LINER NOTES ON LESSON SONGS

* Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour): Like so many Underground Railroad songs, these lyrics held encoded and layered meanings. To steal away could be a religious call for coming closer to Jesus, or a covert call that you or someone else will attempt to find a way to freedom. In another context, this song might have been a way to share information, or that there would be a secret meeting, perhaps that night. At times, moaning the melody was used to hide the true meaning from unwanted ears. This low and mournful version evokes those calls to steal away from oppression.
* Wade in the Water: This is another song that developed layers of encoded meaning in the context of the Underground Railroad. Primarily functioning as a baptismal song, “Wade in the Water” is also said to have referenced the most logical method for safe passage—to travel by water in order to avoid human and canine pursuers. Author James Haskins offers another example of possible hidden meanings in his book Black Music in America. He writes that when a slave had run away and his absence was discovered by his enslaver, the other slaves on the plantation might sing this song. Those enslaved on nearby plantations might also begin to sing the song to alert the runaway. While debates continue on the accuracy of coded meanings in spiritual lyrics and their possible use on the UGRR, there can be little doubt as to the genius of the songs creators. The fact remains that a song such as Wade in the Water certainly allowed for creative licenses to be taken in the interpretation of the meaning, whether for the singer (s) or the intended audience.
* Swing Low Sweet Chariot: This song was created by a freed Choctaw man named Wallis Willis sometime in the mid-1800s. He was inspired by the Red River to write about the Prophet Elijah being taken to heaven from the Jordan River. Willis’ minister transcribed several of his songs and sent them to the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. Since the end of the Civil War, the Jubilee Singers have been bringing African American Spirituals to the world through performance and songbooks. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., in his book The Power of Black Music, states that the chariot, and later the train, is a metaphor for freedom. There are at least 11 spirituals in which “Chariot” is used in the song’s title (Floyd, 1995, p. 279).
* Daniel (also known as Rock Daniel): This song was first recorded in 1941 when it was performed by Reverend CHI. Savage and his church group at Mount Ararat Missionary Baptist Church in Mississippi. The song comes from the time of slavery and Savage learned it from his grandmother when he was a boy. The song makes reference to life’s trials and tribulations and calls out to Daniel, an Old Testament hero, who would understand suffering and who overcame seemingly insurmountable odds. Alan Lomax, who recorded Reverend Savage singing this song for the Library of Congress, described songs like Daniel as requiring the participants to “shout”, working up the fervor of a song in a manner leading to a trance (Evans, 2001).