

## Let's Boogie Woogie in Museums! Episode 2: Enslaved People – Personal Stories

**[Music & Title...]** BOOGIE-WOOGIE IN MUSEUMS. MUSEUM BOOGIE-WOOGIE.

Hosts – ALL: Have you ever been racist?  
The way they behave, it's not right.  
Boogie-woogie in museums.  
A sound and transatlantic journey.  
Against racism. Against racism. Against racism.

Background Voices: I tell you; we must understand the fact that what we today call the transatlantic slave trade profoundly changed the world. The consequences are political, economic, cultural, and social, and still mark our lives today: our way of seeing the world, hearing the world, the way we relate to each other, the way we relate to ourselves. Aimé Césaire said, "It's not by the head that civilizations rot, it's first by the heart."

In this second episode, we will talk about plantations and Work Songs.

Hosts -- Intro: You're listening to Boogie Woogie in Museums podcast.  
I'm Ibrahim. I'm Marine. I'm Sofienne. I'm I'm Jade. I'm Havrunnisa. I'm Sofia.

### **[Humming & work sounds in the background...]**

Hosts: Isn't that the Blues? Or work song?

Student: No Jade, the work song...there's no instrument. it's just singing because the slaves would sing while they worked.

White gold. White gold is sugar. It's precious. And the more you have, the more you want. People love it. And it makes money. In the 17th century, France set up sugarcane plantations in its new colonies. The climate is harsh. The work is hard.

The solution: slaves. More and more slaves were needed. And that's how, over the course of three centuries, millions of people were enslaved on plantations, also known as habitations, in the French colonies.

Philippe Chauveaut-Vindrinet ( PCV):

In 1790, a census showed – and this is not an estimate but a census – that 455,000 slaves were present in the French part of Saint-Domingue, which is now the Republic of Haiti. There were about as many as in North America, but in a very limited, insular space, and knowing that this population more than doubled in 25 years. With a French monarchy that even when nobilized, sometimes had cases like a Bordeaux slave trader who is ennobled for his zeal in the trade.

Students Reciting Work Song:

*The master is in the big house, counting his money.  
Oh, shuck this corn and throw it in the barn.  
The mistress is in the living room eating bread and honey.  
Oh, shuck that corn and throw it in the barn.*

## Let's Boogie Woogie in Museums! Episode 2: Enslaved People – Personal Stories

*The sheep shucks the corn, shaking its horns.  
Oh, shuck that corn and throw it in the barn.  
The whippoorwill sends it to the mill.  
Oh, shuck that corn and throw it in the barn.*

Host: Work, travail, Song, chant. Work song.

In the fields, but also on farms, loading docks or boats. The song that comes out of the gut helps make time less unbearable. The song that adapts to the rhythm of the work. Energetic work, energetic music... the energy of survival at all costs. Work Songs can be seen as seeds. Seeds that will germinate to reveal the first roots of Afro-American music.

Roger Somé: At the very beginning, Creole must have been, in any case, the expression of different African languages, because these captives obviously came from different regions of Africa. And so, gradually, from these different African languages, a language was born. This new language also incorporated words from European languages. And they pronounced it in their own way, creating a mixture that enabled them to communicate, to speak and to also speak without being understood by the master. It was a language of liberation, a language of liberation, a language of combat.

And so, it was necessary to communicate without the master knowing what was being said. From this work and from this language that music also appeared, but in the beginning, what was it? In the beginning, it was songs, songs in the cocoa fields, songs in the sugarcane fields, songs in the cotton fields, and these songs were also songs of resistance.

When you're an Africanist ethnologist and you do your work in Africa, or when you grow up in Africa too, well, you hear women who, when they're crushing millet on the dormant millstone, they sing. They sing. And these women who sing as they crush the millet, well, sometimes you see them in tears, sobbing with emotion. They find emotion in singing. Generally speaking, these songs are about their past. A past that can be glorious, but also a past that can be hard, which they remember. Well, these songs that were sung in the cotton fields by the slaves also had this dimension.

### **[MUSIC, Humming....]**

Host: At the Musée d'Aquitaine in Bordeaux, you can see a model of a plantation.

Student: We see fields, little houses and big houses, trees, people and animals. To me, it's organized.

PCV: Yes, it's organized. You can see very clearly that everything is well separated. Here, for example, is the slave village, and all around this property lived 200 slaves.

### **[Humming in the background...]**

## Let's Boogie Woogie in Museums! Episode 2: Enslaved People – Personal Stories

Host: A slave's day could last up to 14 hours, or even longer on full moon days. And in the evening, after a hard day's work, people continue to sing and accompany themselves with instruments. They either make their instruments from what they find on the plantation, or the masters give them some.

Students: -Why did they give them instruments?  
-Because they can entertain their masters.  
-And so, when they accompany themselves with instruments, it's blues?  
-Yeah, I think so.

### *[Organ/Gospel Music...]*

Host: Slave marriages had no value. The pastors had changed the sacramental vows to, "...until death or distance do you part..." And you know that enslaved people are catechized, forced to go to church.

In 1648, a law required heads of household to catechize their children and servants once a week. This would be the birth of gospel, the music of black churches.

Food was rationed, and accidents happened all the time. Sometimes we're lucky enough to have a home. But often, they sleep where we can. Despite the conditions, these men and women try to safeguard their families by creating a culture of their own. Under unbearable conditions, they never stop resisting and aspiring to freedom.

PCV In fact, a slave is expensive, and it can cost even more, sometimes twice, three times, four times the price, being a man, being a woman. Age, of course, a child, a girl, a boy, a skilled worker. When a slave has been trained, he then costs more, because his training was expensive.

Students: If they bought slaves at high prices, why did they mistreat them?  
They saw them as objects, as if they didn't deserve to be treated humanely.

Since they are bought, a master can do whatever he wants with them. That they're able to spend so much does not stop them from mistreating their slaves.

Host: On a plantation, after 3 or 4 years, a slave was considered profitable, i.e.: the purchase had been recouped, and so anything beyond that was making a profit. On archaeological sites in the West Indies, skeletons have been found of people who died at 18, 20, but their bodies are as worn elderly people - worn out by work and violence.

PCV: We can see that life expectancy is not the same everywhere. On some plantations, the average is 5, 6 or 7 years. Elsewhere, it can be 8 or 10 years. So, to answer your question, yes, and they were expensive. The aim, however, while maintaining iron discipline, was to keep the workers on the plantation long enough to make a profit.

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- Host: Women, in addition to working in the fields or in the home, also suffer sexual violence. The masters have all rights over these women and also own the children born to them. Compared to their numbers, there are few testimonies of enslaved people - a few hundred in the United States; few if any in France. Except for trial transcripts, in which someone wrote down the words of the enslaved person.
- Laurent Védrine: The best-known testimony, in fact, is that of Solomon Northup. Why is that? Because, in fact, it's the subject of a book he wrote in 1855, which was later made into a film called "12 Years a Slave":
- "How foolish are those who flatter themselves to think that the ignorant and degraded slave is unaware of the extent of the wrongs done to him. Let them be fooled, those who imagine that when he gets up, after having been on his knees, his back lacerated and bleeding, he has in him only feelings of submission and forgiveness. Perhaps he will come. He will come if his prayers are heard on the terrible day when the slave will take his revenge and the master in turn will howl in vain for mercy." Solomon Northup*
- Host: Can music be considered a testimony? Even today, we too often rely on the testimony of white people, who were predominantly racist and slaveholders. How can we understand this history and reflect on it through their testimonies?
- LV: When you visit the museum, there's very little... I'd say everything comes from the side of the people who owned slaves, or who benefited from the fruits of the colonial trade, and we have very few real objects or documents from the people who were enslaved. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, the people who were enslaved were, for the most part, in a state of extreme poverty. Secondly, museums in general tend to be made up of a white bourgeoisie, who tend to have a vision of having beautiful collections, beautiful objects, sometimes a little exotic, so all this means that we end up in situations where the enslaved people are genuinely invisible.
- What can be done about this, inside and outside the museum?
- The question you ask is a very interesting one. Do we have direct testimonies from people who were enslaved? In the French context, we have them indirectly, through court records in particular. In the American context, we may have direct testimony. So that's one way of trying to be a little more representative. Then, there are other elements that can be useful or other sources that can be useful, in particular archaeology, a source of information that is rarely used to talk about the history of slavery. You have examples of excavations that have taken place in the cemeteries of slaves, particularly in Guadeloupe. These show the graves of people who had been enslaved, with a few objects from daily life. There are also some rare digs, I believe, of plantations.
- Host: In general, remember that most of the story is told from the point of view of the powerful.

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### *[Outro music plays...]*

ALL: Why does racism exist? Just because I'm black, I've been hated all year.

Host/s: In the next episode, we'll talk about struggle and abolition.

That was episode 2 of Museum Boogie Woogie.

With students from Collège Solignac in Strasbourg.

With students from Collège Édouard Vaillant in Bordeaux.

And Laurent Védrine, Roger Somé, Philippe Chauveau-Vindrinet

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