

MARCUS GARVEY, POPULAR MUSIC AND JAZZ

Richard B. Allen

The folk and popular music of Black people in the United States is rarely studied as topical. However, this body of music reflects its times, and to be fully understood, must be seen in as complete a human context as possible. It helps in hearing the music to know and understand the underlying philosophies and local cultural references that produced blues and jazz topical themes.

For example, two topical songs, "West Indies Blues," and "Black Star Line," were closely intertwined with the life and times of Marcus Garvey and his ability to stir the imagination of the Black population.

Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican immigrant who came to the United States in 1916 to organize the New York chapter of his Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.). His activities were world-wide, but his most important work was done in the United States. The force of his promotional ability caused the U.N.I.A. to grow rapidly into the largest and most powerful all-Black organization the nation had ever seen. Three principal goals of his organization were: the unity of Black people, the establishment of an African colony, and the establishment of Black businesses. He is best remembered as a masterful orator, and politician, but he was also a writer, poet, and song lyricist. The newspaper he established in Harlem was called by his critics "the best edited colored weekly in New York."

At first the work for his organization was mainly



Marcus Garvey in 1922.

speeches and meetings. Sometime in 1919 he projected the idea of an all-Negro steamship company that would link the African peoples of the world commercially. He began collecting money to buy ships for this promised Black Star Line. Drawn from Booker T. Washington's philosophy that Negroes must be independent of white capital and operate their own business activities, the Black Star Line was a supremely audacious move that aroused great excitement among Blacks. Even the poorest person had the chance to be a stockholder in a big business enterprise. Sales of Black Star stock were limited to Negroes.

Under pressure from New York's assistant district attorney to make the promised fleet a reality, Garvey purchased his first ship, the S.S. Yarmouth. The sale was made by a New York cotton broker who was out to take the Black Star Line and its officers for as large a sum as possible. To Negroes who read about the actuality of a steamship managed by a Negro Company, manned by a Black crew, Garvey's name was magic. During 1919/20, thousands of shares of stock were sold at five dollars a share to Black people all over the country. It was at this point that Columbia Records issued a phonograph record of a popular song, "Black Star Line" (No. 14024D, performed by George and Roscoe). The reverse of the record was a piece entitled "My Jamaica." "Black Star Line" is about maritime exploits. The song was copyrighted in 1924 and recorded by at least three singers. It was done in a parody of a West Indian accent.


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THE NEGRO WORLD

LET US GUIDE OUR OWN DESTINY

BY FINANCING OUR OWN COMMERCIAL VENTURES.
HELP US TO HELP YOU HELP YOURSELF AND THE NEGRO RACE IN GENERAL.
YOU CAN DO THIS BY PLAYING A MAN OR WOMAN'S PART IN THE WORLD OF COMMERCE.
SO YOUR FULL SHARE IN HELPING TO PROVIDE
A DIRECT LINE OF STEAMSHIPS OWNED, CONTROLLED AND MANNED BY NEGROES TO
REACH THE NEGRO PEOPLES OF THE WORLD
AMERICA, CANADA, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA, AFRICA AND THE WEST INDIES

There should be no trouble about making up your mind to help your race to rise to a position in the maritime world that will challenge the attention and command the admiration of the world. "Men like nations fail in nothing they boldly attempt when sustained by vigorous purposes and firm resolution."
Money awaiting an advantageous investment should go to purchasing shares in the Black Star Line and reap the reward that is bound to follow.
DO A MAN'S PART RIGHT NOW



Send in and Buy Your Shares Today
"THE BLACK STAR LINE," Inc.
Capitalized at \$10,000,000 Under the Laws of the State of Delaware

2,000,000 shares of common stock now on sale at par value of \$5.00 each for a limited time only at the office of the corporation, 30 West 135th Street, New York City. (Phone: HUNTER 3-8777.)
The Black Star Line, Inc. is the result of a Herculean effort on the part of Hon. Marcus Garvey, world-famous Negro leader, who in July, 1914, founded a world-wide known as the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, of which he is now President-General.
The American now has a membership of over one million persons, with branches all over the United States, Canada, South and Central America, the West Indies and Africa.

THE BLACK STAR LINE, Inc.
is backed today in its operations by the full strength of the organization to say the least of millions of other Negro men and women in all parts of the world.
BUY SHARES TODAY AND NOT TOMORROW

CUT THIS OUT AND MAIL IT

SUBSCRIPTION BLANK

"THE BLACK STAR LINE, Inc."
30 West 135th Street, New York City

Date: _____

Constitution: _____

I hereby subscribe for _____ shares of stock at \$5.00 per share and forward herewith the full payment.

I enclose check for _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____

Zip: _____

Unfortunately Garvey's business acumen did not match his promotional ability, and after a series of mismanagement episodes encouraged by editorial agitation and complaints by a few stockholders, early in 1922 Garvey was arrested on a charge of using the mails to defraud. Postal authorities charged that Garvey and the Black Star Line had knowingly used fraudulent representations and deceptive circulars in the sale of stock through the mails and had advertised and sold space on a mythical vessel. Garvey was indicted and when the trial was postponed, released on bail.

Garvey was found guilty, sentenced to five years in prison, and fined \$1,000. While his appeal was being drawn up, his attorneys arranged for his release on \$25,000 bail. During this period, awaiting appeal, Garvey organized still another maritime venture, the Black Cross Navigation and Trading Company. It was chartered to engage in trade between various areas with large Negro populations and Garvey intended that its vessels would also be used to carry American Negro colonists to Africa.

In 1924 Garvey was indicted for perjury and income tax evasion. The timing of this arrest, on the heels of the growing success of the U.N.I.A., seemed to indicate that the government was determined to harass and embarrass Garvey. There was no evidence that he ever drew the \$10,000 salary on which he was accused of not paying taxes, and years later the U.S. abandoned its income tax evasion case and ordered the charges against Garvey non-prossed.

On February 25, 1925, Garvey's appeal of his mail

fraud conviction was rejected, and on February 8, he entered Atlanta penitentiary. Through the continued efforts of the U.N.I.A. to obtain a presidential pardon, and possibly because Garvey's domestic political organization, the Negro Political Union, was active in the 1924 campaign, President Calvin Coolidge commuted Garvey's sentence in 1927. Since Garvey was not a U.S. citizen and had been convicted of a felony, U.S. immigration laws required his immediate deportation as an undesirable alien. Early in December 1927, without being permitted to visit his headquarters in New York, Garvey was taken to New Orleans and put aboard a ship bound for the West Indies.

Throughout the thirties, operating from Jamaica and then London, Garvey tirelessly tried to recapture his triumph of the twenties. But the worsening world situation forced the attention of everyone away from international things to narrow local concerns. Marcus Garvey died in London of a stroke on June 10, 1940.

In 1923 the Clarence Williams Music Publishing Company copyrighted "West Indies Blues." At the same time there was not only a great interest in Garvey but also a bitter resentment brewing between Blacks born in the U.S. and the West Indians who immigrated here. Clarence Williams knew the market and was well-known among phonograph record company executives, entertainers, composers, and musicians. He was a hustler and was able to convince groups to record and play the song. Among recordings I have discovered are three instrumental versions by orchestras, two by Armand J. Piron's, one by Fletcher Henderson's; one by a novelty band, the Jamaica Jazzers. At least five singers recorded the tune: Clara Smith, Esther Bigeou, Ukulele (sic) Bob Williams, Viola McCoy, and Rosa Henderson. Their efforts were all geared to the Black record buyers of the day. Marcus Garvey inspired lyrics, jingles, slogans, songs. Of the two songs I have mentioned, "Black Star Line" disappeared and "West Indies Blues" was picked up and carried from his time to ours. Jazz bands in honky tonks picked out the tune. It entered the folk tradition. George Lewis' and Punch Miller's Bands played it as recently as the 1960's. The Love-Jiles Ragtime Orchestra, which included members of the Piron Orchestra recorded "West Indies Blues" in 1960. The New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra occasionally play an arrangement from 1924. And Max Roach dedicated his recording of "Motherless Child" to Marcus Garvey.

So Marcus Garvey continues to stir the imagination. The next time you hear "West Indies Blues" maybe you'll think about him. At any rate, the relationship between popular music and historical events bears more looking into.