

African-American Spirituals

This past January Adventure, JA 2018, we experimented with an early-arrival program to encourage registrants to come to St. Simons on Thursday, a day early, to create a time and space to ease into Friday evening's open session. The JA 2019 Survey reviews reported a rousing success!

The Christ Church Frederica X-Church Service on Thursday evening provided a meditative experience that set the tone for the following three days' program. We are delighted to again offer this service on Thursday evening, January 17, 2019.

And learning more about Celtic music with "Ear of the Heart" at JA 2018 from Owen, Moley and Noirin broadened our appreciation of Irish music in the American music mosaic.

For JA 2019, we're again enhancing our understanding of American music with a form which constitutes, according to the Library of Congress, one of the largest and most significant traditions of the American folksong, the African-American spiritual (also called the Negro Spiritual, Jubilee, and African-American folksongs). The musical term "spiritual" is derived from the King James Bible translation of Ephesians 5:19: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (LOC: African-American Spirituals) — again "music of the heart."

But what is this musical distinction, "the spiritual," and how did it come to be? How have these spirituals survived the centuries?

“Spirituals” have often been confused with “gospel songs,” and, granted, there are similarities. However, according to John Wesley Work, Jr. in *African Negro Songs* (Dover Publications, 1940), the Afro-American creative folk-genius and the distinction between “imitation” and “re-assembling” must be considered.

“The complex rhythmic schemes of the African music, which up to the present time have defied analysis or even satisfactory description by European musicians, amply provide the Afro-American with a heredity capable of creating music as imperishable as the spiritual. ... While the African culture *per se* was interrupted by the African (ed. note: forced) migration to America (ed: an estimated 645,000 Africans were imported into the U.S. between 1650 and 1808 as slave labor.) the musicality necessary to create significant music was not disturbed.”

In Africa, music had been central to people’s lives. However, the white colonists of North America were alarmed by and frowned upon the slaves’ African-infused musicality, fearing the dancing and drumming might lead to rebellion. As a result, gatherings were often banned and had to be conducted in a clandestine manner, called “camp meetings,” where they were free to develop their own shared-spirituality with elements of both African cultures and the culture of the region where they now lived. According to Dr. Work, the spirituals were so dynamic that they spread from one section of the South to other sections.

In these camp meetings, “Ring Shouts” were a type of song that used African rhythm chants with a shuffling movement, as dance was not

allowed. In the fields and at work on the plantations, songs often incorporated field hollers (call and response chants).

Dr. Work: “A song-form unquestionably African in origin ... is the ‘call and response chant form.’ Its feature is a melodic fragment sung repeatedly by the chorus as an answer to the challenging lines of the leader. This melodic fragment may be comprised of a name, such as ‘Mount Zion’ in the song *On Ma Journey*, or a phrase ‘For my Lord,’ in the song *Witness*, or a sentence ‘Don’t you get weary’ in the song *Great Camp Meeting*.”

Spirituals are also regarded as codified protest and escape songs. Lyrics about the Exodus were a metaphor for freedom from slavery. *Steal Away (to Jesus)* or *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* raised unexpectedly in a dusty field, or sung softly in the dark of night, signaled that the coast was clear and the time had come to escape.

The “River Jordan” became the Ohio River, or the Mississippi, or any other body of water that had to be crossed on the journey to freedom. *Wade in the Water* contained explicit instructions to fugitive slaves on how to avoid capture and the route to take to successfully make their way to freedom.

Leaving dry land and taking to the water was a common strategy to throw off pursuing bloodhounds from someone’s trail. *The Gospel Train* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* both contained veiled references to the Underground Railroad, and *Follow the Drinking Gourd* contained a coded map to the Underground Railroad. The title itself was an Africanized reference to the Big Dipper, which pointed the way to

the North Star and freedom. It is songs with these hidden codes on which we will concentrate in our program.

After emancipation, many educated African-Americans felt that spirituals should be left behind with slavery, while others sought to preserve them. In the 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an *a cappella* African-American men's and women's chorus founded by Dr. Work at Fisk University, helped to introduce spirituals to a wider audience. The ensemble toured extensively throughout the country, beginning with a tour along the routes associated with the Underground Railroad. The Fisk singers won over critics to the idea of preserving these songs.

Many recordings made between 1933 and 1942 are housed in the American Folklife Center's collections at the Library of Congress. Among them are *Eli you can't stand*, a spiritual underpinned by hand-clapping and featuring lead singing by Willis Proctor, recorded on St. Simons Island in 1959. The Library of Congress' National Jukebox features digitized Victor recordings of a number of spirituals and hymns performed by the Fisk Jubilee Quartet (mentioned above). In this rendition of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, Dr. Work sings the lead tenor part.

Several groups keep the ring-shout traditions alive, and have performed at the Library of Congress in 2010 and 2012. The coast of South Carolina and Georgia, where a dialect of African English called Gullah is still spoken in some instances, is another place where some of these early songs have been preserved.

We at January Adventure are proud to be able to bring you examples of these beautiful spirituals as a living part of African-American history in South Georgia. Early arrivals to JA 2019 will focus on this musical form on Friday morning, January 18th, at Nall's Building.

John Wesley Work, Jr. was the first African American collector of African American folksongs at Fisk University, Tennessee. The "Dr." is not verified in our research, but used in respect for and acknowledgment of his contributions to American culture.

The following references were used to compile this article:

Work, John W. "American Negro Songs," originally published by Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1940.

Johnson, James Weldon and J. Rosamond. "The Books of American Negro Spirituals." originally published by The Viking Press, Inc. 1925. Republished by Da Capo Press, 1969.

Library of Congress, "African American Spirituals"
www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495.

Library of Congress "African American Song"
www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451.