

The Negro Spiritual Royalties Initiative

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Negro spirituals. Referring to the enormous body of folk songs created collectively by enslaved Africans in America and their descendants, "Negro spiritual" is a term that is likely very familiar to church musicians. In Black communities, it is the preferred term for this body of music. However, these works are more typically referred to as "African American spirituals" or simply "spirituals" in predominantly white communities. Other terms include "Jubilee Songs" (named after the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University) and "Sorrow Songs" (coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*). More recently, some are calling this body of work "Black Liturgical Music." Words matter, and while using the word "Negro" gives me, a white woman, discomfort, I can acknowledge that the discomfort is mine and comes from the shame I feel as a white person of unearned privilege. Welcoming these feelings of discomfort, which remind me that there is still work to be done, I will defer to the Black community's preferences in this article and respectfully use the term "Negro spiritual."

Unlike other hymns and worship music, Negro spirituals were not published until after the names of their creators were long forgotten if they were ever even known. They are both witnesses to the horrors of slavery and racism and witness to a merciful, faithful, and just Christianity we still aspire to live into today. Even before the abolition of slavery, these songs had started making their way into the collective memory of all Americans. Since then, they have become the source of literally *countless* musical arrangements and compositions published and sold to churches, schools, community choruses, orchestras, bands, and all manner of musical organizations. The Negro spiritual is also the intellectual property of the enslaved Africans in America and their descendants.

Negro spirituals are undeniably brilliant, capturing over and over again the Holy Grail of music that happens when true artistry is matched by depth of feeling. The feelings they communicate are universal. Few of us will ever have to experience the level of suffering that enslaved Black people endured throughout their lives. Still, all of us have experienced grief, rage, love, gratitude, joy, bitterness, and compassion. The Negro spiritual reflects the totality of the human experience and the entire spectrum of

human emotions. The result is that these songs are almost irresistible to the human spirit.

Experts estimate that at least 1,000, and possibly up to 6,000 Negro spirituals have existed, composed exclusively during legalized slavery. By all accounts, they were entirely improvised and were "honed and refined" according to the tastes and opinions of the participants. They were passed around from one plantation to another, taking on new forms and variations as they went, such that, today, they are deeply incorporated into the canon of folk music in America.

Historical accounts also indicate that slaveholders fully recognized the strong musical tendencies of their African slaves, noting that singing happened in nearly every aspect of life. Many slave owners encouraged singing and paid more for the best song leaders because it allowed their slaves to work longer and harder. Other slave owners forbade their slaves from singing and even praying, with no apparent objective other than to break the spirits of their workers.

For the enslaved African Americans, singing was an act of self-preservation made even more powerful because singing was a group activity. This allowed for community building which was especially important because the African slaves in a single household often did not share a common language. As a result, music became the common language.

Singing was a source of strength and comfort and mental distraction from the cruelties of daily life. As an act of artistic expression, singing reinforced a sense of self-worth. These songs were utterances of the heart, expressing whatever needed to be said - sadness, grief, joy, exhaustion, heartache, humor, courage, compassion, anger, frustration, fear, and most importantly, hope. Singing was (and is) a form of prayer, and these prayers reveal an absolute faith in God to make things right someday.

Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who wrote extensively about his experiences, describes the Negro spiritual like this:

"When on their way, the slaves would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject."

For the last few years, I have struggled with using Negro spirituals appropriately and respectfully in our worship services for a majority-white congregation. They are some of the most powerful, beautiful, and expressive pieces of music that I know. My parents grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and I was raised in Nashville and then Knoxville, Tennessee. My father's choirs always sang arrangements of Negro spirituals, and my mother regularly assigned the H. T. Burleigh arrangements of Negro spirituals to her classical voice students. I grew up regarding the Negro spiritual as high art, knowing that these songs are meaningful and tragic. I never considered the possibility that, as a white person, I shouldn't be singing them.

Now, white America is waking up (once again) to the challenges and injustices faced by people of color in the United States. If you doubt this, look no further than your local neighborhood church: many, like mine, have signs hanging on their buildings earnestly exclaiming "Black Lives Matter." We know that Negro spirituals came from the mouths of enslaved Africans in America. So, what right do we, as white people, have to sing them? What if we misinterpret them, or culturally appropriate them, or what if we are just *too white* to sing them?

If we continue programming Negro spirituals, we need to address the debt we still owe to the enslaved Black people who created them. Black Americans have been last in line to receive recognition and financial compensation for the extraordinary contributions they've made to American culture time and time again. If we, as Christians, indeed are the hands and feet of Jesus, then isn't it our responsibility to do something about this?

At the United Parish in Brookline, we are starting an ongoing initiative of collecting "royalties" for the Negro spirituals we sing in worship. Whenever we sing them, we will collect a special offering that will support the development of Black musicians. We have chosen the Hamilton-Garrett Center for Music and Arts for the next two years to receive these collections. The [Hamilton-Garrett Center](#) is a non-profit music academy that focuses on the artistic development of inner-city students in Boston, Massachusetts. The Center is named for Ruth Hamilton, an acclaimed performer of Negro spirituals, and Elta Garrett, an esteemed singer and music educator. Its mission is to "preserve, educate and celebrate Black music and culture." Launched in October, we have already raised over \$2,000 in "royalties" and have attracted the attention of local media outlets, including [community newspapers](#) and Boston's local [NPR station](#).

Imagine if *all* churches, schools, and music publishing companies started to pay even a small amount in royalties to organizations that empower African American artists and musicians? I would imagine that Negro spirituals have been arranged, published, and recorded millions of times for and by churches, marching bands, handbell choirs, church choirs, college choirs, recording artists, community choruses, solo instrumentalists, and singers, and orchestras. They all incorporate Negro spirituals into their repertoire.

The cost of participating in this practice is minor for the individual, but the cumulative outcome could be huge. Little by little, this practice could become an instrument of a larger quest for restorative justice in which we all participate.

Would that change things? Maybe.

In her book, *Life Begins at the End of Your Comfort Zone*, Jacqui Lewis says, "Keep your eyes on all that's good and beautiful and possible in the world. Because the stories we tell create the people we become."

Love is held hostage by secrets and all the shame that comes along with them. So, let's start being honest with each other and ourselves and ask what Love calls us to do and what Black Americans need us to do. I understand that we can never fully repay the debt we owe to Black musicians, but with God's help, perhaps we can become healers of the breach.

This is the pledge we at the United Parish in Brookline have made:

A Congregational Pledge

Today, we acknowledge the history and significance of the Negro Spiritual and its artistic and spiritual worth in the life of our community today.

With great respect and deep gratitude for the tremendous musical contributions made to American music by Black people, we offer our thanks and praise to God for the creators of the Negro Spiritual and their descendants.

We pledge that each time we sing Negro Spirituals in our worship:

We will sing and hear them with holy reverence and open hearts;

We will honor the unnamed composers who created them;

And we will pay royalties to organizations promoting the advancement of Black artists and musicians in America, starting with [Hamilton-Garrett Center for Music and Arts](#).

We understand that the debt owed to Black musicians and artists can never be fully repaid.

If you would like to learn more about the Negro Spirituals Royalties Initiative, please visit our parish website, www.unitedparishbrookline.org, or email Susan DeSelms at susan@upbrookline.org. ■

Additional Information on The Negro Spiritual Royalties Initiative

<https://www.neumc.org/newsdetail/church-pays-royalties-for-use-of-negro-spirituals-in-worship-16265571>

<https://www.unitedparishbrookline.org/blog/the-negro-spiritual-royalties-project>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGDxey5FOc>

<https://www.wgbh.org/news/arts/2021/11/16/this-church-is-paying-royalties-when-it-sings-spirituals-composed-by-enslaved-africans>