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# **PART I**

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## **UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRITUAL**

# 1

## SINGING IN A STRANGE LAND

*The Origin and Development  
of the Spiritual*



*For there they that carried us away captive required of us  
A song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying,  
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'*

*How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

—PSALM 137: 3–4

### **The Beginning of Slavery**

In 1619 a Dutch Man of War brought to this country the first group of Africans. The ship landed on the coast of Virginia. This importation continued for more than two hundred years, with most of the Africans hailing from the West Coast of the continent. Eileen Southern states that perhaps the most important delineation was the separation of peoples into groups, specifically the Akan, Fon Yoruba, Ibo, Fanti, Fulani, Ashanti, Jolof, Mandingo, Bakongo, and Baoulé.<sup>1</sup> The number of Africans in America rapidly increased with each shipment of people. Some authors suggest as many as fifteen million Africans were transmitted to the Americas during this period.

The conditions that the slaves endured on these ships were indeed inhuman. Slave traders took as many slaves as could be stuffed into a ship, knowing that some would not make it to their final destination. One slave ship, *The Brookes*, was originally built to carry a maximum of 451 people but was carrying over 600 slaves from Africa to the Americas. James Walvin tells us that by the seventeenth century a slave could be purchased for twenty-five dollars and sold upon arrival for about \$150.00. This price rose sharply after slave trade became illegal.<sup>2</sup> Many slaves died in route either from disease or starvation. None could speak English and the variety of tribes represented prohibited many from communicating with each other.

Olaudah Equiano was a captured slave who wrote about his experiences:

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a greeting in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.

The white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among my people such instances of brutal cruelty. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us.

The air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. The wretched situation was again aggravated by the chains, now unsupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.<sup>3</sup>

Although the slave was separated from his home and, in many cases, his family, then stripped of all human dignity, he would be the building stone of a new nation. Hildred Roach writes, “Little did he know that his musical nature and spiritual stimuli would be so important in the development of the new world.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Origins of the Negro Spiritual**

*The Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro; that is, as much so as any music can be the pure and sole creation of any particular group... The Negro brought with him from Africa his native musical instinct and talent, and that was no small endowment to begin with.*<sup>5</sup>

—JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

The Africans on the slave ships were proud people for whom music was an integral part of their entire society. Every great event was celebrated with dance, song and music, and the master musicians were held in high esteem by the people.<sup>6</sup> Bruno Nettl offers the following about the importance of music in the African society:

It cannot be denied that Africans, on the whole, do participate in musical life much more—and more actively singing, playing, composing, dancing—than do members of Western civilization. ... Music in Africa can be said to have a greater or more important role than it does in Western civilization.<sup>7</sup>

But now these proud peoples for whom music was so vital were captives! According to slave narratives by Fredrick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, the Africans were forced to sing both on ship and on land. But out of these painful experiences would grow forth one of America’s greatest art forms—the Negro spiritual.

In fact, it is the interaction and synthesis of the two cultures—the African culture with that of white southerners—that formed the basis for the emergence of the spiritual as a distinctive musical form. Richard Newman shares this view, and quotes Benjamin May, former president of Morehouse College, “The creation of the spirituals was no accident. It was a creation born of necessity, so that the slave might more adequately adjust himself to the conditions of the new world.”<sup>8</sup> James Weldon Johnson felt strongly that the fusing of the spirit of Christianity with the slaves’ African music gave birth to the Negro spiritual.