

Slave Songs

'A band of angels coming after me!'

Before Britain's parliamentary Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807, an endless succession of Africans passed through British ports; many more lived permanently in London and other areas of the UK, working as house-slaves, servants or tradesmen. They brought with them a vibrant culture, which, although often scorned or feared by the people they met, had a lasting effect on the creative life of both Britain and the United States.

Songs are a good example of this. Enslaved Africans adapted their traditional songs to pass the time and give them hope whilst they were packed into the ships that transported them across the world. They also developed rhythmic songs that helped them to maintain spirit and pace while they worked. There is some evidence that American slaves used songs to help guide those who escaped to freedom.

Listen to the audio recording of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. You can follow the lyrics below.



Chorus:

**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*

(Chorus)

*If you get there before I do
Coming for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I'm coming too
Coming for to carry me home*

(Chorus)

*If I get there before you do
Coming for to carry me home
I'll cut a hole and pull you through
Coming for to carry me home*

(Chorus)

*Sometimes I'm up and sometimes
I'm down
Coming for to carry me home
But still my soul feels heavenly bound
Coming for to carry me home*

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot is a 'spiritual': a song deeply rooted in Christianity, to which many slaves had converted.

The song refers to the Biblical story of Elijah being taken away to heaven by a chariot. It also contains the mixture of sadness ('Sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down') and joy ('Still my soul feels heavenly bound') that is found in many spirituals. As with a great deal of slave songs, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* suggests that a better life will be found in heaven.

If you have heard the song before, though, it is most likely that you heard it sung at a rugby match. Nobody is sure how the song became associated with rugby, although many people think that it was due to Welsh fans, who wanted to sing a rousing song to encourage their team.

It was adopted as an anthem by England fans in 1988, after Chris Oti, a black player, turned round a difficult match against Ireland with three tries. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* had sometimes been sung by racist crowd members before this time, to draw attention to black players on the pitch. However, after Oti helped the team go from 0 - 3 at half time to 35 - 3 at full time, the crowd started to sing this favourite hymn in celebration. The song caught on so much, that the England team flew home from their 2003 World Cup victory in a plane called the *Sweet Chariot*.

• • • Slave Songs Activity Sheet



Wade in the Water



Listen to the traditional recording of *Wade in the Water*. Now read the *Wade in the Water* song lyrics sheet, which contains a kind of code. The meaning of the words would have been understood by the slaves but not their masters.

The lyrics sheet is for the same song as the traditional recording, but the words are different in some parts. This is because there are many versions of this song, as slave songs were rarely written down and the tradition was passed on verbally.

1. Decide on something that you would like to talk about in code: it might be something you would like to tell your friends in secret, or something that you would like help with remembering.
2. Now write a song that hides the information in its lyrics. To make it easier, you could use a tune you already know.
3. Perform your song. Can the class decode what you're trying to say?

Become a gospel choir



Modern gospel music grew out of the spirituals sung by slaves. It can be joyous or sorrowful, but is always performed with great enthusiasm by the singers.

1. Watch the video clips of the Soweto Gospel Choir.
2. Could your class form a gospel choir to perform one of the slave songs you have looked at? Think about costumes, dance moves, soloists and how to put across the mood of the song.

A new national anthem



The slave songs were so good that many of them have been re-used by modern singers. 'Wade in the Water' is one example, as it was covered by Marlena Shaw in the 1960s, with its meaning slightly changed to make it into a love song. A recording is included at www.bridgetowerproject.org.

Songs are often re-used. A recent example is the hymn *Jerusalem*, written by William Blake, which some people have suggested should replace our current national anthem, *God Save the Queen*. Can you think of an alternative?

1. In groups of 3, list all the songs you think would make good national anthems. You should take factors into account such as:
 - It needs to be memorable
 - It needs to send out a positive message
 - It needs to be easy for many people to sing together
2. Now choose one of the songs on your list.
3. Put together a short talk that persuades the rest of the class to make use of your song.
4. When all the talks are ready, hold a class debate in which each group makes a short presentation, and then the issue is discussed by the whole class. It may help to write your proposed songs up on the board.
5. Hold a vote to choose your favoured national anthem.
6. Why not write to the Prime Minister to suggest he takes up your idea?

Wade in the Water

“Tell all my friends that I’m comin’ too”

At face value, the famous spiritual, *Wade in the Water*, seems to encourage people to be baptised in order to find hope for the future. However, many historians now believe the song is actually a very clever code that gave advice to slaves from the American south on how to escape to Canada, where slavery was illegal. Have a close look at the lyrics. What do you think?

Slaves who were caught trying to escape would be punished by death, as an example to other slaves. This meant that the song had to be disguised as a religious song to avoid suspicion.

The song suggests the safest way of getting to Canada: follow the river. This meant that slaves could easily navigate at night to avoid being caught.

The journey was long (usually taking a year) and uncomfortable, so the song offered moral support along the way.

Even though hiding an escaped slave was punishable by death, people throughout the United States agreed to take in escapees. This network was highly organised, and became known as the Underground Railroad.

The song contains many repeated lines and a memorable tune, so that it would be easy for escapees to remember.

Another way of avoiding detection: keep low to the ground.

Wade in the water,
Wade in the water,
Wade in the water,
God's gonna trouble the water.

If you don't believe I've been redeemed,
God's gonna trouble the water
I want you to follow him on down to Jordan stream,
God's gonna trouble the water
You know chilly water is dark and cold,
God's gonna trouble the water
You know it chills my body but not my soul.
God's gonna trouble the water

Wade in the water,
Wade in the water,
Wade in the water,
God's gonna trouble the water.

Now if you should get there before I do,
God's gonna trouble the water
Tell all my friends that I'm comin' too,
God's gonna trouble the water
Sometimes I'm up lord and sometimes I'm down,
God's gonna trouble the water
Sometimes I'm level to the ground,
God's gonna trouble the water
God's gonna trouble the water.

The song needed to offer hope to anyone who tried to escape. It suggests that God is on their side, but also that they can be 'redeemed' (saved) by following the instructions.

Jordan is the Promised Land in the Bible. Here, it may have represented the other 'promised land' of Canada.

It is thought the slaves were encouraged to literally wade in the water rather than just walking along the banks of the river. This would prevent them being sniffed out by the bloodhounds sent by slave-owners.

