

The Fisk Jubilee Singers' rich history and outstanding performances have garnered them international acclaim. The materials below provide background information about the group, links to audio and video samples of their work, and links to teaching materials.

About the Fisk Jubilee Singers

Source material taken directly from the artists' website: <https://fiskjubileesingers.org/about-the-singers/>

The Fisk Jubilee Singers are vocal artists and students at Fisk University in Nashville, TN, who sing and travel worldwide.

The original Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced “slave songs” to the world in 1871 and were instrumental in preserving this unique American musical tradition known today as Negro spirituals.

They broke racial barriers in the US and abroad in the late 19th century and entertained Kings and Queens in Europe. At the same time, they raised money in support of their beloved school.

In 1999, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were featured in *Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory* as part of the PBS award-winning television documentary series *American Experience*, produced by WGBH/Boston.



In July 2007, the Fisk Jubilee Singers went on a sacred journey to Ghana at the invitation of the U.S. Embassy. It was a history making event, as the ensemble traveled to Ghana for the first time and joined in the celebration of the nation's Golden Jubilee, the 50th independence anniversary.

In 2008, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were selected as a recipient of the 2008 National Medal of Arts, the nation's highest honor for artists and patrons of the arts. The award was presented by President George W. Bush and first lady Laura Bush, during a ceremony at the White House. [Read the citation [here](#).]

The Fisk Jubilee Singers continue the tradition of singing the Negro spiritual around the world. This allows the ensemble to share this rich culture globally, while preserving this unique music.

Early History and Background

Source: *American Experience* website: *Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory*. The program first aired in 1999 and most recently aired on November 19, 2019.

On November 16, 1871, a group of unknown singers – all but two of them former slaves and many of them still in their teens – arrived at Oberlin College in Ohio to perform before a national convention of influential ministers. After a few standard ballads, the chorus began to sing spirituals – “Steal Away” and other songs “associated with slavery and the dark past, sacred to our parents,” as soprano Ella Sheppard recalled. It was one of the first public performances of the secret music African Americans had sung in fields and behind closed doors.



Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory, produced by Llewellyn Smith, tells the story of a group of former slaves who battled prejudice and oppression to sing their way into a nation’s heart. [Watch this hour-long video [here](#), or watch part 1 (9 minutes) [here](#).] Eventually, they would perform for presidents and queens, tour the United States and Europe, and establish songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “This Little Light of Mine” as a cherished part of the nation’s musical heritage. The program features today’s Fisk Jubilee Singers performing these and many other spirituals; Dion Graham narrates.

The concert in Oberlin was the turning point in a daring fundraising experiment for impoverished Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where the singers were students. Established in January 1866, Fisk taught freed slaves how to count their wages, how to write the new names they had chosen for themselves, and read both the ballot and the Bible. Despite emancipation, the South was a dangerous place: Fisk students who dared teach in the countryside were routinely assaulted and whipped by Ku Klux Klan nightriders; one was shot at in his classroom; another had her school building burned to the ground.

Charged with keeping the financially troubled school afloat, treasurer George Leonard White proposed taking Fisk’s most gifted singers on a fundraising tour of the North. Before they even left town, they encountered resistance: the parents were afraid to let their children go; White’s fellow teachers opposed the tour; and the American Missionary Association, the northern religious organization that operated Fisk, refused to help, worried that the chorus’s appeal for funds would jeopardize their own fundraising activities. But White persevered.

Following the path of the Underground Railway, the group made its debut in Cincinnati. Despite the warm reception, donations totaled less than \$50. Night after night, it was the same: crowds loved their singing, but the collection plate yielded barely enough to cover their expenses. Yet no one turned back.

Life on the road took its toll. White and the singers endured rheumatism, bronchitis, chronic coughs. Their clothes ran to rags. But after the triumphant Oberlin performance, word started to spread. In December, the Jubilee Singers appeared at Henry Ward Beecher’s weekly prayer meeting at Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church. “Every church wanted the Jubilee Singers from that time on,” wrote Maggie Porter. They sang for Mark Twain, President Ulysses S. Grant, congressmen, diplomats.

After less than two weeks’ rest, the singers were back on the road, touring the Eastern United States. Eventually they would tour Europe to universal acclaim and sing for the royal families of Holland, Germany, and Britain.

The group raised what today would be millions of dollars, but they paid a terrible price. Worn down by the relentless schedule, an advance man suffered a nervous breakdown. George White lost his wife to typhoid fever. White himself nearly died of a pulmonary hemorrhage. Contralto Minnie Tate’s voice was torn to shreds. Tenor Benjamin Holmes’s nagging cough was caused by tuberculosis.

They faced discrimination on the road and from the press. A grueling tour of Germany – ninety-eight days, forty-one towns, sixty-eight concerts – brought with it low morale, frayed nerves, and rivalries among the singers.

After almost seven years of touring, the Jubilee Singers returned home. They were honored by Fisk for raising the funds to complete Jubilee Hall and save their school.

But their contributions extended far beyond Fisk University. They had introduced the world to the power of spirituals and challenged racial stereotypes on two continents. “In their wake, hotels, railways, steamship lines, and boards of education integrated their facilities. The Jubilees not only introduced the world to the music of black America, they championed the liberties of all Americans,” says Andrew Ward, co-writer of the documentary and author of “Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers.” More than 125 years later, the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University continue the concert tradition begun by that courageous original chorus of former slaves.

Legacy and Honors

- 1996: The National Arts Club honored the Fisk Jubilee Singers with a Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award.
- 2000: The Fisk Jubilee Singers were inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.
- 2004: The song “Poor Man Lazarus” on the Singers’ 2003 recording *In Bright Mansions* was honored with a Dove Award. (The Gospel Music Association of the United States Dove Awards honor outstanding achievements and excellence in Christian Music.)
- 2006: The Fisk Jubilee Singers were honored on the Music City Walk of Fame.
- 2008: The Fisk Jubilee Singers were awarded the National Medal of Arts.
- 2009: The Fisk Jubilee Singers, with Jonny Lang, released “I Believe” on the album *Oh Happy Day: An All-Star Music Celebration*, and received a Grammy nomination for Best Gospel Performance.
- 2021: The album *Celebrating Fisk! The 150th Anniversary Album* won a [Grammy Award](#) in the Best Roots Gospel Album category, the first for the Fisk Jubilee Singers.
- 2021: At the 20th annual Americana Music Awards, the Fisk Jubilee Singers received the [Legacy of Americana Award](#).
- 2021: *Walk Together Children: The 150th Anniversary of the Fisk Jubilee Singers* appeared on PBS. In this video produced by Tennessee Performing Arts Center, Dr. Paul T. Kwami and the current singers explore the stories of the world-renowned ensemble’s original nine members and reflect on their roles as students and preservers of the group’s legacy. (Click [here](#) to watch a 30-second trailer.)



Links to YouTube Video Files

TITLE	LINK	LENGTH
Performed live at the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville, Tennessee at the 2019 Barbershop Harmony Society Midwinter Convention		
Wade In the Water	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kUfvUDOOxQ	3:45
Steal Away to Jesus	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WooAOf9b6fU	3:06
Rockin' Jerusalem	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8W22FteUdo	2:33
My Soul Has Been Anchored In the Lord	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2E7xZrksYA	3:29
Performed live at at Symphony Hall in Boston as part of the Berklee College of Music Signature Series		
Rise, Shine, for Thy Light Is a-Comin'	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVJICPDsIYo	2:32
What's it like to be a Fisk Jubilee Singer? Hear directly from members of the ensemble.		
What Does it Mean to be a Fisk Jubilee Singer?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8fHKT8HvYI	1:17

Links to Audio Materials

Two selections from their album *Bright Mansions*.

TITLE and LINK	LENGTH
Wade in the Water	3:43
I'm Gonna Sing 'Till the Spirit Moves	2:21

Teaching Materials

- [Fisk Jubilee Singers: Singing our Song Teachers' Guide](#) produced by the Tennessee Arts Commission.
- [Teachers' Guide to the Fisk Jubilee Singers](#) produced by the Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC Education).
- [The Fisk Jubilee Singers: Perform the Spirituals and Save Their University](#), part of the [Black History in Two Minutes or so](#) series and its associated [Black History in Two Minutes Teaching Guide](#).