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### **The Soul of a Man**

Torn to shreds but somehow still intact, Blind Willie Johnson's voice defiantly lifts above the bittersweet rambling of his slide guitar. *Dark Was the Night*—a haunting album recorded over sixty years ago—captured Johnson's ragged yet delicate songs before they faded into the dusk. Beneath the crackling veil of the old recording, the listener hears common themes and envisions one image—a lonesome wanderer searching for elusive rest and peace of mind. Johnson's thoughts and feelings rise and fall like tides in a storm; he plunges into the depths of the despair that he feels as a man on the earth, and then seeks refuge in God and in heaven, that lofty sphere beyond sight.

Uncertain of where he stands, Johnson retreats inward to find his moral compass. In the song *Soul of a Man*, he asks, "Won't somebody tell me, answer if you can, won't somebody tell me, just what is the soul of a man?" Doggedly, he persists, "I'm goin' to ask the question, please answer if you can—won't somebody tell me, just what is the soul of a man? I've traveled different countries, I've traveled different forestlands, I found nobody could tell me just what is the soul of a man..."

"Wild sweet melodies" such as these touched W.E.B. Du Bois. At the turn-of-the century, Du Bois was America's most eloquent spokesman for African-Americans. The founder of the NAACP, Du Bois knew how to exact change. Published in 1903, his signature work would then seem to follow the polemical path of writers like Ida Wells Barnett and Frederick Douglass. Certainly, Du Bois aspires to remedy the immediate social ills plaguing his people. Yet in this compilation of essays on society, Du Bois consistently returns to matters that may seem less than

practical. This work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, is indeed deeply philosophical and introspective. Du Bois attempts to answer Blind Willie Johnson's bedeviling question—just what is the soul of a man? As the title so clearly states, Du Bois hopes to define the form of the African-American soul for his white audience.

In particular, the cultural activities that spring forth from the African-American experience fall under Du Bois's reverential limelight. These activities, after all, are the true conduits of the soul. He speaks on behalf of African-American music, and does so with a lyricist's sensitivity. Each chapter begins with poetry by various literary luminaries; underneath these stellar passages, Du Bois places anonymous bars of music from African-American spirituals. In fact, Du Bois devotes the entire fourteenth chapter to *The Sorrow Songs* of African-Americans. He writes, "...the negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas." For Du Bois, these turbulent spirituals express the stuff the human soul is made of. The folk spiritual is unique to the African-American experience even as it holds universal resonance.

Du Bois offered his more literary work as an antidote to the dogmatic writings of Booker T. Washington. Towering over his contemporaries, Washington had won the respect of America in his quest for African-American empowerment. As the spokesman for his people, Washington focused on the economic shortcomings of the freed slave. By rectifying poverty through pragmatic skills, the black man could advance in society in spite of the opposing forces of racism. Here, a vast chasm opens between these most influential men. Washington was the capitalist extraordinaire, a man versed in the fine art of opening wallets. From his capably plain writing style to the text itself, Washington's character permeates every page of his

autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. Ever the self-promoter, Washington tells the classic tale of the American dream, where the impoverished protagonist reins in prosperity through hard work.

While reading Washington's story, one thinks of the future literature that would come from the same theme. In the 1920's, Horatio Alger captivated America with his fictional paeans to American capitalist society. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* rests on the flip side of the coin. This fictional work reigns as the ultimate critique of American capitalism, and all of the corruption and greed that the system entails. By promoting black employment, Washington satiated the desires of an economically motivated society. According to Du Bois, Washington arrived at the scene at a most opportune time, when "the nation was a little ashamed at having bestowed so much sentiment on Negroes, and was concentrating its energies on Dollars." It's a society in keeping with the spirit of Jay Gatsby—the only color that matters is green.

Arguably, Washington's economic obsession became the bane of his doctrine, the metaphoric "blinding green light" that would close Fitzgerald's novel. Like Gatsby, his intentions are noble, but ultimately short-sighted. Du Bois believed that Washington's doctrine inflicted wounds upon the African-American psyche. By limiting the scope of his concern to matters of labor, Washington implicitly excluded the black man from intellectual pursuits. Reading Washington's words as gospel, blacks and whites alike come to believe in an intellectual caste system. Du Bois devotes a chapter of his book to Washington's philosophy and its deleterious effects. In *Of Booker T. Washington and Others*, he respectfully but adamantly puts forth his perspective. He argues that the image of a "lone black boy poring over French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home" would seem to Washington "the acme of absurdities." After this passage, he pointedly asks, "One wonders what Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi would say to this."

History records Socrates as a giant of philosophy, and St. Francis as a pillar of religious thought. Yet as these men show, intellectual prowess has nothing to do with socioeconomic status. These men, in fact, believed that a deeper intellectual and spiritual state could only be attained through poverty. In *Symposium*, Plato notes that Socrates walked the streets barefooted and clothed in dusty rags; St. Francis, meanwhile, renounced worldly wealth. He instead lived the ascetic life, and talked to birds all day long. Tragically, the most prominent African-American leader brushed aside the idea of a black Socrates or St. Francis.

Only an educated reader would react to this rhetorical barb, for Du Bois does not elaborate upon the relationship of two great names to an impoverished black child. This rhetorical device eloquently and reflexively proves its point—an education can be the key to understanding. This case is but a microcosm; it takes no great leap to see how higher education can contribute to understanding life and one's context in the world. An education in the humanities, though impractical in the short term, would have lasting benefits. Du Bois saw a country that debased and mocked the African-American, which had relegated an entire race to the status of a permanent underclass in both economic and intellectual terms. If opportunities for an education existed, the assumption was that a young African-American could only thrive in areas like bricklaying—such was the typical course at Washington's Tuskegee Institute. Du Bois detects a subtle cynicism snaking through Washington's credo.

Who, then, could rise and assume the voice of the darker-skinned race? Du Bois, for one, hoped to set an example. He writes, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling women and men glide in gilded halls." If Washington filtered his world through a lens tinted in green, then Du Bois envisioned the world with an artist's eye—his landscape is more varied in colors and possibilities. Nietzsche

once remarked, “It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the world and existence can be eternally justified.” After Harvard, Du Bois studied at the University of Berlin; perhaps the young scholar read Nietzschean philosophy. Without a doubt, Nietzsche’s comment ranks as the ultimate rallying cry for the humanities. Art, music, and literature are the most appropriate means to examine aesthetic phenomena, for a visual experience is not something that’s readily quantifiable. Nietzsche’s concern is Du Bois’s. In *The Sorrow Songs*, Du Bois laments, “So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of “swift” and “slow” in human doing, and the limits of human perfectibility, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science.” Ultimately, cultures are judged by their artistic activities. These activities define the experience of a people.

Like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Du Bois uses his established medium to give an enduring voice to African-American oral traditions. By writing his book, Du Bois not only promotes himself, he promotes the artistic heritage of his people. In *The Sorrow Songs*, the artistic philosopher celebrates the country spirituals heard by him in his youth. After establishing a pattern in his epigraphs—that of contrasting renowned poetry with the abstract, silent bars of black spirituals— Du Bois finally lets the words of the African-American spiritual open the chapter. The reader has a poetic expectation while approaching the passage, “I walk through the churchyard/ To lay this body down;/ I know moon-rise, I know star-rise...I’ll lie in the grave to stretch out my arms...And my soul and thy soul shall meet the day,/ When I lay this body down.”

Already, Du Bois entrenches the African-American spiritual in a venerated place. Writing in an age before recorded music, Du Bois’s chapter is structured loosely like a compilation album with liner notes. He is thus the ancestor of Alan Lomax, who some forty years later, would record Southern folk singers in an attempt to preserve that underappreciated tradition. Du

Bois's task, then, is grand. Not only must he represent a deep tradition in but a few pages, he must evoke the essential quality of the music. Because his audience cannot hear the actual music, Du Bois plays the role of the powerful intermediary.

By way of their undiluted emotional power, the songs attain a universal empathy. In one of the opening poetic epigraphs, the English poet Arthur Symons writes, "Unresting water, there shall never be rest/ Till the last moon drop and the last tide fail,/ And the fire of the end begins to burn in the west;/ And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea..." As Du Bois observes, many African-American spirituals evoke to the same imagery. He claims, "Like all primitive folk, the slave stood near to Nature's heart. Life was a 'rough and rolling sea'...the Wilderness was the home of God, and the lonesome valley led the way to life...The sudden wild thunderstorms of the South awed and impressed the Negroes— at times to them "mournful," at times imperious."

Blind Willie Johnson's *God Moves on the Water*, from *Dark Was the Night*, resurrects the spiritual's unique take on natural imagery. Inspired by the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, the song details humanity's futility in the face of nature, which in turn incarnates an omnipotent God. These images are at once naturalistic and visionary, like a great painting by Van Gogh.

Just as in a Van Gogh, much of the appeal of the African-American folk spiritual lies in the human story behind the work. People are moved and fascinated by that special dichotomy: the misery of his life and the beauty of his art. Famously portrayed as a "Stranger on the earth," Van Gogh would have sympathized with the plight of the destitute African-American folk singer. Indeed, many songs detail themes of loneliness and exile—it's not hard to see how these songs gave birth to the blues. While longing for supernatural salvation, these songs admit earthly

desolation. Of one song, Du Bois writes, “the soul-hunger is there, the restlessness of the savage; the wail of the wanderer...”

Return to Blind Willie Johnson. In the song *Everybody Ought to Treat A Stranger Right*, Johnson repeats the eponymous phrase “Everybody ought to treat a stranger right, a long way from home” insistently throughout the entire song. With a brutally gruff voice, Johnson teaches an oft-neglected Christian moral. Johnson’s stranger embodies so many other southern African-American folk musicians. Many were blind, and many more led the vagabond life, playing in circuses and on street corners. In *The Sorrow Songs*, Du Bois also expands into a polyphonic voice. He lists singers, some known, and others anonymous. Through these descriptions, he pays homage to a neglected art form, and the reader comes in contact with the experience of an entire people.

The chapter entitled *The Sorrow Songs*, from *The Souls of Black Folk*, furthers Du Bois’s larger aims. He hopes to show that there is more than one path to freedom. A verified artistic legacy gives a people a tradition and a hope to rise above immediate suffering. Du Bois thus delves deep into introspection, so that he might find just what it means to be an African-American. No one person can answer Blind Willie’s question, “just what is the soul of a man?” Not even Du Bois, though he has a wish regarding the matter: “Sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.” As expressed in sorrowful songs, the African-American soul is something unique and beautiful, and well worth celebrating. In the cry of the folk spiritual, one hears art in its truest form.