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Spiritual song turns psychological passion

By **Don Morreale**
YourHub Contributor

African-American spirituals like "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," "Go Down Moses," and "Wade in the Water" are so much a part of the American songbook that we tend to take them for granted unaware of their origins, much less the hidden messages they contain.

"Most people conflate them with gospel songs, but they're a different genre," said Arthur Jones, clinical professor of culture and psychology, and associate dean at the women's college of the University of Denver. Jones is also the founder of the Spirituals Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the sacred songs of African-American slaves.

As a psychologist, he specializes in African-American mental health issues, but it wasn't until he began studying the spirituals



Professor Arthur Jones. Photo by Don Morreale

from a psychotherapeutic point of view that he saw the connection between music and the psychological well-being of the black community. Black culture, he maintains, is an oral culture.

"That was how we passed on our stories, how we passed on the black experience," he said.

African slaves, newly arrived and thrown together without regard to family tie or tribal affiliation, found themselves cut off from their ancestral roots.

"The creative solution," Jones said, "was to borrow ancestors from the Old Testament, all of whom just happened to be freedom fighters."

African-American spirituals abound with hidden social justice messages. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," for example, is an oblique reference to the Underground Railroad. "Wade in the Water," sung by slaves as a baptismal rite, contains secret instructions for potential runaways to go by water to avoid leaving a trail.

Jones' passion for music first flowered when he won a place on the New York All-City High School Chorus.

"It was very competitive to get in," he said. "There were kids from all 120 of the city's high schools. Singing in that choir was the highlight of my high school life. I lived for the rehearsals on Saturday mornings."

But in college, Jones, up to his

ears in coursework, was forced to set his musical passion aside. "I was only the second person in my family to go to university," he said. "It made no sense for me to major in music. So I followed in my older brother's footsteps and got a Ph.D in clinical psychology."

Jones credits a midlife crisis with rekindling his interest.

"I had a yearning to sing again," he said. "I started working with a voice teacher who taught me how to breathe and project, and a performance coach to learn music performance."

He won a place in the Opera Colorado Chorus, toured with the Colorado Springs Symphony, and in 1990 was approached by the Denver Museum of Natural History to do a recital in honor of Black History Month.

"Without thinking I blurted out, 'I'd like it to be about the hidden meanings in Negro spiritu-

als.' The thing is, I had only surface knowledge of the hidden meanings in Negro spirituals, so I had to dig deeper. This was the first time I did a concert exclusively of spirituals and I was overcome with emotion. I was really drawn into it."

He began a serious study of the music, and eventually wrote a book called "Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals." It was while writing the book that he came to understand the connection between music and mental health.

"I finally felt centered in my professional life," he said. "I've always been meant to do this, to be at the center of a national movement to preserve and revitalize this important cultural tradition. For me, it's become a spiritual calling."

Don Morreale is a Denver resident and contributes frequently at yourhub.com.