

# 1321

**My Soul Has Grown Deep**

A Paper Presented to the Sphex Club of Lynchburg, Virginia  
November 6, 2008

**By Hermina W. Hendricks**

[See the biographical sketch on the following page.]

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## **Part I - Introduction - America's Music**

What is American Music? One of the many ways in understanding and appreciating American culture or to really 'see' America and a composition of the social fabric is to observe the varied cultures of people and listen to their representative artistic expressions beginning in the seventeenth century. One particular expression is music. Music that was either composed by her people - William Billings, amateur composer of the singing school movement beginning in the seventeenth century or music that was brought to America and presented in an informal or formal setting at that same time by the people. First, it is necessary to examine and listen to music in seventeenth century America. It is in that time period that sets a foundation for the evolution of music in America. Initially, one must embrace it all from the music of the Europeans, particularly the pilgrims/puritans –the Anglo-American folk tunes, its origins traceable to England, Scotland, and Ireland; Psalm tunes, English ballads-such as Barbara Allen, sea shanties, English folk tunes and fiddle tunes. Secondly, embrace the music that was brought here inherently and orally by West Africans. (Ghana, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, etc.)

Gilbert Chase, a noted musicologist, critic and the author of several important studies of American and Spanish people was one of the first scholars based in the United States to devote serious attention to the study of music of The Americans. In 1955, he published his most frequently cited work, "America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present". Chase's life span began in Havana, Cuba in 1906 (year of his birth) and ended in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1992(year of his death). His book, America's Music, From the Pilgrims to the Present was the first major work to examine the music of the entire United States, and recognize folk traditions as more culturally significant than music for the concert hall. Chase's analysis of a diverse American music identity has remained the dominant view among the academic establishment.

Chase's view of American music, " By America's music, I mean the music made and continuously used by the people of the United States, people who have come from many parts of the earth to build a new

civilization and to create a new society in a new world, guided by ideals of human dignity, freedom, and justice". ( p.xxv , Gilbert Chase). Implied in these patriotic words are two perceptions: first that the key to American music lies in the folkways of all Americans and second, that historians must be authentic in their research and study the music of all Americans or rather people who have come to America and lived and the people who were brought to America, such as The Africans.

I've used Gilbert Chase's book in many capacities in Academia. His book was either used as a primary textbook whenever I've taught a course entitled, American Music or as a supplementary text presently teaching courses entitled, Ragtime, Blues, and Jazz and Popular Music in America. His discourse and his embrace guides us to focus on all music produced by a people that became known as Americans and their histories from the seventeenth century on through to the twentieth century. No American culture, group, or ethnic group is eliminated. His musicological perspective invites us as musicologist, educators, or enthusiasts to be open to all of the music that we as a diverse society express, present, produce, compose, and celebrate.

Prior to Chase's musicological perspective, one was only exposed to the fostering of the European art of music as it had been transplanted to America. So for us as true Americans, even though our ancestry lies in other countries prior to the seventeenth century, Chase's perspective is refreshing and sets a new course of understanding and appreciation of music in this young America. He embraces and expresses a musical philosophy that is inclusive of all of us.

From 1892 -1895, Antonin Dvorak a great Czech composer served in America as director of the National Conservatory in New York. Dvorak's The New World Symphony is a commemorative work in salute to America. This symphony is comprised of varied elemental styles of spirituals. Dvorak took advantage of his time spent in America to travel to many places to hear native American music, music of Stephen Foster and music of African Americans particularly spirituals. "He issued what was in effect a challenge

to American composers, to look to their own native music as a foundation on which to establish in America what he termed- a great and noble school of music.” (p. 302, Daniel Kingman)

Therefore, this evening my paper or presentation focuses on one important aspect or style in American music – The Spiritual. This body of music was born out of the ancestry of African people brought to America in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century. Born out of would translate to - the African folk music characteristics, i.e. vocal music , acapella singing style, melody, harmony, call and response, poly-rhythms, pentatonic scale melodies, the untrained musical voice, vocal hollers, shouts, vocal swoops, and swirls, thus blue notes.

## **Part II – “The Soulsters from the Hill” of Diamond Hill Baptist Church**

The “Soulsters from the Hill” are an eleven voice choral ensemble from Diamond Hill Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA. This musical ensemble was created by myself over twenty years ago at the church. The choral group was named by the late Rev. Haywood Robinson, Jr. (who was a member). The choristers specialize in a vocal music presentation of Negro Spirituals as the music was called in the nineteenth century and later in the twentieth century. Eventually, this music became known as either Black Spirituals or African American Spirituals. (The name change of musical style because of the political correctness in addressing Black people as Black or African American rather than Negroes). These songs continued to be expressed and composed into the twentieth century in the genre of the Negro spirituals as part of the black musical idiom. The ensemble’s aim is to preserve this body of music by presenting vocally so that modern audiences and congregations can understand and appreciate its historical value, deep emotional motivation, and beauty.

## **Program repertoire**

Opening introduction – Vocal hum

1. Over My Head I Hear Music in the Air
2. I'm Gonna Sing So God Can Use Me

## **Part II - The Negro Spirituals**

Negro Spirituals as they were known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were born out of the institution of slavery in America. This body of music emanated from the heart of the Negro slave. It is not known exactly when these powerful songs began to spring forth. The spirituals possibly appeared as early as the 1600s, but they were first documented around the mid to late eighteenth century. The birthing period ended shortly after Emancipation. History confirms the use of these songs as not only the music of the pre-Civil War “Invisible Church,” but the musical sound of the institution of slavery. These spirituals were referred to as slave songs or plantation songs, and jubilees because in the midst of despair, found fortitude, hope, and faith in God. These were survival songs for the black slave. These songs also held hidden inuendos of communication amongst the slaves, and songs expressed through daily workings on and throughout the plantations, in fields, or in the houses of their owners.

According to Eileen Southern (retired Professor of History at Harvard University), “To be sure, many slaveholders disallowed any kind of religious services for their slaves. Despite the stringent laws of the South prohibiting the assembling of black folk, the slaves managed to hold religious meetings in secret. Modern scholars refer to the religious community of slaves that existed outside the formal church as “the invisible institution” or “the invisible church”. The secret meetings were often held at midnight after the masters had gone to bed. They also took place at sunrise on Sundays, since slaveholding families customarily slept late on Sunday mornings, and the patrols, after their all-night duty, retired at dawn.

Contemporary slave literature is replete with anecdotes about all the things slaves did to escape detection. A common practice was to meet in the deep woods, in remote ravines or gullies, or in secluded thickets. The preachers and exhorters would speak over a kettle of water in order to drown the sound, or the group would turn the kettle upside down in the center of the gathering so that the kettle would absorb the sound of the singing “ (p 179, Eileen Southern).

The origin of the spirituals as well as the composers is unknown to this day. According to Southern, “Rarely is it possible to identify the author of a folksong or to pinpoint its original form. Typically, folksongs are created by nonprofessional musicians, altered by other singers and passed along from one generation to the next by oral transmission. In the process, the music is adapted to the taste of both those who sing and those who listen.” (p. 184, Eileen Southern). So it is with the Spirituals. In the pre-literate era of slavery, the fuel of the “invisible church” was the musical expression constantly fed by the “oral tradition”. The oral tradition comes from African culture – so different from European music culture in that music is notated.

These songs, Negro Spirituals or spirituals are jubilees, folk songs, shout songs, sorrow songs, slave songs, slave melodies, religious songs were influenced by the surrounding conditions in which slaves lived. “These conditions were negative and degrading, to say the least; yet miraculously, a body of approximately 6, 000 independent spirituals exists today – melodies that were, for the most part, handed down from generation to generation. The spirituals, which speak of life and death, suffering and sorrow, love and judgment, grace and hope, justice and mercy, were born out of this tradition. They are the songs of a people weary at heart. These spirituals are the songs of an unhappy people, and yet they are the most beautiful expressions of human experience.” (p. 73, Songs of Zion).

The chief vehicle for the performance of the Negro Spiritual was the human voice. The vocal performance of the spiritual was the feat that provided the spiritual with its shape – rhythm, melody,

harmony, texture, tempo, and text. The majority of the text can from the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. Especially, the Old Testament.

“In Hebrews, the bondage of slaves and the significance of Moses as a leader were major figures. Also, figures in the bible such as Daniel, Ezekiel, and so forth were monumental figures for slaves as represented in their songs. Expressions such as The Promised Land, Heaven, Over Jordan were thought of as actual places where they (slaves) could and would go someday to be rid of trials and tribulations of servitude in America. Freedom from slavery and freedom from life itself were often synonymous in thought, as is depicted in many spirituals.” (p.75, Songs of Zion). Oh Freedom –release in death sometimes became the ultimate hope and goal, as is expressed in “Steal Away” and in “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”. These same spirituals served as communication songs for the Underground Railroad – the secret passageway through Midwest America into Canada where slaves became freedmen if they survived.

“On the plantations, blacks developed their own musical tradition. Techniques of call and response, brought from tribal villages from Africa, continued to be an important element of their music. The coded language of spirituals, which were surprisingly free of bitterness, provided a way for slaves to secretly communicate. “Heaven” and the “promised land” referred to the joy of freedom, crossing the River Jordan” was a metaphor for crossing Mississippi and Ohio into abolitionist territory, and references to trains and railroads were reminders of the Underground Railroad and the freedom it represented.

### **Continuation of program repertoire**

#### 3. Steal Away

this song “reflects the faith that slaves had in God and their belief that He would hear and answer their prayers.” (p. 401, Susan Kantor)

#### 4. Swing Low Sweet Chariot

In the Carolinas, slaves used a sled-like vehicle called a chariot for carrying things. In spirituals, a chariot “swinging low” from the sky represented a means of escape from slavery in America and a way back to Africa.

5. Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray

**Part III - American Missionary Society**

“The American Missionary Association was a Protestant-based abolitionist group founded on September 3, 1846. The main purpose of this organization was to eliminate slavery, to educate African-Americans, to promote racial equality, and to promote Christian values.” (Ward). It was closely aligned with the Congregational Christian Churches, most of whom are now members of the United Church of Christ. It maintained its distinct identity until 1999, when a restructuring of the UCC merged it into the Justice and Witness Ministries division. Colleges that were founded by the American Missionary Association include Atlanta University (1865); Fisk University (1866); and along with the Freedman's Bureau, Howard University in Washington, D.C.

This organization had its roots in the alliance of New England abolitionists and was solely dedicated to the conversion and education of freedmen. This significant direction taken by this organization enabled African Americans and Native Americans in the late nineteenth century to attend an educational institution called a Normal School. This anti-slavery initiative was the agent that established a significant number of normal schools and colleges in the south. In the late nineteenth century Virginia Seminary and College first became an institution not only as a normal school for young black teenagers but also a higher education institution for theology. Also, “the Freeman Bureau was established by Congress in March 1865 to provide food, clothing, and fuel to the destitute and to redistribute abandoned lands among the freedmen”. (p. 49, Ward).

## **Part IV – Fisk University**

Fisk University was founded was founded by the American Missionary Society in 1866 as the Fisk Free Colored School. It was named after General Clinton Bowen Fisk, who was a” member of the Unionist Home Guards and took part in the seizure of Camp Jackson from the supporter’s of Missouri’s secessionist governor while Grant, now an Illinois mustering officer, looked on admiringly. As commander of the thirty-third Missouri Volunteers, Fisk fought all over Arkansas and Missouri and took part in the vain pursuit of Confederate general Sterling “Pap” Price. By the time Fisk was mustered out, he was a brevet major general. He had a round tuba player’s face, an equably genial gaze, and a full beard.

Fisk was a popular man and very good company. But he was first and foremost a teetotaler and, two years before his death in 1890, would receive a quarter of a million votes as the prohibitionist Party’s presidential candidate.

After the war, Fisk was detailed as assistant commissioner of the Tennessee and Kentucky department of the newly formed Freedmen’s Bureau, or, as it was known officially, the bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands.” (p. 49, Andrew Ward). Thus, the founding of the Fisk Free Colored School and eventually Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

The school recruited teachers from either Oberlin College or persons who had strong religious convictions and had a somewhat collegiate education. John Ogden, a former normal school principal from Wisconsin served as the superintendent of education for the Freedmen’s Bureau in Tennessee. With General Fisk’s encouragement, he was determined to turn Nashville into a model of educational reform. He stated, “It was not work for just anybody. If there were any poor broken down teachers in the North, let them stay there, but let the good ones be sent here (Nashville, TN) where they are most needed.” (p. 59, Ward)

Initially, all the teachers at the school were white.

## **V - Fisk Jubilee Singers**

George Leonard White, born in Cadiz, New York in 1838 was the son of a blacksmith who played in a local band. He attended public school until age fourteen and moved to Ohio when he was twenty.

Although not a singer himself, White developed a talent for interpreting music and began directing choirs at various schools and churches in Ohio, where he also founded a black Sunday School. White served in the Union army at Gettysburg, PA and Chattanooga, TN. He considered the Union cause as a holy crusade. Like so many soldiers who served in the Civil War his health was nearly destroyed. After being medically discharged from the Army, he joined the Freedmen's Bureau in Nashville, TN. Nashville became a city that was crowded with impoverished former slaves. He became known as an abolitionist and an innate empathy for the downtrodden. When the Fisk Free Colored School opened under the auspices of the American Missionary Association, he volunteered to teach music and penmanship. White taught music classes and organized a choir comprised of students from his class, thus becoming the choral director.

Samuella Shepard, born in 1851, was a granddaughter and daughter of former slaves on a plantation in Nashville. She too was considered a former slave and attended the Fisk Colored School. Prior to eventually coming to Nashville, she was vocally tutored by a German female instructor, she possessed a true soprano voice and a great aptitude for learning. While living in Ohio, Shepard attended an African American academy for free and enslaved children. Also, she received vocal lessons by a German female instructor because of her great voice. Shepard earned a living by teaching music lessons to young students at the Gallatin school for former slaves. Due to some unforeseen misfortune, she moved to Nashville and enrolled in the new normal school. Eventually became known as the matriarch of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Greene Evans was born in 1848. He was one of fifty slaves belonging to the richest man in Fayette County, TN. He became a body servant of a Yankee soldier. Eventually, this soldier employed him at his hotel in Indianapolis, IN. He later moved to Nashville and entered the Fisk Colored School.

Benjamin M. Homes was born 1846 in Charleston, South Carolina. He was sold several times and eventually was bought by a man named Kaylor and taken to Chattanooga, TN. He later worked in a hotel as a clerk. He too became a student.

Isaac Dickerson was born in 1852 in Wytheville, VA. He was orphaned at the age of five. His earliest memory of slavery was his father was sold to a slave trader in Richmond, VA. His owner, J.F. Kent was a Colonel of the Confederate Home Guard. Dickerson was captured by Yankee troops in 1864 and was released. He later joined Colonel Kent and at the close of war was released. He worked in Chattanooga for a Jewish shopkeeper, whose son taught him how to read and write. He became a student at the school.

America Robinson, born 1855, was a former slave girl who had seen her master's parlor fill with wounded soldiers before her father spirited her away from war-torn Murfreesboro in a Yankee wagon. She too became a student and eventually a teacher at the school.

Jennie Jackson was born free through her mother's manumission in the 1850s. As free blacks, she along with her mother, labored by washboard scrubbing clothes for the local citizens in Nashville and Northern officers. She was known to have an outstanding soprano voice.

Maggie Porter lived on a wealthy plantation with her parents in Nashville. Porter heard, "there was a school out on Cedar where they will give you books, and you don't have to pay a dollar a month, and your mother can keep the dollar. Everybody went. They didn't say anything—just grabbed up their things and left. It was the beginning of Fisk". (p. 57, Ward).

Thomas Rutling was born a slave in Wilson County, TN and the youngest of nine children. His father either ran away or was sold before Rutling was born and his mother was sold when he was only three. As

a witness to the painful separation of mother and son, the daughter of Rutling's master took him into her care, taking him and two siblings with her when she married and moved to a new plantation. At the age of eleven years old, (after 1865) Rutling landed a job assisting a surgeon who worked under General Clinton B. Fisk. Recommended as a candidate for entry to the American missionary Association's Fisk School, Rutling showed up at the school's doors as soon as it opened and was admitted to the High School. He was called one of the best tenors in Tennessee.

George Leonard White encouraged his music students to sing the songs that they were familiar with.

"The slave songs were never used by us then in public, wrote Ella Sheppard. They were associated with slavery and the dark past, and represented the things to be forgotten. Then, too, they were sacred to our parents, who used them in their religious worship and shouted over them. In the summer of 1871, when Fish University was still in the old hospital buildings, one day there came into my room a few students with some air of mystery. The door was shut and locked, the window curtains were drawn, and, as if a thing they were ashamed of, they sang some of the old time religious slave songs now long since known as Jubilee songs. Sheppard recalled, sitting upon the floor (there were but a few chairs) and practicing softly, learning from each other the songs of our fathers. We did not dream of ever using them in public".(p. 70, Ward)

These songs were collected by George Leonard White and became the repertoire for the Fisk Jubilee Singers that was later heard not only throughout Midwest and North America in the 1870s, but internationally as well. Ella Shepard brought him, Swing Low Sweet Chariot. Henrietta Matson, a former missionary and faculty member at the school brought him Didn't My Lord Deliver, Daniel. The Fisk Jubilee Singers caused the spirituals that were born out of the deep soul and emotion of black people who were enslaved in America and placed the songs on the concert stage. These songs went through a metamorphosis that not only changed its form and appearance, but also helped to make it a permanent American musical art form. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first to perform these songs and therefore

set a concert precedence for many choirs at historically black colleges and universities. George White as their director suggested that they sing the songs of their ancestors and so they did.

## **Epilogue**

Langston Hughes, one of the great African American poets, was a part of the Harlem Renaissance in early twentieth century America. Hughes' poetic works captures an authentic view of the spirit of black people. He wrote and published a poem in 1921 that has become a mantra for African Americans whose ancestry started in Africa long before the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its entitled "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of

Human blood in human veins

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathe in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the

Singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and

I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers; Ancient, dusky rivers

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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