

Spirituals

What are spirituals? Who created them? and Why?



Dr. Caldwell

Georgia Laster Branch member, Dr. Hanson Caldwell, has done extensive research on the spirituals. In her book *African American Music Spirituals* she explains that the music and lyrics of the songs we now call spirituals are a reflection of the lives of our enslaved ancestors.

From 1720 to 1865 when slavery was abolished a repertoire of over 6000 melodies was created. The music was preserved and transmitted through generations orally. They addressed every aspect of life— every emotion of living in the days of enslavement. They were composed in the fields, in the kitchen, at the loom, and in the cabin at night. They were inspired by some sad or awe-inspiring event like the death of a beloved one, the hardness of a master, the selling of friend or relatives, heart-rending separations, a camp meeting, or a great revival.

Many of the songs were musical Morse Code and became an essential part of the Underground Railroad movement while others show political activism.

- Follow the Drinking Gourd details an 800 mile escape path from Mobile, Alabama
- Climbing Jacob's Ladder translate into reaching for freedom.
- The Gospel Train refers to the underground railroad as does the chariot. director coming to lead captive Africans to Boston or Buffalo or Philadelphia or Canada.
- When formal meetings/gatherings of slaves are outlawed, secret meetings are held, and the signal songs such as Steal Away, Git on Board Lil Children, Keep your Lamps Trimmed and Burning, Run Mourner, Run and Wade in the Water. transmit the needed information
- In the song Go Down Moses, the Pharaoh is the enslaver and Harriet Tubman— one of the most famous of the conductors on the underground railroad— is Moses.



There are no specific dates or composers associated with the songs. James Weldon Johnson asks about the Who the creators might be in his poem O Black and Unknown Bards.