Day 2 — The Slave Trade and the Influence of the African Diaspora

More than 10 million people were enslaved in Africa and brought to North America, South America, and the Caribbean between 1500 and 1888, when slavery was finally abolished in Brazil (the last country in the Americas to outlaw the practice). A diaspora is a group of people that has been displaced outside its traditional homeland, especially involuntarily, as was the case during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The African diaspora in the Americas stretches from Canada in the north down to Argentina in the south. All but a few of the 47 countries and dependent territories of the Americas were influenced by the slave trade, and as a result, those countries today show varying degrees of African musical influence.

The best-known example, because of the global impact of its popular culture, is the United States. Few people in the world have not heard the uniquely American musics fundamentally shaped by African-Americans—namely, blues, jazz, gospel, rock, soul, funk, and hip-hop.

In contrast, there are many countries in the Western Hemisphere with smaller and less-known populations of African descent. Several of these countries are home to African-related musical traditions that have achieved much less international recognition. Examples of this are Mexico and the Central American countries, which have produced such creolized African-influenced genres as son jarocho (Mexico), punta rock (Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), and cumbia (which started in Panama and northern Colombia, but has since spread across much of Latin America). Similarly, in South America, several countries with African-descended minorities have produced their own African-influenced genres that are relatively unknown elsewhere, such as saya (Bolivia), currulao (Ecuador and Colombia), bambuco (Colombia), gaita (Venezuela), música criolla (Peru), and candombe (Uruguay).

Even the world-famous tango—a music and dance genre identified with Argentina (and to a lesser extent, Uruguay)—was born partly from African influences, some of which arrived directly from Africa and others via other countries (such as Cuba). These African roots of tango (and certain related older styles, such as milonga) have yet to be acknowledged on a broad scale, partly because of Argentina’s traditional denial of its black population.

Brazil—the other giant of the Western Hemisphere, with the United States—has the largest population of African descendants in the world outside of Africa. Brazil is rich in African-influenced musical genres, some of which are strictly local or regional and little known outside their home territories, others of which have had a global impact. Perhaps the best-known Brazilian music with clear African (largely Congo-Angolan) roots is samba, which exists in many different regional varieties, the most famous of which is closely associated with the massive Carnival of Rio de Janeiro. But a full view of African-related music in Brazil would include dozens, if not hundreds, of genres and would fill many volumes.

Aside from Brazil, the region in the Western Hemisphere with the richest and most varied assortment of African-derived and African-influenced musical traditions is the Caribbean, to which the greater part of this course will be devoted, with a special focus on Cuba and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.
KEY TAKEAWAY POINTS

• African culture survived the ordeal of slavery to become a powerful shaping force. (This is worth repeating.)

• The more than 10 million displaced slaves of the African diaspora stretched across most of the countries of the Caribbean and Americas, from Canada to Argentina.

• The African diaspora impacted both the musical traditions of these countries and their broader cultural outreach in varying degrees.

• In many countries of the Western Hemisphere there are numerous musical genres with Africa influence that are not particularly popular beyond the immediate country of origin.

• In some cases such as those listed below, however, the influence of particular regional musical genres reached global proportions.
  
  The American genres of blues, jazz, gospel, rock, soul, funk, and hip-hop
  The tango of Argentina
  Jamaican reggae

• The two regions in the Western Hemisphere with the most descendents of the African diaspora and the richest and most varied assortment of African-related musical traditions are Brazil and the Caribbean.

• Our study of the music of the Caribbean is thus best understood as one cultural subset of the broader African diaspora.

RELATED WEB LINK

• The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two minutes (Slate.com) — a powerful animation

The study of the African diaspora, as mentioned at the outset, represents a growth industry today. But, there is no single diasporic movement or monolithic diasporic community to be studied. For the limited purposes of this discussion, I identify five major African diasporic streams that occurred at different times and for different reasons. The first African diaspora was a consequence of the great movement within and outside of Africa that began about 100,000 years ago. Podcasts created and produced by the African diaspora are gaining ground. From relationships to food, and art to music and tech, Culture Trip takes a look at nine podcasts we think you should be listening to. Falling data prices and the increasing use of mobile phones has made it so much easier for African creatives to tell their stories. As Ekua Mambaza (the co-host of the Afrolit