

LAWRENCE GELLERT

NEGRO SONGS OF PROTEST*

A lullaby I heard near Tyron, N. C.

Sh-hhhhhh baby
Hushabye
Sleep soun' li'l baby
Make yo' big an' strong
Maybe so strong
You have same's white folks
All nice things
Sh-hhhhhh baby
Hushabye
Sleep soun' li'l baby.

I heard a washerwoman striding along the road with a bundle of laundry balanced on her head singing this. The tune was in quick march tempo—loud and free. She sang it with an abandon of exultation and joy difficult to describe.

Shout Oh chillun	We gwine own de hoe
Shout yo' free	An' own de plow
Now you has yo' liberty	An own de han' dat hol'
Yo' no mo' slave	We sell de pig, de horse, de cow
Yo' free, free, free	But neber mo' chile be sol'

Here's one from Greenville, S. C. The five tone scale through which the Negro expresses himself almost as easily as we do in speech is used in the melody. The listener unconsciously humps his shoulders under the impact of a pressing object of great weight, so remarkable is the Negro's skill in creating and imparting his moods in song. The mournful atmosphere in the opening lines is carried throughout. The apparently hopeful note in the chorus lines is not borne out in the tune. More derisive and ironic than anything else.

Nigger he jes' patch black dirt
Raisin' paht de white man's Eart'
Lawd eain' you hear him groan an' weep
White man's aplowin' his'n soul down deep

Nigger shall be free, yes
Nigger shall be free, yes
Nigger, shall be free, yes
When de good Lawd set him free

A tray boy in an Asheville, N. C., sanatorium sang this one. The tune is light, lively—flippant even. Not at all in keeping with the lament and plaintiveness with which the lines are burdened. It may be that the words are a parody on others—more cheerful—about love perhaps or whiskey.

White man go to college
Nigger to the fiel'
White man learn to read an' write
Nigger axe to wuel'
Well it makes no dif'rence how you make out yo' time
White folks sure to bring de nigger out behin'

Ain' it hahd, ain' it hahd
Ain' it hahd to be a nigger, nigger, nigger,
Ain' it hahd, ain' it hahd
Cause you neber get yo' money when it due

If a nigger get 'rested an' cain' has his fine
Dey sen' him out to work on de county line
Nigger an' white man playin' seben up
Nigger win de money, fraid to pick it up
He work all de week, he work all de time
White folks sure to bring de nigger out behin'

Ain' it hahd (etc)

*These songs are part of a collection gathered over a period of two years by the author, in North and South Carolina and Georgia. They are now being arranged for publication. The first group of these songs, appeared under the same title in our November issue.

When a local administrative body contemplates reelection—and when do they not—maintenance of good roads is an excellent asset. These roads are kept in repair by chain gangs. Work on them of course is in proportion to the number of convicts available. Hence no crime goes long unpunished. Not if there can be found a stray Negro within a hundred mile radius.

The convict at work wears the usual chain and ball. In special cases where he is able to raise shackle bond—at the rate of some \$25.00 per month sentence—the shackle is removed. He works without it. They hope he runs away. Certainly he has every opportunity. The bond is forfeited. Clear profit. They can always get another to fill his place. The sheriff takes a walk and jostles a Negro—preferably an out-of-town one (no white friends to butt in). An arrest is made. Disorderly conduct. That's good for at least 90 days.

As a Spartanburg County (S.C.) judge expressed it, "I'm willing to give the nigger the benefit of the 'knout' every time." He wasn't joking. Merely stating a fact. And the sentiment is usual with Southern petty officialdom everywhere.

The song following is in that vein:

Standin' on de corner, wan' doin' no hahm
Up come a 'liceman grab me by de ahm
Blow a li'l whistle, ring a li'l bell
Here come de 'rol wagon rinnin' lak Hell

Jedge he call me up an' axe mah name
Ah tol' him fo' sho' ah wan' to blame
He wink at de 'liceman, 'liceman wink too
Jedge he say ah git some work to do.

Workin' on de road gang shackle boun'
Lon' lon' time fo' siz mont' roll roun'
Miserin' fo' mah honey, she miserin' fo' me
But lawd white folks won' let go o' me.

A workday song. A new verse crops up everytime it's sung. There must be hundreds of them. This version I heard in Mills Springs, N. C.

He work so hahd
Jes' fo' gettin' 'head
But he were cross-eyed
An' fill white folks' pocket 'stead
Ain' dat de truff

Ef nigger work hahd
He worked out fo' long
An' white folks only wan' him
When he stay strong
Ain' dat de truff

Pickin' off de cotton
Hoein' up de cawn
Ah neber does mo'
Den ah's paid fo' doin,
Ain' dat de truff

De hahdes' workin' nigger
Ah eber done saw
Now goin' 'roun' beggin,
He eain' work no mo'
Ain' dat de truff

Pickin' off de cotton
Hoein' up de cawn
Ah's de lazies' nigger
Sho' 's yo' bawn
Ain' dat de truff.

I heard fragments of the next one in both Carolinas. It's a good, lively work song.* Whenever whites happen to be about other lines are conveniently substituted:

Ah tol' mah Cap'n mah han' was col'
Goddamn yo' han' let de wheelin roll

Ah tol' mah Cap'n mah feet was col'
Goddamn yo' feet let de wheelin roll

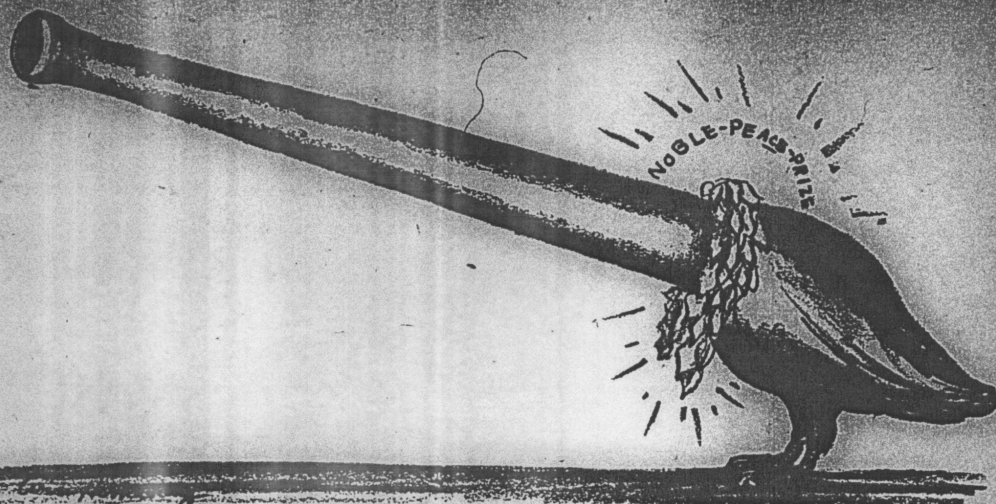
Cap'n, Cap'n, you mus' be blin'
Look at yo' watch it pas' quittin' time

Cap'n, Cap'n how can it be
Whistle done blow an' you still workin' me

*Another version of this song appeared in our May 1930 issue, in the article: Songs of the Negro Worker by Phillip Schatz.



Clarence Chang



KELLOG'S DOVE OF PEACE

William Hernandez

If ah was de Cap'n an' he was me
I'd let him knock off an' go on a sleep

Cap'n, Cap'n, didn't you all say
You wouldn't keep aworkin' me in de rain all day

If Ah haid mah weight in lime
I'd whip mah Cap'n till he went stone blin'

Pay day come an' we all git nuthin'
Cap'n he tryin' to cheat me fo' suttin'

My Cap'n he so damn mean
Ah think he come f'om New Orleans

I'm gonna spit in his coffee
An' spit in his tea
De lawd help dis nigger if he catch me.

A Negro boy—"maid of all work" at the little hotel in Columbus, N. C., sang this. He must be the exception to the widely accepted rule that all Negroes are good singers. They generally have an excellent ear for music, true. Pick up four Negroes anywhere at all and the chances are that you have an excellent quartet. But screechy, unmusical, blatant voices amongst the Negroes are just as common as with us. The time isn't anything to get excited about either.

White man go to ribber
Couldn't get 'cross
Jump on top de nigger's back
Thought he was a horse

White man go to mountain
Couldn't climb de top
Grab hol' de nigger's coat
Tell nigger to pull him up

Nigger say to white man
Ah has on'y two legs jes' lak you
An' fo' ah lets you ride me
Ah has to grow de odder two

Nigger say to white man
Ah has on'y two legs jes' lak you
An' fo' ah pull you up dere
Ah has to grow de odder two

In my opinion innumerable more instances of lynching occur than find their way into the records. Word of them is withheld at the discretion of local authorities. In many cases if a report is made at all "Death from natural causes" suffices. As a matter of fact statistics of any sort regarding the Southern Negro are necessarily sketchy affairs. Legal documents cost money. The Negro can't afford them. Thus he's often born, wed and dies—all without official knowledge or sanction. This song I picked up in Traveller's Rest, S. C. The melody alternates in mood between that of a spiritual and Scottish War Chant—the emasculating Christian influence is dominated by the impassioned call to arms.

Sistern an' Brethern
Stop foolin wit' pray
When black face is lifted
Lawd turnin' 'way

Heart filled wit' sadness
Head bowed down wit' woe
In the hour of trouble
Where's a black man to go.

We're buryin' a brother
They kill for the crime
Tryin' to keep
What was his all the time.

When we's tucked him on under
What you goin' to do
Wait till it come
They arousin' fo' you too.

Your head tain' no apple
For danglin' f'om a tree
Your body no carcass
For barbecusin' on a spree.

Stand on your feet
Club gripped 'tween your hands
Spill their blood too
Show 'em yours is a man's.

This song is of Civil War origin, undoubtedly. But it has a new significance now with the younger Negro. They all know and sing it—a martial air of excellent merit.

Oh brethren rise, give praise to glory
For the year of the Jubilee
Do you want to be a soldier
For the year of the Jubilee.

Oh what you say brother
Oh what you say brother
Oh what you say brother
About dis wahr

I will die in the field
Stay in the field
Stay in the field brother
Stay in the field
Until the victory
March on and you shall gain the victory
March on and you shall gain the day

We want no cowards in our band
We call for only the strongest men

I intend to fight and never stop
Until I reach mountain top.