

ANDREW SARGENT REVIEWS THE SPIRITUALS

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by Andrew Sargent

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African-American literature begins with the spirituals. One of America's oldest indigenous musical forms, these haunting religious "sorrow songs" are arguably the centerpiece of the black oral tradition. First created and sung by slaves, they now lead off the discipline-defining *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*. And because they've influenced the work of such modern black writers as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, they make a perfect starting point for studying black literature as a whole.

Yet there's a challenge in introducing the spirituals into an African-American literature classroom: even as students can be emotionally moved by recordings of, say, "Steal Away to Jesus" or "Wade in the Water," they sometimes struggle to get their heads around the complex history *behind* the music. Because the spirituals are an oral, communal form of folk culture shared covertly by an oppressed group of people, they defy conventional ideas of literary creativity and authorship; they also carry hidden meanings that may not be evident to the first-time listener. And so questions such as "Where did these songs come from?" "To whom do they belong?" and "What purpose did they serve for the folks who sang them?" take on a heightened urgency.

Thanks to an inspiring new PBS documentary, *The Spirituals* (2007), teachers of African-American literature now have a dynamic tool for getting students to dig into these

questions. The work of socially-conscious independent filmmakers Ari Palos and Eren McGinnis, *The Spirituals* does a beautiful job of showcasing the emotional pull of the songs, but it's equally adept at illuminating the historical context in which they emerged and evolved. And with a 26-minute running time that lends itself to screening and discussion in a single class period, *The Spirituals* is a truly invaluable teaching resource.

Much of the documentary's inspirational quality comes from the starring role it gives to the American Spiritual Ensemble, a Kentucky-based, internationally-acclaimed singing group whose performances of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," and others lend the film its soaring soundtrack. But the filmmakers use several other techniques to root the spirituals in a tangible physical and historical reality. In addition to archival footage, still images, and impressionistic re-creations of slave life—all gorgeously photographed—the film's most valuable resource is the informed commentary by musicologists, composers, and the Ensemble members themselves. These interviewees deliver keen insights into the function of the songs and offer personal testimonials on what the spirituals have meant to the people who've sung them.

Students learn, for example, how the spirituals grew out of African rhythms, Christian hymns, and biblical narratives of bondage and freedom; how slaves sang these songs among themselves to cope with the miseries of slavery and assert their faith in God; and how songs such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away to Jesus" often conveyed covert signals about slaves' plans for escape. "One of the reasons it's such a challenge to really know these songs," explains one Ensemble member, "is [that] the very nature of them was secret. One could lose his or her life for communicating the coded messages that these songs had."

The film also chronicles the spirituals' importance to African-Americans after emancipation, focusing in particular on the fundraising work of black student troupes like the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the late nineteenth century, and, later, the high-profile role spirituals

played in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Running throughout the film is a sense that despite their historic significance, the spirituals are a cultural form in danger of being lost or forgotten. Hence the documentary tracks the American Spiritual Ensemble's laudable efforts to preserve and promote the rich heritage of these songs and to build on "old" material with innovative new arrangements.

In the film's final moments, we see this quest take the Ensemble all the way to Mallorca, Spain, where they deliver a show-stopping rendition of "Steal Away to Jesus" to a rapt audience. As the music soars, the filmmakers overlay images of archetypal Deep South locations—cotton fields, slave quarters, rivers—that breathe out the history of black enslavement and resistance. It's the most moving moment in a film that's full of them. And it reminds us why the music that Du Bois once praised as "the articulate message of the slave to the world" continues to speak powerfully to audiences across the globe.

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