African American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition

Compiled and annotated by Bernice Johnson Reagon
Recorded 1993, produced in collaboration with National Public Radio

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The African American concert spiritual tradition began with a tour by Fisk College students in 1871 and continues today on college and university campuses throughout the United States. Combining African and European musical elements, arranged spirituals have enriched and expanded the western concert tradition.
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INTRODUCTION

Lord, I got a right,
Lord, I got a right,
Lord, I got a right,
I got a right to the tree of life.

This declaration song of freedom belongs to a body of musical literature unparalleled in documenting the voice of African American people struggling to battle the yoke of bondage. The songs are called "spirituals."

What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world.

W.E.B. DuBois

The makers of the spirituals, looking toward heaven, found their triumphs there. But they did not blink their eyes to the troubles here. As the best expression of the slave's deepest thoughts and yearnings, they speak with convincing finality against the legend of contented slavery. This world was not their home.

'Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home,'
or,
'I'm a rolling through an unfriendly world.'

Sterling Brown

I did not, when a slave, fully understand the deep meaning of those crude and
apparently incoherent songs. I was, myself, within the circle, so that I could then neither hear nor see as those without might see and hear. They breathe the prayer and complaint of souls overflowing with bitterest anguish.

Frederick Douglass

African Americans moved out of slavery into freedom with the story of their journey wrapped in the songs they sang. The repertoire that became known as spirituals held the cries, and moans, and shouts, and yes, the hallelujahs of a people rising and falling as we moved beyond our shackles. This repertoire of sacred songs has continued to travel within the African American culture, and today, as we near the end of the twentieth century, we can still hear them sung in churches, in homes, and from the concert stages throughout the world.

With this recording we share the journey of the spiritual as it moved with its people into freedom, transformed by the more westernized hybrid culture created within the schools organized to educate African Americans. To understand the story of the spiritual and the relationship between the spiritual as concert repertoire and the existence of Fisk University, one must understand the intensity of the African American’s desire for education during and after slavery.

For more than a hundred years before the end of slavery there had been clandestine schools and tenacious attempts by Black people, though slaves, with occasional support from whites, who risked everything to gain an education. When the day of Jubilee came, the floodgates opened, and the people and their children poured into every opportunity they could find to gain access to an education.

This recording offers a selection of spirituals that belong to a tradition that began in the struggle to save a new school for freed men and women who desperately wanted an education. The story began on the campus of Fisk College (now Fisk University) in Nashville, Tennessee, established by the American Missionary Association, with the help of the Western Freedman’s Aid Commission and General Clinton B. Fisk of the Freedman’s Bureau.

Fisk opened six months after the end of the Civil War, on January 9, 1866, in what had been a Union Army facility. Like all the schools which were started during Reconstruction expressly for free and freed Black people, Fisk struggled from day one. Because Fisk was committed to providing a liberal arts education for its students, it was not very popular with northern philanthropists, who tended to support instead schools that stressed industrial education programs. There were no funds coming in, and a few years after it opened its doors, Fisk was on the verge of closure.

It was the school’s treasurer and music teacher, George L. White, who came up with the idea of taking his students on a tour of northern cities attempting to raise money to save the school. They already had some experience performing in Nashville and area towns, so in spite of those who thought it would fail, in 1871, George L. White and eight students — seven of whom had been born in slavery — started out.

In the beginning the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ repertoire consisted of ballads, arias, and a few other religious and popular choral art songs of the day. Although in their
own free time the student singers would sing the songs that came out of their experience in slavery, they did not view this sacred repertoire as concert material. It spoke with an inside voice that they could understand. George White and his band of singers stepped out on faith that first tour in 1871. Many times faith seemed all they had. During the first month and a half they were turned away from hotels, they lacked warm clothes needed for the northern weather, and they often barely made enough money from their concerts to cover their expenses. While their early concerts were fairly well received, it seemed that their goal of raising enough to help save their school was far fetched. When they started out they did not have a name, but White named them the Fisk Jubilee Singers to avoid references in local newspapers to the group as "minstrel singers."

During mid-November the group appeared before the Council of Congregational Churches in Oberlin, Ohio, and that changed the direction of the tour. Here they performed some of their spiritual songs, "Steal Away" and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and the response was electric. This audience reaction brought the group close to $1,500 and a person to book the group as well as a crucial invitation to perform at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, the pastor of the abolitionist Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. They received rave reviews in the New York press, and their fortunes changed. As the Fisk Jubilee Singers continued on the road with their song — to Connecticut, to Massachusetts, to New York — so did the flow of accolades and funds. They raised over $20,000 on that first tour and in 1972 published Jubilee Songs, a collection of the spirituals they had performed for the first time to concert audiences.

On their second tour, the Fisk Jubilee Singers set sail for Europe where they sang before royalty and audiences who flocked to hear the singing of these wonderful songs. They performed with great success in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales; on the continent they sang in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Italy, and Spain. In 1878, after seven years of touring, the Fisk Jubilee Singers had raised nearly $150,000 for their school and in the process had become the first Black singing group to garner international acclaim.

The success of this repertoire and the popularity of the Fisk Jubilee Singers spawned a cultural movement, as every Black school formed groups to go on the road. The Fisk Jubilee Singers continued for many years as representatives of Fisk University and as a private organization. They took the spirituals many times to Europe, India, and Australia, and an offshoot group spent five years in South Africa during the 1890s performing and teaching the spirituals to school and church groups throughout the country.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers created a new repertoire for the concert stage when they performed the spirituals. They were singing the songs that they had brought with them out of slavery. However, the songs were changed as the musicians began to create arrangements based on the harmonic and compositional techniques and traditions of the European classical music in which they had been trained. They rendered the songs with smoother tones and in harmony. On the lips of these educated songsters, the lyrics flowed forth with a more polished pronunciation. As well, the
in the twentieth century in African American churches and in formal concert performances by high school, community, and university ensembles such as those represented in this collection. There was a conscious effort to be sure these songs would be heard as serious musical compositions. Composers and arrangers like Harry T. Burleigh, Nathaniel Dett, Hall Johnson, Margaret Bonds, Florence Price, and William Dawson led the way with new arrangements. There were more than one hundred schools of higher education for Blacks by the 1930s, and the concert spiritual repertoire was an important part of the culture of most of the schools. Choral groups were organized in African American colleges and universities: Fisk University in Tennessee, Hampton Institute in Virginia, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Atlanta University in Georgia, Howard University in the nation's capital, Rusk College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, and Southern University in Louisiana were all schools that developed strong performance and teaching programs in the concert spiritual tradition.

Singers trained in the classical European tradition who began to perform spiritually as a part of their formal concert repertoire included Roland Hayes and Marion Anderson. During the 1920s another great voice, Paul Robeson, performed full concerts of the spirituals as a tribute to their beauty and power. These pioneers created a path that others followed—Leonynge Price, William Warfield, Simon Estes, William Brown, Florence Quivar, Jessye Norman, and Kathleen Battle.

In this collection of spirituals we have included performances from three college campus groups: The Fisk Jubilee Singers, Howard Uni-
ways in which it reflects the world view of its creators. Understanding African American spirituals requires a combined approach: one must study performance styles, musical qualities, and social function together. Spirituals record the struggle of a people to survive, but like no other histories, they also have the power to touch the souls and stir the emotions of the people who sing and hear them. The African American spiritual and its evolution within American society—like a great river shooting off hundreds of tributaries to be joined together somewhere further down the way—gives us the richest opportunity to view African American choral tradition in a way that unleashes the powerful human story it holds.

2. We Shall Walk through the Valley in Peace
Princely Players, recorded June 12, 1993.

We shall walk through the valley and the shadow of death,
We shall walk through the valley in peace.
If Jesus himself shall be our leader,
We shall walk through the valley in peace.

Other lines:
There will be no sorrow there...

3. Roll, Jordan, Roll
Princely Players, recorded June 12, 1993.

Chorus:
Roll, Jordan, roll; roll, Jordan, roll,
I want to go to Heaven when I die
to hear Jordan roll. [repeat]
6. **Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho**
Fisk Jubilee Singers, recorded May 2, 1993.

**Chorus:**
Joshua fit [fought] the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho,
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and
the walls came tumbling down.

**Verses:**
You may talk about your man of Gideon,
You may talk about your man of Saul,
There’s none like good ole Joshua At the battle of Jericho.

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho...

Up to the walls, oh, Jericho
He marched with spear in hand,
"Go blow them ram horns," Joshua cried
"’Cause the battle am in my hand."

Then the lamb ram sheep horns begin to blow,
Trumpets begin to sound,
Joshua commanded the children to shout
And the walls came tumbling down.

The walls came down, down, down...

Wasn’t that a mighty day, oh Lord,
when Joshua fit the battle.

7. **Wade in the Water**
Fisk Jubilee Singers recorded May 2, 1993.

**Chorus:**
Wade in the water, wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, God’s gon’ trouble the water. [repeat twice]
Verses:
I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?
A band of angels coming after me.

They’re gonna take me to the heavenly place,
Where the streets are paved with gold, and they got pearly gates.

Some say I’ve never been redeemed,
Just follow me down to Jordan stream.

I tell you how the Lord has set myself free,
When I get to heaven, how happy I’ll be.

8. Deep River
Howard University Chamber Choir, recorded May 1, 1993.

Chorus:
Deep, deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Oh, deep, deep river, Lord,
I want to cross over into camp-ground, Lord. [repeat]

Refrain:
Don’t you want to go to that Gospel feast,
That promised land where all is peace.

9. Listen to the Lambs
Howard University Chamber Choir, recorded May 1, 1993.

Listen to the lambs all a-crying,
Listen to the lambs all a-crying,
Listen to the lambs all a-crying,
All a-crying, all a-crying, all a-crying. [repeat]

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd
And carry the young lambs in his bosom
That Promised Land where all is peace.

10. Everytime I Feel the Spirit
Florida A & M University Concert Choir, recorded April 17, 1993.

Chorus:
Everytime I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.
Everytime I feel the spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.

Verses:
Up on the mountain, my God spoke,
From his mouth came fire and smoke.
Looked all around me it looked so fine,
That I asked my Lord if all was mine.

Jordan river is chilly and cold,
It chills the body but not the soul.
There ain’ but one train on this track,
It runs to heaven and right back.

11. Oh Freedom
Princeley Players, recorded March 20, 1993.

Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom, over me.
And before I be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Other lines:
No more weeping…

12. Gospel Train
Princeley Players, recorded June 12, 1993.

The gospel train is a-coming, I hear it just at hand,
I hear them car-wheels rumbling, and rolling through the land.

Chorus:
Then get on board, chilen [children], get on board, chillen, Get on board, chillen, there’s room for many a-more (hmmmm...)

I hear the bell and the whistle, they’re coming ’round the curve,
She’s playing all the steaming parts, straining every nerve.

No signal for another train to follow on that line,
Oh, Sinner you’re forever lost if once you’re left behind.

This is the Christian banner, the motto’s new and old, Salvation and repentance are burned there in gold.

She’s nearing now the station, oh, sinner don’t be vain, But come and get your ticket, and be ready for that train.

The fare is cheap and all can go, the rich and poor are dere, No second-class aboard this train, no difference in the fare.

13. I’m a-Rolling through an Unfriendly World
Princeley Players, recorded March 20, 1993.

I’m a-rolling, I’m a-rolling, I’m a-rolling through an unfriendly world. I’m a-rolling through an unfriendly world.

Oh brothers won’t you help me, Oh brothers won’t you help me to pray.

Oh brothers won’t you help me, Won’t you help me in the service of the Lord.

Additional line:
Oh sisters want you help me...

Other lines:
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone.
Sometimes I feel I ain’t got no home.

15. Steal Away
Princeley Players, recorded March 20, 1993.

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, steal away home.
I ain’t got long to stay here.

My Lord calls me, he calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds within my soul.
I ain’t got long to stay here.

Green trees are bending, poor sinner stands a-trembling,
The trumpet sounds within my soul.
I ain’t got long to stay here.
16. Go in the Wilderness
Princely Players, recorded March 20, 1993.

I wait upon the Lord, I wait upon the Lord,
I wait upon the Lord my God, who take away the sins of the world.

If you want to find Jesus, you have to go in the wilderness,
Go in the wilderness, go in the wilderness, leaning on the Lord.

Other lines:
If you want to be a Christian…
If you want to get religion…
[Ex]pect to be converted…
Weeping Mary…
[Con]flicted sister…
Half-done Christian…
Come backslider…
Baptist member…
Seek, Brother Bristol…
Jesus, a-waiting…

17. Ezekiel Saw de Wheel
Florida A & M University Concert Choir, recorded April 17, 1993.

Ezekiel saw de wheel, way up in the middle of the air,
Ezekiel saw de wheel, way in the middle of the air.
The big wheel runs by faith,
And the little wheel runs by the grace of God.
A wheel in a wheel, way in the middle of the air.

Better mind my brother how you walk on the cross,
Your foot might slip and your soul get lost.
Old Satan wears a clef-foot shoe,
If you don’t mind, he’ll slip it on you.

Some go to church for to sing and shout,

18. Ain’t Got Time to Die
Howard University Chamber Choir, recorded May 1, 1993.

Lord, I keep so busy working for the Kingdom [three times]
Ain’t got time to die.

’Cause when I’m feeding the poor,
I’m working for the Kingdom [three times]
Ain’t got time to die.

Lord, I keep so busy serving my Master [three times]
Ain’t got time to die.

’Cause when I’m giving my all, I’m serving my Master [three times]
Ain’t got time to die.

Now, won’t you get out of my way let me praise my Jesus
Get out of my way let me praise my Lord
If I don’t praise him the rocks gonna cry out!
Glory and Honor, glory and honor,  
Ain't got time to die!

19. Wade in the Water
Arrangement created for the Alvin Ailey ballet “Revelations.”  
Performed by the Howard University Chamber Choir, recorded May 1, 1993.

Chorus:
Wade in the water, wade in the water, children,  
Wade in the water, God's a-gonna trouble the water.

Verses:
See that band all dressed in white,  
Well, it looks like the band of the Israelites.

See that band all dressed in red,  
Well, it looks like the band that Moses led.

The Artists
Fisk Jubilee Singers, Fisk University,  
Nashville, Tennessee, directed by Delise Perkins-Hall.

Howard University Chamber Choir,  
Howard University, Washington, D.C., directed by J. Weldon Norris.

Kehembe Eichelberger, Music Faculty of Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Florida A & M University Concert Choir, Florida A & M University,  
Tallahassee, Florida, directed by Augustus Pearson.

Prince Players, Nashville, Tennessee, community ensemble,  
directed by Orlandus Hannah.

Bibliography
Blasingame, John W. Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies.  

Carawan, Guy and Candié. We Shall Overcome! Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement. New York:  
Oak, 1963.


Dunbar, Paul Laurence. “When Malindy Sings” (1895). In The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1970,  

DaCapo Press. (Reprint of 1969 Viking edition.)


Selected Listening

If you want to hear more African American sacred music, here are a few suggestions:

1. Contemporary Gospel

If you have a local or regional radio station that plays gospel music, listen to it to learn which contemporary artists you particularly like. Then visit record stores in your community to find out which ones carry the best selection of African American sacred music, contemporary and historical. If you have an opportunity to travel to other cities, check out the gospel and sacred music sections of stores there.

2. Historical Recordings

Visit your local and regional record stores to find out which ones carry more traditional recordings of all kinds of music. Look for recordings of African American spirituals (sometimes found in the Classical or Vocal sections of the store).

Check the Jazz and Folk Music sections for recordings by the artists you have heard on this recording. Many historical recordings are being reissued on CD. You might want to write to get on the mailing lists for the following catalogues:

Fantasy, Inc. This company is reissuing wonderful recordings from the Specialty Records archive: Tenth and Parker, Berkeley, CA 04710.

Malaco Music. This company now owns the Savoy Records catalogue. P.O. Box 9287, Jackson, MS 39286.

New World Records, 701 Seventh Ave., New York, NY 10030

Roots and Rhythm, 6921 Stockton Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 414 Hungerford Drive, Suite 444, Rockville, MD 20850.

Selected Recordings:


Kathleen Battle, *Kathleen Battle at Carnegie Hall*. Deutsche Grammaphon 455 440-2

Kathleen Battle, Jessye Norman, and James Levine, *Spirituals in Concert*. Deutsche Grammaphon 429 790-2

Fisk Jubilee Singers, *Fisk Jubilee Singers*. Folkways cassette 2372 (available by mail order, see below for details)

*Great American Spirituals*, volume 9. Angel Records 0777 7 64669 27


Leontyne Price, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*. Red Seal/RCA 3183

Paul Robeson, *The Odyssey of Paul Robeson*. Omega Classics, OCD 3007.

**Credits:**

**Recording Credits:**

Tracks 1, 4, 10, 17 recorded April 17, 1993, by the National Public Radio *Wade in the Water* Production Team: producers Judi Moore Latta and Sonja Williams; engineer Terry Knight.

Track 2-3, 12, 15, recorded June 12, 1993, Nashville Tennessee. Producer Sonja Williams, engineers Barry Sanders and Renee Pringle.

Tracks 5, 11, 13, 16, recorded March 20, 1993. Producer, Sonja Williams; engineer, Jason Stalluto.

Tracks 6-7, recorded May 2, 1993, in Nashville, Tennessee. Producer Sonja Williams; engineer Tom Knox.

Tracks 8-9, 18-19, recorded May 1, 1993, in Washington, D.C. Producer Sonja Williams; engineer Renee Pringle.

Track 14, recorded May 4, 1993. Producer, Judi Moore Latta; engineer, Renee Pringle.


Produced by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon.

Production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters.

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*Wade in the Water*: A series on National Public Radio and four recordings on Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings:

**Volume I:**

African American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition

**Volume II:**

African American Congregational Singing: Nineteenth-Century Roots

**Volume III:**

African American Gospel: The Pioneering Composers

**Volume IV:**

African American Community Gospel
Smithsonian/Folkways

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1947 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original LP liner notes.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes, recordings to accompany any published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

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You can find Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon recordings are all available through Smithsonian/Folkways Mail Order, 414 Hungerford Drive, Suite 444, Rockville, MD 20850. Phone 301/443-2314; fax 301/443-1819 (Visa and MasterCard accepted).