

Spiritual Music: religious songs created by enslaved African American people in the United States.

Here are some big Ideas to think about as you explore this tradition:

- a) Why did enslaved African Americans connect strongly with the themes/stories found in the bible? Why do these same themes appear throughout the spiritual songs?
- b) Why were spirituals sung by slaves? What purpose did they serve in their lives?
- c) What influence did spirituals have on later music/culture? Why are these songs still sung today?

Part I: Spirituals and the Ring Shout

Forms of religious song among enslaved African Americans were developed in secret meetings called "camp" or "bush" meetings, as most slave holders in the early slavery period feared that Christianizing slaves might lead to rebellion. After the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner in Virginia in 1831, many slave owners felt that Christian teachings might actually help to prevent rebellion by inviting ministers to preach to slaves on topics such as obedience. But the slave's secret religious meetings with their distinctive musical forms continued to be practiced even after this Christianization process had begun. In camp meetings African Americans were free to develop their own shared spirituality with elements of both African cultures and the culture of the region where they now lived. "Ring shouts" were a type of song from the southern tidewater region that used African rhythm and chants performed with a shuffling movement, as dance was not allowed.

-Library of Congress

Listen to some examples of ring shouts: Can you identify any vocal traditions?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmmTMg3e5Uo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5U2xTslu21w>

Part II:
Spirituals as a source of inspiration and motivation

<http://www.spiritualsproject.org/sweetchariot/Freedom/source.php>

Go Down, Moses

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSvU39fdYyA>

Part III)

Spirituals as Expressions of Resistance and Protest

<http://www.spiritualsproject.org/sweetchariot/Freedom/protest.php>

Paul Robeson: All God's Chillun Got Wings

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEtMhIB9olg&list=PLJ3X0XM_SmvPutsT59kVxNHE1Y9B8kcR-&index=29

Part IV)

Spirituals as Coded Communication

Perhaps the best known use of spirituals in the service of freedom during the slave period was the imbedding of hidden or coded messages in song lyrics for the purpose of secret communication on the Underground Railroad. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass revealed to his readers that some spirituals interpreted by outsiders as referring to life after death in Heaven, were actually understood within the enslaved African community as meaning a determination to reach freedom in the North.

Two common types of coded spirituals were signal songs and map songs. In a signal song, a singer or group of singers communicated in code that a certain event such as a planned escape from a plantation was imminent. In a map song, the lyrics actually contained elements of a map that directed people to significant points of escape along the routes of the Underground Railroad. The most famous map song was Follow the Drinking Gourd, which used the metaphor of a

drinking gourd to symbolize the constellation of stars known as the Big Dipper, containing the North Star, an important compass guide for individuals and families who needed to be certain that they were continuing to travel in the direction of north as they made their way to freedom.

<http://www.spiritualsproject.org/sweetchariot/Freedom/coded.php>

Research at least two of the following spirituals. Check out the lyrics and listen to an audio or video. Try to identify secret coded messages about the underground railroad and running away from slavery.

Follow the Drinking Gourd

Wade in the water

Steal Away (to Jesus)

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Gospel Train

Part V

Check out the lyrics to “Amazing Grace” Why would slaves embrace this song and its message?

http://www.negrospirituals.com/songs/amazing_grace.htm