

The African American Spiritual with Joe Carter

TRANSCRIPT

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. This hour, an exploration of the African-American spiritual with the late singer and educator Joe Carter. We revisit my 2003 conversation with him about the religious sensibility of this music, its hidden meanings, as well as its beauty, lament, and hope. Joe Carter loved this music. And he sang it and taught it from Novosibirsk to Nigeria.

MR. JOE CARTER: (*singing*) Nobody knows the trouble I've seen...

The slaves could not experience the normal world, you know? They were whipped and they had chains. And they found a secret door to take them into that world where the tears are wiped away.

(*singing*) ...glory, hallelujah.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

PROGRAM:

I'm Krista Tippett. The Negro spiritual is a genre that was born in slavery, yet it claims a place at the heart of American musical and religious life. In 2003, I interviewed Joe Carter, who died last year. He had a singular understanding of the history and hidden meanings of this music. Today, we revisit our exuberant program with him, an hour of conversation and song.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas.

MR. JOE CARTER: (*singing*) Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low...

MS. TIPPETT: The spiritual is the source from which gospel, jazz, blues, and hip-hop evolved. The organizing concept of this music is not the melody of Europe, but the rhythm of Africa. And it also conveys a theology, a potent mix of African spirituality, Hebrew narrative, Christian doctrine, and an extreme experience of human suffering.

Joe Carter has performed for more than 25 years in opera and musical theater, and singing the folk music of many cultures. He's portrayed Paul Robeson in a one-man musical, and traveled to Africa and Siberia as a performer and goodwill ambassador. And he's introduced thousands of people around the world to the spiritual.

In the immediate generations after American slavery ended, this music was almost forgotten. By the 1950s and 1960s when Joe Carter was growing up, many African Americans only vaguely knew of it. His great-grandparents had been slaves. But his Cambridge, Massachusetts, parents were eager that he not build his life on stories of the suffering of his ancestors.

They attended the main black church in Cambridge of that time, where traditional European church music was sung. But occasionally, his family listened at home to a haunting old recording of a renowned Ohio radio choir, *Wings Over Jordan*.

(*Audio clip of Wings Over Jordan playing*)

MS. TIPPETT: The civil rights movement rediscovered the spiritual and put it on the larger American cultural map. When Joe Carter was 15, he formed a folk duo with a Jewish friend. And through him, Joe began to recover the spiritual music of his own people.

MR. CARTER: David told me, 'Joe, your people have wonderful music.' And this was the first time I'd ever heard someone say that. And so he wanted to come to my church to hear the music. So he came to Union Baptist Church on a Sunday morning and heard Bach. He said, 'Joe, that ain't it.'

MS. TIPPETT: From then on, Joe Carter began, he says, to search for the spiritual. I wanted to hear what he's learned about the meaning of this music and its power across time and cultures. He tells me that there are an estimated 5,000 spirituals in existence. They were originally called "sorrow songs." And many of them were composed spontaneously.

MR. CARTER: As a teenager, I met a woman by the name of Jessie Anthony who was, I think she was over 80 when I met her. And somehow, she was coming to our church. And we young people would go to her house to collect her, to bring her to church and so on. Well, here was an African-American woman whose parents were slaves in Virginia. And she sang the spirituals. And she'd heard me sing in church, so she just sort of took me under her wing. And she was going to teach me these songs. And she had a suitcase full of stories that she'd collected over the years of the spirituals. And she would tell me, she'd say, 'Child, when they sang this song, this is what they were talking about, you know? A lot of people don't know this!' And she had stories for every song.

MS. TIPPETT: OK, tell me a story.

MR. CARTER: One of the stories I seem to remember that she told, it was about — Emancipation Day had come. And there was a group of former slaves now on an island off the coast of South Carolina. And my parents were from South Carolina, all my family. And they were waiting for the emissary of the government to arrive in his little boat to tell them that they had received the deeds to their land. Because the government had promised them not only freedom, but 40 acres and a mule.

And so this was going to be a great, wonderful day. And the former slaves had gathered together on the island waiting with bated breath. And finally, they saw the boat of the officer approaching. And they could tell, even from the distance, that his face was not happy and his countenance was somewhat sad. And they said there was a groan that just came from the crowd. And one of the older women from the crowd just stood up and began to make up a song on the spot. She sang, (*singing*) "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Glory, hallelujah."

And then she spoke, looking to the people around her, she said, (*singing*) "Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down. Oh, yes, Lord. Sometimes, I'm almost leveled to the ground. Oh, yes, Lord. Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Glory, hallelujah."

She looked at the people standing by, and she said, (*singing*) "Although you see me going along so." And they answered, (*singing*) "Oh, yes, Lord. I've got my trials here below." And they answered, (*singing*) "Oh, yes, Lord. Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus. Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Glory, hallelujah."

MS. TIPPETT: And sorrow songs, is that what the spirituals were called...

MR. CARTER: Yeah, that's what we're told.

MS. TIPPETT: ...routinely? And it does connote, it connotes within the music, but it connotes something different from the title "spiritual."

MR. CARTER: Mm-hmm. Because they were the expression of the great pain and the sorrow. But at the same time, they were always looking upward. They were always reaching. There was always some level of hope, as, as opposed to the concept of the blues. The blues was just singing about your troubles, and there was no hope. But there's always the glory hallelujah someplace saying, "Oh, and on that glory hallelujah, then we fly."

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: So in the midst of the night, we can fly away to freedom while we're singing these, these songs.
(*singing*)

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow
Down in this wide world below
No hope have I for tomorrow
I've started to make heaven my home

Sometimes I'm tossed and driven low
Sometimes I don't know where to roam
I've heard of a city named heaven
I've started to make heaven my home

MS. TIPPETT: Musician and teacher Joe Carter. I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, exploring the African-American spiritual. The body of music, which we know as the spiritual, emerged from bitter experience, yet it conveyed a generous understanding of the nature of God and of human life.

MR. CARTER: I think that the sorrow became the entrance, the open door, into a whole new world of experience. They, the slaves, could not experience the normal world. They couldn't go out and go shopping. They couldn't buy a house. They couldn't do all the things that the normal white person did. They were slaves, you know? They were whipped and they had chains. And they found a secret door to take them into that world where the tears are wiped away.

MS. TIPPETT: But the tears are cried first, aren't they?

MR. CARTER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, you talked about the, the secret power of these songs. And I think so much of what we're learning now in our advanced day is how important it is to embrace suffering in life in order to move forward.

MR. CARTER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: And maybe they did not have a choice.

MR. CARTER: No, they didn't.

MS. TIPPETT: But there's — it's almost like there's healing in that moment, even though it doesn't take the pain away, you know?

MR. CARTER: And that's one reason, I think, that African-American religion and culture has become so powerful in the world. One of the things that I think about when I think about this body of music, I realize that it was the foundation for most other American music, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: And, and this music has changed the face of music in the 20th century. And the story behind the creation of the spiritual, it's really — it's a miraculous story. Normally, when you hear the story of African-American music in a documentary or something, you go back to Ella Fitzgerald or Louis Armstrong.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: And I say, 'Well, that's, that's great. But you — if you really want to know the story behind the story, find out who Louis' grandmother was and what she was singing. What were the songs he learned when he was a baby? And what, what were the messages of those songs?'

And the thing that we find is that in the midst of all of the most horrible pain, some of these powerful individuals lived transcendent, shining lives. They were able to rise up above. I mean, they were able to be loving and forgiving in the midst of it all.

Mammy was taking care of master's baby. It was mammy, not master's wife, that was nursing that little baby. Mammy could have poisoned the child. She could have smothered the child. But she loved that child like it was her own child. Because there was something in her faith that said, 'You're supposed to be loving. You're supposed to be kind. You're supposed to be forgiving. And there's no excuse if you are not.' We have songs like — the interesting thing, you don't find mean-spirited sentiments in the spirituals.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: They're the most noble sentiments. Now, you — find a song like this: "It's me. It's me. It's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer." (*singing*) "It's me. It's me. It's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer." Not my brother, not my sister.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: Not the preacher, not the deacon, not the doctor, not the lawyer. Not the master? Wait a minute. These are people who were victims. They were in the midst of the most horrible situation but they said, 'I'm taking responsibility for who I am today, and it's me standing in the need. I'm the one that has the proud heart today. Come and fix me.'

MS. TIPPETT: This is not only sound theology and psychology, it's extremely mature spirituality, right?

MR. CARTER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: What was it that, that came together in the lives and the spiritual sensibility of those slaves that, that connected them so powerfully to — really those are the best attributes of Christianity that you're talking about.

MR. CARTER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: They're not often practiced. You know, James Weldon Johnson talked about this as, you know, the verging of the spirit of Christianity with the vestiges of African music or, or an African sensibility.

MR. CARTER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, do you have any ideas about what made that such a special fusion?

MR. CARTER: Well, I've thought about it a lot.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: And, and one thing that's occurs to me, if we go back to the cultures of the slaves that came from many different African nations and languages, but one thing they had in common was they believed in a supreme deity. But they believed He was very busy and very, very holy, and in order to get to Him, you had to go through the ancestors. It wasn't very dissimilar to the way Europeans felt with the saints, and so on. When slavery took place — and there was also this, this concept that you commune with deity with magic, shining songs. If your songs come forth with great fervor, you not only reach deity but deity comes and possesses you, becomes part of you, and gives you the strength to do whatever you've got to do to win your battles, to harvest your crop.

And when people were taken suddenly as slaves, when they were literally kidnapped from their normal lives, whatever those lives were, they were taken away from the land of their ancestors. The spirit of the ancestors couldn't cross the water. And so, when they were taken on these boats away from their homes, they experienced the most deep desolation, possible because not only were they being removed from their friends and kindred, but they were being removed from their God. And they had no way to get to God because the ancestors were way back in Africa on the land.

And I imagine when the slaves heard about this Jesus — now, the master's religion — first of all, you got to realize this, they were not impressed by the master's Christianity, may I say.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, right. I mean, this is why it's even surprising to me that they adopted Christianity.

MR. CARTER: Yeah. Exactly, because they saw all of the brutality, they saw all the hypocrisy and were the, the brunt of it. But they heard about this Jesus, this man of sorrow who suffered and, and they identified. They thought — and then they were told that Jesus is the Son of the High God. 'No. Wait, the Son of the High God? We can get to the High God through this guy?'

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: 'And His story sounds like our story. He's born in terrible circumstances, He's mistreated. He's finally abused and killed. My goodness. Maybe He will carry us to the High God.' Then also, they heard stories about Daniel and the lion's den.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: My goodness. They loved that story because they identified with Daniel.

MS. TIPPETT: Tell the story, and tell me what the connection is between those people and, and that story.

MR. CARTER: Well, let me, let me sing the song that they, they created from the story.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. OK. OK.

MR. CARTER:

(singing)

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, why not everyone?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, why not everyone?

He delivered Daniel from the lion's den

Jonah from the belly of the whale

The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace

Why not everyone?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, why not everyone?

The moon runs down in a purple stream

The sun refuse to shine

Every star shall disappear
But Jesus shall be mine

Oh, didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, why not everyone?
Why not everyone?
Why not everyone?

They were in the lion's den of slavery, and that lion was roaring around them every day. But somehow the hope that came from this story that the angels locked the lion's jaws, I mean, they loved that story.

MS. TIPPETT: The late performer and educator Joe Carter. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, we'll continue this exploration of the African-American spiritual, including Joe Carter's stories of how slaves used these songs as code.

When I spoke with him, Joe Carter told me many stories, and he sang many songs, more than we could fit in to this radio broadcast. Our companion site at speakingoffaith.org gives you a chance to hear what was cut. And in the coming weeks, we'll be including downloadable mp3s of Joe's songs in our podcast. Sign up for it and get each week's program and other bonus material at your convenience. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett. Today, in word and song, we're exploring the African-American musical genre the spiritual. Before humanitarian and performer Joe Carter died last year, we sat down and explored the religious roots and hidden meanings of this singular musical tradition.

Modern Americans sometimes confuse the spiritual with the gospel, but Joe Carter was always quick to point out the difference. Gospel songs, he said, are focused on a joyous message. They have a faster beat and are attributed to identifiable authors. The body of work we know as the spiritual, some 5,000 songs, was written anonymously by slaves. Each song typically expresses a single sentiment or message, often born of grief.

The great Harlem writer James Weldon Johnson published his first collection of American Negro spirituals in 1925, but it remained for the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the phenomenon of black pride to bring these songs to a wide audience. Joe Carter studied and performed the spirituals all over the world. A great-grandson of slaves, he thought deeply about the enduring spiritual power of these songs across many cultures. He was also fascinated by how slaves used the spirituals within their given reality as a kind of code.

MR. CARTER: An old master comes out one day. He says, 'Hey, Joe. Big Joe. I don't hear nobody singing down there. You guys strike me up one of them good old spiritual songs. You know how I like them. Give me one of them good old songs.' And — often when I go to the schoolchildren, I have them sing with me. I say, 'OK. Now pretend you're going to be — you're all slaves, OK? And, and master wants us to sing a song, but you — we don't really want to sing for master, do we?' No. No, we don't. I say, 'Well, I'll tell you something. Master loves our singing, but he doesn't listen to the words we say. He doesn't have a clue what we're — so we can say anything we want. So, let's give the master a good old song.'

MS. TIPPETT: What do you sing with the kids?

MR. CARTER: (*singing*) "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 and tell old pharaoh, 'Let my people go!'" And after we go through the song, they go, "Hey, old master, how was that one?"

One of the connections also that I, I learned about that period of time from my grandparents was my grandfather was a storyteller. And he would regale the family, every time we were together, with slavery stories. I mean, that's what he always talked about. And there was a slave by the name of John who was the star of all of his stories.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: And you never knew whether the story was true or not, but it was always funny and it got your attention, and grandpa was a good storyteller. But there was also always a moral at the end of the story. But the one theme that went through all of these stories was the end of the story, was that John had outsmarted the master. He was always ahead of the master.

So, there was this concept, 'The master doesn't really understand us. We play a role for him and he sees us in a certain way, and we'll play that role as much as we can so that we won't get whipped. So, we've got to understand his thinking, but he can never understand our

thinking.' And so, the spirituals were all, all of the spirituals, all of the songs were masks...

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MR. CARTER: ...as well as, you know, these transcendent wonderful moments. They were also signals for escape. This was one of my grandmother's favorite songs.

(singing)

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

My Lord He calls me, calls me by the thunder
The trumpet sounds within my soul
Ain't got long to stay here
Green trees are bending, poor sinner stands a tremblin'
The trumpet sounds within my soul
Ain't got long to stay here

MS. TIPPETT: You know, it's a religious idea that there is a better life after this one, right? It's a piece of doctrine. But there is something so miraculous happening when you are listening to this music or singing it. You know, for that moment, you're actually transported to that better life, right?

MR. CARTER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, you're singing, 'Soon I will be done,' but I think in singing that song, you can go through another day of this misery.

MR. CARTER: Exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: Right? It makes you strong for a little while. It's almost like the eternal becomes part of the present. It's amazing.

MR. CARTER: I think that's it. I think that is it. It's like you, you get into the stream of that living water.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: And there's no past, present, and future. It's just right now, and right now everything is all right.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: You know, there's a story about Elijah, I think, and a woman whose son died. And she had received this son in a special — as a miracle, actually. And the prophet told her that she was going to have this son at a certain time and she did, and the son dies. And she says, 'Send for the man of God. Send for that prophet.' And Elijah sends a servant. She says, 'No, no, no. I want to see the man. Now, you gave me the promise, I have a child, and my child has died. I'm having a tragedy right now.' And when Elijah rode, coming close to her, he said, "Woman, how is it with thee?" She said, "It is well with my soul."

And, and there was something that you can find even today in those, especially the older people who really have faith, you say, 'How are you doing?' And you just see that smile. And it doesn't say that 'I'm doing OK.' It doesn't say that 'Everything's OK in my life.' Sometimes they'll say, "I'm blessed." Sometimes they'll say, "It is well," you know? So the sense of well-being does not depend on whether things are good or bad or up or down because, if we had to live that way as slaves, we would constantly be buried underneath the ground because the circumstances were so horrible and so bad we had to find, as I say, that secret door.

MS. TIPPETT: We talked about how there was this subversive power of, of the words of the spirituals, saying things which really contradicted the, the interests of the masters, for example. But also I think there were more overt codes and real practical references in some of the spirituals. And give me an example of that, where there was almost a secret language.

MR. CARTER: "Steal Away to Jesus."

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: And, and when someone said, *(singing)* "I ain't got long to stay here," everybody knew, 'Hey, I'm going to be escaping tonight, and I want you to be supporting me.'

MS. TIPPETT: Wow.

MR. CARTER: 'Someone is going to meet us on the other side of the river. Green trees are bending, poor sinners stand a-trembling.' And maybe they had a signal where someone would shake a leaf and a branch of a tree across the river and you'd go on to safety to the Underground Railroad, hopefully. "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home."

MS. TIPPETT: "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." What's, what's going on there that's not overt?

MR. CARTER: Well, first, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." was a death song.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: As most of them were in some way.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: And it was often sung when a child died. And it was a way to evoke one's dignity to say, 'Even though I'm a slave, if God has to send a golden chariot down from the sky, I'm going to have dignity. My child's going to have dignity. I looked over Jordan and what did I see? A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.' But then later you get, "If you get there before I do, tell all my friends I'm coming up there, too." And so the master never knew what they were singing about. You see?

MS. TIPPETT: I did not know that.

MR. CARTER: Yeah. And so I think at some point someone realized, 'Maybe I don't have to die in order to have a little heaven.'

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: Freedom. And, of course, they thought that if they got to the Mason-Dixon Line and crossed, they would have true freedom. And then, unfortunately, they got across the Mason-Dixon Line, still found there was oppression and found that somehow they had to revert back to the original spiritual meanings of the songs because the political meanings never delivered them.

(singing)

Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home
Oh, I looked over Jordan and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home
A band of angels comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home
Why don't you swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home
Oh, swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home
If you get there before I do, comin' for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I'm comin' there too comin' for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home
Comin' for to carry me home
Comin' for to carry me home
Comin' for to carry me home

MR. CARTER: And I think there were so many of the songs, even "Wade in the Water" — "God's going to trouble the water" — another image of people going to the river to be baptized and also going to the river to escape to freedom. And when someone started that song and started moving through the woods, the story of "Wade in the Water." They loved that story. And the story was at a certain season the angels would come and trouble the water, as they say, which, I don't know, they put their wings in or their toenails or whatever. But whatever happened, once they touched the waters, if you got in the water and you were sick, you'd be healed.

And so here's this guy, 38 years he's been going. And Jesus comes by and says, 'What's your problem?' He says, 'Can't you see? I'm a lame man. And every time the angels come to trouble the water, somebody gets in before me.' And Jesus said, 'Do you want to be healed?' 'Well, yes. Of course, I do.' 'Then take up your bed and walk.' They loved this story because this was about self-sufficiency. We are not victims. We're powerful individuals, and we are a people of faith. And so they sang, let me just do a little bit of that song.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. MR. CARTER:

(singing)

Wade in the water, wade in the water, children
Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water
Who's that yonder dressed in white, God's gonna trouble the water
Must be the people called the Israelites, God's gonna trouble the water
Children, wade in the water, wade in the water, children

Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water
Who's that yonder dressed in red, God's gonna trouble the water
It must be the people that Moses led, God's gonna trouble the water
Children, wade in the water, wade in the water, children

Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water
God's gonna trouble the water
God's gonna trouble the water
God's gonna trouble the water

MS. TIPPETT: What this makes me think of is how the politics of freedom can actually distract from this inner freedom and dignity, which the slaves possess and which we find so expressed in this music even today.

MR. CARTER: And maybe in the same sense that sometimes religion can distract from spirituality. You get a structure, a form.

MS. TIPPETT: You get a structure, right.

MR. CARTER: You get a program, and somehow, after a while, the real thing is as elusive as a, as the Holy Grail.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. You can lose this sense that these slaves who created this music obviously had that — at every moment, they were full of grace. They were blessed, right? All was well with their souls no matter what was going on around them, no matter what rights they had or what their legal status was.

MR. CARTER: Now, it must be said that there were certainly slaves who were trying to escape, slaves who were willing to get involved in revolution and insurrection and so on. But I think the larger community had a spiritual identity that guided them.

MS. TIPPETT: And we have to be so careful not to be glorifying slavery, right? Or...

MR. CARTER: That's, yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: Or glorifying, so what are we talking about here? What are we getting at?

MR. CARTER: You know, I think what we're talking about, human suffering and how do we survive when the worst happens? What are the mechanisms? And I think that African-Americans have shown the world, and other peoples have done it, too. Other peoples are doing it all the time, and it's the same process. It doesn't matter who the people are. It doesn't matter whether the song is an actual song of notes and music or whether it's the spirit of the people expressed in some other way, but you'll find, for example, when I sing these songs, I can sing "Motherless Child" in Siberia; they know what it means. They've been through hell. I can go to Scotland and Ireland and Wales and sing these. They understand the sentiment.

As a matter of fact, you go to Wales right now, you'll find African-American spirituals in Welsh in the Welsh hymnbook part of their worship, you know? So the — songs have become symbolic, I think, of that universal quest for freedom, that yearning for freedom and that part of us that says, 'I will not be defeated.'

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, oh Lord
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long way from home
A long way from my home

MS. TIPPETT: : Musician Joe Carter. I'm Krista Tippett. And this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, exploring the African-American spiritual.

MS. TIPPETT: The paradox of the spirituals in their context of slavery was that they gave themselves over in some sense to, to suffering and to the hardness of life and to — really to an essential powerlessness. Now, this, this is where we are. This is where we live. And —

but there was as an "and." And I am beloved, I'm graced, I am blessed, I have dignity, I'm alive and what I experience now is not all there is. You know, there's, there's a surrender and there's an incredible power at the same time in the spirituals — and I don't know, when life is sort of halfway better, maybe the surrender goes away and the power is diminished, too. Does that — am I making any sense?

MR. CARTER: Yeah. I, I think it's...

MS. TIPPETT: And what is...

MR. CARTER: ...you know, that's one of the horrible problems that we have to deal with, with the whole issue of progress, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MR. CARTER: Because in the process, we may lose something. But you know something? Because I have been living with these songs, these songs have become the strength of my life. Because I realize even though I am not in slavery, as my grandparents or great-grandparents were, I deal with all of the difficulties of life that — nobody escapes.

MS. TIPPETT: No. And even somebody who's perfectly free and perfectly rich and perfectly powerful in the world's terms doesn't escape from suffering, right?

MR. CARTER: That's right.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MR. CARTER: And bondage — the worst kind of bondage is that which takes place in the inside, you know. And when we look back to the slavery days, we were bound, but it was the master who was really the slave. And I think some of us understand that now. But I experience in my own life great strength from telling the stories and looking back because I see what they went through, and I haven't experienced anything like what my ancestors did. And I complain about everything, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: I wonder if it is at all disturbing to you that this music with its sensibility has, you know, is considered now to be a defining part of American culture as a whole? You could say maybe that it's been co-opted, embraced. Does that, does that bother you because that necessarily takes it out of its context, doesn't it? I mean, is it OK for a white person to celebrate this as much as...

MR. CARTER: Well, I think it's a good question. And — and my answer is this, when any music or art becomes this transcendent thing that helps people through, it then becomes a property of the universe. It becomes a property of the world. And to tell the story of the spiritual, it's not an African story. It is an African-American story. It's the blending of the two cultures.

And the fact that George Gershwin was influenced greatly by the spirituals, you know, I think it's a wonderful thing that this man could reach out of his neighborhood, go down to South Carolina and listen to the elders sing and come back and say, 'This is a treasure.' And then translate that through his genius and give to the world as so many others have. And I mean, even — there are many European composers like Dvorák who were influenced by this music. And today, I think — it's true with any kind of art, there has to be the sensitivity of the person who is observing and participating. Some people don't get it no matter what you do. And there are other people, you don't have to say anything, they get it from the get-go, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MR. CARTER: One of the things I would say about the development of African-American music and culture, the powers that be found it much more attractive to promote the blues — and to promote the image of the black man singing the blues with a bottle of wine in his back pocket, singing about less-than-noble sentiments while we have this whole treasure. And the Paul Robesons and the Marian Andersons and others who came and brought this music forth, they didn't make the big commercial successes. Well, Robeson did, and Anderson did for a while, but they're among the few. In order to make a commercial success, you've got to sing soul, you've got, you've got to get away from anything that is spiritual. And change the message.

MS. TIPPETT: Soul as opposed to spiritual.

MR. CARTER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: That's interesting.

MR. CARTER: We have still have a problem because there are still people who don't want to tell the truth about who we are. And if the truth is really told, then you've got to go back and tell the story of the love and the forgiveness and the power of many of the ancestors. They weren't all loving and forgiving. I mean, some of them were mean-spirited. Some of them, you know, did whatever they had to do, I'm sure. But as a, a national identity, this music became the embodiment of a spirit of goodwill, a spirit of forgiveness, a spirit of 'I'm going to survive no matter what.'

MS. TIPPETT: Dignity. I mean, that's the word that keeps coming up.

MR. CARTER: And that's — yeah, yeah, yeah. And by the way, this woman that I told you about, Jessie Anthony, she was the most dignified soul I'd ever met. The last time I saw her, she was, I think, 88 years old. Her parents were born slaves. And she began to sing the spirituals. She began — she sang at Boston Public Library, she sang at Harvard, demonstrating the music.

And she said, 'Joe?' I said, 'Yes, Ms. Anthony.' She said, 'I want you to go into my bedroom and look under my bed and tell me what you see there.' And so I went into her bed. I said, 'You got a suitcase?' She said, 'Yes, I do, child.' I said, 'What's in the suitcase?' And she smiled. She beamed at me.

She said, 'In that suitcase, I've got my going home clothes. Ooh, I've got a beautiful dress in there. Jesus is coming for me any day, don't you know, child?' And she just started laughing. I'll never forget that image. Here was someone who'd gone through all of the changes in culture and society, and now was living in an elder apartment complex in Boston, all of her children in Washington, D.C., and everything. And she was still singing her songs. And she was holding her head up high every place she went.

You know, she was the kind of person who just commanded your respect. And when the young people — whenever we go to her house, she would us the stories, all these songs and everything. And then, she would always end singing one little song.

Give me a C, Tom. And she'd sing, 'Children, if you don't remember anything I've told you, if you don't remember any songs that I've sung for you, I want you to remember this one.'

(singing) Be ready when he comes.

Be ready when he comes.

Be ready when he comes.

Oh, Lord, he's coming again so soon.

Be ready when he comes.

Be ready when he comes.

Be ready when he comes.

Oh, Lord, he's coming again so soon.

"Now, Joe, you be ready." You know, "You be ready, child."

MS. TIPPETT: Joe Carter was a teacher, performer, and traveling humanitarian. He died at the age of 57 of leukemia on June 26th, 2006.

MR. CARTER: When my father died and I just — I got the news I was here. And I remember that morning, I had tuned on public radio and there was just a little piece of a spiritual that came through, and it's something that I had heard as a child. You know, later, when I, I did my concerts, I would do a tribute to my father at the end of the concert, I would sing this song.

(singing) Let the work that I've done speak for me.

Let the work that I've done speak for me.

When I come to the end of this road

And I lay down this old heavy load

Let the work that I've done speak for me.

Let the life that I've lived speak for me.

Let the life that I've lived, Lord, speak for me.

When I come to the end of this road

And I lay down this heavy load

Let the life that I've lived, oh, Lord, speak for me.

MS. TIPPETT: And tell us what Joe's stories and songs mean to you. Contact us at speakingoffaith.org. If you're interested in hearing Joe Carter perform more of the spirituals he loved, explore our companion site for this program. And we'll be including downloadable mp3s of Joe's songs in our podcast. Sign up for the podcast and get each week's program and other bonus material at your convenience. Just look for SOF Extras. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org.

MR. CARTER:

(singing) Oh, let the prayers that I've prayed speak for me.

Let the love that I've shared, Lord, speak for me.

Oh, lord, when I come to the end of this road

And I lay down this old heavy load
Let the life that I've lived speak for me.
Oh, let the prayers that I've prayed speak for me.
Oh, yes, let the love that I've shared speak for me.
MS. TIPPETT: Thank you so much, Joe Carter.

MR. CARTER: It is my pleasure to be here. Thank you.

MS. TIPPETT: The senior producer of *Speaking of Faith* is Mitch Hanley with producers Colleen Scheck and Jody Abramson and associate producer Jessica Nordell. Our online editor is Trent Gilliss. Our consulting editor is Bill Buzeberg. Kate Moos is the managing producer of *Speaking of Faith*. And I'm Krista Tippett.

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