

Teachers, Song Writers And Choir Singers Join In Protest Against Swinging Spirituals

Letters Continue to Pour into Courier Office—Many Show Grave Indignation Over Revelations Exposed by Rev. Harvey's Article.

AN OPEN LETTER TO SWING BANDS

The increasing number of swing arrangements of Negro Spirituals, sacrilegious in the most amazing manner, causes me to address this letter to all bands, white and black, who are guilty of this offense. I could name several bands who seem to me to be the worst offenders, but I might omit others who are perhaps not so well known but who are just as guilty. Did I say "guilty"? Yes, guilty of trying to, and seemingly succeeding, in taking all the "spirit" out of spirituals.

Just what is a spiritual? Do any of you swingsters know? Is there anything to a spiritual besides rhythm? Evidently, you do not know there is. A spiritual does have rhythm; it does have syncopation (swing to you). But it also has melodic harmony and sacred text or Biblical import. It is true that the Negro slaves who gave birth to these spirituals were unlettered and illiterate, whose vocabularies were limited to few words and phrases, but the souls of our slave ancestors were rich in higher things than you can comprehend. That is because you have never known persuction. You have never known heartache and sorrow. You have never felt the lash on your backs. You have never seen an auction block. You have never been sold as a chattel. You have never been driven to God to help you to bear all this. And there, my swing butchers of spirituals, is the key to many, many spirituals.

They prayed and had faith in God throughout their days of bondage. Faith to believe that God would hear their prayers, and that even if they were not liberated in this life, they would be in the life beyond the grave. And that very faith and certainty made them able to shout and sing in their darkest hours of sorrow. Could you have done that, Mr. Swing man? Yet, you take that one element in spirituals, that heavenly bliss and exaltation which they put into their songs, and you turn it into a wild, noisy, unharmonic jangle of "hot" arrangements. How can you do it?

In spite of sorrow and sadness as daily companions, slaves could feel joy and gladness. In spite of chains, they could still sing such songs as "When the Saints Go Marching In." In spite of bull whips they could steal away at night and sing, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." In spite of blistered, aching backs, they could sing, "Deep River," or "Good News, Chariot's Coming." In spite of auction blocks, they could sing, "Hallelujah" and "Keep Inching Along."

Well, Mr. Swing Man, if spirituals don't mean a thing to you, they mean a lot to me. If they mean no more to you than a chance to cash in on their rhythm and syncopation; ~~one~~ chance to

show what you can do to arrange one of your own is a better thing than all I can do is to give my radio dial a hard turn off, because you offend me beyond measure, and thanks to that one dial, I do not have to listen to you!

Another thought occurs to me. I wonder how any of you would fare if you were given one of these spirituals to give a literal or dramatic interpretation to it. Suppose it were a contest. Suppose you were before a big audience or the microphone and you were given "Deep River" or "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" to dramatize, or recite. Then, just suppose they did not mean any more to you than they do when you mistreat them by "swinging" them. Where would you come out as a dramatic interpreter? Words! Don't they mean anything to your swing mad minds?

Read the beautiful sad words of "Going Home." Don't stop with just reading them. Study them! And again, I ask: "How can you do it?" Perhaps, if you were in the sad plight of the Jews in Europe today you might understand these spirituals better. Some day you may be driven to a full realization of the import of these songs, and if that day ever comes, you won't have what our ancestors had to bring you through such tribulations as they endured or as the Jews today are enduring under the heel of Hitler. You are evidently not on speaking terms with God.

In conclusion, I wish to say that white orchestras are less to blame than their Negro arrangers. Most white swing orchestras are phoney. They have only copied, and almost beaten the Negro orchestras at their own game. It is you Negroes who have taken these spirituals and offered them as a sacrifice to the god—Money! You must be all out of new ideas for swing music (?) or you would not be desecrating spirituals to keep going. I hope you wake up some day to your folly. And I further advise you to study dramatics. You need it.

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