

From Spiritual to Freedom Song: *Tracing the Road to Freedom through Music*

“The remark in the olden time was not unfrequently made, that slaves were the most contented and happy laborers in the world, and their dancing and singing were referred to in proof of this alleged fact; but it was a great mistake to suppose them happy because they sometimes made those joyful noises. The songs of the slaves represented their sorrows, rather than their joys. Like tears, they were a relief to aching hearts.” – Frederick Douglass¹

The road from slavery to freedom traveled by African Americans was paved with blood, sweat, toil—and song. Music, in many forms, made the drudgery of everyday work and the emotional pain of enslavement easier to bear, and became part of a life force that sustained a people. Along the way, the best-known form of African American music, the spiritual, and all its associated forms, made a lasting impact on American music and the many musical genres we enjoy today, including gospel, the blues, jazz, rock, hip-hop, and more.

The Birth of an Art Form

Spirituals, religious folk songs of sorrow, hope, and redemption, provided comfort and a means of expression to enslaved African Americans. They were a method of coping for a people forced to abandon their native traditions to take on the culture of a hostile, unfamiliar world. They were a participatory art form that survived the Middle Passage, and became a way of life.

Characterized by their use of traditional West African rhythmic and harmonic patterns, the spirituals often employ a “call and response” pattern in which a leader sings or chants a few lines and the group repeats or offers variations on the lines in response. The songs thus draw upon many of the practices central to the African cultures the slaves had been forced to leave behind, emphasizing the primacy of the spoken word, celebrating verbal improvisation, and encouraging group participation.²

The retention of those West African rhythms and harmony was evident in the tradition known as the *ring shout*, an ecstatic expression of praise in which men and women moved in a shuffling, dancelike counterclockwise movement to singing and the beat of stomping feet, clapping hands, and other improvised percussion. This tradition, practiced largely by enslaved persons on the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, was called “shouting.” It is believed that the word “shout” was derived from the Arabic word, *sha’wt*, (which pertains to the circular movement, not the singing), and the movements of the ring shout echo of that West African dance.

Lorenzo Dow Turner, an African American academic and linguist who extensively studied the culture and language of the Gullah people of the Sea Islands during the 1930s, determined the ring shout was “directly inherited from Muslim slaves that had been brought to the Sea Islands.” In doing the ring shout, they recreated the act of moving around a sacred object, similar to the movement of Muslim pilgrims around the *Ka’bah* in Mecca.³ The ring shout also spawned secular dances such as the “buzzard lope,” and was a precursor to the “Greek Step” tradition among African American fraternity and sorority groups. Variations of the “shout” still exist in some African American faith communities today.

Spirituals reflected the lives and times of those who sung them, and they soon became a discreet method of protest. As news of slave rebellions grew, the abolitionist movement took root, and more and more enslaved persons fled slavery (also known among the enslaved as “O! Egypt”) via the Underground Railroad, the songs became a secret means of communication for those who were determined to escape. Songs like “Oh, Mary Don’t You Weep,” spoke of triumph over “Pharaoh’s

army.” Songs like “Steal Away” and “Wade in the Water” contained clues to secret meeting places, or noted how to avoid capture.

Branching Out

In just about every culture, everyday tasks are often accompanied by songs to help set the pace of work or to pass the time. There were **work songs** for churning butter, pounding corn, shucking oysters, and planting, plowing and working in the fields. One example of a work song in the African American tradition is “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore.” That song, documented in *Slave Songs of the United States* (1873), was used as a rowing song by freedmen on St. Helena Island, one of the Sea Islands of South Carolina, long before it became a campfire favorite. Closely related to work songs, **field hollers and calls** were a means of communication for workers in the field. There were calls that signaled the time of day, to signal mealtimes, or to communicate the news of the day.

After the Civil War, choirs were established at the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes, Fisk University, and other educational institutions, to perform spirituals in concert. These concerts, which occurred at a time when representations of black culture were limited to minstrel shows, brought the beauty and dignity of the music to a wider audience. One of these ensembles, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, toured Europe on 1873 to great acclaim, performing for Queen Victoria. The arranged form of these songs, known as the **concert spiritual**, grew from these performances. By the early 20th century, many more of these college choral groups were formed and the concert spiritual tradition continues at many historically black colleges and universities today. African American composers, past and contemporary, who are masters of the concert spiritual include John Wesley Work, Jr. R. Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson, Jester Hairston, and Moses Hogan.

Adaptation and Improvisation

Spirituals have always been part of the black church, and their importance grew during the turbulent times of the Civil Rights movement. During that time, many traditional spirituals were adapted even further, and became known as **Freedom Songs**. Like the spirituals of old, these songs—a mixture of the old tunes often linked with new, topical lyrics—sustained protestors and Freedom Riders as they fought to further the cause of civil rights. For example, the spiritual “Hold On (Keep Your Hand on the Gospel Plow),” was adapted by civil rights activist Alice Wine in 1956 as the famous song, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize.” One of the most famous of these songs, the post-Civil War era song, “Oh, Freedom,” adopted by student activists during the Civil Rights Movement, became an anthem for social justice and equality through the present day.

References

¹Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*. (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845). 13-15.

²Annenberg Foundation. *American Passages: A Literary Survey: Unit 7, Slavery and Freedom*. <http://www.learner.org/amerpass/unit07/authors-9.html>. Retrieved July 10, 2013.

³Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum. *Word, Shout, Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner—Connecting Communities through Language*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, 2010). 18.