

“I’LL BE SOMEWHERE LISTENING FOR MY NAME”: WINGS OVER JORDAN CHOIR,
THE SPIRITUALS, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE DURING THE
SECOND WORLD WAR

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in the Curriculum in Folklore.

Chapel Hill
2019

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ABSTRACT

Mary D. Williams: “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for my Name”: Wings Over Jordan Choir, the Spirituals, and the African American Experience During the Second World War
(Under the direction of Bernie L. Herman)

The choir Wings Over Jordan made numerous contributions to choral music using the spirituals. The transmission of spirituals that began within the institution of slavery were adapted for demonstrations and marches during the Civil Rights Movement. The songs were created to illuminate political, social and cultural environmental messages. The recognition of this choir resulted in music recordings, USO tours during World War II, as well as other international performances. The choir performed weekly on the “Negro Hour” over radio station WGAR in Cleveland, Ohio.

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Compact Disc

“I’LL BE SOMEWHERE LISTENING FOR MY NAME”: Wings Over
Jordan Choir, the Spirituals, and the African American Experience During the
Second World War

COMPILATION
MARY D. WILLIAMS

- I’ll Be Somewhere Listening
- None but the Righteous
- Wade in the Water
- I’m Tryin to Get Ready
- Walk in Jerusalem
- Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel
- O Mary Don’t You Weep
- Farther Along
- Father I Stretch My Hand to Thee
- There’s Not a Friend
- Hush Somebody’s Calling My Name
- By and By
- Get on Board
- Deep River
- Amen

Pianist: Steven Jones

Vocalist: Bria Bowden, Steven Jones, Marlyn White

Editor: Britelite Productions: Alvin D. Williams Jr., Reginald E. Lee

Why I Chose the Music of My Ancestors

When I was a little girl I visited my grandparents as often as my parents would allow. They lived in Smithfield, North Carolina, where the tobacco fields were lush, and you could smell the aroma as you rode down the old dusty Indian Camp Road. We would sit on the screened in front porch while granddaddy told us stories of how he would reel in the big bass down at John Alston's pond or the challenges of building the grand church steeple for Willow Springs Baptist church. Grandma would most assuredly call me from sitting with the storyteller to come into the kitchen and help with setting the table for breakfast, so we could hurry things along to get granddaddy to drive us ladies into town. Granddaddy always drove us to town, because grandma had no driver license. I would do exactly what grandma asked, because I would love to sit in the middle of them as we rode into Smithfield for shopping, hotdogs and ice cream.

My experience became complicated when I learned to read, because as we road into town I would look at the billboard that read, "Welcome to KKK country." The first time I read the sign aloud granddaddy told me what it meant and assured me that as long as I was with him I had nothing to fear. However, my concern grew as I got older and witnessed on several occasions how my grandmother was treated when we walked into Hudson Belk Department Store on Main Street in Smithfield. She held my hand tightly and pulled me close to her as the sales clerk called her by her first name, "Beatrice," and on one occasion told her that what she touched in the store she'd have to buy. "You can't try those shoes on in here," she said. It was absurd, but grandma looked at me with so much love and comfort as we sashayed out the door. They were

rude, and I felt their stares and the nervousness of my grandmother as she held my hand. As we approached the sidewalk she began to moan and hum the melody of the song, “*I don’t feel no ways tired, I’ve come too far from where I started from.*” She held my hand until granddaddy opened our car door. We proceeded to get ice cream and grandma promised we were too close to supper for hotdogs. Her humming persisted as she looked so distant in her eyes. When we arrived back at the house, I was told to change clothes and put on one of my grandma’s favorite aprons, so we could start our work in the kitchen. I’m listening as she starts to sing, ‘*Farther along we’ll know all about it.*’ I can hear the discontent through the song. There was a deeper meaning I felt as she maneuvered around the kitchen.

As a child her songs caught my attention and sometimes I felt deep within me that she was troubled about something. One day after some years had passed I found the courage to ask her about those moments when she would moan. She said, “Baby when you moan, the devil doesn’t know what you are talking about. You’ll understand it better by and by.” I did understand it better as I grew older, and I came to recognize the devils she referred to. Then there were other times as she’d come into conflict with a white person, she would sing songs to “deliver her soul”¹ from the bitter anger she felt. These songs resonated with me as I got older. I would experience being called a “nigger” as I rode horseback down the road with my dad while riding my spirited horse Dan in local Christmas parades. This was especially evident while riding in the Mule Day parade in Benson, North Carolina. White people would spit out racial slurs at me and even throw beer cans at us while riding. James Baldwin, American activist, novelist and playwright says, “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger”² I could not buy into what whites called me. It didn’t take long

¹Beatrice Dobbin in the 70’s

²The Fire Next Time, Baldwin, James

for those songs that took root in me to rise up in me and secure my mind. I didn't believe what the white folks said about me! I wasn't the name I was being called, I wouldn't buy into hatred and racism as a black woman. Why? Because then I'd be no better than they were. The songs of the enslaved were passed to me by my grandmother as she warded off the slime of racism that was spewed on her. The songs gave her the resistance to hold her head up high and not retaliate with hatred. Many years later the songs would do the same for me. I was born to do this. I was born to carry this canon of songs to youth all over the country and the world. I've been immersed in it on every level and use it to reinforce the greatest gift of song that has ever been awarded to a culture of people. The more I sing the spirituals the more I'm filled with resolve that as one song says, "troubles don't last always." So, the songs have opened for me a platform in museums, churches, college campuses, nationally and internationally, and most recently the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. and the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall. I embrace it and challenge listeners to keep this music alive and use it for the purpose for which it was intended-to obtain citizenship, brother and sisterhood and dignity. My interest in Reverend Glenn T. Settle and Wings Over Jordan Choir is that they had trust in their experience. They sang songs of the ancestors to expose and release whites from the trap of history. The trap that black men and women are inferior to white men. The choir represented change and this was a crime against the natural order of things that whites had devised. Wings Over Jordan went beyond the white man's narrative or definition of blackness.

Many African Americans pushed back against the narrative of the white man's rhetoric of what they defined as blackness. Mr. Leroy Murphy born June 1934 living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania retired from the Naval Department after thirty-seven and one-half years. Mr.

Murphy spoke about his love for the choir and how he realized he relished the choir as one of the heroes of African Americans.

Our Heroes

During our interview Mr. Murphy shared with me his memories of Sunday mornings listening to Wings Over Jordan Choir on the radio.

“Every Sunday morning mother would be in the kitchen preparing breakfast for the family. I was a little boy, and I remember sitting with my back up against the speaker of the four feet tall Zenith radio. I love the Wings Over Jordan Choir. Every Sunday I could feel the big baritone and bass voices vibrating against my back through the speakers. To me that was the sound of a “man.” I wanted to have that big bass baritone voice. At those times while listening to the radio my mother would call us around the table to eat breakfast. The choir was singing in the background as we gathered around the table and we would all kneel down around the table at each chair for the prayer. Mother would always start the prayer, “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? There is a cross for everyone and there’s a cross for me.”³

Mr. Murphy shared his childhood memories as he spoke of the moments in his home as a boy listening to the Wings Over Jordan Choir on the radio. I could imagine him with his family on Sunday mornings. He told me that “It was like we had two heroes Joe Lewis and the Wings Over Jordan Choir.”⁴ Mr. Murphy’s family lived five blocks away from their church and on some Sundays his sisters and he would leave earlier than their parents in order to get to Sunday school especially when it was warm. People would have their windows open, because there wasn’t any air conditioning, he said and they could hear the Wings Over Jordan choir singing on the radio through the opened windows. When they arrived at Tiffany Temple they would not sing the spirituals, but rather gospel songs in the choral style that had become so popular in black churches. The vocalists would be sectioned in the choir loft singing a four-part harmonically composed style of performance.

³ Murphy, Leroy Oral Interview 2018

⁴ Murphy, Leroy Oral Interview 2018

It was an age of The Ward Singers, The Gospel Southernaires, glee clubs and a number of male and female quartet groups and ensembles. Gospel music was a combination of the sacred and the secular. Thomas A. Dorsey who was one of the leading musicians that started the concept of combining threads of blues and jazz style as a gospel walkup to good news of biblical text with a composition of blues and jazz. Thomas A. Dorsey began his musical career as musician for Ma Rainey and other secular artists but soon realized that something was missing in his life. He dedicated himself to a Christian life after many years of playing in nightclubs and juke joints. He began to write music with a religious theme, but a secular musical style consisting of jazz and blues while changing the composition of some hymnals written by Charles A. Tindley. The music was denounced as “the devil’s music” by many churches, and many Christians condemned him and the music. However, it began to catch hold becoming what is called gospel music.

In the Church of God in Christ which is considered the holiness church every conceivable instrument was used to perform this music in the church and it took on an improvisational formation depending on how the spirit led. In the more conservative black churches they would only allow piano, and the music was kept close to the composition without deviation. The church was where the music of the enslaved African Americans found solace. The church was where songs were shared. It was the stepping stone for many African Americans to learn and to grow. Regarding the social ills, World War II, the rejection, Mr. Murphey stated “when people would have negative things to say about black people I always would remember the excellence of the choir, they were not just excellent but the singers were very special people who like our ancestors had dedicated themselves to the cause of liberty.”⁵ In this era churches were building

⁵ Murphy, Leroy Oral Interview 2018

on the formal choral style of presenting gospel music with sheet music and all choirs were associated by naming themselves with the association of their church or university. They were vocally trained groups of professionals making every black child proud. “The composed musical arrangements helped me to appreciate music but the spirituals help me to appreciate my people.”⁶

The War

African Americans experienced terrible abuse and trauma during the war. “As young men went off to war we were exceedingly proud.” (Murphey, 2018) Mr. Murphy remembers asking his mother what the war was all about and remembering the USO had hired the choir to go overseas to encourage and give uplift to the troops fighting the war. The spirituals gave uplift to the troops and to all of us. “The arrangement of the spirituals helped me to appreciate the music. The harmony and rhythms changed. It wasn’t musically composed from a book but the freedom it gave to flow was similar to jazz genre.”⁷

The Spirituals

“They flow out of the cry of slavery.” Reginnia Williams

The term spiritual comes from the definition of the word “Psalm” which is defined as a song or a spiritual song. The King James Version of the Christian Bible specifically lifts this word out of Ephesians 5:19, “Speaking to yourselves in hymns and spiritual songs.” The spirituals came out of an array of Biblical stories. The African American Negro spiritual is the largest form of African American religious folksong to date. They were lifted from stories and set to rhythms, chants and harmonies improvisationally captured by listeners and passed

⁶ Murphy, Leroy Oral Interview 2018

⁷ Murphy, Leroy Oral Interview 2018

along. The voices blended in unison in contrast to singing in sectional vocal parts, where everyone participating contributes vocally with their specific tone and pitch. Voices of different coloric sound and different sound waves form as the human voice contributed to this communal experience. The voice is the only instrument.

When people sing together their voices have what musicologists call different colors, done collectively it is defined as singing in unison. Singing communally was a way to navigate in any collective environment acappella. The songs were applied to work life, social life, lullabies or any physical function. They developed while working, while in praise houses or in gatherings held in the bush arbor. The use of spirituals is what Dr. Timothy B. Tyson calls the conversion or creolization of what came up out of slaves adapting to Christianity. The music of the enslaved and their lives were creolized as they became imbedded in American culture through forced slavery. The enslaved realities of life birthed songs that came up out of burdens as they related to the stories of enslaved Israelites. The cultural transformation that took place gave life to the spirituals while adapting to the Christian faith. The experiences and harsh realities created among them was a form of pidgeoning communication-a communication that functioned among a specific group of people. They rejected the notion of what slave masters hoped that Christianity would employ within them, Colossian 3:22 “Servants obey your masters, for this is right.”⁸ The slave master introduced a highly selective group of verses and chapters to the slave, crafting Christianity to confirm slavery. However, the slave took a different approach and in their adaptation of Christianity, crafted a story of liberation. They vilified the slave master as Pharaoh and his army drowning in the Red Sea as the children of

⁸ *The Bible*. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1998.

Israel gained freedom from bondage and headed for the promise land. Christianity crafted by the enslaved envisioned the kingdoms of the world of slavery torn down.

What makes the spirituals a specific contribution to the discipline of folklore is that they are specific cultural forms developed through African and African American cultural processes. The means by which they were performed created changing variations through time and space. The songs serve as a particular kind of document that places the performer and listener in a particular time in history. When the songs were created, and the reasons why they were created, gave illumination to political, social and cultural environmental messages about that time and place. The transmission of spirituals began within the institution of slavery, were then adapted and used in demonstrations and marches during the Civil Rights Movement and continue to be a vital presence today as African Americans continue to face racial inequality in the form of police violence, driving while black and the ongoing presence of Confederate monuments on Capitol Squares.

The spirituals have always provided insider perspectives on the lives of African Americans. Henry H. Glassie, III, a folklorist, places the process of folk songs as songs created in common language and common circumstances forcing the song to be an outcry for freedom metaphorically. The bodily experiences and engagements of the songs stimulate the internal belief in resilience and transformative faith which became infectious and effective in the performing of the spirituals. The shared experience of the spirituals tells the story of historical trauma while it gives anticipation of hope. For example, *John Henry* a work song, says “*He’d die with a hammer in his hand*” during the Reconstruction period. Music was an intricate part of navigating against Black Code policies, (Black Codes were passed in 1865 and 1866 by Southern states restricting African Americans freedom to work in the

labored economy or participate politically. North Carolina suppressed the right for Blacks to take any legal action against a white person without their consent) while at the same time blacks were working to recreate black family life, businesses and a sense of belonging. True freedom had not arrived, it had only been imagined. The songs canvassed an imagery of freedom like *I'm on my Way to Freedom Land*, *Soon One Morning* and *Over my Head I Hear Freedom in the Air*. Songs indicated the rhythms of the times used in helping African Americans survive the grueling demands of work and life. During slavery many songs indicated imagery of being on your way geographical movement. Bernice Johnson Reagon an activist with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee's Freedom Singers in the Albany Movement in Georgia, says slaves imagined distance between where they were and where they were headed. African Americans headed North singing songs that reinforced the imagery of uplift. They worked in factories, they integrated song into factory work life, although they were not titled as work songs. Here, they lent themselves to the work and prison environments as tools of survival. The songs were not about work; they were songs used to help people while they worked. Songs like *We are Climbing Jacobs Ladder* and *I Got a Right to the Tree of Life* imagined uplift and movement toward a better way of life. ⁹

These songs are traditional and emerge specifically from African diasporic traditions, though their use is entirely exclusive to African American communities. Many songs based on the spirituals have specific functions in work situations and the reiteration of things imagined. They served several important functions. The tempo of songs was based on the emotional experiences making the songs slow and emotional or aesthetically pleasing. Some songs became quite useful in helping to pass the time, in offering an outlet for tensions, frustrations and release

⁹Bernice Johnson Reagon, *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me*

of anger. The objective was to sing about the way one felt inside, things that could not be verbalized or expressed openly. Thus, in song one could tell the truth about how one felt. Human voice combined with human emotion allows for expressions of harmony that can only be developed between the singer and the song. This is experienced or manifested when the singer sings the song that comes out of the moment. The performers trust the emotions attached to the song and allow themselves to be exposed.

I understand more than most people that the relationship I have with the power of song and its influence on making myself vulnerable. Songs performed with emotional ties open the heart and give flight to heaviness. Charles A. Tindley, a Methodist minister and one of the great African American music composers known as “The Prince of Preachers” in the 1920’s he shared in his reflections of the spirituals, “This is where I am or will be, and I want some company. Not just any company, but in the case of life being ‘a ship on a raging sea,’ I want the One who rules the elements..., the One who was able to get Paul and Silas out of jail.”¹⁰ The lyrics indicate a deliberate exposure of pain and grief, as it acknowledges oppression and darkness, *Nobody knows the Trouble I see but Jesus...Glory Hallelujah!* The vocalist has shown their vulnerability by reaching deep within with anticipation that by doing so, help will be found somewhere or that God will drive these existing burdens away. The impulse now is to look to God in the present situation.

The spirituals had common features with a specific structure as it relates to Christian philosophy and social complexities. They were created during a time when enslaved men and women had to abandon African cultural forms and creolize through acculturation what they could remember and what they were adapting from Christian beliefs tied to what they

¹⁰ Walker, Wyatt Tee. 1987. *Spirits That Dwell in Deep Woods, The Prayer and Praise Hymns.*

remembered about their African beliefs as they moved through the hateful, varied, and inhumane crucible of slavery. Through the experiences they were able to improvise the spirituals. Howard Thurman an African American author, philosopher and Civil Rights leader said “the spirituals were to meet the need of the present journeys.” Songs like *I want to be Ready*, demonstrated that there’s not a lot of movement, just survival. ⁷There are songs for example, that suggest resistance against all things representing slavery, *No More Auction Block for Me, No More, There is a Balm in Gilead*, and *Where the Wounded are Made Whole*. Lyrically these songs possess imagery of going to a place where there is redemption and a place of being a whole person. The principle of leaving a place or changing locations is demonstrated in the song *I’m on my Way* and *Deep River my Soul is Over Jordan*. The structural arrangement of the songs came from relations between the parts or elements of life’s complexities and existing turmoil like the auction block, humans being sold at the will of the plantation master, whippings, rape and other abuses. Each song held content and themes containing a specific subject matter associated with the burdens and realities of slavery. The enslaved were able to associate themselves with the persecuted children of Israel in the Old Testament scriptures. Songs are embedded in the Old Testament like *O Mary Don’t you Weep, Go Down Moses, Swing Low Sweet Chariot and Steal Away*.

The mood of each song depended upon the state of mind of the singer. The resulting mood of the song affected the transmission and variation of how the song was disseminated depending on the environment. Spirituals gave and continue to give internal earnest attention to the problems each song addressed or addresses. People transmitted the spirituals traditionally person to person and then collectively in a very informal process.

Reverend Glynn T. Settle

This project focuses on what we can learn by using folklore's tools to examine the role of the spirituals in the repertoire of the Cleveland-based group, Wings Over Jordan. The origins of the group can be traced to 1935, after Reverend Glynn T. Settle was the newly ordained appointed pastor of Gethsemane Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, after his apprenticeship with a prominent Baptist minister at Gethsemane, Rev. Settle began to search for ways to build church membership within the African American community. Gethsemane's membership consisted primarily of families that had migrated from the South. One of his initial programs was the Negro Spiritual Preservation Movement. This was a way of singing the spirituals in the most authentic matter and preserving them among African Americans. (Barber ,2005)

It was the rich voice of the black preacher along with regular church members. The harmonies, the arrangements, "I just don't want this music to die." Teretha Settle ¹¹

Some historians consider the move of so many African Americans leaving the South as the first Great Migration. After a war that was fought to keep blacks enslaved, they found the south filled with white supremacy in comparison to the North with a thriving industrial revolution. This produced optimism and hope. Sharecropping was a resurrection of masters and overseers, while moving north brought word of material gain and progress envisioned by those who migrated North. There they could seek political and economic well-being that they felt they were entitled to as Americans. The South did not seem to change. It was the North where things were moving on. The North was Canaan, a land of milk and honey. It was the promised land. By World War I there was a decline of European immigrants to America. There was a demand to supply munitions and other emergency supplies which created a need for a labor force causing

¹¹ Interview with granddaughter of Glenn Settle, Teretha Settle

southern blacks to flood the north. The influx of blacks created urban ghettos like the South side in Chicago and Paradise Village in Detroit Michigan. These cities within cities were filled with the Great migrators and their offspring. Between 1915 and the 1940's, it is estimated that fifteen million people moved from the rural South to northern industrial areas.¹²

Reverend Settle migrated to the north from Reidsville, North Carolina, leaving behind some family and the poverty of sharecropping. His ancestors after the Civil War tried to find their place economically through tenant farming. With tenant farming a white landowner typically provided land, housing, tools, seed for crop, food and supplies on credit. In return for credit, housing and seed sharecropping families gave a portion of their crops to the landowner at the end of each season to pay off debts. Cotton, tobacco and other crops grown in the rural South were thus grown and harvested by former enslaved families as a way of economic survival. Although at the time some saw the Reconstruction era reestablish paid labor to freed slaves, the sharecropping industry put many in severe poverty and in search of better opportunities economically, socially and educationally for themselves and their children.

When Reverend Settle located to Cleveland, Ohio, he divided time between working as a janitor and giving attention to a growing church. Gethsemane Baptist church was located in a poor neighborhood in Cleveland, and was embraced by Black families in the community. Reverend Settle's primary agenda, based on his religious beliefs, was to firmly emphasize the importance of building up and strengthening the black community. He was fully aware of the destitute black families living in the North seeking a better way of life. The church developed and as the membership increased, so did choir participation. The choir members found relief and hope in songs of their ancestors. They were without formal vocal training but spent countless

¹²Reagon, Bernice If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me

hours rehearsing the songs at home and at church. They were natural vocal sounds that came up out of the toils of everyday living just like their ancestors. Many of the choir members had grown up immersed in a complex repertoire of the Negro Spirituals, nurturing people through the authenticity of oral tradition they were all familiar with. They knew the burden the songs came out of, and in some instances, they were burdened and reliving some of the same problems as those that had come before them.

I Can Feel it All Over Me.

Bernice Johnson Reagon says, songs were being born out of the conditions of the moment presented. “They leaned on that part of their culture that provided a voice to what they were holding inside.”¹³ Because of church growth and the challenging racist social climate, Reverend Settle was emphatic about the use of the spirituals. His resourceful insight was to develop a methodology connecting the ingenious musical traditions developed by those who had been enslaved to positively affect black communities and beyond. As shown below, the songs were a valuable source of strength for community members. The choir’s embodiment of the music strengthened church membership as both choir and congregants applied emotional meaning to each song and its application to everyday life situations. The songs were alive within the hearts of the church congregants, building unity between the performers and the listeners. Like Ms. Reagon, Reverend Settle truly believed based on racial experiences, that anyone exposed to the spirituals would be affected positively.

The Radio

The idea to take the music beyond the African American community was something Reverend Settle wrestled with, according to his granddaughter, Teretha Settle. He wanted to get the music beyond the community and get the message out to souls that would never cross the threshold of his church. The idea of crossing cultural lines with the music was embraced by white missionaries in a small collection published in 1867 entitled, *Slave Songs in America*. The spirituals would have otherwise been lost because of the new freedoms had it not been for Dr. George White and the Fisk Jubilee singers of Fisk University. Dr. White and the leader of the group, Ann Shephard, realized that the choir was failing in their performances, and had it not

¹³Reagon, Bernice If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me

been for the spirituals the school would have been shut down. The story goes that at the initial performance of the Fisk Jubilee singers to raise money for the university, the attention of the audience was waning. It was important to keep the audience engaged in order to raise funding. Ann Shepherd knew that the choir was composed of former slaves and children of slaves, so it wasn't difficult to pull from the songs they had heard from their mother's womb. They began to sing sorrow songs, and the audience became emotionally tied to the performance, many with tears streaming from their eyes. Dr. White and Ann shepherd knew they were on to something, so they sang the spirituals from that performance forward as they traveled the world raising money for Fisk University.¹⁴

Reverend Settle felt strongly about the music of his heritage. He wanted crossover listeners from other cultures to feel and experience the songs, and he knew full well the only way was through the mass communication outlet of radio-where different racial audiences could hear the songs and have an experience. African American culture was represented in some degree by the NAACP by their active campaign for equal rights. The message was pronounced through print media, like *The Crisis*, a black newspaper in the area along with other written sources like flyers and written literature. Reverend Settle knew the songs would impact the listener more than the written material distributed. How could he be assured that the translation of this music through radio would make the projected impact? This is a good question and one I needed to ask when doing this work.

Deborah A. Kapchan, professor of performance studies, addresses how through international sacred music festivals, multi-faith audiences are drawn together on a global scale. Kapchan surmised the “sacred imaginaries by preappropriation of the category of the sacred

¹⁴Ward, Andrew, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers*

creates public sentiment through incantations, spoken or chanted words, tones or creative sacred songs.” In presenting sacred songs in a public space there are certain particulars of religious traditions that are relatable to any listener. There are particular sounds of sacred tradition the tones, chants and incantations of the human voice in unison. The sacred music is attractive to people through interfaith presentation outlets. Sacred music is born out of the experiences within a culture among people. In the relatable aesthetics of sounds the listeners find common ground in what they hear. They participate because of its groundedness in religious belief, but primarily the ability to find common ground and public sentiment. There are many factors in sacred songs but the one factor that is thematic throughout is a common promise. A promise is systemic in religious belief as demonstrated in songs. A promise to love, a promise for freedom, a theme of promised redemption is demonstrated in sacred music. Kapchan also asserts the idea that the music is relatable based on kinship through religious life speaking to a specific community as they are gathered.

The enslaved sang the spirituals down in the bush arbor, a secret place where the songs were shared and embraced. The emotional experiences and secrets that were shared is what Albert J. Raboteau, an African-American scholar, called the secret meetings of the enslaved down in the bush arbor the invisible institution. This “existed as a forbidden aspect; slaves might be members of both the independent black church groups or congregations of the slave master, but participated in worship gatherings at night in secret locations, risking severe punishment.” The church has always been the religious realm used to advance the race, while kinships are being developed based on experience, not solely skin color. Alliances formed through family and fictive family relationships based on shared understandings and experiences and what it means to transform the world. The fictive family dynamics are built among the community

through alliances outside the denominations and outside racial lines. This kinship or fictive family is not established by biology and marriage, but by who's having the experiences. Kinship and fictive families serve as a supportive network creating a stronger sense of community and social control using sacred songs as its reinforcement.

Reverend Settle realized this and knew that other cultures were represented on radio stations, including multiple religious traditions and many strands of white culture: "The Catholic Hour, The Protestant Hour and the Presbyterian program and one program representing African Americans, the minstrel show 'Amos n Andy.'" Reverend Settle determined that he would balance the scales of racial inequality. Yet going on the radio meant a confrontation with the minstrelsy tradition head-on due to its popularity in the media communication.

The constant popular stereotypical themes of minstrelsy infiltrated society through a poor representation of African Americans. It gained popularity beginning in the 19th century with stage performances and sheet music illustrations representing black identity. Susan Dunston, one of the contributors to *Blackface: Black Misrepresentation in the 19th Century African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*, says: "What's at issue here in the work of blackface performances in society was a compelling framework to evict black people from their own skin and allow pretenders to take up residency there."¹⁵ Within minstrelsy, white people in blackface represented Blacks as buffoons, as lazy unintelligent people. The show "Amos n Andy," minstrelsy without explanation, received unprecedented success. This only reinforced racist stereotypes.

Still, Reverend Settle thought it was worth the risk entering this radio media community. On CBS all through the 1930's and 1940's the programming receiving the highest ratings were

¹⁵ Dunston, Susan. *Blackface: Black Misrepresentation in the 19th Century African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930*

publicized as “talent raid shows” like “Amos n Andy.” William S. Paley, the son of a Philadelphia cigar maker, named the corporation “Columbia Broadcasting system after purchasing the company for \$500,000.00. He realized early on that radio was the dominant medium to advertise and create programming to fill “on air” space that offered public entertainment. Paley purchased sixteen radio stations and distributed programming to all the stations simultaneously. Radio was comprised of two enterprises, one was the packaging of product distribution and to sell programs to other radio stations and the other was to sell the audiences on the programs with advertisements. The advertising dollars funded the network programs. WGAR radio was founded in 1930 by Michigan millionaire Geo A. Richards and immediately was noted as the “Friendly Station” because of its big concern about contributions it could make to the better future of Cleveland, Ohio. WGAR, a CBS affiliate, was a local outlet for the Wings Over Jordan Choir and was open to having Reverend Settle and the choir aired.¹⁶

As his church’s choir gained popularity in and around Cleveland, the choir changed their name to Wings Over Jordan. The choir’s repertoire was replete with specific Negro Spiritual selections. The Negro Spirituals are considered a communal vocal style of singing representing only African American culture. The songs, transmitted orally from one generation to another, are powerful and pervasive. (i.e. “*Swing Low Sweet Chariot, Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel, Go Down Moses, Nobody’s Fault but Mine, Witness for my Lord, Come by Here My Lord, Come by Here, I see Trouble in the Air.*”) The songs were learned as they were sung. African Americans came into contact with the songs as they were transmitted from slavery to present day. I can’t remember when I learned them. I’ve never not known them. Bernice Johnson Reagon said she learned the songs while in her mother’s womb.¹⁷ The Fisk Jubilee singers, a group comprised of

¹⁶ New World Encyclopedia.org, 2017

¹⁷ Ward, Andrew Dark Midnight When I Rise, 2000

emancipated slaves and freedmen brought the spirituals out of the slave cabins and introduced them to audiences around the world as they traveled raising money for Fisk University.¹⁸ Roland Hayes, the first black classically trained concert artist, performed the spirituals in concert halls saying, “the {sic} {Afraamerican} religious folk songs were born out of our enslaved ancestors and grew up in us.” He was three generations removed from slavery.

Wings Over Jordan took the songs and performed them nationally and internationally through the USO tours and radio. The repertoire was selected and arranged by choir members or Reverend Settle, then directed by the assistant director, Worth Kramer. Settle committed himself to maintaining the tradition that he accredited with the very existence and survival of African Americans. The vocalist required no instruments, which allowed for improvisational interpretation vocally, whether the music was being performed or being transmitted orally within a small community nucleus. They sang the songs as they were moved by the spirit within them.

Reverend Settle’s selection of songs varied in verbal, metric and melody -- making the choral style very complex. The songs were more functional than entertaining. They clearly assist with affirming the resolve of African Americans. They functioned as message boards and guides to direct people to lift their head. In the opening of *Plenty Good Room*, Glenn Settle opens with the powerful auditory style of the black preacher, rich vibrato while he speaks words poetically in rhythm while the choir is humming, “Down here in this sinful world I’m often crowded out and told there’s no place for me. This makes me go with a bowed head and an aching heart. One of these days I’m going to mount the wings of the morning and fly away pass sun, moon and stars where I know there’s plenty good room for even poor me.”

¹⁸ Reagon, *Bernice If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me*, 2001

There were no added embellishments other than heartfelt experience reaching to the audience for understanding. It was simply telling the audience in words that actively require their support in understanding that there's plenty good room for us. Songs set the framework for crossing over to the other cultures. The specific components about the songs made Wings Over Jordan stand out. First the pace and the rhythm in the faster songs was often slowed down in order to be noticed and absorbed. Second, the simple process of lining, or singing the same line twice in the choral style while the vocalist repeated the chorus, reiterated African traditions of call and response. Third, the choral style with harmonizing voice tones maintained a steady beat with lyrics. This supported a narrative of spoken word introductions by Reverend Settle. The formula of drawing from stanzas repetitively and sometimes adding lines to extend the song made the songs most complex in melodies, rhythms and vocal involvement. This contributed to the development Gospel music.

Many of the songs did not depend on or even include a soloist, ensuring the effectiveness it would have on any listener, as well as reemphasizing community. The acapella vocal parts anticipated lyrical add-ons and melodic enhancements as they transitioned in the choral style, particularly the bassline. The songs existed in connection with a harsh set of social conditions and those social conditions could be significantly altered in many cases. This was represented when the song performed was altered based on the audience. *I Wanna be Ready*, a prayer song existing within the harsh social setting altered minds, attitudes and aims when used in a sacred place or gathering. The Biblical influence is a vision of John on an Island alone facing persecution in the Roman Empire. The judgment John envisioned against the empire is the judgement envisioned by African Americans against racism in the United States. John envisioned "a new heaven and a new earth" relieving him from persecution. John was banished

and placed on Patmos Island. However, he envisioned himself “walking in Jerusalem,” free from the tribulation grouped with a corium of believers wearing a long white robe received from the Lamb of God. African Americans identified with this account from the book of Revelation, so the chorus is prompted by John as he envisioned himself walking in Jerusalem, thus “*Walk in Jerusalem just like John.*”¹⁹ When the audience joins in on this song everyone captures the vision of a new earth, a place of equality where all people are free. *I Wanna be Ready* recorded for my thesis CD reflects similar faith toward the judgement on racism and white supremacy as it did when it was originated. It reflects a shift in attitudes as we aim for something higher than the existing experiences.

The spirituals functioned in many ways beyond Sunday services. They were performed in multiple settings, inspiring political organizing through the Masons, women’s clubs, and church group meetings in the Cleveland community. Songs like “*We are Soldiers in the Army,*” “*Let us Break Bread together on our Knees,*” “*Let us Walk Together Children*” and “*I’m on my Way to Freedom Land*” infiltrated the meetings and gatherings where African Americans claimed rights and privileges the same as white men and women. The songs shifted lyrically from songs veiled with political messages to songs of empowerment and rebellion, (“*O Mary, Don’t You Weep,*” “*Don’t You Mourn,*” “*Deep River,*” “*My Soul is Over Jordan*”). Over time, song structure changed on many levels, but the technique was similar to that of the era of the enslaved. The art of performance in song is a long-established weapon for social change, (*Trying to Get Ready,* *Walk in Jerusalem, Didn’t my Lord Deliver Daniel*). The songs inspired an attitude that contributed to “*There’s Plenty Good Room,*” a song that set people’s expectation for equality and fairness: “a seat at the table where liars aren’t permitted, where there’s plenty good room for all

¹⁹ *The Bible*. Authorized King James Version, Oxford UP, 1998.

God's children." The lyrical framework is beautifully revealed in the performance of the song "*O Mary Don't You Weep Don't You Mourn, Pharaohs Army got Drowned*" is a clear indictment of vengeance on the slave holder.

That said, the spirituals have long evolved into an area of scholarly investigation. The structure and technique of the music has been studied by musicologists through primary documents, newspapers, manuscripts, organization records, personal letters and diaries, and of course, audio recordings of performances. They allow us to examine areas of human experience heretofore inaccessible. "When words fail, music speaks."²⁰ Songs give a voice where sometimes speeches do not motivate or impact adequately.

In many cases, these songs are far more effective than spoken word, speeches and lectures at affecting the core of the soul when sung. They stir memory, emotion and consciousness that evokes the listener to be drawn to a specific time in their personal narrative. The tunes and beats of Negro spirituals are influenced by cultural geographical environment. This lets us know that the styles were continuously changing. I talked earlier about my grandmother. The song *Farther Along We'll Know All About It*, stirred memory and emotion within me as I recorded this spiritual. I connected with this song on many levels. The line "*Tested and tried we'll know all about it,*" stirred my memory to words from my grandmother that warned me that in time so many things that I didn't understand as a child I would understand farther along in life. It stirred emotion and consciousness. It took me back to a place at the kitchen table at my grandmother's house in Smithfield. The variation has changed along with the tempo in some instances based on the emotional experience I was having while recording. Lyrics

²⁰ Anonymous author

suggest that I'm farther along now in years and I do understand the emotional ties that she had with the song.

I understand now that I'm farther along with three African American sons of the darker hue through the tests and the trials I've experienced as their mother. Some of these trials include false accusations, the fear of phone calls in the middle of the night if they are stopped by police, driving while black, the stereotypical judgements placed on my son in the military by his superiors, or unjust accusations that my son "must be" a drug dealer to drive a new Silverado truck, because there's no way he could have worked to save money to purchase it! I have come to understand it better as time has moved forward. My thoughts when I recorded, *Father I Stretch My Hand to Thee*, was a plea, a lament, asking the question where else should I look for help to reconcile these differences that are prevalent in racial profiling? There is symbolism of forward movement and the back and forth that goes along with progress, but the song says, "*You got a right...Children gone, but you got a right...Oh weeping Mary-move Mary move, you know heaven is a shining...Run Mary run, I been running all day long, but you got a right to the tree of life.*"

The spirituals transcended social ills giving voice to a world that needed peace. James H. Cone states in his book, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, "Song is essential for identity and survival. Spirituals invite the audience to experience endurance." Songs are a mechanism of survival, identifying a community through a shared experience of songs that reached to redemption from within and without. Songs passed forward the stories of freedom from the people who survived the Pharaohs of this world, and shared how his armies were drowned in the sea. Songs referenced the belief that God in his infinite power would send a Moses to set captives free. The song lyrics proclaim the power of God against the authorities. The enslaved

Africans found themselves as property of White landowners as did the enslaved children of Israel were the property of Pharaoh. For example, in “Go Down Moses,” one hears and gives voice to veiled messages of rebellion and a demand for freedom. Lyrically the singer points a finger toward those in power demanding “*to let my people go,*” telling a story with every verse about captivity and revenge on those that hold people in slavery. This is similar to the musical ballads that often use morality in the story to guide the listener.

The spirituals are a select group of songs that have been taken from Biblical text and adapted to the circumstances and then transmitted. It is important to take serious consideration of how these songs are placed in genre and performed stylistically. Because of the impact of the spirituals and how they derived, they are not placed in certain stylistic genres. It is the element of human voice that makes the music so significant. The performance medium is especially important as well as performance of the lyrics alongside instruments.

A crucial component of the Spirituals are rhythms and delivery. Some are delivered through call and response, a choral presentation of song where the leader calls the lyrics out in rhythm with a reply or response of the same lyric coming from the listeners or choral participants. The spirituals consist of songs linked to social protest, with clues of rebellion-songs veiled with hidden messages of resistance. (“*O Mary Don’t you Weep, Wade in the Water, Steal Away, and Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel*”) and songs polarized by politics and veiled depictions of racial violence. Reverend Settle and the choir members used their voices and their status as artistic activists to become proactive freedom fighters with a focus against racial inequality.

The songs were beautiful and heartfelt, yet the primary function was to affect the listener and provoke them to action. Wings Over Jordan’s lyrical design and presentation produced and promoted the advancement in the thinking of African Americans that heard the music and the

advancement of morality, while trying to stir the conscience of the listener. No matter the race of people, it was informative as it educated and enlightened audiences by raising awareness of the concerns in African American communities nationally and internationally. The songs spotlighted existing trauma, segregation and violence, while encouraging resistance. The songs encouraged uplift by encouraging political activism and motivating Blacks to continue to move up in education, business and family life.

Thus, when Reverend Settle began to broadcast *Wings Over Jordan* on the Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) radio station, the latter became an avenue of what Maria Elizabeth Kennedy suggests that broadcast media has the capacity to transcend the social realities and rules of physical spaces, creating new rules for social relationships through media communication.²¹ Like Reverend Settle before her, Kennedy believed behavior is influenced by what is heard through the broadcast medium of radio. That is why CBS's selection of *Wings Over Jordan*'s performance of the spirituals for broadcast was so significant.

The spirituals were an expression of cultural norms that were easily identified in African American communities. The radio media communication is just one of the mediasphere practices to empower or discourage audiences. The black newspapers, journals, articles along with every possible avenue was used to influence movement. Broadcast media empowered people to participate in creative problem solving of the many social issues. Mr. Leroy Murphy, worked for the Naval department thirty-seven years. During an oral interview he was adamant about the music's ability to give him a sense of pride while facing racism. He was empowered as many others to facilitate and inhabit community spaces, because he had a right as a citizen. He was

²¹ Kennedy Geography

encouraged to dismiss shame and inferiority. He said, “even today when I hear the spirituals, I gain a sense of fortifying pride.”²²

The accompanying playlist is a compilation introducing the advancement of the black preacher through broadcast media that empowered audiences with what Dr. John Blassingame deems a “rude eloquence,” and presents an exploration of the way the freedom and justice tradition was transmitted within the Black community in a specific place, time, and format.

John Wesley Blassingame’s pathbreaking 1972 book *The Slave Community*, analyzes the place of the preacher as an authoritative religious figure in both the white and black communities. Blassingame begins with the slave community and the oratory styles black preachers within it employed. In his analysis, he describes through the use of white observers’ testimony what they termed a “rude eloquence.” Here black preachers maintained some of the strongest links between African and African-American cultural practices. African-Americans treated the articulate preachers deferentially, as “men-of-words,” where it was a common practice to confer authority on an eloquent orator. Within this frame, black preachers commanded respect simply because of their ability to speak well. They addressed the audience with embodied vigor and emotion, continuing a style and manner practiced amongst West African spiritual leaders. Within societies of enslaved African Americans, many black preachers consciously, or sub-consciously, used traditional aspects of black culture to adapt a religious message to their audiences. Now, it would be uniquely different to hear it over the radio. For many non-black men and women, it would be the first experience hearing the oratory style of the black preacher.

²² Oral Interview Leroy Murphy, 2018

The accompanying list of songs is a compilation chosen from programs presented by the Wings Over Jordan choir on CBS radio network 1942-World War II. The transcribed sections are philosophical analyses of introductions in a spoken word format from Reverend Settle. He opens each song with the oratory style of the black preacher, strategic about every word selected from Biblical text. The introduction is supported by specific vocal construct from the choir as they are humming softly, giving the listener a feeling of anticipation as they build on their emotion. This opens the listeners to sensory input and appeals to memory as they wait to receive whatever comes next. Each section is followed by my commentary.

The Project

I developed a musical playlist taking a variety of songs from the repertoire of the Wings Over Jordan choir's recordings between 1935-1943. The purpose of this compilation is to rebuild so much of what has been shattered for African Americans and revisit and deepen the discussion of the spirituals is a scholarly intervention through music toward social justice. It will give some understanding of the transmission of the spirituals and variations through time.

This project demonstrates the use of the spirituals as a social construct to engage community members. Songs are an expressive art form that quenches the thirst for liberty. The compilation reminds us that the place for song is far beyond the controlled religious institution, but is housed in schools, social forums and political gatherings. With the aftermath of slavery and the transition from emancipation of the enslaved to the Civil Rights movement, the spirituals are a transmitter of pathways to freedom. Spirituals became a way of carving out their identity.

"They're singing songs that relate to them, they are songs of our experiences, they are songs of suffering and they are songs that are attached to how God preserved us with those songs."

(Leroy Murphy) The music was designed as a method of social and political effectiveness.

Song List and Liner Notes

1. Plenty Good Room

(Work, John W., *American Negro Songs, 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular*
p.180)

Glenn Settle's Spoken Word Introduction:

“Down here in this sinful world I'm often crowded out and told there's no place for me. This makes me go with a bowed head and an aching heart. One of these days I'm going to mount the wings of the morning and fly away pass sun, moon and stars where I know there's plenty good room for even poor me.”

Commentary: *Plenty Good Room* came straight out of a slave narrative. As slaves were lined up across the front of white churches and forced to perform songs as “the happy darkies,” this spiritual expressed a slave's imagination of the space of God's new world-heaven. In the biblical text the Master (Jesus) told His disciples before ascending into heaven, that He was going away to prepare a place for them, that there were many mansions in His Father's house; if it were not so, He would have told them. John 14:2 The slaves anticipated something greater than freedom in this world. It was life-everlasting in the new world order. A place where there was plenty good room... Reverend Settle riffs on that and suggests there's even room for him.

When I think of the moral implications of the world beyond, there has to be a place for those that believe that in death, a place is made for him/her. However, the song reminds the listener to think about the here and now. With that fact, it implies there's plenty good room, listener, and we want to show the world versions of ourselves as an established a community, where color was not an issue. (making plenty good room, plenty good room for 'even poor me')

2. I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray

Commentary: Spirituals point to a common setting -- this is why they are characterized as sorrow songs and cabin songs that are collective or individual expressions. *I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray* is characterized as a song of lament-a prayer addressed to God by way of a personal affliction, by some type of calamity or by a disastrous situation. It is an expression of sorrow about the situation, appealing to God for relief. This is a cry or plea to move closer to God with a description of loneliness and suffering within the verses lyrically: *I was way down yonder by myself and I couldn't hear nobody pray, (down on my knees) and I couldn't hear nobody pray.* It is a request for help while reflecting on the totality of life in its present state. This is a song performed in choral style, or congregational technique, with a mournful plea for someone (God) to listen. Songs of lament are songs that function to persuade God to change the attitude of the supplier of evil, and give decisive introduction to the supplicant, and to persuade the petitioner to trust God despite the apparent situation -- no matter how hopeless it may seem. This song, like several others, is deeply rooted in emotion. What is important to remember here is that within any song of lament, there is a triangular relationship: the petitioner, the enemy and God or Gods' representative.

3. I'll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name

Arrangement: V. O. Stamps
Copyright 1937 by the Stamps-Baxter Music Company in "Harbor Bells No.6."
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Glenn Settle's Spoken Word Introduction:

"One of these mornings my God's going to snuff out the sun and shape the twinkling stars from their silvery summits and cause the moon to trickle down in blood. He's going to

dispatch an angel to the trembling earth and blow the trumpet which will sound so loud that till it wakes up the dead. I often wonder, where shall I be when it sounds.”

Scriptural reference: I Samuel 3:10 “Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, Samuel! Samuel! and Samuel said, Speak, for your servant is listening.”

Commentary: The strategy in song selection was predicated upon the social issues that hovered over the African American community in the 1930’s and 1940’s. The music penetrated the airwaves during World War II, and the soldiers found resilience in listening to the music of the choir while fighting in a segregated army. Amzie Moore a veteran and later a leading Civil Rights activist, talks about the segregation in the army. “I’ve been segregated from this man whom I might have to save or he save my life. I didn’t fail to tell it.” (Tyson ,2017) While stationed with the Tenth Air Force in Myitkyina, Burma, he was selected by his commanding officer to travel throughout South Asia speaking about democracy and the war. “We had to counteract this Japanese propaganda by giving lectures to our soldiers... We were promised that after the war was over, things would be different, some of us didn’t believe it.” He thought, as did Reverend Settle that it was necessary to reinforce the ideas of imagining freedom. The choir used songs to promote the four freedoms President Roosevelt spoke about in his 1941 state of the Union address: Freedom of speech, Freedom of worship, Freedom of want and Freedom from fear. The four freedoms enlist a democratic view of economic equality, employment, social security and health care-the same issues we face today. It was pure genius using music as a methodology to reinforce the democratic plan of freedom. It is inconceivable how all spirituals have common similarities in structure, and mood. “Somewhere listening” suggests the listener is waiting for an invitation to be heard, waiting to be called, waiting for my place of equality.

4. *Wade in the Water*

The New National Baptist Hymnal, p.489

Arranged by: Willa A. Townsend

Glenn Settle's Spoken Word Introduction: "There is no soul saving nor cleansing power in plain water alone. Many times, the sacred ordinance of baptism is carried out in polluted water. But that touch from above cleanses all things, and converts them to divine purposes. So, don't doubt, just wade in the water children. God's gonna trouble the water."

Commentary: *Wade in the Water* is one of many spirituals that held many embedded secret codes within the song that were a guide to the enslaved as they maneuvered to freedom through the Underground Railroad. This song also references a religious ceremony in its relationship to the Christian Church, the rite of passage symbolically out of sin into freedom of the soul. The immersion in water or the sprinkling of water on a person's forehead symbolizes regeneration of a new life as a Christian.

"*Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water.*" To escape slavery was to be assured the slave holder would track any escapee using blood thirsty hounds. While maneuvering on dry land, the runaway was easily tracked. However, telling the slave to use escape routes through water, or when it rained to walk or wade in the water, was a way to divert the hounds' sense of smell. This was a small method to safeguard from the dogs tracking them down. The Bible is replete with references to the Jordan River or movement to the other side, the other side being an imagined place of redemption. The Jordan River meant to the enslaved a coded or veiled message, namely the Ohio River. If the enslaved could get across the Ohio River they would be free. Harriet Tubman who was given the nickname Moses. She represented a type Biblical Moses that lead millions of "Jews" out of captivity into the promised land. The promised land

was a land of freedom. In traveling to the land of promise there was the crossing of a huge body of water, the Red Sea, which God parted to allow His people to get across to the other side.

Harriet Tubman did the same for millions of enslaved as she made pathways across the Ohio River in the 1800s in America.

5. *Wheel in the Middle of a Wheel.*

(Work, John W., *American Negro Songs, 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular,*)

Ezekiel (Ezekiel Saw the Wheel)

American Negro Songs, 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular: Work, John

<https://youtube/5JvYCebtvX8>

Commentary: “*Wheel in the Middle of the Wheel, the big wheel runs by faith, good Lord; and the little wheel runs by the grace of Grace of God; In the wheel in the wheel good Lord; way up in the middle of the air.*” This song documents a religious experience based on the Biblical text in Ezekiel 10:9-10. “I looked, and behold, the four wheels were beside the cherubim . . . And their appearance was as one, the four of them, as if the wheel were in the midst of the wheel.” The desire for liberation is sought through the spirituals, and the need for freedom rests in the souls of Black folks as a longing to be free, faith in the God that delivered Daniel and grace to wait for it.

6. *Steal Away and Swing Low Sweet Chariot*

Glenn Settle’s Spoken Word Introduction:

“It would be glorious indeed to know just who the people were who created the spirituals.

However, they were not recorded, and we can only pick up bits of information here and there.

We were privileged to go to the plantation in the state of Oklahoma where the next two numbers

the choir will sing were created, a beautiful medley of ‘Steal Away’ and ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariot.’”

Commentary: The concept of liberation is replete in the song “Steal Away.” It becomes an agent of liberation to all oppressed people. The application of this spiritual became a useful trademark for instruction, as well as a declaration for reconstructive change. The poetic instruction using a storm, the imagery of an unstable environment symbolizing change in the hearts and minds of listeners. The lyrics: “*My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder, the trumpet sounds within-a my soul, I ain’t got long to stay here.*” The lyrics gather together like-minded people that have the faith and believe that change is inevitable. The poetic form of “*Steal Away*” is simple and familiar, making this song communal in nature. The development of “*Steal Away*” comes out of a dependence on God as a place of refuge, a place of protection as one that will avenge the oppressed. The oppressed lived in such a manner that they did not know their futures, but believed everything was predicated upon living their best life, one day at a time. The song denotes a stirring, a troubling of the existing cultural norms. It alludes to a change in attitude and posture that evokes God to show Himself and He will answer by signs against the oppressor. The song sets imagery that builds on the desire for freedom that could be attained as the lyrics build a pathway to freedom. The lyrics use nature that any enslaved person can relate (Verse 1) *He calls me by the thunder* Verse 2: *Trees bending, poor sinners stand trembling-rain storms were a signal for escape.* Verse 3: *He calls me by the lighting*

God will cause a natural disturbance for the oppressed against the oppressors. The lyrics are explicit in indicting the oppressor, with warnings of turbulence: thunder, lightning, trees bending, sinners trembling. The Lord is calling the oppressed to a place of freedom, *I ain’t got long to stay here*-the reminder to escape the horror of slavery. The natural turbulence is a sign of

change that will cause them to be free. The Biblical text comes from a letter written by the Apostle Paul declaring to a specific group in Corinth: “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed... perplexed, but not in despair... (2 Corinthians 4:8) Trouble is all around, but Corinthians, don’t despair, this is all a part of the plan of God.” In other words, Glenn Settle encouraged audiences to get through the turbulence -- lynching, abuse, white supremacy-- get through the realities of oppression and injustice. Perseverance becomes the coping mechanism to get through until all are gathered at the meeting place.

Commentary: “*Swing Low Sweet Chariot*” is based on the same premise as “*Steal Away*,” the concept of liberation, the chariot is coming to carry the oppressed to the great gathering place. The imagery in this song is clearly special, “*I looked over Jordan, tell me what did I see; coming for to carry me home, a band of angels coming after me....*” He’s sending the angels to gather His people home, where there’s plenty good room for you and for me. *Swing Low...* used as a lullaby or cradle song during the era of the enslaved, was sung while enslaved mothers nursed white and black babies, making sure the hope of freedom was imparted into the children of the enslaved. A prayer, a plea and a proclamation that in this triangular relationship of God, the oppressed and the oppressor, that God will hear the plea of the oppressed and free them from the oppressors. The song concludes with the words “going home.”

7. *Take Me to the Water*

<https://youtube/8anUTvhehsU>

Commentary: Black theology is expressed through the culture of the spirituals as the songs are used to speak to the world. Richard Bauman, a folklorist and anthropologist who retired from Indiana University Bloomington, speaks extensively regarding performance art and a mechanism to inform the audience. He identifies in his words a theoretical framework of interactive

installations and performances, as an artistic probe for humans to interact. It stimulates one or more of the senses causing and interaction between the audience and the performer.²³ Dr. James Cone at theologian says Black theology uses the analogies of water, as the Bible symbolizes water in its connectedness to freedom. (Cone ,1970) Similarly, Reverend Settle uses his ability to express freedom through water as a framework to escape the social ills and to lead people to a place of self-awareness, elevation and enlightenment.

8. *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*

Negro spiritual
Marian Anderson (Contralto vocal)
Created/Published
Victor, Camden, New Jersey
Genre: Religious, Ethnic Music

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzaWFfyh1N4>

Commentary: So many African Americans were faced with realities that seemed so puzzling as they encountered so many dehumanizing situations during the Jim Crow era. There were so many rules to follow in terms of racial etiquette. The troubles seen and faced each day with no specific rules that could be applied to gain entrance into a life of social equality. For example, when Mr. James Thompson was interviewed in the book *Remembering Jim Crow*, he recalls that he couldn't try on clothing or shoes in a store. If he went into a grocery store, all the white customers were served first and he'd have to wait to be served when the store clerk decided to wait on him: "You had the feeling that white people were better than you." (p.3) Whites had to reiterate white superiority at every level to maintain the fiction of Black inferiority. Simultaneously, Blacks understood they had to maintain self-respect at all cost.

²³ Bauman, Richard Verbal Art as Performance (Bauman ,1986)

Sorrow songs are what W.E.B. DuBois calls “songs of the soul.” They reveal the most intimate expression of the soul deep within. They speak of the burden, the heaviness endured, (“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.”) When struck with sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its post-Civil War promises of land to freed people. A brigadier general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng reached for a song. From all the possible songs she could have selected, she began singing Nobody knows... All the mass joined with her, swaying. The soldier wept. This is a song linked to the lives of the members of the Wings Over Jordan Choir members and they used it to speak to the world.

9. Does Anybody Here Love My Jesus?

“Is there anybody here who loves my Jesus?”

Religion is a blooming rose,

And none but them who feel it know...”

Commentary: This spiritual asks a question: Does anybody here love my Jesus? It can address Catholics, Protestants, Lutherans, and Ku Klux Klan members. The song poses a question, “Does anybody here love?” This song illustrates a song of prayer repetitively asking, do you love my Jesus? This lyric and melody invoke the mechanics of call and response. Rev. Settle knew above all else the theological practice of love should be reinforced to listeners. The ethical imperative of the gospel of Jesus is love and liberation. The interpretation of the love of Jesus, the song says, should be exemplified by white Lutherans and Protestants whose membership was filled with members of the Ku Klux Klan. One could not represent Christianity as oppression and hatred. Rev. Settle interprets that all should apply what God intended through the love of Jesus, and that is to love your brothers and sisters, not oppress them. Christian theology presents the power of love, and Rev. Settle understood what Martin Luther King Jr. later suggested in his speech, “The Power of Love:” those concerned about brother and sisterhood cannot advocate violence. King noted: “Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can’t establish truth... You may murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate through violence... only light can do that... And I say to you... love is ultimately the only answer to humankind’s problems.”

10. Amen!

Composed: Reverend B.H. Hogan and Laura B. Davis

Arranged by: E. Edwin Young

The New National Baptist Hymnal, p.502

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<https://youtube/BE6mVmtwaTQ>

Glenn Settle's Spoken Word Introduction:

“Reconstruction days, though just begun, had already wrought many changes in plantation life. Once the scene of bowed and total submissive slaves, a developing glow of freedom of a type had changed conditions and had even created slaves into different individuals. They were now making many plans and most especially attempting to establish their church growth. Uncle Alvis, chairman of the recently created board of officials, had carefully selected Uncle Alex, another board member, and Aunt Sweetening to lead the prayer services before the preaching on that sunlit big meetin’ day. Ringed by buggies, buck boards, hacks, carriages, carryalls and some wheels, as bicycles were called, the little white washed warped roofed church presented a rather picturesque sight with a strangely attired congregation pouring in from miles around. All bent upon enjoying this great day of days, the sounds of the singing and shouting of the early comers went deep into the woods, and on across the foot log over the little babbling branch which gurgle along in its meanderings. The late comers, quickened by the glorious sounds, soon broke into a trot and hastily joined the rejoicing clad. Uncle Alex and Aunt Sweetening had warmed the congregation up to a live spiritual heat. Then the preacher rounded the roster and delivered his sermon, and now we offer you a musical interpretation of that beloved and revered worship

service. As the singing starts you will note an arising crescendo of shouted Amen, representing the occasion's lively assent of fiery testimonies, and most especially too Aunt Sweetening's testimony. Preacher, an unlettered ex-slave, begins his sermon drawing upon his memory of what he had heard about the life of our Lord and Savior. The reechoing of the mustery shouted, 'Amens' from the congregation reassures the preacher that he is certainly on the right track. The sermon reaches the pop off point of ecstasy, and Aunt Sweetening is so full she just can't hold it in any longer. So, she lets out an ear-splitting shout of, 'Hallelujah, in the kingdom, with my Savior!' And this stirs the embers of the hearts of the newly elected board, bringing forth a thunderous roar approval shout of, 'amen.' And that does it, with added fire and fervency the preacher, Aunt Sweetening, and the total electrified congregation rattled the rafters with their hysterically, emotionalized shout of, 'Amen!!'

Commentary: *Amen* is a call-and-response congregational hymn. The lead vocalist calls the out the lyric, and everyone singing responds with the pattern of Amen. Wings Over Jordan performed the choral pattern of *Amen* in harmony. The lead vocalist has complete freedom in the application of rhythm and melody when calling out the lines, while the chorus supports with the call of *Amen*. Amen is commonly used after a prayer, meaning "it is so, or certainly." The cadence and posture of the 'Amen' in song is a declaration that "All that I've said, all that has been heard, it is so and it is truth, and I agree, *Amen*."

11. Leaning on the Lord

Glenn Settle's Spoken Word Introduction: "Some folk say that there's no feeling in religion, but I love to hear others tell about the great change which took place when they converted. It makes me know that after all, the new birth is not an idle fancy nor worldly form and fashion. I

can't speak for anybody else, but one thing I do know and that is my soul felt happy when I come out of the wilderness leaning on the Lord.”

Commentary: Reverend Wyatt T. Walker, a strategist for the civil rights protests in the 1960s who was chief of staff to Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, suggests the spirituals were crafted out of sufferings and sorrows of their experiences. I believe the spirituals were conjured out of physical and emotional sufferings, creating a place of refuge within self and within community. Songs were crafted while working, and while down in the bush harbor, the invisible church. This church was located in their hearts primarily and the songs connected the gathering of a people united by circumstance. The physical gathering place in the deep thicket of the woods gave the enslaved a sanctuary to craft something beautiful despite dangerous impending circumstances. Wash Wilson, a former slave interviewed by the Works Progress Administration program, founded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in May of 1935, interviewing people across the Americas. During his interview he talks about the “invisible institution.” “When de niggers go round singin’ ‘Steal Away,’ dat mean dere qwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night. De masters...didn’t like dem ‘ligious meeting’s so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.”²⁴

The sorrows and sufferings were placed in theological thought, as an opportunity to express and strengthen their faith. The songs promoted a kind of control for singers, in circumstances that otherwise felt wholly out of control, promoting the belief they were under God’s radar. God knew what they were experiencing, and they were leaning on him for strength to endure hardship. This built on the theology consistent with the Old Testament stories of God

²⁴<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-33/secret-religion-of-slaves.html>

having overthrown kings and kingdoms to set His people free. The Old Testament is replete with characters like Daniel and Moses that had enemies, but leaned on God for ways of escape. They had faith to lean on God in whom they could not see, but could believe and imagine a life of free will, although everyday they were faced with hopelessness and despair.

12. We'll Understand It Better By and By

The New National Baptist Hymnal, p. 325, Charles A. Tindley, 1851-1933

Arranged by: By F. A. Clark

Commentary: *“We are often tossed and driven on the restless sea of time. Somber skies and howling tempests oft succeed a bright sunshine, in that land of perfect day, when the mists have rolled away, we will understand it better by and by.”* A song exemplifying human experience, *we are often tossed and driven on the restless... somber skies and howling tempest are oft precede bright sunshine, in the land of a perfect day when all the troubles are rolled away, we will understand it better by and by.*

The spiritual speaks of the negative conditions, restlessness, and hope of a perfect day. This spiritual uses a language that leads to progressions to a place where troubles over. The persistence of glorifying a bright side is an effort to embrace only what has been a vision of freedom.

13. Over My Head I Hear

Traditional

Arr. By J. Jefferson Cleveland, 1931-and Verogla Nix, 1933

www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9g1_7PBi2g&t=1s

Commentary: Over My Head I hear music in the air-Over my head---I hear music in the air-----

There must be a God somewhere. Over my head in the atmosphere I hear music, I see trouble, I see Jesus....

Dr. James Cone in his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, notes that “in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community,” God becomes the author of justice. He becomes “Yahweh,” reaching to the oppressed in His infinite view to reach the poor, to liberate communities from economic, political and social oppression. During the Wings of Jordan era, this concept is usually placed in speech while Reverend Settle uniquely places this concept in song -- in order for the oppressed to recognize liberality that is consistent with Christian theological beliefs.

14. Deep River

(Work, John W., *American Negro Songs, 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular.*)

The Hymnal of The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, p.494

<https://youtube/Wl-jr9dR7h8>

Glenn Settle’s Spoken Word Introduction: “Out of the misty past, arching the long span from cruel slavery to a day of an effective opportunity, none of these bearing hope mingled with tears still come to warm the soul of a troubled world. “Deep River” and it’s like will live forever, once more our minds turn to scenes of that hallowed divide, by faith, we enter the celestial city built by the hand of God standing eternally upon its enchanted shores, ‘Deep River.’

Commentary: “Deep River” is performed with deep expressive emotion in the phrasing and the melody. The tempo is slow and sustained giving meaning to the words that are projecting to the common knowledge or feelings of the audience.

“*Deep River my soul is over Jordan.*” The lines are few and simple but compelling. The spiritual reconstructs the Biblical text referencing the Jordan River, imagining freedom. We know how important the water references are in each song. In the lyric, “I want to cross over into campground,” one can chronicle a reconstructed life that defies current social ills and injustice. The philosophy of life indicated in the spirituals give two possibilities of freedom. One is the possibility of freedom through the portals of death that is a direct connection to the promised land-crossover from life to death. The second possibility is through portals of waterways-geographic locations offering freedom from slavery through escape to Canada. After Reconstruction, the references emerged as a continual mainstay in the spirituals, thus becoming a way of living deeply embedded in the moral philosophy of millions of African Americans.

15. Trying to Get Ready

Traditional

Harm. By J. Jefferson Cleveland, 1937- and Verolga Nix, 1933

<https://youtube/S-kleXkfsBI>

Glenn Settle’s Spoken Word Introduction: “It’s not because I’m a coward and afraid to defend myself that I, smiling, take the many abuses forced upon me through life. The fact is I pity and pray for those who despitefully mistreat me. You may wonder of my attitude. Well the answer is very simple, I’m busy trying to get ready to try on my long white robe.”

Commentary: The songs are a way of living in the philosophy of African Americans. They reminded people of their freedom to join their churches in the 1930's and 1940's -- to work, dream, and sing of the streets paved with gold. The philosophy of the Bible preached from the pulpit enticed congregants' imaginations of "the long white robe." Church was an intricate part of preparation for something better. It was either to imagine or accept the horrors of the companionship of Satan, represented by Klansman and white supremacists, or instead, "*trying to get ready to try on my long white robe.*" The spirituals thus functioned as folk songs of religious expression and passion. The choir used a moderate paced tempo with a strong bassline to drive this song. Audibly it exercises the imagination with feelings of strength and emotion as the choir takes ownership of the lyrics and charges through with the chorus, "*ready to try-on my long white robe.*" The song represents a preparedness to fight collectively for liberation of an oppressed community to get to that place where *there's no more "weepin and wailin."* This song was used specifically regarding the affairs of the community, remembering God works in the affairs of men. Rev. Glenn Settle makes his argument during every spoken word introduction. He declares that God is at work in the community and the world, and He will surely punish the white oppressor. Biblical old testament songs defined the community for generations, therefore the community is identified by the existing theology of the tension between the old testament and the new. The Old Testament sighting revenge on the Pharaohs of this world and the New Testaments demonstration of sacrificial love, Love thy neighbor as thyself.

15 I Been Buked and I Been Scorned

(1953) Negro Spiritual

<https://youtube/KpYnUrjEq0>

*“I’ve been ‘buked an’ I’ve been scorned children;
I’ve been talked about sho’s you’ born.*

Commentary: The word “buked’ comes from rebuked to be reprimanded or scolded. Many African Americans were reprimanded, and scolded and ridiculed by whites at any time. Black men had to step off the sidewalk when whites passed by them. This is a reminder of keeping the faith no matter what. Everything is based on the faithfulness that one day Judgement is coming, “to be sure...etc.” By human striving those with faith will be written down in the Lamb’s Book of Life and all others will come to destruction.

In conclusion, the songs paint on the canvas of the hearts of all that hear them. The human voice saturates the emotions with a deep understanding of what it takes to go through the storm and rain. It is a plea to God to remember me when my heart is overwhelmed. He takes me to a place far and beyond the sky. When the tears fall and reality seems to fade, the memory attached to a specific song recalls within African Americans the old adage, “When I look back and Wonder, how I made it Over.”

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