

Fiddling With Freedom: Solomon Northup's Musical Trade in 12 Years a Slave

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Blog post published December 16, 2013 in *Sounding Out!*

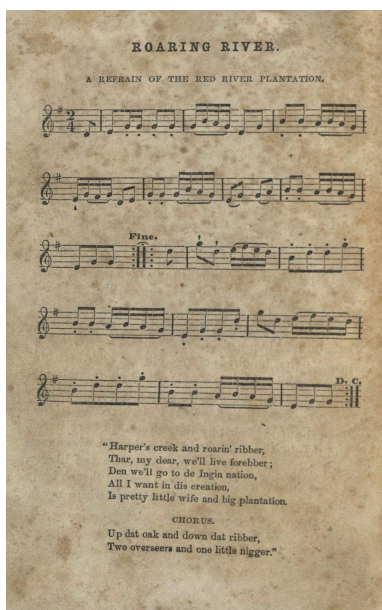
<https://doi.org/10.59350/htgmw-w3q23>

Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, American Studies, Archival, Article, Black Studies



Recommended citation

Lingold, M. C. (2013, December 16). Fiddling With Freedom: Solomon Northup's Musical Trade in 12 Years a Slave. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/htgmw-w3q23>

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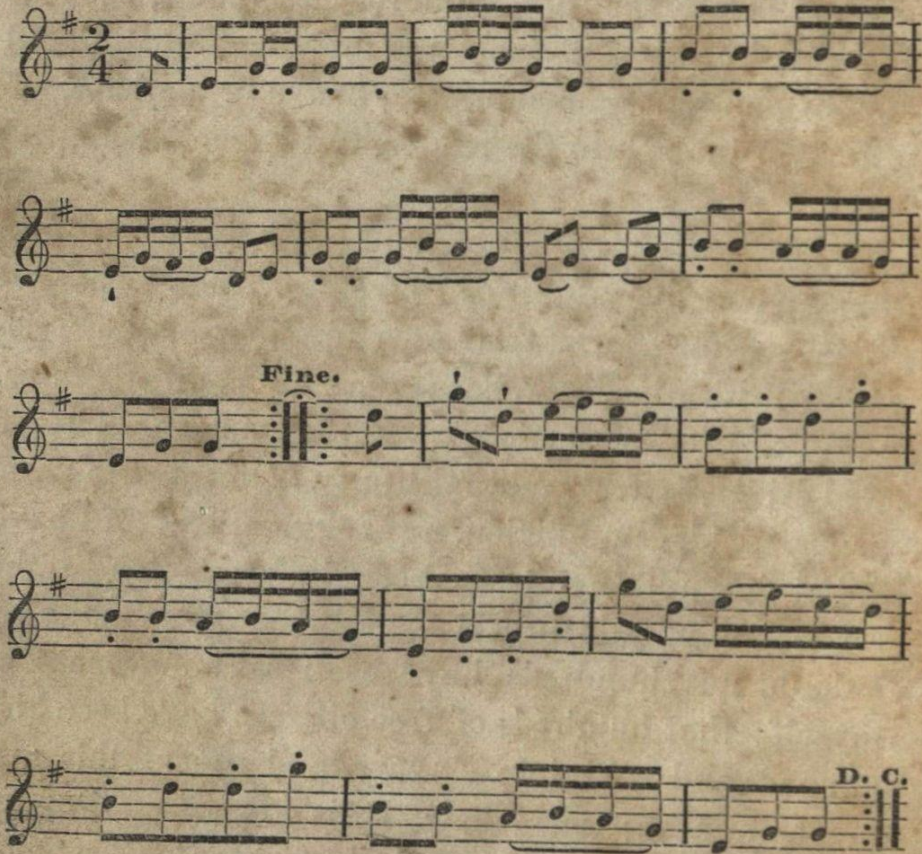
Editor's Note: Sound Studies is often accused of being a presentist enterprise, too fascinated with digital technologies and altogether too wed to the history of sound recording. *Sounding Out!*'s last forum of 2013, "Sound in the Nineteenth Century," addresses this critique by showcasing the cutting edge work of three scholars whose diverse, interdisciplinary research is located soundly in the era just before the advent of sound recording: [Mary Caton Lingold](#) (Duke), [Caitlin Marshall](#) (Berkeley), and [Daniel Cavicchi](#) (Rhode Island School of Design). In examining nineteenth century America's musical practices, listening habits, and auditory desires through *SO!*'s digital platform, Lingold, Marshall, and Cavicchi perform the rare task of showcasing how history's sonics had a striking resonance long past their contemporary vibrations while performing the power of the digital medium as a tool through which to, as Early Modern scholar [Bruce R. Smith](#) dubs it, "unair" past auditory phenomena—all the while sharing unique methodologies that neither rely on recording nor bemoan their lack. Today, the series kicks off with [Mary Caton Lingold's](#) exploration of the materialities of Solomon Northup's fiddling as represented through sheet music embedded in his 1853 narrative, amplifying a sound that was key to both his freedom and his enslavement.—**Jennifer Stoeve-Ackerman, Editor-in-Chief**

Steve McQueen's recent film *Twelve Years a Slave* has renewed interest in the original 1853 narrative, which has long been a valued resource for historians of nineteenth-century slavery, literature, and music. Because Solomon Northup was a highly-skilled fiddler and a keen observer of plantation culture, his autobiography is one of the most substantive accounts of musical life during slavery and, to my knowledge, the only slave narrative that includes sheet music in its text. As such, it preserves in audible form a precious record of Northup's musical artistry and facilitates a sound-based study of nineteenth-century black fiddling, a tradition that was flourishing during Northup's lifetime.

Uncovering the sounds of vernacular music of the pre-recorded era can be incredibly challenging. For this reason, Northup's descriptions, when coupled with musical notation, make it possible for us to hear something historically significant. Although "slave music" was all the rage in the 1850s due to the widespread popularity of blackface minstrelsy, print-based compositions by enslaved (or free) musicians are difficult to come by and even more challenging to verify. The tune presented in Northup's memoir has its own complex relationship to the minstrelsy genre, but it remains a unique sample of African-American music that warrants close-listening.

ROARING RIVER.

A REFRAIN OF THE RED RIVER PLANTATION.



“Harper’s creek and roarin’ ribber,
Thar, my dear, we’ll live forebber;
Den we’ll go to de Ingin nation,
All I want in dis creation,
Is pretty little wife and big plantation.

CHORUS.

Up dat oak and down dat ribber,
Two overseers and one little nigger.”

“Roaring River.” In *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup*, by Solomon Northup, 322. Auburn, NY: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1854. Courtesy of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

I use performance as a research method for exploring historical vernacular music, offering here my interpretation of "Roaring River: A Refrain of the Red River Plantation." As I discuss in an essay titled "[Listening to the Past](#)," the process of performance illuminates the subtleties of musical expression. (Do I play it like this or like that? At what tempo?) The aim of such exercises is not historical accuracy, but rather, an attunement to the sonic possibilities of a given piece. These possibilities cannot tell me how Northup would have played the song or what it meant to him, but they allow me to consider the kinds of choices that he would have had to make as a performer, thus illustrating the intellectual and sensorial richness of his music-making. Rather than simply presenting and describing the sheet music, I aim to make it possible for people to hear what would otherwise sit silently on the page.

In the first recording I play Northup's melody solo to give you a sense of the tune.

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/roaring-river_solo-fiddle.wav

In the second, I am joined by guitar.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/roaring-river-fiddle-guitar-17.wav>

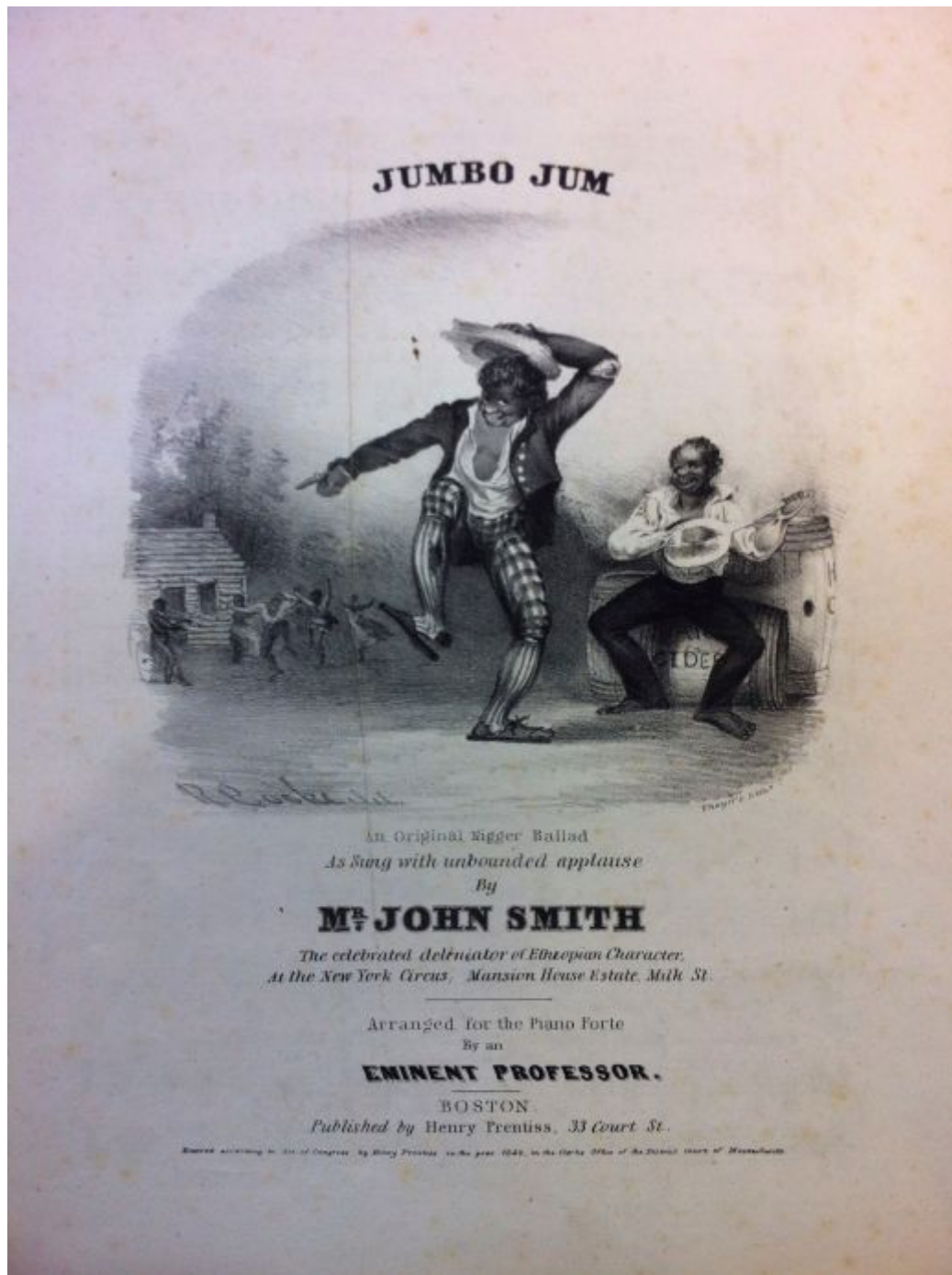
The use of guitar accompaniment would have been highly unlikely during the period, but it helps to support my amateur playing by providing a livelier, fuller feeling. Northup connected with banjoists, percussionists and dancers as an enslaved and free musician and it's interesting to imagine how a single song like this would have been transformed according to the talents, desires, and constraints of the performers assembled. It is unclear from the narrative whether or not the tune is an original composition or something Northup learned while living along the Red River, where he was enslaved in Louisiana. One also wonders how many nineteenth-century readers would have plucked the melody at a keyboard or bowed it on a family fiddle. What might their motivations have been?

Though Northup does not discuss the fiddle tune in the text, he does describe the lyrics below it, remarking that they were accompanied by a percussion technique called "patting" among his fellow slaves. He describes this widely documented practice as follows: "The patting is performed by striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet, and singing" (219). According to Northup, the lyrics that accompanied patting were often nonsensical because they were made to conform to the tonal and rhythmic pattern being patted. He offers "Harper's Creek" as suitable for the practice but it's worth noting that the lyrics voice a presumably white man's desires to own a piece of land and a slave. Though presented below the sheet music at the end of the book, the lyrics are ill-fitting for the fiddle tune provided, which seems more likely to have been played without vocal accompaniment. In light of Northup's descriptions, the sheet music creates an interesting blend of various performance modes, from popular folksy vocal diddy (with possible origins in minstrelsy), to patting, and fiddling. Here you can see a wonderful example of patting accompanying a nineteenth-century fiddle tune as performed by the Carolina Chocolate Drops and guest Danny Barber (Intricate patting begins at 1:22).



<https://youtu.be/nliiRDmBbEQ>

In addition to serving as auditory artifact, the presence of sheet music in the narrative relates to the way Northup's musicality was commodified within the aesthetic economy of slavery during and after his captivity. After regaining freedom, his talents are presented for sale in the book presumably to appeal to the sort of audiences who would also have coveted the sheet music of minstrelsy, which caricatured and lampooned black performances. Popular appetites for representations of plantation culture left an imprint on Northup's autobiography as well as other abolitionist publications, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.



"Jumbo Jum," Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago. J.F. Driscoll Collection of American Sheet Music, Box 307a.

Music-making was both labor and leisure for Solomon Northup and it profoundly influenced his experiences as a slave. His narrative also illuminates the far-reaching impact that he and other black musicians had on their communities as well as nineteenth century music.

Alas! had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage. It introduced me to great houses—relieved me of many days' labor in the field—supplied me with conveniences for my cabin—with pipes and tobacco, and extra pairs

of shoes, and oftentimes led me away from the presence of a hard master, to witness scenes of jollity and mirth. It was my companion—the friend of my bosom triumphing loudly when I was joyful, and uttering its soft, melodious consolations when I was sad. (217)

Solomon Northup's biography is highly atypical of slave narratives because he is a free man who is sold *into* slavery. [Some have criticized](#) the popularization of his circumstances, arguing that because he conforms to modes of respectability as a literate, propertied black man, he serves as an ideal hero for white audiences while inadequately representing the experience of slavery. Though many aspects of Northup's biography are unusual, his status as a highly sought-after musician is emblematic of a legion of black fiddlers who dominated music scenes North and South, from ballrooms to barns, beginning as early as the late seventeenth-century, as Dena Epstein explains in her indispensable study, [Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Music to the Civil War](#) (1977).

Prior to enslavement, fiddling, "the passion of [his] youth," provides Northup with supplemental income that helps to sustain his family during periods of insufficient employment in agriculture and carpentry. Music was an ideal side-career for someone in such circumstances, though, as Northup's story shows, it did not protect him from the dangers of being black in the United States. He is captured and enslaved while touring as a circus musician. Ferrying South toward the Louisiana plantations that would become his deplorable home, Northup's freedoms are violently stripped away. But his talent as a first-rate fiddler travels with him, becoming a defining element of his experience of slavery.

Fiddles were extraordinarily popular instruments during the era. Lightweight, portable, and increasing in mass production during the nineteenth-century, a single fiddle could service a large dance if need be. As such, slaves were encouraged (or forced) to take up the instrument and musical ability was considered a highly prized skill. Fiddling granted (primarily male) slaves an unusual degree of mobility as well as opportunities for economic advancement. The fact that numerous runaway slave ads note that the sought-after individuals were fiddlers or had in their possession a violin suggests that the increased mobility and access to income may have facilitated escape for some. For more information about these trends and their eighteenth-century origins, I highly recommend Richard Cullen Rath's [How Early America Sounded](#) (2003), an excellent cultural history of sound.



Etching of Solomon Northup "in his Plantation Suit" accompanying his 1853 Narrative

Just before being sold at market to his first master, Northup encounters an enslaved young man in possession of a fiddle and sizes him up by asking if he could play the "Virginia Reel," a popular dance. The young man cannot and so Northup takes the instrument from him, boldly showing off his more substantial repertoire and ability, much to the delight of those around him. Though about to be sold into an unknown and terrifying fate, this seemingly mundane interaction underscores how important musicianship is to Northup's identity and also how significant it was to the societies through which he was forced to move. Whether in New York State, a New Orleans slave market, or a backwoods swamp plantation, [fiddling was a thoroughly popular form of entertainment](#), widely enjoyed by Americans, slave and free, rich and poor, native and immigrant.

Northup expresses pride in the fame he earns in the Red River region, noting that he was known widely as the "Ole Bull of Bayou Boeuf." [Ole Bull](#) was a famous Norwegian violinist, who was one of the first musicians to professionally tour the United States in the 1850s; he became a widely-known celebrity. Because of Northup's sought-after talents, his masters hired him out extensively to play at the fashionable balls of nearby plantations as well as the Christmas dances held yearly for slaves. At one ball, he was tipped seventeen dollars, an extraordinary amount that he used to furnish his cabin with bare necessities. In contrast to these more favorable gigs, Northup was also forced to perform during his savage Master Epps' alcoholic binges. These events were held for hours on end in the middle of the night as Northup's fellow slaves were commanded to dance. The violent, dreaded affairs interrupted precious sleep and were utterly humiliating for the participants. Depicted memorably in both the memoir and the recent film, the horrifying scenario shows the way slavery degrades Northup's musicianship and his peers' dancing, turning these arts into yet one more thing that the master possesses. For Master Epps, Northup is a mere musical device, a kind of proto-phonograph, full of tunes that can be made to play on command. Northup's "passion" and economic livelihood are thus converted into a mechanized musical labor commodity under slavery.

Through Northup, we can see how before the eras of sound reproduction and broadcast, the circulation of music across North America was greatly facilitated by the forced migration of enslaved people. At the time of Northup's capture, large numbers of mid-Atlantic slaves were being sold South to the booming plantations along the frontier of Louisiana and Texas. Northup brought a unique repertoire on his journey and he also learned new music that he transported back to the New York publishers of his autobiography. Afro-diasporic musicians began revolutionizing Western music centuries before Northup was born, and as we can see, continued to do so in profoundly significant ways in the Antebellum era both in spite of and due to the harsh conditions of their enslavement.

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I'd like to thank the students in my course "Sounds of the South" for their lively discussion and excellent essays regarding music in Solomon Northup's *Narrative*. I'm also deeply grateful to my musical collaborator, Eric Olsten.

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Featured Image by Flickr User [kubotake](#)

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[Mary Caton Lingold](#) is a doctoral candidate in English at Duke University researching early Afro-Atlantic literature, music, and sound. She leads a collaborative experiment called the [Sonic Dictionary](#) at Duke's [Audiovisualities Lab](#) and co-directs [Soundbox](#), a project dedicated to enhancing the practice of using sound in digital scholarship.

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