

Black American Urban Culture

by Bernice Reagon

Black America began its move to the city because of a driving and desperate need for change. When rural southern communities, for all their fresh air and land, still remained too much a choking, binding, stagnating experience because of racism, economic, social, and political repressions, some people had to leave. Leaving meant many times leaving an extended family, a community, institutions and friends to go to an unknown area with few contacts and few concrete promises. The promise of the city was that it was there. It had an openness and pace that did not exist in small farm-based communities. The promise was that one could test one's abilities in uncharted and untried territory. There was a pioneering thrust to the expanding Black neighborhoods. Initially there was no space to accommodate the numbers; community boundaries were extended block by block, street by street — many times in conflict with other ethnic groups who had come to the city looking for the same thing.

When Charles Albert Tindley left the eastern shore of Maryland for Philadelphia during the 1870s, it was for the rest of his life — a portion that could not come to him had he stayed in Berlin, Maryland. There he had been hired out; he had been forced to learn to read in secret; he had also been deeply loved by his family and was part of the rich Black Methodist community. Here was a spirit that wanted more than Berlin, Maryland, could offer. He needed open country, so he moved to town. As many before and after him, when he moved to Philadelphia, it was into the home of his mother's sister, who had already migrated there. Like many before and after her, the first families to settle became a beacon for the generation that followed.

And yet Tindley did not leave Berlin in many ways. He selectively chose to hold on to long cherished ways of caring and nurturing and building community. Using the same cultural principles and the new challenges and opportunities, he sought to build a new Black community through his church ministry in Philadelphia.

The culture of Black urban America reveals much about the developing new communities. Its range goes far beyond the current street corner and dope pushers, and broken glass, and bread lines, and unemployed young men and crime, and hostility, and smoldering anger. All of this is present — but only as a part of a larger, more complex and dynamic cultural arena, created by a people making its way in a new land.

The rhythm and flavor of Black American urban community life takes one in many directions. The church is a good place to begin, for it served as the first community for the newly arrived family. Many urban churches have memberships based on rural congregations. People from eastern shore, Maryland, especially around Berlin, moved into South Philadelphia and into the church that became Tindley Temple United Methodist under Tindley's leadership. In New York, eastern shore communities moved to Salem United Methodist in Harlem. In Washington and New York, there is

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New Gospel Light Music Store.
Photo by Roland Freeman

a Southern Baptist Church. In D.C., the congregation has a South Carolina base. Many Chicago Black churches, especially Baptist, are shaped by members arriving from Mississippi. And this goes on, for Black migration patterns follow well-traveled corridors. People from the rural areas leave their people and move to urban areas with other branches of their family; thus, over time, entire communities are transplanted.

The Black urban church at its best is the place where the raw edges of change are softened, where old flavors from home are not discarded, but blend in comforting ways in a new urban gospel pot. There you can find the elders of Black sacred songs and prayers, still held by those who only left behind those things that would hold you down, while bringing along all a body or soul would need to stay together. One can go to the Southern Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and still find a strong traditional unaccompanied song service led by elders who hold the old rich pattern of singing a phrase of song before going down in prayer. An opening devotional service might have as many as ten prayers. Some of the prayers start with the Twenty-Third Psalm, others with the Lord's Prayer. Both patterns are traceable to regional church traditions in southern communities.

Urban churches range from major edifices, like Tindley Temple in Philadelphia that seats 3,000 and Wheat Street Baptist in Atlanta, Bible Way Temple in Washington, to Abyssinian in Harlem, to Mt. Pisner Baptist in Chicago, to storefronts. Here one finds people in worship giving up cultural ideas of a building and creating a worship space in whatever space is available. Inside one usually finds the old patterns with amen corners and general congregational seating laid out, as well as pulpit and choir areas if there is one. These congregations start with small numbers, as few as five or six, and the successful ones grow to larger congregations. In certain cases small congregations are maintained because of the desire for intimate family related worship.

In many churches, devotional services led by the elders with their old songs in the old traditions have been supplanted by the sounds of gospel songs accompanied by electronic organs or instrumental combos. The

new songs shake the rafters, with tambourines, drums, horns and pentecostal shouts — new songs written by new songwriters for a people in a new time, and a new place.

The new songs, called gospel, were the musical expression of a people moving to the city. From Charles Albert Tindley came “Stand By Me.” Lucy Elizabeth Campbell composed “Something Within.” Thomas Dorsey composed “Move On Up A Little Higher.” They were printed and sold and recorded, and they entered the people’s oral tradition through these phonograph recordings and the radio. This new urban music became national in scope, found in congregations throughout the Black community, city and country, small and large.

Going out to a “singing” is another urban-based activity which takes place in churches, schools, auditoriums. “Singings” are programs of gospel music, with anywhere from two or three to ten groups doing a few numbers each. The evening is opened by a minister and many times ends with the doors of the church being opened. It is the Christian social cultural event.

Today, one finds gospel music in congregations throughout the community regardless of denomination: Baptist, Methodist, Catholic and Episcopal. Its repertoire has also become a staple of high school choruses, and the formation of gospel choirs on all university campuses is both a social, cultural and political issue. Beginning with the Howard University Gospel Choir during the late 1960s, gospel music advocates demanded a recognized space for it in the American sacred music tradition alongside the European-based classical repertoire.

Then there is the home; the row house, the apartment with children who have keys; where the food is still pig feet and collard greens and stewed corn and tomatoes and okra — bought fresh or frozen or sometimes even grown in the garden out back — if there is a back, or down the street if there are community plots this year. Life changes — work is wherever it can be found — so home is sometimes where we sit in the evenings and on weekends. And if you are lucky, even though grandmama is “down home,” she is also the warm, soft, wise, old lady across the hall, around the corner, down the street, who serves just in the needed times. She has her home remedies, and she listens, and her eyes have watched the streets and can tell you how they can be the way to where you want to be, or what to do so you do not get stuck there.

The street has no fields, no wide spacious yards — many front porches are stoops on the sidewalk. People sit outside in the evening when the sun goes down, after work. Children play on the sidewalk. The yards once used for play are now for decoration and hold flowers brought up from the South. The games change. “Here goes Miss Lilly” and “Green Green Rocky Road” and jump rope move over and give way to “double-dutch” chants that pick up the latest topics on the block. The “double-dutch” that young girls do is a part of their socialization — girls learn to grow up into a community of womanhood on the sidewalk as well. Street cheers — a community-based extension of cheerleading — are today’s most prolific recreational activity for young females. The language of school-based cheerleading is controlled and overseen by adults, that of street cheers is not. Here language is a reflection of young girls’ moving into womanhood through a ritual of puberty, exploring a full range of social and cultural ideas — work, sex, careers, dreams and fantasies.

Suggested reading

Abrahams, Roger. *Deep Down in the Jungle, Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964.

Jones, Ralph H. *Charles Albert Tindley, Prince of Preachers*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982.

Keil, Charles. *Urban Blues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Whitten, Norman E., Jr. and John F. Szwed, eds. *Afro-American Anthropology, Contemporary Perspective*. New York: The Free Press, Collier-Macmillan, 1964.

For young males the street is for moving in gangs. Organized activities are football, band, drill squads. However, street gangs are without adult supervision, and activity ranges from groups that work daily on music in teenage bands to roamers—groups of young men who walk around looking for action of almost any kind.

The street also has its music, in the form of “do-wops” and “rap” groups. The music of the street became the basis of the music of the “show,” with the best discoveries forming “the top 20” (once race-based, now crossover record sales charts), with musicians like Stevie Wonder, La Belle, Donna Summer and Michael Jackson. Blues of the country fields and small town jukejoints became Chicago urban blues, R and B, soul, and funk. Reflections of evolving patterns of socialization, this Black American popular music is an integral part of the rites of passage of young Black teenagers moving into adulthood. That it comes to most of its listeners through a commercial entertainment industry does not obscure the fact that it is also street based culture. And when the industry runs dry, as it did with disco, it goes back to the streets and packages the latest new song form, in this case “rap.” With the development of rappers, block bands, and dance groups, the street and sidewalk performance spaces are also basements, park festivals, recreational centers and street stages. With the advent of “breaking,” Black social dance is being redefined in every way. Change in form, motion, function and players propel Black dance forward into a new time and space, while at the same time echoing age old practices of African based rituals.

The street as passageway gets its strongest cultural symbol from marches and parades; from high school bands, the followers of Marcus Garvey, to those of Daddy Grace, to Caravans of the next Black politician campaigning for the next highest office. It has its picket signs and protest demonstrators. It also has its vendors, on trucks and cars, and on street sidewalks; selling melons, greens, potatoes and onions, roasted peanuts, mangoes, jewelry, earrings, posters and buttons. If you need it or want it, you can find it in the street markets.

As in any pioneering effort, there is the cost. Moving into spaces where there are no spaces always results in broken and waylaid lives on broken street corners, with no jobs, schools with too few Black teachers in charge who hold and cherish an aesthetic that is dynamic and Black.

This sidewalk and street culture in its place is like the street—it is supposed to be a place to somewhere else. Something you use to get where you want to go. It is also the place where people get lost.

The presence today of Blacks at the head of American cities is a signal of progress in the continuing transformation of the Black American presence in America. Black urban culture is no longer the art of moving into a few blocks or finding a relative to show a new arrival the ropes. Today urban areas are in many instances new Black communities with political power to name leadership and elder positions. Black American urban culture continues to reflect a community still being born, still in transition, still working out the problems faced by a people once secure in extended families on rural land settlements, then moving in search of a new kind of security, where family, home, church, party, street and community may be formed far beyond blood lines. The culture of American cities echoes the fact that urban America is also Black urban America, a powerful, rich, evolving source of cultural life and creativity.