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**Musical Fugitivity: Music, Escape, and Identity
in the Lives of Enslaved People in North
America**



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Musical Fugitivity: Music, Escape, and Identity in the Lives of Enslaved People in North America

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Introduction

‘Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage.’¹

- Solomon Northup

These words from Solomon Northup exemplify the importance of music to his experience of slavery; his violin functioned as an outlet for his emotion and made his time in bondage slightly more survivable. A free-born Black musician, Northup was kidnapped and sold into slavery, remaining enslaved for twelve years. His narrative is widely cited due to his remarkable experience and detail on his kidnapping and escape. What is particularly revealing, however, is his relationship with music and the impact it could have on enslaved lives, especially the psychological and physical escape it could provide.

Music permeates all aspects of life. It is often referred to as ‘the only universal mode of communication’ as it is able to express what cannot easily be said.² It is an emotional medium and a window to the inner-self, making it a powerful tool for identity across time, space, and culture. Additionally, music provides a significant form of escape for everyone. It has the power to transcend the boundaries of reality, offering a form of sonic transportation into spaces shaped by emotion, memory, and imagination. Dorsa Rohani calls this ‘musical escapism’ - a psychological phenomenon through which people use music to disengage with immediate reality.³ This study seeks to apply this concept to slavery, however the term ‘musical fugitivity’ is perhaps more appropriate for this context. Jack Halberstam argues that fugitivity is not merely about physical flight, it ‘is being separate from settling’.⁴ This notion resonates with the everyday forms of resistance found in America’s Plantation South where enslaved people performed subtle yet powerful acts of agency and resistance against the institution of slavery, demonstrating their

¹ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Chapel Hill: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997) <<https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html>> [accessed 26 April 2025], p.217

² Dan Fisher, ‘Music and Identity: Escape, Engagement, and the Quest for Authenticity in a Commodity Culture’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Arkansas, 2002) <https://www.proquest.com/docview/287860297> [accessed 11 April 2025], pp.1, 91-92

³ Dorsa Kiana Rohani, ‘Musical Escapism’ (unpublished manuscript, University of Toronto, 2024) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382424075_Musical_Escapism [accessed 11 April 2025], pp.2,5-6

⁴ Jack Halberstam, ‘The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons’, introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe; New York; and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), pp. 4-7 (p. 6).

adversity to settling.⁵ If we apply this logic to music, often cited as a key act of resistance, the term 'musical fugitivity' offers a compelling lens through which to understand music as a form of resistance and escape.

Despite white attempts to suppress Black musical expression, such as the 1740 Slave Code prohibiting the use of drums and other instruments following the Stono Rebellion, music remained integral to enslaved life in the United States.⁶ Enslaved people continued to sing while they worked, prayed, rested in their quarters, and gathered as a community. They also crafted their own instruments to accompany these moments, providing spaces for emotional and cultural expression. Drawing on diverse African traditions in an American context, their unique musical style became a tool of survival and self-expression.⁷ While this cultural output remained under-examined for much of the twentieth century, since the 1970s historians and ethnomusicologists have increasingly recognised the foundational role of enslaved people in shaping not only African American music, but a distinctly American sound. Genres like blues and jazz trace their roots to the innovative, emotive rhythms forged in bondage. But for the enslaved, music was more than an art form - it offered imagined freedom, emotional escape, cultural continuity and expression, and a quiet defiance of white attempts at assimilation.

Although it is impossible to construct a complete picture of music as a form of escape and identity for enslaved people in America, both narratives of the formerly enslaved and runaway advertisements offer valuable insights. Narratives provide first-hand accounts that reveal how music served as a source of both mental and physical relief, and as emotional and cultural expression within the brutal conditions of slavery. Meanwhile, runaway advertisements, produced by enslavers when bondspeople fled their control, have been largely overlooked in musical histories. However, they offer crucial glimpses into how enslaved individuals were perceived and how music may have shaped their identities and aided their escape. Musical ability or fondness was often recorded in these advertisements, suggesting it was not only a noteworthy skill, but one that may have been useful in the act of escape. This will be the first study of its kind to examine the

⁵ For a detailed study on everyday resistance see Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁶ John Belton O'Neill, *The Negro Law of South Carolina* (Columbia: J.G. Bowman, 1848) <<https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/public/gdcmassbookdig/negrolawofsouthc00onea/negrolawofsouthc00onea.pdf>> [accessed 26 April 2025], p.26

⁷ Shane White and Graham White offer a comprehensive account of music during slavery in North America: Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

relationship between music and escape through the lens of fugitive advertisements, arguing that incorporating these underused sources allows us to uncover a richer, more complex picture of musical resistance. By analysing narratives and runaway adverts, this dissertation highlights how music underpinned both everyday and extraordinary acts of resistance on plantations. The first chapter explores the emotional, cultural, and communal impacts of music through formerly enslaved testimonies, while the second builds upon this foundation to show how these aspects of musical fugitivity shaped the identities and actions of those who escaped. Ultimately, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of escape and resistance to show that they were complex, individual experiences shaped by a multitude of factors.

Literature

The cultural turn of the 1970s saw a shift in scholarship to an increased focus on culture as a point of analysis. In studies of slavery, this shift focused more on the cultural practices, identities, and agency of enslaved people with studies emerging that recognised the psychological and cultural power of music in enslaved communities. John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* was one of the first key works to acknowledge the emotional impact of music, stating that its 'therapeutic value... should not be dismissed lightly'.⁸ Lawrence Levine built upon this foundation, emphasising the emotional importance of music in demonstrating the resilience, creativity, and continuation of African culture in the lives of the enslaved.⁹ Both scholars shifted the historiography of slavery by foregrounding the emotional and cultural richness of the enslaved through reading sources that prioritise their voices. Their insights continue to be valuable bases for scholarship on resistance and culture, including this dissertation's focus on music as a vehicle for escape and identity.

Historians have increasingly focused on comprehensive studies of music and sound to understand the emotional, cultural, and social aspects of enslaved life. Shane White and Graham White's *The Sounds of Slavery* is foundational in this field, offering a rich reconstruction of the soundscapes that shaped slavery. Their analysis focuses on all aspects of Black sound through which

⁸ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.59

⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 30th Anniversary edn (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2007)

bondspeople demonstrated agency and formed a distinctive African American culture.¹⁰ Although not directly concentrating on music as escape, their work highlights the importance of sound to enslaved identity and expression. Their methodological use of sound as a lens for interpreting enslaved expression, especially in narratives and runaway advertisements, offers a critical framework for this dissertation. However, while they focus on speech in advertisements, this study shifts the focus to the underexplored presence of music as a central form of self-expression, identity, and fugitivity.

Other scholarship has focused more specifically on the idea of music as resistance and its multifaceted uses by the enslaved. Notably, Katrina Dyonne Thompson's exploration of the 'onstage' and 'backstage' roles of music performance uniquely explores this. 'Onstage' refers to the white perception of enslaved music as subservience and entertainment, whereas 'backstage' refers to the strategic manipulation of music and dance as self-expression.¹¹ Similarly, Stephanie Camp's concept of the enslaved 'third body' as 'a site of pleasure and resistance' reinforces how enslaved people used performance and movement to challenge the psychological and physical limits slavery imposed.¹² This dissertation extends these themes by highlighting music as symbolic resistance and as a lived, imaginative tool of escape.

Although many scholars have acknowledged the psychological impact of music on enslaved people, few offer a comprehensive synthesis of its emotional and cultural expressions of freedom. Thomas Barker's work 'Spatial Dialectics' provides the closest conceptual foundation for this dissertation, presenting music as a space through which enslaved people could imagine and emotionally experience liberation. He critiques the scholarly tendency to overlook music as a serious vehicle for freedom and resistance, arguing that 'the ability of slaves to experience freedom on the plantations was... contingent upon them being able to think freedom'.¹³ This dissertation builds directly upon Barker's insights, analysing narratives to understand how enslaved people were able to transcend the structure of slavery through music, and runaway advertisements to determine how music was used to construct selfhood and aid physical escape.

¹⁰ White and White, p.xviii

¹¹ Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), p.103

¹² Camp, p.68

¹³ Thomas P. Barker, 'Spatial Dialectics: Intimations of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Song', *Journal of Black Studies*, 46.4 (2015), 363–383 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24572907>> [accessed 23 April 2025], p.376

Where this dissertation makes its most significant intervention is in its analysis of musical instruments and music-related self-fashioning in runaway slave advertisements. While scholars such as Sterling Stuckey have examined the importance of instruments like the fiddle in enslaved culture, especially regarding the continuation of African traditions, very little work has been produced on how playing music or carrying instruments into escape shaped fugitive identity.¹⁴ There has been much scholarship on the identities of runaways, notably *Runaway Slaves* by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger. They have a chapter dedicated to the profile of fugitives yet there is no mention of musical skill or fondness, despite their presence in the archives.¹⁵ Additionally, David Waldstreicher opens his seminal 'Reading the Runaways' with an advertisement describing a man named Tom who played 'well upon the fiddle' yet does not explore how this musical detail contributed to his identity or escape.¹⁶ This dissertation brings such references to the fore, interpreting them as key to understanding how fugitives expressed agency, constructed selfhood, and used music to aid and express freedom. In doing so, it offers a new contribution to the historiography of music and slavery.

Method

This study explores how enslaved people used music to express themselves, form identity, and imagine and experience freedom. To do so, it draws upon two primary source bases: narratives of the formerly enslaved and runaway advertisements. By using interpretive methods, it aims to explore the possibilities of how music could act as a form of escape and identity rather than reading them as complete truth and universal experience. James Sidbury warns of the issue of homogenising enslaved experiences by viewing any act committed by an individual that did not reinforce slavery as an act of resistance.¹⁷ This dissertation aims to focus on how acts of musical engagement could have provided a sense of escape, rather than viewing them explicitly as resistance to avoid overlooking enslaved agency.

¹⁴ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, 25th anniversary edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.19-22

¹⁵ John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, 'Profile of a Runaway' in *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.209-233

¹⁶ David Waldstreicher, 'Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56.2 (1999), 243-272
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2674119>> [accessed 11 April 2025], pp.243-244

¹⁷ James Sidbury, 'Slave Resistance', in *The Routledge History of Slavery*, ed. by Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.204

This dissertation relies heavily on reading against the grain, inspired by Saidiya Hartman's detailed method of reconstructing enslaved histories through fragmented accounts. She emphasises that documents like the Works Project Association (WPA) narratives cannot offer a complete or objective account of the past, but that they can be used to imagine what might have been possible.¹⁸ Following this approach, this study reads narratives and advertisements against the grain to trace how music may have offered enslaved people a sense of emotional survival, identity, and escape within the confines of slavery.

Using the WPA interviews conducted in the 1930s and antebellum freedom narratives, this dissertation explores the role of music in enslaved life and how it functioned as psychological and physical escape. These accounts, written or spoken by formerly enslaved people, offer a rare insight into the emotional and cultural dimensions of slavery. Freedom narratives, especially those of Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northup, are often cited by scholars when analysing musical and cultural practices. These narratives have been employed in this dissertation as they provide rich detail on the emotional nature of music and its use as a form of mental and physical escape. To build a broader picture, this dissertation also draws extensively on the WPA narratives. George Rawick, a foundational scholar in their interpretation, emphasised that these testimonies 'reveal the day-to-day life of people, their customs, their values, their ideas, hopes, aspirations, and fears', as well as how they coped with, adapted to, and resisted the conditions of slavery.¹⁹

However, they do have significant limitations. Many interviewees were children or adolescent at the time of emancipation, raising concerns over memory as the interviews were conducted over 70 years later. Moreover, the interviewers were mostly white and some were the descendants of enslavers, which may have led to mistrust or caused interviewees to tailor their accounts to what they believed interviewers wanted to hear. Another key issue is the leading questions asked by white interviewers which could have caused dishonest or inaccurate answers to fit the question.²⁰ Despite these issues, narratives remain invaluable for determining enslaved experience, especially the multitude of ways that music provide a sense of escape.

¹⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, rev. and updated 25th anniversary edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), pp.12-14

¹⁹ George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), p.xix

²⁰ 'The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection', in *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938*, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/limitations-of-the-slave-narrative->

This dissertation also draws on runaway advertisements to explore how music shaped fugitive identity. While historians have used these advertisements to examine patterns of escape and self-fashioning, the role of music in these sources has been largely overlooked. Yet many advertisements mention musical ability such as fiddling or singing, offering valuable insight into how enslaved people were remembered, expressed themselves, and perhaps how they navigated their escape. Ignoring these references risks diminishing the agency of enslaved musicians who fled. These advertisements are inherently tied to acts of fugitivity; therefore, they demand analysis when determining the importance of music as a form of escape. Where previous scholarship has noted these details in passing, this study treats them as central, arguing that musicality could be both a marker of identity and a form of psychological or strategic escape.

To explore this, advertisements from online databases for Virginia, North Carolina, and Texas have been used, offering a temporal and geographical spread across older and newer states.²¹ These databases were the richest, with thousands of sources for each area, hence their use in this dissertation. The database for Texas has significantly fewer advertisements than Virginia or North Carolina due to its youth as a state, therefore analysis is slightly limited. Although references to music only make up a relatively small percentage of these advertisements, and they were written by enslavers, they can still reveal the role music played in enslaved peoples' lives and escapes.

Used together, narratives and runaway advertisements provide a unique lens for exploring music and its links to psychological and physical escape. Although using a speculative approach, it can be beneficial for imagining the possibilities of enslaved lives when a full picture can never be known. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to restore agency to those, like musicians, who have been overlooked in previous studies.

Structure

collection/ [accessed 23 April 2025]; for more detail on the use of these sources see John W. Blassingame, 'Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems', *The Journal of Southern History*, 41.4 (1975), 473–92 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2205559> [accessed 23 April 2025]

²¹ The databases used were: The Geography of Slavery in Virginia, ed. by Thomas Costa (University of Virginia) <<https://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html>> [accessed 25 April 2025]; Digital Library on American Slavery, ed. by Richard Cox and David Gwynn (University of North Carolina at Greensboro) <<https://dlas.uncg.edu>> [accessed 25 April 2025]; Kyle Ainsworth, Texas Runaway Slave Project (East Texas Research Center, Ralph W. Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University) <<https://digital.sfasu.edu/digital/collection/RSP>> [accessed 25 April 2025].

This dissertation adopts a two-chapter structure, each drawing on a different source base to explore musical fugitivity.

Chapter One: Musical Fugitivity in Narratives: This chapter examines how music functioned in enslaved life as a form of psychological and physical escape from the realities of bondage.

Chapter Two: Musical Fugitivity in Runaway Advertisements: This chapter explores how runaway advertisements reveal the possible roles of musical skills in shaping enslaved people's escape strategies and the construction of fugitive identities.

Chapter One: Musical Fugitivity in Narratives

This chapter is divided into two sections: Instruments and Singing, each exploring how different forms of music offered enslaved people a means of escape from bondage. While broader scholarship on enslaved music has often focused on lyrics, such as Eileen Southern's work, this chapter concentrates on the act of music-making itself.²² Moreover, frolics were a vital site of musical fugitivity, yet they are not explored in detail in this chapter, leaving a gap for future research. Instead, the focus remains on foundational practices like making and playing instruments, and singing, to build a clearer link to the themes of escape and identity in Chapter Two.

Instruments

The significance of instruments in enslaved life is echoed in the language used to describe their role in musical spaces. In several narratives, instruments are said to 'furnish' the music, suggesting they were not just tools for sound. To furnish something is to complete it, to provide it with what is necessary, implying that instruments were vital elements that completed and enabled musical expression. Celestia Avery recalled how people bought fiddles to furnish their frolics, while Henry Bland and Isiah Green described music as readily furnished by fiddles, banjos, and hand clapping.²³ The repetition of this word across narratives reveals that instruments were seen as essential to creating the atmosphere of dance, joy, and emotional release, forming moments of freedom and self-expression within the constraints of slavery.

The making of instruments allowed enslaved people to resist material deprivation and assert cultural expression. Simp Campbell, formally enslaved in Texas, noted how 'all them music gadgets was homemade', describing banjos made from wood, sheepskin, and catgut.²⁴ In a system that denied possessions and autonomy, crafting instruments was an act of resistance to material deprivation and an assertion of self-expression through African cultural continuity. Ernest Brown Jr.

²² Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd edn (New York: Norton, 1997), pp.152-204

²³ Library of Congress, 'Celestia Avery' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn041/>> [accessed 23 April 2025] p.23; 'Henry Bland' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams-Furr*, p.81; 'Isiah Green' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2, Garey-Jones* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn042/>> [accessed 23 April 2025] p.53

²⁴ Library of Congress, 'Simp Campbell' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn161/>> [accessed 23 April 2025] p.192

argues that what some dismissed as ‘unorthodox combinations’ is actually a manifestation of African American ingenuity, as musicians of African descent created tools that could express the spiritual and emotional depth denied by their social conditions. This creativity was rooted in West African traditions, which valued layered rhythms, sonic diversity, and experimentation.²⁵ This is demonstrated in the testimony of James Bolton who recalled gathering after supper to ‘knock tin buckets and pans’ like drums, while others blew on handmade quills ‘made outen reeds... every whistle in the row a different tone’. Similarly, Marshal Butler described playing a fiddle alongside the beat of a tin can while someone hit the strings of the fiddle with broom straws, improvising with the materials available to create fuller sound.²⁶ Though appearing benign to white audiences, like Thompson suggests, such practices subverted domination and maintained cultural continuity ‘backstage’.²⁷ By transforming ordinary objects into instruments, enslaved people used sound to express identity through cultural practices, sustain their heritage, and briefly transcend the realities of bondage through musical expression.

The emotional and cultural importance of music to enslaved people is further revealed in the efforts they made to acquire instruments. When making them was not possible, some saved money to purchase them by raising and selling chickens, as Celestia Avery recalled in her WPA interview.²⁸ This highlights the desire enslaved people had to actively seek out instruments as sources of emotional and cultural meaning, asserting agency and resistance by saving for something meant purely for their own enjoyment. Similarly, Andy Brice of South Carolina described the intense urge he felt to buy a fiddle after hearing his master play: ‘Sumpin’ bust loose in me and sing all thru my head and tingle in my fingers. I make up my mind, right then and dere, to save and buy me a fiddle’.²⁹ Andy’s description is almost like an epiphany, emphasising the deep emotional pull of music and the temporary escape that playing could offer. These testimonies show that

²⁵ Ernest D. Brown Jr., ‘African American Instrument Construction and Music Making’, in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. by Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.23; White and White, p.52

²⁶ Library of Congress, ‘James Bolton’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams–Furr*, p.99; ‘Marshal Butler’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams–Furr*, p.163

²⁷ Thompson, p.117

²⁸ ‘Celestia Avery’, *Vol.4, Part 1*, p.23

²⁹ Library of Congress, ‘Andy Brice’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 1, Abrams–Durant* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn141/>> [accessed 23 April 2025] p.76

instruments were not simply tools for entertainment, but valued sources of joy, selfhood, and mental refuge.

While many enslaved people had to make or buy their own instruments, some were provided them by enslavers who recognised their value.³⁰ Skilled musicians were able to temporarily escape the physical confines of slavery, offering them a limited but meaningful form of fugitivity, as Thompson explores.³¹ Solomon Northup, for example, detailed in *Twelve Years a Slave* how his violin 'introduced [him] to great houses', relieved him from days of field labour and the presence of a harsh master, and provided material conveniences such as tobacco and shoes.³² Similarly, John Cameron's WPA testimony reflects how musical skill could provide physical relief as his enslaver 'had two of de slaves jus' to be fiddlers', indicating some musicians were full-time and exempt from field labour almost entirely.³³

Musicianship also facilitated a degree of physical and social mobility, escaping the restrictions traditionally faced by most enslaved. Northup noted how he 'became more acquainted than [he] otherwise would, up and down the bayou', suggesting that musical skill allowed enslaved people to travel beyond their home estates, build networks, and increase their chances of eventual freedom.³⁴ Such benefits were not unique to Northup. Isiah Green recalled that white families without musicians often hired enslaved performers from other plantations, offering musicians rare mobility and exposure.³⁵ Scholars such as Thompson and Southern emphasise how musical skill opened spheres otherwise closed to most bondspeople, offering fleeting physical escape and a rare form of autonomy within the boundaries of slavery.³⁶

In addition to mobility, musicality granted enslaved people a degree of status within plantation communities, something Thompson describes as 'freedom while in bondage'.³⁷ The 'conveniences' Northup received, the ability to keep tips, and the honour of a special seat at feasts all reflected a unique position of recognition and material advantage. Fellow bondspeople even

³⁰ White and White, p.51

³¹ Thompson, p.109-110

³² Northup, p.217

³³ Library of Congress, 'John Cameron' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 9, Mississippi, Allen-Young* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn090/>> [accessed 23 April 2025] p.19

³⁴ Northup, p.216

³⁵ 'Isiah Green', *Vol.4, Part 2*, p.53

³⁶ Thompson, p.109; Southern p.176

³⁷ Thompson, p.110-111

referred to him as a 'millionaire'.³⁸ Henry Dant echoed this sense of autonomy in his WPA interview, recalling that he 'had money in [his] pockets all de time' from playing the fiddle round the neighbourhood.³⁹ Though still bound by slavery, some musicians were able to momentarily transcend their legal status as property, through monetary and material gain, performing identities rooted in skill, worth, and individuality. These experiences exemplify the duality Thompson identifies of loosening the chains of enslavement while remaining confined within them.⁴⁰

Instruments also served as a source of emotional relief and a reflection of their feelings, offering enslaved musicians a way to endure and momentarily transcend sorrow. Northup referred to his violin as 'the soother of [his] sorrows', describing how when his 'soul was disturbed... it would sing [him] a song of peace'.⁴¹ As Levine suggests, music provided enslaved people with a rare means to 'transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of [their] environment... by permitting [them] to express deeply held feelings which ordinarily could not be verbalized'.⁴² The act of playing became an important outlet for grief, frustration, and longing, fostering escape from negative emotion. Reflecting after slavery, Andy Brice described how playing his fiddle allowed him to forget his missing foot as it seemed to be at the end of his leg patting the same while he played.⁴³ Although referring to life post-emancipation, the statement reveals music's enduring power to reshape experience and offer relief. If that was what music did for him post-emancipation, it can be assumed that it provided a similar sense of transcendence during slavery. In both narratives, music acts as a form of sonic transportation: a way of psychologically escaping the weight of suffering. This imaginative transcendence laid the groundwork for deeper emotional bonds with the instruments themselves, entering the realm of companionship and meaning.

The personification of instruments in formerly enslaved peoples' accounts reveals this sense of companionship that playing an instrument could provide. Northup repeatedly refers to his violin as his 'companion', assigning it active emotional roles. For instance, he details it 'triumphing loudly when [he] was joyful, and uttering its soft, melodious consolations when [he] was sad'.⁴⁴ By giving the instrument human qualities, Northup reveals the importance of the violin to his emotional

³⁸ Northup, pp.217, 196

³⁹ Library of Congress, 'Henry Dant' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 10, Missouri, Abbot-Younger* <<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn100/>> [accessed 23 April 2025] p.99

⁴⁰ Thompson, p.110-111

⁴¹ Northup, pp.196, 217

⁴² Levine, p.8

⁴³ 'Andy Brice', *Vol. 14, Part 1*, p.76

⁴⁴ Northup, p.217

survival as the only constant from his free life before bondage to his life under slavery. The violin supported him like a friend, lightening life's burdens. Similarly, Andy Brice described his fiddle as a spiritual force, stating that 'dat fiddle draws down from hebbin all de sermons dat I understan'.⁴⁵ Though not religious, Andy found clarity and grounding through music, emphasising the power of instruments in guiding as well as soothing. Both men saw their instruments as more than objects – they were companions, forms of guidance, and emotional crutches. Their accounts reveal how instruments served as subtle yet powerful forms of musical fugitivity, offering not just sound, but solace and selfhood.

Singing

Singing offered bondspeople a significant emotional release, processing daily sorrows through sound. One of the most widely cited reflections on this is found in Frederick Douglass' narrative:

'Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears... I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness.'⁴⁶

This passage remains one of the most powerful insights into the meaning of enslaved song. Douglass challenges white interpretations of enslaved singing as evidence of contentment, reframing it as an outlet for anguish when other forms of expression were denied.⁴⁷ His comparison of singing to crying reveals how music facilitated an escape of emotion from the body and allowed people to externalise pain. Douglass' own admission that he sang to 'drown [his] sorrow' reinforces how singing provided a temporary psychological departure from the dehumanising structures of slavery.⁴⁸

In secular singing, the emotion was less evident in the lyrics but more in the sound, which functioned as an outlet for expressing desires of freedom from bondage. White and White argue that the importance of sound among North American bondspeople can be traced to West African traditions of using calls to communicate. Enslaved people adapted these practices to overcome

⁴⁵ 'Andy Brice', *Vol. 14, Part 1*, p.77

⁴⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999) <<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html>> [accessed 26 April 2025], p.15

⁴⁷ Southern, p.177

⁴⁸ Douglass, p.15

language barriers and to express feelings of loneliness, pain, and despair.⁴⁹ Often the lyrics were secondary and would 'seem unmeaning jargon' to others, but the tones and sounds held profound emotional weight. Douglass' description is paramount for understanding this emotional depth: 'they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains'.⁵⁰ This emphasis on tone over lyrical clarity demonstrates how enslaved people used sound as a form of expression that transcended verbal communication. 'Tones loud, long, and deep' show the outpour of emotion and longing for freedom that the sounds carried. His descriptions give a good indication of the raw emotion in these sounds, and suggest that every note contained suffering and resistance, emphasising the escape of these emotions from the body. Additionally, that each tone was 'a prayer... for deliverance' reflects the idea that it was not in what they sang but how they sang that symbolised their hope and longing for salvation.

Moreover, reflecting on Saturday night frolics in his WPA interview, Marshal Butler captured this release in his description of the events as enslaved peoples' 'night to howl'.⁵¹ Howling implies an uninhibited outpouring of emotion, suggesting that singing during these gatherings offered bondspeople a rare opportunity to vocalise their inner lives. In this context, raw, unstructured, communal sound became a form of musical fugitivity allowing temporary escape from the emotional and physical constraints of bondage. Similarly, Uncle Hemp Kennedy explained that Black people 'today can't sing lak dat... 'cause day ain't libed back dere, an' day can't feel hit lak us', highlighting that the intensity of those songs was the product of lived suffering.⁵² His reflection reinforces that the power of enslaved song came from its ability to sound what could not openly be said, linking to Blassingame's discussion of secular songs as an expression of the realities of oppression.⁵³ Ultimately, enslaved people often created a space for resistance and emotional release through sonic expression rather than words.

Religious singing offered enslaved people a form of spiritual escape, allowing them to imagine salvation and express hope. Scholars have long stressed the psychological importance of spirituals, especially how they fostered a vision of freedom beyond bondage. Barker argues that

⁴⁹ White and White, pp.20-21

⁵⁰ Douglass, p.14

⁵¹ 'Marshal Butler', *Vol. 4, Part 1*, p.163

⁵² Library of Congress, 'Uncle Hemp Kennedy' in *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 9, Mississippi, Allen-Young*, pp.89-90

⁵³ Blassingame, p.50

‘the inseparability of music, religion, and everyday life served as a means by which slaves could preserve and enact’ their humanity while constructing a picture of liberation.⁵⁴ William Adams, formerly enslaved in Texas, recalled that bondspeople would ‘pray to be free and sing and dance’, illustrating how music acted as a physical manifestation of hope.⁵⁵ His words underscore the inseparability of music and religion, through which, as Levine suggests, the enslaved were able to adapt and transcend their situation by articulating their ‘deepest and most enduring feelings and certainties’.⁵⁶

The testimony of Anne Bell from South Carolina, powerfully captures the intersection of music, religion, and escape. Reflecting on the spiritual ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariot’, she explains that the lyrics ‘Jesus Gwintar Carry Me Home’ expressed a belief that freedom would only be achieved in heaven. She continues, ‘if dere ain’t a heaven, what’s colored folks got to look forward to? They can’t git anywhere down here’, highlighting how spirituals helped enslaved people endure bondage by imagining liberation beyond earthly suffering.⁵⁷ The idea of ‘home’ in the song evokes not just heaven, but a place of rest, safety, and belonging, a concept denied to Black Americans during slavery and at the time the WPA interviews were conducted. Anne’s testimony also reveals the role that religious singing played for women, who, as caregivers and mothers, often faced greater obstacles to physical escape, instead turning to everyday forms of resistance, as explored by Stephanie Camp.⁵⁸ Therefore, singing acted as a form of imaginative and emotional survival, creating a space for hope and psychological resistance. Her voice underscores that, for many, religious songs were about enduring the present with dignity and defiance when physical freedom was not possible.

Religious worship and singing were not always permitted and some enslaved people had to resist restrictions to express their faith. While many enslavers allowed prayer meetings and church services, as recalled by Sarah Byrd, some bondspeople carved out their own spaces to worship far from white surveillance. Stearlin Arnwine and Carey Davenport, both formerly enslaved in Texas,

⁵⁴ Barker, p.376

⁵⁵ Library of Congress, ‘William Adams’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*, p.10

⁵⁶ Levine, p.19

⁵⁷ Library of Congress, ‘Anne Bell’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 1, Abrams-Durant*, pp.53-54; For more on spirituals see Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977)

⁵⁸ Camp, pp.68-71

described having to retreat to the woods or ‘dugouts and hollows’ to hold secret prayer meetings.⁵⁹ These gatherings were often referred to as ‘stealing away’, an act that, as Saidiya Hartman notes, ‘defied and subversively appropriated slave owners’ designs for mastery and control’.⁶⁰ Religious devotion was threatening to some enslavers as it provided the enslaved with moral strength and a vision of freedom that challenged their authority.⁶¹ Consequently, secret worship involved immense risk as white patrollers hunted fugitives around plantations and enslavers imposed harsh punishments for such defiance. In these spaces, singing became both dangerous and defiant, underscoring the emotional urgency of musical worship. Moreover, singing what came up from the heart, as Carey described, reflects the spontaneous, emotionally charged nature of enslaved music, and the essential role of music and religion in processing that emotion.⁶² Whether allowed or prohibited, singing spirituals was a meaningful act. In secret worship, it became not only a symbol of resistance but a momentary physical and psychological escape with fleeting yet powerful experiences of emotional and spiritual release.

Even when bondspeople could not physically remove themselves, they found ways to carve out emotional spaces for worship and expression. As Cato Carter recalled, some had to put their heads in pots and pans to sing and pray, while William Adams recollected that they took a ‘sugar kettle and turn it top down on de groun’ and put logs roan’ it to kill de soun’’.⁶³ These extreme efforts to muffle their voices reveal the subversive power of religious singing; these acts were more than devotion, they were attempts to defy the dehumanising restrictions enslaved people faced. The vivid imagery of heads buried in pots and pans underscores how desperately enslaved people sought space to sound their grief, hope, and longing for freedom. That enslaved people were willing to risk punishment and endure discomfort to preserve the act of singing highlights the value they placed on music and faith. Even in the most restricted of settings, these songs voiced hope and freedom, offering imagined escape through the power of sound.

⁵⁹ Library of Congress, ‘Sarah Byrd’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1, Adams–Furr*, p.170; ‘Stearlin Arnwine’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*, p.33; ‘Carey Davenport’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*, p.282

⁶⁰ Hartman, p.117

⁶¹ White and White pp.55-56

⁶² ‘Carey Davenport’, *Vol 16, Part 1*, p.282

⁶³ Library of Congress, ‘Cato Carter’ in *Federal Writers’ Project: Slave Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*, p.206; ‘William Adams’, *Vol.16, Part 1*, p.10; Rawick explores the symbolic meaning of pots in African tradition: Rawick, pp.40-42

Chapter Two: Musical Fugitivity in Runaway Advertisements

At the time of writing, there is no dedicated scholarship on how musicality appears in runaway advertisements or its role in aiding escape. Though brief and utilitarian in form, they often recorded skills, trades, and personality traits beyond physical descriptions. Musicality was sometimes mentioned, not just for identification, but as a marker of value, yet its significance has been overlooked by historians. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding the role of music in enslaved life, its connections to identity, and its possibilities for resistance and escape. As David Waldstreicher argues, advertisements were the original narratives, publishing ‘stories about slaves and their seizure of freedom’.⁶⁴ Although written by enslavers to reinforce slavery, they inadvertently provide rich insights into how fugitives shaped their own lives and escapes. James Sidbury notes that each act of flight was individual, shaped by specific goals and circumstances, making generalisation impossible.⁶⁵ This chapter makes the central intervention of this dissertation by offering the first close analysis of how music shaped fugitive identity. It first reads the advertisements through the eyes of enslavers, before reading them against the grain in sections exploring music’s role in fashioning fugitive identities and how musical instruments may have aided escape.

Reading the source

Fugitive advertisements reveal much about how enslaved musicians were perceived by enslavers, offering insight into their views through evaluative judgement of musical skills. Phrases like ‘plays very well’ or ‘tolerably well’ show how musical ability was assessed, implying a scale of commodified worth.⁶⁶ Those described as more talented were likely valued for their capacity to generate income or provide entertainment. This is supported by Franklin and Schweninger, and

⁶⁴ Waldstreicher, p.247-248

⁶⁵ Sidbury, p.205

⁶⁶ Examples drawn from a range of advertisements from the *Geography of Slavery in Virginia*, *Digital Library on American Slavery*, and *Texas Runaway Slave Project* [all accessed 25 April 2025]

Viola Müller, who highlight higher rewards for skilled fugitives, demonstrating the economic value and closer surveillance of those deemed more talented.⁶⁷

Moreover, these advertisements reveal a more intimate mode of surveillance. Descriptions like ‘fond of singing’ or ‘remarkably fond of playing the fiddle’ suggest that enslavers noticed what enslaved people enjoyed, not just what they did.⁶⁸ This points to intimate surveillance which turned personal interests into identifying data, as explored by Simone Browne, rendering enslaved people traceable through their habits.⁶⁹ Musicality, in this context, was not treated as a meaningful part of enslaved identity, but as another characteristic to be catalogued, claimed, and exploited. Its marginalisation in scholarship on fugitivity reflects a similar logic, as musical references are often noted in passing but rarely analysed, reinforcing the idea that music was peripheral rather than central to enslaved experience and selfhood.⁷⁰ Musical talent was not neutral; it marked individuals as economically valuable, socially visible, and therefore more threatening when escaped.

The language used to describe enslaved musicians reveals enslavers’ anxieties surrounding their escape. Those with multiple skills were frequently labelled ‘artful’ or ‘cunning’, with intelligence being a significant trait of runaways. As Franklin and Schweninger argue, enslavers feared such individuals as their likelihood of successful escape threatened both their authority and their economic interests.⁷¹ Moses, a fugitive from Virginia, was a skilled individual who could play the fiddle, sing ‘new tunes by note’, and was ‘ingenious in woodwork’ among other things. His enslaver cautioned readers to ‘take notice of the above remarks, as he may by his artfulness procure a pass’, underscoring the fear that skill and intelligence could facilitate successful escape.⁷² Similarly, Anthony from North Carolina, was described as charismatic and highly adaptable, with an impressive skill set - carpenter, barber, rider, pressman - that included the ability to bill ‘a little on the fiddle’. These skills were accompanied by descriptors such as ‘artful’ and ‘conceited’, revealing

⁶⁷ Franklin and Schweninger, p.173; Viola Franziska Müller, *Escape to the City: Fugitive Slaves in the Antebellum Urban South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022; online edn, 18 January 2024) <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469671062.001.0001> [accessed 23 April 2025], p.34

⁶⁸ Examples drawn from a range of advertisements from the *Geography of Slavery in Virginia*, *Digital Library on American Slavery*, and *Texas Runaway Slave Project* [all accessed 25 April 2025]

⁶⁹ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p.53

⁷⁰ For instance, David Waldstreicher and John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger explore elements of self-fashioning but ignore music despite its existence in the archives: Waldstreicher, *Reading the Runaways*; Franklin and Schweninger, ‘Profile of a Runaway’ in *Runaway Slaves*, pp.209-233

⁷¹ Franklin and Schweninger, p.224,226

⁷² Moses: ‘Twenty Dollars Reward’, *Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser*, 8 January 1795

<https://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/vg1795.xml&style=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/display_ad.xml&ad=v1795010004> [accessed 23 April 2025].

his enslavers worries that his confidence and versatility would help him pass as free.⁷³ Although musical skill was often just one of many talents described, it carried particular economic and entertainment value. As previously explored, enslaved musicians could be hired out for profit, making them valuable sources of income as well as plantation entertainers. Additionally, their musical visibility made them more socially mobile, increasing enslavers' fears that they could earn support on the run or blend into free society. Ultimately, these descriptions reflect enslavers' anxieties that musicians could use their talent, confidence, and visibility, the very traits that made them valuable, to escape, pass, and survive. The next section will build on this by reading enslavers' descriptions against the grain to reconstruct how fugitives fashioned their identities in flight.

Music in fashioning identity

Some advertisements reveal how music and religion formed identity and threatened enslavers. In 1828, three men - Tom, Dave, and Jesse - ran away from enslaver William Bell in North Carolina. Dave and Tom were brothers, possibly escaping to return to their home in Craven County, with Jesse likely accompanying them. Dave was described as 'fond of singing psalms', yet simultaneously accused of using religion to 'cloak his villainy' and as 'being the greatest rogue'.⁷⁴ This contradiction reflects Bell's attempt to paint Dave's musical worship as insincere, masking unease about Dave's personality and potential for self-liberation. Waldstreicher notes that accusations of false piety were attempts 'to strip the runaways of their hard work and skill, [and] their respectability and success as self-made men and women', portraying them as deceptive or morally corrupt to justify their recapture. Instead, the statement more plausibly suggests that Dave's use of religious music was a source of strength and spiritual resilience, linking to Chapter One's themes of music as psychological escape and mental strength.⁷⁵ Singing was the most accessible form of music; it could be performed anywhere, internally or aloud, to maintain spiritual focus, emotional endurance, and a sense of self while on the run. Music may have also offered hope for reunion with his family and community in Craven County, not just for freedom. Notably, Dave's fondness for singing is the only

⁷³ 'Twenty-Five Dollars Reward', *Raleigh Star*, 30 September 1814, p. 1 <<http://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/2081/>> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁷⁴ '30 Dollars Reward', *Carolina Centinel*, 10 May 1828, p. 3 <<https://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/680/>> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁷⁵ Waldstreicher, p.255

personal trait mentioned in the advertisement beyond his physical appearance, suggesting that, for both Dave and Bell, music was a defining part of his identity.

In some cases, musical ability is the defining aspect of a fugitive's remembered identity, as seen in the case of Essex, also known as Sussex, from Virginia. His advertisement, placed in 1779, states that he had been 'very fond of playing the fiddle before he left', a strikingly personal detail that appears despite the fact he had 'been run away ten years'.⁷⁶ That this memory persisted a decade after his escape implies that music was a defining aspect of how he was known and remembered. Essex's identity was closely tied to music, and this detail shows the lasting impression musicality could leave. The rest of the advertisement focuses on his recent movements, like staying in houses in the summer and travelling by water, and reveals that he had been successfully passing as free under the surname Scott.⁷⁷ While it is unclear whether music remained part of his life after his escape, the fact that it was the only interest of his provided to try and identify him a decade later raises the possibility that it continued to shape his identity in freedom. Additionally, his ability to pass as free would have granted him greater access to instruments, communities, and social spaces that likely involved music. Essex's case highlights how music could remain embedded in the memory of enslavers and in the lived experience of fugitives as something remembered and potentially used to sustain a new life.

Stephen from North Carolina's case further shows how music shaped remembered identity and suggests it may have sustained him during fugitivity. Placed in 1811, five years after his escape, the only personal detail included in Stephen's advertisement was that he was 'remarkably fond of fiddling and commonly [had] a fiddle hung to his back'.⁷⁸ That he was rarely seen without his instrument implies the daily presence of music in his life and emotional support it may have provided. Much like Solomon Northup, whose violin sustained him during bondage, Stephen's musical life appears inseparable from his sense of self. This is further implied by it being the only personality trait retained after five years, emphasising the impact music had on his enslaved identity to both him and his enslaver. Like Essex, it is unclear whether music continued to play a part in Stephen's life after he fled, yet the enduring memory of his musicianship reveals how deeply

⁷⁶ 'Two Hundred Dollars Reward', *Virginia Gazette*, 19 March 1779

<https://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/vg1779.xml&style=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/display_ad.xml&ad=v1779030058> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ '50 Dollars Reward', *Edenton Gazette and North Carolina General Advertiser*, 1 February 1811, p. 3

<<http://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/712/>> [accessed 23 April 2025].

woven music was into his identity and raises the possibility that it continued to shape his sense of self after his escape.

Some advertisements reveal how musical ability could have combined with other factors to create a new fugitive identity. The case of Dick, a fugitive from Texas in 1859, provides a striking example of how music could intersect with literacy and race to fashion a distinct identity. One of the first descriptors in the advertisement is that 'he play[ed] on the fiddle', suggesting that musicality was a defining part of who he was, and possibly one of his key roles on the plantation.⁷⁹ Due to its placement, this skill could have been a fundamental reason for the abnormally large reward of five hundred dollars. As noted by scholars such as Müller and Franklin and Schweninger, advertisements were more often placed for skilled bondspeople, and those with higher rewards were those deemed more likely to succeed. Some skilled fugitives managed to hire themselves out while on the run, therefore Dick may have used his musical skill for economic survival, making success more achievable.⁸⁰

Dick's literacy and ability to pass for white played crucial roles in his self-fashioning as a fugitive. As a mixed-race individual, he occupied the complex position of legally enslaved yet able to transgress visual racial boundaries. As Martha Cutter explains, passing as white involved a manipulation of complex racial signifiers such as name, speech, or behaviour.⁸¹ Dick was skilled, literate, pale-skinned, and was believed to be travelling under the names Richard Tyler or William Wright, consciously forming a new identity to increase his chances of freedom. His musicality, too, may have supported this performance. As a fiddler, he could have passed as a professional musician, a role that offered plausible mobility and a degree of social acceptance in both Black and white communities.

The advertisement also reported that Dick was headed to Mexico, a known refuge for runaways after the abolition of slavery there in 1829.⁸² Armed with forged free papers, assumed names, and the ability to pass as white, he deliberately fashioned a new identity to escape

⁷⁹ '\$500 Reward', *San Antonio Ledger and Texan*, 19 November 1859, p. 3
<<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth179814/m1/1/>> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁸⁰ Müller, p.34; Franklin and Schweninger, p.175; Franklin and Schweninger, pp.134-136

⁸¹ Martha J. Cutter, "'As White as Most White Women': Racial Passing in Advertisements for Runaway Slaves and the Origins of a Multivalent Term', *American Studies*, 54.4 (2016), 73–97 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44982355>> [accessed 23 April 2025], pp.79,82

⁸² Damian Pargas, 'Introduction', in *Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America*, ed. by Damian Alan Pargas (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018; online edn, 23 May 2019), pp.1– 20
<<https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813056036.001.0001>> [accessed 23 April 2025], p.11

enslavement. His musicality, though only one element of this complex reinvention, likely strengthened his chances of survival and adaptation, offering a credible occupational role that could support his flight.

Finally, Mark's case offers a unique example of how music remained a constant between the boundaries of enslavement and fugitivity. Enslaved by William Allason in Virginia, Mark first escaped in 1780 with three other men - Phill, Adam, and Will. Mark stands out for his versatility and international background. Born in St. Jago, he spoke Portuguese and was described as 'remarkable for his ingenuity' and 'capable of doing something at every kind of business'. Among the most detailed elements of his descriptions, however, is his musicality: he 'blows the French horn, can play on the fiddle, whistles many tunes well... is fond of marches and church musick, particularly that belonging to the Roman Catholick religion, which he professes'.⁸³ This intersection of music and religion reveals how deeply embedded musical worship was in Mark's daily life under slavery. His fondness for church music suggests a sonic world that may have shaped his inner life, offering hope, strength, and emotional escape. In this sense, music may have helped sustain his psychological readiness and inspiration for physical escape. That such a detailed musical description appears in a relatively short advertisement shows that music was inseparable from how Mark was perceived, and from how he expressed himself.

In 1784, Mark escaped again. This time alone. His reappearance in the archives raises many questions about what happened in the years between escapes and what may have compelled him to try again. His solo escape strategy suggests he adapted after his earlier recapture. The advertisement reveals a more calculated plan: he carried a gun for protection and a soldier's hat and blankets for better disguise. It was suspected he would escape by water, the same tactic as his previous escape, drawing on maritime skills to travel as far as possible. His enslaver also believed he would attempt to pass as free this time, enabled by his ability to speak Portuguese.⁸⁴ This combination of linguistic skill, mobility, and disguise suggests a consciously fashioned fugitive identity shaped by adaptability and self-presentation. Yet one detail remained unchanged. The description of Mark's musical abilities is repeated word-for-word, signalling that musicality

⁸³ 'Forty Pounds Hard Money Reward', *Virginia Gazette*, 9 August 1780

<https://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/vg1780.xml&style=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/display_ad.xml&ad=v1780080025> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁸⁴ 'Eight Dollars Reward', *Virginia Gazette or American Advertiser*, 13 November 1784

<https://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/vg1784.xml&style=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/display_ad.xml&ad=v1784110056> [accessed 23 April 2025].

remained a fundamental aspect of his identity. While his material tactics shifted, music likely continued to provide emotional and spiritual support, and an imaginative connection to freedom. Mark's case highlights how music could serve as an enduring mode of resistance and foundation of identity that endured beyond capture and inspired another escape.

Instruments and fugitive identity

Some advertisements highlight how instruments could be used to forge a new identity. Billy, a young fugitive from Virginia in 1779, shows how musical identity could be materially carried into escape. Described as playing 'well on the fiddle' and 'brought up in the capacity of a house servant', Billy likely performed for the household, making music a defining part of his role under slavery. When he fled, he took with him not only new, fine clothing but also a new fiddle - an unusual, somewhat impractical item to carry while escaping.⁸⁵ The advertisement's emphasis on the instrument suggests it was of significant value to him, opening multiple interpretative possibilities. Music may have provided emotional support, a source of income, or have been part of a strategy to pass as free. Free Black musicians were not uncommon, and when combined with the stylish clothing Billy took, musical skill could help construct a convincing free identity. Alternatively, the newness of the fiddle means he could have intended to sell or trade it, as Simone Browne asserts.⁸⁶ Described as 'a very artful fellow' by his enslaver, Billy's decision to take the fiddle appears strategic, planning for economic challenges on the run, blending practicality with performance. While historians like Franklin and Schweninger have examined the symbolic value of clothing and other material items in fugitivity, the presence of musical instruments has received far less attention.⁸⁷ Billy's case shows how music, like dress, could signify agency, strategy, and self-presentation.

Jonas, from North Carolina in 1805, offers a different kind of musical fugitivity that enabled him to blend into a role rather than stand out. He is described explicitly as a fiddler who 'took a Fiddle with him', suggesting music was not just part of his identity, but something he deliberately chose to carry into escape. Jonas's case also records that he was 'carried off by a white woman',

⁸⁵ 'One Hundred Dollars Reward', *Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser*, 5 October 1779

<https://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/md1779.xml&style=/xml_docs/slavery/ads/display_ad.xsl&ad=m1779100009> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁸⁶ Waldstreicher, p.253; Browne, p.53

⁸⁷ Franklin and Schweninger, pp.219-224

likely intending to pass as her property, as some fugitives assumed the identity of someone else's property to evade detection.⁸⁸ In this context, the fiddle could have been used to reinforce the appearance of a domestic or personal bond, as enslaved musicians were sometimes attached to white households for entertainment or service. While Billy may have used music to perform independence, Jonas's musicality may have helped him maintain freedom under the pretence of subordination. Whether intended as camouflage, survival, or expression, the fiddle functioned as a tool of identity adaptation, allowing him to move strategically through the risks of fugitivity.

If Jonas used his instrument to adapt to a new role, Nelson's story points to his fiddle as a form of emotional support and cultural continuity. When he fled from his enslaver in Texas in 1854, Nelson had already been displaced multiple times having been born in Virginia and sold through Mississippi. His key descriptor is that he was a fiddler who 'took his fiddle with him'. Unlike Billy and Jonas, Nelson's advertisement uses possessive phrasing of 'his fiddle', suggesting a deeper personal connection to the instrument.⁸⁹ Nelson's fiddle was likely hard earned and central to his enslaved identity, making his decision to take it an emotional one. Tiya Miles's exploration of the packing of Ashley's sack alludes to the careful but rushed selection of objects for escape, illuminating the prioritisation of items with profound personal meaning.⁹⁰ His enslaver also described him as 'fond of whiskey drinking', a common trope used by enslavers to depict fugitives as unruly or corrupt. Yet, as Thompson details, alcohol was often offered to talented musicians as a reward for their performances, suggesting that Nelson's enslaved life likely involved frequent participation in musical gatherings and frolics.⁹¹ Additionally, there is no suggestion that Nelson sought to pass as free; his decision to take his fiddle may have been less about constructing a new identity and more about preserving a personal one. The instrument likely connected him to a familiar musical culture among enslaved communities, where music held deep emotional and social significance. Whilst Nelson's fiddle could have served economic or disguise purposes, it more likely functioned as a portable reminder of selfhood and emotional resilience during fugitivity.

⁸⁸ 'Twenty Dollars Reward', *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, 20 May 1805, p. 3 <<http://dlas.uncg.edu/notices/notice/853/>> [accessed 23 April 2025]; Waldstreicher, p.256; For more on why see Franklin and Schweninger pp.32-33

⁸⁹ 'RAN OFF', *Texas Ranger & Lone Star*, 5 January 1854, p. 3 <<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth48302/m1/3/>> [accessed 23 April 2025].

⁹⁰ Tiya Miles, 'Packing the Sack', in *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (New York: Random House, 2021) <<https://research-ebsco-com.bris.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=0b8680fb-e866-3786-88cf-f41a71e64b7f>> [accessed 26 April 2025].

⁹¹ 'RAN OFF', *Texas Ranger & Lone Star*, 5 January 1854, p. 3; Thompson, p.110

Conclusion

Through the exploration of narratives and runaway advertisements, this dissertation has argued that music was a vital form of escape for enslaved people, offering emotional, spiritual, and physical relief from the conditions of slavery. Musical expression allowed bondspeople to create spaces of imaginative freedom, cultural continuity, and momentary transcendence from the dehumanising structures around them. Although not always intended as direct resistance, both everyday acts of musical escape and large-scale flights involving music quietly subverted white interpretations that framed Black musical expression as evidence of contentment or compliance.

Reading the two chapters together deepens our understanding of how music functioned within enslaved life. Narratives reveal music's personal and emotional significance, showing how instruments served as companions and enabled physical and social mobility, while singing offered emotional release and spiritual endurance. They provide crucial context for the advertisements, which expose how musicality made enslaved people visible, valuable, and threatening to the enslaver order. Taken together, these sources demonstrate that music's role in psychological or physical escape unsettled the structures designed to confine and control enslaved lives.

This study has been limited by its source base. Runaway advertisements have only been drawn from Virginia, North Carolina, and Texas due to the availability of online archives, restricting wider geographical comparisons. Similarly, while the WPA narratives are insightful, they are shaped by memory, interview dynamics, and limited temporal and geographic range, meaning they cannot fully capture the role of music across enslaved life.

Further research could expand this work by analysing fugitive advertisements from a broader range of states, exploring patterns in how musical skills were represented and how they contributed to escape, and integrating material culture to better understand the role of instruments themselves. Additionally, while this dissertation has focused primarily on individual expressions of musical fugitivity, collective experiences such as frolics also reveal important communal dimensions of musical escape that would benefit from further study.

Ultimately, this dissertation has shown that music was not only a form of cultural and emotional expression, but also a vital means through which some enslaved people escaped,

survived, and imagined freedom. By creating spaces of psychological and physical escape, acts of musical fugitivity subtly resisted the totalising grip of slavery.

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