

Negro Spirituals: History 5/29/22  
Penny Hall

Good morning everyone.

I'd like to share a little of the history of Negro Spirituals. But before I do, there are two things to note. First, a word about terminology. Some people use the term African American Spirituals, but the preferred term seems to be Negro spirituals, because that was the correct term during that time for the people who originated them.

Second, a word about appropriation. There is some concern about white folks adopting and singing Negro Spirituals. A few years ago I asked Reggie Harris about that. He is an amazing Black singer and civil rights activist, who taught us to sing Spirituals as we rode a bus through Mississippi and Alabama. He said that as long as we know and respect the origin of the Spirituals, it is a good thing to sing them, a beautiful thing. May it be so with us.

Negro Spirituals are responses to the traumatic experiences of being enslaved. They were originally made up and sung before the Civil War by enslaved people in the South. They gathered, usually outside, to worship and pray on Sundays, the one day they were not forced to labor. Most enslaved people were taught to be Christians. The slaveholders maintained this was civilizing and saving them. But the people brought with them elements of their African beliefs and practices and combined them with Christianity. This African influence is reflected in the call and response style, often used in Spirituals, which worked especially well, since the people were forbidden to learn to read. A few slaveholders objected to converting the enslaved, worried that if they were Christians, it might be wrong not to give them their freedom. That was exactly what this religion said to the enslaved:

Because enslavement is contrary to God's will, God would liberate them.

Some Spirituals are sorrow songs, which are slow in tempo and express yearning and suffering, like "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" and "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child".

These songs show despair, both at being in a state of sin personally, and also at being oppressed and exploited. Other songs are jubilees, which are uptempo and affirmative, such as "Gonna Shout all Over God's Heaven" and "This Little Light Of Mine". These express joy, at both personal salvation, and liberation from enslavement.

Notably, spirituals such as "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd", "Wade in the Water", and "Steal Away to Jesus" contain "code" referring to escape to the free states of the North. From the bitter times of slavery, through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and right up to the present, Negro Spirituals have remained relevant, expressing longing and hope for a better world.

Right after the Civil War, students at Fisk University in Nashville Tennessee, who had been enslaved as children, formed the Jubilee Singers. They travelled around the US and Europe, introducing Negro Spirituals to the world. They saved Fisk financially and celebrated the dignity and humanity of Black people at a time when doing so was new.

We recognize that our country has paid no royalties to the creators of these beautiful songs. We hope that contributing today's plate collection to the talented musicians and actors of the Mixed Magic Theater in Pawtucket is a small way to say thank you. The United Parish in Brookline, Massachusetts has started contributing to organizations for Black musicians whenever they sing Spirituals. We hope this practice will spread throughout the country, as a way to pay our debt forward.

The thing I love the most about spirituals is that they ARE a spiritual link. They are a living expression of the feelings and ideas of the people who created them. And the spirits of those people reach across the years and touch our spirits as we sing their songs.