

Negro Spiritual Royalties Initiative

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We're talking about *Negro Spirituals* today and a new social justice initiative that we at the United Parish are starting. First - let's get the name out of the way. The term *Negro Spirituals* refers to the enormous body of folk songs created collectively by enslaved Africans in America and their descendants. In Black communities, that is the preferred term for this body of music. In the predominantly white community, they are more typically called *African American Spirituals*, or simply *Spirituals*. Other terms used for them are *Jubilee Songs* (named after the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University) and W. E. B. Du Bois called them *Sorrow Songs*. Du Bois was the first Black American to earn a PhD from Harvard, and was one of the founders of the NAACP. It is worth noting here that in his collection of essays called *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois poignantly describes the predicament of Black Americans:

”It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

More recently, some are calling the Spirituals “Black Liturgical Music.” Words matter, and while using the word Negro, even in this context, gives me discomfort, I can acknowledge that the discomfort is mine, and comes from the shame I feel as a white person of unearned privilege. I therefore defer to the Black community's preferences, respectfully using the term *Negro Spiritual* shortened to *Spiritual* from time to time, and welcome the feelings of discomfort. They remind me that there is still work to be done.

Unlike other hymns and worship music, *Negro Spirituals* were not published until after the names of their creators were long forgotten, if they were ever even known. They are both witness to the horrors of slavery and racism, and witness to a merciful, faithful and just Christianity which we still aspire to live into today. Even before the abolition of slavery,

these songs had started making their way into the collective memory of all Americans. Since then, they have become the source of literally **countless** musical arrangements and compositions published and sold to churches, schools, community choruses, orchestras, bands, and all manner of musical organizations. The Negro Spiritual is also the intellectual property of the enslaved Africans in America and their descendents.

In an excerpt from *O Black and Unknown Bards*, written by Black American poet, lawyer, civil rights leader, and author of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, James Weldon Johnson asks -

*O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?*

*Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?*

*Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.*

*What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?*

*How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.*

*Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars*

*At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.*

*You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ*

This poem sums up so many important aspects of the *Negro Spirituals*: they are undeniably brilliant, capturing over and over again the Holy Grail of music that happens when true artistry is matched by depth of feeling. The feelings they communicate are universal. Few of us will ever have to experience the level of suffering that enslaved Black people endured throughout their lives, but all of us have experienced grief, rage, love, gratitude, joy, bitterness, and compassion. The *Negro Spiritual* reflects the totality of the human experience, and the entire spectrum of human emotions. The result is that these songs are almost irresistible to the human spirit.

Escaped slave Frederick Douglass describes it like this:

“When on their way, the slaves would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune... I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject.”

It is so hard to understand what caused the more abusive slaveholders (of which there were many) to be so hate-filled. How were their hearts not softened by the undeniable humanity expressed by the people they claimed superiority over? How did they not hear God's voice imploring them to turn back? It's hard not to notice the eerily familiar hypocrisy running

rampant in slaveholding culture. Who, again, are the ones with violent and evil tendencies? Who, exactly, are the ones who don't feel pain or empathy? The devil here has not even bothered to put on a disguise.

For the last few years in particular, I have struggled with how to appropriately, and respectfully use *Negro Spirituals* in our worship services at the United Parish. They are some of the most powerful, beautiful, and expressive music that I know. My parents grew up in and near Birmingham AL. My sister and I grew up in Nashville, then Knoxville TN. My father's choirs always sang arrangements of Spirituals, and my mother regularly assigned the H. T. Burleigh arrangements of *Negro Spirituals* to her classical voice students. I grew up regarding the *Negro Spiritual* as high art, knowing that these songs are both important and tragic. I never considered the possibility that as a white person, I shouldn't be singing them.

But now, white America is waking up (once again) to the challenges and injustices faced by people of color in the US, as is evidenced by the fact that we have a sign hanging on the outside of our building earnestly explaining that **Black Lives Matter**. We know that *Negro Spirituals* came from the mouths of enslaved Africans in America. What right DO we have to sing them? What if we misinterpret them, or culturally appropriate them, or what if we are just too white to sing them?

These songs have been so deeply incorporated into the canon of folk music in America that most of us don't even know which ones are *Negro Spirituals* and which ones aren't.

Let's test our knowledge - I'll start , you all pick up where I leave off.

This Little Light of mine
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
I've Got Peace Like a River
We Shall Overcome
Lord, I want to be a Christian
I'm gonna lay down my burdens...
Go Tell it On the Mountain....

Ezekiel Saw the Wheel...
It's Me... it's ME oh Lord, Standing in the Need of Prayer
Let Us Break Bread Together
Nobody Knows ... the Trouble I've Seen
When Israel was in Egypt's Land... "let my people go"
He's Got the whole world in his hands
Do Lord, O Do Lord, O Do Remember Me
Wade in the Water...
We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder....
Gimme That Old Time Religion
Rock a My Soul
Mary Had a Baby
As I went Down in the River to Pray
Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burnin'
I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table -
In that great Gettin' Up Morning
My God is a Rock in a Weary Land
Ride On King Jesus
Soon and Very Soon,
Were You There when they...
Great Day! Great Day the Righteous Marching

How many of you knew that *all of these songs are Negro Spirituals?*

(Each of my sung prompts elicited accurate responses from the congregation, and not one person was aware that all of the songs listed were Negro Spirituals.)

A quick history review:

In 1619 - the first Africans were brought to America to become slaves, beginning **244 years of legalized slavery on U. S. soil.**

1775 - About 150 years later, the Revolutionary War began, with between 5 and 8,000 African-Americans fighting for the Patriot side, and another 10-20k fighting for the Crown.

150 years later, in 1772 - John Newton, an English slave trader turned abolitionist and clergyman, wrote *Amazing Grace*. This song would later become one of the iconic anthems in the Black community, reaching its true artistic glory in the voice of Mahalia Jackson.

1808 - Slave Trading was abolished.
Meanwhile, slavery remained legal in the US for another 55 years.

1857 - The *Dred Scott Ruling* determined that the US Constitution was not “intended” to **protect people of African descent.**

1860 - The Republican party declared slavery itself to be “a crime against humanity” as part of their presidential campaign. Though nothing came of it, it is the first example of the term being used in this way.

1863 - The **Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves, but** ONLY as punishment to the troublemaking states that had seceded from the Union.

1865 - The 13th Amendment finally abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the US after 264 years. EXCEPT when it was used as **punishment for a crime.**

1867- Three northern abolitionists compiled and published *Slave Songs of the United States*. According to its authors, **the first 7 songs were already sung in both white and Black churches** by the time the collection was published,

1871 - **(150 Years AGO)** The Fisk *Jubilee Singers*, made up of *emancipated former slaves*, brought Spirituals to the concert hall, and raised the equivalent of \$3.5 million in today's dollars, for Fisk University. The Jubilee repertoire quickly made its way into concerts, and Vaudeville, Minstrel Shows, and as always, church.

1929 Harry Thacker Burleigh, among the first acclaimed Black American composers, published *Jubilee Songs of the United States - Negro Spirituals* arranged in classical form.

1936 - Works Progress Administration, a part of the New Deal, started collected testimony from former slaves. They collected, in 1936, over 2,000 first hand accounts from just 2% of the former slaves still living at the time. (If these statistics are correct, there were at least 100,000 former slaves still living in America in 1936.)

Experts estimate that there are at least 1,000, and possibly up to 6,000, *Negro Spirituals* in existence coming exclusively from the period of legalized slavery. By all accounts, they were entirely improvised, and were “honed and refined” according to the tastes and opinions of the participants. They were passed around from one plantation to another, taking on new forms and variations as they went.

Historical accounts also indicate that slaveholders fully recognized the strong musical tendencies of the enslaved, noting that singing was incorporated into nearly every aspect of life. Many enslavers encouraged singing, and paid more for the best song leaders, as it allowed the enslaved to work longer and harder. Other enslavers forbade the enslaved from singing and even praying, with no apparent objective other than to break their spirits.

For the enslaved Africans in America, singing was an act of self preservation. Singing helped to build a desperately needed sense of community, and an alternative way to communicate. Singing was a source of strength and comfort, and mental distraction from the cruelties of daily life. As an act of artistic expression, singing reinforced a sense of self worth. Spirituals were utterances of the heart, expressing whatever needed to be expressed. Sadness, grief, joy, exhaustion, heartache, humor, courage, compassion, anger, frustration, fear, but most importantly, hope. Singing was (and is) a form of prayer, and these prayers reveal an absolute faith in God to make things right someday.

In order to keep singing *Negro Spirituals*, we need to address the debt we still owe to the enslaved Black people who created them. Black Americans have been last in line to receive recognition and financial compensation for the extraordinary contributions they’ve made to American culture over and over again. If we truly are the hands and feet of Jesus, then isn’t it our responsibility to do something about this?

Today, we are starting an ongoing initiative of collecting "royalties" for the *Negro Spirituals* we sing in worship. Whenever we sing them, we will collect a special offering that will support the development of Black musicians. For the next two years at minimum, we have chosen [Hamilton-Garrett Center for Music and Arts](#), in Roxbury as the recipient of the royalties that we collect. Imagine if churches, schools, and music publishing companies started to pay even a small amount in royalties to organizations that empower African-American artists and musicians? If I had to guess, I would imagine that *Negro Spirituals* have been arranged, published, and recorded **millions** of times for and by churches, marching bands, handbell choirs, church choirs, college choirs, professional choirs, children's choirs, schools, recording artists, community choruses, solo instrumentalists and singers, and even orchestras. Virtually every musical organization imaginable has very likely incorporated *Negro Spirituals* into their repertoire at one time or another. Most have done so on a regular basis,

For the individual, the cost of participating in this practice is minor, but the cumulative outcome could be huge. Little by little, this practice could become an instrument of a larger quest for restorative justice in which all of us participate.

Would that change things?

Maybe.

In her book - [Life Begins at the End of Your Comfort Zone](#), Jacqui Lewis says

"Keep your eyes on all that's good and beautiful and possible in the world. Because the stories we tell create the people we become."

YES to that, I say! Love is held hostage by guilt and shame, and there is much to be ashamed of. The past will continue to haunt us until we start making things right. Let's start being honest with ourselves, and ask what Love calls us to do, and what Black Americans require us to do. With God's help, may we truly become the healers of the breach.

Congregational Pledge

The plate offering from today's service will go to
Hamilton-Garrett Center for Music and Arts in Roxbury.

We at the United Parish in Brookline
acknowledge the history and significance of the African American Spirituals,
traditionally called Negro Spirituals, sung in today's worship service.

With great respect and deep gratitude
for the extraordinary musical contributions
made to American music by Black people,
we offer our thanks and praise to God
for the creators of the Negro Spirituals and their descendents.

We pledge that each time we sing the spiritual songs
of enslaved Black people in our worship together:

We will sing and hear them with holy reverence and open hearts;
We will honor the unnamed musicians who created them;
And we will pay royalties to organizations
promoting the advancement of Black artists and musicians in America,
starting with Hamilton-Garrett Center for Music and Arts.

We understand that the debt owed to Black musicians and artists
can never be fully repaid.

Through our prayers, our gifts and our actions,
we will strive to do all that we can
to end systemic racism in America.