

# INTRODUCTION

*Soul Praise—Amazing Stories and Insights Behind the Great African-American Hymns and Negro Spirituals* explores the people, places, and events that have shaped the heart and soul of African-American worship music. The powerful, soul-stirring songs are familiar—Swing, *Low Sweet Chariot*; *Go Down, Moses*; *Take My Hand, Precious Lord*. These anthems are rooted in the richness of African-American history and continue to offer solace and celebration to hearts seeking freedom and hope.

*Soul Praise* is divided into the following sections:

*Traditional Spirituals* covers the period before 1865 when Negro spirituals, or plantations songs as they were also called, had their beginnings in the deep recesses of southern fields. Instructions for secret meetings and planned escapes were often hidden in the lyrics of these songs. Slaves used them to communicate even under the watchful eye of their unsuspecting masters.

*Beyond Abolition: Black Renaissance/Civil Rights Movement* covers the period between 1865 and 1960 and takes a look at some of the works of such noted composers as Thomas A. Dorsey, Charles A. Tindley, and Lucie Campbell. Also included in this section is a sampling of songs made popular during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

*Euro-American Contributors*, the third section, gives more insight into the works of Watts, brothers Charles and John Wesley, John Newton, and other Euro-Americans who

penned many of the hymns sung in African-American churches. Just as African Americans took the Christian religion as their own, they also embraced some of its music—breathing new life into it and adapting it to their history, culture, and circumstances.

*Soul Praise* will captivate and inspire you to reach out with personal faith and praise to the God of your fathers. It will also encourage you to deepen the roots of your faith and help you celebrate the fortitude, hope, and faith behind songs that continue to enrich the world of music.

PART I

SLAVE &  
PLANTATION SONGS:

TRADITIONAL SPIRITUALS BEFORE 1865

## Slave and Plantation Songs

The history of the Negro spirituals, also referred to as slave songs and plantation songs, is more than a simple accounting of the foundation of African-American music in this country. It is a story with much deeper roots—roots that reach back in time to reveal the sordid tale of a torturous human bondage—a time when African Americans were held captive and struggled to survive the tyranny of their white slave owners. Many slaves lost that struggle along the way, but their struggle lives on through the testimony of song.

The old Negro spirituals give an account of the life and history of Black Americans and how they suffered enslavement and persecution solely because of their skin color. Sometimes the songs were joyous, but many times they were sad. The lyrics almost always served as testimonies of a people who had strong faith that their God would someday deliver them.

"They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment," the 19th-century writer and educator W.E.B. DuBois wrote in his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*. "They tell of death and suffering, and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways."

Examples can be found in songs such as *Steal Away*, a traditional plantation spiritual that speaks of the desire of every African American entrapped by the bonds of slavery. "Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus! Steal away,

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steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here." The hope was always for a way of escape from their present hardships, a "stealing away" to refuge in the arms of a loving Savior. Until that final refuge could be found, the slaves found solace in allowing their spirits to steal away during their secret religious meetings.

Often, the slaves looked to the Bible and the stories of the Israelites' escape from bondage for inspiration and encouragement. Much of that inspiration is reflected in the lyrics of songs like *Go Down, Moses*; *Michael, Row the Boat Ashore*; and *Joshua Fit the Battle of Jerico*. These songs illustrate a strong hope for freedom and deliverance and an eventual resting place in their own Promised Land.

## GO DOWN, MOSES

H.T. BURLEIGH

*Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land.  
Tell ok Pharaoh,  
To let my people go.*

*When Israel was in Egypt's land.  
Let my people go.  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand.  
Let my people go.*

*"Thus spoke the Lord," bold Moses said:  
Let my people go.  
"If not, I'll smite your first born dead,"  
Let my people go.*

*No more shall they in bondage toil.  
Let my people go,  
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,  
Let my people go.*

*When Israel out of Egypt came,  
Let my people go.  
And left the proud oppressive land.  
Let my people go.*

*O, 'twas a dark and dismal night.  
Let my people go,  
When Moses led the Israelites.  
Let my people go.*

*'Twas good ok Moses and Aaron, too,*

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*Let my people go,  
'Twas they that led the armies through,  
Let my people go.*

*The Lord told Moses what to do,  
Let my people go.  
To lead the children of Israel through,  
Let my people go.*

*O come along, Moses, you'll not get lost.  
Let my people go.  
Stretch out your rod and come across,  
Let my people go.*

*As Israel stood by the waterside,  
Let my people go,  
At the command of God it did divide.  
Let my people go.*

*When they had reached the other shore,  
Let my people go,  
They sang a song of triumph o'er,  
Let my people go.*

*Co down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land,  
Tell ole Pharaoh,  
To let my people go.*