

ACTIVITY: SONGS OF SLAVERY

How did slaves express forbidden feelings and desires, such as anger, resentment, or a longing for freedom? One way was through music and the use of coded language. Like many people throughout history, slaves sang songs to pass the time as they worked. These songs relied heavily on African musical traditions, incorporating rhythm, call-and-response patterns, percussion, and banjos. Because slaves were almost always in the presence of their white masters or overseers, they learned to disguise the meaning of their songs, hiding politically challenging content behind seemingly innocuous words. Beneath the surface of many of these songs you will find coded messages about plans to escape, directions for how to head north on the Underground Railroad, derisive comments about white people, and soulful lamentations about life under slavery. As one of the only emotional and spiritual outlets available, these songs contain the hopes, dreams, frustrations, and fears of generations of African Americans. Taken together, they can be used to study the experiences of slaves. We will work on deciphering the first song together as a class. After that, you will work in groups of three or four to analyze the following songs and answer the corresponding questions.

"Follow the Drinking Gourd"

This song is often attributed to a man known as "Peg Leg Joe," a former sailor who lost part of his leg in an accident at sea. While working as an itinerant carpenter and handyman, he often spent his winters in the South, traveling from plantation to plantation and teaching slaves this song. Unfortunately, we know nothing more about the mysterious Peg Leg Joe.

*When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is waiting to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

Scholars believe that the words, "When the sun comes back," refers to the transition from winter to spring. Quail are migratory birds that fly south for the winter and north for the summer. The drinking gourd is the Big Dipper and the old man is Peg Leg Joe.

Despite white southerners' best efforts, most slaves knew that they could obtain their freedom by escaping to the North. From the time they were old enough to understand, many slave children were taught to use the stars of the Big Dipper to locate the North Star, which lies almost directly north in the sky. Slaves referred to the Big Dipper as the Drinking Gourd because they used hollowed-out gourds to scoop water from buckets rather than metal dippers. This verse taught slaves to leave their homes in winter and to follow the North Star north. Eventually, they would meet a guide who would escort them on the rest of their journey.

Abolitionists connected to the Underground Railroad knew that most slaves would have to cross the Ohio River before they could successfully reach the North. After several disastrous attempts, they eventually concluded that the river was too wide and swift for most people to swim across. As a result, they began to advise fugitive slaves to cross it during the winter months when it was frozen.

*The riverbank makes a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way,*

*Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

This verse taught listeners to follow the bank of the Tombigbee River out of Alabama. They were to look for dead trees that were marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot, which would help them distinguish the Tombigbee from the other north-south rivers that flow into it (thus preventing them from walking in circles and heading back into Southern territory).

*The river ends between two hills,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

*Where the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is waiting to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

This verse informed slaves that the Tennessee River eventually joins the "great" Ohio River. After crossing the Ohio, they would meet a guide from the Underground Railroad who would accompany them on the rest of their journey.

1. What is this song about? How do you know?
2. What knowledge does the listener or reader need in order to understand this song?
3. Why do you think the composer created this song?
4. If you were a slave, how do you think you would feel while listening to or singing this song? What would you think if you were a white Southerner?
5. What genre does this song belong to?

The next set of songs were described by Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

"Canaan"

*O Canaan, sweet Canaan,
I am bound for the land of Canaan,
O Canaan, it is my happy home,
I am bound for the land of Canaan!*

[Untitled Song]

*I thought I heard them say,
There were lions in the way,
I don't expect to stay
Much longer here.*

*Run to Jesus - shun the danger -
I don't expect to stay
Much longer here.*

Source: Douglass, Frederick. *My bondage and my freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1855).

1. According to Frederick Douglass, these songs had double meanings for slaves. What do you think they are about? How do you know?
2. What knowledge does the listener or reader need in order to understand these songs?
3. What kind of language is used in these songs? Why do you think the composers chose to use this language?
4. How are various groups of people portrayed in these songs?
5. Why do you suppose slaves sang these songs? How do you think they made them feel?

"All the Pretty Little Horses"

[Note: The key to understanding this song is that there are two babies.]

*Hush-a-bye, don't you cry, go to sleep my little baby,
When you wake, you shall have, all the pretty little horses,
Blacks and bays, dapples and grays, all the pretty little horses.
Way down yonder, in the meadow, lies my poor little lambie,
With bees and butterflies peckin' out its eyes,
The poor little thing crying Mammy.*

1. What is this song about? How do you know?
2. What knowledge does the listener or reader need in order to understand this song?
3. Why do you think the composer created this song?
4. How are various groups of people portrayed in this song? Whose perspective is privileged? Whose perspective is excluded?
5. If you were a slave, how do you think you would feel while listening to or singing this song? What would you think if you were a white Southerner?

"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.*

[Chorus]

*Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's Land.
Tell ol' Pharaoh,
Let my people go.*

*Thus saith 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.*

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

What is this song about? How do you know?

1. What knowledge does the listener or reader need in order to understand this song?
2. What kind of language is used in this song? Why do you think the composer chose to use this language?
3. How are various groups of people portrayed in this song? Whose perspective is privileged? Whose perspective is excluded?
4. If you were a slave, how do you think you would feel while listening to or singing this song? What would you think if you were a white Southerner?