

**‘Bring on Da Noise, Bring on Da Funk’:
The Sounds of Slavery in
Richmond Virginia in the 1850s**

SHANE WHITE*

At about eight o'clock on a Monday evening in early November 1852, an informant brought word of a black subscription ball to the somewhat improbably named Officer Trueheart of the Richmond police. It was not as though the occasion was a clandestine affair. Far from quietly slipping off to some destination well outside the built-up area, the organizers of the Richmond dance had rented out the cellar, basement, and dining hall of the Washington Hotel right in the heart of the city. Acting quickly, Trueheart secured a warrant from the Mayor, rounded up a 'posse of watchmen', and headed across to the hotel. According to the *Daily Dispatch*, a 'supper had been prepared for the company, and dancing was about to commence', when the authorities descended on the establishment, causing a 'tremendous stampede of the negro aristocracy'. A few dozen of those present escaped, but some 90 blacks, 47 men and 43 women, all 'adorned in full ball-room dress', were arrested. The newspaper writer was unable to resist livening up his account with the sort of humor that inevitably accompanied such a story: he wrote of the 'ebony sprigs of youth and beauty' spending the night in the 'cage' and then, the following morning, being 'marched in mournful procession, amid a large concourse of grinning, sympathizing friends to the Mayor's Court'. Outside the court nearby streets were unlawfully blocked by parents and relatives who 'wore very *dark* and rueful countenances'. Inside it was even more crowded, as irritated owners and hirers of the slaves, come to fetch their

* *Shane White holds a personal chair in History at The University of Sydney. This inaugural lecture was delivered to the Arts Association on 28 April 2004.*

human property, filled the court room to overflowing. All but three of the police's haul of African Americans were slaves: the fact that the next issue of the *Dispatch* printed both the names of the slaves and their owners probably did little to improve anyone's temper. It turned out that only one slave, an 'unfortunate ebo' named Robert Harris as the newspaper had it, did not have a pass from his master or mistress to go the ball. The luckless Harris's back 'was mulcted in damages to the amount of 10 lashes'; the rest of the blacks were discharged. According to the *Dispatch*, the proprietors of the Washington Hotel had made themselves liable for a fine of one dollar for each slave at the dance.¹

If the *Dispatch's* reporter treated the whole affair with a certain amount of levity, another writer for the newspaper a few days later took a less sanguine view. Moving the arrested blacks to court had prompted 'thousands of idle slaves' to pour out on to the streets to everyone's inconvenience. The writer of this piece thought that this behaviour 'was equally as unlawful and reprehensible as the gathering at the Washington Hotel the evening before', and concluded that 'that race have more idle time, and really see more pleasure than do the whites generally'.²

For white Richmondites, what was most disconcerting about the whole incident of the black ball was probably not the amount of noise such an event was likely to create. Had the black band been allowed to play, perhaps in the early hours of the morning, the music may have become what we might anachronistically term 'hot', and the ball might have become somewhat raucous, but generally the event was hardly going to be much louder or any more of a nuisance than were the elite white balls that dotted the social calendar. Similarly, in the case of the crowd scenes around the City Hall, there may well have been an element of threat or menace in the air, but if the gathered blacks were unduly loud that circumstance was not mentioned. Richmond blacks who attended the curtailed ball or who watched proceedings at City Hall the next morning were behaving in an almost indistinguishable fashion from whites. And there was the rub. Only a few months previously, a Mr Mayo, in his charge to the

Grand Jury, condemned 'the assumptions of equality exhibited by blacks' in both their 'dress and deportment' and in 'riding in carriages contrary to law'.³ In the case of the black ball, then, the vexing issue was not the volume of noise that would have emanated from the ball but by whom it would have been made: slaves dancing the night away at a ball at one of the city's big hotels would have created what can be termed 'sound out of place'.⁴ Maybe New York blacks could attend balls, mill noisily around the streets, and think of themselves as the equal of any man or woman in the city, but there was a widespread feeling among whites in Richmond in the 1850s that things in their city were getting more than a little out of hand. That over a hundred slaves thought nothing of attending a ball at the Washington Hotel—and, hardly less worrying, that most of their owners had given them permission to do so—was about as good a sign as any that things were awry.

Of course Richmond was hardly typical of the urban South, but then nothing was. By the 1850s, Richmond was the most important city in the Upper South, a regional centre for processing and manufacturing, a slave market, and the capital of the State of Virginia. According to the 1850 census, 44.6 per cent of the total population of 27, 570 were black, and of those blacks 9,927 were slaves and 2,369 were free.⁵ What made southern slavery different in Richmond was the extent to which slaves lived away from their owners, the extent to which many slaves were able to hire them-selves out and to negotiate the conditions of their employment, and the extent to which slaves could elude white supervision. But for all its idiosyncrasies, a close analysis of the city still reveals much about the urban South, in particular the degree to which African American sound, be it the 'sound out of place' of a black ball, the sound of slaves singing as they worked, or the noise of everyday black life, saturated the streets of southern cities.

One of the features that made Richmond distinctive was the scope of slave hiring. Typically, slaves were hired for the calendar year and many individual slaves were given the freedom to bargain

with potential masters, allowing a slave, as a writer in the *Dispatch* complained bitterly in December 1852, to choose someone who would indulge him, or 'grant him many privileges and a good deal of time for himself'. As a result, in the week between Christmas and the New Year Main Street became 'one vast unroofed intelligence office', with numerous slaves clamoring to secure their future for the next twelve months.⁶ Any white Richmonders in the vicinity would be confronted by a sea of black humanity thronging Main Street and would have to endure the sound of innumerable importuning black voices washing over them as they made their way through the crowd. One week before Christmas in 1855, a writer in the *Dispatch* forlornly reminded readers that '*Hiring Time* is at our doors, and with it will come all the harassing incidents necessarily attending the hiring of servants'.⁷ Everyone was out for a bargain or a good deal and, inevitably, occasional disputes and raised voices could be heard above the general hubbub of intense bargaining.

The week after Christmas was hardly the only occasion on which black voices impinged upon the consciousness of whites. Indeed, snippets of black speech, occasionally comic but more often worrying, were continually reported in the press. Sometimes it was the content of the utterance that attracted attention. In 1852 Jane Williams, a slave, used a hatchet to kill her mistress, a Mrs Winston, and her mistress's nine month old child, a frightening incident that shook white Richmond to its core. A few days after Williams's execution an outraged white reported in the *Dispatch* some of the comments he had overheard from the large number of blacks who had attended the gruesome ritual. One had pronounced that 'She has gone home', another that, 'She is in glory', and a third had opined that 'her seat is far higher in Heaven than that of Mrs Winston'.⁸

In other cases it was the language and tone of voice with which African Richmonders addressed whites that was shocking. A constant stream of anything but deferential slaves and free blacks was hauled in front of the Mayor on charges of insolence and then soundly flogged. In August 1852, a Dr Hunt angrily

marched off to the house of his washerwoman, Elizabeth Clarke, a free black, in search of his new shirt collars. Clarke claimed that the collars had already been delivered and responded to Hunt's demands in a 'very insulting' fashion. Things quickly escalated with the angry washerwoman ordering two black women who were also in the room with her to shut the door and to 'kill the d—d white s— of a b—'. After a scuffle, Hunt managed to slip out of the door and escape from 'the black tigresses'. Clarke and one of the other black women each received ten lashes.⁹

If for Richmond's whites the insolence of individual slaves and free blacks was alarming enough, their collective behaviour was even more worrying. In the 1850s the city's newspapers were full of complaints about free blacks and slaves jostling whites on the street, blockading the streets, and not allowing whites the wall, in short not conducting themselves in a deferential fashion. There were also innumerable complaints about blacks who, in their leisure hours, congregated noisily to drink, gamble, and dance. Sometimes slaves took advantage of an owner's temporary absence. In March 1852, nine or ten blacks gathered in the kitchen of the absent Mr Sturdivant's apartment and 'commenced dancing and singing, and holding a Mormon pow-wow'. The racket disturbed a Mr Gianini's nerves so much that he knocked on the door in order to discover why his neighbor 'was allowing such a bubbery to be kicked up'. Gianini managed to secure three of the offending slaves, who were taken by the watch and then duly sentenced by the Mayor to a whipping.¹⁰ More often, though, slaves gathered at various tippling and 'disorderly' houses. In 1857, for instance, the *Dispatch* called for special vigilance on Sundays when the myriad grocery stores selling alcohol on the sly 'attract[ed] and create[d], through the medium of liquor, throngs of noisy, drunken negroes'.¹¹ Undoubtedly the most notorious such establishment in Richmond was the *Bird in Hand*, run by Richard Weston, a white man, a venue which many found objectionable and which consequently was regularly descended upon by the watch.¹²

As far as Richmond blacks, both slave and free, were concerned,

things had become noticeably worse by the 1850s. Not only were laws requiring slaves about town to carry passes enforced more regularly, but it was also the case that an increasingly jumpy white population seemed to be intent on passing a series of measures fettering black street behaviour. In these attempts free blacks were lumped in indiscriminately with slaves. A new city ordinance passed in 1852, for example, prohibited 'negroes' from entering the public squares, carrying canes, smoking, riding in hacks, and standing on the street in groups of more than five.¹³ In 1859 all the measures concerning Richmond blacks were codified into a twenty-seven part ordinance that not only made it clear that whites wanted to regain control of the city streets but also emphasised that muting black sound was an important part of this process. African Americans were prohibited from using 'provoking language,' making any 'insolent or menacing gestures' or a 'loud offensive noise,' or uttering 'any blasphemous or indecent word' within earshot of whites.¹⁴

But of course passing ordinances was one thing, enforcing them something else entirely. What happened in Richmond, and indeed throughout the South while slavery existed, was that a flurry of activity in which the letter of the law was enforced vigorously would be followed by a lull of weeks or months in which whites lost interest. Because too many people made too much money selling liquor illegally to African Americans, because it was much more convenient for whites to pay slaves small sums of money on the quiet to do things they were not supposed to do, and because enforcing all of the laws required a considerable amount of effort, it was unusual for any crackdown to last too long.

For all that, though, there was a noticeable quickening of the pace in the 1850s, much more interest in quieting Richmond's blacks, and a diminishing time between police crackdowns. These crackdowns were sometime prompted by a murder or some incident or other that re-awoke white fears. The *Dispatch* played a significant role in publicizing such incidents or in pointing out when law enforcement was lax. As well Joseph Mayo, the Mayor

for much of the 1850s, often intervened, ordering the police to sweep the city looking for blacks illegally loitering; on one occasion Mayo ordered two policemen 'to scour the by-streets, lanes, and alleys and break up the various gatherings of negroes who assemble every Sabbath day to pitch cents, bet at dice, drink and fight'.¹⁵ But then, inevitably, after a few score blacks had been made examples of and suffered the inevitable whippings handed out in the Mayor's Court, things would ease off for a while, until the next crisis occurred.

To talk of cycles, or ebb and flow, or even of ambiguity and ambivalence, in the way laws were enforced is to make it sound as if blacks were dealing with some abstract law of nature, rather than with white passions and whims. From the perspective of free blacks and slaves, it was a question of reading the mood of the city's whites, of knowing when the squeeze was on and when smart blacks should stay out of the way. And those who, because they were inept, or occasionally indifferent, or often just plain unlucky, misread the situation wore their mistakes on the skin of their backs, for even though slavery had only a few years left to run, it was still the most corporeal of institutions.

For some time in the early 1850s, according to the *Daily Dispatch*, the white citizens of Richmond had considered a free black named John Carter to be 'partly deranged' and had tolerated what they viewed as his antics. When Carter had had a bit to drink, apparently a not uncommon occurrence, he would parade down the middle of the city's streets '*à la militaire*'. Carter would 'then stop and mount some convenient barrel or stoop, [and] deliver an extemporaneous sermon upon the sin and frailties of mankind to an enchanted group of grinning "sables" ', ending his preaching with a flourish by giving the crowd a 'benediction', before turning on his heel, and walking away, 'swearing with the precision of a trooper and the fury of an anti-gospelist'. It was loud, exaggerated, and edgy, public theater that always threatened to get out of hand. As Carter's knowing black audience and the *Dispatch*'s writer were well aware—and probably most of Richmond's citizenry were at least dimly aware—white behaviour

was being parodied and satirized by the apparently drunk free black. Almost inevitably, the performance had to end. Perhaps Carter, emboldened by his compatriots' enthusiastic response, went too far—the *Dispatch* reported that things were escalating and that his recent conduct had been of 'the most obscene and insulting character'—or perhaps the city's mood had changed in the wake of several violent incidents. At this distance, the motivation for official intervention is unclear, but the result is not. Carter was hauled in front of the authorities, sentenced to a Biblical 'thirty nine stripes', and then swallowed up in the legal system's maw, a free black man unable to produce the papers that could demonstrate his freedom.¹⁶

Not infrequently, then, individual blacks such as John Carter made obviously noisy incursions through the soundscape of southern cities and their impact was hardly negligible. But for all that, it was more the sounds of African Americans going about their daily lives that characterized those cities' sonic texture. Indeed, whether whites liked it or not—and as usual there was a range of opinion on the matter—it was impossible to be out and about in Richmond, or other urban centres, without hearing the sounds of slavery. African American culture—particularly in its musical expression—permeated southern cities just as effectively as did the scent of magnolia on a summer evening's breeze.

Take something as simple—or as complex—as whistling. Whistling, of course, was hardly the sole preserve of slaves, but in the early decades of the New Nation the practice was particularly associated with African Americans. The best account of slave whistling comes from nearby Lynchburg. It is a description through which, as happened more frequently than not, the white author, J. Alexander Patten, conveyed his own deep ambivalence about African American culture. His comments were embedded in his complaint about Lynchburg's 'very large negro population', who were mostly out of sight during the day, but who, in the early evening, were 'unpleasantly numerous'. As respectable citizens gingerly made their way along the 'narrow and uneven' sidewalks, they did so under the watchful eyes of the city's blacks,

hanging about on street corners and perched on fences and walls, who 'keep up a continual whistling'. All it took was a slight variation in the pitch or volume of the whistling to raise the hair on the backs of white necks, especially those of women, and to transform an evening stroll into an unpleasant lesson concerning the changing nature of race relations in the 1850s. Something ominous and threatening was in the air. According to Patten, Lynchburg's slaves and free blacks stood 'with their backs to the palings and walls, their hands in their pockets, and braced by their extended legs, whistle[d] away their evening hours'. This was an aggressive use of sound, and to a lesser extent of the black male body (for the lounging whistlers were mostly male) to mark territory, signalling nothing so much as that all those indignant complaints in the newspapers were correct and that unless something was done whites would indeed hand over control of the streets to a motley crew of free blacks and slaves.

And yet, for all his appreciation that the whistling blacks were passing contumacious messages between themselves, with an almost complete indifference to the angry glances of whites crowding the same sidewalks, Patten was also aware of the beauty of what he heard. As he readily acknowledged, 'Lynchburg blacks have genius, as well as lips; and whistle in a manner well calculated to "soothe the savage breast" '. They whistled, Patten noted acutely, 'the tunes of the plantation where they were born, and hope to die' and those 'of the factories, where the song lightens their labor' and, importantly, 'each is given with an accuracy, and even sweetness' which an 'instrument cannot always achieve'. It is impossible to read Patten's words without gaining an idea of the pleasure—and it was often exhibited in the most exuberant of fashions—that Lynchburg blacks derived from their whistling. Individual blacks quietly whistling themselves to sleep on ketches moored to the riverbank, and groups of blacks who had 'made wagers as to harmony and wind', all impinging on the soundscape in characteristically African American ways. Particularly interesting here were the groups of blacks performing what were essentially whistling cutting contests, a form that is familiar

enough to us today from over a century of music history from jazz through to rap, but that was worthy of note in slavery times. Patten carefully watched and listened to gangs of blacks going past on the street, 'whistling their loudest and best', a performance which incited them to 'displays of their fullest capacity; and thus the concert goes on'.¹⁷

Black whistling was a commonplace of life in southern cities, even if it was not often commented on at length by travellers, diarists, and other chroniclers of everyday life. More memorable for whites, however, and hence more often mused over in writing, and ultimately more revealing of African American culture and its complexity, was the sound of slaves and free blacks singing. By the 1850s blacks and whites had been living cheek by jowl in the urban crucibles along the eastern seaboard for decades, indeed, in many cases, for well over a century. Inevitably, and regardless of whether either party liked it or not, black and white cultures mixed promiscuously, forming new patterns, and changing the originals forever. Once slaves had incorporated white hymns into their musical repertoire—and it is important to remember that it was only in the last two or three decades of slavery that substantial numbers of slaves became Christian—those hymns would never sound the same again. Increasing numbers of whites went out of their way to listen to massed African American voices raised in song, and on Sundays in Richmond and other cities in the South, many became unabashed admirers of what they heard. Others, troubled by what, against their better judgment, they had come to enjoy, could only acknowledge their pleasure in the most grudging fashion. An anonymous correspondent of the *Daily Richmond Examiner* in 1861 noted that 'some very fine vocal music' could be heard on Sundays 'by listening to the choir of the First African Church'. But he quickly went on to point out that 'no extraordinary amount of *intellect* is required to make an excellent vocalist'. However, the *Examiner's* man conceded, 'most of the Africans are naturally good musicians' and 'with proper cultivation', the African Church choir 'would make the best vocalists in the world; yet the Africans are *radically* inferior in intellect to every other

variety of the human species'. From which he concluded 'that music is not a highly intellectual art or accomplishment'.¹⁸

Maybe the supercilious young man—he certainly seems sophomoric—was right in that the singing of hymns hardly demonstrated African American intellect. What is absolutely certain, though, is that the sounds of black religious music provided a soundtrack to which a range of the city's inhabitants, from white listeners sheepishly noticing their feet tapping in time, to Richmond slaves who used hymns as work songs, moved. In the cities, this casual exchange between what some have been misguided enough to see as discrete categories of the sacred and the secular, a mixing that is characteristic of African American music and, indeed, culture, was if anything heightened. This was particularly the case in Richmond in the 1850s. Industrialisation and urbanisation are usually seen as noisily rendering worksongs redundant—there was good reason for the Lomaxes, in search of 'authentic' worksongs in the 1930s, to want to record black prisoners on the road gang rather than tractor drivers or factory workers—but in *ante bellum* times most factories in Richmond processed tobacco, barely used machines, and were, if not silent, certainly quiet enough for slaves to use song to regulate the pace of their labor.

According to the *Boston Evening Transcript's* correspondent who visited Richmond in late 1860, if one went into any tobacco manufactory one would see from fifty to a hundred blacks working and hear 'their delightful voices' joined in 'a flow of delightful harmony'. As he explained to his Boston readers, 'slaves work and sing as a matter of course', and in fact 'could not well do the one without the other'. He had visited 'some twenty or more factories' in Richmond 'where the same habit was observable'.¹⁹ When William Cullen Bryant visited a Richmond tobacco factory in which eighty black boys and young men were rolling leaves into plugs, he learned that 'we encourage it as much as we can, for the boys work better while singing'.²⁰

What is particularly fascinating here is observing southerners, both white and black, striving to accommodate to a world that was changing, and doing so in ways most closely associated with

the cities. Southern industrialisation was still only in its most embryonic stage and older ways of behaving persisted for some time. Singing in factories did not occur just in Richmond. In a hemp factory in Lexington in the 1840s, one observer heard almost a hundred slaves 'drown the noise of the machinery by their own melody'. Even more surprising to modern sensibilities, some black factory workers managed to accompany their singing with a little jig. As they joined in the chorus, many of these Kentucky slaves 'at the same time walk[ed] backward and forward about their spinning, with great regularity, and in some measure keeping time with their steps'.²¹ Here again we find blacks turning work into performance.

Richmond's slaves' practice of using spirituals as worksongs reinforced the co-mingling of religion and industry. In his *Richmond in By-Gone Days* (1856), Samuel Mordecai wrote of the similarities between churches and tobacco factories. One of the latter had been built on the very spot on which a church had once stood: not only was the 'tobacco factory large enough for a Cathedral' and capped by a belfry, but it was also the case that to passers-by it sounded as if it were a religious establishment. As Mordecai commented, 'it is a pleasure to listen to the sacred music with which they [the slave factory workers] beguile the hours of labour'.²² Undoubtedly not all citizens of Richmond thought that the boundaries between religion and industry were blurred, but, regardless, the result was that on every day of the week in Richmond people could stroll past imposing edifices and hear massed African American voices singing psalms, hymns and spirituals.

It seems clear enough that more and more whites, both locals and visitors, enjoyed listening to this music—one traveller called it a 'most celebrated tourist attraction'—but working out what it meant to the slaves themselves is, as usual, rather more difficult. The first thing to be said is that, for all the relative newness of a situation in which large numbers of slaves became Christians and sang hymns, the way they used the songs to pace their work and the way they sang those hymns were practices firmly embedded

in African American culture. The *Boston Evening Transcript*'s correspondent explained to his readers that the black workers in the factories were singing hymns, 'many of which are the same as are heard in the churches of Boston', yet for all that he called them 'peculiar hymns' as well, a sure sign that melodies were being embellished, rhythms made more complex, tempos slowed or quickened.²³

Interestingly, even in these white accounts—and they are the only ones we have—there is a strong suggestion that, on occasion, blacks carefully calibrated the volume of their singing to suit their own purposes. And those purposes, depending entirely on context, could have ranged from having a bit of fun, playfully ragging a white foreman or owner, or deliberately provoking an overseer into a desperate struggle of wills with his slaves. The *Boston Evening Transcript*'s correspondent reported that in several factories 'conversation with the proprietor was almost impossible, in consequence of the "congregational singing" among the operatives'. Doubtless a deliberate drowning out of the idle chat of gawking tourists gave slaves some satisfaction and not a little amusement, but the most effective black use of sound was the eerie silence that the slaves created when they refused to sing. The brother of one tobacco factory proprietor told William Cullen Bryant that the black factory workers 'will sing all day long with great spirit', but that 'at other times you will not hear a single note'. Any sign of dissatisfaction with conditions on the factory floor, and usually this meant the behavior of the overseer, and the black workers clammed up. Bryant's informant went on to note that 'they must sing wholly of their own accord; it is of no use to bid them do it'.²⁴

The situation was replete with irony although not much of it was obvious to contemporaries. For the most part, our image of factory workers comes from later in the century and from the North. Serried ranks of young migrant women sitting at sewing machines in a New York sweatshop are both memorialised and rendered mute by the occasional photographs that survive. And, of course, nowadays we so often see them as young innocents,

unaware of their rendezvous with the Triangle Waist Company Fire of 1911, in which 146 mostly teenager factory workers would die horrendously. When Richmond tobacco factories sounded the way we expect them to sound, when the only noise was from machines, was precisely the point at which things were most awry. Not only was the silence an unnerving contrast to the usual noisy scene on the factory floor but, as the proprietors well knew, that uncanny quiet was also costing them money. Silence signalled black solidarity, a lack of interest on the part of slaves in continuing to keep their fingers working in time, indeed a determination to upset the industrial rhythm and to cause production to taper off. At the conflict's end, the black workers would once again respond to the call of one of their compatriots, the Lord's name would echo through the factory, and the money would start rolling in once more. William Cullen Bryant's informant thought it remarkable that 'their taste is exclusively for sacred music; they will sing nothing else'.²⁵ He certainly appreciated that slaves had no trouble at all with, indeed delighted in, using reconfigured hymns and psalms as worksongs. But he exaggerated his case. Richmond slaves on occasion did sing songs in which the Lord's name was not invoked.

Late on a summer night, in July 1852, Richmond's watch, doubtless responding to angry complaints from whites unable to sleep, managed to catch four miscreants, all of them free blacks. William Jackson Cash and Joseph Custols, both adults, and two small boys, Thomas Jenkins and Robert May, along with three others who slipped away too quickly, had been 'engaged in serenading some black damsels'. The Mayor sentenced Cash and Custols to ten lashes apiece, while the two boys, who gave up the names of another three blacks who had participated 'in the musical expedition', were 'let off with five lashes each'. The following night 'two more "negro serenaders"', this time both slaves, were caught performing 'with "bones" and "banjo" on Broad street', and sentenced to ten lashes apiece.²⁶

For the *Daily Dispatch*, it was all an affair to be treated lightly—fifty lashes were a drop in the ocean of floggings

regularly handed out by the city officials, and, for the whites, were neither here nor there. The *Dispatch*'s editor, utterly incapable of resisting temptation, captioned the first story 'A BARBER-IOUS SERENADE'. And yet this minor incident was the product of well over a century of cross-cultural intermingling of black and white in the urban centres. The lyrics to the songs were rendered in English, probably in Black English; the serenade is not an African or an African American genre, although having a group, not an individual, perform it is. As well, the banjo and the bones were both instruments of African origin, although by 1852 they were well on their way to being widely recognised as vital parts of the quintessential American institution of the minstrel show. Working out exactly what was going on late on a summer night on Broad Street is well nigh impossible from such brief descriptions, particularly when they are freighted in the levity of a century and a half ago. What is clear, though, is that serenading was one more way that free blacks made the night hideous with their music, and what is particularly fascinating is that the following night a couple of slaves accepted the almost certainty of a flogging to ensure that the beat went on, and that the watch and courts were needed to secure quiet so that whites might sleep.

Apparently serenading was relatively unusual—the authorities' approach hardly encouraged it—but the distinctive and often haunting cries of slave hucksters were pretty much accepted and a commonplace. As each fruit or food came into season, southern city streets became a cacophony of competing cries. In mid-July 1855 in Richmond, a writer in the *Daily Dispatch* noted that the first watermelons were beginning to come into market. 'In a short time now', he continued, 'the public ear will be greeted at every corner of the street, with "red meat, black seed, so sweet, indeed"'.²⁷ In nearby Norfolk, Virginia, a few years after slavery had ended, William Wells Brown, the famous runaway slave and author, carefully listened to a black woman selling 'some really fine strawberries' and then, unusually, wrote down her words. She sang:

I live fore miles out of town,
I am gwine to glory.
My strawberries are sweet an' soun',
I am gwine to glory.
I fotch 'em fore miles on my head,
I am gwine to glory.
My chile is sick, an' husban' dead,
I am gwine to glory.
Now's de time to get 'em cheap,
I am gwine to glory.
Eat 'em wid yer bread an' meat,
I am gwine to glory
Come sinner get down on your knees,
I am gwine to glory.
Eat dees strawberries when you please,
I am gwine to glory.

What is immediately apparent here is the characteristic African American way in which this woman, probably an ex-slave, promiscuously mixed the sacred and the secular, unhesitatingly combining religious exhortation with entreaties to buy her strawberries. Brown's almost dismissive gloss on the lyrics—that 'the interest, however, centred more upon the manner than the matter'²⁸—suggests that she was also singing these words in a characteristically African American way, but of course these sounds are now long lost to us. If it was and is almost impossible to trap on the page just how these cries sounded, it is often easier to pick up something of the overall effect of scores of slaves noisily hawking their wares at full volume. In times of glut, the streets became a bedlam. 'The city yesterday was uproarious with the clamour of the sable watermelon-venders', wrote one of the *Daily Richmond Examiner* correspondents in August 1861. 'At every corner the inevitable mule-cart and the irrepressible negro were to be encountered.' The superabundance would not last long though, 'and negroes and carts will soon be a scarcity in our streets'.²⁹

From well before the sun rose until very late at night, the streets of Richmond echoed to the noise of black living. The

sounds made by free blacks and slaves hawking their goods, singing, whistling or humming, arguing, shouting, playing in the streets, and merely going about their work were a part of the fabric of life not just in Richmond but, to a greater or lesser extent, in most American urban centres. White reaction to this development varied immensely. There were many whites who recoiled from every alarum and noisy disruption and who would try to insulate themselves from the city streets; others accepted such interruptions as part and parcel of living in an American city; and by the 1850s there was a significant minority who revelled in listening to examples of black cultural expressiveness. What is particularly intriguing is that the minstrel show, featuring white performers in blackface, became a sensation, the most popular form of entertainment in the country, at precisely the same time, and elicited a similar variety of reactions from its audience. In the late 1840s and 1850s, Americans, black and white, foreign and native-born, were attending minstrel shows in their droves. This was as true of Richmond as anywhere else. In 1852, for example, Kunkels' Opera Troupe came through the city several times to sell-out crowds.³⁰

What did it mean that there was a good chance that the thousands of patrons who queued up and paid to be spectators as a troupe of white actors with blackened faces performed in 'black dialect' could, on their way home from the theatre later that night, hear the 'real thing', black cab drivers whistling, or the raucous duets of a pair of black tubmen emptying the privies? The answer is complicated because undoubtedly Americans were attracted to minstrelsy for many reasons.

On the one hand, the theatrical representation of black life on the minstrel stage leached out of it most of its edginess and threat, taming African American culture for the entertainment of a mostly white audience. According to one member of the Richmond audience, the Kunkels' 'songs and Ethiopian colloquies are chaste and witty, devoid of anything that could be exceptionable to the most fastidious taste'.³¹ Much of minstrel show humour depended on stereotypes of blacks, on presenting an exaggerated version of

what many whites claimed to see everyday around their own city. When the Kunkels put on a skit entitled *The Black Barber*, in which one of the blacked-up cast members cavorted on stage 'with his two foot razor, currycomb and blacksmith's shears', the performance 'convulsed the audience with laughter'.³² But on the other hand, for some in the audience the appeal of the minstrel show lay precisely in its embrace of African American culture. For one enthusiastic Richmond patron, who wrote for the *Daily Dispatch*, the extraordinary appeal of the Kunkels was easy to explain. In other performances, by lesser companies, black 'language and dialect [were] wofully travestied, often by persons who professed to be Ethiopian singers, but who knew nothing more of negroes than that their skin is dark'. To attract the plaudits of a knowing audience, such as that in Richmond, rather more was involved than performers merely blackening their skin. The Kunkels, the *Dispatch* writer pointed out, 'have studied the peculiarities of the African character with great success, and they speak the negro dialect as a real Virginia negro would do it'.³³ In other words, the success of the Kunkels, at least in part, derived from the fact that they sounded very similar to performances from free blacks and slaves that could be heard throughout Richmond at virtually any time of the day or night.

Part of the minstrel show's staying power derived from its ability to embody these contradictory desires, to celebrate black culture and, at the same time, to repress it. From T. D. Rice down to Elvis and Eminem, a long line of white entertainers has stolen the sounds of black culture, becoming, thereby, famous and rich, certainly much more so than did the African Americans who inspired their performances. The Kunkels were pioneers, positioned early enough in this lineage to love as well as thieve, to pay careful attention to the particulars of what they imitated. And, of course, it has always been more than theft, not just imitation—the way in which the Kunkels and others transformed what they went out and listened to into something that could be staged successfully was no less a creative act than any of those performed by the African Virginians to whom the Kunkels

apparently paid such close attention. By the 1850s the sounds made by African Richmondites, indeed more generally African Americans, were a familiar part of the soundscape. For all the scares and panics of the last years before America lurched into war, what was most noticeable was the extent to which, after decades of living together, it was finally obvious that the cultures of master and slave were entwined. This was a development deplored by some, welcomed by others, and scanted by many, both black and white, but, regardless, the simple fact was that the sounds of slavery had penetrated the core of American culture, and the repercussions of that would be heard down to our own time.

Notes

- 1 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 10 November, 1852.
- 2 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 13 November, 1852.
- 3 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 12 August, 1852.
- 4 Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, Cambridge, 1998, p.195.
- 5 On Richmond generally see Gregg D. Kimball, *American City, Southern Place: A Cultural History of Antebellum Richmond*, Athens, 2000; Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787–1861*, Chapel Hill, 2003; James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730–1810*, New York, Cambridge, 1997; Midori Takagi, 'Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction': *Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782–1865*, Charlottesville, 1999. The population figures are taken from Kimball, *American City*, p.31.
- 6 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 22 December, 1852. The most recent study of slave hiring convincingly argues that the practice was in fact endemic to the South. We would still suggest that, in part because of the amount of industry, Richmond was still distinctive in the amount of slave hiring that occurred. See the excellent Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the American South*, Cambridge, Mass., 2004.
- 7 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 18 December, 1855.
- 8 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 28 October, 1852. On the Winston murders, see Takagi, pp.112–15.
- 9 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 5 August, 1852.
- 10 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 9 March, 1852.
- 11 Quoted in Rothman, p.121. But see also *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 22

- September, 1855, where the Mayor explained that a gathering of more than five blacks in a grocery would be unlawful if they were there 'for their own purposes', whereas a similar gathering might occur 'for the purposes of the master and yet be lawful'.
- 12 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 27 January, 1852.
 - 13 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 22 September, 1852; 23 September, 1852. On the enforcement of the law about passes, see *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 15 January, 1852, for the Mayor's instructions to have all blacks attending fires at night who did not 'belong' to the engines to be 'peremptorily' arrested, and *Richmond Daily Dispatch* 3 February, 1852 for a warning about giving slaves unendorsed passes. The mayor intended to carry out the law 'to the very letter' and as he noted 'a sound thrashing will make the slaves more particular' about obeying the law exactly.
 - 14 Quoted in Rothman, p.120.
 - 15 Quoted in Rothman, p.120.
 - 16 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 2 June, 1852.
 - 17 J. Alexander Patten, 'Scenes in the Old Dominion. Number Two—A Tobacco Market', reprinted as 'Scenes from Lynchburg' in Eugene L. Schwaab and Jacqueline Bull, eds, *Travels in the Old South, Selected from Periodicals of the Times*, Lexington, 1973, 2 vols, vol.2, p.541. For a penetrating few lines on whistling, see W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, pp.92–93.
 - 18 *Daily Richmond Examiner*, 28 September, 1861.
 - 19 'Congregational Singing in Richmond, Virginia,' *Dwight's Journal of Music* 18 (12 January 1861): 333. On singing in the tobacco factories, see also Suzanne Gehring Schnittman, 'Slavery in Virginia's Urban Tobacco Industry—1840–1860,' (Ph.D. Diss., The University of Rochester, 1987), pp.174–78.
 - 20 William Cullen Bryant, *The Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant*, Parke Godwin, ed., vol.2, *Travels, Addresses, and Comments*, New York, 1964 [orig. pub. 1884], pp.25–26.
 - 21 Quoted in Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, New York, 1970, p.18.
 - 22 Extract from Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days* (1856) reprinted in Eileen Southern, comp. and ed., *Readings in Black American Music*, New York, 2nd edn. 1983, pp.136–37.
 - 23 'Congregational Singing in Richmond, Virginia', p.333.
 - 24 'Congregational Singing in Richmond, Virginia', p.333; Bryant, *Travels, Addresses, and Comments*, pp.25–26.
 - 25 Bryant, *Travels, Addresses, and Comments*, pp.25–26.
 - 26 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 28 July, 1852; 30 July, 1852.

- 27 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 19 July, 1855.
- 28 William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: or, The South and Its People*, Boston, 1880, p.211.
- 29 *Daily Richmond Examiner*, 17 August, 1861.
- 30 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 12 March, 1852; 24 September, 1852. The historiography of the minstrel show is particularly rich. See Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*, Cambridge, 1997; W. T. Lhamon Jr, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., 2003, pp.1–92; Lhamon, *Raising Cain*; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, New York, 1993; William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*, Urbana, 1999.
- 31 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 24 September, 1852.
- 32 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 12 March, 1852.
- 33 *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 25 September, 1852. Some minstrel performers may have paid particular attention to African American culture but at least some contemporaries were confident in their ability to differentiate between white and black. A story in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 27 March, 1857, recounted that an ‘immense crowd’ in South Carolina had watched ‘genuine plantation darkies’ perform on stage. According to the writer, Christy’s and other minstrel troupes ‘have never played “plantation airs” as these little chaps do’. He suggested that ‘If eloquence is essentially based on feeling the subject, the skill of these boys is more than usual eloquent music’.