

A Call To Justice and Mercy Do It Yourself BIG SING

Welcome to our first ACTJAM Big Sing!

This fall we looked at the history of racism in our country from different perspectives. Four hundred years of history in the book *Stamped*. A closeup of the civil rights movement and Jim Crow south of 1961 in the movie *Hidden Figures*. Now we turn to Black music and the stories told through song about the struggle for freedom and of hope.

Since we can't be together in person, we're doing the next best thing -- a do-it-yourself BIG SING. It's like a do-it-yourself walking tour of a city. There's a map and a route. There's a description to read about each sight. Finally, there's a ticket to get you inside.

Amy will be our guide through this Big Sing. She's chosen the songs, mapped our route and written a short description of each selection. After you've read it, click on the YouTube link(s) to listen to the recording that Amy selected. That's your ticket 'in' to the song. If it's familiar --sing along!



Amy Hartsough
Dir. of Music

Hello Bethel! I'm so honored to lead this tour of Black music and its influence on music and culture in the U.S.

First, a bit of history. When slaves were brought to our shores starting in 1619, they brought with them their spiritualities and religions. Once here, they mixed their African musical inspirations with the stories of Jesus and his Jewish ancestors, especially the stories of Israel's struggles, enslavement and freedom in the promised land.

Spirituals are the codified creations of these stories, a type of religious song. Spirituals proliferated in the last few decades of the eighteenth century up to the abolishment of legalized slavery in the 1860s. The spiritual constitutes one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong.

We're going to look at a few popular ones, the stories that surround them, and conclude with two songs that are popular especially with children.

~ Spirituals ~

Wade in the Water - Swing Low, Sweet Chariot - Steal Away

Wade in the Water, first published in 1901, has been attributed to Wallace Willis, a freedman who sang with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, although this song like *Swing Low* and *Steal Away* has unknown origins. All three songs were associated with the Underground Railroad.

Harriet Tubman used spirituals to communicate with slaves who wanted to escape. Tubman is the most famous of the Underground Railroad's "conductors." Because the Underground Railroad of the mid-nineteenth century used railroad terminology as a secret language to assist slaves to freedom, it's speculated that songs like *I got my Ticket* were a code for escape.

A spiritual that was certainly code for escape was *Go down, Moses*, used by Harriet Tubman to identify herself as a Moses figure to slaves who wanted to flee north. *Wade in the Water* alerted slaves to go into water to avoid capture by slave owners' dogs.

Here are some examples of code words in spirituals:

Heaven/life after death = freedom in the North

Canaan, the Promised Land = freedom

The Drinking Gourd = the Big Dipper, stars that point North

A chariot or train = the Underground Railroad, a means to escape to freedom

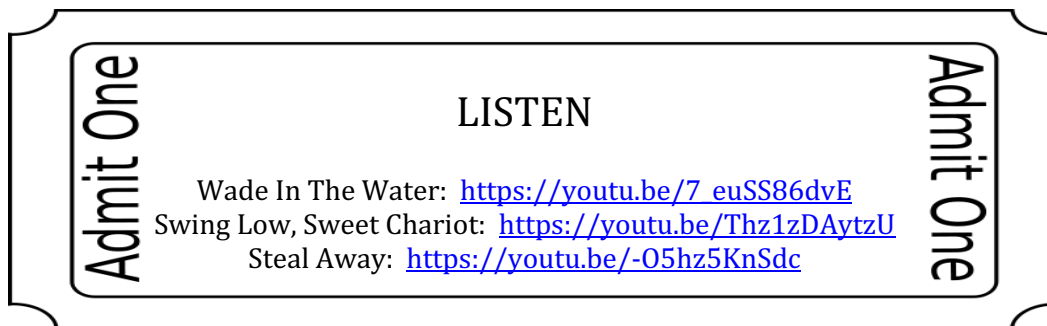
Steal away = sneak away secretly

Moses = a freedom fighter, an Underground Railroad conductor, or Harriet Tubman

The Jordan River = the Ohio River or other body of water to cross to get to freedom

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot was one of Tubman's favorite songs. If a slave heard this song, he/she would know they had to be ready to escape.

During a ten-year span Harriet Tubman made 19 trips into the South and escorted over 300 slaves to freedom. As she once proudly pointed out to Frederick Douglass, in all of her journeys she "never lost a single passenger."



Let Us Break Bread Together - Michael Row the Boat Ashore

Let Us Break Bread Together is a spiritual attributed to the West African Gullah/Geechee slave cultures that developed in the coastal areas around St Helena Island, Beaufort, and Charleston, South Carolina.

Michael, Row... is a Black spiritual first noted during the American Civil War at St. Helena Island, one of the Sea Islands of South Carolina. It was sung by former slaves whose owners had abandoned the island before the Union navy arrived to enforce a blockade.

Charles Pickard Ware was an abolitionist and Harvard graduate who had come to supervise the plantations on St. Helena Island from 1862 to 1865, and he wrote down the song in music notation as he heard the freed men sing it. Ware's cousin William Francis Allen reported in 1863 that the former slaves sang the song as they rowed him in a boat across Station Creek. The song was first published in 1867 in *Slave Songs of the United States* by Allen, Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison.



He's Got the Whole World In His Hands

He's Got the Whole World... is a traditional African American spiritual, first published in 1927. There is not much known about this beloved spiritual, except that it was born in the fields of the enslaved south.



Go Tell it On the Mountain

John Wesley Work Jr. (August 6, 1871 – September 7, 1925) was the first African-American collector of folk songs and spirituals, and also a choral director, educator, and songwriter. With his wife and his brother, Frederick Jerome Work, John Work Jr. began collecting slave songs and spirituals, publishing them as *New Jubilee Songs as Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers* (1901) and *New Jubilee Songs and Folk Songs of the American Negro* (1907). The latter book included the first publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which he may have had a hand in composing, although this is not confirmed. The spiritual itself dates back to at least 1865.

The earliest version of the spiritual appeared in *Religious Folk Songs of The Negro, as Sung on The Plantations*, new edition (1909) with the heading “Christmas Plantation Song.”



~ Gospel & Freedom Songs ~

This Little Light of Mine

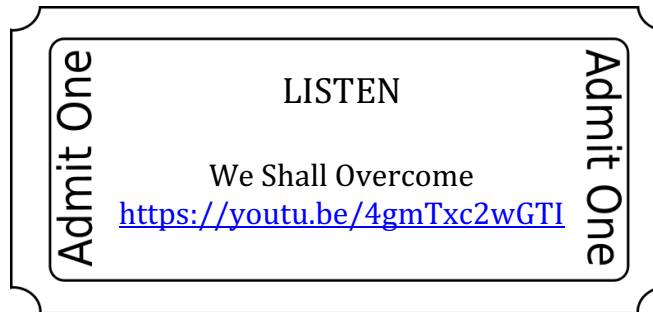
We are now moving onto gospel songs and freedom songs. *This Little Light* is a very popular gospel song from perhaps 1920s claimed by the civil rights movement through Zilphia Horton and the Highlander Folk School. Ms. Horton was a white woman, a daughter of a coal mine owner, and a trained classical musician who was determined to use her talents to bring about radical change and social justice for all. She made sure this song was used during the civil rights movement (1954-1968).



We Shall Overcome

This song was introduced to the Highlander Folk School as the spiritual *I'll Overcome Someday*, by Black composer Charles Albert Tindley. Zilphia Horton then changed this hymn to the song we know now, taught it to Pete Seeger, and the rest is history.

Here in Madison, we sing it at the Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations every year. This is the Civil Rights Movement's "torch song".



Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around

This is one of the freedom songs from the Civil Rights Movement based on the spiritual *Don't Let Nobody Turn Me Round*. A version of that song was included in the 1940 book *Negro Folk Songs* edited by John W. Work.

In 1961 the Freedom Riders set out to protest segregation in interstate travel, leaving from Washington, D.C., and traveling into the Deep South. Their buses were ambushed and burned; their bodies beaten by mobs, the Klan and Southern police. Many of them ended up in Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary, charged with trespassing. Voices rose out of the cells, expressing their determination, often singing *Ain't Gonna let Nobody Turn Me Round*.

My mother, Alice, a Creole woman who grew up in the segregated South, and marched with Dr. King, taught me this song when I was being bullied as a child. As I learned more about the origin of this song growing up, it became my anthem of sorts - how if I remain steadfast to my own integrity, with God at my side, no one had the power to take away my humanity.



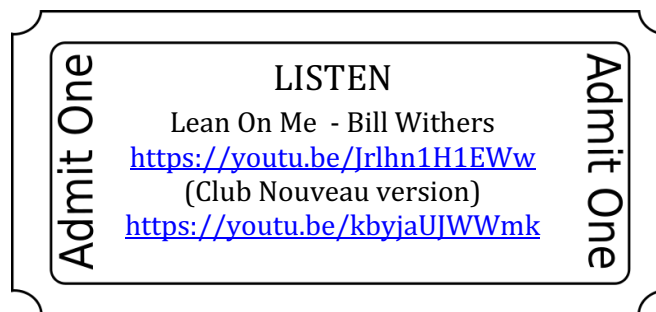


Before we go onto our last song, a few words about Black slave music influencing ever forward. Spirituals played a significant role as vehicles for protest at intermittent points during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many of the freedom songs of the period, such as Oh, Freedom! and Eyes on the Prize, were adapted from old spirituals. Both of these songs are performed by the group Reverb in a video of their concert at the Library of Congress in 2007.

Freedom songs based on spirituals have also helped to define struggles for democracy in many other countries around the world including Russia, Eastern Europe, China and South Africa. Some of today's well-known pop artists continue to draw on the spirituals' tradition in the creation of new protest songs. Examples include Bob Marley's Redemption Song and Billy Bragg's Sing Their Souls Back Home.

Lean on Me

This beautiful song written by Bill Withers in 1972, has gospel roots, and one can hear the influence. In an interview, Bill Withers explains the inspiration for *Lean on Me*, which he wrote after he had moved to Los Angeles, and found himself missing the strong community of his hometown of Slab Fork, West Virginia. Withers recalled: "I bought a little piano and I was sitting there just running my fingers up and down the piano. In the course of doing the music, that phrase crossed my mind, so then you go back and say, 'OK, I like the way that phrase, Lean On Me, sounds with this song.'"



Thank you for your time, and I hope this tour of Black music whets your appetite to learn more, listen more, and feel the music of our Black brothers and sisters with a new, fresh understanding!