

# In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals

EILEEN GUENTHER. ST. LOUIS: MORNINGSTAR MUSIC PUB., 2016. ISBN 978-0-944529-71-3. 492 PAGES. \$28.00.

**T**hough there have been numerous books and periodicals written on the history and significance of the Negro spiritual in American music and religious life none have been as transformational on this topic as Eileen Guenther's *In Their Own Words: Slave Life and the Power of Spirituals*. Guenther's unique mixture of song and the personal stories of slaves presents a compelling and moving account of spirituals within the context of slave life. In the introduction, she highlights four reasons for the importance of this work. First, "that spirituals are 'universal' and available to all persons who are prepared to open themselves to the unsettling healing power that inhabits these marvelous songs of life" (xvi); second, "Spirituals affirm a complete trust in God to make right in the next world what was done wrong in this world..." (xviii); third, "spirituals not only offer a mirror of slave life, they have been called 'a master index of the mind of the slave' (xviii); and finally, "spirituals are powerful, beautiful music of sorrow and hope" (xix).

The book is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the reader to the definition of the spiritual and its origin, musical and performance characteristics, and the relationship between Christianity and slavery. The second section addresses the cultural and social aspects of slavery, including housing, education, weddings, funerals, and resistance. The final section highlights the contributions of spiritual arrangers such as Henry (Harry) T Burleigh, James Weldon Johnson, R. Nathaniel Dett, and William L. Dawson, and the influence of spirituals on other musical styles and genres. Guenther's exhaustive scholarship weaves together religion, music, and history in telling the often joyous, but always tragic, dark period of history. The intermingling of song and personal testimony of slave life gives this text an added dimension absent in other books on the subject. While it is difficult to highlight one particular strength in a collection so full of strengths, the inclusion of a biblical concordance, keying scripture texts with spiritual titles, makes this text an invaluable resource.

This book will speak to the interest and concerns of music and worship leaders, as well as academics and theologians. This book will be valuable to clergy and worship leaders in the local church; to professors and students in the college, graduate school, and seminary communities; to high school and community choral directors; and to the lay person with a passion and love for music. Guenther's work is prophetic and timely for the world and the church. The music and message of spirituals is more relevant now than ever before. Guenther's argument for her book is summarized in the final sentence; "The value of knowing in their own words—the context that gives birth to the spirituals, their meanings, and the potential for connecting to life in the twenty-first century is one in which I believe with all my heart" (411).

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