

The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual

A Lecture-Recital

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THE ART OF THE NEGRO SPIRITUAL

The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual

By Randye Jones

In a 2003 interview, the author was asked, "What is the difference between Negro spirituals and gospel music?" It seemed like a simple question, but it was immediately apparent that the answer was far from simple. First, it is complicated by the fact that both exist due to the deep-seated need of a people to express their faith in song. Secondly, composers of one style have used the other for source material, and musicians have often used performance practices of one when singing or playing the other. Also, the history of one style blends into the other.

The times and environment in which the spiritual was nurtured were starkly different than the incubator of black gospel music. Gospel music is clearly rooted in the spiritual, and gospel musicians have certainly drawn on the spiritual for source material. But what is the "gospel truth?" Are gospel songs simply "jazzed-up" spirituals? This paper proposes to look briefly at the history and performance practices of each music style and a few of the many musicians who contributed to their development. Its goal is to seek out the "gospel truth" about what makes the two styles similar and what makes them different.

The Negro Spiritual: From Cotton Field to Concert Hall

A Brief History

Negro spirituals are songs created by the Africans who were captured and brought to the United States to be sold into slavery. This stolen race was deprived of their languages, families, and cultures; yet, their masters could not take away their music.

Over the years, these slaves and their descendents adopted Christianity, the religion of their masters. They re-shaped it into a deeply personal way of dealing with the oppression of their enslavement. Their songs, which were to become known as spirituals, reflected the slaves' need to express their new faith:

My people told stories, from Genesis to Revelation, with God's faithful as the main characters. They knew about Adam and Eve in the Garden, about Moses and the Red Sea. They sang of the Hebrew children and Joshua at the battle of Jericho. They could tell you about Mary, Jesus, God, and the Devil. If you stood around long enough, you'd hear a song about the blind man seeing, God troubling the water, Ezekiel seeing a wheel, Jesus being crucified and raised from the dead. If slaves couldn't read the Bible, they would memorize Biblical stories they heard and translate them into songs.¹

The songs were also used to communicate with one another without the knowledge of their masters. This was particularly the case when a slave was planning to escape bondage and to seek freedom via the Underground Railroad.

¹ Velma Maia Thomas. *No Man Can Hinder Me: The Journey from Slavery to Emancipation through Song* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 14.

Spirituals were created extemporaneously and were passed orally from person to person. These folksongs were improvised as suited the singers. There is record of approximately 6,000 spirituals or sorrow songs; however, the oral tradition of the slaves' ancestors—and the prohibition against slaves learning to read or write—meant that the actual number of songs is unknown. Some of the best known spirituals include: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen", "Steal Away," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses," "He's Got the Whole World in His Hand," "Every Time I Feel the Spirit," "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees," and "Wade in the Water."

With the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the conclusion of the American Civil War in 1865, most former slaves distanced themselves from the music of their captivity. The spiritual seemed destined to be relegated to mention in slave narratives and to a handful of historical accounts by whites who had attempted to notate the songs they heard. Two of the most significant of these accounts are found in Thomas Wentworth Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, which recounted the slave songs he heard the black Union soldiers sing, and the 1867 publication, *Slave Songs of the United States*. In the preface of *Slave Songs*, compiler William Francis Allen described the difficulty they had recording the spirituals they heard:

The best that we can do, however, with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original. The voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate; and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper. And I despair of conveying any notion of the effect of a number singing together, especially in a complicated shout, like "I can't stay behind, my Lord" (No. 8), or "Turn, sinner, turn O!" (No. 48). There is no singing in *parts*, as we understand it, and yet no two appear to be singing the same thing—the leading singer starts the words of each verse, often improvising, and the others, who "base" him, as it is called, strike in with the refrain, or even join in the solo, when the words are familiar.²

The performance of spirituals was given a rebirth when a group of students from newly founded Fisk University of Nashville, Tennessee, began to tour in an effort to raise money for the financially strapped school. The Fisk Jubilee Singers not only carried spirituals to parts of the United States that had previously never heard Negro folksongs, the musically trained chorus performed before royalty during their tours of Europe in the 1870's. The success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers encouraged other Black colleges to form touring groups. Professional "jubilee singers" also toured successfully around the world. Collections of "plantation songs" were published to meet the public demand.

While studying at the National Conservatory of Music, singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh came under the tutelage of the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. Dvořák visited the United States in 1892 to serve as the new director of the conservatory and to encourage Americans to develop their own national music. Dvořák learned of the spiritual through his contacts with Burleigh and later commented that:

² William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison, comp., *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York, A. Simpson, 1867; reprint, Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1995), iv-v.

. . . inspiration for truly national music might be derived from the Negro melodies or Indian chants. I was led to take this view partly by the fact that the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water, but largely by the observation that this seems to be recognized, though often unconsciously, by most Americans. . . . The most potent as well as most beautiful among them, according to my estimation, are certain of the so-called plantation melodies and slave songs, all of which are distinguished by unusual and subtle harmonies, the like of which I have found in no other songs but those of old Scotland and Ireland.³

In 1916, Burleigh published the song, "Deep River," for voice and piano. By that point in his career, he had written a few vocal and instrumental works based on the plantation melodies he had learned as a child. However, his setting of "Deep River" is considered to be the first work of its kind to be written in art song form specifically for performance by a trained singer.

"Deep River" and other spiritual settings became very popular with concert performers and recording artists, both black and white. It was soon common for recitals to end with a group of spirituals. Musicians such as Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson made these songs a part of their repertoires. Paul Robeson is credited as being the first to give a solo vocal recital of all Negro spirituals and work songs in 1925 at the Greenwich Village Theatre, New York, New York.

Over the years, composers have published numerous settings of Negro spirituals specifically for performance on the concert stage, and singers, such as Leontyne Price, Jessye Norman, Kathleen Battle, and Simon Estes, have also successfully recorded them for commercial release.

Composers also set spirituals for chorus and organized choral groups on college campuses as well as professional touring choirs. Hall Johnson started the Hall Johnson Negro Choir in September 1925 because he wanted "to show how the American Negro slaves--in 250 years of constant practice, self-developed under pressure but equipped with their inborn sense of rhythm and drama (plus their new religion)--created, propagated and illuminated an art-form which was, and still is, unique in the world of music."⁴ His success in the 1930's through 1950's was joined over the years by that of Canadian-born Robert Nathaniel Dett, William Levi Dawson, Undine Smith Moore, Eva Jessye, Wendell Whalum, Jester Hairston, Roland Carter, Andre Thomas, Moses Hogan, and many other choral composers who used the spiritual for musical source material.

While Burleigh, Johnson and their contemporaries were actively composing art song and choral settings of spirituals, it was not until the 1930's that a concerted effort was made to preserve this part of American culture in its original form. Following the lead of Fisk University, Southern University, and Prairie View State College, the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress

³ Antonín Dvořák, "Music in America," *Harper's* 90 (1895): 432.

⁴ Hall Johnson, "Notes on the Negro Spiritual," (1965). In *Readings in Black American Music*, comp. and ed. Eileen Southern, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 277.

Administration (WPA) worked with various state programs to record the first-hand recollections of the survivors of slavery. These slave narratives included stories about the role of music in their lives and songs delivered by those who had sung these folksongs in that bygone era.

Over the years, the spiritual has given birth to a number of other American music styles, including Blues, Jazz and gospel. Spirituals played a major role in buoying the spirits of protesters during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950's and 1960's. The songs served as a rallying call to those who were demonstrating against laws and policies that kept African Americans from having equal rights.

These art songs challenge both the vocalist and the accompanist to display their technical skills and musicality. More importantly, the songs demand that the musicians tap into the deep well-spring of emotions that inspired those slaves of ages past. As noted by Hall Johnson:

True enough, this music was transmitted to us through humble channels, but its source is that of all great art everywhere—the unquenchable, divinely human longing for a perfect realization of life. It traverses every shade of emotion without spilling over in any direction. Its most tragic utterances are without pessimism, and its lightest, brightest moments have nothing to do with frivolity. In its darkest expressions there is always a hope, and in its gayest measures a constant reminder. Born out of the heart-cries of a captive people who still did not forget how to laugh, this music covers an amazing range of mood. Nevertheless, it is *always* serious music and should be performed seriously, in the spirit of its original conception.⁵

Whether in a concert performance, joined in congregational singing, or just singing to oneself, spirituals must be sung with an understanding of what forced such powerful songs to rise up from the souls of the men and women who created them. The unknown creators of those American folksongs may no longer be amongst us, but their longing for freedom and their abiding faith remain to fill our hearts each time we sing these emotionally charged songs.

Soprano Ruby Elzy expressed simply the art of singing spirituals, "the singer who strives to sing the spirituals without the divine spirit will be like the man who plants pebbles and expects them to grow into lilies."⁶

The Music

Spirituals fall into three basic categories:

- Call and response – A "leader" begins a line, which is then followed by a choral response; often sung to a fast, rhythmic tempo ("Ain't That Good News," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses")
- Slow and melodic – Songs with sustained, expressive phrasing, generally slower tempo ("Deep River," "Balm in Gilead," "Calvary")

⁵ Johnson. *Thirty Spirituals: Arranged for Voice and Piano*. (New York: G. Schirmer; dist., Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1949), [5].

⁶ Ruby Elzy. "The Spirit of the Spirituals: Religion and Music, a Solution of the Race Problem," *Etude* 61, no.8 (August, 1943): 495-496.

- Fast and rhythmic – Songs that often tell a story in a faster, syncopated rhythm (“Witness,” “Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit,” “Elijah Rock,” “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho”)

The lyrics dealt with characters from the Old Testament (Daniel, Moses, David) who had to overcome great tribulations and with whom the slaves could easily identify. From the New Testament, the slaves most closely identified with Jesus Christ, who they knew would help them “Hold On” until they gained their freedom. Although slaves often sang about Heaven, the River Jordan—and the hidden reference to Underground Railroad destination, the Ohio River—was regularly a subject of their songs.

Since the rhythm—once established—was key to their songs, the singers would add or delete syllables in words to make them fit the song. Pioneers of spiritual art songs often chose to use dialect, the manner slaves pronounced words, in their settings. Some examples are:

Heaven – Heav’n, Heb’n, Heb’m	River Jordan – Riber Jerd’n	mourner – mo’ner
Children – chillun, chil’n, childun	my – ma, m’	there – dere
for – fer	Morning – mornin’	more – mo’
the – de	religion – ‘ligion	going to – gwine, gon-ter
Jubilee – Juberlee	and – ‘n’, an’	get – git

Early vocal settings reflected the goals of pioneering composers to retain as much of the “feel” of the original spiritual as was possible. Choral settings were ideally performed a cappella, and solo vocal pieces allowed the use piano accompaniment for support of the singer. They mainly composed in a steady 2/4 or 4/4 meter.

Over the years, however, compositions have become more tonally and rhythmically complex in both the vocal line and accompaniment. There is less use of dialect. This much more structured approach presents more technical challenges to the performers, but it further erodes their opportunities for expressive interpretation. However, this places greater responsibility upon the performers to be sensitive to the original intent of the music and to communicate that intent to the listener.

Gospel Music: “Good News” in the City

A Brief History

The gospel music of the African American had its beginnings during the years following the Civil War. Many newly freed slaves began seeking a new life away from the rural setting of the Southern plantation. They sought opportunities for better education and employment to the north and west.

From a religious standpoint, the freedmen took two very distinct paths. Some formed churches affiliated with established white denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc.) and worshiped using formal, structured liturgies modeled after their white counterparts. They rejected the Negro spiritual in its original form because the folksongs not only reminded them of their former conditions, but the songs did not fit their newly formed aesthetic. They chose to sing hymns by Dr. Isaac Watt, John Wesley and Richard Allen, though the congregations still sang the hymns with a favor that hinted at their African roots.

Predominately in the South, the second path led poorer, less well-educated African Americans to form their own Pentecostal or holiness churches. From around 1870 until the turn of the 20th century, hymns began to appear that combined the syncopation, call-and-response, and improvisation of African American music with the formal structure of the white hymn. These "gospel hymns" addressed the desires of African Americans who wanted songs that more profoundly expressed their belief in the "Good News" found in the four Gospels of the New Testament. Best known of the composers of gospel hymns was Charles A. Tindley, a Methodist minister who wrote such hymns as "I'll Overcome Someday," "We'll Understand It Better By and By" and "Here Am I, Send Me."

Unlike the creators of the spiritual, Tindley and his contemporaries copyrighted and published their music in collections such as *Gospel Pearls* and *New Songs of Paradise*. They also promoted their works in concerts and events like the National Baptist Convention. Although some music was performed a cappella, some churches allowed, for the first time, the use of instruments such as the piano, drums and tambourine. Gospel performing forces during this period consisted either of male quartets or female gospel choirs.

In the early decades of the 20th century, southern African Americans were in the midst of a massive migration north, and they carried their music with them. Chicago became the center of gospel music in the 1920's and 1930's with the arrival of Thomas A. Dorsey, called the "Father of Gospel Music." Dorsey, who had developed a very successful career writing and performing with blues diva Ma Rainey, introduced blues elements to the sacred music he wrote. He went virtually from church door to church door, gradually convincing ministers that this "devil's music" was suitable for their services. With the help of vocal soloists such as Sallie Martin, Mahalia Jackson and Roberta Martin, he made recordings of his songs, eventually generating an international audience for his music. Dorsey composed over 400 songs in his career, including his most famous song, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Although Dorsey was able to devote his musical output solely to gospel music, many of his contemporaries continued to maintain secular and sacred professional lives. Among them, Blues great Blind Lemon Jefferson was also known as Deacon L. J. Bates. The singing preachers not only recorded gospel "race records," they visited urban congregations around the United States, preaching and singing:

In contrast to the Black "spiritual," whose inception was in the cotton fields and in the rural setting of the camp meeting where large numbers of Blacks gathered in the open to listen to itinerant preachers, the gospel song came about in urban settings. Huge temporary tents erected for revival meetings by touring evangelists, as well as large tabernacles, were the settings where the early gospel music flourished.⁷

By the 1950's, gospel music had undergone additional changes. It was not unusual to hear electric organ or guitars, brass and string instruments, and a variety of percussion instruments accompany choirs that now included male singers. Male quartets began performing with instrumental accompaniment, and they added one or two members to their groups to allow four-part harmony under the lead. Keyboardists were expected to display great improvisational skills and to be able to use a much greater range of chordal options to enhance songs. Prominent

⁷ J. Jefferson Cleveland. *Songs of Zion*. Supplemental Worship 12. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 172.

performers included Clara Ward, the Swan Silvertones, the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, and Wings over Jordan. The Soul Stirrers, led by Sam Cooke, brought in an entirely new audience to the world of gospel music: teenaged girls who were drawn to Cooke's physical attractiveness and suave singing style.

These performers and many others recorded steadily to meet the growing demand for gospel music over the radio. Unfortunately, as was the case for African Americans in popular music, gospel performers were rarely fairly compensated:

The rip-off was manifested in several ways: records producers paid artists for fewer records than were sold (artists did not see the books), records were distributed in areas where the artists did not perform and therefore had no knowledge of the market, the artists were not advised that they themselves were paying for the recording session and they would receive no money until the cost of the session had been paid, and the reprehensible act of signing a group as a tax write-off and investing no money to promote their recordings... singers would purchase hundreds of recordings at a reduced price from the producer and sell them during their concert tours. The singers themselves left the stage or pulpit and moved through the audience selling records.⁸

Gospel grew in prominence in other cities, especially Philadelphia (Clara Ward, The Dixie Hummingbirds), Detroit (C. L. Franklin, Della Reese), St. Louis, Memphis, Birmingham, and New York (Sister Rosetta Tharpe). Performers took their music into locations outside the usual church venues. Mahalia Jackson sang at Carnegie Hall (1950), on the Ed Sullivan Show, and at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958—Clara Ward and the Ward Singers had performed there the year before; the Caravans and the Dixie Hummingbirds appeared at the Apollo.

By the 1960's, gospel was being performed in nightclubs, and gospel plays had come to Broadway. Singers like James Cleveland, Shirley Caesar, Aretha Franklin, Inez Andrews, the Mighty Clouds of Joy, and the Staples Singers reached prominence. However, there was also a shift towards the popular music of the time that made gospel purists uncomfortable:

But all was not well, for even though gospel was beloved in 1965, there was a faction within the group that was a decade or more younger than the leaders. This new generation wished not only for a modern sound in gospel but also more access to the popular music market. They wanted to drop choir robes and business suits and don the latest in casual fashions; they wanted to add synthesizers, drum machines, and other instruments from popular music, and they wanted a greater association with popular music performers... What once had been a genuine expression of ecstasy in responding to gospel soon became vocal and physical clichéd responses to the music. In fact, gospel was bursting out of the world it had created.⁹

Edwin Hawkins closed out the decade with his release of "Oh Happy Day," which combined the elements of gospel with those of Rhythm and Blues. Along with others in this new generation,

⁸ Horace Clarence Boyer. *The Golden Age of Gospel. Music in American Life.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 54.

⁹ *ibid*, 258.

such as Andrea Crouch, BeBe and CeCe Winans, and Richard Smallwood, he brought a new generation of listeners to gospel music.

Contemporary gospel has made further shifts over the years. While solo performers and small ensembles continue to exist, the dominant gospel groups are made up of large choirs with soloists using amplified sound equipment designed for popular music venues. On college campuses across the country, students have created their own gospel groups. Churches that had resisted gospel music for decades finally have acquiesced and started gospel choirs. Choirs, such as Kirk Franklin's, have integrated Hip Hop into their sound.

The popularity of gospel music is showing no signs of waning in the foreseeable future.

The Music

Early gospel hymns used the call-and-response of the spiritual, as well as syncopation and improvisation. The songs tended to be in 2/4 or 4/4 meter and use diatonic harmony:

Most of these early gospel songs have verse-chorus structure or strophic form. They are based on primary triads and seventh chords with the third and seventh degrees of the scale often varied to create blue notes. Although appearing frequently in written form, the gospel song is rarely performed as written. Since the songs are transmitted aurally, they are classified as "composed folk songs" and are interpreted individually by singers as well as instrumentalists.¹⁰

By the 1930's, performers were far less restrained in their use of harmony, and vocalists and instrumentalists were much freer with their improvisation. The lead singer took a much more active role, singing whole verses while the other members of the ensemble repeated words or phrases behind the leader in harmony. The lead singer added ornaments such as melismas and glissandos for dramatic effect:

They alternated tone colors, by using falsetto, growls, vibrato, and by switching the lead between different singers. In addition, the lead singers began to add text interpolations—improvised personal statements and testimonies in the manner of gospel soloists and preachers... Sometimes the leader gives a cue for all the background to "drop out," and he or she continues indefinitely with a soft instrumental background. The lead can then "preach," "work the audience," or "shout the audience" to elicit response.¹¹

Bass singers, who had been added to ensembles in the 1920's, were replaced by the bass line in the piano or with bass guitar by the 1950's. Thus, mixed choirs consisted of soprano, alto and tenor or baritone.

From the 1970's onward, soloists began the song in the middle range of their voices then progressed to the farther ends of their ranges for dramatic effect. While they are vocally smoother, there is still the tendency towards a great deal of vibrato. With the advent of rap

¹⁰ Joyce Marie Jackson. "The Changing Nature of Gospel Music." *African American Review* 29 (Summer 1995): 185.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 187.

gospel, the lead singer either speaks throughout the song with choral and instrumental accompaniment or alternates between sung and spoken text.

So, What Is the Gospel Truth?

Musicologist Eileen Southern compared the Negro spiritual and gospel music with the following:

1. Gospel texts are subjective and hortative. The poems generally center on a single theme, which is stressed through the repetition of phrases. The subjects are wide ranging, such as conversion, salvation, yearning for spirituality, etc. Spirituals texts are group-oriented and tend to tell stories about Biblical events and figures, especially of the four Gospel books of the Bible and the Old Testament. Its themes and subjects are similar to those of the spiritual.
2. Gospel songs have instrumental accompaniment, which is as "integral part of the performance as is the singing, and in like manner equally an expression of the folk." The spiritual is sung *a capella*.
3. Gospel has a characteristic rhythmic intensity because of its marked syncopation and percussive instrumental rhythms.
4. Gospel uses strophic forms, with verses and refrains, and like white gospel, its songs tend to be sixteen or thirty-two measures in length. Spirituals typically consist of one strain repeated again and again, as a, a, a, a etc; or of two strains as in a b patterns.
5. Gospel melody, with its flatted thirds and sevenths, is related to blues; the spiritual uses "bent tones" only occasionally.¹²

Additionally, spirituals relied mostly on oral transmission to pass the music from person-to-person or on the transcriptions of others who heard the songs. Gospel music composers, even in the infancy of the genre, published and recorded their songs. However, it is similar to spirituals in that most groups learn new songs not from sheet music, but from listening to recordings or others performing the songs. The progenitors of the spiritual surely had no thought of marketing or selling their music; in the case of gospel music, Tindley, Dorsey and their successors made a concerted—and highly successful—effort to spread their musical message through commercial means. Spirituals flourished in the vacuum of the plantation, where the influence of other musics was limited, if it existed at all. On the other hand, gospel music has regularly adopted elements of the secular popular music of the period: Blues, Jazz, Rhythm and Blues, and most recently, Hip Hop.

Despite these considerable differences, however, the most significant similarity persists. Both spirituals and gospel music address the need of a people to express their faith in a dynamic, musical way. Simply put, the "gospel truth" is that whether one wanted to "Steal Away to Jesus" or to ask, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," a tormented soul sought and found relief in a risen Savior.

¹² Eileen Southern. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 459-460.

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