

**African American spirituals** are considered the earliest sacred music in the United States. They are associated closely with slavery, which our Black sisters and brothers endured until 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln. Spirituals continued to be sung, even after slavery was formally abolished, and remain woven into the history and culture of the African American experience.

Over time, spirituals have also been known by other names, such as folk songs, shout songs, sorrow songs, slave songs, religious songs, and jubilees. It is because of the passion and religious emotion that permeate spirituals that they are most commonly known by that name.

While many consider spirituals chiefly music to help pass the grueling hours of labor enslaved people were required to do, spirituals actually served many other purposes for slaves. A couple of examples include their teaching power: Black people learned vocabulary, numbers, letters, and useful information. As long as enslaved people were completely uneducated, they were almost bound to their owners. A sort of education was happening through this music.

Perhaps the most important use of spirituals for enslaved Americans was a hidden language, with words and metaphors having instructions for how they could escape by way of the Underground Railroad and other ways. Somehow white slave owners did not usually pick up on this creative, risky, but effective means of communication in song, and so that music is sacred to African Americans.

This brings up the ongoing debate as to whether white folks should or can in good conscience sing Black Americans' spirituals. Many consider it cultural appropriation by white people and think the music should be reserved for African Americans.

Please find a link that interests you below. There is so much interesting information on spirituals and their sacred meaning in Black lives.

## **Resources:**

### **YouTube Spirituals, Compilations:**

- <http://spirituals-database.com/the-negro-spiritual/>
- <https://www.gpb.org/news/2019/09/17/slavery-civil-rights-the-legacy-of-negro-spirituals-in-georgia>
- <https://youtu.be/SwWki9GEIho> (kids' Bible Story collection within spirituals)
- [https://youtu.be/8zeshN\\_uumU](https://youtu.be/8zeshN_uumU)
- Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle sing: <https://youtu.be/axzB-qLudRI>
- Songs of Slavery: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5gesReHGww6aCtl1VdBUVJHzSwzy0CD>
- African American Heritage Hymnal: 575 Hymns, Spirituals, and Gospel Songs, General Editors, Rev. Dr. Delores Carpenter and Rev. Dr. Nolan Williams, Jr.

### **Hidden Meaning and Language of Spirituals:**

- The Black History Project: [https://youtu.be/5MfcIVXS5\\_o](https://youtu.be/5MfcIVXS5_o)
- The Hidden Meaning of Spirituals: <https://youtu.be/PMbiEdGjLUo>
- The Double Meaning of the Spirituals: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784158?seq=1>
- Teacher Tool Video: The Meaning of African American spirituals: <https://youtu.be/fZNtuY-ubNI>
- “African American Spirituals: History on the Net,”  
<https://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/1600-1859/3-spirituals/index.html>
- “Underground Railroad Secret Codes,” <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/underground-railroad-secret-codes/>

### **History:**

- Underground Railroad: <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad>
- African American Spirituals History:  
<https://www.historyonthenet.com/authentichistory/1600-1859/3-spirituals/index.html>

### **Who Should Sing African American Spirituals?**

- <https://youtu.be/uxGr0v7EeE8>
- White Choirs Singing Spirituals: <https://pages.stolaf.edu/americanmusic/2019/10/09/white-choirs-singing-spirituals/>
- Spirituals, Whose Songs Are They? <https://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/spirituals-whose-songs-are-they-anyway-and-why-arent-we-singing-them/>
- Why It Matters Who Sings Spirituals: <https://youtu.be/uxGr0v7EeE8>