



THE SPIRITUALS SERIES



Stand by Me: Narrator Script

Stephen M. Lee

FROM THE COLLECTION

Stand by Me: A Celebration of African-American Song

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Introduction

Stand by Me: A Celebration of African-American Song blends scholarly research with the soul-filled singing of African-American Spirituals and Black Gospel Music. *Stand by Me* is both informative and uplifting, inspiring listener and performer to experience African-American song as celebration and prayer.

Context

Although *Stand by Me* was penned during the months following Hurricane Katrina and my forced evacuation from New Orleans, Louisiana, it is not a “period piece.” Its timeless, faith-filled message pushes beyond the devastation of August 29, 2005 and prayerfully confronts the global presence of natural and human-made chaos, past, present and future.

Excerpts of *Stand by Me* were first performed on November 17, 2005 in Orlando, Florida, at a national conference of the American Music Therapy Association. An unsuspecting and unrehearsed audience of 1200 music therapists served as the opening-night conference choir, singing five scored choruses from an earlier version of this present-day collection. *Stand by Me* now resembles a patchwork quilt, for it has been arranged and rearranged, pieced and “re-pieced” with spoken word, melodies and harmonies, and excerpts from my own published research in the *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* (“African-American Spirituals: A Synoptic Analysis of Seventy Hymnal Inscriptions in Six Protestant Hymnals,” Fall 1999/Spring 2000). This “re-piecing” is what John Lovell, Jr. calls “the creative side of artistic borrowing,” in *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*. Not only does this “patchworked” *Stand by Me* draw upon the wealth of African-American Spirituals and Black Gospel Music, it also embraces the Blues, Jazz, Taizé, barbershop quartet, and the spirit of African-American Methodist minister/hymn composer Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933). All of these influences contribute to the genius of African-American Song.

Explanation and Conclusion

Following an initial score reading and/or hearing, *Stand by Me* would appear to be an exercise in “navel gazing,” for the often-repeated words “me,” “I,” and “my” appear to deemphasize the prayer of the community while overemphasizing the needs of the individual. Consider, however, African scholar John S. Mbiti’s statement, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am complete.” This African worldview celebrates the interdependence/interrelatedness of the individual in community. Therefore, Rev. Tindley’s hymned supplication, “when the storms of life are raging, stand by me,” is a prayer of the individual who fully understands the existential reality that “me” exists within the context of community. It is my earnest prayer that faith communities, singers and pianists will embrace these very accessible arrangements of African-American Spirituals. Have fun singing and playing them and avoid, at all cost, becoming a slave to the printed musical page!

—Stephen M. Lee

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Program

While the assembly gathers to be seated, a soloist (positioned front and center) begins to sing “Over My Head” (edition 30113332). Allow approximately 5–8 seconds of intentional silence after singing “Over My Head.”

The chorus processes into place while singing “Come by Here” (ed. 30113333), at first unaccompanied and then to the sound of improvised African drumming. When the chorus has reached its place, Reader 1 begins:

Reader 1: *(Read with intention and conviction, in the style of a Gospel preacher.)*

Black folk have been singin’ and shoutin’,
moanin’ and cryin’,
quiverin’, shiverin’ and magnifyin’,
rantin’ and ravin’, with black hands wavin’,
praisin’ the name of Jesus:
Jesus in the morning,
Jesus in the noontime,
Jesus when the sun goes down.

Reader pauses. Soloist and liturgical dancer interpret “Jesus in the Morning (Praise Him)” (ed. 30113335).

Reader resumes when singing and liturgical movement come to a natural end.

Reader 1:

Black folk praised Him
in the deep woods, in remote ravines, in gullies,
in secluded thickets called “brush arbors;”¹

Black folk praised Him
in the preacher’s cabin,
in the “praise house,”² in the “cottonhouse,”³
in the white church, in the black church;⁴

Black folk praised Him
with their moans, with their chants,
with their cries for deliverance,
with their faith songs, their sorrow songs,
their meters and their hymns;⁵

Black folk praised Him
in the storefronts, on the waterfront,
at work and at play;

Black folk praised Him
through “weary years,”
through “silent tears”;

Black folk praised the Name of Jesus.

Reader pauses. Soloist, chorus and liturgical dancer interpret “Sweet Jesus” (ed. 30113336). Soloist and chorus repeat as directed, gesturing to the audience/assembly to sing on the final repeat (see score).

Reader resumes when singing and liturgical movement come to a natural end.

Reader 1:

Black folk blessed the Name of Jesus,
singing “sperichils,”⁶
Slave songs, Black folk songs,
the epitome of the cries and expressions of the human spirit in bondage;⁷

Black folk sang spirituals:
for cotton picking, corn shucking,
railroading, steam boating,
in section gangs, on chain gangs;⁸

Black folk sang Spirituals for runnin’,
Spirituals for shoutin’
Spirituals for clappin’,
Spirituals for worshipin’
Spirituals in the ring,
Spirituals for “jes’ sittin’ around.”⁹

Black Presbyterians sang; Black Methodists sang;
Black Baptists, Black Catholics and Black Episcopalians sang.
Black folk sang in the north and they sang in the south;
Black folk sang in the east and they sang in the west;
Black folk sang of slavery; Black folk sang of freedom.

Reader pauses. Soloist, chorus and liturgical dancer interpret “Oh, Freedom” (ed. 30113337).

Reader resumes when singing and liturgical movement come to a natural end.

Reader 1:

From the womb of Black bondage
gushed the souls of Black folk;
From the womb of Black bondage
gushed the songs of Black folk;
From the womb of Black bondage
gushed the Spirituals.

To know the Spirituals
is to plunge nakedly into the river of ancient, ancestral archetypes.
To be known by the Spirituals
is to allow the arrow of compassion to puncture the heart,
the light of truth to illumine the mind,
the seed of understanding to impregnate the soul.

The Spirituals are more than words and phrases.
They are more than haunting melodies.
The Spirituals are more than objects for exegetical study.

They are the “Well of Souls” of the Black folk who created them!
 Therefore, to know the Spirituals is to know their creator.
 To know their creator is to know God!

Get to know the Spirituals! Read the Spirituals!
 Listen to the Spirituals! Meditate upon the Spirituals!
 Grapple with the essence of the Spirituals!
 Sway, rock, dance, jump, foot-tap, hand-clap,
 and dare, if you will, to...sing the Spirituals!

Reader 2: (*Proclaim in a sing-song “preaching style,” ad lib freely.*)

Sing the Spirituals:

Every time you “Feel the Spirit,”
 and you just gotta “Go, Tell It on the Mountain.”

Sing the Spirituals:

because you “Trust in the Lord,”
 and you know you “Shall Not Be Moved.”

Sing the Spirituals:

because you “Want to Be Ready,”
 and “Soon-a-Will Be Done” with the trouble of this world.

Sing the Spirituals:

because “The Lord’s Laid His Hands” on you,
 and you know, that you know, that you know, you’ve “Been Changed.”

Sing the Spirituals:

because you “Just Come from the Fountain,”
 and now “You Got Good Religion.”

Sing the Spirituals:

because the “Spirit Says Sing,”
 even though “Nobody Knows the Trouble” you’ve “had” or “seen.”

Sing the Spirituals:

when there ain’t nothin’ left to do but “Steal Away to Jesus,”
 on your knees, praying “Do Lord, Do Lord, Do Remember Me.”

Sing the Spirituals:

when “Somebody’s Knockin’ at Your Door,” late in the midnight hour
 and you’re prayin’ that it’s “Good News.”

Sing the Spirituals:

when you got to “Wade in the Water,”
 just to “Come Out of the Wilderness.”

Sing the Spirituals:

in the “praise house,” in the outhouse,
 in the fields, in the streets.

Sing the Spirituals:

when you’re up, when you’re down,
 when there’s no one around.

Sing the Spirituals:
 in times of joy, in times of sorrow,
 sing 'em today, sing 'em tomorrow.

Sing the Spirituals:
 when you're tired, when you're weak, when you're worn,
 while at work, in the morn,
 while asleep, late at night,
 on the porch, in a chair, combing hair,
 on a bus, going nowhere.

Sing the Spirituals.
 Sing the Spirituals.
 Sing the Spirituals.

Chorus sings "Over My Head" (Reprise) (ed. 30113332).

*** Intermission ***

After a brief intermission, the chorus gathers the assembly by singing "Hush" (ed. 30113338), encouraging all to sing while returning to their seats. Chorus continues singing while processing back to places. Singing comes to a natural end when all participants are in place.

Chorus quietly intones "Stand by Me" (ed. 30113339) on an "ah" or "loo" while the Reader continues.

Reader 1:

African survivals, embedded in the rivers of early African-American Song, spawned the creation of many of our present-day musical genres and art forms: African-American Spirituals, Ragtime, Black Gospel Music, Jazz, the Blues, and Rap, just to name a few. Often expressed in the form of vocal and instrumental improvisation; complex polyrhythm; melodic motifs with flattened or blues notes; melodic lines overlapping choruses; call-and-response patterns; repetition; mask and irony; African survivals attest to the continued presence of a thriving African musical and socio-cultural heritage throughout the present day African Diaspora. For centuries, this African heritage watered and nurtured creative genius. For centuries, African survivals yielded bedrocks of strength and comfort to oppressed and traumatized people everywhere. The African-American Spiritual and Black Gospel Music are two of these many bedrocks.

Although the names of most of the geniuses who created the African-American Spiritual have been washed away by the tides of time, there are many well-documented Black Gospel Music pioneers.* Two of these pioneers embraced African survivals in their composing, performing, and singing: Thomas Dorsey, hailed as the Father of Gospel Music, was previously known as "Barrel House Tom," the renowned blues pianist/arranger and band leader for Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, whose "secular" style of playing triggered a storm of opposition from conservative, mainline African-American churches in Chicago during the 1920s. Likewise, New Orleans-born Mahalia Jackson, whose singing was heavily influenced

*Further discussion on Thomas Dorsey, Mahalia Jackson and Charles Albert Tindley can be found in *We'll Understand It Better By and By*, Bernice Johnson Reagon, editor.

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by the music of the sanctified church and by recordings of Blues greats such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, also received not-so-welcoming receptions from the more old-line, elite, African-American churches of Chicago in the late 1920s. By combining the African-American Spiritual and Western hymnody with so-called “secular” and/or “sanctified” music performance practices, these pioneers shaped and fashioned “Black Gospel Music.” This “sanctified” bluesy performance style, already popular in the urban storefront church, became popularized by the mass media. Eventually, this “good news” local-music current raged into a global gospel music phenomenon, uniting people of diverse cultures, beliefs and faith traditions.

Stand by Me: A Celebration of African-American Song ignores the so-called dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Recalling the genius of the early Black Gospel Music pioneers, *Stand by Me* similarly reworks the African-American Spiritual such that seemingly diverse musical styles and influences—a plaintive, Taizé-like chant, a rousing stevedore’s cry, a soulful blues lament, the rhythms and harmonies of the urban storefront church, and an *a cappella* jazz octet—all share equally in shaping the African-American Spiritual as a catalyst for celebration and prayer. Although the title of this work was inspired by Reverend Charles Albert Tindley’s hymn of the same name, this musical compilation makes a radical departure from the Tindley hymn. Traditional Tindley melodies, harmonies, and rhythms have been reworked. Vocal improvisations and piano complements have been transcribed to enhance any music or worship setting.

In turbulent times like these, as our world tries to make sense of earthquakes, hurricanes, mudslides, bombings, and pandemics of poverty, hatred, and injustice, we can find strength and comfort in the waters of African-American song. Let us, therefore, “Wade in the Water.” Let our “weary years” be quickened and our “silent tears” be no more. Then, in the midst of seemingly utter chaos, we too shall proclaim:

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me.

At the conclusion of the reading, the chorus sings “Stand by Me” (ed. 30113339).

Soloist and chorus sing “When the Storms of Life Are Ragin’” (ed. 30113340).

Soloist and chorus sing “Walk with Me” (ed. 30113341).

Soloist and chorus sing “Standin’ in the Need of Prayer” (ed. 30113321).

The performance concludes with the reprise of “Jesus in the Morning” (ed. 30113335).

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1. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 179.
 2. Melva Wilson Costen, *African-American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 50–52.
 3. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 167.
 4. Portia K. Maultsby, “The Use and Performance of Hymnody, Spirituals, and Gospels in the Black Church,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XIV (Fall 1986/Spring 1987), 141–159.
 5. Wyatt Tee Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1992), 38.
 6. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 181.
 7. Walker, *Somebody’s Calling My Name*, 43.
 8. “Negro Music” in *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Willi Apel (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972), 568.
 9. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 181.

Preview

