

Primary Source: African American Spirituals ^[1]

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore in 1818. He escaped from slavery at age 20 and became an active figure in the abolitionist movement, eventually becoming one of the most important black American figures of the nineteenth century. In this excerpt from his autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Douglass describes the purpose and effect of spirituals for enslaved people.

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly ^[2] enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate ^[3] 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. The thought that came up, came out -- if not in the word, in the sound; -- and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment ^[4] in the most rapturous ^[5] tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly ^[6] the following words:

"I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!"

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon ^[7], but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. 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 could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble ^[8] comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish ^[9]. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable ^[10] sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception ^[11]. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, -- and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate ^[12] island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

Primary Source Citation:

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* Boston: Antislavery Office, 1845.

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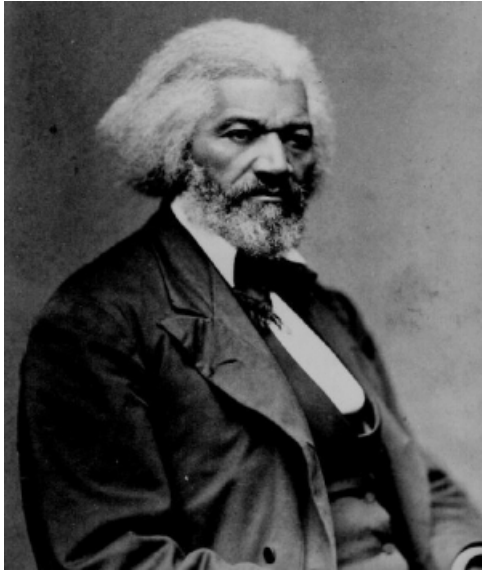
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Frederick Douglass [25]

Watch and Listen:

These recordings are part of the John and Ruby Lomax 1939 Southern States Recording Trip collection at the Library of Congress. The Gospel Train is a folk spiritual, part of an African American song tradition that arose during slavery. Spirituals were created by slaves using elements of African music such as clapping, drumming, repetition of lyrics, and call-and-response to express their religion and their experiences as slaves.

The Gospel Train [26]

I'm Gwine Home on de Mornin' Train [27]

Long Way to Travel [28]

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