

Messages in the Freedom Songs of Slavery

Museum Connection: Family and Community

Purpose: In this lesson students will be exposed to the freedom songs of slavery as they relate to the struggle for freedom and the Underground Railroad in order to have them make a personal connection to the environment that inspired the songs.

Course: High School General Music or Vocal Music Classes

Time Frame: 2-4 class periods

High School General Music ELOs:

II. B. 4. The student will identify sources of American music genres, trace the evolution of those genres, and cite well-known musicians associated with them.

II. D. 3. The student will analyze factors that influence relationships between a composer's work and his or her environment

High School Vocal Music ELOs:

II. C. 3. The student will explain ways that the principles and subject matter of various disciplines are interrelated with those of music.

II. D. 2. The student will analyze factors that influence relationships between a composer's work and environment.

Objective(s):

Students will examine messages embedded into the freedom songs of slavery, explore their relationship to the plight for freedom and the Underground Railroad, and experience a variety of performance recordings of the music in order to develop their own "quilt" of representative musical and visual works.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Quilt codes	in many African cultures, quilt patterns were a traditional way of passing down information from generation to generation. Many believe that African slaves brought those traditions with them and stitched patterns into blankets or quilts that represented secret codes with messages about how to escape. It is believed that certain patterns in certain orders would be displayed to convey secret messages to
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	escaping slaves.
Underground Railroad	a secret network of people, homes, and routes formed by sympathizers to assist runaway slaves in escaping to freedom. The “railroad” was run by abolitionists with religious or moral objections to slavery, by freed slaves, and by runaway slaves. After the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, it was important for slaves to make it to Canada especially since the law made it easier for slave owners to capture runaway slaves in the northern states of the U.S.
Work song	a song that is sung during labor to coordinate the work or for morale. Some believe that foremen encouraged singing in fields in order to keep track of slaves.
Corn-field ditties	songs sung in rural prayer meetings that are considered the predecessors of spirituals.
Spirituals	songs created by African slaves in the southern United States. The songs are a mix of the highly rhythmic traditions of many African cultures and the biblical texts of the European slave owners. Slaves often met secretly to express their religious feelings through singing and dancing because these overt expressions were feared or even forbidden by slave owners. Slaves related to the stories of overcoming oppression found in the biblical texts and used them to convey double meanings.
Code song	a song that contains specific directions or plans to escape slavery. These songs can be sacred or secular (religious or not religious in nature). The following are examples of words or phrases with double meanings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heaven—life after death meant freedom in the North • Canaan, the Promised Land, Home, Glory, to Jesus—words that signified freedom or a place where one could be free • Drinking Gourd—the Big Dipper, a group of stars that show which way is North • Chariot or Train—the Underground Railroad, or a means to escape to freedom • Steal away—sneak away secretly • Wade—take the river to avoid detection by dogs • Moses—freedom fighter, Underground Railroad conductor, or Harriet Tubman specifically • Jordan (river)—the Ohio River or another significant body of water that needed to be crossed to get to freedom

Materials:

For the Teacher:

Teacher Resource PowerPoint (includes Resource Visuals and Sheets for projection)

<http://www.msde.state.md.us/w/MessagesFreedomSongs062013.ppt>

Teacher Resource Sheet 1: A Sampler of Coded Messages in Quilt

Teacher Resource Sheet 2: Messages in Freedom Songs

Teacher Resource Sheet 3: Graphic to Compare Song Texts and Embedded Messages

Teacher Resource Sheet 4: Make Your Own Quilt

(All teacher resources are included in Teacher Resource 2 PowerPoint for projection display)

For the Student:

Student Resource Sheet 1: Song Lyrics from the Underground Railroad (pages 1, 2, 3, & 4)

Student Resource Sheet 2: “Interpreting Text for Messages”

Student Resource Sheet 3: “Make Your Own Quilt Organizer”

Student Resource Sheet 4: “My Quilt of Songs”

(Student Resource Sheets 2, 3, and 4 are also included in the Teacher Resource PowerPoint)

Resources:

Publications:

Johnson, James Weldon & Johnson, John Rosamond, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, originally published 1925 (New York, Da Capo Press, 2002).

Robertson, Gloria Grant. “Underground Railroad.” *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*. 2004. SAGE Publications. 24 Mar. 2010. http://www.sage-ereference.com/blackstudies/Article_n240.html.

Ryan, Pam Munoz. *When Marian Sang*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2002.

McBride, James. *Song Yet Sung*. New York: Riverhead, 2008.

Web Sites:

PBS: Slavery and the Making of America

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/history.html>

Society of School Librarians: The Underground Railroad Quilt

<http://societyofschoollibrarians.webs.com/undergroundrailroadquilt.htm>

The Spirituals Project

<http://www.spiritualsproject.org/>

PBS: Slavery, in the Key of Jazz

http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time_slavery.htm

Official Site of Negro Spirituals, Antique Gospel Music.
<http://www.negrospirituals.com/history.htm>

Sweet Chariot: the Story of the Spirituals
<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Freedom/coded.cfm>

Owen Sound's Black History (Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada)
<http://www.osblackhistory.com/songs.php>
<http://www.osblackhistory.com/quiltcodes.php>

The Origins of the Spirituals
http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/ChurchAndMinistry/ChurchHistory/Harry_Burleigh_Spirituals.aspx

Making Music's African American Music: Spirituals and Gospel Music.
<http://www.sbgmusic.com/html/teacher/reference/styles/spirituals.html>

Historical Background:

Music has long been a way to express all emotions in the human spectrum. For enslaved Africans, music was a way to retain a small vestige of their culture, protest the unfairness and deplorable conditions of their enslavement, provide hope for a better future, and communicate with others. After being loaded tightly onto ships headed for North America, captured Africans were sold at auctions and often forcibly separated from family members and friends.

Slave owners were fearful and suspicious of any loud musical expressions or any large gatherings of slaves. Drums were not allowed because slave owners feared that they could be used to send secret messages. Music was usually only allowed in church or in conjunction with work, unless it was a "quiet" song. Work songs typically used a call-and-response form that was a tradition in many Western African regions, and were used to motivate and lighten the burden of physical labor. Music was also used for worship in church services, and some slaves were allowed to gather outside of church to sing, pray, and dance. These "corn-field ditties" evolved into spirituals, and were allowed because they served to help spread the messages of Christianity. They were accompanied by clapping, stomping, and shouting. Slaves were all too aware of the hypocrisy of the slave owners and their promotion of Christianity. However, the slaves related closely to the Christian themes of being "saved," of finding a spiritual or temporal "home" or "promised land," of triumphing over strife, and with Old Testament figures who were viewed as inspirational heroes. Since it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write, the spirituals were passed along orally. There were often many versions of songs, so it is not uncommon to find changed phrases or even phrases that are similar in different songs.

Many of these songs had alternate meanings for the slaves. Some were merely inspirational, evoking a longing and hope for freedom and the control of one's own destiny. Others served as a means of communication between slaves. They gave specific instructions about how and when a slave could escape toward freedom, such as leaving in a particular season or at a certain time of

day, and the best means of escape. The river Jordan was often used as a metaphor for the Ohio River and the free country that lay north of it. “Home” meant a place where all were welcome to live freely. “Chariots” and later “trains” were specific references to a means of escape such as the Underground Railroad, and “stations” meant places along the journey where slaves could stop for help or provisions. Some songs even cautioned slaves to be discreet about their plans for escape. Stories of Moses or other biblical heroes often referred to freedom fighters such as Harriet Tubman, and biblical villains such as “Pharaoh” referred to slave owners and their foremen. The texts of the songs could not speak directly against slave owners, but biblical themes and other songs with seemingly innocuous meanings were allowed.

After slavery was abolished, two separate perspectives on spirituals emerged. Some African Americans wanted to put the past behind them along with anything that reminded them of the hardships and injustice. Others saw the spirituals as a historic art form and sought to weave them into the musical culture. The music continued to evolve in the churches, and was even performed in secular settings—sometimes with less religious word substitutions. The Fisk Jubilee Singers from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee are credited with spreading spirituals throughout the United States and Europe through a series of tours from 1867 to 1872. Other professional groups followed such as the Tuskegee Institute Choir, Loudin’s Jubilee Singers, and Stinton’s Jubilee Singers.

It was also common at the turn of the twentieth century for African-American school boys to form groups known as “quartets” which would perform in schoolyards and on the street. Economic strife that made rural living a hardship encouraged movement into urban areas, and a new category of artists known as the “blind singers and footloose bards” emerged. With the “Black Renaissance” of the 1920’s, the spirituals became influenced by a movement toward sophisticated forms of poetry and harmony. Classically trained soloists performed moving renditions of spirituals, and choral versions with intricate harmonies were published. In addition, as rural African-Americans moved into cities, the music evolved into Gospel songs with the addition of instrumental accompaniment.

Many musicians have played vital roles in advancing spirituals into the collective repertoire. Important composers/arrangers of spirituals are Charles Albert Tindley (1856-1933), Harry Thacker Burleigh (1866-1949), John Work II (1873–1925), John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954), R. Nathaniel Dett (1882–1943), Edward Boatner (1898-1981), William Dawson (1899–1990), Thomas Andrew Dorsey (1899-1993), John Work III (1901–1968), Undine Smith Moore (1904–1989), and Moses George Hogan (1957-2003). Notable singers of spirituals include Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, Dorothy Maynor, and Sallie Martin. More recently, operatic singers Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle have included spirituals on albums and in concerts.

Sources:

Official Site of Negro Spirituals, Antique Gospel Music. *Negro Spirituals.com*. Spiritual Workshop, Paris.[Web]. <http://www.negrospirituals.com/history.htm>
Silver Burdett. 2010. *African American Music: Spirituals and Gospel Music*. *Making music*. Retrieved from <http://www.sbgmusic.com/html/teacher/reference/styles/spirituals.html>

Lesson Development:

Motivation: Display **Teacher Resource Sheet 1, “A Sampler of Coded Messages in Quilt.”** Discuss the various patterns and their meaning for escaping slaves. Engage in a class discussion about prior knowledge of the Underground Railroad and the role of Harriet Tubman. Ask students if they are aware of the role of music in the lives of slaves. Use information from the Historical Perspective to enhance student understanding of the development of music by enslaved African-Americans.

1. Display **Teacher Resource PowerPoint 2, “Messages in freedom songs”** and allow students to guide exploration of the songs: their lyrics, the scores, and the recordings. <http://www.msde.state.md.us/w/MessagesFreedomSongs062013.ppt>
2. Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 1, “Song lyrics of freedom songs,”** and **Student Resource Sheet 2, “Interpreting text for messages.”** Instruct students to work in pairs or small groups to complete the graphic organizer on a song (of their choice or assigned by the teacher). Students will decipher embedded messages and survey recordings of their song by an assortment of artists.
 - a. Level One: students receive little or no assistance from teacher and make inferences about embedded codes or alternate meanings independently.
 - b. Level Two: teacher provides only coded words without their meanings or limited examples of coded meanings.
 - c. Level Three: teacher explicitly teaches the coded language of the songs and students find examples in the text.
3. After all groups have analyzed their texts for embedded codes, have the students present their findings and look for commonalities between the songs and messages using **Teacher Resource Sheet 3, “Graphic to Compare Song Texts and Embedded Messages.”**
4. Have students draw conclusions about the hardship of an escape to freedom and the role of the songs in the process and discuss findings as a class. Have the students compare present day challenges that they experience to the hardships of the enslaved and escaping African Americans. Using the graphic organizer **Student Resource Sheet 3, “Make Your Own Quilt Organizer,”** have students brainstorm comparisons between their hopes, joys, and struggles and the hardship of the slaves.
5. Distribute **Student Resource Sheet 4, “Make Your Own Quilt,”** or a class-generated graphic or poster, create a quilt using the students’ observations about present day hardships. Invite the students to link current song titles, graphic images, or scanned artwork to their quilt using PowerPoint or other media such as a poster.
6. **Assessment:** Students should design a label for their quilt that states their names and summarizes the meaning of the song titles and artwork as they relate to the piece of art.

7. **Closure:** Have the students present their quilts and labels to the class and engage in a discussion about the similarity between the expressions of the student-made quilts and the songs of the slaves.

Thoughtful Application(s):

- How did the singing of Spirituals influence the course of American music? How did it influence music worldwide?

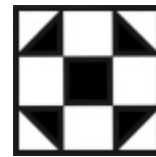
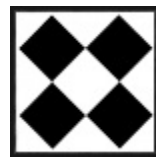
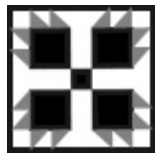
Lesson Extensions:

- The Reginald F. Lewis Museum offers several school programs that connect to the curriculum lessons.
 - *Journey in History Theater* provides living history and theatrical performances which highlight African Americans in the museum's gallery.
 - Take the theme tour, *Heritage* and experience the rich, cultural heritage of Maryland's African American community. Learn how African Americans established and influence Maryland's historic communities, social organizations, work traditions and artistic customs.
 - Contact group reservations for schedule updates.
- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum and examine the Harriet Tubman quilt. Research the origins of one of the spirituals embroidered in the quilt.
- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum and observe the following:
 - The quilts on display at the museum.
 - The evolution of music in the Baltimore area post-civil war and the representative musicians in the Strength of the Mind gallery.
- Perform a variety of spirituals in arrangements for solo voice, small ensemble, or for chorus.
- Compose a spiritual or code song using manuscript or notation software.
- Rewrite words to a spiritual, to talk about an issue facing African-Americans today.
- Discuss the life of Harriet Tubman and the history of the Underground Railroad.
- Draw a timeline or web of the history of African-American music.

Teacher Resource Sheet 1

A Sampler of Coded Messages in Quilt

<http://tinyurl.com/m6zkwv>



<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/black/quilt.asp>

Teacher Resource Sheet 2

Messages in the Freedom Songs of Slavery

**Go Down
Moses**

**Follow the
Drinking
Gourd**

**Swing Low
Sweet
Chariot**

Deep River

**Messages in
freedom
songs**

Steal Away

**Nobody
Knows the
Trouble I've
Seen**

**Wade in
the
Water**

**The Gospel
Train's A
Comin'**

Teacher Resource Sheet 3

Graphic to Compare Song Texts and Embedded Messages

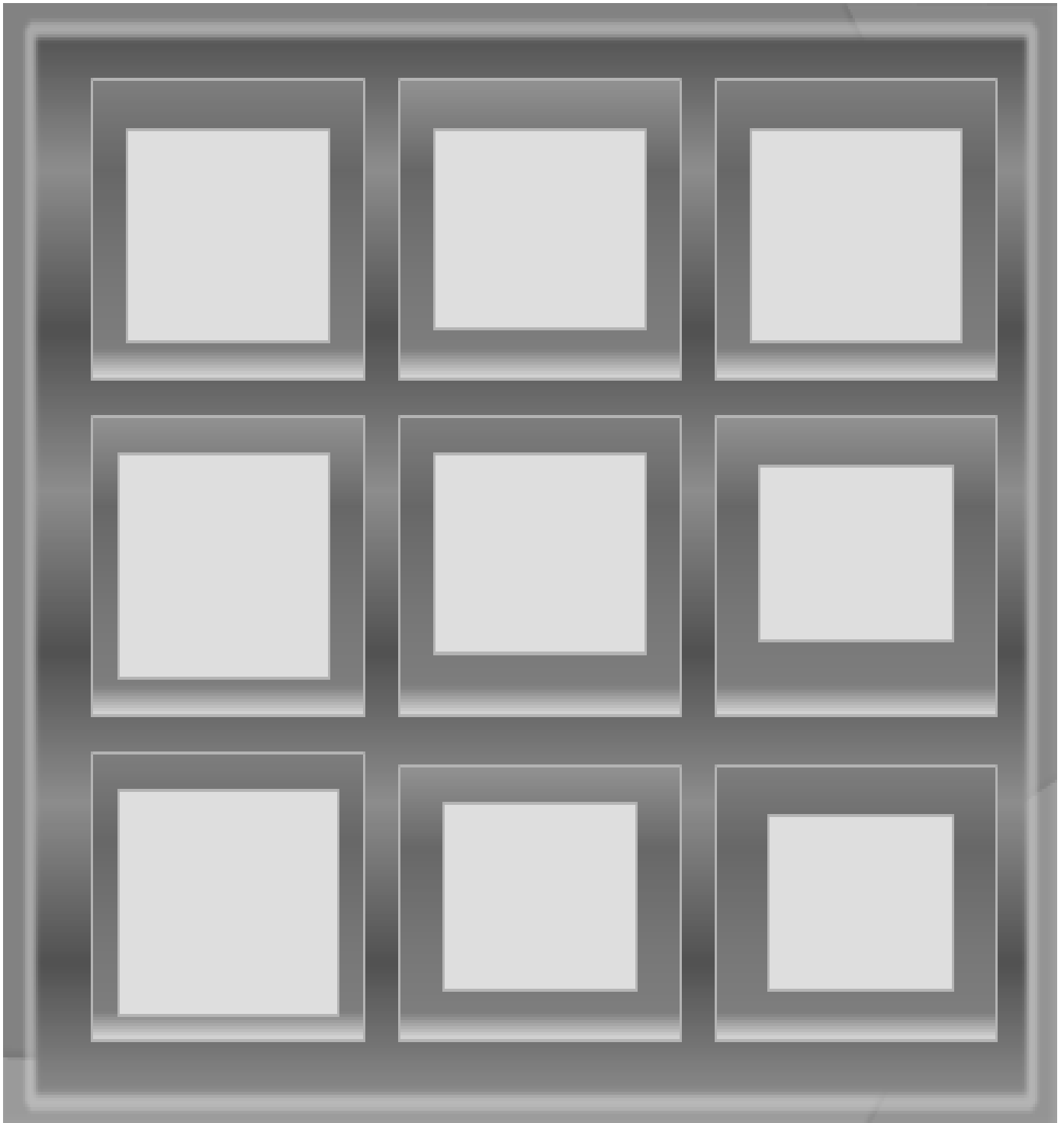
After all groups have analyzed their texts for embedded messages, have the students present their findings and look for commonalities between the songs and codes.



Teacher Resource Sheet 4

Make Your Own Quilt

Place your name in the center block and then add song titles and visuals that express something about the hardships, hopes, or joys in your life.



Student Resource Sheet 1, page 1

Song Lyrics from the Underground Railroad

GO DOWN MOSES (Second version)

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

<http://www.smallchurchmusic.com/index.php?RHymnCode=3117711633556>

NOBODY KNOWS DE TROUBLE I'VE SEEN

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/nobody_know_de_trouble_i_ve_seen.htm

Student Resource Sheet 1, page 2

STEAL AWAY TO JESUS

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

<http://www.smallchurchmusic.com/index.php?KeyWordType=Lyrics&KeyWordData=steal+away+to+Jesus>

WADE IN THE WATER

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

http://www.gospelsonglyrics.org/songs/wade_in_the_water.html

Student Resource Sheet 1, page 3

SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

http://www.negrospirituais.com/news-song/swing_low_sweet_chariot_swing_lo.htm

THE GOSPEL TRAIN

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

http://www.negrospirituais.com/news-song/the_gospel_train.htm

student Resource Sheet 1, page 4

FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

http://www.gospelsonglyrics.org/songs/follow_the_drinking_gourd.html

DEEP RIVER

For resource:

Open the Hyperlink below

http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/deep_river.htm

Student Resource Sheet 2

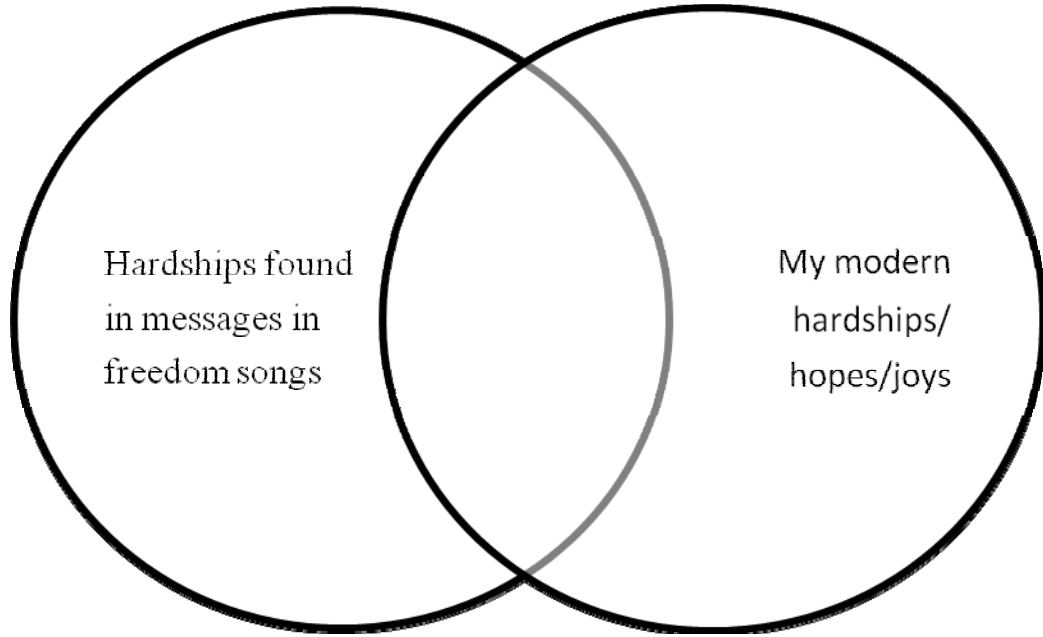
Interpreting Text for Messages

[Text from song]	• [meaning]

Student Resource Sheet 3

Make Your Own Quilt Organizer

Consider information you read about life as a slave as well as the information you can infer from the freedom song texts and compare it to modern day concerns with which people struggle. Now consider the hardships—large or small—as well as the joys and hopes that you face in your life. What would a quilt of your life look like? What music and pictures would it include? Are there any that are similar to the feelings expressed in the freedom songs?



My hardships/hopes/joys	Music or visuals that address the sentiment

Student Resource Sheet 4
My Quilt of Songs

Place your name in the center block and then add song titles and visuals that express something about the hardships, hopes, or joys in your life.

The image shows a large rectangular frame divided into nine smaller squares, arranged in three rows and three columns. Each square is intended for a student to write a song title and draw a visual representation. The squares are currently empty, serving as a template for the project.