

Federal Writers' Program  
Paul Diggs  
Lakeland, Florida  
October 14, 1938

### The Florida Negro in Music

One Negro said, "we brought music to this country and we will take music away," that is to say, "he was born with music in his soul, and he expects to die with music in his soul." This is a part of his life, and he is naturally inclined to be musical, from generation to generation.

The Negro's native musical gift is universally recognized. Africa has been called "the continent of music." In America this gift early began to express itself in the development of the spirituals, and in later years in rag-time and jazz. For a century or more the Negroes have been folk-song makers. Black faced minstrels used plantation jingles. Their material was collected from the slave and folk material. It was very close to the nineties that Negro songs started to become popular, and they have made a gradual increase in this field ever since. There is at present a score or so of colored writers of popular songs in America.

It is common in Florida to see Negroes going from town to town, with their banjos, tin horns, wash boards, saws, gallon jugs, a string on a broom handle, and other contraptions, making rhythmic music to the delight of the listeners. They sing songs in their own free style, and shuffle their feet in time with the tune.

Negro jazz bands have been playing jazz and honky tonks long before the jazz craze hit the country. In most all "joints" there was the favorite piano player, who sometimes was accompanied with a drum, banjo, mandolin, guitar, and later a saxophone was

aided. The leader of the band would develop a style all of his own. The many intricate movements are original and they help to develop rhythm that they pour out from their souls in playing. Their feet are never still, and this adds to their ease in interpreting their music. In most "joints" and places where the swing bands play in Florida, the style of music comes from the blues, the daddy of most all American swing music.

Through this process of development in the past, some musicians graduated from the common street scene to the stage and radio broadcast. A few have reached the professional stage and their returns have been in keeping with their talents.

Another contribution from the Negro in Florida and elsewhere has been the spiritual songs that their mothers use to sing way back in the slavery days. Some would hum them and others would take the same tune and make up verses as they went along. These same tunes have been collected with fitting words and are today one of our richest heritages. The folk music may be heard sung by almost all church choirs or groups. It is the type of music that they know, love, and sing best.

Florida has sent out into the world some very fine Negro bands. They have made names for themselves along with other famous bands in the United States. One well known to all music lovers was "Selling Billy Stewart" and his Floridians. Billy Stewart is now deceased, but his fame lives on. He organized his band out of Sanford, Florida. Another group famous within the State, was the Sunshine Serenaders. They were organized in St. Petersburg, Florida, "The Sunshine City." Tampa also contributed some fine

bands whose life in most instances were short lived.

Bill Hears has carried the name of the Orange State, through his splendid musical organization, better than any other of the jazz bands, from West Palm Beach, Florida to Broadway, to the West Coast, to the deep South, and back to his camping ground.

Music in our colleges have developed some fine talent and they have played their part in communities where they have settled, imparting music appreciation to members of the race.

In F.A.M.C, there has developed a splendid orchestra led by Prof. L.A. Kirksey, who has filled numerous engagements outside of the school campus. They have displayed the same style of music that other famous orchestras have. Mr. Kirksey is a member of one of the old outstanding Negro families of the State, and displays the qualities of a very fine musician.

Another very fine musician, J. Harold Brown. Born in Lakeland, Florida. Now heads the music department at F.A.M. College. Mr. Brown, is a member of one of the pioneer families in Lakeland. He is a pianist, pipe organist, and a composer. Having some fine and outstanding work to his credit.

Another outstanding Floridian whose achievement in the field of music is universally known is James Weldon Johnson (deceased). He has written music for Negro musical comedies. Many have been played on Broadway. His songs cover a wide range from the spirituals and jubilees of the cotton pickers down south to the delicate love. His most widely sung composition is "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," a song that is used by the Negroes as a national hymn in their schools and churches and at all Negro gatherings.

Federal Writers' Project  
Paul Biggs  
Lakeland, Florida  
October 14, 1938

J. Rosamond Johnson, a brother of James Weldon Johnson, has composed light operas for Klaw and Erlanger, and many popular songs for May Irwin, Lillian Russell and Anna Held. He has also brought out several volumes of Negro spirituals. All the work of Florida boys.