

# CDSS Sings: Singing Together, Past and Present

By Reggie Harris

On a recent tour, I had the joy of performing at the Broward County Performing Arts Center, entertaining and educating audiences of middle-schoolers from the local schools in Fort Lauderdale, FL. It was a great opportunity to connect audiences of middle school students to a part of our musical and cultural history that often fails to find inclusion in American classroom study: the role of music in the life of those in slavery in the 1700s and 1800s.

The fact that music played such a critical role in organizing and freeing those in bondage in America is still not widely known. It's an exciting part of our history that I've had the joy of sharing for over 35 years with students and teachers from coast to coast.

The spirituals, biblically based, rural, Southern songs of pain, hope, and freedom, rose out of those communities and were often used as code and directional songs on the Underground Railroad. They brought the people into a shared sense of connection and made it possible to create bonds, pass messages, and to get and remember critical information that made opposition and escape possible. These are the songs and stories that bring the period to life. And the key is getting my audiences to sing.

Now, the challenge in that endeavor lies in the fact that more and more people are not used to singing together as a group in our shifting cultural landscape. We have become more accustomed to an individualistic personal musical expression. Music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is most often experienced in the role of consumer. This shift, generated by clever marketing that targets age, race, gender, social location, and class, has created a society that is more accustomed to listening and being sung *to* rather than singing *together*. For marketers, this is both profitable and pervasive.

Singing together in public often makes people, and especially middle-schoolers, uncomfortable. Add in that these young consumers are more likely to be fans of pop, hip hop, rap, and a variety of music stars that most people over 30 don't even know about. It's a different cultural connection than existed up until the latter stages of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are not kids who are used to folk music gatherings, festivals, or singing circles.

Fortunately, for those of us who believe in the value of those community lessons from the past, there is the fact, proven by research, that we humans are hardwired for music and story. Armed with that knowledge, there are ways to create the atmosphere that allows these all-too-capable but reluctant singers to emerge. And music is the key.

The visceral melodies of these simple songs have touched the hearts of people all over the world for over 250 years. To those middle school students in the theater, hearing them sung almost magically connected the ears to the hearts, and after a bit of nervous laughter the students began to listen to the lyrics. Then by using the rhythm of the guitar I allowed the beat to stir the feet and soon you could see the shoulders start to sway. It wasn't long before their hands joined in and then an invitation: "Turn to the person next to you and say "I can't wait to hear you sing!!" More laughter.

In mere minutes, those students came alive, singing and celebrating the power of songs to unite, inform, and inspire folks to action. They couldn't help but join in as I led them line-by-line.

*"Who are those children dressed in red  
God's gonna trouble the water  
Must be the ones that Moses led  
God's gonna trouble the water  
Wade in the water!"*

The spirituals have been transforming lives, getting feet moving, healing broken spirits, and creating community for people to take on challenges for a long time.

It's the same enthusiasm that has made my visits to CDSS camps to lead workshops on the spirituals and storytelling so engaging and fun. The adults that I've encountered there are just as curious and eager to sing, learn, and celebrate the stories of struggle and triumph as those middle-schoolers.

“Who are those children dressed in blue  
 God’s gonna trouble the water  
 Must be the ones that made it through

Who are those children dressed in black  
 They’re never, never, never, never, never goin’ back.  
 Wade in the water.  
 Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children.  
 Wade in the water. God’s gonna trouble the water.”

The songs, so relevant to that critical time in our national and cultural past, are also a key to our present. Whether it’s studying Harriet Tubman, Henry “Box” Brown, and Frederick Douglas in the 1800s, or Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Fanny Lou Hamer leading in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, or Rev. William C. Barber standing with thousands on the NC capitol steps in 2020

talking about healthcare and poverty, the spirit of song can connect us all and move us to action.

This is work I love to do. Whether performing for thousands in concert halls and at festivals, or in small groups for a summer class or house concerts, there is nothing like hearing voices blending together that makes me feel as hopeful for the future of our world.

**Reggie Harris** is an internationally acclaimed songwriter, storyteller, and lecturer who performs and educates audiences in concert halls, festivals, colleges, schools, places of worship, and other venues worldwide. He is a Kennedy Center artist, a Woodrow Wilson Scholar, and the Director of Music for the UU Living Legacy Project. Find out more at [www.ReggieHarrisMusic.com](http://www.ReggieHarrisMusic.com)

## Wade in the Water

Key of Am African American Spiritual

5 Wade in the wa - ter. Wade in the wa - ter chil - dren.

9 Wade in the wa - ter. God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter!

Verse:  
 13 Who are those chil - dren dressed in Red? God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter!

Must be the ones that Mo - ses led. God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter!

Chorus: Wade in the water... Wade in the water children.  
 Wade in the water...God’s gonna trouble the water! (repeat)

Verse: Who are those children dressed in Red?  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!  
 Must be the ones that Moses led.  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!

Who are those children dressed in White?  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!  
 Must be the ones gettin’ ready to fly.  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!

Chorus

Who are those children all dressed in Blue?  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!  
 Must be the ones that made it through.  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!

Who are those children all dressed in Black?  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!  
 They must be the ones who are never going back.  
 God’s gonna trouble the water!

Chorus