

The History of African American Spirituals



Spirituals have a long history in African American culture in the United States. A spiritual is a religious song that relates to the experience of enslaved African Americans.

Introduction to Spirituals

The word *spiritual* comes from the King James translation of the Bible verse Ephesians 5:19. The verse reads, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Spirituals are a blend of the Christian religion enslaved Africans discovered in the American South, and the African-styled songs from their homeland.

Enslaved Africans would blend their style of music with Christianity. Singing as a form of communication is deeply rooted in African American culture. When Africans were kidnapped and shipped across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage, they used singing as a way to communicate during the voyage and to stay alive through the oppression and unjust treatment.

Spirituals During Enslavement

In the eighteenth century, enslaved Africans would gather together in "camp meetings" outdoors. There, they would sing and dance. Sometimes it would appear as if they were in a trance. At times they would also perform "ring shout" style, a shuffling, circular dance with chanting and hand clapping. This is seen in the faster versions of the spirituals "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Jesus Led Me All the Way."

Enslaved Africans were drawn to parallels between their difficult situation and those in Biblical stories. There was Moses, who would lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. After the Israelites' emancipation, Moses led the escaped Israelites through the desert to the promised land, or Canaan. In the Bible, Canaan was the land God promised to the Israelites. This hope for a better future is found in the lyrics, "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan." Influential abolitionist and former enslaved person Fredrick Douglass wrote of this spiritual in his book *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Douglass said this spiritual spoke of getting into heaven. He said it was also about the enslaved people arriving in the North, where they could find freedom.

At times, enslaved Africans would sing spirituals to strengthen their resolve, or to persevere toward a better future. Not only would the songs have double meanings, but they would sometimes have messages. Enslaved Africans would also sing songs while working in the fields. Some of the spirituals would have encoded meanings, like "Go Down, Moses," which Harriet Tubman used when she was a conductor for the Underground Railroad. Tubman would use the song to let people know she was there to help them while they escaped.

Spirituals During Emancipation

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, signed by Abraham Lincoln, meant that some enslaved people were free. But slavery continued to exist. African Americans still did not have the same rights as white Americans. Even after the 13th Amendment to the Constitution passed in 1865, making slavery illegal in the whole country, African Americans still did not have equal rights.

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As newly emancipated African Americans searched for jobs and homes, they continued to face unjust treatment. Some examples of the racism they encountered included not being able to get jobs and fair pay because of the color of their skin. During this time, African Americans would continue to use spirituals to share their frustration over this unequal treatment. The spirituals were also about their hope for a better life.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott from 1955 to 1956 used spirituals to strengthen people's resolve during their year-long refusal to use the bus. During the boycott, African Americans would share rides or walk. In some cases, their commute to work took longer than if they caught the bus! One spiritual they sang to persevere through this time was "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize." It was based on the gospel hymn "Keep Your Hands on the Plow," but they changed the words to fit their current boycott circumstance. The Montgomery Bus Boycott marked the start of the civil rights movement, whereby people would come together to demand equal treatment for all Americans.

Spirituals During the Civil Rights Movement

The 1960s was the era of protest songs and freedom songs. Spirituals changed into songs that had a political message, or that hoped for change. During the civil rights movement, people used music to express their views on justice and equality. Protest songs were a popular form of music. They could be heard both at rallies and on the radio.

"Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" was just one of many songs adapted from spirituals during the civil rights movement. The movement's famous song, "We Shall Overcome," mixed the gospel hymn "I'll Overcome Someday" with the spiritual "I'll Be Alright." Combining the songs allowed protesters to link their past trials with their current unequal treatment.

During the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, musicians Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul and Mary performed to show their support for the movement. Often protest songs describe something that is going on in a community, or the world. These songs describe the kind of changes they would like to see happen. Protest songs can be angry, sad, or optimistic. They have been written in all different styles, from folk to soul to hip-hop. Songs like "What's Going On" and "A Change is Gonna Come" are examples of protest songs.

Impact of Spirituals

Without a doubt, spirituals have been an important part of African American culture. During each period of struggle, African Americans have used songs to help them persevere. Songs are used to communicate messages. Spirituals are used to hope for a better future for African Americans and their families. While there have been different styles of spirituals over the years, the purpose has been the same: to sing about the African American experience.

Student answers will vary but may include:

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Directions: Complete the table with information from the text.

Write key details about spirituals during enslavement.

- Enslaved people would gather together in "camp meetings" and sing spirituals.
- Enslaved Africans would sing spirituals while working.
- The style of the spirituals could have a "ring shout" style, a shuffling, circular dance with chanting and hand clapping.
- They would sing spirituals with hidden messages about running away, like "Go Down, Moses."

Write key details about spirituals during the emancipation period.

- Emancipated African Americans would use spirituals to share their frustration or hope for better treatment.
- During the bus boycott, people sang a new version of "Keep Your Hands on the Plow." They changed some of the words and called them "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize."
- Spirituals focused on dealing with unequal treatment after slavery ended.

Write key details about spirituals during the civil rights movement.

- Some spirituals changed into protest songs that were political.
- The protest songs were heard both at rallies and on the radio.
- The movement's famous song, "We Shall Overcome," mixed the gospel hymn "I'll Overcome Someday" with the spiritual "I'll Be Alright."
- Musicians Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary performed to show their support for the movement.

Use the details of the different types of spirituals to compare spirituals in the Venn diagram.

