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Micaiah H. Jones
Cedarville University

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Abstract

This paper intends to inform the reader about the great impact that the Fisk Jubilee Singers had on developing and understanding American music, specifically African American slave songs and culture, during their years of performance and travel. It also seeks to highlight the contradiction of the Fisk singers' situation during that period of their lives; many of them were recently released from slavery, yet they were obligated to tour as a group for years after their education had ended. This resulted in most of the members altogether forfeiting their diplomas. This paper focuses on the difficulty which the Jubilee singers were subjected to and asks the question of whether or not they had been freed from slavery at all, or whether this attempt at freedom and education really became another form of slavery for the group of young students.

Keywords

Jubilee, Jubilee singers, Spiritual, George White, Fisk University, Ella Sheppard, African American

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Micaiah Jones
Cedarville University

Postbellum America was a difficult time for everyone. Especially difficult was the southern cultural climate immediately following the Civil War. Among the many challenges faced by people of color following the war was the difficulty of finding a job. Many of the slaves in the south were not given the opportunity to receive an education, which severely limited their ability to get a job doing anything but manual labor. Oftentimes, newly freed slaves had not ever been taught how to read or write, which made acclimation into society as freed citizens extremely challenging. Northern white missionaries attempted to fix this through the establishment of Fisk University. Following the founding of this institution was the establishment of a very talented group of singers called the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Although the efforts of Fisk University to assimilate black students into society as free people were quite noble, many of those efforts came at the cost of the freedom, once again, of the Jubilee Singers.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were originally a group of ten singers, consisting of four males and six females, who attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The university was founded by the American Missions Association (AMA), a group of northern missionaries, in 1866, just a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation.[1] It was named after Clinton Fisk, a member of the Tennessee Freedmen's Bureau, and was founded on the site of a former Union hospital.[2] The AMA created Fisk University as a means to prepare African Americans for life as freed individuals through education. However, the university had very limited funding, which made it difficult to employ professors and pay them adequately. Furthermore, those employed at Fisk worked for the AMA, which "paid salaries to its teachers only upon petition." The teachers at

[1] Graham, 1.
[2] Milner, 401.

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the university were more accurately working as missionaries than they were for a salary.[3]

For the school to remain open, there had to be a way to bring in more income. The solution became the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The group's name came from the "year of jubilee," which is described in the Bible in the book of Leviticus. "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan."[4] George White, the group's director, claimed that this name came to him from a "divine guidance" of the Lord.[5] The ensemble made three concert tours during their time as an ensemble between 1871 and 1878, originally solely to raise money for the school.[6] The Fisk Jubilee Singers both introduced and transformed the spiritual as a genre.

The group initially began by performing popular songs and European classics; they presumed that their audiences would both enjoy and relate to this music. They also sought to demonstrate their own capabilities as black folks to learn and absorb white culture. However, as they began performing on their first tour, the Jubilees realized how much their audiences loved their Christian songs; these "plantation melodies" and "sorrow songs" were especially beloved by the northern missionaries.[7]

Interestingly, and yet understandably, the Jubilee Singers did not initially plan on sharing the music of their culture. Ella Sheppard, who played the important role of arranger, pianist, assistant director, *and* fellow singer, once noted, "We did not dream of ever using them in public." According to Sheppard, the songs reminded the group of their time in slavery, which was not something they desired to remember. However, George White, the group's main director, began to collect these songs from the group members and create choral arrangements for them. Perhaps the most well-known spiritual song by the Jubilee Singers is "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," which was contributed by Sheppard herself.[8]

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[3] Graham, 5.
[4] Leviticus 25:10 (New International Version).
[5] Robbins, 406.
[6] Graham, 1.
[7] Ward, 65.
[8] Ward, 65.

The Jubilee Singers truly did move people with their music wherever they performed it. The first time the group performed a spiritual was at a religious conference in Oberlin, Ohio. They weren't given an official place on the program; they were, rather, a sort of back-up option. They were informed that they would be called on if there was a pause in the program. There was, in fact, such a pause. The group began softly singing "Steal Away to Jesus" from the back of the church. Everyone grew very quiet as they listened intently to the heartfelt words of the song.[9]

The group became a much bigger success than was expected. What was once simply a means of fundraising for the college to remain open became a ticket to fame and great accomplishment for the talented students. Ironically, all but one member of the group forfeited their degree from Fisk University so that they could tour with the Singers full time.[10] In her article, "On the Road to Freedom, The Contracts of the Fisk Jubilee Singers," Sandra Graham weighs the pros and cons of being a part of the ensemble. Undeniably, there were benefits; the Singers were paid very well, receiving $250 per quarter. They were able to gain an extensive amount of experience traveling abroad and performing, as well as practical knowledge as they learned how to be better musicians. They gained celebrity and acknowledgement for the first time in their lives; this was inevitably an exciting experience. However, Graham draws a parallel between the treatment of African Americans as inferiors throughout their time in slavery and the controlling treatment of the Fisk Jubilee Singers during their time as members of the ensemble. She does this by deeply analyzing each of the clauses of membership as a Jubilee Singer.

One point made by Graham in her article is that they endured a very controlling atmosphere during their membership in the group. "Just as George White sought to control every musical aspect of the troupe's singing…so the AMA sought to control almost every aspect of the singers' lives."[11] This makes sense to an extent; the organization needed the students to strengthen the school's reputation and thus reel in more donors.[12] It is also widely acknowledged by historians that the group was pushed to exhaustion, without enough rest or time to recover from

[9] Robbins, 406.
[10] Graham, 2.
[11] Graham, 4.
[12] Graham, 4.

illness: "skinny, stalwart Ella Sheppard became so ill that her doctor said she must return to Nashville. But White refused to give her permission and grimly pressed ahead."[13] Journal and diary entries of the members of the group have been found, blatantly expressing the harsh conditions through which they were forced to continue to sing. America Robinson, one of the female vocalists in the group, wrote about the experiences of her fellow members. "Rest is the thing most desired among us just now. Jennie [Jackson] does not get better. She had three very bad days last week. She was screaming with pain. Maggie Porter is singing but always complaining of her chest. Maggie Carnes has been sick over a week."[14] It is immoral to continue to push musicians to the point of exhaustion and illness, but the fact that George White and the AMA continued to force the group to perform is also especially disappointing because, according to Graham's article, the AMA had promised to be responsible for the health and wellness of the students, and to "exercise watchful care" over them as they traveled and performed.[15] Not only that, but the AMA did not pay for the students' medical needs.[16] They certainly did not fulfill this promise, as the singers continued to sing through the pain and sickness that they seemingly all experienced.

Interestingly, Mark Twain (or Samuel Clemens, his birth name) was given the opportunity to see and hear the Jubilee Singers perform live. The experience deeply moved him, and he wrote:

> I was reared in the South, & my father owned slaves, & I do not know when anything has so moved me as did the plaintive melodies of the Jubilee Singers. It was the first time for twenty-five or thirty years that I had heard such songs, or heard them sung in the genuine old way—& it is a way, I think, that white people cannot imitate—& never can, for that matter, for one must have been a slave himself in order to feel what that life was & so convey the pathos of it in music.[17]

Although this is a lovely sentiment, the singing of spirituals by the Fisk singers was not something that they initially did willingly. Slave songs

[13] Ward, 65.
[14] Graham, 5.
[15] Robinson, quoted in Graham, 5.
[16] Graham, 5.
[17] Clemens Milner, 399–400.

were associated with just that—slavery. Although they were deeply emotional and meaningful pieces of music, for the Jubilee Singers they carried with them the darkness, fear, and deep pain of slavery. Sheppard reflected on this experience: "[Slave songs] 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. We finally grew willing to sing them privately."[18] The group's reluctance to sing these songs in performance demonstrates the complete view that they had of themselves. They both recognized that slavery had been a large factor in who they had become as individuals, and yet they also firmly refused to let the past hold them down from who they were each becoming.

White observers of the popularization of black spirituals by the Jubilee Singers took a seemingly unintentional but objectively wrong stance. Examples of this are evident in the 1867 anthology, *Slave Songs of the United States*. Phrases such as "Still, the chief part of the negro music is *civilized* in its character—partly composed under the influence of association with the whites, partly actually imitated from their music" and, "On the other hand there are very few which are of an intrinsically barbaric character" (the latter quote is in reference to the slave songs which have been collected and notated)[19] demonstrate that black people, in the political and cultural climate of the late 1860s, were considered more as artifacts than actual United States citizens.[20]

The spiritual songs were well loved by almost every audience that heard them performed. Audiences believed they were experiencing authentic African American music and culture when they attended the performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and to some extent, they were! Even so, there was certainly more that went on behind the closed doors of rehearsal rooms in preparation for these performances. Although the spirituals that the Fisk Singers performed on tour were actual slave songs which the members brought from their memory on the plantations or which had been passed down within their families, they were not exactly performed authentically.

The Jubilees spent much time with their director, George White, essentially recreating these songs to make them more like American

[18] Milner, 402.
[19] Allen, vi.
[20] Milner, 403.

church hymns in four-part harmony. This is not the way that they were originally sung. Graham states, as quoted by Milner in his article, "The Tenor of Belonging: The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Popular Cultures of Postbellum Citizenship," "'[i]n arranging the spirituals, White probably was concerned with making them exotic enough to sound interesting, but familiar enough that audiences could recognize them as relatives of music they were accustomed to,' thus creating 'a polished concert performance with spirituals resembling hymns.'"[21] White was seemingly more concerned with the fundraising benefits of performing music that the many Christian donors would enjoy than he was with portraying the music of this people group authentically. This is yet another irony of the "freedom" that came with Fisk University—the very music that was used as a salve to the anguished soul of the enslaved African American, arguably became commercialized and Americanized.

The Jubilee Singers and the songs that they introduced to the United States were deeply influential and have greatly changed the way that we as a nation understand music today. Nonetheless, there was deep pain associated with the performance and publication of these songs. Music which was used to console the pain of slavery was also used to further extend the suppression endured by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who were virtually still enslaved to a life of service during their time as members of the group. Not only did they endure the physical exhaustion of constant performance, but also the painful reminder of the bondage they had been freed from. They were persuaded to sing songs that were, understandably, deeply personal to them and to their families. They were pushed to the point of exhaustion and illness on their tours and were not given time to rest. The group was subjected to singing the songs which represented slavery and anguish, the only thing they truly had as their own, in new, more hymn-like arrangements which more closely resembled white America. Their adversity, however, was not in vain. They admirably and almost singlehandedly changed the way that America understood both music and slavery as a whole.

[21] Graham, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers," quoted in Milner, 403.

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