

Harriet Tubman

AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Spirituals

Songs were used in everyday life by enslaved people. Singing served many purposes, such as providing rhythm for repetitive manual work, as well as being used as inspiration, motivation, and celebration. Singing was also a way to express values and solidarity with one another. Songs were used as tools to remember and communicate, since the majority of the enslaved could not read. Sometimes the songs were called spirituals. The spiritual is the earliest form of African-American religious music to develop in the United States.

Harriet Tubman and other enslaved people used songs as a strategy to communicate in their struggle for freedom. Coded songs contained words giving directions on how to escape; they were also known as signal songs or map songs.

Songs sometimes used Biblical references and analogies of Biblical people, places and stories, comparing them to their own history of slavery. For example, “being bound for the land of Canaan” for a white person could mean ready to die and go to heaven; but to an enslaved person it meant “ready to go to Canada”.

These are the lyrics of some songs that have been passed along for generations:

Wade in the Water

Tubman used “Wade in the Water” to tell the enslaved to get into the water to avoid being seen and smelled or tracked by dogs. This is an example of a map song, where directions are coded into the lyrics.

Chorus: Wade in the Water, wade in the water children.

Wade in the Water. God’s gonna trouble the water.

Who are those children all dressed in Red?

God’s gonna trouble the water.

Must be the ones that Moses led.

God’s gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

Who are those children all dressed in White?

God’s gonna trouble the water.

Must be the ones of the Israelites.

God’s gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

Who are those children all dressed in Blue?

God’s gonna trouble the water.

Must be the ones that made it through.

God’s gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

Follow the Drinking Gourd

This song suggests escaping in the spring as the days get longer. It also refers to quails, birds which start calling each other in April. The “drinking gourd” is a code name for the Big Dipper, which points to the Pole Star towards the north. Moss grows on the north side of the dead trees, so if the Big Dipper is not visible, dead trees will guide them north.

When the Sun comes back

And the first quail calls

Follow the Drinking Gourd.

***For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.***

The riverbank makes a very good road.

The dead trees will show you the way.

Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,

Follow the Drinking Gourd.

The river ends between two hills

Follow the Drinking Gourd.

There’s another river on the other side

Follow the Drinking Gourd.

When the great big river meets the little river

Follow the Drinking Gourd.

***For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.***

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Steal Away

This song communicates that the person singing is planning to escape.

Chorus: Steal away, steal away!

Steal away to Jesus?

Steal away, steal away home!

I ain't got long to stay here!

My Lord calls me!

He calls me by the thunder!

The trumpet sound it in my soul!

I ain't got long to stay here!

Chorus

My Lord calls me!

He calls me by the lightning!

The trumpet sound it in my soul!

I ain't got long to stay here!

Chorus

Sweet Chariot

If an enslaved person heard this song he would know he had to be ready to escape. The Underground Railroad (sweet chariot) is coming south (swing low) to take the enslaved to the north or freedom (carry me home). This was one of Tubman's favorite songs according to Sarah Bradford's biography, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*.

Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home,

Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see

Coming for to carry me home,

A band of angels coming after me,

Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,

Coming for to carry me home,

Tell all my friends that I'm coming, too,

Coming for to carry me home.

Unnamed Song

This unnamed song was sung by Harriet Tubman when approaching her group after taking a detour to get food for the day. This song lets them know it is safe to approach her. Source: *Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her People* by Sarah Bradford

Hail, oh hail, ye happy spirits,

Death no more shall make you fear,

Grief nor sorrow, pain nor anguish,

Shall no more distress you there.

Around Him are then thousand angels,

Always ready to obey command;

They are always hovering round you,

Till you reach the heavenly land.

Jesus, Jesus will go with you,

He will lead you to his throne;

He who died, has gone before you,

Through the wine-press all alone.

He whose thunders shake creation,

He who bids the planets roll;

He who rides upon the tempest,

And whose scepter sways the whole.

Go Down Moses

This song was sung by Harriet Tubman when near her group, to let the runaways know it is not safe to come out because there is danger in the way. Source: *Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her People* by Sarah Bradford

Chorus:

Oh go down, Moses,

Way down into Egypt's land,

Tell old Pharaoh,

Let my people go.

Oh Pharaoh said he would go cross,

Let my people go,

And don't get lost in the wilderness,

Let my people go.

Chorus

You may hinder me here, but you can't up there,

Let my people go,

He sits in the Heaven and answers prayer,

Let my people go!

Chorus