“Wings Over Jordan” (May 10, 1942)

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Wings Over Jordan: A Sense of Home

Religious broadcasting has significantly impacted American media over the past century. The introduction of the radio at the turn of the 20th century shifted how Americans were able to communicate with each other. By the 1920s, more than half of urban households owned a radio and were receiving a significant portion of their entertainment and news from radio broadcasts. Nearly half of the American population lived in rural areas in the 1930s; with the popularization of radio, these isolated communities could also receive up-to-date news from around the country and listen to the latest forms of entertainment. During that era, faith-based entertainment was in heavy demand. In 1937, the religious program “Wings Over Jordan” became the first national broadcast to be hosted and produced by African Americans. Hugely successful, it became a beacon that linked rural and urban African American communities during a time of much displacement.

Originally, “Wings Over Jordan” premiered on Cleveland’s WGAR under the name “The Negro Hour.” The weekly broadcast was a showcase for the Cleveland-based African American religious a cappella choir Wings Over Jordan. The program would go on to be broadcast on CBS throughout the duration of World War II and become one of the most highly regarded radio shows of its era. As it especially appealed to and was appreciated by the Black community, “Wings Over Jordan’s” motivational music and messaging are credited with being catalysts of the Civil Rights movement.

The music broadcast on “Wings Over Jordan*”* would be recognized by contemporary audiences as gospel. In the African American community, there is a long history of music being developed and performed with the intention of healing; gospel music can be traced back to enslaved people in early 17th century Virginia. Because of their forcible displacement from their homelands, much of their cultures and traditions were stripped from them. Nonetheless, they successfully retained elements of their melodic and rhythmic traditions. The common threads shared by these salvaged musical traditions became a unifying factor for a Black population whose ancestors came from various tribes, cultures, and regions of Africa.

Call-and-response singing is one of the core traits of African musical traditions and is an essential aspect of early African American faith-based music. As hymnal music was popularized in the mid-18th century, songs such as John Newton’s “Amazing Grace” became anthems of the abolitionist movement. With the cross-pollination of hymnal music and African music traditions, early forms of the African American faith-based music known as “spirituals” began to emerge

among enslaved people throughout the south by the turn of the 19th century. These songs afforded African Americans the opportunity to communicate the hardships experienced in tremendously difficult environments; through faith, they found a way to endure. As Robert Stevens notes, "In the understanding that organized sound could be an effective tool for communication, they created a world of sound and rhythm to chant, sing and shout about their conditions. Music was not a singular act but permeated every aspect of daily life. In time, versions of these rhythms were attached to work songs, field hollers and street cries, many of which were accompanied by dance."[1]

After the emancipation of enslaved people in 1853, the first wave of the Great Migration of freed people from rural communities to urban centers took place. Many African American families migrated away from the south through the first half of the 20th century; most chose to leave their rural communities to seek better opportunities than sharecropping, a common rural employment for African Americans at the time. "Sharecropping," or "share tenancy," is a system in which two or more parties combine privately owned resources to produce mutually agreed-upon agricultural outputs, the profits to be shared according to certain mutually accepted percentages.[2] Manipulative loan tactics, peonage, and harsh labor conditions often motivated the rural population to seek prospects away from the only home that they knew.

Because of the migration, many songs and traditions were preserved through the efforts of urban churches and newly developed Black institutions of higher education. In the 1870s, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were credited with beginning the transcription of spirituals at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Through the Singers' relentless touring of the south and north, audiences around the country were exposed to African American faith-based a cappella music. The Singers' efforts directly influenced the development of other choirs in the 20th century; the most notable of those successors was Wings Over Jordan.

Wings Over Jordan was founded in 1935 by Reverend Glenn Thomas Settle, the pastor of Gethsemane Baptist Church in Cleveland, Ohio. A significant portion of Gethsemane Baptist Church's congregation was made up of former southerners who had moved to Cleveland seeking better opportunities; Settle himself was born in 1894 to a humble sharecropping family from Reidsville, North Carolina, who migrated to the north in 1902. They maintained their sense of home through the songs and traditions they brought with them from the south. Some of the songs sung by the congregation were "Amen," "When I've Done the Best I Can," "Alone," and "Wade in the Water," among many others that had been performed in rural communities throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Whereas much of the migration before 1920 had been motivated by choice, new arrivals to urban centers were driven by various factors such as a boll weevil infestation that ruined cotton crops across the south, Klan intimidation, and the effects of the Great Depression. By 1934, organizations such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (the first integrated sharecropping union) demanded improvements to the labor system. Ultimately, their efforts led to landowners pursuing agricultural automation, which relieved the need for mass African American agricultural labor in rural communities. By the 1940s, these changes forced most African Americans from the only recognizable homes they had ever known; during the 1940s alone, over 1.4 million African American people migrated from rural southern communities. Many of those displaced sharecropping families found familiarity through the weekly faith-based programming of "Wings Over Jordan," which aired on CBS from 1938 to 1947. The radio show and the choir it was named for became symbols of familiarity for this population. Wherever they were, they could turn on the radio and hear people that resembled them and shared a similar journey. The national broadcast received wide success for its entertainment value, but ultimately provided the transient African American community of that era with a sense of home.

Bryan Pierce, is the current curator of the National Museum of African American Music. In both his academic work and as a museum professional, Bryan has specialized in subterranean African American aesthetics in music and decorative arts. He pursued a PhD from Arkansas State University and throughout his time at ASU, Bryan worked at the Southern Tenant Farmers Museum. He was also on the development team for the Boyhood Home of Johnny Cash.

Notes

1. Robert Stevens, "A Brief History of Gospel Music's Evolution," *Mail & Guardian*, May 3, 2019, https://mg.co.za/article/2019-05-03-00-a-brief-history-of-gospel-musics-evolution/.

2. See Steven N. S. Cheung, "Private Property Rights and Sharecropping," *Journal of Political Economy* 76, no. 6 (Nov–Dec 1968): 1107–22.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.