

The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

Call-and-Response

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A powerful form of communication rooted in African religious and cultural traditions, call-and-response is a spontaneous verbal or nonverbal alternating pattern of single leading voice or action and ensuing individual, choral, or group reaction that has shaped the music genres, religious ceremony, cultural arts, and civic interactions of much of the African diaspora. This entry reviews the roles of call-and-response in social interaction and performance.

What Is Call-and-Response?

Call-and-response is a method of democratic engagement between an individual and group for the purpose of interactive participation. It may also be used to compel mass movement to spiritual higher ground, intellectual enlightenment, collective advancement, or an ideal sociopolitical end. Its formula involves an initiating statement or physical action, rapidly followed by a second, sometimes third and fourth verbal or nonverbal response, in answer to or as instruction compelled by the original statement. The back-and-forth between speaker and listener, action and reaction, may be improvised and embellished in the process.

In African cultures, call-and-response is employed at community gatherings, in the discussion of civic affairs, in storytelling and education, in ceremonies and festivals, and in vocal and instrumental music.

Social Functions of Call-and-Response

Although intrinsically African, the American roots of call-and-response can be informally traced through European observers back to the arrival of the first slave ships in Virginia in the early 17th century. African Americans adapted the call-and-response form to suit various forms of self-and group expression: in religious observances, community meetings, storytelling, children's games, and a range of musical forms.

In plantation life, call-and-response was most often articulated through dance movements, remembered from Africa, that facilitated selfassertion and cultural

affirmation in a way that appeared entertaining, and nonthreatening, to slave masters. During a corn-shucking celebration, for example, group leaders called out instructions as workers responded physically and verbally. (This basic form of call-and-response was also prominently used in the notorious Southern chain gangs.) Call-and-response was also used to communicate across adjacent fields, to give strength to weary bodies and spirits and to comment on the oppressiveness of their condition. Call-and-response dance competitions during slavery stressed social integration and unification [p. 278 ↓] and acknowledged the role and ability of the leader to set acceptable standards.

During the period of enslavement, call-and-response was also used in storytelling, which traditionally served an educational function or as a method of culture transmission. This practice is often cited as an influence among those who advocate the use of call-and-response as a teaching method. Some researchers suggest that syllabic call-and-response instruction can be effective in closing literary and linguistic achievement gaps attributed to differences between Standard English and African American English.

Ecumenically, call-and-response is regarded as a cornerstone of African American religious behavior. Its origins, in part, arise from African religious rituals. For example, the pastor asks, "Can I get an 'Amen?'" The congregation responds: "Amen!" He calls again: "Can I get an 'Amen?'" The congregation answers: "Yes, Lord!" The pastor asks a third time: "Can I get an 'Amen!'" The congregation responds: "Praise Jesus!" Through such exchanges, call-and-response blurs the lines between preacher and congregation.

Performance Call-and-Response

Since it is among the strongest defining characteristics of African musical forms, call-and-response has also evolved in America as the fundamental structure of the iconic genres that grew out of its oppressive chattel slavery system: gospel, blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz.

The repetition of initial complaint and lamenting response forms the very heartbeat of the blues, both vocally and in musical structure. In jazz, the alternation between call-and-response is generally defined by an instrumental solo and respondent series of

complementary melodies, performed individually or collectively, in intricate rhythm and harmony by other musicians in the band. The same repetitive rhythmic back and forth forms the heart of most gospel choir performances and competitions.

Performance call-and-response was defined by legendary tap dancers such as Honi Coles, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, and Gregory and Maurice Hines, among many others. Crossing cultures, it marks the most famous routines of Robinson with Shirley Temple and of Fred Astaire; it is among the most memorable scenes of the classic musical *West Side Story*. More recently, call-and-response defines the street-dance forms of break dancing and krumping.

Profound and far-reaching, the influence of call-and-response is identifiable everywhere the transatlantic slave system came ashore. In the United States, the African American influence is inextricably threaded through all of its cultural nuances and musical forms, including rock n’ roll, rhythm and blues, rap, and hip-hop.

See also [African Aesthetic, The](#); [African Languages and American English](#); [Blues Aesthetic, The](#); [Griots, Rappers, and Deejays](#); [Ring Shout](#); [Storytelling: A System of Cultural Cohesion](#)

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Further Readings

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