
Excerpt from “Creating a Culture: the Music of Enslaved People”

When Africans were brought to America in chains, they brought their culture, traditions and music with them in their minds and hearts.

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Source: Learning for Justice Teaching Hard History Text Library

¹ Enslaved people performed different types of music at distinct moments in their lives. For example, to keep their spirits up, they sang work songs while they picked cotton, shucked corn, cut wood and did other repetitive work. For this reason, many enslavers and overseers encouraged enslaved people to sing while working, since they thought it made them work harder. This tradition of making music while working was brought directly from Africa, where music was part of daily life. Some work songs were communal (sung in a group) and others were solo songs. “Calls” were used to communicate a message to other workers, while “hollers” were individual songs that expressed more personal feelings and moods, like sadness, loneliness or exhaustion. Hollers evolved after slavery was abolished and were used by street vendors to sell products in Southern cities like Charleston and New Orleans.



² While many enslaved people were not allowed to learn to read and write, this doesn't mean they weren't intelligent. They showed cleverness by making fun of their enslavers in songs and by using satire. This is a type of humor that doesn't sound like a criticism on the surface, but that other enslaved people would understand. There were also songs that held hidden messages, like “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” which gave instructions to runaways on how to use the stars to escape slavery and go north.

³ The folk spiritual is the earliest form of African-American religious music to develop in the United States, in the late 1700s. Spirituals used Christian verses from the Bible but combined them with lyrics about the specific situation of being enslaved. Singing during worship was usually accompanied by handclapping, body movement and sometimes shouting. Folk spirituals also

used an African form of music-making known as “call and response,” where the lead singer would sing a line, the congregation or chorus would respond with the same line, and then the lead singer would improvise.

4 The ring shout, which involved singing while moving in a circle, was one of the most popular types of worship. Harriet Tubman is said to have sung the spiritual “Wade in the Water” while she was helping enslaved people escape on the Underground Railroad. The lyrics told runaways to walk in the water instead of on land because the dogs used to find them wouldn’t be able to pick up their scent as well.

Comprehension Questions

Use textual evidence to answer the following questions.

1. What were *work songs*? Why were they significant (important)?

2. How did enslaved people use music to assist them in finding freedom?

Exit Ticket

How did enslaved people use music as a form of resistance? How did they use music to express joy? Use evidence from any of the texts and/or videos we have discovered this week to support your response.
