

SPIRITUALS: MUSIC AND MEANING



Lesson 1: Birthed from the Black Experience in America

The core of African American Spirituals presents a unique cultural expression merged from the sounds of African traditional folk music and the reality of chattel slavery in the United States during the Antebellum period. The music resonates with our ears, the rhythm resounds like the beating of our hearts or the tapping of our

feet, and the lyrics encourage us to persevere through trying times. In order to fully appreciate the breadth and impact of the music as a religious, cultural, and political phenomenon, we must center the music in its origins and immerse ourselves in the human condition of its intended audience.

As Theologian Dr. James Cone notes:

I want to examine the spirituals and the blues as cultural expressions of Black people, having prime significance for their community. How did the involuntary servitude of Africans and their descendants in America reflect itself in the music? What were the techniques employed for cultural survival?

I also want to reflect on the theological and sociological implications of these songs. What did it mean “to steal away to Jesus” when one had been stolen from Africa and enslaved in white America? What did it mean to “work on a building that is a true foundation” or to “hold up the blood-stained banner for the Lord” when one had no building to call his or her own, and one’s own blood was stained with slavery? What did it mean to be a “child of God” and a Black slave in a white society? All these questions touch the very substance and “gut” of Black religion as reflected in the spirituals.

Cone, James H.. The Spirituals and the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition (p. 3).

Let us explore these questions both to further our understanding of the enslaved community and to relate their condition and historical witness to our own. That does not mean that everyone can position themselves in the place of enslaved persons. In fact, beneficiaries of enslaved labor must repudiate this too common practice of misappropriation. Rather, faithful, compassionate, and humble examination of these compositions may cultivate greater empathy, allyship, and action toward the liberation of all

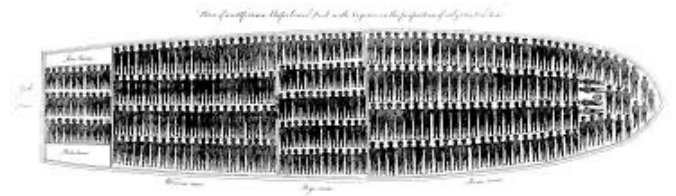
people in all circumstances in all places. That aspiration and hope makes studying and embracing spirituals meaningful and transformative.

Discussion Question: What do you know of the realities of daily life for enslaved Africans?

These works are situated in both their time and eternity. During the Civil Rights Movement, activists turned toward spirituals (even authoring new ones) as the anthem and encouragement of the movement. Activists and supporters today do the same. These songs were made for resisting.

Civil Rights Leader and Pastor Emeritus of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, OH, Rev. Dr. Otis Moss Jr. expresses the power of “African American Music and the Freedom Movement”:

The greatest judgements against slavery were deposited in the belly of the slave ships, in the “harmony and melody” of millions of God’s prophetic, poetic, history making, and civilization bearing children. W.E.B. DuBois says our ancestors, our foremothers and forefathers, maintained a “harmony and melody in an ill harmonizing and unmelodious land.” Henry Mitchell says it’s “difficult to kill culture.”



The Africans, the makers of the first musical instruments, the creators of science, the parents of medicine, art, architecture, agriculture, and the first exponents of monotheism, could not be totally crushed in a 400-year triangular slave trade. Neither could their music be exterminated in a 244-year American holocaust (chattel slavery).

There was a philosophy of freedom, a theology of liberation, a song of protest that would not surrender to the slave master’s rawhide and the hangman’s noose. Through our “weary years” and along our “stony road,” the silenced drum keeps beating and marching should keep traveling triumphantly.

(Excerpt from the African American Heritage Hymnal)

More Discussion Questions:

1. **What is your favorite Spiritual and why?**
2. **How does the message of liberation permeate the lyrics of Spirituals?**
3. **How do Spirituals offer encouragement for resisting oppression?**
4. **What hope do we find in the Spirituals for this life?**

MY SOUL'S BEEN ANCHORED IN THE LORD

(SECOND VERSION)

LEADER

In the Lord, in the Lord, My soul's been anchored in the Lord.

My soul's been anchored in the Lord.

1. I'm born of God I know I am
2. Goin' shout an' pray an' nev - er stop

My soul's been anchored in the

Been purchased by the dy-in' Lamb
Un - til I reach the mountain top

Lord

My soul's been anchored in the

O Lord! O Lord!—

Lord, My soul's been anchored in the Lord, My soul's been anchored in the Lord.