

## 22.12.2 Musical Legacies Hour

SM Sarah McConnell

AC A.D. Carson

MS Mary Caton Lingold

SF Sarah Finley

SM

2020 was an especially heavy year for most of us. The loneliness of complete COVID isolation, the fear of the disease, the sadness and anger about the deaths of Black people at the hands of police. For A.D. Carson, there was also the intensely personal grief of losing family and friends.

AC

Yeah, so that was heavy. It was a lot and I don't know grieving, you know, like the the normal rituals that we have around grieving. We're not able to participate in them in the ways that that we're used to, even just being with family as comfort.

SM

So A.D. Carson turned to his music, and the album 'Talking to Ghosts' was born.

MUSIC

When we was riding from Sandusky to Decatur / I figured more discussions would come later / It was January and the plans were simple / A funeral we went to / Sometimes with family I think we tend to / assume tomorrow was always gonna come / and never think that it's the last time / I'm sure I thought about it that time.

SM

From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, the historical legacies that music both creates and grapples with.

MUSIC

No permission necessary / We love because we love / That's something no one else can get above / When I picked up the phone heard Chris saying they killed Cuz / it felt like he said they killed us.

SM

A.D. Carson is the professor of Hip Hop and the Global South at the University of Virginia. His album 'I Used to Love to Dream' was the first rap album peer reviewed for publication with an academic press. His newest album is 'Talking to Ghosts.' A.D., you have said that this newest album of yours, 'Talking to Ghosts,' was a reflection of your own experiences grappling with the pandemic, grappling with the loss of loved ones, the death of loved ones. With the civil rights

uprisings and the death of people at the hands of police, and your own anxieties coping with all that. Did you feel anxious? Did you go through dark times?

AC

Yes, yes. And I'm sure that the feelings that I felt, the things that I dealt with are things that lots of people were dealing with all across the country, individually in isolation. Like lots of people, I try to intellectualize things and make sense of them by tidying them up into essay form. Or, when I can't do that, then I make music. And I spent a really significant portion of the pandemic trying to write the essays that I thought would explain away, not just my anxiety, but the pain, the grief, the mourning, the inability to really look at the television because every time it was turned on, there was something that would make the anxiety even more pronounced. And the essays just never, they never really got what I was trying to convey. And so I, like I went downstairs like I normally do, and I'm listening to music, and it starts to flow out. And the arguments that come across in the music are the exact things that I'm trying to write essays about. And it wasn't long before I realized that the things that needed to be said, the things that wanted to be said, wanted to be said in music, and not necessarily in essay form.

SM

There's a great example of that in one of the tracks called 'Above.' Tell me about 'Above,' where that hit you so personally.

AC

Yeah. I mean, maybe 'Above' is also the song where I realized that this project was what it was. I think that was also the inspiration for, or at least partially the inspiration for, the title of the album: 'Talking to Ghosts.' It was early 2020. My brother and a couple of cousins, and my brother's son, we all had to go down to Southern Illinois because one of our close cousins had passed away. So we went to we went to, you know, send him off, to remember him, and all of those things. And we took it as an opportunity to go visit the land where my grandparents lived. So we're standing out in this field now, because the house is gone and it's overcast, and it had just been raining, and so like the street is a little flooded. And my cousins, and myself, and my brother, nephew, are laughing about the land where we, where we had our first basketball hoop. And it wasn't really a basketball hoop, it was milk crate and we cut the bottom out of it. And then we nailed it to a piece of wood and then put it out in the middle of the field. And so we're just laughing and having fun. And I didn't think any more of it. Well, we all know that shortly after that, then the pandemic hit and we weren't able to go anywhere.

And then I get the news that one of my cousins who was there with us, his name is Devin - and the cousin whose funeral we were at, his name

is Jamal – but Devin, I found out from my brother that the Devin was killed, tragically. And it was just like, it was terrible. But we're also at this moment where the pandemic won't allow us to move. So my immediate instinct is to like, get in the car and go home. But then there's this other thing, they're saying, well, we can't travel, the university has restricted all of these kinds of things. And I really have no clue what's going on. Yeah, so that was heavy. It was a lot. And I don't know grieving, you know, like the the normal rituals that we have around grieving, we're not able to participate in them in the ways that that we're used to, even just being with family as comfort. And so one of those days that I was sitting there trying to write those essays, I start flipping through my pictures. And as I'm swiping through the pictures, this file comes up, and it's a video. And it's a pretty dark video, but the audio is me, and my cousins standing out there in that field. And we're laughing about that basketball hoop. I knew at that moment, I mean, it felt like I was being called by that to make something with it.

SM

Called by Devin.

AC

I was being called by my cousin to share his laughter just this moment. So I'll play it.

MUSIC

If growing old is a gift wish I could give it / Wonder if it was given to me if I would live it / Understand literally how insincere that sounds when I'm around to sing / but they won't get to play it / Knowing you was a gift wish I could give it / Wonder since it was given to me how I should live with / understanding what it means inside a lyric that I can deliver / but you'll never get to hear / what they have in there, they have liquor? You know the house was back there. Yeah. That was Paul's joint (BEEP). That was a field that was (INAUDIBLE) Court is a stretch. (Laughter) Think it was regulation?

AC

Yeah, so that's me, Devin, my cousin Ed, and my brother, Kris, my nephew, Kaeith. And we're all just standing out there in front of our grandparent's land, laughing and remembering what it was like being kids there.

SM

Did that bring you joy?

AC

It brought me joy, it brought me tears. It was you know, like, I mean, it was my opportunity to say more to him. And I felt before that point that I would never get to say anything else. And so, you know, it brought me some semblance of a kind of, a kind of ritual. A kind of

way to mourn, a kind of way to remember, but also a way to think that, you know, in in these certain ways he's always here with us. That just because folks aren't physically present, present doesn't mean that they aren't talking to us. And it also doesn't mean that we can't talk back.

SM

There's another track where you incorporate the singing of a church service, and also breathing plays a big role in it. Tell me about those two factors.

AC

Okay, yeah. So there's a, there's a song. One of the last songs on the album is called 'To Be Repeated.' And it's a sample, there's a sample of a gospel song. And it kind of evoked to me, not being in church, but standing outside of church, you know, like with family, waiting for our grandmother to come out, and then you know, we jump in the car and go back home and then you know, we have this big dinner and you know, like a huge chunk of cake. And so, like that comfort, or that feeling, I wanted to be able to try to replicate that in a certain way. And so what you hear on the song or as the song, the introduction of the song comes up, is you hear that. You hear the sounds of being outside, but you also hear breathing. And I think that breathing is a really important part of this project because of the anxiety, and the ways that I've felt, well just so intently aware of my breathing, and hoping that I would be able to continue to breathe because of all of the things that were going on.

MUSIC

He has a long held belief that how to get to where we at / is due to things that he did / So soon to be breaking there are the stories of struggles that my brothers and I went through / Staring out the windows of apartment buildings / building our imaginations waiting patiently not complacent / People stomach aching / Mama making eggs and bacon / left to late to take the public transportation to Wisconsin on our own too / I never really want to but paint for you a picture so you're sure to see it vividly / is how you will remember me / and if not you can visit me in memory / I mention these to give you the illusion that I'm using what I learned / But really, truth is complicated / I kind of made it more to cope with the (BEEP) / The day we all lose hope in / The twist until nobody (BEEP) can you in Hell and you've been well behind a well drink / a sloppy little secret / your friends are all so thoughtful so they keep it / You're seeking higher answers / And Granny's cancer can't be canceled out / So you're like Joe Joe dancer scared enough to fan the flames about / I'm thinking about the love you lost that barely gave you your heart back.

AC

It's really wanting to narrate not just what that closeness with family feels like, but the idea that well, like, memories are a place

too, you know? And, um, that's a place that some of us feel compelled to visit very often. And I think that this album kind of deals with that as well. I think that as all these things were going on, my body was trying to tell me, slow down, chill out. You can't do everything, you know, all of those things. So I've, you know I found myself sitting there watching press briefings, talking to family, etc. And just listening to my breath, trying to, you know, like, check my pulse, looking at my watch to see if my if my heart rate is increased. And I start feeling this, like this tension in my chest. And it feels like, like a heavy rope. That is like, pulled as taut as it possibly can be and then twisting.

And at that moment, I'm like, something's wrong. I know something is wrong. I go and look in the mirror to see if there are any, like visible signs of something wrong. And then, you know, I call a friend and I try to explain what's going on. And a friend says you probably should go to a hospital. But then I'm thinking there's COVID At the hospital. If I go to the hospital and I and I'm not sick then I might get sick because I went to the hospital. And that next morning, I get to the hospital. And then I'm connected, you know, like to the machine to try to see what's, what's the deal with my heart. And I noticed at this moment, really that it had been like a solid nine months since I've had any contact with another human being. This person putting the contacts on my chest is the first time that I'd touched or been touched by another person. And the doctor comes in and tells me your heart's fine. You've been having panic attacks.

SM

Did you find during the pandemic you were sort of channeling your grandmothers – who you had lost by that time – but in that nine months not being touched by anyone, did you think about the love connection to them and their erasure from the earth?

AC

Yeah, I mean, I think that there's, there's often this thing that happens for me is, I'll be talking and, and I'll say, I'll say a thing and to me it sounds like my grandma's voice. And I think that there's this impulse, especially for academics, to try to, like cut that out. To not, to not do that, to make sure that we, I don't know sound, quote unquote, professional. But it feels to me like an incredible gift from my grandmothers to be able to speak sometimes and it's their voice that comes out of my mouth.

SM

I feel that way too. I'm proud when idioms come out, and phrases, and I think I know who that is.

AC

Yes, yeah. And so, I want to make a record of that as well. I want my

grandmothers on the record, even if it's me channeling them with my voice. And so that's kind of what, it's one of the purposes of the music that I try to create.

SM

There's another one of these pieces where you really get into breathing. Tell me about what breathing has signified to you from this pandemic period?

AC

Yeah, well, it's not, it's not just the anxiety, and sort of being very conscious or conscientious of my own ability and inability to breathe. But thinking about all of the other people who are probably sharing in this moment where breathing becomes like such a fundamental part of our lives that we recognize. And of course, we're all doing it all the time, for the duration of our lives. But it just feels like during this moment in time, everybody's aware of our breath, and the ways that like sort of inhaling and exhaling might signal something more, might signal something dangerous, might portend, you know, like these really dark things. So what I want to play here is just a piece at the end of a song that's actually called 'In Hell.' And the song actually itself deals with the aftermath of violence. But at the end of it, I want it to include a breathing exercise.

MUSIC

Exhale / deep breaths niggas / let your chest swell / Think I'm alive  
I can't tell / Even if I'm breathing I'm breathing in Hell / Exhale,  
inhale / I'm still pulling niggas (INAUDIBLE) / Think I'm alive/ I  
can't tell / Even if I'm breathing I'm breathing in Hell / Give me  
your hands. Take a deep breath in and hold for 5,4,3,2,1. Exhale.

SM

Breathing, it makes me think of George Floyd of course, I can't breathe.

AC

Yes, yes. And so that that is precisely... the point wasn't to try to reenact the brutal killing of George Floyd. But it was to think about the many ways that we want to breathe, and we are rendered incapable of breathing.

SM

You make reference on the album to "beyond a better Hell." Where does that phrase come from, and what does it mean?

AC

Beyond a better hell actually comes from a conversation that I had with the historian James Loewen. James Loewen unfortunately passed away fairly recently. And we were having an ongoing conversation because he is a... well, he's a historian. He's from my hometown,

Decatur, Illinois. And I wanted to share my previous album with them called 'I Used to Love to Dream,' and 'I Used to Love to Dream' focuses so much more on Decatur as the site of a kind of historical intervention. And he sent me a message back and said, you know, it's interesting but I assumed that Decatur was better for Black people now than it was 50 years ago. And my response to that was sure, except that if it is still hellish for Black people after 50 years, then a better Hell is not what I'm looking for. It's still Hell.

So that was the reason for that. It's like the progress narrative that has us say we're thankful for how far we come, in response to how far we need to go. And I think that we can be critical of what is going on right now, while acknowledging perhaps it is better. But if it's bad right now, then better doesn't make anybody feel good. I mean, you know, we're still enduring hellish conditions

SM

There's something else from your back and forth with the historian James Loewen. He is the guy who wrote 'Sundown Towns,' and is probably best known for a book he wrote in the 90s called 'Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.' That was influential on you.

AC

It was, because number one, he's a dude from my hometown. You know, and by the time we're talking, he's a much older white guy who's working at universities. But what he's saying is, the histories that we got are bad histories. The histories that we got are mythological. And this, it resonates not just because that's something that I realized later about, about our own hometown, but that this is what we are doing with American history across the board. And so, you know, it felt like a natural progression to write an album like 'I Used to Love to Dream' where I'm trying to intervene in America's history or in Decatur's history, and America's history more broadly. And then when I send it to him, you know, like, then, like, the response is, but isn't it better now? And I'm like, but you're the guy who said that we need to do better histories. And so I think that I'm trying to, I think that I'm trying to contribute to that.

SM

The other thing you seemed to have gotten from those conversations had to do with, well who was telling our history? And who makes it into history, not just "winners tell history." But why isn't my cousin in the history? And why aren't I or my grandmother, or anybody's grandmother, not just yours? But what constitutes meaningful history?

AC

Yeah, like the capital 'H' history narrative, is something that I'm always trying to push back against, because I know that whenever the story gets written about COVID, or when the story gets written about

Decatur, or the story gets written about Illinois, or about Southern Illinois, there will be people who certainly are not included. So my cousin Devon, or either of my grandmothers, even the conversation with a historian who might say that, you know, this is a, you know, this is an interesting town and we need to have better histories written about it.

But if those histories continue to be written by the same people who wrote the previous histories, then I don't think that those histories are going to be any better. So how do we include the voices of the people who are historically marginalized, who are presently excised, who are consistently left out of the narrative? And so not only me channeling my grandmothers' voices, but like, other folks, grandmas, or other people's cousins, or my cousin or, you know, anybody. Like, what makes us, what makes us suitable narrators of the thing that we call history?

SM

We can't all be in history, right?

AC

Yeah, I guess that we can't. But like, the thin slice that we get that is called the official narrative seems to be far too limiting to describe the magnitude of the lives that are lived and lost during our lifetimes.

SM

Do you appreciate the worries that people have about, "No, no stop trying to change the histories as we've always told them. Modify them somewhat, but going radically in the other direction is damaging."

AC

I think that the folks who believe that it's damaging to have a radical revisitation of the ways that we tell and we write histories are the people who feel as though they have the most to lose. And I think what they feel that they have to lose is narrative control. And that narrative control has a lot to do with the power that is bestowed upon the folks who get to say, this thing that happened matters, and these things that happen don't. And when they get to decide who and what matters, then they also get to decide resources, they get to decide who the winners are, they get to decide who the losers are. And maybe most importantly, they get to decide who the heroes are and they get to decide who the villains are. And I think that some of those people maybe fear that if a more comprehensive history is told, that they might be narrated as villains when they see themselves as heroic.

SM

So you're saying history is not just history, but its history, and. We're constantly adding to our understanding and revising, and it's dead if we don't do that.

AC

That's absolutely correct. And this is the reason that I wrote the song 'Ampersand' and the remix of that song 'and per se and' that has mickey factz on it is on this album. So I'll play a piece of that.

MUSIC

Yes, yes. I be knowing that folks be not understanding the moves I make when I make em / but be making them still / rules I be breaking be arbitrary / And art's necessary to document how I live / and how I lived it / Then what you're about to hear / is better than the peer review / Peering through to the process / a living document of how I got this / from where it was to where it is / delivered to your speakers consistent with the thesis / The remix / A lot of people feel I don't exist / I'm not inside the public eye so they go and dis / but my fingerprint is left on the head of a chauvinist / cause my impact is felt via vocalist / and the socialists posing as a cloned example / But the beat feels different once you know the sample / I'm instrumental producing thoughts on an open panel / Furious / These are the things I'm not supposed to grapple.

AC

The ampersand, if you don't know the history of it, the word comes from (INDAUDIBLE). And that is a word that comes from people mispronouncing a thing over and over. And so at the end of the alphabet, it would go x y, z, and per se and. And it would be the symbol that means "and," and because it was always said in the same way that you can imagine LMNOP for a child sounding like one word, "ampersand" became one word. And now, you know, it's a smushed word. But I think conceptually, if we think about history as these things that we are adding consistently, that we're revising consistently, rather than this idea that it's a radical departure, it's a radical change, it's just saying "and." And so I wanted to add mickey factz to the song and then add a modified beat and then explore that concept a little bit more, more in depth than I did on the previous version of it, that's on the album that came out before this one.

SM

A.D. Carson, this has been a treat. Thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

AC

Thank you so much for having me. I really do appreciate it.

MUSIC

Ammunition handle a business (INADUDIBLE) / strategize and look out for watching eyes / That occupy the lane I'm in / and know that even if I signal / that only change what I see in the rearview.

SM

A.D. Carson is the Professor of Hip Hop and the Global South that the University of Virginia. His newest album is 'Talking to Ghosts.' This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

MUSIC

I've had less and have made better with the stress / when your friends left to be ancestors...

SM

Welcome back to With Good Reason at Virginia Humanities. In recent years, much has been done to reroute genres like blues, jazz, reggaeton and Calypso, and African musical traditions. And yet, we know very little about what the music of early enslaved Africans actually sounded like during their own times. Mary Caton Lingold is an English professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her forthcoming book aims to account for the music of Atlantic Africans, and trumpet the legacy of performers whose names have been largely forgotten, but whose sounds still echo.

ML

I'd always been a country music fan, and I had grown up studying classical music, and I started playing the bluegrass fiddle and became part of the music community out in the Mountain West. And as I was taking up the instrument and learning to play, I realized that so much of the repertoire and the songs were based on the blues, based on gospel music. Not only that, of course, the iconic instrument of bluegrass music is the banjo. Engineered by enslaved people and principled on many traditional African instruments that spread around the world because of slavery.

So I started to think about how the music that I loved and was playing had this story that was a part of it. The story of slavery, the story of Black musician's creativity, and yet you know, also the story of how it had become whitewashed. And led me to wonder about musical life under slavery, and exactly how enslaved captives brought these traditions to the New World and managed – how did they manage to establish musical traditions while facing enslavement? We sort of know that happened. We see the evidence, we've got all these genres, reggae, kompa, reggaeton, jazz, blues, we can hear these legacies. But how can we begin to really understand the particularities of that history?

SM

And so much of this, you're right, developed in the Caribbean. That's where the American slave societies learned how to do things and where Black American culture actually is rooted.

ML

That's exactly right. You know, I live in Virginia. And we tend to think of Virginia as this important founding colony. But really, it

was in the Caribbean where the wealth and the economy that fueled the founding of the Americas happened. And it was on the backs of enslaved people. And that's where plantation cultures and practices took root, and where enslaved people began to develop these traditions. And there was incredible circulations between plantation societies. So even though I'm from Texas, if I want to understand that, that world that I grew up in, you really have to look to the Caribbean.

SM

A big part of your research was trying to find long ago performances by African Atlantic musicians. Who were the musicians, and where were they from? And when were these performances?

ML

In my research, I really focused on enslaved musicians who were survivors of the Middle Passage, who came from Africa, because these are, you know, really the founding generation of Black American life. Really, surprisingly, I've been able to uncover, pull a few threads and really gain some insights into people's lives, including an enslaved man named Macaw, who lived in Barbados in the 1640s. He was probably from an area of what is now Nigeria, and he was known as the chief musician on the plantation where he was enslaved.

SM

How did you come to know about this musician named Macaw.

ML

So there was an Englishman named Richard Ligon, and he went to settle in Barbados. When he traveled there, he brought his theorbo with him. That is a huge Italian lute with multiple strings. So he was a really committed musician, and he was very attuned to what he heard. And one day, Ligon was sitting, playing his theorbo and Macaw had some status on the plantation. And so he approached Ligon, then took the theorbo and worked his hands up and down the neck, trying out the sounds. And then a few days later, Ligon describes passing by Macaw around the plantain grove, and he was there building an instrument of his own which is clearly a type of xylophone. Xylophones were, and still are a really prominent instrument across many African traditions.

So Ligon sees Macaw sitting down, building this instrument, and then Ligon takes the mallet from Macaw, and tries out sounding notes across the keys that he's constructed. And of course, Ligon has a kind of paternalistic tone and a patronizing take on this, because he actually criticizes Macaw and says, "well, your your scale is missing notes." Because of course, his ears were, were tuned to want to expect a European scale on an instrument. And that's not how xylophones are tuned in West Africa. So it's a wonderful kind of emblematic encounter that shows not only the kind of richness of the musical exchanges between these authors and enslaved people, but also the impasse, the kind of lost in translation nature of these encounters and what's

missing.

SM

You've also studied what may be the earliest notation record of African music. How early was this, and where?

ML

So this is just about 40 years later in Jamaica in the 1680s. The source comes from a narrative written by Sir Hans Sloane. He traveled to Jamaica in the 1680s as the personal physician to the new governor of the island. And later, like many of these other authors, he wrote up what he saw and heard. And so he asked a man named Mr. Baptiste, whom he describes as, quote "The best musician there," if he would write down you know, some of the music that he heard.

SM

And this was a person of African descent?

ML

This Mr. Baptiste had long been assumed to be a French traveler. But what we know about music and the life of free people of color, and enslaved people in the region at the time, is it's really far more likely that he was a person of color. So with this hunch, I went to the archives in Jamaica, and indeed, I did uncover records that suggest he was probably of African descent. We came to believe this because it portrays three distinct African traditions under the titles that are headed Angola, Papa, and Coromantee. And so whoever heard and transcribed this music knew enough about these distinct African genres to distinguish them, and to take care in distinguishing them. So one is titled Angola. And I'll let you hear a bit of that one now.

MUSIC

(FEMALE VOCAL MUSIC PLAYS)

ML

It's an incredible piece of music. And after creating these recordings on a website with composer Dave Garner and historian Laurent Dubois, the chorale at the University of West Indies, in Jamaica, actually performed this in their concert. Which I'm so pleased that they were able to do that.

SM

And what do you hear in the song from the 1680s that you think is still influential today, that has reverberations?

ML

Above all, I believe, call and response. Which is a key, iconic characteristic of African and African diasporic music. You hear the vocal line, and then the instrument responding. And they have a kind of conversation between each other. Many African genres are so

participatory, so that listening to this music would mean ululating, or clapping. We don't get that written down in the transcription. But I hear in the instrument responding to the voice, that pattern: "ba ba, ba, ba, ba, da dum." It's very rhythmic. I mean, it reminds me of a drum pattern. "Bop, bop, bop, bop ba." You know, it's, to me when I first started studying this piece, I thought, maybe that's actually a kind of notated, you know, created into an instrumental melody, but maybe it's actually a rhythmic pattern.

SM

Is there another one you also want to share with us that illustrates another aspect of the music from this period?

ML

Yeah, I'd like to play a couple of the pieces from the songs that are described as Coromantee. Coromantee refers to the Akan peoples of modern Ghana. And one thing that's really interesting about the Coromantee pieces that Baptiste described, is it's not just one song, it's three different songs. And so it's interesting to hear how different they sound from one another, even within what is ostensibly a shared tradition, at least as Mr. Baptiste is interpreting it. So I'll play just a few excerpts of two of these so you can hear how different they sound from one another.

MUSIC

(STRINGED INSTRUMENT MUSIC PLAYS)

ML

Don't know what you heard when you listen to that, but to me, this piece reminds me a bit of European lute music. It's interesting how our ears are trained to hear certain things as sounding European, or sounding African. But of course, there was tremendous exchange between Europeans and Africans, even in the eras before the rise of the slave trade. So I like how this piece invites us to think about some of the similarities between instrumental traditions in West Africa and in Europe. But here's another piece under the same title of Coromantee that Mr. Baptists transcribed.

MUSIC

(STRINGED INSTRUMENT MUSIC PLAYS)

ML

So one of the things that I hear when I listen to that piece is the incredible technical proficiency that would have been required to play that really rapidly descending pattern. In the... and it's being played on a fretless banjo. So that pattern "da da da da da dum" that is not easy to play on an instrument without frets. And so it speaks to the expertise that many enslaved musicians had, and also the technical quality of the instruments that they constructed.

SM

It's exciting that as you say, this is such important music. Because these African musicians and their descendants revolutionized global music. And these bits that are written down by travelers in the 1600s are the earliest bits we have records of. It's kind of like the Jim Webb telescope peering into the birth of a distant star, right?

ML

Yeah, it really is. And it's so moving to me to be able... one of the things that I really enjoy about sharing these pieces through performance, and especially sharing them with other musicians and inviting them to perform them, is it revivifies that legacy. You know, letting it live again in sound. And I feel that it can be a real act of memorialization to their legacy and an opportunity to reflect on the tremendous gift that these artists gave us, and gave their descendants, and gave the world through these historic sounds.

SM

That was Mary Caton Lingold. She's a Professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her forthcoming book is tentatively titled 'Sound Legacy: Music and Slavery in the African Atlantic World. You can listen to the Baptiste recordings at [musical passage dot org](http://musicalpassage.org).

SM

Africans and their descendants once made up a big part of the early colonial Mexican population. But the musical canon from this period is so white. Sarah Finley is a Spanish Professor at Christopher Newport University. She's uncovering records of African singers and musicians in early colonial Mexican music, to see how Afro-Mexicans influence the sounds of that time, and of today. I read that there was not a legal designation for Black in Mexico, until just this decade. Could that be?

SF

That is true. What happened in the colonial period is, is that in Mexico, you have a system that's called the Casta System. And in the Casta System, the society was very racially stratified. And so they divided people based on their race. But it was much more complex than what we think of, particularly in the United States, we think Black or white. But what happened was, is they divided people based on your lineage. And so if you had, for example, a Spanish mother and an indigenous father, then you are what's known as a mestizo. And there were people from all over in early Mexico. There were people from Africa, there were people from Spain. There were people who were born in the Americas, and there was also a connection with the Philippines. And so there were people from East Asia that lived in that space as well. It was a very racially diverse space.

SM

Do you think that that lack of recognition of African influence in

Mexico sort of shows itself in scholarly understanding of what you're looking into: music from that period?

SF

Exactly. We often as historians, as musicologist, as people looking at earlier periods, we depend really heavily on what's been written down. And a lot of what's been written down in Mexico exists in the churches, and particularly in the huge cathedrals. And they're beautiful, but they're huge cathedrals in the city centers. And those are where we have the most documentation. These were spaces with a lot of power. And so often the musicians, the people making music in these spaces, were of European descent. We don't have a lot of records of people of African descent or indigenous people making music in these spaces, at least in the city centers. And the truth is, is that even if they were white spaces on paper, they weren't white spaces in practice.

The slaves for example, there were millions of decrees saying that the slaves needed to not work on Sundays, because they needed to go to church. They would have, everyone would have been expected to go to church. There were huge religious festivals in the city streets. Everyone would have participated in these festivals. And so what I'm interested in looking at is looking within the cathedral, but also moving beyond it to show that yes, indeed, there were Africans making music all over Mexico City, and all over other large urban spaces in early Mexico or New Spain.

SM

And what are you finding?

SF

What I'm finding is really interesting, because when I started this project I probably started the way that most people would start it, which is looking for sounds that I imagined as African. Lots of drums or lots of rhythm. What I'm finding are people making sound, and people making music, and doing it in ways that seem to be extremely European. And one of the reasons that they're doing this is because they're negotiating spaces that would have otherwise excluded them to enter those spaces. So for example, we have records of castrated singers, castrated enslaved African singers in the cathedrals. There was one in the Puebla cathedral, and there was one in the Mexico City cathedral. These singers were enslaved. They were highly trained. So even though they weren't necessarily making African music in the cathedrals, it's an example of how African people negotiated spaces in Colonial Mexico to be heard.

SM

So give me an example of liturgy, a piece of music that we might have traditionally thought of as exclusively, let's say, European influenced, but ways in which you're discovering there also is this

African influence in there.

SF

So the pieces of music that I'm working on quite a bit are called villancicos. And they're pieces that were written basically for parties that accompany the liturgy. Sometimes they form part of the liturgy, sometimes they did not. We have what are called Villancicos de naciones, or villancicos that feature European and non European voices. Sometimes they're Portuguese, sometimes they're African. Oftentimes, they have a really jovial tone, they make fun of these voices. And in terms of the villancicos that feature African voices, they're called Villancicos de Negros, or Black Villancicos, they're very racist. And so oftentimes we say this is a style that's come from the Peninsula, it has nothing to do with African reality. While that may be true, there are also a lot of sounds in these villancicos. And they can tell us an awful lot about how the European authors who are writing them perceived African sounds.

So for example, you have one by the author, Sojuan Inez de la Cruz, where she talks about how the two individuals singing are sick. And she says they have husky voices. Well, that can tell us something about how the white listener is perceiving the tone of Black voices. And that tells us well, it doesn't necessarily give us insight into actual Black sound, it does tell us that they were there. It tells us that she was listening to them. And it tells us a lot about how they were imagined.

SM

Play a bit from one of these for us. And then let's talk about what we hear in it.

SF

So the piece that I have here is called fancy Franciscia Donde Vamo. It's by a composer named Gaspar Fernandez. It's from Puebla, and it's, it's a Christmas Villancico, which is very appropriate for the season. What's really interesting about this particular piece is that the Black singer is a soprano. Now that was not uncommon. Those pieces were often sung by choir boys because women were not supposed to be singing in the churches. But the fact that there was this particular Black soprano in the Puebla cathedral at the time, there was a Black castrati named Juan de Veran in Puebla at the time. And that singer, I propose, inspired the composer. So in the soprano part, even though we can't necessarily point to something and say "this is African sound," it's a piece that imagines Juan de Veras' presence. In some ways, it's an archival source that says we might not have any music that he wrote down. We don't know what kind of music went on in his home. But we know that he was here, and we know that he was influential on this composer

SM

And what period is this music?

SF

This music is from the early 1600s.

MUSIC

(SPANISH VOCAL MUSIC PLAYS)

SF

This is a part of the villancico, and like I said it's a Christmas villancico. And it's a dialogue between Franciscia, a woman, who is the leader of a band of Afro-descendant people who are going to see the baby Jesus. So we know it was a male castrate singer, a Black male castrate singer, who would have been very prominent amongst a group of white singers who sing in the part of a woman Franciscia, and leading a band of other singers. And these other singers would have been other white singers from the copia, or the Cathedral Choir. So it puts him, in some ways it imagines him in a position of power. It puts him in a very visible and very audible position. And even though we know that the singer Juan de Vera was a slave, it's still important to think about the fact that the villancico, and that his work as a musician, enabled him to be heard.

SM

And of course, years later, it's more well known that Mexican folk music has very strong African-Mexican roots, right?

SF

Yes, very much so. But that's again, something that's really difficult to trace. One of the tricky things in Mexico is that like you mentioned, it's really a country that, in part because of the Mexican Revolution, but for a lot of other reasons, has grown up with this sort of dual identity of Spanish and indigenous. And it's only been recently that Mexicans have started to recognize the importance of their African heritage. And it's very difficult to trace sound in writing. And because of that, it's really hard for us to point to something in contemporary Mexican music and say, "this is African and I know that it is." And so we can start to sort of tease out these connections. And maybe we can't point to something and say "that is African." But we can say the influence is there. This is not a country that's based on two cultural inheritances. It's a country that has at least three if not more.

SM

Sarah Finley, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

SF

Thank you.

SM

Sarah Finley is a Spanish professor at Christopher Newport University. Her forthcoming book is provisionally titled 'Beats: Afrosonic Vibrations from Urban New Spain.'

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