

“Oh Mary Don’t You Weep”--The Swan Silvertones (1959)

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Essay by Jerry Zolten (guest post)*



Original label

“Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” is one of the ethereal African American spirituals--a freedom song--born in the anonymity of slavery and drifted across time to bubble up as the need arose. The song might have been lost to the ages had it not been resurrected by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers of Nashville, Tennessee, who performed it on their post-bellum worldwide tours and were the first to record it as “O Mary Don’t You Weep, Don’t You Mourn” in New York City on October 23, 1915 (Columbia A1895).

African American folklorist John Work, whose father sang with the Fisks on that first recording, included the traditional words and music in his classic “American Negro Songs” (Bonanza Publishers, NYC, 1940).

Chorus:

*O Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn, O Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn.
Pharaoh’s army got drown-ded, O Mary, don’t you weep.*

Verses:

*Some of these mornings bright and fair, take my wings and cleave the air.
When I get to heaven going to sing and shout, nobody there for to turn me out.
When I get to heaven going to put on my shoes, run about glory and tell all the news.*

The song was subsequently recorded in early versions by African American artists the Virginia Female Jubilee Singers and the Southern 4, and later by Anglo, “sacred” artists the Georgia Yellow Hammers, the Morris Family and Merritt Smith and Leo Boswell.

“Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” drew from both Old and New Testament stories with Pharaoh’s army perishing in the Red Sea as they pursued the Israelites fleeing bondage out of Egypt (Exodus 13:17-14:29), and sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany blaming Jesus for failing their brother Lazarus, pleading that Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, which he miraculously did (John 11: 28-35).

The song is not coy or veiled in meaning: in the struggle for “right,” don’t be troubled by harm that comes to those who were inflictors or stood in the way. In 1958, as the Civil Rights Movement was heating up the Swan Silvertones (“Swan” was the name of the bakery that sponsored them) recorded their stunningly brilliant version of “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” (Vee Jay 879), that meaning hit home especially.

The Silvertones were led by Claude Jeter with Paul Owens, John Myles, and William Connor (Louis Johnson, a regular in the line-up, may not have been present) delivered a tour de force performance recorded live in the studios of radio station WENW in Bessemer, Alabama. In his singular arrangement, Jeter deconstructed the traditional “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” and reassembled it as nothing less than a battle cry for freedom.

Against the backdrop of electric guitar, handclapping, and what might be the beat of feet stomping on the floor, Connor’s bass voice pumps out a driving rhythm as Owens and Myles in a supercharged vocal exchange spur Jeter on to falsetto heights. In the space of three minutes the performance builds from calmly pulsing to a wailing mantra punctuated by Jeter’s electrifying falsetto mewls and shouts of the name “Mary.” As it peaks, Jeter throws out the line, “I’ll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in my name,” which years later inspired Paul Simon to write his song “Bridge Over Troubled Water.”

The lyrics of “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep” as performed by the Swan Silvertones are:

*Oh, I’m singing...Mary (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Martha don't have to moan (Oh Martha, don't you moan),
Listen to me...Mary (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Martha don't have to moan (Oh Martha, don't you moan),
Pharaoh's army (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
They got drowned in the sea one day (Down in the Red Sea)
But Jesus said, “Mary.” (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
You’re little ole sister don’t have to moan no more,
(Oh Martha, don’t you moan).*

*Now can I get a witness... He said...
Mary (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Martha don't have to moan (Oh Martha, don't you moan),*

*It may be somebody’s sick today (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
If somebody here ain’t got no home (Oh Martha, don't you moan),
Listen...Pharaoh's army (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
They got drowned in the sea one day (Down in the Red Sea),
But I believe a man said, “Mary.” (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
You’re little sister don’t have to moan no more,
(Oh Martha, don’t you moan).*

*Now listen. If I could right now (If I could),
I wanna tell you that I surely would now (Surely would)...Mmmm,
Put my foot on the rock children (Stand on the rock),
Stand on the rock where Moses stood one day (Moses stood),
Because Pharaoh's army (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
That’s what the Bible said, got drowned in the sea one day,
(Down in the sea).*

*But I believe a man said, "Mary." (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
He said "Mary!" (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
He said "Mary!" (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Trouble in the land will be all over after a while (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
You won't have to give up right for wrong no more,
(Oh Mary, don't you weep),
And maybe could have been a little hard to hear,
(Oh Mary, don't you weep),
And I believe Jesus said I better call a little bit louder,
(Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Aaaa-aah Mary! (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Wish I had somebody to help me call "Mary!" (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Yeah! Mary! (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Yeah, yeah, yeah, Mary! (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
I'll be your bridge over deep water if you trust in my name Mary,
(Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Oh, I'll be your rock in a weary land (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Aaaaah Aaaaah Mary! (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
I don't believe she heard you, you better call her again
(Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah Mary (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Yeah Lord (Oh Mary, don't you weep),
Tell Martha don't have to moan no more (Tell Martha don't have to moan)*

Jerry Zolten is an educator at Penn State University specializing in the realm of American vernacular and roots music. He is the author of "Great God A'Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music" (Oxford University Press).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.