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## African American spiritual music: A historical perspective

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*In that great gettin' up morning  
Fare you well, fare you well  
When you see the forked lightning  
When you hear the rumbling thunder  
When you see the moon a bleeding  
When you see the well's on fire  
Fare you well, fare you well*

-Great Gettin' Up Mornin'-

**F**are you well? Where might you be journeying? Must you leave early in the morning, before first light? And what sights will you watch for: a flaming moon; a bleeding well? What does all this mean for the traveler?

Spiritual music served as a form of communication for slaves in the United States in the pre-civil war era. Having few possessions and even fewer written documents, slaves had songs, stories, and dances that allowed them not only to worship but to communicate in ways other than through written communication. When 250 years of slavery ended, the predominant American culture had influenced and changed the slaves, but, in return, American popular music had taken on certain elements of the music of slaves of African descent.

Authors and illustrators of children's books have revitalized spiritual music for new generations of audiences. In particular Ashley Bryan, with his books **Walk Together Children: Black American Spirituals, I'm Going to Sing: Black American Spirituals**, and **All Night, All Day: A Child's First Book of African American Spirituals**, offers richly illustrated songbooks. Spiritual music can be used as the basis for a thematic unit that links literature, the arts,

and social studies and can be made applicable to students of all ages.

### INTRODUCING CHILDREN TO SPIRITUAL MUSIC

The purpose of this article is to present a compressed history of African American spiritual music to provide educators with an introduction to this topic. Teachers may wish to incorporate the study of spiritual music in literacy education. Connections to interactive activities built upon inquiry and discovery abound. Young children may be engaged in activities involving play songs to learn more about rhyming; they might also experiment with nineteenth century cooking and learn to create simple nineteenth century clothing, or they might craft musical instruments from raw materials similar to those used by slaves. Early elementary students might create an illustrated book of spirituals, begin to discover the concept of freedom, and explore communication without using words (signals, drums, etc.), or probe the double or hidden meanings found in some of the songs. Children might also create dioramas of plantations and study astronomy to learn how a slave might "follow the drinking gourd."

Upper elementary students might interview descendants of slaves, read historical fiction, study nineteenth century American art, learn about the technology of the era, or create authentic functional crafts (e.g., drinking gourds). Middle schoolers might contrast immigration with the forced migration of slaves or study the economics of the era. High school students might compare various governmental systems that allow slavery (past and present), explore accounts of slavery in works of

historical fiction, or may produce a slide show or videotape on slavery, along with music and original narration.

Spiritual music is a topic that can be investigated through texts of many genres. Students can explore nonfiction histories of this musical form and read biographies of notable figures. The lyrics of the music offer opportunities to study poetic imagery, form, and rhythm. Allusions to spiritual music in fiction can also be found. Teaching students about African American spiritual music may help achieve many aims. In part, it may support learning in an integrated curriculum, develop multiple intelligences, emphasize teaching peace, social justice, and diversity, and bring speakers and performers into schools.

### IN TIMES OF SLAVERY

Aboard slave ships, some captains would either allow or force Africans to sing and dance to keep them fit and strong. Tribes or clans were kept separate so that they could not plan revolt. But even as they sang and danced in their own languages, the slaves were united by sorrow and fear.

In the United States, persons who were black, slaves or free, were at times denied the right to make music altogether or to make certain kinds of music, such as drumming. Generally, slaves were rigorously converted to Christianity. Slaves were told that it was God's will that they serve in this life and they were instilled with the belief that their salvation would come in heaven. Most of the slaves embraced the new faith that enabled them to incorporate their mystical ideas about the afterlife with their love of song. Ironically, as the slaveholders' inhumanity disgraced Christianity, the spirituals glorified that same religion.

Some white Americans of the era thought the Africans weren't capable of singing and playing white European music. However, as the slave culture mingled with the Protestant culture, many spirituals came to sound similar in melody to Protestant hymns and certainly spoke many of the same ideas-praising the Lord, looking for salvation, etc. However, the tribal rhythms transformed the staid, quiet hymns into new songs with rhythm and depth. The loudness, rhythm, and intonation were something that the whites had never heard before.

At a time when standards of literacy for most of the populace meant recitation (but not necessarily reading) of the Bible, and although slaves were usually denied the right to read and write, their ability to sing about Christianity made them

effectively literate in religious recitation. They demonstrated literacy through the accentuation of the musical intelligence (Gardner, 1983). Another unintended outcome of converting Africans to Christianity through teaching them white church music was that some of the spirituals came to serve a dual purpose-- to worship and also to communicate or signal information about escape routes, safe houses, and persons to trust. The songs *Gospel Train*, *Get on Board*, *Little Children*, *Behold That Star*, and *This Little Light of Mine* are well known examples of songs that gave secret messages about finding the way to freedom.

Folk music, by the strictest definition, stretches continuously from a far distant past. Part of the African tradition meant using drums. It was the drum, particularly, that allowed the slaves to at times send a sort of Morse code from one plantation to the next. They were sending messages that the masters didn't expect, but when the masters came to understand this, often drums were banned. The slaves drummed with their heels on wooden floors to achieve the same loud sounds. Slaves introduced many new instruments to the United States: the drum, the bones, body percussion, and an instrument variously called the bania, banju, or banjar, a precursor to the banjo but with no frets.

Sometimes spirituals were called sorrow songs. Slaves played them to express deep suffering, endurance, and yearning for freedom in the peaceful kingdom of heaven. Spirituals offered emotional release, psychic relief, and helped some slaves keep up morale. They sang to lighten their burdens, remind one another of hope, restore their spirits, increase their courage, and enjoy the little free time they had, as in the spiritual *Just Keep on Singin'*. The ballads mingled sorrow with great joy, faith in God's love, and optimism in other worldly release. Funerals, particularly, were filled with music. Part of the solace of song came in togetherness. Church was, at times, the only place slaves could legitimately congregate, socialize, and safely express feelings. Church was also one place they could sing songs that had dual meanings, such as *Deep River*, which was used to plan meetings to discuss escape. *Wade in the Water* meant that a slave's absence had been discovered. Singing the song would spread the word to other plantations in hopes that the runaway would hear it, know the bloodhounds were after his[her] scent, and travel by water to hide any scent and tracks.

Spirituals were often interactive songs, using call and response singing. A leader sings a main

verse, the call, and a group sings the response. An individual might make up a new verse, to be answered by the group's chorus. This impromptu musical form was perfect for sending news and updated messages in the struggle toward emancipation. Slaves also sang call and response songs as work songs, which resembled the English and Irish "chanteys." Here, again, groups working in fields, in stables or loading wagons at market places might have a chance to send messages. Other songs, such as *Scandalize My Name* or *You Fight On* were sung to teach social relations, character development, and how to relate to others. Some songs, such as *John Henry*, glorified heroic figures.

### THE RESPONSE OF SOUTHERN WHITES

As time went on, a number of southern whites, some of whom were slave masters, encouraged and even enjoyed the spiritual music for its own sake, with the exception of the drums, which were never aesthetically pleasing to the white audience. Some masters were content with music as a palliative; they felt the slaves were happier and less rebellious. Some people, unfortunately, saw the conditions of the slaves through a very limited perspective and misunderstood the slaves' love of music. They assumed it meant acceptance of their lives, or happiness. The myth of the contented slave was perpetuated by some whites.

Spiritual music was often passed to whites by slave women who took care of owners' children. Spirituals were sung as lullabies and play songs. Many southern whites grew up with warm childhood memories of these songs. In yet another incongruity, some present day societies dedicated to the preservation of spiritual music are exclusively white Southern societies.

In some Anglo-Saxon communities there was a purposeful absence of musical tradition. Music and dance were sinful and not respectable; they were thought to be frivolous. They were public displays of emotion, took time from work and prayer, and might be racy or in poor taste. Often their own musical forms were stiff and emotionless, but African-inspired music offered great emotion and variety. It is a sociological precept that the most emotionally expressive musical forms in any society usually come from that society's lowest classes. African-influenced spiritual music offered a rustic flavor in popular entertainment. Plantation masters, to amuse themselves and their guests, allowed slave bands to form. Musicians, singers, and dancers provided musical entertainment pre-

viously unheard by Anglo-Saxon ears. Nevertheless, it was entertainment, not art; only European music was considered art.

The slave bands inspired the minstrel shows. Half a century or more before vaudeville, white musicians began to borrow from black music. Minstrel shows featured white men who smeared burnt cork on their faces and sang and danced to African-inspired tunes. No blacks were allowed to perform or attend performances. Minstrels performed skits, musical comedies, and popular ballads. In the 1830s-60s minstrelsy was in its heyday. Performers used banjo, bones, dance, and imitation of black dialect. Minstrels went on "research trips" to slave plantations to listen to songs, observe clothes, and write down dialect. In this era black music began to be written down by white musicians as well as by a few black musicians. At that time, the imitation of black persons was not meant to be cruel. It was meant to show musical styles that were new and fresh. After the Civil War, however, embittered whites did portray cruel, harsh stereotypes in minstrel shows. There were antics, jokes, and comedy skits at the expense of African Americans. The portrayal of men emphasized shuffling, stupid characters or cified dudes and panderers. The women were depicted as prostitutes. Minstrels of this age did not research the emerging African American culture, but rather recycled negative stereotypes. Eventually blacks were allowed to play in minstrel shows, but, in a shameful practice, they too had to put blackened cork on their faces.

### SPIRITUAL MUSIC'S MISAPPROPRIATION BY MAINSTREAM AMERICAN CULTURE

The lack of authenticity of minstrelsy corrupted performance of spiritual music for white audiences. Through composers such as Stephen Foster an indelible, sentimental image of the gracious old south was widely promoted. To white America, common knowledge of spiritual music meant exposure to plantation music that portrayed the contented slave, while the sorrow songs, work songs, and escape songs were seldom heard. Although Foster, a white Northern composer, researched plantations to write *Swanee River*, *My Kentucky Home*, *Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair*, and other songs, he perhaps inadvertently expedited a belief that oppressors try to promote--the idea that the oppressed are happy with their station in life.

Given that this was the picture of plantation life that white audiences had come to accept, even

African American musicians needed to perpetuate this image to survive in the musical marketplace of the time. Perhaps the best known composer is James Bland who wrote *Carry Me Back to Old Virginy* for the Genuine Colored Minstrels, his troupe. Popular performance of the late 1800s downplayed the unique elements of spiritual music. Its rhythms were made more acceptable to whites. Sorrow songs were sung by individuals as ballads, not by groups as mass release of emotion or as communication.

### THE INFLUENCE OF SPIRITUAL MUSIC ON OTHER MUSICAL FORMS

In 1893, the influence of American black music was dignified when innovative composer Antonin Dvorak chose spiritual music to represent America in his *Symphony From the New World*. Even so, spiritual music has had a far greater impact on popular music than on classical music.

As early twentieth century African Americans moved to the cities, they took their music to dance halls and saloons, and influenced the blues, the tango, and ragtime. The Blues are sometimes known as secular spirituals, songs of lament about more earthly subjects such as love and money and social injustice. If spirituals were sometimes covertly protest songs, blues music protested overtly. Crime, prison, abandonment, substance dependency, loneliness, despair, and being far from home were and remain subjects of blues music.

Playing the blues required reading and writing musical notation and understanding scales, tones, and suspended tones. Blues music contained particular "broken notes" which were notated in blue, hence "Blue Notes," hence the blues! The blues were the first form of black music written down with regularity. In Memphis, a heated mayoral campaign took on blues music as a catchy campaign theme, hence *Memphis blues*. The blues also took on tango rhythms; the word "tango" came from the African "tangana," music that was played by Africans enslaved in Spain and by African Cubans and Brazilians.

Syncopation, or ragged time, was a natural part of spiritual music. The rhythms of Protestant hymns were transformed and the songs were played on African-inspired instruments. At the first World's Fair in Chicago in 1892, itinerant black musicians came together to hear each other experiment with syncopated music. One of these musicians was Scott Joplin, and ragtime, the first black dance music in America, was born. Ragtime influ-

enced 20th century piano music, notably the Tin Pan Alley Sound as well as the big band dance orchestras. Jazz, gospel, rhythm and blues, soul, and rap are all descended from spiritual music.

### PRESERVING SPIRITUAL MUSIC

In the 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Nashville's Fisk University began performing sacred songs for popular audiences. The chorus brought two causes to the world: education for African Americans and the preservation of spiritual music. The chorus still exists today.

A great figure in spiritual music in this century was Paul Robeson, one of the few African Americans of his day who could perform European classical music, the only music of its day considered "art," to enormous audiences in Europe and America. Recordings of Robeson's deep, booming voice introduced spiritual music to listeners all over the world.

Wings Over Jordan, a chorus and preservation society, and the singing group Sweet Honey In The Rock are currently promoting performance and recording of spiritual music. Smithsonian Folkways is the industry leader in producing compact disk recordings.

### EXPLORING SPIRITUAL MUSIC

The following list of books and recordings is in no way exhaustive. Libraries, book and music stores, and Internet-based merchants offer many and varied items.

#### Books on spiritual music: History, performance (Adult)

- Cleveland Public Library. (Originally published in 1937, 1991). **Index to Negro spirituals**. CBMR Monographs, No. 3. Chicago: Columbia College Center for Black Music Research.
- Cone, J.H. (1991). **The spirituals and the blues**. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Epstein, D.J. (1977). **Sinful tunes and spirituals: Black folk music to the civil war**. University of Illinois Press.
- Haskins, J. (1987). **Black music in America: A history through its people**. T.Y. Crowell.
- Hudson, W. & Hudson, C. (1995). **How sweet the sound**. Scholastic.
- Johnson, J. W. **God's trombones: Seven Negro sermons in verse**. Penguin Books.
- Johnson, J. W. (1993). **Lift every voice and sing**. Walker. (also Scholastic, 1995).
- Jones, A.C. (1993). **Wade in the water: The wisdom of the spirituals**. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Lovell, J. (1972). **Black song: The forge and the flame** [The

story of how the African American spiritual was hammered out]. New York: Macmillan.

Reagon, B.J. (1993). **We who believe in freedom: Sweet honey in the rock ... still on the journey.** New York: Anchor Books Doubleday.

Reagon, B.J. (1994). **Wade in the water: African American sacred music traditions.** Smithsonian. (Book and tape)

### Musical scores

Commission for Black Ministries of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church. (1981). **Lift every voice and sing: A collection of Afro-American spirituals and other songs.** New York: The Church Hymnal Corp.

Sandburg, C. (1923). **American songbag.**

Warren, G. S. (1997). **Every time I feel the spirit: 101 best-loved psalms, gospel hymns, and spiritual songs of the African American church.** New York: Henry Holt and Co.

### Books and activities related to spiritual music (Children's books and teachers' resources)

Becvar, P. (1991). **A place called Mother Hubbard cupboard.** Chicago: Nystrom.

Boatner, E. (1973). **The story of the spirituals.** New York: Belwin Mills.

Bryan, A. (1974). **Walk together children: Black American spirituals.** Atheneum.

Bryan, A. (1982). **I'm going to sing: Black American spirituals, Vol. 2.** Atheneum.

Bryan, A. (1991). **All night, all day: A child's first book of African American spirituals.** Atheneum.

Carter, D.R. (1995). **Music in the family.** Lindsey Publishing.

Clifton, L. (1973). **All us come cross the water.** Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Ehrlich, S. (1988). **Paul Robeson.** Chelsea House.

Fox, P. (1973). **The slave dancer.** New York: Dell.

Greenfield, E. (1975). **Paul Robeson.** New York: HarperCollinsPublishers.

Holmes, B. (1995). **Paul Robeson: A voice of struggle.** Raintree SteckVaughn.

Hopkinson, D. (1999). **A band of angels: A story inspired by the jubilee singers.** New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Hopson, D.P., Hopson, D.S., & Clavin, T. (1969). **Juba this and Juba that: 100 African American games for children.** Fireside Books. (See also Tashjian, V.H., **Juba this and Juba that: Story hour stretchers for large or small groups.** Little, Brown.)

Hurd, T., (1984). **Mama don't allow: Starring Miles and the Swamp Band.** Harper & Row.

Johnson, J.R. (1970). **Lift every voice and sing: Words and music.** New York: Hawthorn Books.

Johnson, J.R. (1993). **Lift every voice and sing.** New York: Walker. Illustrations by Elizabeth Catlett.

Johnson, J. W. (1995). **Lift every voice and sing.** Scholastic. Illustrations by Jan Spivey Gilchrist.

Jones, H. (1995). **Big star fallin' Mama: Five women in black music.** Viking.

Kroll, V. (1992). **Wood-Hoopoe Willie.** Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.

Langstaff, J. (1987). **What a morning: The Christmas story in black spirituals.** M. K. McElderry Books/Macmillan.

Langstaff, J. (1991). **Climbing Jacob's ladder: Heroes of the Bible in African American spirituals.** M.K. McElderry Books/Macmillan.

Larsen, R. (1989). **Paul Robeson: A hero before his time.** F. Watts.

Levene, D.B. (1993). **Music through children's literature.** Teacher Ideas Press.

McKissack, P. (1992). **Paul Robeson: A voice to remember.** Enslow.

Moll, P.B. (1994). **African American story books & activities for all children.** Purchase through author, Hampton Mae Institute, 4104 Lynn Ave., Tampa, FL33603-3421.

Ringgold, F. (1992). **Aunt Harriet's underground railroad in the sky.** Crown Publishing.

Schroeder, A. (1997). **Satchmo's blues.** New York: BDD.

Silverman, J. (1994). **Traditional black music series: Slave songs, African roots, gospel songs.** Chelsea House Publishers.

Silverman, J. (1996). **Just listen to the song I'm singing.** Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press.

Strickland, D. S. (1986). **Listen children: An anthology of black literature.** New York: Bantam.

Warren-Mattox, C. (1989). **Shake it to the one that you love the best: Play songs and lullabies from black musical traditions.** Nashville: Warren-Mattox Productions/ JTG. (Available as book, tape, or book and tape kit)

Winter, J. (1988). **Follow the drinking gourd.** Knopf.

Discography			
<i>Wade in the water</i>	African American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition, Vol. 1 African American Congregational Singing, Nineteenth Century Roots, Vol. 2 African American Gospel, The Pioneering Composers, Vol. 3 African American Community Gospel, Vol.4 Smithsonian/Folkways, 1994 several volumes	<i>Singing for freedom: A concert for the child in each of us</i>	Music for Little People, 1995 (juvenile folk music)
		<i>All for freedom</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Music for Little People, 1989 (juvenile folk music)
		<i>I got shoes</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Music for Little People, 1994 (juvenile folk music)
<i>Rainbow sign</i>	Rounder, 1992 (juvenile folk music)	<i>Breaths</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Flying Fish, 1988

<i>In this land</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Earthbeat, 1992	<i>Spirituals</i>	Philips 9500, 1979
<i>Live at Carnegie Hall</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Flying Fish, 1988	<i>Works</i>	William Grant Still New World Music, 1990
<i>Still on the journey</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Earthbeat, 1993	<i>The American vocalist: Spirituals and folk hymns</i>	Boston Camerata Erato, 1992
<i>Sweet honey in the rock</i>	Sweet Honey in the Rock Flying Fish, 1976 (juvenile folk music)	<i>Spirituals</i>	Simon Estes Philips, 1985
<i>Spirituals in concert</i>	Kathleen Battle Deutsche Grammophon, 1991	<i>He's got the whole world in His hands</i>	Marian Anderson RCA Victor, 1994

**REFERENCE**

Gardner, H. (1983). **Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences**. New York: Basic Books.