

Singing with Racial Justice



This series “Singing with Racial Justice,” looks at the background stories of spirituals created by enslaved people that have been included in worship. For Africans who wanted to escape slavery, songs had an important purpose. They could be used to communicate. Their songs passed from one group to another – and along with the songs came the code.

The lyrics of the song, ***Go Down Moses***, represent liberation of the ancient Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, a story recounted in Exodus 8:1. For enslaved African Americans, the story was very powerful because they could relate to the experiences of Moses and the Israelites who were enslaved by the pharaoh, who to the slaves represented the slave holders. It holds the hopeful message that God will help those who are persecuted.

However, the song had multiple messages, discussing not only the freedom of Moses and his people but also the physical freedom of runaway slaves. Many slave holders outlawed this song because of those very messages. In a biography about Harriet Tubman by Sarah Bradford, Bradford states that Tubman used ***Go Down Moses*** as one of two code songs used with fugitive slaves to communicate when fleeing Maryland. Some people even hypothesize that she herself may have written the spiritual. Others claim that Nat Turner, who led one of the most well-known slave revolts in history, either wrote or was the inspiration for the song.

Interesting Note: ***Go Down Moses*** is believed to be the first spiritual recorded in sheet music. Reverend Lewis Lockwood, while visiting Fortress Monroe in 1861, heard runaway slaves singing this song, transcribed what he heard, and eventually published it in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*.

Go Tell It on the Mountain dates back to at least 1865. The song is considered a Christmas carol because of the original lyrics about Jesus’ birth. An article on sermonwriter.com tells us that ***Go Tell It on the Mountain*** calls us to do the most natural thing in the world—to spread the news about something wonderful - the birth of the Christ child. Some claim that the inspiration for this song came from the prophet Isaiah who wrote: “You who tell good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.”

Go Tell It on the Mountain would surely have been lost long ago, except for the work of John W. Work, Jr. and his brother, Frederick J. Work. The brothers searched Appalachia for American spirituals which were passed down verbally, from plantation to plantation; very few were ever written down. In 1907 they published the song in a collection entitled *Folk Songs of the American Negro*.

In the 1920s, the Fisk Singers began to perform the song, but it saw little success. However, ***Go Tell It on the Mountain*** gained popularity with the birth and growth of blues, jazz and early rock ‘n’ roll in the early 20th Century.

Go Tell It on the Mountain chorus: “Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ was born.”

For more than a century, ***Lift Every Voice and Sing*** has held a powerful place in American history. The hymn is known as the Black National Anthem, but it's more than that. It's a history lesson, a rallying cry, a pledge of unity, and as people gather to fight for equality and justice, it is an ever-present refrain.

Lift Every Voice and Sing is a hymn written from the context of African Americans in the late 19th century, the hymn is a prayer of thanksgiving as well as a prayer for faithfulness and freedom, with imagery which evokes the biblical Exodus from slavery to the freedom of the "promised land."

The Poetry Foundation website has this first-hand account by co-composer, James Weldon Johnson:

A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us, and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children.

Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used.

Steal Away, can be interpreted as an expression of spiritual longing to be united with Jesus (in death) or as a coded message about the Underground Railroad and its promise of freedom from slavery. The song's Biblical roots (Exodus 19:16-23) are relevant to either interpretation. Moses and the wandering in the desert are linked to many African American spirituals. Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery only to return over and over to the South to lead others to freedom, was known to her people as "Moses."

The Virginia slave Nat Turner, who organized a revolt against slave owners, used the song ***Steal Away*** as a signal to call people together to talk about their plans.

Interesting Note: Spirituals were often sung in secret gatherings and enabled slaves to discover, express, and experience an interior soul space, "a home," that the harshness of slave owners and slave drivers could not reach. The wit, dedication, and success that African Americans had went far beyond what slave owners thought slaves were capable of.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, an African-American spiritual song, uses the theme of death to remind the listener of the glory that awaits in Heaven. The text refers to the Old Testament account of the Prophet Elijah's ascent into Heaven by chariot. However, some scholars suggest an alternate explanation. Abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass was adamant in his view that the Negro spirituals were not limited to Biblical interpretations but, instead, were encoded with a secret language of escape.

The second stanza of ***Swing Low Sweet Chariot*** reads, "I looked over Jordan, an' what did I see, Comin' for to carry me home, A band of angels comin' after me, Comin' for to carry me home." In this view "swing low" is a call for abolitionists to visit the southern United States where slaves were being held, Jordan might be the Mississippi River or the Ohio River, "home" would imply escape from slavery, and

the “band of angels” would be representatives from Harriet Tubman’s Underground Railroad who would lead groups of slaves north to freedom. This message would be disseminated among slaves as a warning to anticipate escape. Douglass’ view of the language of Negro spirituals such as ***Swing Low Sweet Chariot*** dispels the myth of the contented slave whose religious fervor erased the pain of enslavement.

Interesting Note: ***Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*** has been sung by rugby players and fans for decades. The song became the England Rugby World Cup theme for the 1991 Rugby World Cup and reached number 16 on the UK singles chart.

Wade in the Water: Harriet Tubman used the song ***Wade in the Water***” to tell escaping slaves to abandon the path and move into the water. By traveling along the water’s edge or across a body of water, the slaves would throw chasing dogs and their keepers off the scent.

Interesting Note: Tubman also used slave songs to relay other messages. Sometimes she had to leave a group she was leading north. She would tell them to hide and wait for her signal. If she came back and sang one song two times, they would know it was safe to come out of hiding. But if there was danger — slavecatchers in the area, for example — she would sing another song. This would mean that the group had to stay in hiding until Tubman sang the “all clear” song. If you didn’t know the signal, you might think that Tubman was singing just to pass the time of day.