



Season 6, Episode 11: Slave Songbook

Wes Cowan: By 1860 there are roughly four million enslaved Africans in the United States. Forcibly transplanted to a new land, they've brought with them a rich African heritage... including songs. Adapted to reflect the experiences of a life of hard labor on plantations, these slave work songs, laments, and shouts of protest evolve into a new musical form – the spiritual. The spiritual will in turn become the wellspring for generations of musicians who will create the blues, gospel, jazz, and the protest songs of the 1960s. Now, Avery Clayton of Los Angeles, California, believes he may have discovered a vital link to this important music.

Avery: I was just going through some boxes in my mother's collection, and I came across this book and, noticed the date, and read the first paragraph, and I knew that it was something special.

Wes: Avery?

Avery: Hey, Wes. How you doing?

Wes: Good. Good to see you.

Avery: Good. Come on in.

Wes: Thank you.

Avery: So this is our black Hollywood hallway.

Wes: Wow, you've really come a long way since last year. Last year, Gwendolyn Wright met with Avery to investigate an intriguing autograph book with ties to the Harlem renaissance. That book was just one part of a huge collection of African American artefacts Avery's mother, Mayme Clayton, accumulated over her lifetime. Now that the collection has moved into a new museum in Culver City, California, tens of thousands of artefacts are finding a home. So, Avery, what have you got for me?

Avery: Well, I have a book that I found. And...and it's a collection of African American spirituals.

Wes: Really?

Avery: Yeah. Yeah.



Wes: Well, let's take a look at this. *Slave Songs of the United States*. Wow, published in 1867.

Avery: Yeah, two years after the end of the Civil War.

Wes: What do you know about the book?

Avery: Well, very little. You know, there is something that caught my attention. And...and it's in the first paragraph. If you don't mind, I'd like to read it to you.

Wes: Okay.

Avery: "The musical capacity of the Negro race has been recognized for so many years that it is hard to explain why no systematic effort has hitherto been made to collect and preserve their melodies." And it got me to thinking...could this be the first book of Negro spirituals published in the United States?

Wes: And that would be a really interesting thing. Sounds like that that's your question, in fact.

Avery: Well, that's one of my questions. And then I also want to know, who were the people who collected this music? You know, what was their motivation?

Wes: This is a really fascinating story and I'm ready to get going.

Avery: Okay. Fantastic.

Wes: You know, I've sold hundreds, if not thousands of 19th Century books. And, this has a publication date of 1867. The binding, the printing style, everything is typical of the period. But what's unusual is that the title page lists no authors or editors. Let's see if I can find them. Oh, yeah, there we are. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison. The book is a collection of 136 songs, with music and lyrics. You know, I recognize some of the songs that are here like *Roll Jordan Roll*. Here's *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*. Most are songs I've never heard before. Many express a hope for redemption in the life beyond. "Bendin' knees a achin'. Body wracked with pain. I wish I was a child of God. I'd get home by and by." The editors took great care to record the words in phonetic English, just as they heard them. But I'm not finding any information on the publisher. An online search shows that Avery's book has been reprinted many times, and remains in print today. Oh look here's one from 1960. 1929. 1962. 1992. A popular work, but nothing to indicate if this was the first collection of spirituals. I'm at Howard University in Washington, D.C., to meet Dr. James Norris, professor of music, and director of the Howard choir. Dr. Norris has long known about this book, and says its songs are deeply personal.



Dr. Norris: My granddad was a Baptist preacher. I heard them sung authentically all my life. And they're just right here in my heart.

Wes: To the enslaved African, what did these songs mean?

Dr. Norris: These songs were everything. He had to sing about his condition. Being sold...his family being separated. He had to sing to just keep his plain mental bearing.

Wes: He tells me that plantation owners often forced enslaved Africans to attend church to hear the message of Christianity... a message that missionaries carefully tailored to justify slavery. But the enslaved men and women took this new language and created their *own* spirituals... songs that often contained coded meanings, bringing messages of hope and, sometimes, visions of escape.

Dr. Norris: "Roll, Jordan, Roll". Jordan was what? A river you had to cross. Okay, that could have been what? The Mississippi or the Tennessee River. Crossing into a better place. Old Satan was the slave master. Hell was being what? Sold further South.

Wes: So...in spite of the fact that the words were actually biblical, their meanings were very personal.

Dr. Norris: Personal.

Wes: Dr. Norris explains that even though the words were from Christianity, these songs have their roots in Africa, where music was infused into every aspect of life. In the Americas, the enslaved Africans were forced to adapt.

Dr. Norris: They weren't allowed to use instruments they brought with them. They took them from them. So what, they improvise with what...[clapping hands]...hand clapping. On the side of the...[slapping leg]... what? Improvise. I look at them and I marvel, over how we got through all of this. But how we got through it all by what? Singing.

Choir singing, "No more peck of corn for me. No more, no more..."

Wes: It was the enslaved Africans' work songs that gradually evolved into the blues, and form the backbone of virtually every American music form created in the 20th century, including Jazz, Rock and Roll, and Hip Hop. So, Doctor Norris, is this book the first book of slave songs?



Dr. Norris: It is the first large collection, yes, of slave songs, because others were published individually. Like three and four at a time. And it's a very important collection.

Wes: So who were the individuals responsible for collecting this extraordinary music? I'm at California state university Dominguez Hills, to meet Hansonia Caldwell, a music professor emeritus and the author of books on the African American spiritual. She recognizes Avery's collection right away.

Dr. Caldwell: Those of us who are involved in the field of spirituals know this book because it's the first.

Wes: Now, these three people... who are they? Do you have any information about them?

Dr. Caldwell: Well, yes. I have some information about them in the back here. So yes, this is William Francis Allen. He was a Harvard graduate, and a student all over Europe, came back and eventually became a university professor.

Wes: And who's this?

Dr. Caldwell: This is Charles Pickard Ware, who is the younger cousin of William Allen, and also a Harvard graduate. Most of the songs that are in the book are from his collection.

Wes: Really, okay.

Dr. Caldwell: And then, Lucy McKim Garrison. Lucy is from Philadelphia; she was a pianist and a violinist and a piano teacher. She's the only musician in the group.

Wes: Dr. Caldwell tells me that Allen, Ware, and Garrison were all committed abolitionists who'd worked before and during the civil war to destroy the institution of slavery.

Dr. Caldwell: The people who are pro-slavery are espousing a philosophy that says that the people that are being held in enslavement are not human beings. So one of the things that abolitionists were doing was trying to document the cultural voice of the African, as a way of affirming the humanity of the African.

Wes: She explains that in the 1860s, most Americans' exposure to the music of enslaved Africans was through minstrel shows – degrading parodies of slave life written by whites, and performed by whites in blackface.

Dr. Caldwell: They were determined to say that Africans were happy as slaves, which was a nonsensical statement. But, that was how they were portrayed on the stage.



Wes: Dr. Caldwell says that, after emancipation, many freedmen wanted to leave the music of slavery far behind. The fact that Avery's book has preserved over 100 of these songs is incredibly significant.

Dr. Caldwell: It would have been possible to actually lose all of these songs, so the fact that they are still with us is really incredible.

Wes: One thing perplexes me – if our abolitionist editors did compile these songs during the civil war, how had they gotten the cooperation of Southern plantation owners, who were surely hostile to their political goals? I'm meeting someone who knows all about collecting America's original music... Library of Congress archivist Todd Harvey, a librarian with the folk life collection.

Wes: Hi, Todd.

Todd: Hi, Wes. Good to meet you.

Wes: Good to see you. He wants me to hear a song collected by a visionary folklorist named John Lomax. It's an early recording of "Roll Jordan Roll".

Recording of "Roll Jordan Roll"

Wes: Dr. Harvey says that Lomax and his son, Alan, travelled the southern United States collecting and preserving thousands of original songs – including some of the first-ever recordings of African Americans singing original spirituals. Like the Lomaxes, the editors who compiled the songs in Avery's book gathered music from all over the rural south.

Dr. Harvey: But the largest part of the book was collected in the South Carolina Sea Islands, St. Helena Island, Port Royal Island, Hilton Head Island area.

Wes: But unlike the Lomaxes, who worked long after slavery had been abolished, our Northern editors had to gain access to plantations during the polarizing 1860's. How did they accomplish this? As we search among the library's five million maps and atlases, Dr. Harvey locates something that may help answer my question.

Dr. Harvey: This is a map of the Battle of Port Royal. At the beginning of the war, one of the Northern strategies was to blockade important Southern east coast cities. So in November of 1861, the Union Navy sailed down into the Broad River and very quickly overcame Fort Beauregard and Fort Walker, on either side



of the river, and within a few days had landed their troops and had taken over the entire area, including St. Helena Island.

Wes: Dr. Harvey tells me that the few hundred land owners fled the South Carolina Sea Islands the same day, freeing over 30,000 enslaved Africans. The Union Army sent over one hundred teachers, missionaries, and superintendents down to the islands to set up schools and run the plantations. The project is known as the *Port Royal experiment* – a groundbreaking effort to prepare the emancipated slaves for life as freedmen. Dr. Harvey thinks this experiment factored into the creation of Avery's songbook. In fact, Charles Pickard Ware... Now I'm ready to tell Avery what I've learned. I've arranged for him to meet me back in Washington.

Wes: Well, Avery, first thing I want to do is give you your book back to you.

Avery: Well, thank you.

Wes: And it's a great story.

Avery: Is it?

Wes: Yeah, it really is. I learned an awful lot. Your first question was could this be the first book ever published of African American spirituals? And, the answer to that is definitely yes.

Avery: Wow. Wow.

Wes: You know your second question is who these three people are that compiled these songs? I tell Avery that the editors were all Northern abolitionists committed to preserving this valuable music. But there's a lot more to this story. It wasn't until Union victories drove out former plantation owners that the three abolitionists discovered a unique opportunity to achieve their goal.

Dr. Harvey: The white Southerners left the area. And so abolitionist groups, from the North, came in to fill the void. One of the plantations was Coffin's Point, at the northern end of St. Helena Island. And that's where Charles Pickard Ware was stationed, and that's where he collected many of these songs.

Wes: Ware and his two co-editors from the North had unprecedented access to the freed slaves, and spent free time listening to and transcribing their songs.

Dr. Harvey: It was a remote location. There were thousands of enslaved Africans there and it was a good place to hear this music.



Wes: As a result, *Slave Songs of the United States* was the first scholarly work documenting the music of Africans in America.

Avery: I can't tell you how proud I am, you know, to have this book in our collection. I am just...blown away. I think my mom is smiling too.

Wes: Well, I'm so happy that you're happy but, you know, I've got one more thing. You might wonder why I asked you to meet me here at Howard University in Washington. Want to follow me?

Avery: Okay.

Wes: Dr. Norris has arranged a private concert just for Avery – a chance for some of the pages of his book to come alive.

Choir sings "My Father How Long?"