

Boola by Duke Ellington (Extracted from H. Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America* and Maurice Peress, *Dvorak to Duke Ellington*)

BLACK

A message is shot through the jungle by drums.
Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!
Like a tom-tom in steady precision
Like the slapping of bare feet across the desert
wastes.
Like hunger pains...

Out of this deep dream of freedom
Evolved the only possible escape
Freedom of expression in song.
Out of this great need for freedom
The work song was born.
Not a song of triumph. Not a song
Of burden. A song punctuated
By the grunt of a heaving pick
Or axe. A song punctuated by the swish
And thud of the sledgehammer.

In the kingdom of Songhay
There flourished a system of agriculture, law,
Literature, music, natural sciences, medicine,
And a schooling system too. As early as the
Eleventh century you were weaving cotton...
In the Sudan!

1700

Boola put down his heavy load and gazed about.
He'd been looking at this tree-swept land
Reclaimed by steady swinging of his ringing axe,
And was proud of what he saw there. Had not this toil
Restored those steel-y muscles rippling
'Neath the black satin smoothness of his skin?
Had not the sun erased the mark of cruel, cold hate
That etched his face the night they brought him
To this strange and friendless place?
...WORK! WORK! WORK! WORK!
But to work was to grow strong, and he knew
Weak men could not survive this test
Of worthiness to be free.

Boola sang while he worked...

Boola danced away from a boot in the britches...
A song eased his master's conscience...
Boola reasoned: "I'll sing...
And hide my thoughts from him..."
A silent slave was a brooding slave...
A brooding slave was a dangerous slave...
 Too many masters found dead
 Or not at all...
So! SING, you black bastards...SING!...
A song eased the lash. The whip fell
Less frequently across his weary back.
Boola sang. His master smiled. His slaves
Were happy. He complimented himself on
His great philanthropy.

Boola was irresistibly drawn
To that pretty white house with the steeple.

Come Sunday. With all the whites inside
The church, their less fortunate brothers
Emerged from everywhere to congregate
Beneath a tree. Huddled there, they passed
The Word of God around in whispers...
 When the whites inside lifted voices
 In joyous song...
The blacks outside would hum along
Adding their own touches...weaving melodic,
Harmonic, rhythmic patterns.
Thus the spiritual was born.
Highly emotional worshipping of God
In SONG.

He had done a Human Being some good
He was Eligible to Wash-Comb His Hair-Put on a tie+
Come Sunday Go to Church+
Pray, Pray to the good God Who Had given him the Strength
That he was putting to such an Evil Cause.

(The Reading of the Bible Was the Beginning of the Negro's Education
The more educated he became the more unbearable His Slavery-
Good Souls Praying + Singing
Faithfully without a Word of Bitterness or Revenge-
I forgive the Past Suffering,
Just let My People Go.)

Thrilling, puzzling, strange it was...

They spoke of love of all mankind...
What then was this? Did they not hear:
“A false balance is an abomination to the Lord;
But a just weight is his delight.”...
“When pride cometh, then cometh shame;
But with the lowly is wisdom.”...
“The integrity of the upright shall guide them;
But the perverseness of transgressors
Shall destroy them.”...
The master carried his fear with him...
Clutched to his bosom, into the heaven of love.
Boola sang his way into the gallery of the church
He could sing...yes...
But he couldn't sit with the worshippers
Of the Christ who said: “Peace on earth,
Good will toward men.” Boola sat upstairs,
The “Crow's Nest”! Did they not realize
He was above them—closer to that Heaven
They were shouting about?

Poor master. Why must he crush his soul
With fear? Why must he live a lie
Of inequality? Why must he force his lie
On others? Why must he pick clean the bones
Of the silver-throated thrush
The golden lark
And leave to crow to rasp alone?

[Note; Feb 9, 2014. The following section is quoted in Peress. I am not certain of its placement other than a reference that BLACK “closes with a joyous release” p 183]

“Light”

Oh, well, here's something new...Let's sing About this. Our work
Lightens...our song
But the spiritual slips in and out as we see
And learn new things. Boola worked.
And dwelt in song...

The slave song broadened, covering all things
Sometimes soft...sometimes loud. A rainbow
Of color, complete with a pot of gold. Paradise
To come. On their way to heaven in tempo.
The pulse, the beat was ever present.
Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

BROWN

Gone from the pages of history
Names of black men who made us free.

Boola's black brothers from across the sea
Had come to fight for his liberty!

Surely, now he'd get his due...
The war was won...
Where was his liberty?

"All men are created equal..." A noble document...
But to Boola it was sheer hypocrisy...
A mockery of men's souls.
Four million blacks wanted to be free!

Pursued by blood-thirsty men and beasts...
Hunted...
Tracked down like wild animals...
Still fighting
Tho' the battle had been won!

Out of this welter of broken bodies
And shattered dreams... Arose mighty men
Of action! Nat Turner... Denmark Vesey...
The Gabriels... The Catos... The Toms!
The greatest of them all
A black woman... HARRIET TUBMAN!

Boola jumped for joy
(freedom) shrouded
Now in uncertainty and insecurity.

They had earned the right to finish out
Their sorry lives unworried and at ease...
What now? "You must go... You're trespassing here."
"Get up and go!"... But where?
..Nobody knows but Jesus...
 "They set us free... but left us alone
 To starve... to freeze... to die."

Elation, frustration, joy, sorrow
Got all mixed up in the hearts of these black souls
Set free.

And marching home a hero came
Who learned to play the white man's game
Was to suffer the loss as well as the gain,
And the joy of the victor was turned to pain.

The Blues

The Blues...

The Blues don't...

The Blues don't know...

The Blues don't know nobody as a friend

Ain't been nowhere where they're welcome

Back again...

Sighing...crying

Feel just like dying

The Blues is a one-way ticket from your love to nowhere

The Blues ain't nothin' but a black crepe veil

Ready-to-wear.

BEIGE

Harlem! For all her moral lurches

Has always had

LESS cabarets than churches!

Who draped those basement dens

With silk, but knaves and robbers

And their ilk?

Who came to prostitute your art

And gave you pennies

For you part...

An ill-repute.

Who took your hunger

And your pain

Outraged your honor

For their gain?

Who put the spotlight

On your soul.

And left you rotting

In the hole.

These strangers dug!

Who brought the dope

And made a rope

Of it, to hang you

In your misery...
And Harlem...
How'd you come to be
Permitted
In a land that's free?

And so, your song has stirred the souls
Of men in strange and distant places
The picture drawn by many hands
For many eyes of many races.
But did it ever speak to them
Of what you really are?

Did it say to them
"The joy I'm giving,
Is the foil I use to lose my blues
And make myself an honest living?"
How could they ever fail to hear
The hurt and pain and anguish
Of those who travel dark, lone ways
The soul in them to languish?

And was the picture true
Of you? The camera eye in focus...
Or was it all a sorry bit
Of ofay hocus-pocus
How then, this picture
They have drawn?

It can't be true
That all you do...
Is dance and sing
And moan!

Seek not for honot
Not for gain
But rather for the joy of doing...
For credit is an empty thing
Unless accomplishment's derived
From a burning, aching need for giving.

Once more you've heard your country's call.
Patient...wond'ring...you give your all...
Altho' the livid "why" evolves within
Your brain
You know that right or wrong...your homeland
Will remain.

(Note: This is included in Peress)

Harlem! Black Metropolis!
Land of mirth!
Your music has flung
The story of "Hot Harlem"
To the four corners
Of the earth!

But did it (Harlem's music) ever speak to them?
Of what you really are?
Did it say to them...
"The joy I'm giving
Is the foil I use to lose my blues
And make myself an honest living!"
Did it speak to them
That all your striving
To make your rightful place with men
Was more than jazz and jiving!
How could they fail to hear
The hurt and pain and anguish
Of those who travel dark, lone ways
The soul in them to languish...

Yes Harlem!
Land of valiant youth,
You've wiped the make-up from your face,
And shed you borrowed spangles,
You've donned the uniform of truth,
And hid the hurt that dangles
In heart and mind. And one by one
You've set your shoulders straight
To meet each challenge and to wait
Till justice unto you is done.

Once more, you've hear your country call,
Patient, willing to give your all.
Once more, the word is sent to you
[sung from here on]
And the black, the brown, the beige
Is ready for the chance to wage
The fight for right 'neath the red, white, and blue!

