

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”—The Fisk University Jubilee Quartet (1909)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Toni P. Anderson (guest post)*



*Fisk University Jubilee Quartet
(King, Myers, Ryder and Work)*



Original label

In December 1909, the Fisk University Jubilee Quartet, a male foursome carrying on the legacy of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers of the 1870s, entered the Victor Studios in Camden, New Jersey, to record 12 songs chosen from their concert repertory. Ten of the songs would eventually be released on five different discs. Among the titles was “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” one of the best-known and beloved Negro spirituals now firmly established in the canon of American folksong. In just one or two takes per title, the Victor recording captured the quartet’s rich blend and sophisticated performance style. These were the first recordings of the artistic, concert versions of spirituals associated with Fisk University and its accomplished musicians.

The unaccompanied recording of the quartet showcased the talent of four Fiskites: John Wesley Work II (1st tenor), James Andrew Myers (2nd tenor), Alfred Garfield King (1st bass), and Noah Ryder (2nd bass). By the time of the 1909 recording session, Fisk University had earned a reputation as being the “music conservatory” for aspiring black artists, primarily due to the immense fame of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers, who toured in the interest of the university from 1871-1878. Known for their precise, tight harmony, emotional pathos, and refined stage deportment, the Jubilee Singers, under the direction of George L. White and Ella Sheppard, presented a cultivated version of the spiritual to audiences throughout America and Europe. Although the original group disbanded in 1878, Fisk University launched a revived company in 1899 from which eventually sprang the male quartet, under the leadership of John W. Work II.

By focusing on polished, nuanced ensemble singing and superior musicianship, Work’s quartet continued the vocal tradition established by its predecessors. The 1909 recording demonstrates the quartet’s resonant singing. The clear, distinct lead voice majestically soars over the rich, soulful harmonic support. “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is filled with hope and triumph, especially at the tune’s climax: “I looked over Jordan and what did I see / a band of angels comin’ after me.” The spiritual then winds to a restful close, suggesting a calm assurance of eventual release from this world: “Comin’ for to carry me home.”

In 1909, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” was known to many Americans, both black and white. The spiritual first appeared on the concert stage when it was performed by the original Fisk Jubilee Singers. As their fame grew, the managers secured the services of Theodore Seward to transcribe the spirituals and had them printed into a small songbook which sold at Jubilee Singers concerts for \$.25. Noting the ensemble’s huge success, other black institutions began forming their own choral ensembles and spurious groups simply impersonated the original troupe. Within a few short years, the musical landscape was peppered with over ten companies fashioned after the original Jubilee Singers, and by the 1890s, many black groups had launched successful foreign tours. All of these troupes featured their own renditions of spirituals, and many included “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” in their regular programming.

But the true origin of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” will perhaps forever remain a mystery.

John W. Work claimed that the spiritual “burst forth” from the anguished soul of Sarah Hannah Sheppard, the mother of Ella Sheppard of Fisk Jubilee Singer fame. Sarah gave birth to Ella on a Tennessee plantation in 1851. When she learned that her master intended to sell her to another plantation, thus separating her permanently from Ella, she resolutely set out for the Cumberland River, intent on drowning both herself and her daughter. She was stopped by an “old mammy” who cautioned Sarah to “let de chariot of de Lord swing low.” Reaching toward heaven, the wise woman pulled down an imaginary scroll and prophesied that the young child would one day stand before kings and queens. Sarah yielded to the old woman’s counsel, turned back, and allowed herself to be sold and taken to Mississippi. Ella did indeed perform before royalty. She eventually reunited with her mother and brought her to live with her in Nashville.

Work said he received this story directly from Sarah Hannah Sheppard. But other sources claim that the spiritual was written by Wallace Willis, a slave affectionately known as “Uncle Wallace,” in the mid-1800s.

According to this account, Wallace and Minerva Willis lived on a plantation owned by Brit Willis, a half-Choctaw Indian, in Holly Springs, Mississippi. When the U.S. government ordered the Choctaw Indians to relocate to southern Oklahoma in the 1830s, Brit Willis took Wallace and Minerva Willis along. There, he rented out “Uncle Wallace” to a nearby school for Native American boys, where Willis is said to have entertained the boys by singing spirituals he composed, including “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Alexander Reid, the school’s headmaster, was so taken by this spiritual that he jotted it down and shared it, and several other spirituals, with the Jubilee Singers when he heard them at a concert in New Jersey. In an 1884 article, Reid recalled how he spent a day with the Jubilee Singers, teaching and drilling these new songs until the troupe had them firmly committed to memory.

Whether Reid’s rendition of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” was totally new to the troupe, or simply a new version of the old spiritual, is unknown. We do know for certain that the original Fisk Jubilee Singers were approached by many who eagerly shared with them their cherished versions of spirituals. And we also know from Ella Sheppard’s diary that a “new ‘Swing Low’” had entered into the company’s repertory by March 1875. The spiritual held special meaning for Ella. In 1912, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” was sung at the deathbed of her mother, Sarah, who

rallied momentarily and attempted to sing along. In honor of this special woman, John Work and his quartet rendered the spiritual at Sarah's funeral a few days later.

Melodically, the Jubilee Singers' rendition of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" matches the one performed by Work and his quartet in 1909, and is the version that has survived time. The Victor recording label enjoyed a wide distribution, which helped to further popularize the spiritual. Record sales were so successful that, in 1911, the quartet returned to the Victor studios for three more recording sessions.

John Wesley Work II and his wife, Agnes Haynes Work, continued to lead ensembles associated with Fisk University for several years, preserving the legacy of close spiritual harmony begun by the original Jubilee Singers. But relationships with the administration began to sour over issues of influence, control, and musical direction. Work resigned altogether in 1923 and died two years later of heart failure.

Over a century has passed since the Fisk University Jubilee Quartet's historic recording, yet "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" has remained an American favorite. Composers have arranged it for choral ensembles, concert soloists, jazz bands, concert bands, dance bands, and symphony orchestras. It is included in countless song anthologies and public school children have sung it for decades. Barbershop and gospel quartets included arrangements of the spiritual in their sets; Joan Baez performed it at Woodstock in 1969; and pickets solemnly sang the spiritual to protest George Wallace's arrival in Wisconsin. England's rugby fans have sung "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" at games for decades. Echoes of the spiritual are traced in Dvorak's symphony "From the New World," and the tune is included in a medley in the Broadway musical "Bubbling Brown Sugar." "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" has also inspired works of arts. The spiritual is forever immortalized in the famous "Singing Windows" of the Tuskegee Chapel.

The list of those who have since recorded "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" reads like a virtual "Who's Who" of artists, ranging from concert soloists to country singers: Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Fats Waller, Benny Goodman, Johnny Cash, B.B. King, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Bobby Darin, Patti Page, the Al Hirt Orchestra, Eric Clapton, Merle Haggard, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the Robert Shaw Chorale, Etta James, Willie Nelson, George Jones, Denyce Graves, Kathleen Battle, and Beyonce, to name just a few.

Sung, recorded, arranged, and performed throughout the world for almost two centuries, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was included by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Recording Industry Association of America in its historic list called "Songs of the Century." The Fisk University Jubilee Quartet's recording of the spiritual was named to the National Recording Registry in 2002.

Both honors testify to the artistry and influence of John W. Work II and his quartet. Their 1909 Victor recording aptly illustrates the nobility of a song that nourished the hopes and dreams of enslaved African Americans and fueled the imaginations of all people longing for a better tomorrow.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress; Quartet photo courtesy of Doug Seroff.