

MSC Singers Class #5 - "Go Tell It on the Mountain"

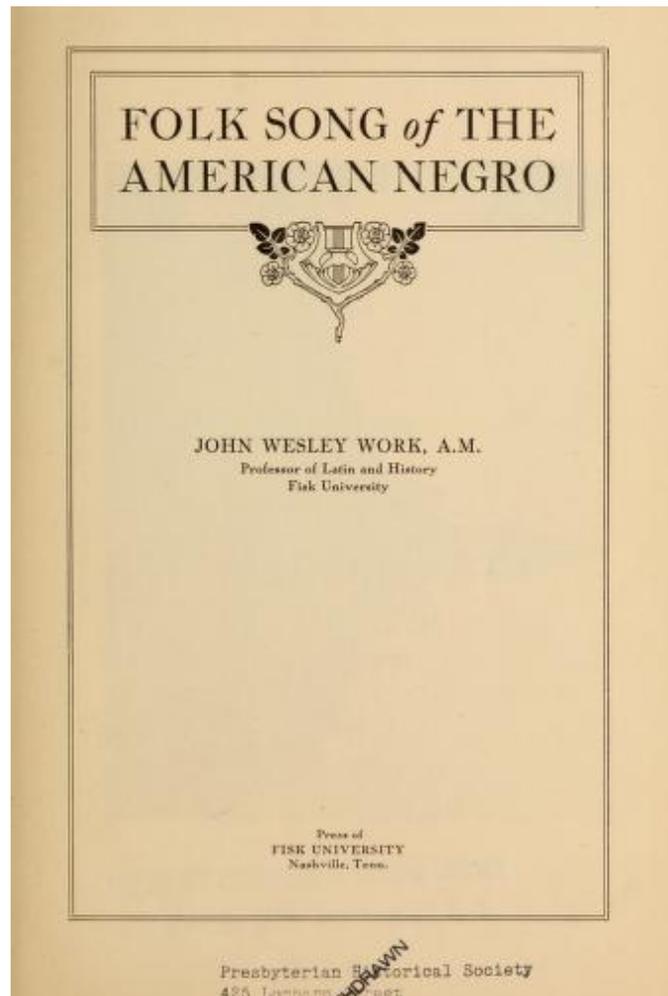
This is another African-American spiritual dating back to at least 1865. This famous Christmas folk song has been recorded by many solo gospel singers and choral groups all over the world. We consider this a folk song because it comes out of the vernacular aural tradition and a Christmas carol as its original lyrics celebrate the Nativity of Jesus:

*Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;
go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.*

Like many spirituals and folk songs, this Christmas carol has a pretty vague origin. The song certainly dates back to the pre-Civil War era. It was most likely passed on from plantation to plantation orally without sheet music, let alone tapes, records and CDs. Because of this, it is difficult to accurately specify a date. But the good news is we do know who the person was who was responsible for making this song into a Christmas classic. He was the Nashville-born collector of spirituals named **John Wesley Work Jr.** (pictured on the right)



John Work's life-long love for music started at a young age. His father was the director of the local church's choir. He studied Latin and history at Fisk University where he organized singing groups there as well. His combined passion for history and music led him to research African-American spirituals and subsequently a professorship at Fisk. With the help of both his brother Frederick and wife Agnes Haynes, he compiled their findings, into a famous book called **FOLK SONG of the AMERICAN NIGRO**



The songs in this book were sung regularly by the ***Fisk Jubilee Singers*** in starting in 1901. And it was in this book that we have the first publication of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.



By the 1920s, the Fisk Singers regularly began to perform the song, but it still saw little reaction from the general public.

Here are the ***Fisk Jubilee Singers*** singing a digitally enhanced 1907 arrangement of *Go Tell it on the Mountain*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iATAt1S4Blw>



It is important for our class to revisit the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The school's a cappella singing group had a history of touring across the United States to fundraise for the college, a tradition that Fisk University still continues today. The Jubilee Singers were hugely important regarding the spread of these African American spirituals and folk songs to white audiences in the 19th and early 20th century. This was the first time many white people had the opportunity even to hear spirituals. Most were unaware that these songs even existed and it was the first time many white audiences were exposed to black music actually sung by black people.



These formal concert tours also began to delegitimize the blackface minstrel movement so popular at the time. To me what is interesting, is how this pre civil war folk song has progressed from the imagination of intelligent but mind you, illiterate slaves on a plantation to now a world-famous Christmas song. And thanks to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has become a very popular Christmas staple.

Here is a more modern recording of the Fisk Jubilee Singers singing this song. This is from a CD called *A Celebration of Spirituals, Hymns and Gospel Songs*. Released in 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6zmFTw4slU>



Although this song's success can be credited to John Wesley Work and the Fisk Jubilee Singers, other recordings began to take on a life of their own. The first hit recording by a famous stage and radio singer was from Mahalia Jackson who you know as a gospel and jazz singer in the 50s. This version is the one we know today. It has a gospel swing to it with a little piano and a choir, setting the stage for Jackson's powerful voice.

So here a digitally enhanced recording from the 1950s of **Mahalia Jackson** singing - *Go Tell It On The Mountain*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMJ2UriVc40>



Another great African American folk singer - performer was the late great **Odetta**. Here she performs *Go Tell It On The Mountain* for German Public TV, in 1989.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A67XRzkBKAw&list=RDW0-w50YZgol&index=9>



This is the version I listened to when I was in college in the 1960s. For those of us who were into folk music, *The Weavers* and especially Pete Seeger was an important part of our musical experience. The Weavers did this recording in 1951 when the group was made up of Fred Hellerman, Pete Seeger, Lee Hays and Ronnie Gilbert.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oCjic5eVlw>



So, you are getting the idea that this song has been recorded many, many, times. Artists like Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, Dolly Parton, even Simon and Garfunkel, have made the stage with this song. Even a surprising number of country artists like Garth Brooks and Little Big Town, have had a go at recording this Christmas carol. But to me, Mahalia Jackson or Odetta are the ones to go to if you're looking for an authentic version with a real authentic spirit and presence.

That said, I think it is important and interesting to contrast a performance by a white singer like **Frank Sinatra** and **Bing Crosby**. This is an arrangement by Fred Waring .

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YbYUxzAnhg>



If you are looking for country western style recordings, it is amazing what you can find out there on the internet. For instance, here is a bluegrass version featuring the well-known traditional country duo, **Keith & Kristyn Getty**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHEczf28lvi>



Well, for an interesting change we now turn to the famous folk trio *Peter, Paul and Mary*. In 1963 they rewrote this song calling it *Tell It on the Mountain*. Protest songs were nothing new to Peter, Paul and Mary with songs like *Blowin' in the Wind* and others. So, *Tell It on the Mountain* was no exception. This version just eliminated the nativity from the lyrics, and replaced it with an excerpt from Moses in Exodus- "Let my people go."

It is interesting the way Peter, Paul and Mary took a spiritual, and reworked the lyrics, modernized it, and adapted it into a song of solidarity with the 20th century struggle for civil rights.

Here is that Peter Paul and Mary version of

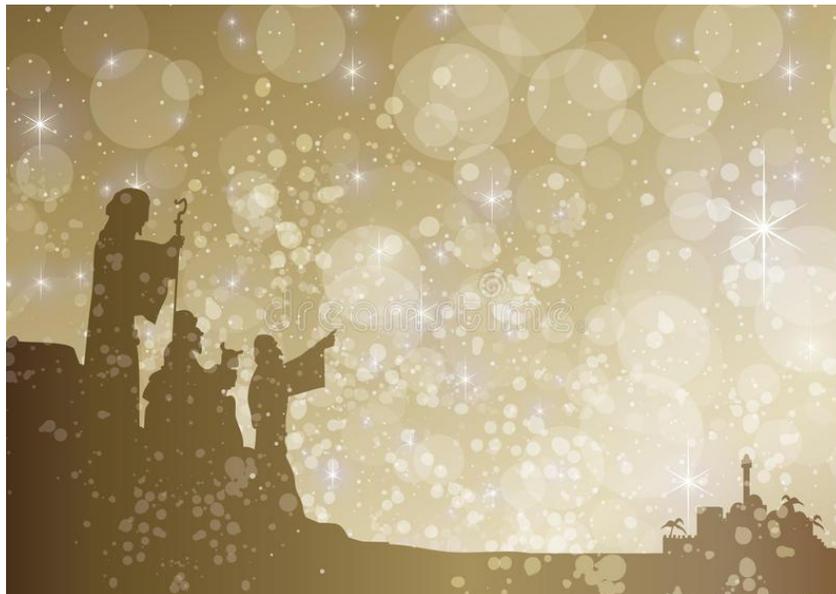
Tell it on the Mountain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NF3mlogmtg>



Our last listening example is one of the best recordings I came across. It is from Lynda Randle who is a well-known singer of southern gospel music. She has an extraordinary mellow, alto voice. This is a live excerpt from Lynda Randle's DVD/CD called ***Homecoming Christmas From South Africa***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ruGHkSWX84&list=PLloXtwPe9RiWHy0BvrOr18AqM9ToIV-GT&index=7>



**Go, tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born!**

While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light

Chorus

The shepherds feared and trembled
When lo! Above the Earth
Rang out the angel chorus
That hailed our Savior's birth

Chorus

Down in a lowly manger
Our humble Christ was born
And God sent us salvation
That blessed Christmas morn

OPEN MICS - DISCUSSION

Thank you, class, for putting aside the time to be with us for yet another MSC Singer class. Next week will be our last class. I will briefly talk about another folk Christmas carol, called *Rise up Shephard and Follow*. As well, I hope we will be able to hear the world premiere of our virtual choir performance of *The Cherry Tree Carol*.

That said, by the end of this week you should have made your recordings and emailed them to me. I will not be able to accept any recordings after the 10th as Fred and I need to meet on Saturday to blend together the final choral product.

I look forward to seeing you next Tuesday.   Stuart

Resources:

Library of Congress

Fisk University Mississippi Delta Collection (AFC 1941/002)

Peter Sanfilippo – journalist and write