

## **MSC Singers Class #2 – The folk song Mary Had a Baby**

Besides being one of the best known African American spirituals, *Mary had a Baby* is one of the best examples of a Christmas folk song that has a text specifically referring to the birth of the child Jesus. This Spiritual is thought to date from the early 18th century and was probably sung as a religious revival camp song in a call and response style. This was a technique of singing that helped unify the African American congregations during their time of worship.

*Mary Had a Baby* most likely originated from the island of Saint Helena off the coast of South Carolina. This island should not be confused with another Saint Helena, the tiny island between Africa and South America. This is where Napoleon Bonaparte was exiled until his death. The Saint Helena that we are speaking about, is believed to have been the port of call where slavery was first introduced in America in 1526. This was long before the date of 1619 and the Jamestown colony.

### **How did folk songs like *Mary Had a Baby* originate?**

During the time of slavery, the black slaves were encouraged, if not required, to attend the church services of their white owners. At these services, the congregation would typically sing the hymns of the English hymn writer, Isaac Watts. An 1820 addition of his hymnbook circulated widely throughout the south, and these melodies and lyrics became popular among the black slaves. They used many of the texts as the basis for their spirituals and their work songs. This new slave interpretation of these old English hymns was more closely aligned to the traditional African work songs of leader and chorus. In this style, a group leader or presenter would sing out the melody of the song while the congregation sang a response. As well, many slaves learned these Isaac Watts hymns as a way of learning to speak English.

After the Civil War, this style of “call response” singing, continued to be sung in the all-black churches, especially those of the south. Church members, having learned these spiritual songs from their ancestors, most of whom were former slaves, and passed them along in the oral tradition from generation to generation. Here is this simple call response text :

*Mary Had a Baby*

*Mary had a baby (my Lord)*

*Mary had a baby, Mary had a baby,*

*Mary had a baby, (oh, my Lord)*

*Where did she lay him (my Lord)*

*Where did she lay him (oh, my Lord)*

*Etc.*

*Laid him in a manger (my Lord)*

*Laid him in a manger (oh, my Lord)*

*What did she name him? (My Lord)*

*What did she name him? (Oh, my Lord)*

*Named him King Jesus (my Lord)*

*Named him King Jesus (oh, my Lord)*

The beauty of **Mary had a Baby** is especially evident in this arrangement by William Dawson, 1899 - 1990, an African-American composer-conductor from Alabama. Dawson's choral works are still very popular today and are sung frequently by college and university choirs. Let's begin our listening with his beautiful arrangement of *Mary Had a Baby* sung by The Saint Olaf University Choir, directed by Anton Armstrong. (Saint Olaf - Minnesota)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqtWcSK5Dag>

Now I think you will enjoy this more gospel treatment of this wonderful folk song.

**Mary Had a Baby - arr. Roland M. Carter**

**Winston-Salem State University**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUp\\_G2HeOno](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUp_G2HeOno)

You all remember our friend Alice Parker? Here is the Robert Shaw Chorale (all men) singing one of her early TTBB arrangements of

**Mary had a Baby - Arr. Alice Parker**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mp1OTfQ\\_Y10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mp1OTfQ_Y10)

Now here's another version with a new melody and new text. Here we have the add-on refrain, "*the people keep a-comin but the train done gone.*"

This very gospel treatment of this African American folk song performed by.

**"The Youth Gospel Choir" recorded by the BBC.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUxWNpdYIQ>

*Mary Had a Baby*

*Mary had a baby (my Lord)*

*Mary had a baby (oh, my Lord)*

*Mary had a baby (my Lord)*

*The people keep coming but the train has gone*

*Where did she lay him (my Lord) (repeat 3 times)*

*The people keep coming but the train has gone*

*Laid him in a manger (my Lord) (repeat 3 times)*

*The people keep coming but the train has gone*

*What did she name him? (My Lord) (repeat 3 times)*

*The people keep coming but the train has gone*

*Named him King Jesus (my Lord) (repeat 3 times)*

*The people keep coming but the train has gone*

What is the meaning of this additional text about a train? Historian John Lovell states, *“The genius of the black people who created over 6,000 existing African American spirituals, was their ability to weave together complex ideas and make them appear simple.”*

It is interesting to note how much is accomplished in this seemingly simple spiritual *Mary Had a Baby*. We have birth, we have worship and we have warning.

**Birth**: *Mary Had a Baby* celebrates the birth of Jesus. But it is also a celebration of mother and child. First the “call”, an announcement: *Mary had a baby!* Then the “response” of **worship**: *Oh my Lord*. Each of the following verses continues the story, first with a question and then an answer., Example: *What did she name him? She called him Jesus. Where was He born? Born in a stable*. Etc. Then the **warning**. It comes in the refrain; *the people keep a-comin’ and the train done gone*. This is found at the end of every verse.

What did the slaves mean by placing the image of Mary’s newborn baby besides a train station? The train imagery figured prominently in African American legends and one can easily understand why. There were trains of the Underground Railroad: “the freedom train,” “the lonesome train,” “the gospel train.” These represented the real trains that ran mile after mile, taking passengers from station to station and

eventually to freedom. The phrase *the people keep a-comin' and the train done gone* was perhaps a spiritual warning in that Mary's baby represents rebirth, liberty, and rescue. So, the idea was not to miss your opportunity to worship Him.

Another thought was that Christmas was the one time of year on plantations when work was relaxed while plantation owners and their families celebrated. This gave slaves the perfect opportunity to escape. Don't be late! Or the train will be gone.

Here is a rendition sung by the well known African American, folk singer

**Bruce Cockburn - Mary Had a Baby**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syS9wU1Sr8A>

Thanks for listening and I look forward to next week where the topic will be a famous English

folk Christmas Carol called "*What Child is This?*"

Until then, stay well, and hearts high



Stuart

**SOURCES:** Celebration: "Stories of the Songs of Christmas" Linda Hargrove-Teets  
History of Hymns: By Cynthia Wilson and C. Michael Hawn.  
St. Helena Island Spiritual: N. G. J. Ballanta-Taylor