

Many of the musical examples for this article can be viewed on our Web site at <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>.

"Shout All Over God's Heaven!"

How the African-American Spiritual Has Maintained Its Integrity in the Face of Social and Musical Challenges

by Thomas Lloyd

This article is based in part on the experience of collaborative performances by the Chamber Singers of Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges, directed by the author, with the Fisk Jubilee Singers under the direction of Paul Kwami and the Howard University Choir under the direction of J. Weldon Norris.

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I recently visited Fisk University with a college chamber choir with the intent of making a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the concert performance of the African-American spiritual. While there, we were fortunate to share a concert with the current generation of the Fisk Jubilee Singers[®], directed by Professor Paul T. Kwami. This landmark campus on a hill looking over Nashville possesses a sense of history that permeates not only the buildings and grounds, but also the imaginations of the current students as well, who proudly carry on an important legacy of African-American education and empowerment. The most prominent building on campus still is Jubilee Hall, built with funds raised by the first two Jubilee Singers tours under the direction of George L. White and the inspired leadership of Fisk student and former slave, Ella Sheppard. Within Jubilee Hall hangs the famous portrait of the second group of Jubilee Singers painted by the English portraitist Edmund Havell at the time of the Singers' historic visit with Queen Victoria.

The most surprising revelation came the next day at the beginning of our concert in Fisk Memorial Chapel. Eleven of the sixteen current members of the Jubilee Singers come out





The Jubilee Singers in Victorian costumes

on stage in Victorian costumes (on a swelteringly hot day) and moved into the exact same configuration as the eleven singers in the famous portrait in Jubilee Hall. They presented a medley of spirituals called *A Portrait Comes to Life*. The spirituals were sung using mostly simple four-part call-and-response harmonizations (as shown in Example 1 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>). Some of these arrangements are from the collection published by former Jubilee Singers director John W. Work III¹ and are very close in style to those recorded by his father with the Fisk Jubilee Quartet in the early decades of the

twentieth century.²

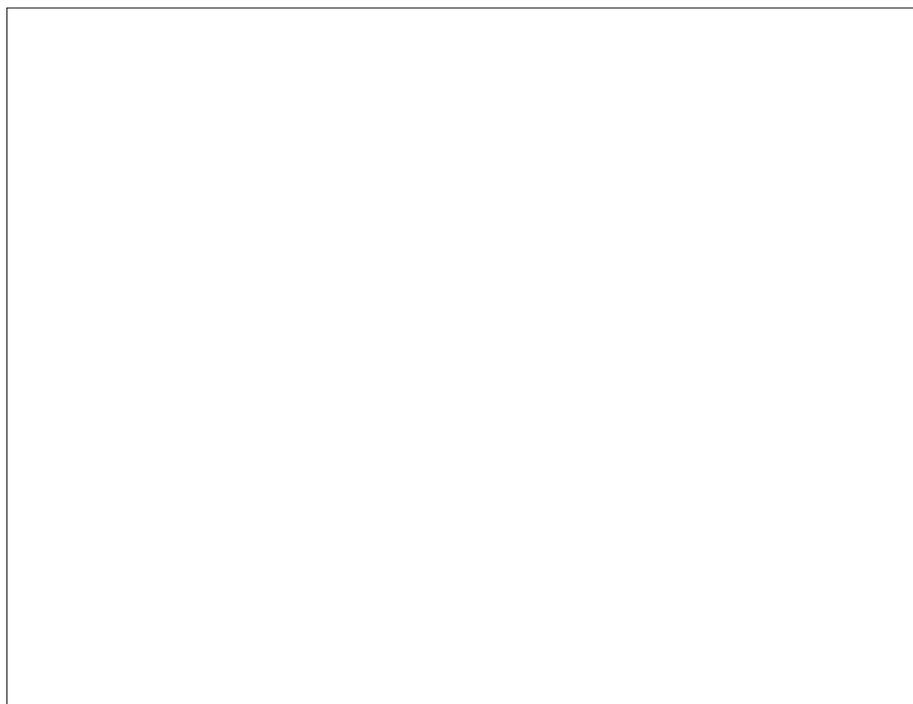
The young performers sought to emulate their predecessors by singing with directness, simplicity, restraint, and resolute dignity. In between selections, they stepped out from the “portrait” one by one to introduce their historic characters using more relaxed inflections suggestive of the conversational rural dialect of the slaves. They would then step back into the ensemble to sing another spiritual with tightly unified diction and unmistakable conviction. Hearing the spirituals sung by a small ensemble without a conductor instilled a desire to explore further the evolution of the spiritual from its origins

in the antebellum slave communities of the South to the imaginative choral arrangements of the outstanding composers still building on this tradition today.³ As the result of recent research and reissues of historic recordings, it is possible to get closer to the heart of the spiritual, not in order to argue for the authenticity of one particular interpretation over another, but to see how the biblically-based folk songs of the slaves have managed to maintain their essential integrity in spite of being subjected to a daunting range of transformations, accommodations, and appropriations.⁴

The Sound of the Spirituals in Their Original Context

The first known recording of black spirituals is a Columbia cylinder of the Standard Quartette singing *Keep Movin'*, recorded in 1894 in Washington, D.C. (see Example 2 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>). This track and the first disc recordings of the spiritual, which include five Victor tracks of the Dinwiddie Colored Quartet made in New York in 1902, are among a large number of digitally restored historic recordings now available on the Document Records label.⁵ Unfortunately, the invention of Edison's tin-foil cylinder phonograph in 1877 and Berliner's gramophone disc recorder in 1887 came too late to record the spirituals as they were sung by the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, not to mention the slaves who first sang these songs at camp-meeting revivals, while working in the fields, or at clandestine church meetings.⁶

However, the slave communities of the relatively remote Sea Islands chain of islands lining the east coast from Maryland to Florida have used their relative isolation to sustain older traditions that are thought to retain clear elements of nineteenth-century slave culture from its African roots. Folklorists Alan Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle recorded these traditions beginning in 1935, including spirituals and “ring shouts” (a tradition with strong African roots, where dancers would move in a circle while singers surrounded them with song, often accompanied by rhythmic clapping)⁷ Example 3 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>. These ring shout sessions that



would often take place after late night worship services, could carry on for hours, late into the night, with some songs starting slowly, and then gradually increasing in tempo until the gathering was roused into a frenzy.⁸ Other kinds of spirituals could be sung slowly, and drawn out with great feeling. One of the early accounts of spirituals sung in their original context comes from the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass, recalling his days as a slave child on the plantation:

[The spirituals] told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep, they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. . . . [I] did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs.⁹

From these and other contemporary sources, several elements of the original performance style of the spirituals can be deduced:

- *Everyone* who gathered together participated in the singing, some times at post-worship meetings with hundreds at a time—there was no passive audience;



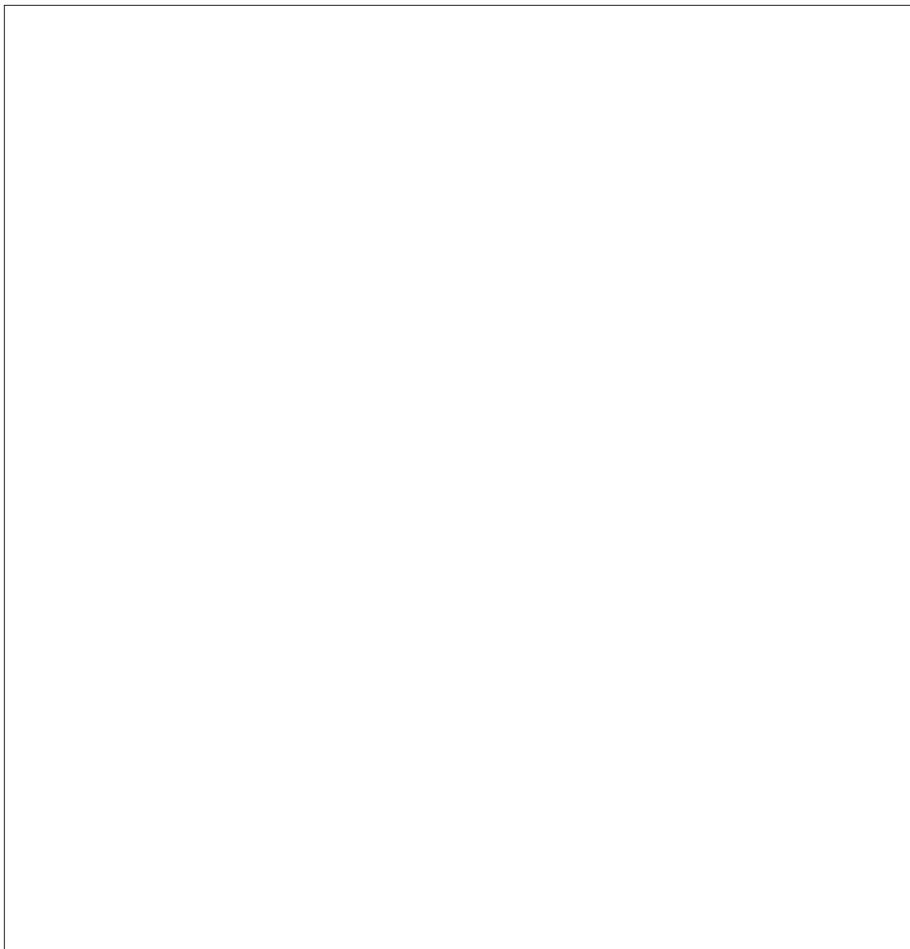
- The singing was improvisatory in nature, with words and music passed on and embellished through an oral tradition; this method was often facilitated by the “call” of a strong lead singer and the “response” of those gathered;
- The singing was vigorous. It “would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs” with a range of vocal color from “speech-like sounds” to “screaming and yelling;”¹⁰
- The musical texture can best be described as heterophony, i.e.; rarely were the songs sung purely in unison or with the independence of individual polyphonic voices, but there was also no clear harmonic or rhythmic uniformity: The lead voice carried the melody while other voices harmonized more

or less freely underneath, within traditional patterns.¹¹

The First Tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers

In 1867, a white, former Union army sergeant named George L. White (1838-95), became the treasurer and one of the first teachers at the Fisk Free Colored School, funded by the American Missionary Association, an abolitionist organization. After a time, White began gathering a group of students together for informal singing in his home, in part to keep his and their spirits from flagging in the midst of struggles to keep the new school from going under. He was inspired by their voices and the dire financial straits of the college, so he began arranging occasional fund-raising concerts for the choir. The repertoire was drawn from the popular songs of the day, abolitionist hymns, Scottish folks songs, and eventually complete cantatas.¹²

The second president of the new school, Adam Knight Spence, wrote in



1871 of an incident: “[O]ne day there came into my room a few students with some air of mystery. The door was shut and locked, the window curtains were drawn, and, as if a thing they were ashamed of, they sang some of the old-time religious slave songs now long since known as Jubilee songs.”¹³ Ella Sheppard, the leader of this group of students, who would become lead soprano, pianist, and onstage director of the Jubilee Singers, wrote of this experience: “[S]itting upon the floor (there were but few chairs) [we sang] softly, learning from each other the songs of our fathers. We did not dream of ever using them in public.”¹⁴

George White began to work closely with the students, transcribing some of the songs into musical notation and encouraging Ella Sheppard and the other students to work out arrangements of the songs that they could perform in public. White then organized the group into a resolutely disciplined ensemble. Andrew Ward outlines some of the written accounts from the first student singers concerning George White’s approach to singing in this way:

‘He insisted we use the same naturalness of expression we would



speaking to the audience.’ He had a horror of harsh tones: everything was softened; in fact, esses [sic] were not just softened but sometimes omitted. They were to sing with their mouths open wide enough to fit a finger between their teeth. The singers had to blend with each

other, listen to the entire ensemble; no voice except a soloist’s was to be heard above another.

Because they were reluctant to expose their songs to white ears, and because they would so often have to rehearse their pieces in hotel rooms, their *pianissimi* [sic] would become a kind of signature of the Jubilee sound. White used to ‘tell the singers to put into the tone the intensity that they would give to the most forcible one that they could sing, and yet to make it as soft as they possibly could.’ [T]hey sang with ‘so much feeling in every syllable’ because ‘Mr. White drilled that into us.’¹⁵

The style of singing described here seems to be a far cry from the free, robust communal singing in the fields of ante-bellum plantations. It would also be hard to dismiss the view of some in the black community at the time that performing the spirituals in concert in this way represented a humiliating accommodation to white audiences. They saw it as an inappropriate sharing of a part of their cultural heritage that was painful and better to be kept within the collective memory of the people who suffered under slavery. By the turn of the century, there were even a few open rebellions in black colleges such as Fisk and Howard, and in some prominent black churches against the idea of performing spirituals.¹⁶ As time passes, the achievements of the Fisk Jubilee Singers continue to be appreciated as more courageous and far-reaching in influence than may have been realized at the time.

Countering the Images of Black-faced Minstrelsy

The final abolition of slavery by the passage of the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution in 1865 initiated one of the most dramatic social transformations in history, as four million newly freed slaves began to recreate themselves after three centuries of servitude, arbitrary severance of family ties, and prohibitions against education. Entire communities and an educational and economic system had to be created from scratch. Even in the northern states to which many of the

newly freed slaves fled, the predominant cultural and purely musical images of African-Americans were derived from black-faced minstrelsy.

pleasantly stay in the memory. Unlike the spirituals, however, the words did not originate with the tunes, and often still reflect, in subtle or not so subtle ways, the

persisted into the twentieth century on the vaudeville stage, in musical comedy, on the movie screen, radio, and television. And yet, blackface minstrelsy was a tribute to the black man's music and dance, in that the leading figures of the entertainment world spent the better part of the nineteenth century imitating his style.²⁰

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Although this movement is sometimes viewed today as a quaint, racist relic on the fringe of American culture, it was, in fact, the dominant form of entertainment for the entire last half of the nineteenth century. Offshoots continued into the next century, in radio and television shows such as *Amos 'n Andy*, which remained hugely popular into the 1960s. What was then also known as "Ethiopian minstrelsy" involved the appropriation of black folk songs by professional white performers whose faces were blackened by cork. They successfully sought to draw laughter at the expense of the black characters they mimed, in particular the slickly urban "Zip Coon" and the laggardly plantation hand "Jim Crow." (The latter's name was later given to the whole era of racial segregation in the South).¹⁷ Following emancipation, black performers also began to form their own minstrel groups, re-claiming the material in their own fashion, in order to take advantage of the only avenue to the theater and concert stage available to them at the time.¹⁸

Many of the songs that came out of this era are still with us today, such as *Polly-wolly-doodle*, *Buffalo Gals*, *Arkansas Traveler*, *Turkey in the Straw* (which is the name of the instrumental version of *Ol' Zip Coon*), among many others, because their melodies, originating in black folk culture, are great tunes that easily and

ridicule intended by black-face performers. These songs have become so much a part of our cultural "wallpaper" at this point that the words or their original context are rarely considered.¹⁹ Eileen Southern summarizes the contradictions of this musical genre in this way:

The practices of 'Ethiopian' minstrels in the nineteenth century established unfortunate stereotypes of black men—as shiftless, irresponsible, thieving, happy-go-lucky 'plantation darkies'—that

Assessing the Achievements of the Fisk Jubilee Singers

Seen in this context, it was quite startling for white audiences to see on stage a group of nine former slaves, dressed not in the tatters of Jim Crow or the slick-city outfits of *Zip Coon*, but in simple, dignified suits and gowns, performing the spiritual songs of the slaves with a restraint, control, and expressive intensity that would take the audience's breath away. One listener closely affiliated with the singers, Mary Spence, observed:

[The opening *pianissimo* was so] exquisite in quality, full of the deepest feeling, so exceedingly soft that it could hardly be heard, yet because of its absolute purity carrying to the farthest part of any large hall, it commanded the attention of every audience. As the tone floated out a little louder, clearer, rose to the tremendous *crescendo* of *My Lord Calls Me*, and

diminished again into exquisite *pianissimo* sweetness, the most critical enemy was conquered.²¹

In four tours between 1871 and 1882, the vocal ensemble of between nine and eleven singers succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations. They achieved their initial goal of raising a huge sum of money (\$150,000) for the survival of Fisk University that would go on to educate a range of important leaders, from early literary figures such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, to political leaders such as John Lewis and Alcee Hastings. The Jubilees introduced the spiritual songs of the slaves to millions of listeners across the northeastern United States and Europe. In so doing, they served to preserve a cornerstone of African-American culture for their own people and to bequeath to the world one of its most life-affirming cultural legacies.

Even in the early days of the first tour when they needed every cent of ticket revenue just to keep going, the Jubilees

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were also pioneers in the dawning struggle for civil rights by refusing to perform in auditoriums or churches that prohibited attendance by blacks. They confronted the harsh segregation of public accommodations in the supposedly more hospitable North, often by reminding hotel managers and restaurateurs how differently they had been treated in Europe. They had some success in breaking a number of racial barriers along the way, such as the segregation of Pullman rail cars in 1880.²²

Andrew Ward has aptly summarized the lasting impact of the music they performed and the way they performed it.

What the Jubilees accomplished for themselves and the nation was to demonstrate the dignity, intelligence, and educability of black Americans. In the circles of the wealthy, a man might once have gotten away with casually remarking that higher education was wasted on blacks. But without abandoning their own culture and traditions, the Jubilees provided vivid and convincing proof to the contrary. Their music demonstrated to the world that there was something of lasting value in African-American culture.²³

Word of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' success spread quickly among the other newly emerging colleges such as the Hampton Institute in Virginia and the Fairfield Normal Institute in South Carolina.²⁴ However, this increased touring activity diluted critical financial support for touring ensembles from church foundations. By the time of the fourth tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers (1879-82), decreased funding from the American Missionary Association forced them to operate independently of the university.

The Fisk Singers had adopted the name "Jubilee" (associated with the biblical "year of Jubilee" when all slaves were to be freed) to differentiate themselves from minstrel groups and their repertory.²⁵ However, their popular success had such an effect that minstrel groups began to call themselves "Jubilees," as they took the new sacred songs and added them to portions of their shows, mocking the religious gatherings of the slaves.²⁶

By the end of the fourth tour, the declining health of George White and exhaustion of Ella Sheppard led to two separate Fisk Jubilee Singer groups being formed by two of their singers, Frederick Loudin and Maggie Porter. Both groups toured the world, including East Asia, until the turn of the century. But by then, the Jubilees were all but lost in the crowd of imitators and minstrel troupes.²⁷ W. E. B. DuBois observed: “Since their day they have been imitated—sometimes well, by the singers of Hampton and Atlanta, sometimes ill, by straggling quartets. Caricature has sought again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real.”²⁸

The Popularity of Early Recordings of the Fisk Jubilee Quartet

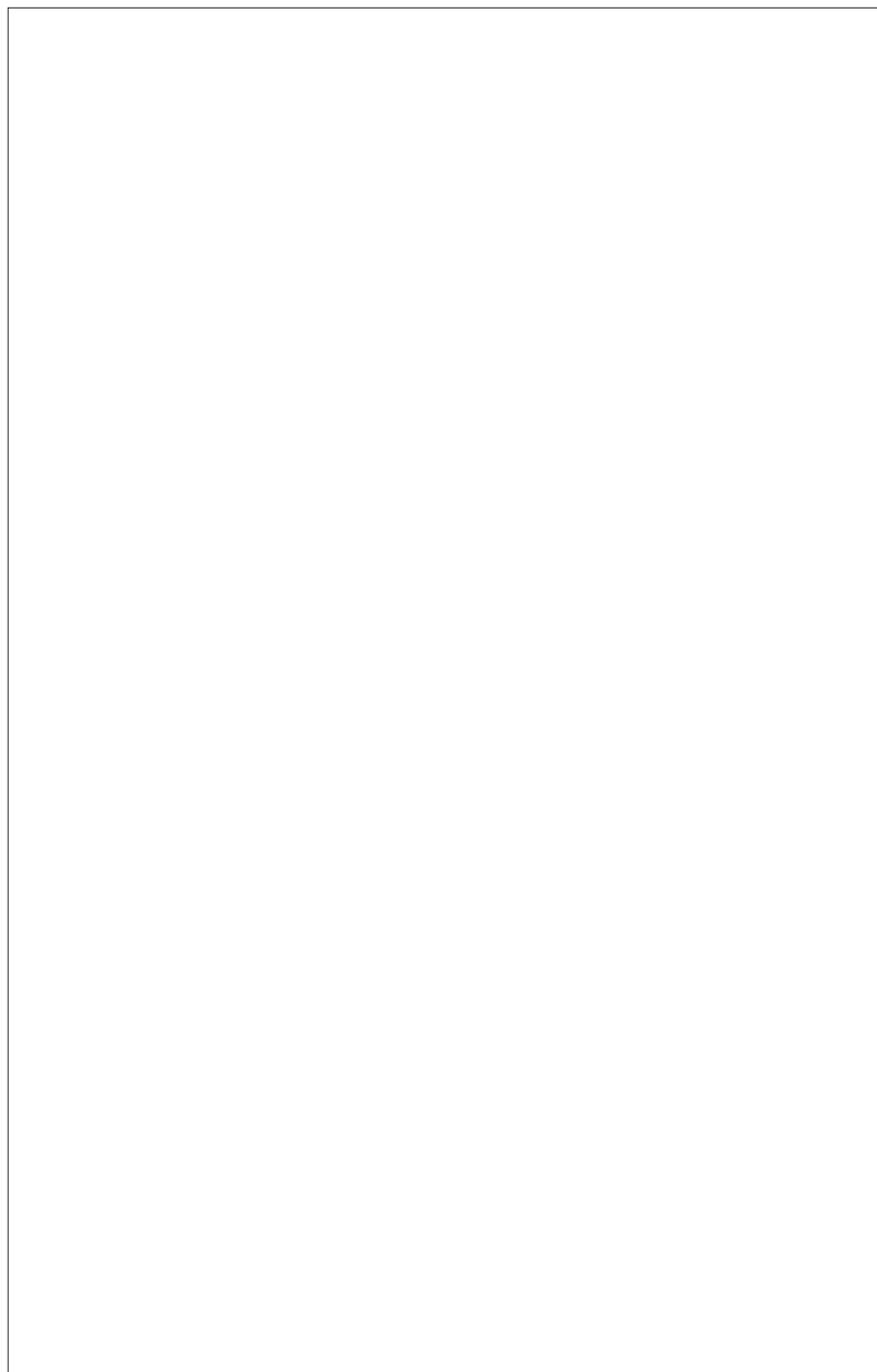
However, the next generation of Fisk Jubilee Singers created one more major resurgence of the spiritual into mainstream American popular culture. In 1899, John W. Work II (1871-1925), a young member of the Fisk faculty, set out to reclaim the integrity of the spiritual by forming a touring male quartet, of which he was first tenor.²⁹ Reasons for forming a male quartet to carry on the tradition are open to speculation, but the barber-shop quartet movement had begun to flourish around 1895,³⁰ and the voicing of the Fisk Quartet arrangements had some similarities with the sartorial genre, having the top voice float freely in harmony above the lead melody in the second tenor.

The development of a Fisk Jubilee male quartet may have been beneficial when ten years later John Work negotiated a significant contract with the Victor Talking Machine Company for a series of commercial recording sessions. Acoustic recording at the time required performing into a large horn (similar to the Victrola horn seen on Victor’s famous “his master’s voice” emblem). This reduced the number of performers who could be effectively recorded. Recording engineers tended to favor strong, focused male voices over larger ensembles with a higher or more diffuse sound.³¹ John Work and his early collaborators (who included James Myers, tenor, Alfred King or Leon O’Hara baritone, and Noah Ryder, bass)

certainly met those requirements. Their voices were resonant, vibrant, beautifully centered, and deftly tuned. The four-voiced harmonies were perfectly balanced and rhythmically unified. These impressive performances were all done in one or at most two complete recordings.

In the early years of an industry that had thus far recorded exclusively white artists, Victor was taking something of a risk by recording the Fisk Quartet. Although the company’s advertising copy described the spiritual’s religious content

as “quaint conceptions” that “sometimes excite to laughter,” it nevertheless labeled them “folk songs” rather than “coon songs,” the only category reserved for Black music of any kind. Victor also took the unusual step of listing the names of the quartet on the label as a means of assuring the audience of the authenticity of the Fisk connection.³² Their cover photo was in concert dress, white tie, and tails.³³ The page opposite Victor’s announcement of the first Fisk recording promoted a new release of *Down Where*



the Big Bananas Grow by black-face comedians Collins and Harlan—"another of those real darky shouts by the ever welcome 'Kings of Comedy.'"³⁴ However, Victor's investment in the Fisks paid off, as recordings of the Jubilee Quartet released between 1910 and the early 1920s, primarily by Victor, but also by Columbia, have been estimated at over two million copies sold.³⁵

The exigencies of the recording industry had contributed to having the spiri-

tual presented to the world in what was probably an even more intimate and refined style than that of the first Fisk ensembles. Again, this would seem to be fairly distant from the communal style and social context of the oppressive plantation conditions under which the spirituals were first sung. However, insofar as the quartet arrangements still reflect the relatively straightforward choral harmonizations worked out by Ella Sheppard and her fellow Jubilees, the melodic and

harmonic language can be heard as remaining connected to the music of the plantation fields. These arrangements share several elements that point to the original musical textures of the slave singers discussed earlier: the call-and-response form with a song leader and harmonizers, the lead singer taking creative liberties with the melody or its upper harmonization, and the lower parts moving with characteristic harmonic progressions, albeit ones that have been decided upon in advance.³⁵

Performance Characteristics of Early Recordings

For example, in the 1909 recording of *I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray*,³⁶ John Work's voice soars above the melody quite freely and expressively, revealing an improvisatory artistry associated with the spiritual far beyond the vocal conventions of other quartet genres such as barber-shop. (Example 4 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug/2004>.) Another cut from a Victor recording session two years later, *Po' Mourner's Got a Home at Last*,³⁸ is remarkable for its divergence from traditional harmonization. (Example 5 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug/2004>.) Until the final cadence, there is no four-part harmony at all, but rather unisons, solos, and duets with the high tenor and low bass in octaves on the wordless, free vocalizations of the refrain. Up-tempo spirituals such as *O Mary Don't You Weep Don't You Mourn* (recorded for Columbia in 1915³⁹) swing with an infectious rhythmic buoyancy and a pulse that never wavers. (Example 6 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug/2004>.)

One track from these early recordings, *Old Black Joe*, bears mentioning in light of the earlier discussion of the minstrel movement. The 1909 Victor recording of the Fisk Quartet singing *Old Black Joe* by Stephen Foster (1826-64)⁴⁰ is remarkable for a most unusual, haunting arrangement. John Work's tenor is heard floating way above Noah Ryder's bass on the melody, a spacious, almost symphonic use of solo voices. The text, depicting the nostalgia of an old male slave for times gone by, speaks of "the days when my heart was young and gay" and "Where are the hearts once so happy and free?" (Example 7 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug/2004>.)

Foster's songs were a regular and popular part of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' non-spiritual repertoire. America's most famous songwriter of the era, Foster aspired to reform the demeaning aspects of the minstrel repertoire with carefully crafted melodies consciously written in emulation (some would later say appropriation) of the black spirituals. His songs romanticized the plantation life of the slaves while glossing over the harsh realities of that life, making them easier for white audiences to hear. Foster's songs were perennial favorites of black minstrel groups as well as the Jubilee Singers, were looked upon favorably by no less a black leader of the time than W.E.B. Du Bois, and were performed by prominent black recitalists in the twentieth century such as Harry T. Burleigh and Paul Robeson. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, there was a reaction against the legacy of minstrelsy and Foster's proximity to the genre, but later scholarship saw his contribution in a more positive light for its perceived role in promoting racial reconciliation.⁴¹

At the end of 1916, John Work retired from the quartet and handed over the leadership to the second tenor, Reverend James Myers, whose wife Henrietta (always listed as "Mrs. James A. Myers") also became involved. Though generally unheard while doubling one of the middle parts, she eventually took over leadership of the Fisk Jubilees upon her husband's death in 1928.⁴² Recording sessions continued, with Columbia and smaller labels,⁴³ but these never sold nearly as well as the earlier Victor recordings (which remained in the catalog until 1928⁴⁴). The performances never quite ascend to the level of the sessions led by Work. A comparison between the 1909 (Victor) and 1920 (Columbia) takes of *Roll, Jordan, Roll* shows the earlier recording to be much more vibrant and expressively energized with Work's soaring tenor on top.⁴⁵ (Examples 8 and 9 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug_2004>.) Interestingly, the later recording also raises the famous lowered seventh of the refrain, contrary to the earlier recording and the version later notated by Work's son.⁴⁶ A dramatic difference in dynamic shading occurs with the wider frequency range of the first electronic recordings of the Fisks by Columbia in 1926, here with a quintet led by Reverend and Mrs. Myers.⁴⁷ (Example 10 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug_2004>.)

2004>.)

The music of the spirituals had again reached an international mass audience, this time through the medium of a new technology that would revolutionize the

age singing for their collective survival, the essential musical form of the spirituals remained intact: unaccompanied singing, a lead voice carrying the melody with an improvisatory feeling, and characteris-

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world of music. The spirituals were now presented by four men singing alone in a room, one-on-a-part, through a megaphone. The resulting record albums, with their formal photograph in white tie and tails on the cover, would reach millions. As different as this was from the picture of a large community of people in bond-

tic harmonization underneath, albeit with concert hall clarity. The religious and political implications of the texts were probably missed by most of an audience still enthralled by minstrel tunes. However, as was the case in a different mode of performance for the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, the dignity and emotional direct-

ness with which the songs were performed coaxed a wide range of listeners to respond to this music seriously and on its own expressive terms.

Musical and Social Upheaval in the Jazz Age

The social and musical upheaval of the 1920s provided the greatest challenge the spiritual would yet face in maintaining its integrity while avoiding extinction. By the end of this period, it would find itself no longer sharing market space with the icons of American pop culture, but in exchange would reach safer and more permanent places to grow, in the concert hall and in the repertory of professional, school, church, and community choirs all over the world.

In the wake of the first World War, in which over 200,000 black men fought and served (including those in a number of outstanding service bands), the secular side of black folk music began to break the shackles of minstrelsy and strike out with an independence of its own. Black artists developed their folk music tradi-

tions in a way that caught the attention of the tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley and the leading modernist composers of Europe. What became known as “jazz” grew out of the emergence of ragtime, brass band music, syncopated dance music, and the blues.⁴⁸ Well suited to the energies of the age, this music was aggressive, sensuous, and the instruments of the band claimed center stage. The influence of the spiritual was not completely obscured by all this high energy,⁴⁹ but it was increasingly viewed by a younger generation as a musical relic of the past.

In the black churches, the spiritual had been almost completely replaced in worship by charismatic gospel music, which had come into its own by adapting the harmonies, rhythms, and instrumental accompaniments of the blues and jazz to the congregational lining-out of hymns that had continued since the Great Revival.⁵⁰ As demonstrated in recording sessions continuing into the 1920s, the Fisk groups firmly held the line against any encroachment by the newly popular styles, maintaining an unaccompanied vocal texture with subtly inflected melodies and

straightforward harmonies.⁵¹ However, Tim Brooks noted that even the leading black journals of the day (which usually made a point of celebrating black artistic accomplishment) such as *The Freeman*, the *New York Age*, and *The Crisis* (the journal of the NAACP) made little reference to the Fisk recordings, even in the years of their peak popularity.⁵² By the end of the “roaring 20s,” the male quartet had moved on from the spiritual to gospel, with groups such as the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Soul Stirrers, and Swan Silvertones.⁵³

Harry T. Burleigh and the Solo Spiritual

The next form in which the spiritual captured the imagination of the concert-going and record-collecting public was the solo song accompanied by piano. This form was given birth by Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949), a successful baritone recitalist and composer. As a student at the National Conservatory in New York, Burleigh worked closely with the esteemed Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904). Respond-

ing to his teacher's interest in the spiritual, he sang the songs for him for hours on end, inspiring Dvořák to challenge American composers to develop a national style of their own with the spiritual as a foundation.⁵⁴ One biographer reported a story that Dvořák changed the famous spiritual-like solo in the slow movement of his *New World Symphony* to be played by English horn instead of clarinet, in order to match the color of Burleigh's voice.⁵⁵ His 1916 publication of the *Jubilee Songs of the United States of America* was the first published collection of spiritual arrangements for solo voice and piano. By the mid-1920s, outstanding black concert singers such as Roland Hayes (1887-1976), Paul Robeson (1898-1976), and Marian Anderson (1902-93) began to make recordings of the song arrangements of Burleigh and others that met with significant popular success. (Hayes can be heard with the Fisk Jubilee Quartet on second tenor in five tracks recorded by Edison on cylinder in 1911.⁵⁶) The authoritative voices of these great singers gave a much more intensely personal expression to the now familiar spirituals, with the piano giving the harmonization

a purely instrumental inflection. (Examples 11, 12 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>.)

Hall Johnson and the Emergence of Larger Mixed Professional Vocal Ensembles

Meanwhile, new professional vocal ensembles devoted to the spiritual with larger numbers of women's and men's voices began to emerge, bringing a more vigorous sound and musicality to the genre. Violinist, violist, and composer Hall Johnson (1888-1970) formed an ensemble of eight singers in 1925 that grew to twenty by the time the choir made its New York City concert and Victor recording debuts in 1928.⁵⁷ (Example 13 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>.) Johnson was looking for a different kind of compositional style to evoke the sound he heard from the former slaves of his Georgia childhood. In an interview with Eileen Southern, he said that he sought to preserve "[T]he conscious and intentional alterations of pitch often made. . . . The unconscious, but amazing and bewildering counterpoint produced

by so many voices in individual improvisation. . . . The absolute insistence upon the pulsing, overall rhythm, combining many varying subordinate rhythms."⁵⁸

Johnson sought to bring the palpable sound of the community singing of the slave songs on the plantations to the concert hall by involving a larger number of voices in more complex counterpoint. Ironically, this led to a more highly-evolved compositional style, where the hand of the composer came to the fore more than in the earlier arrangements, where for one or two voices on a part, improvisation did not need to be written out. (Figure 1)

Johnson's choir and his fresh arrangements were so well received, he was soon engaged for a Broadway musical, *The Green Pastures* (1930), which then brought him to Hollywood for the movie version in 1936.⁵⁸ This hugely successful landmark production offered Johnson the opportunity to reach a large audience with his new choral arrangements, which are heard almost continuously throughout the show. Opinion among black critics at the time was divided. Some critics, such as Langston Hughes, decried the

(73) *ff*

S A Rock, E - li - jah! Shout, shout! Rock, E - li - jah! Com-in' up, Lord - y!

T B *f* Oh, E - li - jah, rock! Shout, shout! E - li - jah, rock! Com-in' up, Lord, Oh,

Ob. Sop. Ah! Com-in' up, Lord.

S A Rock, E - li - jah! Shout, shout! Rock, E - li - jah! Com-in' up, Lord.

T B E - li - jah, rock! Shout, shout! E - li - jah, rock! Com-in' up, Lord.

Figure 1. Hall Johnson, *Elijah Rock*, mm. 74 - 80.

Pulitzer Prize winning play for its reinforcement of many of the typical stereotypes of black religiosity and social customs. Others, most notably James Weldon Johnson, were so moved by the opportunity it created for black actors to display the highest level of artistry, they were willing to overlook limitations they felt the actors transcended.⁵⁹ As such, the Broadway show, movie, and subsequent touring shows (many of which were closed to black audiences) represented a return of the kind of broad exposure the spiritual received through the tours of the early Fisk Jubilee Singers and the recordings of the Fisk Quartet.

Another important professional choir to emerge in the late 1920s was conducted by Eva Jessye (1895-1992), who became the first black woman to be internationally recognized as a professional choral conductor.⁶¹ She gained further prominence through her work as chorus director for the operatic premiers of Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* and George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.⁶² Many of the leading black concert artists of the

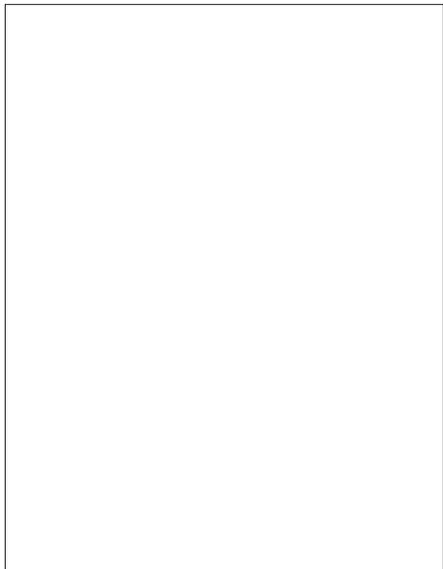
day passed through Eva Jessye's choirs. Professional black choirs continue to play an important role in the preservation and advancement of the spiritual, ranging from longstanding groups such as the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers in Los Angeles (beginning in 1968) and the Brazeal Dennard Chorale in Detroit (from 1972) to newer groups such as the Moses Hogan Chorale in New Orleans and the recently formed Nathaniel Dett Chorale in Toronto.

William L. Dawson and the Emergence of Large Mixed Choirs in the Historical Black Colleges

During this same pre-war period, the professional touring ensembles from the Historical Black Colleges faced more of a struggle, affected not only by changing musical fashions, but also by drastic budget retrenchment in their institutions brought on by the Depression. Fisk University decided to disband the Jubilee

Singers in 1932 until their director, Henrietta (Mrs. James) Myers, formed a successful octet touring group and persuaded the university to stay the course.⁶³ Recordings of the octet under Mrs. Myers's direction⁶⁴ show the arrangements moving in a more choral direction. Meanwhile, the college began to develop a larger all-student mixed choir, as was the case at many other schools, such as the Hampton Institute under the Canadian-born composer R. Nathaniel Dett.

A major step forward in the performance of the spirituals by larger college choirs came with the leadership of William L. Dawson (1899-1990), who directed the Tuskegee Institute Choir in Alabama from 1931-55. Dawson began his tenure at Tuskegee by bringing a 100-voice college choir to perform for an entire week at the opening of Radio City Music Hall in New York City in 1932. Dawson's arrangements and the sound of his choirs introduced a more vigorous style of singing the spirituals. In arrangements such as his *Ezekiel saw de wheel*, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit*, and *Ain'-a That Good News!* the rhythmic momentum of the song brings to mind the contemporary accounts of the slaves singing in a ring shout, where they "would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs."⁶⁵ His trademark closing phrases are full of richly voiced extended harmonies that bring the accumulated rhythmic energy to an ecstatic conclusion. (Example 14 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>.) Some of his arrangements of the



slower songs, especially *Steal Away* explore unexpected harmonic regions and take on the character of an extended tone poem, looking at the same material from different points of view (Figure 2). In this, he was not unlike his contemporaries Hall Johnson and R. Nathaniel Dett, who were unafraid to let their musical training and imagination build highly original arrangements that went well beyond the simple harmonization of the folk melodies. An unusually large number of Dawson's arrangements are still among the most performed of any composer in the choral repertoire, and remain models for many composers who have followed in the tradition.

The Spiritual as Freedom Song

Looking back, we can see how each of the dramatically different manifestations of the concert spiritual managed to preserve some but not all elements of what

Dawson's arrangements and the sound of his choirs introduced a more vigorous style of singing the spirituals.

we think of as how the spirituals originally sounded. The first touring groups of the Fisk Jubilee Singers established the essential dignity of the songs, allowing them to speak to new audiences with simplicity and directness. The male quartets showed how vocal refinement could reveal an intimacy and pure songfulness in the spirituals that might otherwise have been missed. The great soloists displayed the artistry of subtly improvised inflection, in the way that a slave song leader

might have put his personal stamp on a song. The extended arrangements for large professional and college choirs revived a sense of the collective power of communal singing. But while all this creativity preserved and re-invigorated the music of the spiritual, it was still a struggle for the spiritual to penetrate the minds of its listeners with the meaning the songs had in the hearts of those who performed them, who were the descendents of the slaves.

68 *ff a tempo* *f* *ppp* *p* *pp espr.*
 S Steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way home,
a tempo
 A Steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way,
a tempo *pp* *ppp*
 T Steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way,
a tempo *pp* *ppp*
 B Steal a-way, steal a-way,
a tempo *pp*

74 *p* *pp* *pppp* *pppp*
 steal a-way home.(hum)
 steal a-way, steal a-way home.(hum)
 I ain't got long to stay here, steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way.
pp *pppp*
 steal a-way, steal a-way, a-way home.(hum)

Soli for 3 Tenors *p* *pppp*

Figure 2. William L. Dawson, *Steal Away*, Ending, mm. 68 - 80.

Certainly, once the music had survived the popular exposure of triumphant world tours, hit recordings of quartets or renowned soloists, and the Hollywood fanfare of the movies, there would be more space to present the music for its own sake. In the concert hall, academy, or church, spirituals could be performed alongside affectionate commentary on their origins and meaning. However, it was perhaps only with the recruitment of the spiritual to the service of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s that the songs came into their own as music that told a story and inspired action. More often than not, the original words were changed to make the already multi-layered symbolic meanings of the spirituals explicit to the modern ear. However, it was not a far stretch to modify the text of the spiritual *Hold On!* from “Keep on climbin’, and don’t you tire,/ Ev’ry rung goes high’r and high’r,” to “We’re gonna ride for civil rights,/ we’re gonna ride both black and white.”⁶⁶ The revival of the spiritual as freedom song, sung by whole

rooms or streets full of people whose only audience was a transfixed world looking on, was not just a by-product of the movement, but an essential expression of its heart and soul. (Example 15 <www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/aug2004>.) With a new awareness of the unfinished business of the Emancipation Proclamation, the spiritual was understood again as a powerful vehicle for the expression of human sorrow, active resistance to injustice, and confidence in a just future.

Performing the Spirituals Today

The challenge of building racial justice and understanding in American society is still very much an unfinished business today. Though there were many white college students joining their black brothers and sisters in singing freedom songs in the 1960s, as a white director of predominantly white choirs, I am frequently approached by my white students with a

confession that they don’t feel right about singing the spirituals. On one level this expression of unformed white guilt reflects an admirable recognition that this music grows out of the suffering of a people who were enslaved by the society of their ancestors.

And yet, to assume that people who are not African-American are categorically unable to connect as performers with the underlying meaning of the spiritual risks taking us back to the very basis of racism: the denial of another people’s common humanity because of racial distinctions. Most great works of art have attained universal status because they are able to articulate ideas and emotions coming out of a very particular time and place in a way that other people can readily understand, even in vastly different cultural and historic situations.

Certainly the origins of the African-American spiritual in the enslavement of one group of people by another make it significant. It is a measure of the achievement of the people who first sang these melodies that their songs not only served to sustain a sense of hope for the slave community through great adversity, but also have gone on to speak powerfully of the desire for hope in the face of despair for people all over the world as America’s most recognizable form of vocal music.

As in the performance of any music not composed in our own contemporary community, interpretation requires a meeting of two different cultures. We must first seek to understand the origins of the spiritual—such things as its religious and political meaning for the slave community who first sang them, its layers of symbolic subtext related to seeking escape from slavery, and the nature of the choir for which the arranger wrote for, even the sound of that choir if recordings are available. All this is in an effort to seek to understand the music on its own terms, as close to the full context of its origins as we can. However, the next step is not to try to imitate one of the great Hall Johnson or Tuskegee Institute choirs, but to look honestly at our own choir, our own experience, our own world perspective, and try to find lines of connection. Our goal, as with any music, should be to sing the music honoring the integrity of the song and its creators and the innate character and identity of our particular ensemble.

NOTES

- 1 John W. Work (III), *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940).
- 2 *Fisk Jubilee Singers* Volumes 1 (1909-1911) and 2 (1915-1920). Document Records, DOCD-5533,5534; for recent recordings of the current Fisk Jubilee Singers under Paul Kwami, see the college Web site at <www.fisk.edu/index.asp?cat=16&pid=166>.
- 3 This experience at Fisk also brought to mind that I could not remember having heard one of the many still thriving Historical Black College choirs at an ACDA convention in recent years. If my memory is not mistaken, the wider choral community is missing out on the opportunity to remain connected to the most essential living link to the history of America's important contribution to choral repertoire.
- 4 For a thorough recent discussion of issues of authenticity related to the understanding of the spiritual (well beyond stylistic performance issues), see Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins—The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation*. (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1999). Cruz credits educators in the new black colleges for preserving a cultural tradition that was otherwise in danger of being lost (the freed slaves often showed little interest in preserving the songs because they reminded them of their oppression, while white society treated black musical sources with ridicule and appropriation). But at the same time, he feels this wider exposure led to a romanticized approach by northern white liberal abolitionists and a detached scientific approach by emerging academic folklorists, both of which served to distance the observers from the people who originally sang the spirituals and their predicament, and by extension, the predicament they faced in the rapidly industrializing and segregated North alongside the failure of Reconstruction in the South.
- 5 *The Earliest Negro Vocal Quartets—1894-1928*. Document Records: DOCD-5061. For a complete catalogue listing of Document's historic re-issues, see <www.document-records.com> (recordings of spirituals are found in the 5000 series).
- 6 Eileen Southern notes that while the slaves were often forbidden from gathering independently for church services out of fear of fomenting rebellions, their masters usually preferred to hear them singing in the fields as a way to know that they were working, and to track how far along they had progressed. (*The Music of Black Americans—A History*, Third Edition. (New York: W.W.Norton, 1997) 161). She also remarks that many whites chose to interpret the singing of the slaves as a sign of contentment with their condition (Ibid., 177).
- 7 Among the numerous recordings of Sea Island singing are *Southern Journey, Vol. 12—Georgia Sea Islands—Biblical Songs and Spirituals* (Rounder, CD 1712), *The McIntosh County Shouters—Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia* (Smithsonian/Folkways, CD FE 4344), *Been So Long in the Storm—Spirituals, Folk Tales and Children's Games from John's Island, South Carolina* (Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40031). More recently, Bernice Johnson Reagon has recorded the congregational singing of current churches who still remain tied to these earlier ways of singing: *Wade in the Water, Volume II, African-American Congregational Singing* (Smithsonian/Folkways, CD SF40073).
- 8 Southern, 181-2.
- 9 Frederick F. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 58 (quoted by Cruz, Culture, 23). For a detailed study of the ante-bellum origins of the black spiritual, see Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals—Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).
- 10 Southern, 201-3.
- 11 Southern, 198.
- 12 Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000) 83, 90. Ward's book contains a thorough and detailed account of the origins and first tours of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and was accompanied by a video documentary produced by WGBH and Nashville Public Television for the PBS *American Experience* series: Llewellyn Smith and Andrew Ward, *Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory* (60") available through <www.shop.pbs.org>.
- 13 Adam Knight Spence, undated lecture, Mary Elizabeth Spence Collection, Notebooks; quoted in Ward 110.
- 14 Ella Sheppard Moore, "Historical Sketch of the Jubilee Singers," quoted in Ward 110.
- 15 Ward, 114-115.
- 16 John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon House, 1972) 416; Ward 399-400.
- 17 For an introduction to black-face minstrelsy, see Southern *The Music*, 89-96, and Bean, Hatch, McNamara ed., *Inside the Minstrel Mask—Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). For a thorough discussion of the broader cultural ramifications and complexities of the minstrel period, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft—Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. Lott's thesis is that the minstrelsy movement represented a complex love/hate relationship between white society and black culture, a way in which whites deal with their fascination with this culture and their repressed need to overcome racial segregation, not because of the injustice it brought to blacks, but because of the void it left in white culture.
- 18 Southern, 237.
- 19 It doesn't take much to see the offence intended in some of the texts, like "Ol' Dan Tucker," who "washed his face with a fryin' pan, combed his hair with a wagon wheel," etc., but with other songs whose words on the surface seem more benign (i.e., "Turkey in the Straw"), the fact that their crude texts were applied to black folk music by white entertainers solely for the purpose of enhancing the ridicule intended by their farcically costumed and choreographed dance performances should at least give one pause before singing them.
- 20 Southern, 96.
- 21 Mary Spence, "A Character Sketch of George L. White," *Fisk University News*, Oct. 1911 (Fisk University Collection), quoted by Ward 153-4.
- 22 Joe M. Richardson, *History of Fisk University 1865-1946* (University of Alabama: 1980) 49 (cited in Ward 383).
- 23 Ward, 394-5.
- 24 Southern, 229.
- 25 Ward, 139.
- 26 Lott, 235-6.
- 27 Ward, 373-93.
- 28 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint ed., New York: Signet Classic 1995), 267, quoted in Tim Brooks, "Might Take One Disc of This Trash as a Novelty": Early Recordings by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the

- Popularization of “Negro Folk Music,” *American Music* 18:3 [Fall 2000] 282 (the phrase at the beginning of the title of Brooks’s article refers to a remark made by Thomas Edison before deciding not to issue three test cylinder recordings of the Fisk Jubilee Quartet [Brooks 295]).
- ²⁹ Brooks (283) suggests that the quartet that made the first Victor recordings was drawn from a larger Fisk chorus, but without citing a reference. Ward (404) says that there was a period from 1916 to 1925 where Fisk supported a professional quartet and a student choir for fund-raising performances, citing Richardson 81.
- ²⁹ V. Hicks, ‘Barbershop’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online* ed L. Macy (Accessed 8/15/03), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.
- ³¹ Brooks, 284.
- ³² Brooks, 283-286.
- ³³ Document-Records DOCD-5533 cover.
- ³⁴ Brooks, 289.
- ³⁵ Brooks, 297-8.
- ³⁶ The harmonizations on the early recordings are fairly close to those preserved in John W. Work III’s later collection *American Negro Songs and Spirituals* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1940). John Work II and his folklorist brother Frederick published several collections and histories of the spiritual, most notably *Folk Song of the American Negro* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1915).
- ³⁷ Document-Records DOCD-5533 track 2 (1909).
- ³⁸ Document-Records DOCD-5533 track 14 (1911).
- ³⁹ Document-Records DOCD-5534 track 8 (1915).
- ⁴⁰ Document-Records DOCD-5533 track 6 (1909).
- ⁴¹ Deane L. Root: ‘Foster, Stephen Collins’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 30 April, 2004), <http://www.grovemusic.com>. For a provocative recent biography of the composer with an overview of the place of Foster’s songs in American culture, see Ken Emerson’s *Doo-dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997). For a detailed study of the sources and interpretations of Foster’s song texts, see William W. Austin’s *Susanna, Jannie, and the Old Folks at Home: The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours*, 2nd edition (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
- ⁴² Brooks, 300, 306.
- ⁴³ Document-Records DOCD-5534, tracks 13–24 and DOCD-5535 (*Fisk University Singers, Vol. 3*). Edison cylinder recordings from 1911, 1916, and 1920 can be found on DOCD-5613 (*The Earliest Negro Vocal Groups, Vol. 5*).
- ⁴⁴ Brooks, 296.
- ⁴⁵ Document-Records DOCD-5533 track 5 (1909), DOCD-5534 track 17 (1920).
- ⁴⁶ Work, *American Negro Songs* 199.
- ⁴⁷ Document-Records DOCD-5535 tracks 3-8 (1926).
- ⁴⁸ Southern, 365ff.
- ⁴⁹ See James H. Cone’s penetrating look at the connections between spirituals and the blues, in *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).
- ⁵⁰ For a probing discussion of the relationship between the spiritual and gospel music, see Marvin V. Curtis, “African-American Spirituals and Gospel Music: Historical Similarities and Differences” in the *Choral Journal* 41:8, March 2001, 9-21. One important instance where the black church did not abandon the spiritual was in the “Wings Over Jordan” choir, founded by pastor Glenn T. Settle of Gethsemane Church in Cleveland, which broadcast a popular weekly radio show to the nation on CBS between 1939 and 1949, with breaks during the war to perform for the troops in Europe (Southern 423).
- ⁵¹ Some purists of the style are concerned even today by some of the extended jazz harmonies such as those found in Larry Farrow’s arrangements and some of the gospel-inflected spirituals such as those of the late Moses Hogan, though others rejoice what they consider to be the renewing variety these and other recent composers have brought to the tradition.
- ⁵² Brooks, 299.
- ⁵³ Southern, 483.
- ⁵⁴ Southern, 267-8.
- ⁵⁵ H.C. Colles, “Antonin Dvorák in the New World” in *The Musical Times*, vol. 82, no. 1180 (1941), referenced by John Clapham in *Antonin Dvorák: Musician and Craftsman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1966), p. 90.
- ⁵⁶ Document-Records DOCD-5613, tracks 1-5.
- ⁵⁷ For re-issued recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir, see Document-Records DOCD-5566, *Negro Choirs – 1926-1931* (tracks 19-24 recorded 1930-31) and Document-Records DOCD-5608, *1940s Vocal Groups Vol. 2 - 1940 – 1945* (tracks 5-15 recorded 1940-41).
- ⁵⁸ Hall Johnson, “Notes on the Negro Spiritual,” in *Readings in Black American Music*, rev. edition ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983).
- ⁵⁹ The movie version of *The Green Pastures* (1936) has been transferred to videocassette – MGM/UA Home Video, ISBN: 079281794X.
- ⁶⁰ Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theater – From “Coontown” to “Dreamgirls,”* (Baton Rouge; LSU Press, 1989), pp. 137-141.
- ⁶¹ Southern, 422.
- ⁶² The 1940 original cast recording of *Porgy and Bess* was re-issued in 1992 by MCA Classics – MCAD 10520.
- ⁶³ Doug Seroff, “Mrs. James A. Myers, 1989 Gospel Arts Day Honoree: A Life devoted to the Spiritual,” in *Gospel Arts Day-Nashville*, June 18, 1989, cited by Brooks 307.
- ⁶⁴ Document-Records DOCD-5535 tracks 9-29 (1935-1940).
- ⁶⁵ See note 10 above. Dawson can be heard conducting the Tuskegee Institute Choir on the album *Spirituals* originally released on Westminster Gold/MCA. A CD can be obtained from Neil Kjos Music Company.
- ⁶⁶ For printed versions of spirituals that were adapted as freedom songs, see *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs!* compiled and edited by Guy and Candie Carawan. (Bethlehem, Pa.: Sing Out Corp., c 1990); includes songs originally published in: *We Shall Overcome* (1963) and *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (1968), by Oak Publications. For recordings of these songs from the period, see Smithsonian Folkways CD(2) SF 40084, *Voices of the Civil Rights Movement—Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966* (re-issued 1997).