

# Music and the Underground Railroad

*A Presentation by Reggie Harris*

The Underground Railroad was a multi-racial, multi-faith freedom movement in antebellum America from approximately 1830 to 1860. Secret code songs were an important part of the planning and implementation of escapes from slavery by African Americans and their allies for freedom.

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

MUSIC & THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD is an exploration of slavery and the quest for freedom, presented in story, song, and narratives developed by Kim and Reggie Harris.

This performance is a dynamic and carefully researched presentation that incorporates interchangeable songs, stories, and interactive participation highlighting important aspects of this powerful historical chapter in America. Reggie Harris is able to adapt any performance to fit the needs of each situation whether it be K-2, middle school, high school, college, intergenerational family, or various community venues for music and story.

Songs in the performance will most often include, “Oh Freedom,” “Wade in the Water,” “Steal Away,” “Free at Last,” “No More Auction Block,” “Let Us Break Bread Together on our Knees,” and possibly other “spirituals,” as well as stories in the “tradition.” Stories are used to highlight and connect the audience with the material and give historical background in a narrative way.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Reggie Harris has traveled the world for more than 40 years as a songwriter, storyteller, and lecturer using music and the spoken word to make an impact in education, social and racial justice, the environment, and faith and in human and civil rights.

He is a teaching artist in the John F. Kennedy Center’s CETA program, a Woodrow Wilson Scholar and the Director of Music Education for the UU Living Legacy Project, leading civil rights pilgrimages throughout the South.

Reggie’s recording “Steal Away: The Music and the Underground Railroad,” with Kim Harris is included in many museum and library collections and is widely used as a resource all over the world. The HARRISES were featured performers in the 1988 textbook series *World of Music* by Silver Burdett and have developed educational materials for more than 25 years in their roles as educators and presenters and as workshop leaders in the Art in Education Partnership program for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., as well as at other centers of arts and learning through the United States and Canada.

You may purchase their CDs and receive information about other educational materials produced by Reggie by visiting the website **[www.ReggieHarrisMusic.com](http://www.ReggieHarrisMusic.com)** or at or at Appleseed Recordings: **<http://www.AppleseedMusic.com>**.

## ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Slavery came to North America almost as soon as the first settlers came to these shores. Slaves were the property of the men and women who owned them, and were treated as such. Like cattle or horses, the slaves were often called “stock” and were almost never in control of their lives or their fates. They were not considered smart or even human, were not allowed to go to school, and in many cases, were punished or beaten if they taught themselves to read.

From the time they were born, slave masters controlled their every action. If slaves married, it was not a legal wedding, nor was it officially recorded. When their children were born, few birth certificates were issued. Families were often separated at their owners’ discretion. If the master could get a good trade, he did not think twice about selling a mother away from her children.

Slaves might learn that there could be a better life from “shepherds” (those who travelled into slave territory to encourage escape) or hear information through the “Black grapevine” and try to make an escape. Although there were slaves in the North, many African-Americans living there were free, and jobs could be found. Further north in Canada, the slave laws in the United States did not apply, so slaves reaching the border were forever free.

The Underground Railroad was a term used in the United States that designated a system of steps, from the Southern states to Canada, which existed before the Civil War. This route allowed slaves to escape to freedom. The system stretched across northern states like Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan, and through New England. Along the way, concerned abolitionists and willing families let the escaped slaves stay in their homes, churches, or barns during the day, since the slaves had to travel mainly at night.

Although the system was called an “underground railroad,” it was neither underground nor a railroad. It was called “underground” because it was a secret, and “railroad” because railroad terms were used as codes. For example, escaping slaves were called “packages” or “freight.” The routes were called “lines,” the stopping places “stations,” and the people who aided the slaves were “conductors” and “station masters.”

### **Why did slaves sing spirituals?**

African-American spirituals rose from the ordeal of slavery. They spoke to the conditions in which slaves found themselves. These songs have rhythmic appeal, great beauty, and Biblical themes that express a range of emotions. Each song probably began as the inspiration of a talented individual among the slaves and was formed by the group. The songs passed from person to person, making the original authors anonymous. They are songs of faith and also songs of freedom.

One way spirituals were used as codes for escaping slaves can be seen in the song, “Steal Away” which could be sung in the night as a signal of an impending escape. “Green trees are bending” in the lyric could suggest that a good time to escape would be spring, when flowers and trees were blooming and temperatures were more conducive to travel.

Many people consider spirituals to be one of America's greatest contributions to the world of music.

This program celebrates the ingenuity of an oppressed people who used their culture, their resourcefulness, and their voices to find the way to freedom.

## **MORE BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

**SPIRITUALS:** Spirituals are songs that were composed by communities of enslaved African Americans in the years between 1830 and 1860 in the rural South. They are songs with mainly Biblical themes that express meaningful thoughts, desires, emotions, and reflections on the situation of people in bondage. They are still sung in many churches today.

**SECRET CODE SONGS:** A code song is one in which the words you sing have two or more meanings and can be used to send messages or information to others. Songs (spirituals, work songs, and play songs) sung by free and enslaved African Americans contained veiled messages of protest and/or plans for escape. Many slave masters and their allies thought that the singing by slaves indicated contentment and therefore underestimated the intellectual capacity and ingenuity of the people they held in captivity.

**GRIOT:** A griot is a song leader/historian/storyteller in many traditional African, some modern African, and African-American communities. Enslaved griots were natural gatherers and dispensers of information as the secret code song traditions developed in the "New World."

## IN THE CLASSROOM

### A classroom activity based on the Underground Railroad for students in grades 2-5

#### ***Step 1: Introduce the Song***

1. Play the song, “Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees” (#3 on *Steal Away: Songs of the Underground Railroad*). Ask for a show of hands of the students who have heard the song before. Some students may recognize the songs from their churches. This fact must first be acknowledged as these are songs not only of freedom but also of faith.
2. Using the background information listed above, tell the students (or help them to discover) what a spiritual is, explain that there are Underground Railroad secret codes contained in the code songs and about the role of griots.
3. Play the song on the CD again, this time instructing students to listen with the “ears” of a person or community of people in slavery who long for freedom.

#### ***Step 2: Interpret the Meaning of the Song***

1. Discuss the first phrase, “Let us break bread together on our knees.” If the key word in the phrase is “together,” what message might the singer be passing along to the listener? Ask for ideas from students. The meaning of, “Let us break bread together” is a call for a secret meeting of the slave community.
2. Ask students, “To be able to meet with other people, what two things do people need to know?” (The time and place of the meeting.) Explain the meaning of the lyrics: “When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun” suggested the time and place of meeting.
3. Students may be surprised at the codes contained in the song. Remind them that all groups of people have ways of speaking that only those inside of the group truly understand. Ask students if their families or friends have special words and phrases that only they know and use. Ask for a show of hands, but do not ask students to share these words/phrases. Students may show surprise that teachers/adults realize that special “student” language exists.
4. Consider some of the following questions with students:
  - What are other examples of codes used in history by groups of people working for freedom?
  - How do natural resources play any role in social movements in contemporary times?
  - How might the use of coded language or symbols that a community uses alter their status or change their relationship with those who are not part of the code?
  - What difficulties do you think Underground Railroad code users encountered, and what adjustments might one need to contemplate to make a code remain successful?

- Slaves lived in a variety of places and situations (e.g., farms, plantations, villages, and cities.) How might these codes be affected by the physical location of those using it? Why would meeting BEFORE sunrise be advantageous? (Early morning might provide the only personal time of the day before work started.) Can you think of any religious reasons why some slaves might be rising early before work and how would this “aid” the use of the code? (10-15% of persons brought from Africa were of Islamic traditions and rose early for prayer. A master MIGHT be sympathetic to slaves’ pleas for worship time.)

## TWO CODE SONGS OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

### “Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees” Song Lyric

VERSE

*Let us break bread together on our knees  
Let us break bread together on our knees  
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun  
Oh Lord have mercy on me*

VERSE

*Let us praise God together on our knees  
Let us praise God together on our knees  
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun  
Oh Lord have mercy on me*

### “Go Down Moses”

VERSE

*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*

VERSE

*Thus spake the Lord, bold Moses said,  
Let my people go  
If not I’ll strike your first born dead  
Let my people go.*

VERSE

*No more in bondage shall they be  
Let my people go  
And then shall all humankind be free  
Let my people go*

CHORUS

*Go down Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, tell ol’ Pharaoh,  
Let my people go*

## GEOGRAPHY

On a map of the United States, find the states that were in the Union in the 1840s. On your map, label the slave states and the free states with an S or a F.

Draw a possible route which the slaves could use to reach Canada.

Research the ways people make a living in the slave states and the free states. List them. Why did the South keep slavery longer than the North?

*“Where the big river meets the little river,  
Follow the drinkin’ gourd.  
For the sailor boy’s a-waitin’ for to carry you to freedom,  
If you follow the drinking’ gourd.”*

The song “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” while not a spiritual or a song used on the Underground Railroad, does incorporate many of the themes and the codes used by slaves. It is believed to have been written in the 1930s and does highlight the use of the constellation the “Big Dipper” that can help one find the North Star.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

### Historical and Cultural Websites

**The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center**  
<https://www.freedomcenter.org/about-us>

**The Spirituals Project**  
[www.Spiritualsproject.org](http://www.Spiritualsproject.org)  
*A great resource for information and context about the spiritual in form and history.*

**The National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, TN**  
<https://www.civilrights museum.org>

**Negro Spirituals**  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/twh/higg.html>  
*(An eyewitness Article in the Atlantic Monthly from 1867)*

**Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass**  
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography/>  
*(In his own words, the great abolitionist talks about spirituals and code songs)*

**Henry’s Freedom Box**  
<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plans/teaching-content/henrys-freedom-box-storia-teaching-guide/>

### Books and Periodicals

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New York: Penguin 1984

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Hamilton, Virginia, *The People Could Fly.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985

Jones, Bessie, and Bess Lomax Hawes, *Step It Down: Games, Stories and Songs from the African American Heritage.* Athens, GA: University of GA Press, 1972

*Last Chance for Freedom.* Syracuse, NY: New Readers Press, 1983

Sterling, Dorothy, *Freedom Train.* New York: Doubleday & Co., 1954

Southern, Eileen, *The Music of Black Americans.* New York: Norton and Co., 1971

Washington, Booker T., *Up From Slavery.* New York: A.L. Burt & Co., 1901

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