

Traditional African American Songs from the Era of Slavery

A) All the Pretty Little Horses - The key to understanding this lullaby 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 things crying Mammy.

Questions

- 1- Who are the two babies in this lullaby? Which baby is the woman singing to?
- 2- Why do you think the woman was assigned to care for this baby?
- 3- What does this song tell us about the experience of enslaved Africans?

B) Go Down, Moses - This song is an African American version of Exodus from the Old Testament.

When Israel was in Egypt land, Let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go.
Chorus- Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.
"Thus spoke the Lord," bold Moses said, Let my people go.
"If not, I'll smite your first-born dead." Let my people go.
Chorus- Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.
Old Pharaoh said he'd go across, Let my people go.
But Pharaoh and his host were lost, Let my people go.
Chorus- Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.
No more shall they in bondage toil, Let my people go.
They shall go forth with Egypt's spoil, Let my people go.
Chorus- Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.

Questions

- 1- What does Moses say to Pharaoh?
- 2- Why do you think enslaved African Americans sang a song about ancient Israelites?
- 3- What does this song tell us about the experience of enslaved Africans?

C) Follow the Drinking Gourd- This song is supposed to contain an oral map of the Underground Railroad. The "drinking gourd" is the star constellation known as the Big Dipper.

When the sun comes up and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.
Chorus- Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.
The river bank will make a mighty good road, the dead trees will show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot, travelin' on, follow the drinking gourd.
Chorus- Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.
The river ends between two hills, follow the drinking gourd,
There's another river on the other side, follow the drinking gourd.
Chorus- Follow the drinking gourd, follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is awaiting for to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.

Questions

- 1- Why does the song tell passengers on the Underground Railroad to follow the "drinking gourd"?
- 2- Why would runaway slaves prefer an oral map to a written map?
- 3- What does this song tell us about the experience of enslaved Africans?