

## MSC Singers class #6 Rise Up Shepherd and Follow

This Folk song Christmas carol first appeared in print in 1867 under a different title, *A Christmas Plantation Song*. It was in a book called Slave Songs of the United States. Later this song in 1909, with the name we know it, *Rise Up Shepherd and Follow*, was printed in a book called Religious Folk Songs of the Negro as sung on the Plantations. In this book, the songs were collected during the American Civil War directly from slaves in Georgia and South Carolina.

*Rise Up Shepherd and Follow*, could be classified as one of the many Anglo European-American “shepherd carols” because it resembles a European style song. But the difference is that, typical of the African American style of singing, this carol is in a call and response style.

Regarding the text, it is interesting to note that in this carol, it was the shepherds who followed the star, not the wise men. When we read the book of Mathew, it is the story of kings or wise men who rise up and follow the star, not the shepherds.



Yet when we look at these lyrics, we can recognize that the story in this song really has reference to the book of Luke where there are “*shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.*”



*There's a star in the East on Christmas morn,  
**Rise up, shepherd, and follow.***  
*It will lead to the place where the Christ was born,  
**Rise up, shepherd, and follow.***  
***Follow, follow, rise up, shepherd, and follow.***  
***Follow the Star of Bethlehem,  
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.***

*If you take good heed to the angel's words,  
**Rise up, shepherd, and follow.***  
*You'll forget your flocks, you'll forget your herds,  
**Rise up, shepherd, and follow.***

So, what is the reason for the text in this song? Scholars suggest that by replacing the kingly travelers with shepherds of a lower class, the slaves had quietly created a revolution status for themselves. They became the wise seekers because they were following the star that would lead them to the place of salvation... a place of freedom. Certainly, the slaves would more likely identify with shepherds than with kings. So, this song represents the longing of the black slaves to follow the star, as shepherds of God, out of bondage.

Now this song also brings up an interesting concern that plantation owners had. They thought that if slaves sang about Christianity, they would also want to be free from labor. And from the early 1600s, there were laws to make sure that slaves understood that they were property and not free from work. Some southern theologians even went so far as to say that slaves had no soul. Therefore, treating them as property instead of as human beings was justifiable. Then in 1664, Maryland and other states, passed a law that allowed the baptism of slaves and with that, slaves began to convert to Christianity.

Speaking further about the text the lyrics for *Rise up Shepherd and Follow* gave many a slave owners great deal of worry. Slave revolution was always a concern and the plantation owners did not want their slaves singing about rising up. In this song, the slaves sang about following a star, which was, of course, a metaphor for the North Star which would lead them out of slavery. In this song they were also told to listen, which would have been the reminder or cue, to pay attention to the details of the break-out or escape. As well, they sang about leaving or

forgetting your flocks or in other words leaving your slave obligations. So, this was a song celebrating the birth of the Jesus. But it was also a song about revolution and liberation.

In what setting might the slave sing this spiritual? The famous abolitionist and author Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) who was born a slave and escaped to freedom in his early twenties, described the life of enslaved workers between Christmas and New Year's Day:

*The days between Christmas and New Year's are allowed as holidays; and, accordingly, we were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and take care of the stock. This time we regarded as our own, by the grace of our masters; and we therefore used or abused it nearly as we pleased. Those of us who had families at a distance were generally allowed to spend the whole six days in their society. The staid, sober, thinking and industrious ones of our number would employ themselves in making corn-brooms, mats, horse-collars and baskets; and another class of us would spend the time in hunting opossums, hares, and coons. But by far the larger part engaged in such sports and merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, drinking whisky; and this latter mode of spending time was by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters (Douglass, 1845, p. 74).*

So, Douglass is stating that slave masters did allow a change from the normal routine for benefit of their enslaved workers, but also for their own convenience. The masters concluded that relaxing the rules and encouraging sporting events and the consuming of alcohol was “a most effective means in the hands of slaveholders in keeping down the spirit of insurrection.”

Here is an interesting 1857 drawing of enslaved people celebrating at Christmastime.

It is called *“Winter Holidays in the Southern States: Plantation Frolic on Christmas Eve”* from *Frank Leslie, Illustrated Newspaper* (December 26, 1857).



Let's listen to our rendition of **Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow**. This recording has no identity as to who is singing it. But it is a good choral-gospel version of this folk song Christmas carol.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_0EziU-2vQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_0EziU-2vQ)

Certainly most, if not all spirituals, are in the call-and-response style, where a leader sings a line of text, and a group responds with a refrain. (This is also true of sea chanties) But in the book

Religious Folk Songs of the Negro there is only a melody, with no indication of alternating call-response. But of course, today the current hymnals include a format where the leader sings a phrase then the choir and congregation respond, “*Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*”

Now for a contrast, let’s listen a more formal classical setting. This is also a very good example of the African American call-response style built into formal symphonic arrangement. Here we have the great opera star, **Kathleen Battle** and the **Boys Choir of Harlem**.

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

For those of you who love the bass baritone voice, here is another beautiful again, classical performance of this folk carol. It is **Wintley Phipps** – in his CD **Holy Night**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OrAgWq5iow>

The first known magazine style publication featuring *Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow* was a text-only printing. It was in a short story titled “Christmas-Gifts” by Ruth Stuart (1849–1917) and was published in a magazine in 1891, called *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*. In this story, slaves were participating in a Christmas celebration hosted by their Louisiana plantation owner family. During an entertaining dance, two of the slaves began to sing the spiritual, “Rise Up, Shepherd and Follow.” Stuart was known for her use of dialect, and the spiritual was published in that form. It is interesting to study this archaic dialect found in that text:

*Dey's a star in de eas' on Chris'mas morn,  
**Rise up, shepherd, and foller!**  
Hit'll take yer ter de place whar de Saviour's born,  
**Rise up, shepherd, and foller!**  
Ef yer taken good notice ter de angels' words,  
You'll leave yo' flocks and leave yo' herds,  
**An' rise up, shepherd, and foller!***

Back to some listening. Here is my favorite black folk/jazz singer **Odetta** singing *Rise up Shepherd and Follow*. Not that she uses the old archaic dialect, this is a wonderful jazz recording. It comes from her CD **Christmas Spirituals**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkv\\_TQXPbTw&list=PLS6aMtdhI9EqKFY9hNPayC3bgXXUcGBb0&index=127](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkv_TQXPbTw&list=PLS6aMtdhI9EqKFY9hNPayC3bgXXUcGBb0&index=127)

Since we call this Christmas carol a folk song, we had better include a folk song rendition. Here is **Pete Seeger** singing *Rise up Shepherd and Follow* in a typical 1960 folk style complete with banjo. This comes from his Smithsonian LP recording **Traditional Christmas Carols**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOI-xfKRt3I>

Finally, semester after semester, beginning way back to the Fall 2015, our MSC Singers classes have been dedicated to studying and singing Anglo American folk music, rewritten or “arranged” into choral settings. This composer is famous for his beautiful settings of many, many, folk songs. And for those of you who

have sung in church and community choirs, I suspect you have performed this **John Rutter** version of *Rise Up Shepard and Follow*.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpffoBZOj\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpffoBZOj_M)

To end the first half of our class, here is the star on the top of the Christmas tree. It is this stunning performance by non-other than **The King's Singers** - *Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1blcp9nL5Co>



Well, now for the moment we are all excited to hear about. Did we manage to create a Midcoast Senior College – MSC Singers virtual choir recording of the *Cherry Tree Carol*? I am both happy and relieved to say, YES! I hope you will all be pleased with the outcome of this project.

But before we hear ourselves sing, I want to thank those of you who submitted recordings and complement you for your efforts in taking the time and to delving into a technology and process that is certainly daunting. Nancy, Candi and Susan get particular mention for their hard work in producing instrumental accompaniment to the recording. I also want to thank my friend Fred Gosbee for his expertise and tireless work in putting together the final stage of this product. So, here is the world premier YouTube performance of the famous **MSC Singers** performing: ***The Cherry Tree Carol***

<https://youtu.be/G72DgU9VuyM>