

### CHAPTER 3. COLLECTIONS, COMMUNICATION, AND CODED TEXT

The text of spirituals is a fascinating and dynamic entity. Their animated lyrics are filled with rich imagery and dramatic storytelling. They frequently recall Bible stories, featuring the epic struggles of large communities of people, as well as heroic figures who led these people to victory. The symbolism of such stories must certainly have provided a sense of association, hope, and inspiration to those bound by slavery. These “stories in song” were sung for multiple purposes: to provide religious instruction, to offer encouragement to people clearly in desolate and desperate circumstances, and finally, as a subversive call to action—a call to escape the bonds of slavery to freedom in the north. The language of the spirituals was enigmatic, to be sure, containing double, and even triple meanings to those that sang them. However, those that were listening, slave owners and slave masters, rarely heard more than what they wanted to hear...simple religious songs.

A point of clarity is required. *Not all spirituals contain coded messages. And not all coded messages (in spirituals) were used in the Underground Railroad.* Many of those enslaved escaped on their own, without any direct assistance from the Underground Railroad system. Some of the so-called “secular” spirituals were just everyday songs about work and play. Furthermore, some coded messages in the spirituals were not specific to any particular escape plan, but instead, referenced an abiding desire for freedom.

The coded messages were effective because the language that was used had more than one meaning. Clearly, there was a need for this type of communication—a need to “own” something that was far more precious than any material items they were denied through slavery. A deficiency exists in terms of how many conductors (and to what extent) are aware of these coded messages. This study hopes to provide helpful information on this subject.

## Oral Tradition

The unique character of this genre of music is significant, in that, there are great variations in texts that survive for each song. Rather than the customary manner of transmitting music across ages and cultures (through written musical notation), spirituals were perpetuated and promoted through a distinct word-of-mouth tradition. This begins much earlier than slavery in America. The African culture embraced the word-of-mouth tradition; this did not change once people were enslaved and brought to American shores.

Spirituals are folk songs, created by anonymous, uncelebrated poets who were enslaved on the plantations of the American south. Through their persistence and popularity, they have formed an important and inspiring repertoire of song. However, one of the challenges of spirituals is that they were born out of oral tradition. Inconsistencies—in text, in melody—occur frequently. Repetition of parts, or even entire sections of text, also arises with regularity within differently titled pieces of music. There is good reason for this, of course: the music was not written down, at least not in a comprehensive and systematic way, until 1867.<sup>26</sup> It was shared from generation to generation, and from plantation to plantation, by word-of-mouth, which allowed for great variance in what was known for each song. “Time and ‘group editing,’ according to John W. Work, are “the two greatest known purifiers of folk song. For instance, one person may create a song in which there are some unnatural intervals or some words that do not quite fit the meter. If the group is favorably impressed with the song as a whole, gradually, and without conscious effort, it replaces these unnatural intervals and misfit words with more suitable ones.”<sup>27</sup> The advantage to this oral tradition (in terms of using music to interact secretly) was that there were so many variations to the tunes and text that it was difficult for adversaries to keep track of the song, and ultimately, the meanings of those songs.

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<sup>26</sup>William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1867). This landmark collection, undertaken as part of the Port Royal Project, was the first organized effort of preserving this folk music.

<sup>27</sup> John Work, *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 11. “The inferior and incongruous material found in many spirituals has resulted from the fact that these songs became so prolific within such a short time period.”

## Early Collection of Spirituals

Would we know about spirituals if they had never been written down? It's not very likely. Certainly, some descendants of the tradition would have passed it down through the generations, but so much may have gotten lost over time. Additionally, many of the formerly enslaved may have avoided passing down their knowledge of the spirituals because they may have felt that it was a painful reminder of the past—one that they did not hope to remember. Even the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who first began their concert singing tradition in 1871, programmed a traditional, European-style concert program (and performed it with great facility), but the audience's reaction was not what they had hoped for. They decided to include two spirituals, which were very "enthusiastically received" by the audience; thus, the concert spiritual made the transition from improvised field songs to *a cappella* choral arrangements.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to 1867, no organized attempt was made to preserve spirituals for the future. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, three missionaries working in within the Port Royal Experiment, met with newly freed slaves and asked them about the songs they were singing. They carefully transcribed what they heard, trying to represent, as best they could, the text and music that each singer offered. The resulting collection of text and lyrics was inspiring, but in their unique character, also presented a great challenge. When the three missionaries met to compare their collections, they noted the many variations of the text and tunes of each song. Singers may have presented related, but unique variations on the same text or tune.

It is likely that performance of these tunes also varied widely, with several differences in practice and style, depending on location, the person "leading" the singing, and the community of singers that joined in. For this reason, in all of the primary collections of spirituals, many variations occur. This variation in text may be seen as something that may rob the spiritual of

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<sup>28</sup> John Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame; the Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 403.

its strength; on the contrary, the consistency in intent (delivered by such a variety of means) offers a musical/cultural vehicle that was incredibly effective.

We must be so thankful that early spiritual collectors recognized the inestimable value and inspiration of this art and strove to preserve it before it was lost or forgotten. “In the wake of these publications, the significance of spirituals was recognized along with the risk of loss if left to oral tradition alone.”<sup>29</sup>

There were obvious difficulties in the collection of these tunes. It was necessary to establish a sense of trust in order to meet and work with these newly freed singers. Understanding the differences in text, diction, rhythm, and melody that occurred from each singer to the next was daunting. Because there were often several versions of the “same” song, collectors noted which singer had provided them with the spiritual, even though they didn’t know the original composers of the tunes. Recording rhythms and melodies was also difficult because of the stylistic differences between the spirituals and the more-familiar (to the collectors), European-style music. Collectors wrote that “every effort” was made to transcribe the music exactly as it was heard, but that it was challenging to accurately represent the captivating singing style.<sup>30</sup> As Eileen Southern suggests, it was “practically impossible to identify the author of a spiritual and find its original form. The song is a stone, polished by the river of oral tradition.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Eileen Guenther, *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals* (St. Louis: MorningStar, 2016), 336.

<sup>30</sup> Allen, Ware, and McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs*, iv. “The difficulty experienced in attaining absolute correctness is greater than might be supposed by those who have never tried the experiment, and we are far from claiming that we have made no mistakes. What may appear to some to be an incorrect rendering, is very likely to be a variation; for these variations are endless, and very entertaining and instructive.”

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I’ve Seen: the Big Book of Negro Spirituals* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 100. “In her fundamental study of American black music, Eileen Southern underscores that it is practically impossible to identify the author of a spiritual and to find its original form. The song is a stone, polished by the river of oral tradition. It is modified according to circumstances. Also, this music is particularly difficult to transcribe.”

André Thomas devotes a portion of his book, “Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual”, to the discussion of four of these primary collections.<sup>32</sup>

*Slave Songs of the United States* by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, 1867.

*The Jubilee Singers and Their Songs* by J.B.T. Marsh, 1880.

*Negro Folk-Songs: The Hampton Series Books I-IV, Complete* by Natalie Curtis-Burlin, 1918.

*Befo’ de War Spirituals: Words and Melodies*. E. A. McIlhenny and Henry Wehrmann, 1933.

There are other important early collections as well, notably, those by John Work, James Weldon Johnson, and Nathaniel Dett.

### **Using Music to Communicate**

Communication within the plantation community was necessary, not only to plan escape and secret meetings, but probably more so as a means of coping and emotional survival. Music was the vehicle that carried communication from one person to another, from a community of enslaved workers to the neighboring plantation—ultimately, it carried messages throughout the south and along the routes of the Underground Railroad as well.

“Through all these musical manifestations, a communal identity was built up. The slaves did not have a wide choice of means to recognize each other in the diversity of their origins and grow into belonging to a community of destiny. But song was one of them. It allowed the group to exist, and to last, on the basis of a common identity that was forged by the creativity of vocal expression.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> André Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007). “The heartfelt voice of the slave resonated today thanks in large part of the efforts of several collectors who sought to preserve the spiritual. Among the most important are four anthologies from the nineteenth century. Viewed chronologically, they clearly show a development from simply capturing the melodies to the crafting of actual arrangements of these melodies. Perhaps their greatest value is in the glimpse they provide into the performance of this music in both social and religious situations on the plantation.”

<sup>33</sup> Chenu, *The Trouble I’ve Seen*, 94.

Simple musical notes and rhythms, text and expression, were able to provide a enough camouflage to mask the real subject of the communication. Because it was so effective, music was a primary form of communication.

Harriet Tubman's biographer, Sarah Bradford relates why music was the primary form of communication, using Tubman's own words: "Slaves must not be seen talking together, and so it came about that their communication was often made by singing, and the words of their familiar hymns, telling of the heavenly journey, and the land of Canaan, while they did not attract the attention of the masters, conveyed to their brethren and sisters in bondage something more that met the ear."<sup>34</sup> She continues, telling stories of songs that Tubman would sing to signal that she was going to leave, or that it was safe (or unsafe) to come out after her arrival.

Although undocumented—certainly, if it *had* been documented, it would not have remained secretive and would have put many lives in danger—musical communication was extremely effective, and masterfully utilized by the enslaved, as well as those that sought to help them. Arthur Jones helps us to understand the power of using music to communicate on the plantation:

“Although it is impossible to determine with any certainty the dates of composition of any specific songs, there is no question that spirituals and other songs were used frequently for secret communication among fellow captives or between captives and people in the free community working to facilitate escape or revolt. Clearly, enslaved Africans employed spirituals and other folksongs as secret coded communications, announcing plans for escape, revolt and clandestine meetings, or cheering on comrades in battle.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Coded Text**

“And so, in common with folk songs of all ages, the Afro-American spiritual employed a mask and symbol. Using them as they did, they were able to write songs that dealt with every phase of the slave's life and to do so without fear of being punished.”<sup>36</sup> Coded message was used

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<sup>34</sup> Sarah Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: The Moses of her People* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 16.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Wade in the Water*, 45-48. The songs were "secret" largely because people outside the tradition failed to understand them.

<sup>36</sup> Lovell, *Black Song*, 193.

so much within the spirituals, it's astonishing that slave masters didn't understand that there was something subversive afoot in the fields. It was effective because the messages, although seemingly simple bible stories or religious references (at least, that was how they were interpreted by those that managed and owned the plantations), actually had multiple meanings. Frederick Douglass, in "My Bondage and My Freedom" writes,

"A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan. I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north—and *the north was our Canaan*. It had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of our company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery."<sup>37</sup>

The enslaved were able to communicate freely through song, to complain without suspicion, to plan secret meetings, to make plans for escape, or cheer on someone else that had escaped. Through their coded music, they shared the collective burden of the community and transformed their sorrow and suffering into art. Arthur Jones reminds us that the meanings of these codes were flexible, and could change depending on who was singing, and who was being sung to: "Of course, none of these songs had any 'fixed' meanings but were available 'in the air' to any African person needing them for any specific purposes. In the mainstream of the African tradition, the songs were highly functional; they could be improvised or utilized in various ways."<sup>38</sup> Through the varied repertoire of spirituals, major themes emerge as vehicles for coded message delivery. Following is a list of the most commonly-used themes for coded messages.

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<sup>37</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 94.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Wade in the Water*, 58. The meaning was fluid. It meant what they *wanted* it to mean, or what they *needed* it to mean. This was all done in the moment, but was easily understood by the community while slave masters stood by, oblivious to the clever communication.

## **Common Themes/Text in Coded Message Spirituals, Context, and Translations:**

- **Heaven/Canaan/Promised Land/Gospel Feast/Mansions/Kingdom**
  - Context: the enslaved often sang of heaven and their longing to go to heaven
  - Translation: freedom, the northern free states, Canada, Africa (Liberia), or heaven
- **Hell/Egypt**
  - Context: where evil, sin, and bondage resides
  - Translation: being sold further south, slavery, death, sin
- **Deliverance/Being Redeemed/Baptized/Good Religion**
  - Context: every man whose soul is converted deserves deliverance
  - Translation: freedom, escape, religious conversion
- **Jubilee**
  - Context: the Year of Jubilee (from Leviticus 25:8-10) referred to the day, every fifty years, when the Israelites received their freedom and their property returned
  - Translation: emancipation, freedom, escape
- **Heroic Figures (Moses, Daniel, Elijah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Hebrew Children, Peter, Paul, Silas, Lazarus, Noah, Jacob, Gideon, Joshua, Nicodemus, the Israelites)**
  - Context: heroic figures of the Old Testament were ordinary men with extraordinary faith
  - Translation: these figures represented the ordinary men and women enslaved on plantations hoping to be delivered from slavery, as well as those heroes that sought to help them to freedom (agents of the Underground Railroad)
- **Evil Figures (Satan, Pharaoh, Egyptians, Rich Man Dives)**
  - Context: any persons that stood in the way of freedom
  - Translation: slave traders, slave masters, slave owners
- **Water/Jordan River/Red Sea/Rivers/Baptism/Rain/Fountains**
  - Context: a reference to water meant either a journey (on the other side was freedom), or an action of the water (aiding in escape by concealing the scent from dogs) washing the soul cleanly into a new life (baptism, finding freedom)
  - Translation: Ohio River (most-used meaning), Atlantic Ocean (to return to Africa), or any other river that posed as a barrier to freedom
- **Transportation (chariots, ships, trains, wheels, wings, shoes, walking, running, flying, Jacob's ladder)**
  - Context: any items that would facilitate traveling and escape/modes of transportation
  - Translation: methods of movement and escape on the Underground Railroad
- **Possessions (shoes, robe, crown, harp, bells, trumpet, wings)**
  - Context: since the slaves didn't "own" anything, the promise of having these things in heaven or when they were freed was exciting
  - Translation: they were symbols of traveling, devotion, praise, or freedom
- **Place (Drinking Gourd, Canaan, streets of gold, Promised Land, pearly gates, Jordan River)**
  - Context: providing a sense of "place" kept the focus forward to escape
  - Translation: North Star, Canada, freed states, escape routes



There are, of course, more of these coded texts in the spirituals, but this list encompasses a good deal of the most commonly used themes. Discussing and disseminating these coded songs through our contemporary lens is a very different prospect than in their original context so many years ago, yet because they are songs about life, they still captivate.

“They (coded spirituals) did not survive for their secretive nature, and for us to examine them. They exist because they are deeply moving and inspiring. One reason for the survival of these songs...is that the secret nature of certain songs precluded their being revealed to collectors and observers, for obvious reasons. It is impossible to determine the extent to which this phenomenon was at work in their disappearance in the oral history repertoire. I believe that one additional reason why many of the spirituals have survived is because the original inspirations behind their creation derived from deeply meaningful, archetypal human experiences, relevant not only to the specific circumstance of slavery, but also to women and men struggling with issues of justice, freedom, and spiritual wholeness in all times and all places.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jones, *Wade in the Water*, 47. This music survives because it was meaningful to the community. It provided hope and support to those who needed it. It was a reflection of the human experience, sorrow and suffering converted into inspiring art.