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## **FREEDOM SONG: THE FISK JUBILEE SINGERS STORY**

PROFESSOR HARVEY BROUGH WITH EMILY DANKWORTH, CHRISTINA GILL, WILLS MORGAN, AND MICHAEL HENRY

Good evening. I'm Harvey Brough. I extend a big welcome to our soloists - Emily Dankworth, Christina Gill, Will Morgan, Michael Henry - and to you the gorgeous audience in the Museum of London. Also, to you out there in the internet zone, greetings to you all.

### **(Music) NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I SEE**

Harvey: So, first the big question, how did I, Harvey Brough, a choirboy from Coventry come to stand before you telling this story? I remember being quite young, maybe 9 and being introduced to a mysterious thing, clumsily called a negro spiritual. The song was *Steal Away to Jesus* and although obviously religious, was very different to any of the music I customarily sang with my choir. When I was older, I learned that songs like this came out of the horror of slavery and that though they were folk songs, in theory, open to all, singing them was a complicated matter. Much more recently, in 2013 my friend Justin Butcher and I were running a choir called Vox Holloway and were aware that the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation fell that year. We wanted to do something to mark the occasion. So again, I turned my attention to the genre of spirituals. And once again I found that it was difficult to find a reason to sing them, they sprang from such barbaric events. I did a lot of research and pretty much gave up on the idea.

Then, by chance, I came across a reference to an extraordinary story about a group called the Fisk Jubilee Singers. It seemed scarcely credible - had a group of ex slaves really travelled to this country and sung to the highest and lowest in the land, touring all over the British Isles and even singing to Queen Victoria? At that time, there was precious little information about them online, so my friend (and member of Vox Holloway) Tricia Zipfel suggested I meet with Viv Broughton, a gospel expert who in fact I had come across, as he also runs the Premises rehearsal studio in Hackney. Viv did know about the Jubilee Singers and when I asked him about them, he simply said, 'you need this book' and handed me a red bound tome that dated from about the 1890's.

When I looked at it, I was really excited for two reasons. Firstly, it was called *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* by J B T Marsh and I could immediately see that it had the information I was seeking. Secondly, the subtitle was 'With Their Songs' - and when I turned to the back, I saw about 130 songs laid out rather like hymns. Amongst them, were some very well-known spirituals - *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, *Deep River* and others. Also, some that seemed to me very obscure. When Justin and I began to study the book in earnest, it struck us that by telling the story of the people who brought the music to us, perhaps we would find a context in which the songs could be sung.

Here is that story, as told in the piece that Justin and I created from this material - **FREEDOM SONG:**

Harvey: It starts in slavery:

Christina: I was born in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Wills: I was born in Morganstown, Kentucky.



Emily: I was born and raised in Linn County, Tennessee.

Mike: I was born way down in Alabama, at that place name Notasulga Christina: I was born in Black River, Louisiana.

Wills: I was born on Massa Toler's plantation, down in ol' Virginia, near Lynchburg, in Campbell County.

Emily: I don't know where I bin born. Nobody never did tell me.

ALL: We was born slaves

### **(Music) CHORUS NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I SEE**

Emily: Lord, my white folks was rich, they had's many as five or six hundred niggers, men, women an' chillun'.

Mike: In my daddy's time, an' all along my mama's time, that's when they chain the coloured people an' cut them all to pieces with cat o' nine tails an' sprinkled salt an' pepper on them.

### **(Music) BROTHERS WON'T YOU PRAY FOR ME**

Christina: The times I hate mos' was pickin' cotton when the frost was on the bolls. My hands git sore and crack open an' bleed.

Mike: Night never comed out, wit' you had nothin' to do. Time to cut tobacco, if they want you to cut all night long out in the field, you cut. It didn' matter 'bout you tired. You 'fraid to say you tired.

Emily: A white man would ride back an' forth an' about with spurs an' a whip, an' you better not look up from yo' work.

### **(Music) SISTERS WON'T YOU PRAY FOR ME**

Mike: We had real bad eatin', bread, meat, water, an' they fed it t'us in a trough, jes' like the hogs.

Emily: They'd sell us like they sell horses an' cows an' hogs. Have a auction bench, an' bid on you jes' same as you biddin' on cattle. They'd have a regular sale every month, at the court house. An' git two hun'erd dollar, hun'erd dollar, five hun'erd dollar.

Mike: Slavery was the worst days was ever seed in the world. An' I got the scars on my ol' body to show to this day. I seed worse than what happen to me.

Emily: What I hated mos' was when they beat me an' I didn' know what they beat me for, an' I hated they strippin' me naked as the day I was born.

Christina: Solomon the overseer beat them with a big whip an' massa look on. They cut the flesh most to the bones and some they never got up again.

Wills: Some o' the people I belonged to was in the Ku Klux Klan, an' I use to see 'em turn out. They went round whippin' niggers. They git young girls an' strip 'em stark naked, an' put 'em 'cross barrels, an' whip 'em till the blood run out o' them, an' then they put salt in the raw parts.

Harvey: The piece continues with a short account of the American Civil War with a representation of a battle between two tunes, Dixieland and John Brown. This section finishes with Abraham Lincoln's declaration: "I,



Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy thereof, do hereby proclaim and declare that ... on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free...”

### **(Music) FISK UNIVERISTY FIRST BUILDING SONG – WOKE UP THIS MORNING**

Harvey: On January 9th, six months after the last shot was fired in the Civil War, the Fisk University opened for classes in Nashville Tennessee. A permanent university for the higher education of the freed people.

Wills: The Fisk University was founded on faith.

Christina: And precious little else.

Harvey: The founders faced a terrible struggle in their quest to establish an educational foundation. Nashville, where they began to build Fisk University was the dark heart of the slavery in the South, they struggled to find and afford land. All the odds were stacked against them, but they persevered and bought the lease on an old hospital barracks of the Union Army. A ramshackle University began to take shape, but the campus buildings, cheaply and hastily constructed soon fell into decay. How could funds for a new building be found?

### **George White**

Christina: Enter a remarkable man, George White, who was indeed a white man.

Mike: George White, blacksmith’s son from New York

Emily: Former schoolteacher

Wills: Veteran of the bloody battles of Gettysburg and Chancellorsville

Harvey: He was the treasurer of the new University but had a feeling for music which led him to form a choir, singing music that at the time was considered suitable.

### **(Music) I’M A GOING TO SING**

In Spring 1867, the group gave its first public concert. Perhaps they could raise funds. by singing songs pleasing to a predominantly white audience?

### **(Music) THE SINGERS OF FISK UNIVERSITY - LILY OF THE VALLEY**

Mike: The concert was a great success!

Wills: A great success financially

Christina: A leadin’ daily newspaper interpreted the concert as “evidence that the negro was susceptible of education”

### **(Music) WHAT KIND OF SHOES ARE THOSE YOU WEAR**

Harvey: Three years later, the singers gave a magnificent rendition of that fine cantata, “Esther - The Beautiful Queen”, by Mr. W.B. Bradbury, to a large and delighted assembly. They went on to Memphis -

Emily: where we filled the opera house to burstin’!



Christina: - then south to Chattanooga

Mike: - where the audience cheered us to the echo -

Harvey: At about this time the National Teachers' Association of the United States held its annual convention in Nashville -

Christina: - and we was to sing at the openin' convocation!

Mike: - to the great disgust of some -

Wills: - who were profoundly indignant that "the dam' niggers could not be kept in their own places" -

Emily: But we turned out so popular, they asked us to sing at every session!

**(Music) THESE SHOES I WEAR ARE GOSPEL SHOES**

Harvey: So far so good, the singers from Fisk had taken their first tentative steps into performing - but then something remarkable happened:

Wills: One of the singers, Miss Ella Sheppard Emily: That's me -

Wills: led a small group of students to the office of the Fisk Principal and with some air of mystery they asked Principal Spence to lock the door and draw the curtains...and then...

**(Music) STEAL AWAY INTRO UNDER DIALOGUE**

Harvey: as if disclosing some shameful secret, they sang to him some of the old-time religious slave songs, long since known as Jubilee Songs.

**(Music) ELLA SHEPPARD - STEAL AWAY**

Emily: The songs of sorrow...o' the plantation...of slavery. We never sang those songs to anyone but ourselves. They was sacred to our parents, sacred an' secret, melodies o' sufferin'...of anguish...an' a fierce hope o' freedom. Many times we use to sit together, jes' sit on the floor and sing t'each other softly...

**(Music) STEAL AWAY - MY LORD HE CALLS ME**

Emily: We never dream o' singing these songs in public. We was free now. Why should we sing the slave songs of our people's sufferin' fer the entertainment of white folks?

Emily: At Mr White's behest, I started to transcribe the secret songs o' the plantation . . . Steal Away, Swing Low Sweet Chariot...

Christina: Go Down Moses, Deep River!

And, guided by George While they did start singing them in public. The reaction was huge: A review in Tonic Sol-fa Magazine said: *The singers began with their signature piece: Steal away... 'The first chords came floating on our senses like gentle fairy music and they were followed by the unison of the phrase 'Steal away to Jesus' delivered with exquisite precision of time and accent; then came the soft chords and bold unison again, followed by the touching, throbbing cadence 'I hain't got long to stay here' like whispering to the soul.*



## **Fisk Quartet**

There are no recordings of the original Fisk Singers. But, a second, smaller group was formed some 20 years later - a male quartet led by John Work II and they were recorded between 1909 and 1916.

I'll play a short extract - a spiritual – 'In Bright Mansions Above'. As you will hear, it's quite restrained - definitely a spiritual sound, not full on Gospel, which came much later.

But it has a fervency and a latent passion which must have sounded remarkable to people hearing it 120 years ago and give us an idea of how the original Fisk Singers might have sounded.

## **(Music) BRIGHT MANSIONS ABOVE**

### **Portrait of George White**

Harvey: The relationship of George White (a white man) to his singers (all who had been slaves or suffered directly from the consequences of slavery) is almost impossible to imagine now.

Emily: But he was obviously a very good man, who had fought a war to set slaves free. He hatched the idea of taking a group on the road, to raise the much-needed funds to continue the construction of Fisk University.

Christina: This was courageous - at this point he had no support, indeed rather more the disapproval of his superiors at the University. No funds were available for such a daring plan - a group of ex slaves going on tour to perform to who knows who? So, to make it happen he mortgaged his own house and the group of singers tentatively set out on a concert tour of the South.

Wills: They suffered terrible discrimination (they were turned away from countless hotels) and hardship (they couldn't even afford overcoats to protect them from the cold)

Mike: but little by little, they began to find an audience for their music, including some of the songs of sorrow. They continued their tour through the South.

## **(Music) THE GOSPEL TRAIN IS COMING**

Harvey: They arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 7th, 1871. George White with eleven singing students of Fisk University.

Christina: Ella Sheppard, Maggie L. Porter an' Jennie Jackson - s'pranners;

Emily: Minnie Tate, Eliza Walker an' Phoebe J. Anderson - c'ntralters;

Wills: Thomas Rutling an' Benjamin M. Holmes - tenors;

Mike: an' Greene Evans, Isaac P. Dickerson an' Big George Wells on the bass.

Harvey: And as governess to the young ladies, Miss Wells, Principal of the American Missionary Association School of Athens, Alabama. Thirteen persons in all -

## **(Music) WE SHALL WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY**

Christina: At the start of our travels, we sang in the two churches of Cincinnati. Full audiences greeted us with appreciation, but the donations were few...

Mike: for it was on that Sunday and Monday, that the great Chicago Fire of 1871 swept away the houses of one hundred thousand people.



Wills: In Ohio, as everywhere else, people could scarcely think or talk about anythin' except the fire.

Mike: Collections for the victims were set up in every town and city of every state. There could not have been a week less favourable in which to commence our work.

Christina: We decided to give the proceeds of the first paid concert - Wills: - something less than fifty dollars -

Mike: to the Chicago Relief Fund

**(Music) WE SHALL WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY - sung**

Wills: In the next town, Chillicothe, we were turned away from the main hotel on account of our colour.

Mike: At the second hotel, the story was the same: "No admittance to negroes."

Emily: At the third hotel, the landlord gave us his own bedroom as a parlour -

Wills: - and served up our meals in private, otherwise all his guests would'a' up an' left, he said.

**(Music) THERE WILL BE NO SORROW THERE – sung**

Harvey: Unexpected as it was and painful to endure, it seemed it was to be a part of the singers' mission to break down this odious and cruel colour prejudice.

Their struggles in America's South, nearly broke the spirit of the group. But lead by George White's extraordinary zeal, they began to change the hearts and minds of their audiences - and as importantly, began to break even on the considerable costs of touring with a sizeable group.

Emily: At this time Mr. White was preoccupied with how to promote the group. They were billed as Negro Minstrels or other demeaning names.

In Columbus, after an anxious and almost sleepless night, a name for the group presented itself - "The Jubilee Singers".

Christina: The 'Year of Jubilee' was in the Bible, when all the captives were set free –

Mike: When we was slaves, we use to pray for the Year of Jubilee to come -

Wills: an' it had come at last - an' we were witnesses to its advent. Mike: We *were* the Jubilee Singers.

Wills: An' thinking up that name was the best night's work he ever did.

Harvey: Next they began to tour the North of America, where they began to find real success and fame while still experiencing some discrimination along the way. Even the favourable reviews that they received still saw them as something of a novelty act:

The New York Tribune said: "The wild melodies of these emancipated slaves touched the fount of tears - and grey-haired men wept like little children. We have long enough had its caricature in corked faces; our people can now listen to the genuine soul music of the slave cabins!" Slowly but steadily though, they began to find real success.

Mike: Boston, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, on and on... and in New York we were sponsored by the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher.

Christina: He proclaimed: Folks can't live on air. Though they sing like nightingales, they need more to eat than



nightingales do. Next week the Jubilee Singers shall give a concert in my church and the congregation shall endow them with a lavish benefit.

Wills: The concert in Plymouth Church was thronged - and we were the heroes of the hour!!

Harvey: They closed their first season with a final night in Troy, New York and set off home to Nashville with the astonishing sum of twenty thousand dollars raised for the Fisk University - in today's money nearly four hundred thousand dollars!

### **Mark Twain**

Christina: It was Mr. Mark Twain who first proposed that the Jubilee Singers should travel to England -

Emily: (slyly) - once the foremost slave-tradin' nation of the world!

Harvey: Mark Twain wrote to his friend the Earl of Shaftesbury, that renowned Christian philanthropist and reformer, to arrange matters.

Wills: - and so it was that in May 1873.

Christina: - less than two years after we first set out from Nashville.

### **Fisk Jubilee Singers' 1<sup>st</sup> Trip to Britain**

Emily: we found ourselves in London, at Willis's Rooms

Mike: - givin' a concert to a private audience of the highest in the land Emily: Lords and Ladies, members of Parliament

Christina: - clergymen, newspaper editors -

Emily: - everyone invited personally by Lord Shaftesbury hisself!

Harvey: The Singers carried the audience by storm! Congratulations were lavished upon them, and the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, beseeched them most solicitously to visit them the next day at Argyll Lodge.

Emily: Imagine our surprise and delight to learn, that Her Majesty the Queen of England was expected soon! Her request - was for us to sing, "Steal Away to Jesus".

Harvey: Who could have imagined, that day at Fisk when young Miss Ella Sheppard first sang Steal Away to Principal Spence, behind closed doors, with curtains drawn, that one day she'd be singin' it before the Queen of England?

### **(Music) STEAL AWAY II – GREEN TREES A'BENDIN'**

### **Fisk Jubilee Singers perform for Queen Victoria**

Harvey: There was great irony in this, since Britain was indeed the most enthusiastic slaving trading nation, but the Jubilee Singers were treated with great respect and admiration wherever they sang here.

Emily: Over the next three months, we was invited to sing everywhere!

Wills: In Westminster Abbey and the Crystal Palace,





Emily: In schools, universities, hospitals and soup-kitchens,

Harvey: They did scores of concerts in the years 1876 - 87 in England, Scotland and Ireland, visiting most of the major cities, but also much smaller places - They did scores of concerts in the years 1876 - 87 in England, Scotland and Ireland, visiting most of the major cities, but also much smaller places...

Emily: Saffron Walden!

Wills: Grimsby!

Harvey: They even holidayed for 6 weeks in Scarborough, which must have been a challenge in spite of its billing as 'The Queen of Watering Places' They still struggled with finances, as the costs of touring were great and as they became more and more famous, some of the pitfalls of notoriety affected them. There were arguments within the group and arguments with the management - they began to demand proper fees for their work. There was even when, they reached Europe, an affair within the group involving one of the married members, pretty scandalous stuff which contrasted with the dignified way they conducted themselves most of the time.

But I think Britain can be proud of the reception that the Jubilee Singers were given here. Only 20 years previously they had been suffering the effects of slavery, but now they were established stars and played to huge audiences all over the country.

Christina: We sang for Prime Minister Gladstone twice! The second occasion was when he invited us to breakfast with him and his family. . .

Mike: He was captivated by their singing 'it was not the music alone; their eyes flashed, their countenances told of reverence and joy and gratitude to God!

Harvey: This is Emma Sheppard's story; in FREEDOM SONG we imagine her telling it to the assembled Lords and Ladies:

Emily: My father was a slave, my mother was a slave, and I was born on a plantation, a frail an' skinny little baby slave. I was like to die, but I didn'. When I was around three, the mistress come to my mama an' say, "Sarah, you are an insolent girl. I'm gonna sell you down the river to Mississippi. But I will keep your little daughter Ella here with me." Well, my mama decided to throw herself off the cliff into the Cumberland River, an' me too. She was stumblin' down the dusty river road, draggin' me behind her, but an old black woman saw her face, an' she jes' knew what my mama had in mind. She put her hand on mama's shoulder an' she said, "Now, don't you do it, honey. You gotta wait - wait till the chariot o' the Lord swing low. God's got great work fer this li'l chile to do. She gonna stand before kings and queens! Honey, don't go to the river!" So, Mama took me back to our li'l cabin, an' she held me in her arms all that night, an' she sang to me, till they came to take her away:

### **(Music) SWING LOW**

Wills: On June 11th, 1873, the Hackney Gazette announced that the 'marvellous and heart- stirring melodies' of the Jubilee Singers could be heard that night at the Down's Chapel, Hackney Downs, Clapton.

Mike: Tickets may be obtained of Mr Surman, family grocer, corner of Lea Bridge Road - Wills: And at the offices of this newspaper.

Christina: Then we was invited to sing at Dr Thomas Barnardo's East End Juvenile Mission at the Ragged School in Hope Place, Hackney - where Mr John Newman, the manager of the Mission, felt that 'such singin' from the soul should not be forgotten. . .

Harvey: Mr Newman speedily set to work to teach the children of the Mission the songs of the Jubilee Singers -





and a new choir was born - the East London Jubilee Singers of Hackney!

### **(Music) I'M SOMETIMES UP AND SOMETIMES DOWN - sung**

#### **Jubilee Hall**

Harvey: And as they began in London, so they continued - in city after city throughout Britain and Ireland, country after country, carrying all before them. On to the great courts and capitals of Europe, and on to the Orient, to the palaces of India and Japan, and the churches and city halls of Australia, winning great renown and great endowment for Fisk University, assuring its legacy to posterity. These tours raised an estimated \$150,000 for the university, funds used to construct Fisk's first permanent building. Named Jubilee Hall, the building still stands and is used today as dormitory accommodation for students. The beautiful Victorian Gothic building houses a floor-to-ceiling portrait of the original Jubilee Singers, commissioned by Queen Victoria during the 1873 tour as a gift from England to Fisk.

#### **Freedom Song Hackney Empire – March 2019**

Harvey: FREEDOM SONG is a full-length piece in two halves, telling the Fisk Jubilee Singers story - you're just heard some of that story. The piece goes on to question how we should react to it and how the struggle for equal rights that the Jubilees started over 150 years ago was taken forward by the civil rights movements in the 20th century. It also looks at the uncomfortable truth that slavery is still with us.

Wills: 155 years ago, when Abraham Lincoln made the declaration of emancipation, there were 4 million people of African Origin in slavery in the United States.

Christina: Today, there are an estimated 46 million people trapped in slavery across the globe. The modern slave trade is one of the fastest growing industries in the world today, representing 150 billion dollars a year in illegal profits.

Harvey: So, it was hard to finish the piece on a bright and happy note as slavery hasn't truly been abolished. One reason why we wanted to tell the Jubilee's story was that their treatment in Britain was respectful and full of admiration for them as singers and as human beings, even though this country was deeply involved in the Transatlantic slave trade for for nearly 250 years, from the time of Elizabeth the First until Britain's abolition of slavery in 1807.

During that time British ships carried an estimated 3.4 million enslaved Africans to the Americas.

It's not possible to walk anywhere in this country without being implicated in this - all the big cities, Liverpool, Bristol, London, Glasgow - everywhere is built with the profits of the slave trade.

David Olusoga, the learned writer in these matters, whom I'm honoured to stand alongside in this series of lectures, writes that black history of this country must be taken seriously and become mainstream. I think that has to come from all sides. And it seems to me that we have a story here that all of us, black and white can learn from. Furthermore, it is a story that is hardly known in this country: it's becoming better known now as more material keeps appearing, but, when I worked with the Hackney Empire Community Choir who sang with us in our performance last March at the Hackney Empire, I asked who of them had heard of the story - not one had, even though many of them sing with gospel choirs regularly.

*FREEDOM SONG* concludes with songs about the importance of Freedom for all. We will finish with Roll, Jordan Roll, one of the Spirituals from the Fisk Jubilee Book that I was given.

Thank you for listening, I thank our wonderful soloists Emily Dankworth, Christina Gill, Wills Morgan and Michael Henry for telling the story with me.

And I thank Justin Butcher for creating the piece with me.

If you like the sound of *FREEDOM SONG*, come and see a complete performance at the Hackney Empire on Sunday March 29th next year. Or do look out for the recording which we will produce before Christmas (!).

### **(Music) COST OF FREEDOM**



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