

Negro Spirituals

Slaves led very difficult lives. They were forbidden many things, but they were allowed to go to church and play music. Because they had so few things to enjoy, they put a great deal of energy into their music.

Combining African rhythms and harmonies with messages of hope from the Bible, they created what are called “Negro spirituals.”

At the time, the word used to refer to African-Americans was “Negro,” meaning “black” in Spanish. It is no longer a respectful term to use. A “spiritual” is a song that expresses worship or faith in God.

Because slaves were often banned from using musical instruments, they created complex voice harmonies. The words of the songs were often taken from stories in the Bible that told about freedom and hope for a better future.

One of the best-known spirituals describes the Biblical tale of Moses leading the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt. This story was very powerful for African-American slaves. Can you imagine what a slave thought about when singing these words?

*“When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go.
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.”*

If you know the song, “Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore,” you know a spiritual from that time. Think about the words, “River Jordan is deep and wide, milk and honey on the other side.” That milk and honey meant more to a slave than food. It meant hope for a better world – perhaps not in this life, but in the next.

Negro spirituals deeply influenced American music. They changed over time and were the basis for gospel music, the blues, and jazz. The basic structures of this kind of music are all taken from spirituals.

Those forms of music in turn influenced rock ‘n’ roll, R&B, soul, reggae, and hip-hop. Musicians like the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Aretha Franklin or Kanye West all built on the sound of Negro spirituals.

In fact, the earliest mention of rock ‘n’ roll comes from a spiritual called “The Camp Meeting Jubilee,” which was recorded in 1916. It includes the words, “We've been rocking and rolling in your arms,” which is a reference to slaves being cradled in the arms of God.