

## Handout 1 - African Music and “Spirituals” in the U.S. South



Roughly 500,000 West Africans were brought to the U.S. during slavery. About nine times as many were transported to the Caribbean. The individuals on those slave ships came from dozens of kingdoms and ethnic groups throughout West Africa, each place and each group having its own rich song and dance traditions that made use of various drums, stringed instruments and singing.

What happened to those traditions in the “New World” varies based on location and local government. The colonial governments of Spain tended to have a more “liberal” approach to managing captive populations, allowing them to maintain some of the musical and spiritual traditions of their homelands. In the U.S., nearly all African traditions were viewed as dangerous, “heathen” or “primitive” and actively suppressed. Because colonizers were aware of the tradition of “talking drums” in West Africa in which large drums were used to send messages across long distances, they feared and legislated against African music. The *1740 Slave Code of South Carolina*, for instance, mandated that, “It is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Province, that all due care be taken to restrain Negroes from using or keeping of drums, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes.”

As the U.S. slave population embraced Christianity, both because it was expected of them and because the many tales of redemption in the Bible offered hope, some poured African musical ideals into the singing of “spirituals,” a song form that brings European church music together with the call-and-response based vocals and multi-layered rhythms of West African music. Spirituals allowed enslaved people to express religious conviction and also to sing about freedom and justice, somewhat safely, using the words of the Bible. They also provided an outlet for musical expression that was accepted, or at least tolerated, by those in power.