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Listen: Brookline church embraces power of Negro spirituals

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Standing at the pulpit Sunday, light streaming in through the stained glass windows behind her, United Parish Minister of Music Susan DeSelms began to sing.

“This little light of mine…” she started.

“…I’m gonna let it shine,” the congregation finished.

“Swing low…”

“…Sweet chariot.”

And so it went, on and on, down a list of songs that have become deeply embedded in American culture and modern faith, songs whose creators — enslaved Black Americans — have gone largely unacknowledged, their names lost to time. With her call-and-response, DeSelms highlighted the songs’ popularity and their cultural context, historically overlooked among white audiences.

On Oct. 31, United Parish in Brookline launched a new program to recognize the culture and history behind these songs, called Negro spirituals, and give their creators recognition and “royalties” long overdue.

During these services, the church’s plate offering will benefit Dorchester-based nonprofit Hamilton-Garrett Music and Arts, dedicated to passing on and preserving the legacy of Black music.

What are Negro spirituals?

Negro spirituals are rooted in American slavery, where African slaves merged their own culture with Christianity, often resulting in songs linking Bible stories to their experiences in bondage. Spirituals played an important role in early African American Christianity, particularly at a time when most slaves were illiterate and Bible verses were memorized and passed along by word of mouth.

“It was all grounded in their faith; their faith in God, their faith in one day that they would be free, their faith in their ability to overcome the horrors of slavery, and also their faith in themselves,” Hamilton-Garrett Executive Director Gerami Groover-Flores said in an interview.

According to Groover-Flores, some spirituals, like “Wade in the Water,” sought to pass along messages about escape plans; Others were meant to spread hope.

More than 150 years removed, Negro spirituals contain universal emotions and messages, DeSelms said.

“What I hear and feel in them is this strain, this perseverance, this ability to sing through pain and get through it,” she said in an interview. “Everything under the sun is in them: It’s loneliness. It’s anger. It’s grief. It’s joy … and courage, and gratitude.”

Negro spirituals became part of the American repertoire through performers such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a touring ensemble started in 1871 and made up of students from the historically Black Fisk University in Nashville.

'Hallelujah': Fisk Jubilee Singers win first Grammy after 150-year career

Forging a partnership

Today, the songs remain popular mainstays in many congregations, Black and white.

But the songs raise some questions, particularly for white singers and parishioners, DeSelms noted. Who should sing them? Should non-Black singers use the African-American Vernacular English dialect while performing Negro spirituals?

"There's a lot of angst around all of it, but also a deep love for this music and also an understanding that it's connected to one of the most atrocious times in U.S. history," she said. "So, what do you do with that?"

Recently, as she was coordinating payment to license congregational hymns and songs, DeSelms reflected on the lack of similar royalties for Negro spirituals. There, she saw an opportunity to educate her congregation and acknowledge Black artists' impact on the American canon.

And in Hamilton-Garrett, she found the perfect partner.

The nonprofit is affiliated with the Historic Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Roxbury and named after two of its members, soprano and longtime Boston Public Schools music teacher Elta Garrett and contralto Ruth Hamilton, a proponent of Negro spirituals, according to the school's website.

While the school looks to preserve Black music, the point isn't to develop the next Coltrane or R&B star, Groover-Flores said.

"What we do is we try to inspire them based on the music that is the foundation of our heritage," she said, adding, "How do we continue to tell the story so that it never dies?"

Even though United Parish's program won't benefit those who initially wrote or popularized Negro spirituals, like Hall Johnson or H. T. Burleigh, the collected "royalties" will benefit their descendants, the next generation of Black musicians passing through Hamilton-Garrett, Groover-Flores explained.

'Be faithful, be flexible': Hingham churches learn to embrace permanent changes to worship

Credit where credit is due

DeSelms said her goal is to include Negro spirituals in the United Parish service at least once a month.

She acknowledged some white parishioners may feel uncomfortable seeing or using the term “Negro” — she was uncomfortable, too. She encouraged community members to embrace that discomfort and look inward, considering the term's slavery and Jim Crow associations, as well as the generations of racial injustices swept under the rug.

It’s important to include that acknowledgment — even if it’s uncomfortable — because the name “Negro spiritual” serves as a reminder that the music is not just for entertainment, Groover-Flores said.

“From our perspective as the African American community, especially for us at Hamilton-Garrett, preserving this work, ... it’s gotten to the point where I think it’s OK when people say ‘African American spirituals,’” she said. “But when you just remove us altogether from the title and you say, ‘Oh, we’re singing the spirituals,’ you’re removing the credit.”

U.S. history: Curriculum, books were written by and for white people. What about kids of color?

DeSelms said she hopes parishioners walk away with a deeper understanding of the cultural history, as well as a better sense of what they can do to address racial injustice. For her part, Groover-Flores said she hopes United Parish gets excited about this new opportunity.

“Yes, it's going to get messy, and we're going to have to dig deep and have conversations that maybe we might not have looked forward to having," she said, adding she hopes the church is "excited about the work that is ahead."

That work, as Elta Garrett noted Sunday, is ongoing.

“I’m sure you can see the struggle,” she told the congregation, pointing to her white hair. “My hair is not dyed; the struggle is here. But I would do it all over again. ... The road has not been easy, but the task continues.”