Music has been a way that different cultures express their emotions, social practice, and traditions. I would define music as a universal language that expresses feelings in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color. Music can tell a story of personal experiences in life and can sometimes be easily recognized. Music can be used for any occasion and help improve physical and emotional health and well-being. Since the days of worshiping at the bush harbor, spirituals were how the African American people told stories, communicated escape route, and sent a message from plantation to plantation. In some churches today, spirituals can still be heard. I want to explore how spirituals told African Americans' stories from slavery to the present day in this ethnography.

Negro spirituals are songs created by enslaved Africans captured and brought to the United States. Slavery was common in the southern states on Plantations. They were taught their masters religion and forced to work in fields harvesting crops. On Sunday, their masters would read them biblical stories and give a bias interpretation of its meaning. After they would gather at the bush harbor, one of the slaves who could read would provide a message of hope, love, and freedom. Memorizing Biblical stories, they heard and translated them into songs. Early in the morning, you would hear songs about Moses and the Red Sea God troubling the water, the Hebrew children exodus from Egypt, Jesus being crucified and raised from the dead. This is how they expressed the understanding and trust in the God of their masters in their own way. When planning an escape to communicate with one another without the knowledge of their masters, spirituals were used to provide direction to freedom via the Underground Railroad.

The actual number of songs is unknown and are typically sung in a call and response form, with a leader improvising a line of text and a chorus of singers providing a solid refrain in unison. During this time, the only instrument that was used is vocal and clapping their hands. Other types of spirituals are Slow and melodic and Fast and rhythmic.

After the Emancipation Proclamation signing in 1863, some of the former slaves moved North and others remained in the south. Even though they were no longer slaves, the African American community had to deal with segregation, hatred, and oppression. In 1867, William Francis Allen compiled a publication titled *Slaves Songs of the United States.*This publication contained spirituals Allen heard from black Union soldiers. Allen stated, " The best that we can do, however, with paper and types, or even with voices, will convey but a faint shadow of the original. The voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate, and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper."[[1]](#footnote-1)

The spirituals that were sung by the African American ancestors have influenced many hymns and inspirational songs we hear in the Church. Sacred music in the African American church helps ease the pain and agony of oppression. The melodies were sung with the belief that God would deliver them from their oppressors. These sacred songs, moans, chants, psalms, shouts, hymns, jubilees were woven through work, play, and worship in America.

I had the pleasure of interviewing my uncle, Patrick J. Whitehead, who serves as the Director of Music at the Historic 16th Street Baptist Church and Choral Accompanist/Assistant and Adjunct Instructor of Music at Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama. Mr. Whitehead is an accomplished pianist and pipe organist of 25 years also studied music with Valerie R. Harris and Tell Peter Lott. He earned a Master of Arts with High Distinction in Music and Worship from Liberty University in Lynchburg, VA. Growing up in the south, he attended two Historical Church, 6th Avenue Baptist Church, also known as Second Colored Church, and 16th Street Baptist Church, known as the First Colored Church. In both of these churches, spirituals and hymns are very much alive today. Some of the Historical Black Colleges would come and hold concerts sing the old spirituals to a packed auditorium. One of the unique features of both churches is an active pipe organ. There are a lot of black churches that don't use them at all.

In 1963, racial tension became very high in Birmingham, Alabama. Dr. King and the other civil rights leader often met at a Historic Churches in Birmingham to discuss civic issues and a social center to hear lectures. In talking to the current Pastor of the 16th Street, he shared that in church records, every meeting held, spirituals were sung before and after. At the time, the church clerk documented how effective spirituals and sacred music got them through tough times. They would march and sing negro spiritual that told the world how they felt and a unified body. It was their way of telling the stories of the past and plan for the future.

On September 15, 1963, at 10:22 am, the Historic 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed by a mob of white men. This bombing claimed the lives of 4 little girls and injured twenty-plus individuals. This event had a significant impact on how the Church heard and sung spirituals. Songs such as "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" and " We shall Overcome" took on a different meaning after this world-changing event. People all over the world, no matter their race, gender, religion, or creed, would come to the Annual Memorial and Observance. In the end, people would lock arms and tear-stained eyes, singing, " We shall Overcome!"

Some of the best-known spirituals include: "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," "Steal Away," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses," "He's Got the Whole World in His Hand," "Every Time I Feel the Spirit," "Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees," and "Wade in the Water."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Reference:

[https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/ritual-and-worship/african-american-gospel#:~:text=African%20American%20Gospel%20music%20is,development%20of%20rhythm%20and%20blues.](https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/ritual-and-worship/african-american-gospel%22%20%5Cl%20%22:~:text=African%20American%20Gospel%20music%20is,development%20of%20rhythm%20and%20blues.)

1. Randye Jones: - The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual .... https://learningintheopen.org/2020/02/11/randye-jones-the-gospel-truth-about-the-negro-spiritual-from-cotton-field-to-concert-hall/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Randye Jones: - The Gospel Truth about the Negro Spiritual .... https://learningintheopen.org/2020/02/11/randye-jones-the-gospel-truth-about-the-negro-spiritual-from-cotton-field-to-concert-hall/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)