

Revels Podcast

October 2020 - Spirituals and Stories with Johnny Nichols, Jr.

Transcript

**Maggie:** These are tough times for the performing arts both for artists and for audiences like those who attend Revels performance events. The Revels Connects series is an online performance series initiated as a response to the pandemic that hit early in the Spring of 2020. I'm Maggie Holzbeger Folklorist Mass Cultural Council's Folk Arts and Heritage Program. And today's conversation is a companion podcast to Johnny Nichols' performance of spirituals which was filmed at Payson Park Church in Belmont accompanied by Revels' former Music Director Megan Henderson. Hello Johnny.

**Johnny:** Good morning. How are you Maggie?

**Maggie:** Okay.

**Johnny:** Good.

**Maggie:** Let's start with a little bit about your background. You are originally from Louisiana and I would like you to talk about your musical journey starting with the music you heard at home.

**Johnny:** Yeah. Absolutely. So, my grandfather was an evangelist in the South and he travelled all over the Gulf Coast preaching. And because we were a singing family we all travelled with him and sang at these different religious events, conferences, etc. So church music, religious music, especially gospel music, was something that was just embedded in my home. And, and you know, I loved it. I loved every moment of it. And then I do remember, every Saturday morning I listen to XM Radio Now and, uh, turning on the Classics stations and I hear a lot of Motown stuff that brings me back to Saturday morning cleaning that my mom would turn on the record player and listen to all of these great gems while cleaning, but at the end of the day it was because we were such a closely knit religious family uh sacred music was something that was very important and I listened to most of the time from spirituals to the most current Gospel songs.

**Maggie:** What a wonderful environment to grow up in. I remember you telling a story about your father and the use of the term called moans. Can you share that with us?

**Johnny:** You know, so I didn't know what moans were back in the day. I just knew they were a sign of something negative. My father would often moan "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" or even my grandmother would sit in her rocking chair and just rock and moan and . . . one of the things at an early age I did recognize was she, my grandmother and my father seemed so much at peace. And anytime I would see any other African American moan they seemed to have some type of inner peace and those moans as I grew up and started looking and studying and looking at them

academically those moans were really expressions because the words really couldn't express what you felt and how you felt it. And, so you had to ascend to moans. My father would after coming home from a long day's work he would moan. My grandmother, as I said, sitting on the porch, moaning and I would honestly love to give anything in this world to be inside of their heads to know exactly what they were feeling and, you know, what they were thinking about, you know, those moans probably were thoughts about decades ago whenever their family was living. Or, a troublesome time or a joyous time. And so, it varied, and I find myself moaning now and you know, for me it is something sacred and spiritual and calming within myself and, and, I don't even catch myself oftentimes my friends like, "Johnny, why are you singing?" And I don't catch myself doing it. It just becomes a natural thing that is so important to the soul of African Americans.

**Maggie:** For listeners who may not be familiar with the term moan, can you, I know, I am putting you on the spot, but can you give us an example of what a moan would sound like?

**Johnny:** Yeah, if I were to sing . . . so moans, first of all really kind of went outside of the structured piece of music. Oftentimes moans would embellish a lot on the melody. Or, a new tune would even be created. So, a moan, if I were to sing, moan, Amazing Grace, it would sound [Johnny gives an example of moaning]. And even then, you know, intonation wasn't an issue for me like, my intonation was all over the place. Rhythm, tempo were all over the place, but it was really organic regarding how I felt at the time. So that would be a, but moans, just too save everyone time, moans would be a lot longer than that. They would be almost a dirge in the tempo. But yeah, that's a moan.

**Maggie:** Sort of transportive.

**Johnny:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Maggie:** Now it sounds like you left home to study music formally earning degrees in choral conducting and performance, and you've even worked extensively in theater. So I wanted to understand how that wide ranging background serves you in the singing of spirituals.

**Johnny:** Because you learn what a spiritual isn't. You also get a chance to see the important place that spirituals have in society, in the musical world. There's no formalized definition of a spiritual. Spirituals have been around since the early 1600s and scholars even today cannot agree on what a spiritual is, but we can all agree with what a spiritual isn't. And not only that, but with spirituals and the contemporary songs I see today, there's a connection of feeling and emotion and organic performance that most people don't ever get a chance to experience. My background in gospel music and sacred music and spirituals have allowed me to speak, or to sing earnestly, with grit, with authenticity. Honestly, I think that having all of these genres, these idioms of music in the back of my head really enhance each other. My knowledge in singing Motown really does help my singing of spirituals. My knowledge in classical music also helps

and vice versa. So it's all building blocks and with spirituals being the foundation because it was essentially one of the first forms of folk songs in America.

**Maggie:** Talk a little about the history and the cultural context of spirituals. How they came about in this country and possibly roots in Africa.

**Johnny:** Yeah. So, you know, spirituals are more unique to America, to Western civilization, and in the 1600s when the first set of slaves came over they were forced to sing even on the boat. But, singing, singing was something natural to slaves. There are a lot of scholars who will write that folks on the continent of Africa, their influence on music was much stronger than any other continent or geographical location on this Earth. And so singing was incredibly, incredibly important to the slave. And we came, when slaves came over to America, of course, slaves were forced to practice Christianity. And so out of their grief and out of their pain, out of their struggle, the spiritual was born. Out of their love and importance of music to what was forced upon them from their slave owners.

**Maggie:** Give listeners a sense of what kind of contexts an enslaved person would sing a spiritual in.

**Johnny:** Well you know, it's funny, because a spiritual is a subsection of what's called a slave song. So you have a whole bunch of slave songs and those slave songs could include spirituals. They could include a ring shout, they could include a moan. They could include plantation songs, work songs and so forth. So, the spiritual was . . . the context is what you asked, right?

**Maggie:** Yeah, well, you know, think of daily life, different times of the day, . . .

**Johnny:** The context was depending on what they needed it for. If you look at spirituals today, there is no tempo at all in any of the spirituals. There are no, typically when you look at a sheet of music at the top left or right hand, depending on the publisher's side, they will put some type of note. Like, sing this excitedly. Sing this joyously. Sing this, beautifully and so forth, right. None of this stuff really exists on a true spiritual because they were sung at that particular time for that particular need. Oftentimes spirituals did have a double meaning like, "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning." That spiritual on its face, of course, was a sacred term that basically said be ready for Jesus, right. And, but also, it was a sign that said, hey, ya know, tonight, we're going to actually go and walk, so make sure your lamps are trimmed and are able to be burned throughout the night. So, there was that context. There was the context, even as they worked, you had spirituals that helped with making sure that things were in line and folks were being worked together. And oftentimes, you'll have this debate on the speed of many of these spirituals. So say, for instance, *Soon-a Will be Done a-With the Troubles of the World* as a spiritual that oftentimes is up for debate with the tempo. So oftentimes you'll hear [example of fast tempo] "Soon-a will be done a-with the troubles of the world, the troubles of the world, the

troubles of the world.” Or [sings example of slower tempo] “Soon-I will be done a-with the troubles of the world.” And that actually depended on what the conductor or writer intended for that song to be. If it were a work song, you can imagine that it’s very difficult for a slave to actually work and till the ground with a hoe or something and it would be [example of fast tempo] “Soon-I will be done a-with the troubles of the . . .” Right? and working in that tempo would tire out the slave super fast, so of course, it would be a lot slower [example of slower tempo] “Soon-I will be done a-with the troubles of the world.” So, yeah, so, just again it just really depends on what was the purpose at the particular time. Spirituals span all sorts of emotions and reasons.

**Maggie:** Yeah. I wanted to talk a little about call and response because I associate that with secular work songs like you just mentioned. You know, field hollers or sea shanties, but also with singing in a religious context like the lining out of hymns in church. But, can you describe a little bit how call and response might function in a spiritual?

**Johnny:** So call and response is very interesting because they were often, as you said, used in work songs, but it was also an element of singing that helped the uneducated slave because if you sang, you know the, the spiritual Amen. The song goes [singing the song]. “Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen, amen.” And then you have a leader “See the little baby” and then everyone would go [singing response] “Amen.” And those folks were oftentimes uneducated, they didn’t know the words. And just like most folk songs or folk stories, they are passed on. And so there was no lyric sheet. So everyone may not have known the lyrics. So that was one of the real importances of call and response. There was also that idea that spirituals were very organic. So, yes, while you had [singing] “see the little baby,” and everyone would go [singing] “Amen”. But if there was something that happened that day, something that was joyous. [singing ] “We crossed over Jordan” saying that they successfully crossed over the river into safety. Then they would sing Amen to that. Or it was something like, I escaped a punishment, or something, folks would praise about that. So the call and response would act in a way to celebrate or to talk about what was happening at that particular time.

**Maggie:** Right so there would be a lot of improvisation

**Johnny:** A Lot of it.

**Maggie:** And that makes a lot of sense.

**Johnny:** A lot of improv and a lot of, again, one of the key elements to spirituals is how things were very organic to the soul.

**Maggie:** From my understanding, a spiritual is something that began as an oral tradition of religious singing by African Americans during the time of slavery and then evolved into a repertoire for solo and choral performances on the concert stage. I’m thinking of touring groups

from historically black colleges and universities. Can you talk to us a little bit about how that transition took place? Because it's a huge shift.

**Johnny:** Yeah, so as you said, it was an oral tradition. And people didn't write stuff down; they didn't know how to write down music, how to record music. That was a phenomenon for the longest time that wasn't necessarily unique to just African Americans or slaves, it was unique to a lot of folks. And so, you had your very academic and seasoned composers and academics in music and they would take the spiritual and make it into something that was an art form and one of the first people to do it believe it or not was Dvořák. The guy who wrote *Symphony of a New World*. He was one of the first persons to come out and say the spirituals are a very important art form and of course there is no surprise his colleagues across Western Europe were all like, no, because of course it was African Americans who were singing it. But once he actually started naming spirituals as a legitimate musical art form, people started writing it, and they wrote it down in unison first. Because they didn't really recognize, now mind you these are white people, these are Europeans. They didn't understand the harmonies that were associated with African singing. And so eventually there was a publication called, *Plantation Songs*. . . *Plantation and Cabin Songs*. I believe that was the name of it. And they were the first to start writing down harmonies. And their idea was they wanted to capture the real sound of slaves, because slaves, Africans, would oftentimes sing in three or four part harmony and of course whenever spirituals or slaves songs were sung, they were likely songs that were in four or three part harmony. So that came about and then you had the Fisk Jubilee singers which was an HBCU out of Tennessee. And I think, if I'm not mistaken, the oldest HBCU out there. They started putting them down for choruses for the stage. And it was really important because it gave society an opportunity to really understand a spiritual and be exposed to spirituals for the first time. So once they started taking these normal spirituals that were just written, you know, to be frank, very hymnlike. You know, very four part, very kind of structured. Then you had different composers to come in and actually make these wonderful arrangements to the spirituals that you hear today on the big stage.

**Maggie:** Yeah. Talking about following up on that style in the singing of spirituals. Would you agree then, I think you basically said this, that the style of singing spirituals became much more arranged, a mix of folk and European classical influences for concert halls?

**Johnny:** Yeah.

**Maggie:** As that happened, can you talk about what was gained and possibly what was lost?

**Johnny:** I think . . . that's actually a really good question. What was gained and what was lost? I think what was gained was this universal use of the spiritual. And this universal knowledge and appreciation of the spiritual, for sure. And, not only that, but it was the energy. It was the storytelling in spirituals. Because, like I said before, spirituals were used for that very specific thing at that very specific time. Arrangers have come about to write spirituals to help tell a story within that spiritual. So if, you know, you hear something like *Deep River*, right, the tempo of it is typically very slow. It typically is a song for mourning, or for reflection. And so the original arranger of that has set the music up in a way that it tells that story of reflection or mourning or loss or something like that. So we've gained the storytelling aspect of it that is very specific,

And oftentimes, I guess what was lost is the idea that spirituals were sung for so many different reasons, so like *Deep River*, often times you hear this as a slow piece and it's, you know, mourning but have you ever heard it as an upbeat piece of music? Have you ever heard it as an inspirational piece of music? And you don't really hear it as that anymore cause we've kinda pigeon held these songs in a certain way, so if anything I think that is the element that's lost is the authenticity behind what was sung and the flexibility behind the spirituals.

**Maggie:** Yeah that's really well said! And it leads me to ask you about a word you used earlier, "grit." You know, and when you're ready...when are you ready to perform a spiritual? Tell us that story about your mentor.

**Johnny:** Oh Louis Neighbors, a fantastic, fantastic mentor as well as a singer and teacher, grew up in Louisiana as well and traveled the world singing spirituals as well as classical pieces, really big basso profundo. He stood about eight foot tall! The funniest thing about him is that he was about eight foot tall, about three hundred pounds and drove a Mini Cooper. So he always came in at 8:45 on the dot and it was just one of those things that I would just like to sit outside and watch him get out of his car. But a good guy, but he, I remember him first teaching me about the spiritual and, you know we, we sang, you know...I forget what simple spiritual it was and I said, "Mr. Neighbors an actual spiritual" and he said, "Johnny you're not ready" and I said, "I'm not ready? What do you mean?" And he was like, "You know, you don't know heartache. You don't know true triumph. You don't know what it's like to actually have some type of situation in your life that you feel enough that you can express it and emote it." And of course I was like "aw pshhh yes I am I'm totally ok to do that." So he gave me a spiritual and I remember thirty seconds into me opening my mouth, he stops, slaps me across my forehead and says, "Johnny you're singing like a white boy." And, I didn't know what that meant. And I also was thinking, "Ok well I'm- You're teaching me classical techniques of course I'm going to *quote unquote* sound like a white boy." But it gave me some time to really understand what he meant by that and I forget what spiritual it was, but basically he was saying that I didn't have...I had the technique, I was not performing in a way that spirituals were supposed to be performed that emote in such a way. Yes I agree that spirituals are songs that can be sung by any race, by any age because we can all go through things, and that's why I thought I was ready because I've been through things, you know. My young nineteen year old self thought I'd been through some things. But to perform a spiritual, with the correct style, meant that there were things that you had to really lean into, like the dialect. Like, instead of singing, "Children" you sing "Cherren" or "Chillen." If you sing "Father" you sing "Fathah." You know for the longest time, what's the name of that song...? I did not understand *Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho* right? But it took me a while to understand that "fit" even though it meant "fought," cause I would always self correct "Joshua *fought* the battle..." but it's supposed to be fit cause that was the dialect. And so I had to learn how to lean into those emotions and feelings and technicalities that a slave would. I also had to think about, you know even like the moans, how do I embellish and do bends and let my voice emote in a way that actually told my pain or my triumph in a story. So oftentimes when I do hear spirituals or sing spirituals or even teach them, I teach the style that is associated with it, and not only just the style but what the voice should sound like. How the voice, you can change and manipulate the voice in so many ways, but how can you manipulate your voice to sound rich and smooth and lyrical in what you're doing, cause in a performance sense, that is what we need in order for you to actually tell the story in an authentic way. So that grit is that really digging and leaning, and the study behind what that is.

**Maggie:** That's fascinating, I mean it's like you have to be culturally informed but also a trained singer. So it's this marvelous mix of folk and classical traditions, you embrace so beautifully.

**Johnny:** [Laughing] thank you! I love it, you know, it's almost theatrical in a sense, I'm sorry to cut you off. But it's almost theatrical being able to, you know in a theater sense you have two hours to tell a whole story. The challenge with the spiritual is, and not a bad challenge, how do you take a two minute song, and tell the lifetime of a slave? And so you get a chance to actually exercise your theatrical chops to really emote that and you know you have successfully done that if you have been able to have the audience really stand back and reflect and see that whole entire picture of the slave in that one song.

**Maggie:** Well is there anything I haven't thought to ask that you want to add?

**Johnny:** You know I talked about what a spiritual is not, and one of the things that we've said is, in the world of academia, is that a spiritual is not gospel. And I recently had this conversation not too long ago...it's easy for one to think that gospel is spiritual and spiritual is gospel. But it's not. Both, yes, are idioms of music that are primarily celebrated by the African American culture, and they both have sacred texts. But one, the spiritual was...an organic piece of spiritual, was a folk piece, a spiritual was a piece that was ever so changing until it was actually written down. And even the words were changing. A gospel piece is, yes, it derived from spirituals but it also, more importantly, has influences of jazz and the blues. Especially in the chord structure and how they're written. And I want to make sure that's important for people to understand, that a spiritual is not gospel and gospel is not spiritual. That's one of the huge things to remember.

**Maggie:** Well thank you, and thank you for enlightening us on the world of spirituals.

**Johnny:** Absolutely, this has been a pleasure.

**Maggie:** Ok, thank you Johnny!

**Johnny:** Thank you!