

St. Agnes Black History Month: Week 2

The first known reports of distinctive black religious singing date from the early nineteenth century, but many of these reports are vague and the musical notation practiced at the time was inadequate to capture distinctive features of music as performed. Before the Civil War descriptions of black music are scattered and intermittent. But when the war shattered the closed society to which enslaved Africans were confined and brought them into large-scale contact with the world outside the plantation, northerners, often agents of the federal government or missionaries, came to appreciate their distinctive music. As with ex-slave narratives, the African American authorship of the spirituals was challenged at first. But in an 1867 article published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a militant New England abolitionist who commanded the first freed slave regiment to fight against the Confederacy, was among the first to describe how he heard "the choked voice of a race at last unloosed." He diligently took down the songs sung by the First South Carolina Volunteers around evening campfires. Higginson failed to recognize the African musical components of the slave songs, but he did catch something of the communal process by which these songs evolved, describing them as a "stimulus to courage and a tie to heaven." Noting how at the outbreak of the Civil War, enslaved blacks sang, "We'll soon be free / When the Lord will call us home," Higginson confirms the layered meaning of many spirituals, citing a drummer boy who confided in him that "Lord" in the song was a code for the "Yankees."

But it was when the Port Royal Relief Committee was established as an experiment to show how formerly enslaved people could work and learn as free people that an opportunity arose for studying the spirituals, culminating in the landmark work *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. In their introduction the editors admit that they did "the best we can do with paper and types," but that even their efforts "will convey but a faint shadow of the original. . . . The intonation and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced upon paper." Since the people who composed and first sang

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the spirituals were not the people who wrote them down, there is considerable variety in the ways in which nineteenth century African American dialect was rendered. Because of the difficulty in knowing precisely how many words would have been pronounced as they were originally sung, the lyrics will be reproduced here in standard English.

The distinguishing musical aesthetic of the spirituals derives from West African percussive forms, multiple meters, syncopation, a call and response structure, extensive melodic ornamentation, and an integration of song and movement, each involving improvisation. Call and response embodies the foundational principle behind the performance of the spirituals, denoting the ritual requirement of what is necessary for completion. The soloist in original performances of the spirituals was viewed as a mystic whose call inspired the participating group to respond. This full sense of process and communication reinforces the communal identity and its belief that art is an appropriate response to oppression. Very much a ritual act, when spirituals were sung by enslaved people they amplified their desire for liberation and created conditions of sacred space and time wherein the biblical stories of which they sang were transformed and the history of the ancient past became the history of the present.