

Songs of Slavery and Emancipation

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Recommended Citation

Bateson, Catherine V. (2022) "Songs of Slavery and Emancipation," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.3.10

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss3/10>

Review

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Summer 2022

Callahan, Mat. *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation*. University Press of Mississippi, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$30.00 ISBN 9781496840189 pp. 234

“My father, how long, ‘Fore we done sufferin’ here? . . . We’ll soon be free . . . We’ll fight for liberty when the Lord will call us home”—so sang the lyrics of *We’ll Soon Be Free/My Father, How Long?* according to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in his recording of Black spiritual, enslaved, and wartime songs in the middle of the American Civil War (94). Its roots dated from before the conflict; a song adapted over time but with the same core longing for freedom mixed with a deep-seated sense of religiosity. This particular ballad appears almost halfway through Mat Callahan’s *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation*—a compendium more than a history of songs by and about slavery, abolition, and enslaved resistance originating in the United States from the early nineteenth century through to the 1860s. *We’ll Soon Be Free* presents a good impression of what most of the songs in this work discusses.

The first thing that will strike the reader is that this is not a conventional history book. Despite being Callahan’s research, it begins with a detailed introduction by UCLA Professor Robin D.G. Kelley, who brings his renowned expertise on the African American diaspora, social movements, intellectualism, and his passion for Black music and visual culture, to his overview of what Callahan’s work is about. He helps situate enslaved and abolitionist songs about resistance within their historical framework. He both introduces Callahan and his musical, critical and activist background, and the broader messages behind the book’s main areas of attention. Kelley notes, for instance, that Callahan has understood “the call for revolution by means of armed struggle” heard in enslaved songs, “alongside the clarion call deliberately set out to break slavery’s hold in the presumptive land of liberty” echoed by Black and White American abolitionists (4). Moreover, Kelley argues that “song as expression of a vision of freedom meant that the everyday challenges of living life . . . took precedence over the routinized oppression of slavery” (6).

This “vision of freedom” is a sentiment reinforced in the concluding afterword, again coming not from Callahan but from Kali Akuno, executive director of Corporation Jackson in

Mississippi. Akuno succinctly stresses the contemporary relevance to these older songs, arguing that they contain messages “as if they were written yesterday.” The songs printed in full in Callahan’s study “are not only important historically,” Akuno highlights, but “have a direct bearing on today’s movements for [the] social and economic transformation” of African Americans in the twenty-first century (72). Coming in the wake of prominent Black Lives Matter campaigns, and even greater social, cultural, and political attention towards ongoing racial prejudice since George Floyd’s murder in summer 2020, Akuno is right to draw these parallels and emphasize the book’s contemporaneous relevancy on this issue. *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation* carries crucial history that enlivens our collective memory and helps us keep the spirit of resistance strong and moving forward,” Akuno concludes, with an apt review of this study’s modern-day impact (72).

While extremely welcome and necessary, that wider contextual framing to incorporate the present-day history of limited freedoms and resistance does raise questions over *who* this book is actually for. It is divided into two simple parts—“Discovery and Authentication” and “Lyrics,” with the latter second part divided further into “Slave Songs” and “Abolitionist Songs.” Following Kelley’s Introduction, four brief chapters outline Callahan’s approach to his sources, as the reader finally hears his explanation about how he found the songs listed in Part 2 and some of the history behind them in relation to abolitionist and White collating of enslaved music. At times, this section reads like a personal first-hand research journey account of Callahan’s discoveries into a rich vein of source analysis, as he argues that he “kept expecting some historian of music or ethnomusicologist to have made the connection between slave revolts and their musical expression” (27). Callahan attempts to make that connection, though whether he makes it strong enough will be reflected in the future use of this book as a source collection in and of itself. It is a welcome addition to American music history scholarship, and in keeping with the growing study of songs as sources of expression in and of themselves to be read and used alongside traditional written material sources and oral history.

Songs are fundamental contemporary cultural sources, and those presented here are no different. Callahan also discusses previous scholarship and collections of enslaved songs dating back to the 1870s when many were published after the Civil War and emancipation, and there is some useful early musicological historiography. Yet for all the benefits of this older literature review, a book of this nature has some notable American song scholars missing in its Bibliography. By focusing so much on slavery and abolition songs, Callahan’s study does not consider the comparative framing seen in work by James A. Davis, Christian

McWhirter, Catherine Bateson, and Billy Coleman amongst others. Their combined current work on various aspects of nineteenth century American balladry and its broader musical zeitgeist provides the bigger national scene into which *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation*'s primary examples were published and circulated. Had the secondary source remit extended beyond just enslaved and abolitionist music study to wider 1800s music—even for brief contextual comparison—errors that appear might be rectified. Though a minor point, Callahan's assertion that *Hail Columbia* “was the national anthem of the United States at the time of the War of 1812” is incorrect (41)—there was no official national anthem until 1931. Laura Lohman's recent work (another un-cited significant contextual text) is one of several that has discussed how *Hail Columbia* was part of five or six national anthemic ballads which circulated the young American republic and whose tunes in turn influenced enslaved spiritual and resistance compositions. Here is an opportunity to connect with very recent American historical musicology that Callahan misses.

Callahan's central arguments are perhaps not fully aimed at this field despite first impressions. *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation* is very much a study on the specific songs he has collated, and most of the book's areas of analysis are about contextualizing slavery and resistance moments. As he states at the start, the book “is, first, a collection of songs composed and sung by slaves either preparing for or commemorating revolt and resistance” (ix). To provide more background on this topic, and on abolitionist songs composed by fugitive and free Blacks between the American Revolution and Civil War, Callahan brings in current scholarship on slavery and abolition (particularly employing Manisha Sinha's influential study *The Slave's Cause*). This does give the effect of reading a good primer of early slavery history, slave rebellions and attempted revolts, and the enslaved experience. While extremely useful for a reader less familiar with slavery studies scholarship, this analysis will not leave any historian and literary scholar of enslaved nineteenth century America with many new pieces of information other than the song sources themselves. Callahan adds to that further by including Herbert Aptheker's 1939 study about slave revolts in the United States in an appendix section. This work, known to any student of American slavery, again gives basic coverage of resistance and revolt movements by those like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey; it should be employed alongside more recent and specific scholarship by anyone using this book to explore overall slavery history.

This selective detailing again raises the question of who this book is for. For a music and song historian, it is frustrating that there are actually only thirty songs detailed in full in this book (fifteen slave songs/fifteen abolition songs). Though there are lyrics and examples

mentioned in the introductory first part chapters, there is little embedded analytical explanation that unpacks the lyrics. This is left for the reader to do. That adds to the unconventionality of the book and makes a break from current musicological histories. Then again, Callahan does not approach this from a conventional scholarly background—his interest in music and poetry as an experience to be heard as well as read is borne out by the fact that this book is just one part of a bigger project. Callahan’s study utilizes immersive reading and multimedia, with an accompanying CD (similar to Coleman’s work on early American music) and a documentary film.

The book itself, beautifully and clearly produced laying out the songs and several pages of related images, does at times suggest that one should approach this like a detailed accompanying museum exhibition resource. There is much to gain if the reader comes to *Songs of Slavery and Emancipation* with that knowledge about the book’s contents and layout. This work would certainly make a strong teaching text for future students and scholars interested in finding sources about slave resistance from enslaved (singing) voices. Ultimately, Callahan helps to demonstrate how enslaved and abolitionist songs in America became “a powerful weapon against slavery and anti-Black racism,” still holding great relevance to this day (18).

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