

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

The American Spiritual

History

Spirituals began in the early 19th century by African American slaves who, because they were unable to practice their own African religions, adopted Christianity. As they were not allowed to form congregations (due to fear that the slaves would plot rebellion if they were allowed to have meetings), they did so under the cover of darkness, in the middle of the night. The Spiritual developed at these meetings, blending African performance traditions with hymns from white churches.

Spirituals allowed the slaves to sing about things they were unable to speak openly about: their mourning, suffering, resistance and strong desire for freedom. The Spirituals had a double meaning: while frequently singing about Christian salvation and the deliverance of the chosen people in the Old Testament, the slaves were in fact singing about their own freedom from the sufferings of slavery.

Over the years Spirituals became a standard folk song for all Americans, regardless of their ethnic background.



Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Activity 3 – Call and Response

Spirituals frequently used the technique of Call and Response, in which one person or group sings one phrase and then another person or group responds as a direct commentary on the first phrase.

A familiar Spiritual using this technique is *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

Use the Supplemental Worksheets to follow the lyrics to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. Teacher or musician will instruct the class to sing all lines except those in italics to experience Call and Response.



South Carolina State Standards

General Music:

VI.A,B,F

Materials:

On-site musicians or teacher may lead this lesson

Lyrics to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* (see *Supplemental Worksheets*)

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Activity 4 – The Meaning Behind the Music

The lyrics in Spirituals frequently had double meanings. Read the lyrics to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and discuss the words. Relate the words to the desire to escape from slavery. How do the words show hope and faith?

Spirituals were frequently used by fugitive slaves as a secret code. An extended lesson may be used in studying the life of Harriet Tubman (1820-1913). The 19th century biography of *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* is based on interviews with Ms. Tubman and vividly describes the use of Spirituals as secret code. This work is available in electronic version at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/harriet/harriet.html>. A reading of selections followed by discussion is recommended.

SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT
Arranged by J. Rosamond Johnson To Mrs. Arthur Curtiss James

Very slowly (with steady swing)

Swing low sweet char-i-ot, Comin' for to ear-ry me
home, Swing low sweet char-i-ot, Comin' for to ear-ry me
home, O swing low sweet char-i-ot, Com-in' for to ear-ry me

South Carolina State Standards

General Music:

VIII.A,B,C

IX.A,B,C,D,E

Social Studies:

3-4

Materials:

Download of *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*