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Gospel Music Scholar Robert Darden Explores Powerful Role of Spirituals in the Civil Rights Movement

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, AL, to kick off the bus boycott in 1955, it was before an audience of 5,000, singing hymns. Thousands of voices united in song, prayer, and protest formed a soundtrack to the civil rights movement, one that grew from the spirituals sung by slaves. In *Nothing but Love in God's Water: Black Sacred Music from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, October 24, 2014), the first of two volumes, gospel music scholar Robert Darden explores how songs and singers helped African Americans challenge slavery, subjugation, and oppression.

Darden is the director of the Gospel Music Restoration Project, currently at Baylor University, which will become a permanent feature of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture when it opens on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 2015. He draws upon hundreds of interviews, one-of-a-kind sources, and rare or lost recordings to illustrate the ways sacred music "irrepressibly bubbles up and envelops black people at their times of greatest need."

The protest spirituals of the slavery era survived beyond the Civil War to aid freedom fighters in the difficult years ahead. Darden traces the music's survival through a variety of sources, including the African American church and the labor union movement, which adopted religious songs to rally workers.

As the spirituals and labor union songs galvanized people, a new permutation evolved on Chicago's south side during the mid-20th century: gospel music, which Darden says "reached further still into the consciousness of white America and would play an important role in the civil rights movement."

Darden surveys the work of slave composers whose names are lost to history, along with other composers, performers, music historians, and the activists who employed, preserved, or were perhaps the subject of song: Harriet Tubman and John Brown, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the father of gospel music Thomas A. Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mahalia Jackson, Paul Robeson, Billie Holiday, Sam Cooke, Rev. C.L. Franklin, father of singer Aretha, and many more.

The songs are center stage, including early spirituals "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "Steal Away to Jesus," "John Brown's Body," and most significant of all, "Go Down Moses"; and later gospel and protest songs, such as "We Shall Overcome," "Move on Up," and "Strange Fruit." These songs are dangerous, Darden says: "They have the power to affect the singer as well as the listener and to influence events in the present and those still to come."

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Nothing but Love in God's Water is ultimately about story, song, and laughter, Darden says: "It's a story that came from Africa that sustained the slaves and their descendants for generations. Songs that enveloped the best of the Christian faith and withstood the police dogs and water cannons in Birmingham. Laughter that enabled blacks in the Jim Crow South to secretly laugh at those who were trying to crush them."

"This music provided something that enabled black people to challenge the most powerful nation on the planet armed only with love, justice and song," Darden says. "It's all there in those old spirituals, and those unstoppable, irresistible gospel songs."

Robert Darden is director of the Black Gospel Music Restoration Project, and Associate Professor of Journalism, Public Relations, and New Media at Baylor University. A former gospel music editor for *Billboard* magazine, he is the author of several books including *People Get Ready: A New History of Black Gospel Music*.

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