

The Negro Spiritual

Excerpt from *The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual*, by Randye Jones

A Brief History

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

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

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

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

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

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

