

## Spiritual

Sandra Jean Graham

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A type of sacred song created by and for African Americans that originated in oral tradition. Although its exact provenance is unknown, spirituals were identifiable as a genre by the early 19th century. After the Civil War and into the 20th century choral, solo, and instrumental arrangements for private and concert performance emerged.

### 1. Ancestors of the spiritual.

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Spirituals grew out of an American culture of slavery that was distinguished in significant ways from slave cultures in other parts of the Atlantic world. For example there was greater contact between blacks and whites in the United States than on plantations in Latin America, which generally had a higher ratio of slaves to whites. Catholicism, a minority religion in early 19th-century America, was a majority religion in Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil; West Africans whose religious systems embraced lesser gods, talismans, and religious fraternities found ready equivalents in Catholic saints, blessed objects, and religious brotherhoods, providing a foundation for religious syncretism that Protestant dogma did not. African cultures in the southern Atlantic were more frequently “refreshed”: plantation owners in Brazil and the West Indies sometimes found it more economically advantageous to work their slaves until they died and then import new ones from Africa, whereas most North American slaveholders encouraged reproduction among their slaves, resulting in a larger native-born population.

Folk spirituals were a hybrid of West African and Anglo-American music and ritual. The ring ritual, common in many West African cultures, was recreated among the US slave population in the early 1700s and practiced widely until the Civil War. Known in the United States as a shout or ring shout, participants danced in a circle, slowly at first and then with quickening pace and intensity, sometimes for several hours, until the Holy Spirit possessed them and they fell to the floor. In Africa drums were a vital element of the ring, but US slaveholders prohibited them because they could be used to communicate messages. In their stead slaves substituted handclaps, foot stomps, and beating of sticks, which formed a polyrhythmic accompaniment to the singing and dancing. Because laws in the South prohibited blacks from assembling, slaves

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practiced ring rituals in an “invisible institution” of collective cultural practice, after midnight in secluded natural settings, in praise houses, or in slave quarters distant from white observation.

Anglo-American hymnody was another important influence on the development of spirituals. Only a small minority of slaves were members of a Christian church before the Civil War, and many slaveholders chose not to promote Christianity. Options for worship consisted of independent black churches (as early as the 1770s), white churches (where blacks were segregated by seating area or by service times), and praise houses on plantations, where the preacher could be black or white. In each case worship was conducted under white supervision. Initially African Americans who worshipped in the Christian church sang Protestant psalms and hymns from white hymnals, but this began to change with Richard Allen’s *Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns* (1801). In 1786 Allen was made an assisting pastor of Old St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church (Philadelphia), a white church with black members. When in 1794 he founded Bethel, the first independent African Methodist Episcopal church, Allen decided that the Bethel worshippers should have their own hymnal. His compilation is the earliest existing evidence of hymns favored by African Americans. Two editions were published in 1801, giving a total of 64 hymn texts without melodies. Although some of the texts were undoubtedly sung to Protestant tunes, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Bethel worshippers also made use of popular melodies, a practice consistent with revivalist activity of the second half of the 18th century. Supporting this conclusion is a comment by anti-revivalist John F. Watson, who wrote in his 1819 *Methodist Error* that such songs were “first sung by the illiterate blacks of the society.” Some of the hymns in Allen’s collection had wandering refrains; for example the refrain “Hallelujah to the Lamb who purchas’d our pardon,/We’ll praise him again when we pass over Jordan” is attached to both hymns one and five (and could be attached to any hymn in performance). The use of popular tunes and wandering refrains generated collective participation and point toward the evolution of the spiritual in the North.

The ring ritual and Anglo-American hymnody converged at camp meetings, which were one response of America’s frontier communities to the revival movement during the Second Great Awakening (c1780–1830). From the first camp meeting in Cane Ridge, Kentucky (1801) camp meetings were interracial, with black participants frequently outnumbering whites. They attracted hundreds and even thousands of people who belonged to America’s geographical and socioeconomic margins. Lasting for days or even weeks in shady groves, camp meetings called for a new kind of hymn to encourage collective singing without written aid and to match the highly emotional style of worship among both whites and blacks, which was characterized by screaming, jumping, jerking, falling down, and clapping hands. Consequently song leaders added wandering refrains to hymns, introduced repetitive phrases, set words to catchy tunes, and improvised new songs through call and response with the worshippers. In *Methodist Error* Watson complained about the “senseless songs” sung by blacks in their quarters at the camp meetings, which consisted of “short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with

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long repetition *choruses*." Such singing lasted for hours, in a "merry-chorus manner" of the harvest field, accompanied by ring dancing and body percussion. Even more alarming to Watson was that such singing "has already visibly affected the religious manners of some whites." Later in the century Fredrika Bremer and other white observers confirmed Watson's observations, although not his opinions, about these songs.

Over time the ring songs (which became known as ring shouts), wandering refrains, and improvisations coalesced into a body of song that became known as spirituals. By the late 1810s blacks began holding their own separate camp meetings (which whites sometimes attended), and spirituals were the songs they sang.

## 2. Folk spirituals, 1800 to 1860s.

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Until the late 1860s, spirituals were orally transmitted and, as such, existed only in performance. The Civil War provided many white northerners with their first extended exposure to plantation slave culture. Army officers, missionaries, educators, and war correspondents wrote descriptions of singing, shouting, and dancing among plantation slaves that gave their readers a taste of what many southerners had already experienced. Among the most balanced and detailed were the reports of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, colonel of the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the Union's first regiment of former slaves. The educational work of William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles P. Ware with the Gullah on Port Royal, a South Carolina sea island, in the early 1860s resulted in the first published collection of spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). Wartime sources were invaluable, not least because they identified a body of song connected by elements of musical style, content, and performance practice.

Common forms of spirituals include verse only, verse plus refrain, and refrain only. Spirituals typically have a responsorial structure—with calls and responses overlapping in folk performance, creating a continuous flow of sound—and considerable textual and melodic repetition. Verses often have "internal refrains":

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, *Coming for to carry me home*,  
A band of angels coming after me. *Coming for to carry me home*.

Although no one type of scale predominates, gapped scales are common; this gave many 19th-century white listeners the impression of hearing both "major" and "minor" simultaneously. In folk performance melodies had high variability and an ambiguous approach to pitch. Singers would alter the tune when repeating a verse or chorus, and embraced slides, shakes, melismas, microtones, and interjections (moans, cries, shouts), which produced a heterophonic texture. As a result it was difficult for transcribers to identify a "standard" melody, as Allen notes in his introduction to *Slave Songs*.

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The rhythm of folk spirituals was regulated by dance, an inheritance from the West African ring ritual. As with melody, the editors of *Slave Songs* commented on the difficulty of expressing it in notation. Single voices might join and drop out of the song at will, and “irregular” rhythms seem to have arisen from alternating duple and triple subdivision of the beat, as well as from changes in tempo that might result in hurried (and indecipherable) phrases. In performance rhythms seem to have been syncopated and swung, with tones lengthened, shortened, or omitted according to a singer’s impulse. Historically, rhythmic spirituals have been notated in duple meter with frequent instances of syncopation, but considering that dancing and body percussion were also rhythmic elements of performance, it is perhaps more accurate to conceive of them as being polyrhythmic. Spirituals in triple or compound meters are rare in printed editions. There are also descriptions of spirituals in free rhythm, often growing out of prayer or a sermon.

The lyrics of spirituals retold stories of the Old and New Testaments, and African Americans took special delight in stories that related the triumph of ordinary men over powerful foes, such as Daniel in the lion’s den, Jonah in the whale, and David fighting Goliath. Other popular figures included Jacob, the angel Gabriel, John the Baptist, Mary and Martha, and Jesus. Moses delivering his people from Pharaoh was an especially potent story for the slaves, who identified with the captive Israelites. Satan was frequently a comical figure, who likely represented white masters. African Americans were selective in their approach to Christianity, avoiding stories about masters and obedience. The poetry was a forceful mix of first-person declaration and metaphor that communicated in images rather than cohesive narrative, with little concern for rhyme schemes—the consequence of a compositional practice rooted in improvisation. Singers inserted real-world topics into their spirituals as well; one of the many verses to “Go Down, Moses” refers to the debate over excesses of emotional worship: “I’ll tell you what I likes de best,/Let my people go;/It is the shouting Methodist,/Let my people go” (*Jubilee Songs*, 1872).

# SLAVE SONGS

OF THE

## UNITED STATES.



New York:  
A. SIMPSON & CO.,  
1867.

William Francis Allens Slave Songs of the United States, New York, 1867.

Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC Chapel Hill

Slaves were adept at hiding their true feelings as well as their rituals from public view. Stuckey among others argues that Christianity was a protective cloak for West African religious principles and practices. He relates a story by former slave Simon Brown of a baptism in which the convert is held underwater, dying a “small death” and communing with the ancestors before reemerging. In that context the spiritual “Sister, you better get ready/You got to die/You got to die” takes on a different significance from the literal meaning of the words. Slaves, like their African forebears, did not recognize a clear demarcation between sacred and secular; rather, all elements of the divine were incorporated within the everyday world. The spirituals cannot be understood by abstracting their music or lyrics, but rather must be understood in terms of specific performance contexts. Spirituals might be sung for worship (in the praise house, as a ring shout, or at a camp meeting); for baptisms and burials; as a code

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song to signal a planned escape; as a lullaby; to accompany work; or for socializing. The occasion would determine the number of singers, tempo, singing style, and other elements of performance.

### 3. Arranged spirituals, 1860s–90s.

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The arranged spirituals of the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University came to define the genre in the second half of the century. (See Jubilee singers .) Replacing the heterophony of folk practice with synchronized homophonic (SATB) textures; dialect with standard English; ambiguous pitches with exact intonation; raw timbres with cultivated vocals; moving, percussive bodies with still posture; and an undifferentiated dynamic with a range expressive devices (for example, crescendos, ritards, holds), they created a presentational style of performance for discerning audiences.

The initial impact of arranged spirituals was in the North, as a result of the 1872 tour of the Fisk singers, and in Europe (especially Britain and Germany), where the Fisk troupe toured between 1873 and 1878. Rival concert troupes sprang up in short order, replicating the success of the Fisk troupe to greater or lesser degrees. The widespread popularity of spirituals was confirmed by parodies in minstrel and variety shows. Publications of arranged spirituals proliferated in the 1870s and 1880s, in both anthologies and sheet music editions. Major jubilee troupes published transcriptions of their own a cappella arrangements, the Fisk and Hampton Institute compilations being the most influential. Some of these arrangements were incorporated into anthologies of college songs and parlor songs.

The heyday of jubilee troupes waned by the mid-1880s, although the jubilee tradition lived on in male quartets. The first commercial recordings of spirituals were made in the 1890s (for example, the Kentucky Jubilee Singers recorded c1894), although no recordings from this decade are known to survive. The founding of the American Folk-Lore Society (1888) and especially the Hampton Folk-Lore Society (1893) supported a resurgent interest in documenting folk spirituals before they became a casualty of acculturation. A number of white performers, riding a wave of nostalgia for the “simpler” prewar era, even performed spirituals in concert, including Jeanette Robinson Murphy, Kitty Cheatham, and Polk Miller.

With the popularization of spirituals after the Civil War, opinion-makers trumpeted that the United States could finally boast a true “national” music. Those sentiments were affirmed by Antonin Dvořák, who in 1893 famously declared, “in the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.”

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## 4. Nomenclature and the origins controversy.

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From the 1890s to the mid-1980s scholars debated whether spirituals were the cultural creation of whites or blacks. Arguing for white origins were (among others) Wallaschek, Benson, White, and George Pullen Jackson. Arguing for black origins were Krehbiel, J.W. Johnson, Epstein, Tallmadge, and Lovell. The controversy became particularly vigorous in the wake of Jackson's publications of the 1930s and 1940s (and his 1954 *Grove* article on spirituals). In *White and Negro Spirituals* (1943) he matched 263 white spirituals to black cognates on the basis of printed song collections, asserting that black spirituals derived from white. Gilbert Chase among others pointed out that date of publication did not confirm date of origin in oral tradition, and was additionally irrelevant given that southern slaves were kept illiterate by law or edict.

Debates over origin tended to focus on "what remained" of African culture after Africans were brought to the United States—often termed "African retentions," "African survivals," or simply "Africanisms." Scholarship since the 1980s, however, has been less interested in cataloguing survivals and more focused on the processes, interactions, and attitudes that shaped African American culture. Spirituals reflected West African world-views applied to distinctly American experiences, in music that fused West African modes of performance with Euro-American musical styles.

The term "spirituals" derives from *Colossians* (3:16), which encourages expression of gratitude to God through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; the term was common in America, appearing in the title of the 1651 revised edition of the *Bay Psalm Book: the Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Old and New Testaments*. It is not known when "spiritual" was first applied to African American song. In *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* Epstein quotes an account of the choir of the First African Baptist Church of Richmond singing "spiritual songs" in 1855. Over a decade later in *Slave Songs* Allen and his co-authors identified "sperichils" as songs that accompany a ring shout. There was no standardization of terminology until the early 20th century. Writers and practitioners referred variously to spirituals, hymns, chants, shouts, and camp meeting or revival songs. After the Civil War and the rise of the jubilee groups, spirituals were additionally known as jubilees, slave songs, plantation songs, sorrow songs (W.E.B. Du Bois), and songs of bondage. Nonetheless, African American spirituals are characterized by a slave consciousness formed by West African cosmologies, cultural memory of African rituals and musical aesthetics, and slave psychology. No such common consciousness binds the repertory Jackson identifies as "white spirituals." Jackson determines his three subcategories of white spirituals—religious ballads, folk hymns, and revival spirituals—largely on the basis of morphology and musical features (tune family, scale, range). As a result the term "revival spirituals" masks the heterogeneity and historical complexities embedded in the songs placed in this category, among them camp meeting songs, shape note hymns, the spiritual songs of the Shakers, and German-language spiritual songs of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

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The term “Negro spiritual,” used occasionally in the 19th century (as early as 1867 in the *Atlantic Monthly*), became the standard label in the 20th. It is still in use as a historical designation, although “African American spiritual” is increasingly frequent in the 21st century.

## 5. Spirituals since 1900.

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Spirituals underwent continued development in the first half of the new century especially. samuel Coleridge-taylor 's *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* for piano (1905) included sophisticated arrangements of spirituals. henry t. Burleigh 's art song spirituals took the artistry of vocal arrangements to a new level. Whereas 19th-century arrangements had featured diatonic chordal accompaniments, Burleigh wrote piano lines that formed a sensitive complement to the voice and helped create a dramatic arc, with effective uses of chromaticism and variation in each verse. Burleigh published his first choral arrangements in 1913, and his solo vocal arrangements followed in 1916 (the most famous being “Deep River,” which immediately became a staple on concerts by both black and white artists).

Recordings of spirituals proliferated. Quartets and quintets from Fisk University recorded a cappella spirituals in the arranged choral style of the 19th century (with some updated harmonies) starting in 1909. Important composers–arrangers–directors who continued the black college choir tradition of spirituals included R(obert) Nathaniel Dett and Clarence Cameron White (Hampton Institute), william levi Dawson (Tuskegee Institute), and John Work, II (*see Work: (1) John W. Work (i)*) and John Work, III (*see Work: (3) John W. Work (ii)*) (Fisk University).

During the Harlem Renaissance (1920s–40s) composers continued to render spirituals as art music. Burleigh composed orchestral arrangements of spirituals in addition to vocal settings. Hall Johnson and J(ohn) Rosamond Johnson arranged spirituals for their respective professional choirs, who performed them in concert, Broadway shows, and films. Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson became celebrated interpreters of spirituals in recitals. Symphonic works by William Grant Still and William Levi Dawson, among others, revealed musical inspiration from spirituals. The anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, while acknowledging the beauty of art-song arrangements, labeled them “neo-spirituals” because they did not reflect the aesthetics and emotional quality of folk practice. Folklorists continued to collect and publish anthologies of folk spirituals, and were especially active in the renaissance era.

Collections of spirituals for congregational singing in revivals, evangelistic meetings, churches, and schools began to appear in the 1910s with John Nelson Clark Coggin's *Plantation Melodies and Spiritual Songs* (c1913), Homer A(lvan) Rodeheaver's *Rodeheaver's Plantation Melodies* (1918), *Songs and Spirituals* (1921), and the Baptist publication *National Jubilee Melodies* (c1920s). Pointing toward the development of a more conventional hymnal was R(obert) Nathaniel Dett's *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro* (1926), an



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extension and major revision of earlier Hampton Institute publications of spirituals. Dett organized the “hymns,” as he called them, thematically, according to the way spirituals were already in use at Hampton:

Hymns of Admonition (e.g., “De Ole Sheep Done Know de Road”) Hymns of Christian Life (“I Ain’t Going to Study War No More”) Hymns of Aspiration (“In Bright Mansions Above”) Hymns of Judgment (“In Dat Great Gittin’-Up Mornin’”) Hymns of Praise (“Rise and Shine”) Hymns of Tribulation (“Keep Me from Sinking Down”)

Dett noted that despite the spirituals’ singularity of poetry, melody, harmony, and rhythm, “they correspond in sentiment with all the basic ideas of orthodox religious dogma.” As such Dett’s 26 categories correlated more closely with those found in contemporaneous white hymnals than did Work’s earlier general categories (sorrow, faith, hope), put forth in his *Folk Song of the American Negro* (1915).

As (African) American musical genres proliferated in the 20th century, spirituals were absorbed into new performance styles, such as gospel (for example, the Golden Gate Quartet, Mahalia Jackson, Rosetta Tharpe), blues (for example, Charley Patton), and jazz (for example, Johnny Griffin Orchestra). Spirituals were a favorite among performers of the 1950s–60s folk revival (for example, Pete Seeger, Odetta). During the Civil Rights Movement spirituals lived again in folk practice. As freedom songs they circulated in oral tradition much as they had in the early 19th century, sung communally with lyrics tailored to local conditions. Choral arrangements for high schools, community groups, and professional choirs multiplied; for a good overview of influential choral arrangers see *The Oxford Book of Spirituals* (2002), edited by Moses Hogan, who was a leading force in developing and extending the musical tradition of spirituals. Although folk performance of spirituals has dwindled dramatically, it lives on in pockets of the United States, especially in churches of the rural South.

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