



## The Legacy of the African-American Spiritual

From Minnesota Public Radio's Sound Learning ([www.soundlearning.org](http://www.soundlearning.org))

### Sound Learning Feature for December 2003

From *Speaking of Faith* ([www.speakingoffaith.org](http://www.speakingoffaith.org))

The spiritual, born in the American South, created by slaves, 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 the theology conveyed in these songs is a mix of African spirituality, Hebrew narrative, Christian doctrine, and an extreme experience of human suffering.

The selections in this month's feature are of particular interest to teachers and students of music, history, and social studies.

#### Segment 1: Introduction and the Purpose of Spirituals

Listen: <http://www.soundlearning.org/features/2003/12/rafiles/segment1.ram>

##### Key Terms and Topics

- Genre
- The Spiritual
- The impact of spirituals on the evolution of American music
- The transcendent power of music to pull people out of dire situations
- The formation of American culture from a blend of cultural traditions

#### Segment 2: Spirit of Christianity with African Sensibilities

Listen: <http://www.soundlearning.org/features/2003/12/rafiles/segment2.ram>

##### Key Terms and Topics

- Cultural preservation and assimilation: the blending of cultures in the formation of America.
- African cultural traditions in the African-American cultural identity
- Fusion of African Traditional Beliefs with Christian Belief System

#### Segment 3: Spirituals as Resistance

Listen: <http://www.soundlearning.org/features/2003/12/rafiles/segment3.ram>

##### Key Terms and Topics

- Comparing musical traditions of spirituals and gospel
- Examining modes of resistance during slavery
- Examining power of storytelling



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### Segment 4: Universal Appeal of Spiritual

Listen: <http://www.soundlearning.org/features/2003/12/rafiles/segment4.ram>

#### Key Terms and Topics

- Examining the universal elements of spirituals: coping, surviving, honoring ancestors and dignity
- Examining of how music forms cultural identity

In the following pages, find instructional ideas and study guides for each segment intended to aid in the teaching of:

- Listening comprehension.
- Critical thinking.
- Research challenges.



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#### Listening Comprehension Questions

- 1) Who created the Spiritual? What other styles of music spun out of it later in history?
- 2) What is the organizing concept of The Spiritual
- 3) What are the characteristics of the theology found in these songs?
- 4) What historical event revived The Spiritual?
- 5) About how many Spirituals, according to the host, are there?
- 6) Are Spiritual Songs simply songs about great pain?
- 7) What was the Slaves' secret door? Where did it lead?
- 8) What feelings do you not find in Spirituals? What feelings do you find? Does this give the sense of an advanced ethic or a regressed one?



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#### **Critical Thinking Questions**

- 1) What purpose did/does the Spiritual have in African-American history?
  
- 2) What makes the Spiritual different from other types of music, what is special about it?
  
- 3) What feelings do you not find in Spirituals? What feelings do you find? Does this give the sense of an advanced ethic or a regressed one?
  
- 4) Define "oral tradition" as a source in history. Why do historians study songs and stories of the past? What can we learn from the "oral tradition" that classic documents do not offer? Evaluate the importance of the oral tradition in the study of history.



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#### Research Challenges

1) What musical elements/traits from the African tradition can be found in popular music in America today?

2) Comparison Activity: "Music as the door out of despair"

Joe Carter explains the "transcendent quality" of music to be its ability to offer a mental escape from situations of despair. Listen to three spirituals and describe the mood of the songs. How do you feel when you listen to these songs? Write down the message that was being conveyed in each song. Write a paragraph that describes what specifically spirituals provided for slaves.

After completing this task, see Music of the Holocaust (<http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/music.htm>) and read about how music was a mode of expression and survival during the Holocaust of World War II. Listen to three examples of songs from this time period and describe the mood of the songs. How do you feel when you listen to these songs? Write down the message that was being conveyed in each song.

Question 1: Compare and contrast spirituals with the music from the Holocaust.

Question 2: Write a summary that explains how music serves as a survival mechanism.



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#### **Listening Comprehension Questions**

- 1) What were the primary religious beliefs of Africans in their homelands?
- 2) What were the most appealing aspects of Christianity for slaves?
- 3) What were the most unappealing aspects?

#### **Critical Thinking Questions**

- 1) Why would slaves convert to Christianity?
- 2) Compare and contrast the values/beliefs of African society with those of Christianity.



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#### Research Challenges

1) Research traditional cultural practices/beliefs in traditional African society. Identify three major elements of traditional African culture (common traits within the diversity of African societies). Explain each of these traits and why they were valued in African culture. Find examples of these traits in modern American culture. Are these same traits/beliefs valued in modern American culture? Explain.

Related link:

**Africans in America**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/narrative.html>

2) Research traditional African stories and storytelling.

a. What was the function of stories in traditional African culture?

b. Find one story that serves as a good example of the traditional African religious beliefs that are discussed in the radio program. Share with the class why this story serves as a good example of the tradition.

Related link:

**Traditional African stories and storytelling**

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/fssn/index.htm>

3) Research Gullah culture. What is it? Specifically, how is it similar to traditional African beliefs/culture? Why has Gullah culture developed as a separate entity? Why is Gullah culture a unique tradition within the larger American tradition today?

Related links:

- **Gullah Culture**  
<http://www.knowitall.org/gullahnet/>
- **National Geographic on Gullah Culture**  
[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/06/0607\\_wiregullah.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/06/0607_wiregullah.html)



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#### Listening Comprehension Questions

- 1) Gospel and Spiritual songs are \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) Gospel songs focus on \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) Spirituals were written by \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4) Where do most songs come from?
- 5) There's this concept that the master never really \_\_\_\_\_ us.
- 6) What was the name of the star of all of the slavery stories that Joe's grandpa taught him?
- 7) Explain the story of Elijah in your own words.
- 8) People with faith respond to "how are you" with \_\_\_\_\_.
- 9) What line did people think would bring them freedom when cross?
- 10) What's the story behind the song, "Sing low, sweet chariot"?



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#### Critical Thinking Questions

- 1) According to Joe Carter, what was the significance of the story of the pool of Bethesda?
- 2) Explain what Joe Carter means when he says, "the politics of freedom distract."
- 3) How were songs used to resistance against slavery?
- 4) Why were many spirituals re-discovered and published in the 1960's?

**Opposing Viewpoints:** To explore the issues of slavery and slave resistance, conduct an informal debate in response to the following question:

How should the United States honor the story of slave resistance and the chapter of slavery in American history?



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#### Research Challenges

1) Compare and contrast gospels and spirituals. Research both styles and listen to selections of each. How are their messages similar and different? Explain how the music feels different when you listen to each? What is the purpose of each style?

2) Research James Weldon Johnson. Write a report that summarizes his work. Why did James Weldon Johnson begin collecting and then publishing spirituals? See if your library or your public library carries his 1925 book of spirituals. If they do, read the lyrics to these spirituals and write a summary of what these songs are about. If they do not, write a letter to the library explaining what this book could offer to their current book collection and why they should order it!

Related link:

**James Weldon Johnson Biography**

<http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/amlit/johnson/johnson1.html>

3) What are different modes of resistance that were employed by slaves against slavery? How do the spirituals fit into this larger picture of slave resistance?

Related links:

- **Resistance: Maroon Slaves**  
[http://www.si.edu/maroon/educational\\_guide/23.htm](http://www.si.edu/maroon/educational_guide/23.htm)
- **Breaking the Silence: Teaching about Slavery**  
[http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/main/08/teacher\\_home.shtml](http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/main/08/teacher_home.shtml)
- **Underground Railroad Site**  
<http://www.undergroundrailroad.org/>
- **Underground Railroad National Geographic Site**  
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/>



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#### Listening Comprehension Questions

- 1) What role did spiritual identity play for slaves? Explain the different roles/aspects.
- 2) What does Joe Carter say can religion distract people from?
- 3) According to Joe Carter, who can take something away from the spirituals, and which composers have used elements of the spiritual?
- 4) How did slaves gain power from the spirituals?
- 5) What were the "going home clothes?"
- 6) Why does Joe Carter appreciate the spirituals, what does he find so uplifting?



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#### Critical Thinking Questions

- 1) How does the music that Joe Carter sings apply to the conversation about dignity, spirituals and religion?
- 2) What message do the spirituals get across to Mr. Carter? To you?
- 3) What stance does Joe Carter take on musical forms such as Blues and Rap? Why?
- 4) Explain the connection between 'dignity' and spirituals.
- 5) What musical style was promoted over spirituals? Why?
- 6) What is the significance of the song by Jessie Anthony that is played during this segment?
- 7) What role does music play in conveying experiences? How should music and stories be used in the study of history?
- 8) How does music shape cultural identity? How does it represent cultural values?



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#### Research Challenges

Joe Carter speaks about how music reflects the values of a culture. Listen to and then study the lyrics of four songs that are on popular radio today. What values are these songs reflecting? Do you find any common trends in what the songs are about? Why do you think these songs are about these values? Do these songs represent our culture well? Explain.

Finally, how are current songs similar or different to the spiritual?



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