

SPIRITUALS: MUSIC AND MEANING



Lesson 2: The Library of Congress Celebrates the Songs of America

A spiritual is a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African people in the American South. The songs proliferated in the last few decades of the eighteenth century leading up to the abolishment of legalized slavery in the 1860s. The African American spiritual (also called the Negro Spiritual) constitutes one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong.

Famous spirituals include "Swing low, sweet chariot," composed by Wallis Willis, and "Deep down in my heart." The term "spiritual" is derived from the King James Bible translation of Ephesians 5:19: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." The form has its roots in the informal gatherings of African slaves in "praise houses" and outdoor meetings called "brush arbor meetings," "bush meetings," or "camp meetings" in the eighteenth century. At the meetings, participants would sing, chant, dance and sometimes enter ecstatic trances. Spirituals also stem from the "ring shout," a shuffling circular dance to chanting and handclapping that was common among early plantation slaves. An example of a spiritual sung in this style is "Jesus Leads Me All the Way," sung by Reverend Goodwin and the Zion Methodist Church congregation and recorded by Henrietta Yurchenco in 1970.

In Africa, music had been central to people's lives: Music making permeated important life events and daily activities. However, the white colonists of North America were alarmed by and frowned upon the slaves' African-infused way of worship because they considered it to be idolatrous and wild. As a result, the gatherings were often banned and had to be conducted in a clandestine manner. The African population in the American colonies had initially been introduced to Christianity in the seventeenth century. Uptake of the religion was relatively slow at first. But the slave population was fascinated by Biblical stories containing parallels to their own lives and created spirituals that retold narratives about Biblical figures like Daniel and Moses. As Africanized Christianity took hold of the slave population, spirituals served as a way to express the community's new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes.

Spirituals are typically sung in a call and response form, with a leader improvising a line of text and a chorus of singers providing a solid refrain in unison. The vocal style abounded in freeform slides, turns and rhythms that were challenging for early publishers of spirituals to document accurately. Many

spirituals, known as "sorrow songs," are intense, slow and melancholic. Songs like "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," and "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," describe the slaves' struggles and identification the suffering of Jesus Christ. Other spirituals are more joyful. Known as "jubilees," or "camp meeting songs," they are fast, rhythmic and often syncopated. Examples include "Rocky my soul in the bosom of Abraham" and "Fare Ye Well,"

Spirituals are also sometimes regarded as codified protest songs, with songs such as "Steal away," composed by Wallis Willis, being seen by some commentators as incitements to escape slavery. Because the Underground Railroad of the mid- nineteenth century used terminology from railroads as a secret language for assisting slaves to freedom, it is often speculated that songs like "I got my ticket" may have been a code for escape. Hard evidence is difficult to come by because assisting slaves to freedom was illegal. A spiritual that was certainly used as a code for escape to freedom was "Go down, Moses," used by Harriet Tubman to identify herself to slaves who might want to flee north. [1]

As Frederick Douglass, a nineteenth century abolitionist author and former slave, wrote in his book *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) of singing spirituals during his years in bondage: "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan."

The publication of collections of spirituals in the 1860s started to arouse a broader interest in spirituals. In the 1870s, the creation of the Jubilee Singers, a chorus consisting of former slaves from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, sparked an international interest in the musical form. The group's extensive touring schedule in the United States and Europe included concert performances of spirituals that were very well received by audiences. While some African Americans at the time associated the spiritual tradition with slavery and were not enthusiastic about continuing it, the Fisk University singers performances persuaded many that it should be continued. Ensembles around the country started to emulate the Jubilee singers, giving birth to a concert hall tradition of performing this music that has remained strong to this day.

The Hampton Singers of Hampton Institute (now Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia) was one of the first ensembles to rival the Jubilee Singers. Founded in 1873, the group earned an international following in the early and mid- twentieth century under the baton of its longtime conductor R. Nathaniel Dett. Dett was known not just for his visionary conducting abilities, but also for his impassioned arrangements of spirituals and original compositions based on spirituals. A cappella arrangements of spirituals for choruses by such noted composers as Moses Hogan, Roland Carter, Jester Hairston, Brazeal Dennard and Wendell Whalum have taken the musical form beyond its traditional folk song roots in the twentieth century.

The appearance of spirituals on the concert hall stage was further developed by the work of composers like Henry T. Burleigh, who created widely performed piano-voice arrangements of spirituals in the early twentieth century for solo classical singers. Follow the link to view sheet music for "A Balm in Gilead," an example of a spiritual arranged by Burleigh Marian Anderson's 1924 rendition of "Go Down Moses," is taken from an arrangement to Burleigh (select the link to listen to this recording). Many other composers followed in Burleigh's footsteps. In the 1920s and 1930s, prominent classically trained artists such as Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson spotlighted spirituals in their repertoires. The tradition has continued into more recent times with classical stars like Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman frequently performing spirituals in their recitals. While spirituals continue to have a presence in the concert hall, the centrality of the form to the Black church has waned in the twentieth century with the rise in popularity of Gospel music. The Gospel tradition has preserved the lyrics of many spirituals, but the musical forms have changed dramatically as harmonies are added and the tunes arranged to suit new performance styles. For an example of the Gospel Quartet style that arose in the 1940s, listen to this recording of the Golden Jubilee Quartet performing "Oh, Jonah!" In spite of these changes, forms of the traditional spiritual continue to survive in some of the conservative congregations of the South that are either more isolated from modern influences, or that simply choose to preserve the older songs.

Many recordings of these rural spirituals, made between 1933 and 1942, are housed in the American Folklife Center collections at the Library of Congress. The collection includes such gems as "Run old Jeremiah," a ring shout from Jennings, Alabama recorded by J. W. Brown and A. Coleman in 1934, which has a train-like accompaniment of stamping feet; and "Eli you can't stand," a spiritual underpinned by handclapping featuring lead singing by Willis Proctor recorded on St. Simon's Island, Georgia in 1959. Many field recordings of spirituals are available online in this presentation, including the earliest known recording of "Come by here," or as it is often called today, "Kumbahya," sung by H. Wylie and recorded by folklorist Robert Winslow Gordon on a wax cylinder in 1926 (the middle of this recording is inaudible, probably due to deterioration of the cylinder).

The "white spiritual" genre, though far less well recognized than its "negro spiritual" cousin, encompasses the folk hymn, the religious ballad and the camp-meeting spiritual. White spirituals share symbolism, some musical elements and somewhat of a common origin with African American spirituals. In 1943, Willis James made this field recording of the Lincoln Park Singers performing "I'll fly away," which was composed by Albert E. Brumley, a white man. This field recording serves to illustrate the link between Black and white spirituals.

The genre of white spirituals came to light in the 1930s when George Pullen Jackson, a professor of German at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, published the book *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933). The book was the first in a series of studies that highlighted the existence of white

spirituals in both their oral and published forms, the latter occurring in the shape-note tune books of rural communities.

Black spirituals vary from white spirituals in a variety of ways. Differences include the use of microtonally flatted notes, syncopation and counter-rhythms marked by handclapping in black spiritual performances. Black spiritual singing also stands out for the singers' striking vocal timbre that features shouting, exclamations of the word "Glory!" and raspy and shrill falsetto tones.

Spirituals have played a significant role as vehicles for protest at intermittent points during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, spirituals as well as Gospel songs supported the efforts of civil rights activists. Many of the "freedom songs" of the period, such as "Oh, Freedom!" and "Eyes on the Prize," were adapted from old spirituals. Both of these songs are performed by the group Reverb in a video of their concert at the Library of Congress in 2007. The movement's torch song, "We Shall Overcome," merged the gospel hymn "I'll Overcome Someday" with the spiritual "I'll Be all right."

Freedom songs based on spirituals have also helped to define struggles for democracy in many other countries around the world including Russia, Eastern Europe, China and South Africa. Some of today's well-known pop artists continue to draw on the spirituals tradition in the creation of new protest songs. Examples include Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" and Billy Bragg's "Sing their souls back home."

(Source: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/ritual-and-worship/spirituals/>)

More Discussion Questions:

- 1. What is your favorite Spiritual and why?**
- 2. How d**

Oh, When the Saints Go Marchin' In

Oh, when the saints go marching in
Oh, when the saints go marching in
Oh Lord I want to be in that number
When the saints go marching in.

Oh, when the drums begin to bang....

Oh, when the stars fall from the sky....

Oh, when the sun refuse to shine....

Oh, when the moon turns red with blood....

Oh, when the trumpet sounds its call....

Oh, when the horsemen begin to ride....

Oh, brother Charles you are my friend....

Oh, when the saints go marching in....