and political ramifications, so the changes wrought by the civil rights movement, still unfolding, are many and varied. The most pronounced shift has been from a concentration on access to public accommodations and the vote to an overwhelming concern for jobs. This is primarily a change of emphasis, for even in the early 1960s the demand was for “jobs and freedom.” Martin Luther King, Jr., embodied this shift. Having begun his public life with a protest against segregated city buses, he died showing solidarity with striking sanitation workers.

Desegregation and Reaction

In retrospect, the most salient section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has been Title VII, which prohibits discrimination on account of race (and sex) by employers and unions. This provision has made it possible for workers, usually with the help of such civil rights organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), to sue unions or employers for the right to employment or to advancement on the job. For Southern black workers, this has meant breaking out of the narrow spectrum

of “Negro” jobs and advancing along lines of seniority that previously had been limited to whites.

In three Southern industries—steel (Birmingham, Alabama, and Baltimore, Maryland), tobacco (Virginia and North Carolina), and textiles (North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia)—black workers have successfully sued their unions and their employers for equal access to employment and promotion. With the exodus of white men from these fields into relatively high-paying new areas of industrial employment in the South, black workers since the late 1960s have found increased opportunities in manufacturing. The textile industry, long a white preserve, clearly reflects these changes.

In 1966, before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (created by the Civil Rights Act of 1964) began monitoring the textile industry's compliance with Title VII, blacks—clustered in janitorial positions—represented only 8 percent of the work force in textiles. By 1968, however, black workers had increased their participation in the textile work force to 13 percent, which included semiskilled jobs as operatives that they had hitherto not been allowed to hold. By the early 1970s, the Southern textile industry was overwhelmingly female and, depending on the plant, anywhere from 25 to 85 percent black. In Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina in 1978, 26 percent of all jobs in textiles were held by blacks. About one-third of the black workers were operatives, but only a handful were employed in salaried positions. Even today black women are rarely employed as secretaries in the textile (or any other Southern) industry.

In the late 1960s, black women eagerly moved into semiskilled positions in the textile industry from even lower-paying jobs as waitresses or domestic servants. Unlike many of their white predecessors, black textile workers did not come to the factory directly from agriculture, and they were less susceptible to employer paternalism than white workers had been. This distinction has encouraged the unionization of Southern industries that employ large numbers of blacks—particularly textiles, which long resisted unionization.

Since the 1960s, when black workers, many of whom were highly religious, married their church affiliation to the civil rights movement, black workers have been willing to use collective means to achieve economic and social betterment; they are therefore sympathetic to unions. Many black Southern

workers see the campaign for economic empowerment through union organization as an extension of the struggle for civil rights—the one depending on racial solidarity, the other on class solidarity. While many Southern whites remained wary of collective action in the 1960s and 1970s, blacks embraced mass action, which the civil rights movement had shown to be effective in the pursuit of poor people's rights. In the Oneita mills in South Carolina and the J. P. Stevens mills in North Carolina, for instance, the enthusiastic support of black workers produced union victories.

The consequences of changes as fundamental as those wrought by the civil rights movement are bound to be complicated, even conflicting on some levels. After more than twenty years, understandably, various black Southerners define racial interests differently, as the legacies of federal legislation indicate. The Civil Rights Act made it possible for African-American workers in the South to enter industrial jobs that were more likely to be unionized than were domestic and agricultural work, and labor organization, in turn, built upon and reinforced the civil rights movement's evocation of racial solidarity. At the same time, however, the political ramifications of the Voting Rights Act demonstrate the potential for racial fragmentation. An example from the Deep South illustrates this point.

Ordinarily the Alabama Black Belt vote fraud cases of 1985 are taken as an indication of the Reagan administration's hostility toward independent black political power, which is a correct reading of the national import of these trials. Briefly stated, the U.S. Justice Department tried for vote fraud several black defendants who had been prominent civil rights activists, the best known of whom was Albert Turner. A close associate of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 1960s and an SCLC leader in Alabama, Turner had marched in King's cortege in 1968.

In the mid-1980s Turner and his associates achieved a measure of political success by pledging themselves to support the interests of the people of the Alabama Black Belt, the majority of whom were poor and black. Ranged on the other side were black politicians who favored accommodation with the local power structure; they reasoned that cooperation with those who had long wielded economic and political power was simply good strategy.

Even though all the accusers and all but one of the defendants in the vote

fraud trials were black, media coverage tended to portray the struggle in racial terms—Turner and his allies representing the black side, their opponents, the white side—because the powerful people in Alabama and in the Justice Department were not black. That Turner and his colleagues were continuing the civil rights tradition of representing the poor reinforced this dichotomy. The outcome of the trials—acquittal on all but minor charges—was seen as a black victory, considering that the defendants had good civil rights credentials and the support of black organizations. Although this was the proper conclusion from the vantage point of recent history, it obscures the interesting point that, in the Alabama Black Belt, blacks had disagreed on what, exactly, constituted their best interests. These disagreements were over ideological and economic issues that cannot be sorted out unequivocally according to race alone.

If the significance of race declines in Southern public life, African Americans may be expected more and more to diverge ideologically and therefore politically. But as long as the poor in the South continue to be disproportionately black and as long as racial discrimination remains a reality, politics in the South will display a black side and a white side. In the meantime, one thing is clear. The breakup of the rigid system of white supremacy and the end of the era of segregation have made discussions of "the Negro" meaningless.

Black Southerners as Southerners

Much has changed since midcentury, but much, particularly in rural areas, remains the same, because economic power remains entrenched among white elites. Throughout most of the South, especially the urban South, blacks have begun to exercise their civil rights in a political revolution that continues to unfold. The mounting influx of non-Southerners, many of whom are Hispanic, Asian, or Jewish, makes it impossible to go on generalizing about Southern society as biracial and culturally monolithic. The modern South differs from that of fifty years ago, in large part because black Southerners (like white Southerners) have been leaving home in extraordinary numbers. Especially in the once heavily populated Deep South, this exodus

has altered the region's human geography. For black Southerners, interestingly enough, the human tide turned between 1975 and 1980, when only 220,000 black Southerners left the region and 415,000 blacks moved into the South from other regions.

The cultural repercussions of black migration out of the South have been national, even international in scope. Over the course of the twentieth century, the blues, jazz, and gospel music have become widely recognized idioms, many of whose present-day practitioners are neither Southern nor black. No matter what their race or the region in which they live, today's Americans are more likely than ever to be acquainted with some aspects of the culture that black Southerners created. And thanks to the civil rights movement, non-Southerners in the South are likely to encounter Southern blacks in virtually all aspects of public life—as highway patrolmen, bank tellers, ward heelers, and mayors—which would have been virtually unheard of as recently as the 1960s. In its various guises, much racism remains in the South, as it does in other American regions. But black Southerners are far more able to share their strengths as artists, workers, and thinkers than ever before.

One symbol of the new age is black Southerners' increasing willingness to claim the South as their own territory and a sometimes begrudging, often delighted willingness on the part of white Southerners to acknowledge this claim. The best-known example of this reclaiming occurs in eastern North Carolina on the Somerset plantation, where descendants of several slave families have convened each Labor Day since 1986. Inspired by Dorothy Spruill Redford, who traces her heritage back to the enslaved workers of Somerset, the African Americans whose ancestors built an empire now insist that their contribution be recognized. Southern history, as well as the Southern future, must take its black side into account.