AFR/CHR 230

Required Book Analysis

Submitted to Dave A. Wilcoxson

Of

MERCER UNIVERSITY

By

James E. Jordan

*The Spirituals and the Blues*

James H. Cone

26th February 2004
The Spirituals and the Blues, written by James H. Cone, demonstrates the humanity of African Americans as they struggled to define themselves and their world during the troubled days of slavery and “Jim Crow” oppression. Furthermore, Cone examines the spirituals and the blues as cultural expressions of African Americans and how they had “prime significance for their community” (3). The author’s organizational schema works well insofar as he opens his book with a broad discussion of how the black spirituals have been interpreted, offering the reader relevant information regarding historical debates about black music and how religion impacted them. Cone begins to narrow his project by focusing on the spirituals and black experience, after which he divides his analysis into three informative sections that each concentrate on specific aspects of the spirituals: i) God and Jesus Christ in the Black Spirituals, ii) God and Black suffering, and iii) The Meaning of Heaven in the Black Spirituals. The blues appear only to receive a small amount of attention—one chapter at the end of the book—but this is all part of Cone’s larger plan to prove that both the spirituals and the blues are “two artistic expressions of the same experience” (130). Because the author believes that the blues and the spirituals flow from the same source he does not have to regurgitate that which he previously explained when dealing with the spirituals. All that is required is for Cone to prove is that the blues did flow from the same source, which he does satisfactorily, even going so far as to name the blues “secular spirituals” in an effort to illustrate the common link between these two musical manifestations of the “black soul.”

Cone asserts that the spirituals were slavery songs, while the blues were songs from the post-emancipation—Jim Crow—era, yet that both dealt with what it meant to be black, what it meant to endure, and, essentially, how African Americans managed to
preserve their cultural heritage in the face of the dominant culture’s prejudices, discriminations, and God. The author demonstrates his understanding and awareness of the vast literature on the spirituals by referring to a number of prominent scholars in the field to evidence his own assertions. One such example is where Cone quotes W. E. B. DuBois, stating that the spirituals were an “affirmation of life” (13). Another example is where John Lovell’s argument—that there were three main themes inherent to the black spirituals: i) a desire for freedom, ii) a desire for justice in the judgment upon his betrayers, and iii) the strategy by which he expected to gain an eminent future—is provided to better explain the complexities of the spirituals (14). Cone forcefully quashes the myth that many whites hold to be true regarding slaves singing about the heavenly hereafter insofar as he declares that the spirituals were not about freedom in the next world, they were sung as lamentations and for giving hope to the black community for freedom in this world. There was no separation, as in Western culture, between the sacred and the secular in traditional African culture; African Americans sang literally. Consequently, he persuasively argues, “the spirituals enabled blacks to retain a certain measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude” (30). Part of the reason why African Americans were able to survive, Cone states, was the community they created with their fellow brothers and sisters, and that they were able to combine “the memory of their fathers with the Christian Gospel to create a style of existence that participated in their liberation from earthly bondage” (30). Ultimately, however, the author argues that “the theological assumption of black slave religion as expressed in the spirituals was that
slavery contradicts God, and God’s will,” therefore, He will liberate black people…“all else was secondary” (65).

The blues, on the other hand, Cone declares, “depict the ‘secular’ dimension of black experience (96). The author manages to present his case with considerable persuasion by offering discussions about how, like the spirituals, the “blues were related to the functional character of West African music,” and also by adding that black music is not an artistic creation for its own sake, “rather it tells us about the ‘feeling’ and ‘thinking’ of an African people” (98). By dispelling the falsehood that the blues were not anti-God (they just ignored Him) and so therefore could not be “spirituals,” he puts forth the idea that the blues were secular spirituals because: “they are secular insofar as they articulate the bodily expression of the black soul, including its sexual manifestations, but they are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience” (100).

Cone’s use of sources is both substantive and instructive. The first chapter has an abundance of secondary and historiographical material as to inform the reader exactly where this book fits in. Perhaps there could have been a longer discussion on where he obtained his sources on the spirituals i.e. 1850’s Virginia or how many slaves were part of the spirituals (although I do realize he’s doing oral history, therefore, it is a lot harder to quantify). The best, and also the most subtle, part of Cone’s analysis is the repetitive style he uses to hammer home his points. Frequently, the author will reword one of his main points and reiterate it many times during the course of the book – this is no mistake, he is following the lyrical rhythm of the spirituals and blues he is writing about – it is just too clever to be a coincidence. The essence, therefore, of what Cone writes about is that,
basically, “black music is the music of the soul, the music of the black psyche renewing itself for living and being”; the spirituals and the blues are black music, and they are essential to our understanding of African Americans of both yesterday and today (104).