

“Who, How, and Why Not?: Questioning African American Spirituals”

Mark Burford, Associate Professor of Music

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845)

“Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel.... He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an old aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran faster, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.”

“Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked.... After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes...and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor.”

“I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition.... It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.”

“While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild old songs, revealing at once the highest joy and deepest sadness.... [T]hey would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have somehow thought that the mere hearing of these songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject would do.”

“The Jubilee Singers,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 1, 1873

“The first piece on the programme was ‘Keep Me from Sinking Down, with ‘The Lord’s Prayer,’ which was sung in an exquisitely pathetic manners by the full troupe of eleven performers.

This was followed by ‘Rise and Shine,’ ‘Getting Ready to Die,’ ‘Turn Back Pharaoh’s Army,’ ‘Go Down, Moses,’ ‘Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,’ and several other of their popular airs....

The voices of the whole troupe are very good, and show evident signs of great culture. Their style of singing is unique and charming. It is not in the usual line, but gives pleasure to those of high musical taste. Most of the singers have been slaves, and from the specimens of the old plantation hymns and songs we can form some idea of the hopes, fears and sufferings of that people.”

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Sorrow Songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

"What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world.... They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways." (page 169)

"...weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men." (page 167)

W. E. B. Du Bois's "Ten Master Songs" (pages 170–71)

1. "You May Bury Me in the East"
2. "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"
3. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"
4. "Roll, Jordan, Roll"
5. "The Rocks and Mountains"
6. "Been a-Listening"
7. "My Lord, What A Morning"
8. "My Way's Cloudy"
9. "Wrestlin' Jacob"
10. "Steal Away"

"And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people." (page 168)

"The first is African music, the second is Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody... Side by side, too, with the growth has gone the debasements and imitations,... a mass of music in which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the real Negro melodies." (page 171)

"Our song, our toil, our cheer have been given to this nation in blood brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?" (page 176)

James Weldon Johnson, "O Black and Unknown Bards" (1922)

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than "Go down, Moses." Mark its bars
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting pean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live,—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.

Alain Locke, "The Negro Spirituals" in *The New Negro* (1925)

"Negro folk song is not midway its artistic career as yet, and while the preservation of the original folk forms is for the moment the most pressing necessity, an inevitable art development awaits them, as in the past it has awaited all other great folk music." (page 208)

"In view of this very imminent possibility, it is in the interest of musical development itself that we insist upon a broader conception and a more serious appreciation of Negro folk song, and of the Spiritual which is the very kernel of this distinctive folk art. We cannot accept the attitude that would merely preserve this music, but must cultivate that which would also develop it." (page 210)

Marian Anderson, "Go Down, Moses" (1924)

When Israel was in Egypt land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go

Go down, Moses
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go

Paul Robeson, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" (1936)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
And why not every man?

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den
Jonah from the belly of the whale
The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace
And why not every man?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel...

The moon runs down in the purple stream
The sun forbear to shine
Every star did disappear
Now glory shall-a be mine

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel...

Zora Neale Hurston “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals” (1934)

“The idea that the whole body of spirituals are ‘sorrow songs’ is ridiculous.” (page 79)

“The real spirituals are not really songs. They are unceasing variation around a theme. Contrary to popular belief their creation is not confined to the slavery period. Like the folk-tales, the spirituals are being made and forgotten every day.... Moreover, each singing of the piece is a new creation. The congregation is bound by no rules. No two times singing is alike, so that we must consider the rendition of a song not as a final thing, but as a mood. It won’t be the same thing next Sunday.” (page 79–80)

Deacon A. Wilson and Congregation, “Certainly, Lord” (1926)

So glad I’ve got religion
Certainly, Lord!
So glad I’ve got religion
Certainly, Lord!
So glad I’ve got religion
Certainly, Lord!
Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!

Thank God I’ve got religion
Certainly, Lord!
Thank God I’ve got religion
Certainly, Lord!
Thank God I’ve got religion
Certainly, Lord!
Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!

I’ve been to the water
Certainly, Lord!
I’ve been baptized
Certainly, Lord!
My soul has been-a anchored
Certainly, Lord!
Certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord!

Hosea Williams and Selma Marchers, "Steal Away" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" (1965)

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

"Here's another one that we used to sing on the farm back down in the red hills of Georgia that I learned to love at an early age, son of a sharecropper, and it was this one."

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory Hallelujah

Moses Hogan Chorale, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?" (Arranged by Moses Hogan)

Half Chorus (Introduction)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
Then why not every man?

Chorus (twice)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
And why not a-every man?

Verse 1

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den
Jonah from the belly of the whale
And the Hebrew children from a fiery furnace
And why not every man?
Hallelujah!

Chorus

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
And why not a-every man?

Verse 2

The wind blows east and the wind blows west
It blows like the judgment day
And ev'ry poor soul that never did pray
Will be glad to pray that day
Hallelujah!

Chorus

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
And why not a-every man?

Verse 3

I set my foot on the Gospel ship
And the ship it began to sail
It landed me over on Canaan's shore
And I'll never come back any more
Hallelujah!

Chorus

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
And why not a-every man?
Hallelujah!

Extended Chorus

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel from the lion's den
And Jonah from the belly of the whale
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace
Then why...
A-every man...
He delivered...
Yes, he did...
Yes, delivered Daniel from the lions
Oh yes!
Oh, tell me why...
A-every man...
He delivered...
Yes, he did...
Yes, delivered Daniel from the lions
Oh yes, he did!
Tell me why!
Tell me why not every man!