In 1903, the great historian and sociologist W.E.B. DuBois made the prediction in his immortal *Souls of Black Folks* that the "problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." In the last chapter of that remarkable book Dubois wrote about the Negro Spirituals. He called them the "Sorrow Songs" and wrote, "And so by fateful chance the Negro folk song--the rhythmic cry of the slave--stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas."

They were called "Sorrow Songs" because "they tell of death, suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways." Yet Dubois also knew that "through all of the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope, a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence." DuBois also noted that the spiritual "has been neglected, it has been, and is half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people."

This music of "triumph and calm confidence" is the music presented here by Hank Jones and Charlie Haden. This music was the product of an enslaved African people. Using the rhythms and beats of their various African homelands, the slaves sang in circles and in call-and-response fashion. The music slowly evolved as the many African peoples over time became African American. Many of the songs are from a people yearning for equality and freedom, in this world and the next; either on these shores or in a heaven above.

Over the years, many so-called experts have tried to give the meaning of these songs in strictly religious terms alone. By doing so they emphasized the despair of slaves and later free Blacks with their conditions in this world and their hope for a better life only in the next. However, a close reading of many of the texts of the spirituals shows that these were not songs of despair, but songs of struggle. Not all believed that only in heaven would freedom come. In other words the songs were otherworldly, but also of this world. Heaven was not just above, but right here on earth, and that heaven was freedom, and the long call for 40 acres and a mule. To other Blacks it was the hope to go to the "promised land." For some, this was to return to Africa, to others it was to Canaan land. The former slave and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass wrote of the meaning of the song, "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan" for the slaves. Douglass wrote that the song meant "something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan." Indeed, Douglass did flee from slavery to the north and become the most eloquent voice against slavery of his time.
It is nearly impossible to give an author or the origin to many of the Negro spirituals. This is true of many folk songs throughout the world because many were conceived and sung long before the words were written down or the musical score noted. But many of the songs performed here have been so established in tradition that we may piece together some of their meanings and histories.

Legend and considerable historical facts tell us that the title tune, "Steal Away," may have been written by Nat Turner, who in 1831, led one of largest slave revolts in North America, in Southampton County, Virginia. Look closely at the words enclosed in these notes:

"the trumpet sounds within-a my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here,
Steal a-way, steal a-way, steal a-way to Jesus
Steal a-way, steal a-way home, I ain't got long to stay here"

One can imagine Turner and his fellow conspirators using these words as they gather themselves to seek their freedom. The song was used as a code to convene secret meetings by Turner to plan the aborted revolt. In the vocal renditions of "Steal Away," the congregation and the leader exchange responses, just as Turner did with his fellow men and women and as Jones does with Haden.

"It's Me, O Lord" is an old favorite of Hank Jones. Jones was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, but like so many African-Americans during the first decades of the 20th century, he moved north, to Pontiac, Michigan, outside of Detroit. Many of the songs Jones performs here with Charlie Haden, he heard as a youth as part of the legendary Jones Family musicians. The second verse of the song reveals it's meaning:

"Tain't my mother or my father but it's me O, Lord
Standin in the need of prayer,
Tain't the deacon or my leader but it's me O, Lord,
Standin in the need of prayer."

Far from showing the selfishness of the singer, the song reflects one's own responsibility for his or her actions.

"Nobody Knows the Trouble I See" is a staple of any performance or recording of Negro spirituals. The original words were, "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See, Nobody Knows like Jesus." But in some performances the word "like" is substituted with "but" thus changing the entire meaning of the song. The slaves knew that other Blacks and fair-minded whites did understand their plight. The second verse goes

"Brothers will you pray for me
An help me to drive ole Satan away?"

For the enslaved African, Satan was the devil and the devil was also the slave owner.
"Spiritual" was written by Charlie Haden as a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, all slain in the 1960s while seeking social, racial and economic justice. The song was first performed on the "Dreamkeeper" album by Haden and the Liberation Music Orchestra accompanied by the Oakland Youth Chorus. Charlie also played the song in Washington, D.C. with the Duke Ellington High School for the Performing Arts Chorus. The album was itself inspired by the poem by the same name written by Langston Hughes.

Many believe that "Wade in the Water" was written by Harriet Tubman. Most assuredly it was a song she often sang as she led slaves along the "Underground Railroad" to freedom in the north. The slaves immersed themselves in water as they crossed rivers on their way to freedom, which also symbolically represented earlier African norms of total immersion in the water during religious rites. Used along with other songs such as "Follow the Drinking Gourd," i.e., the Big Dipper, slaves used these songs to gather, to plan secret meetings, to unite, to worship and to follow the north star to freedom.

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is another of the well-known spirituals. During slavery, the first verse was usually sung by a leader and the Congregation followed. The song is today performed either by a soloist or full congregation in unison. The song tells of the struggle to reach Jordan: "if you get there before I do, tell all my friends I'm comin too...." Harriet Tubman also sang this song as a secret code to tell other slaves that she would be there to aid them. Indeed she was called the "Moses of her people."

"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" is perhaps the best known of the spirituals to wider audiences. The words, "Sometimes I feel like a Motherless child, A Long Way from home," can be fit into any situation by any person feeling low. Indeed, throughout the years many of the songs have been sung by people acquainted only with the lingering melodies of the songs and not with the actual words or their meanings. However, James Weldon Johnson, author of the African American anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, in their 1925-1926 masterpiece, The Book of American Negro Spirituals have shown how Blacks often changed the words to their own songs which often changed the mood and the meaning. In this case the words would read more defiantly:

Sometimes I feel like an eagle in the air  
Some-a dese mornin's bright an' fair  
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load;  
Goin' to spread my wings an' cleave the air.

"L'amour De Moi," is a French Canadian folk song, brought over from France in the 16th century and originally called "L'amour de moy" which means my love. It's no surprise that Charlie Haden chose this song. Charlie was born in Shenandoah, Iowa, and sang with the legendary Haden Family on the radio, in churches and at fairs. As a
youth he heard and sang folk songs, spirituals and hymns. Charlie first heard "L'amour De Moi" sung by Paul Robeson on an album entitled "Live Performance at The Royal Albert Hall," London, August 10, 1958. Charlie has always admired the music, artistry and courage of Robeson. And like Robeson he too has travelled the world listening to indigenous music of the native peoples. For his courage, Charlie was once jailed in Portugal for playing his song, "Song for Che" that he dedicated to the people of Angola and Mozambique who were fighting for national independence from Portugal in the 1970s. And of course much is known about Robeson's persecution and loss of passport and income because he protested McCarthyism, helped to organize labor and sang for freedom-loving people in dozens of countries.

Most of us need no introduction to the Irish-American folk song, "Danny Boy." It too was sung in the tradition of the Negro Spirituals by Paul Robeson as an expression of his love of the music of the peoples of the world, and with the Irish people.

"I Got a Robe" is one of the more upbeat and faster of the spirituals. Blacks clearly believe that they too are God's chosen, and laugh at their oppressors who surely won't rule in heaven as they have on earth. Just as you may want to dance and sing as you hear this tune just imagine the slaves singing and dancing as they sang this song, knowing that one day they would be free.

I got a robe, You got a robe,
All God's children got a robe.
When I get to heaven gonna put on my robe,
Gonna shout all over God's Heaven, Heaven, Heaven!
Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't going there,
Heaven, heaven.
Gonna shout all over God's Heaven!

If there is one song that African American and whites have shared over the last 30 years it is "We Shall Overcome." Pete Seeger tells the story of adapting it from the song "I'll Overcome" also called "I'll be All Right." The "I" becomes "we" in the collective struggle for Civil Rights for all Americans, and for those in other lands who have also identified it with their own struggles. Put to use by the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it became the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. Charlie first recorded it on his first Liberation Music Orchestra album, as a tribute to those demonstrating at the 1968 Democratic Party National Convention.

Noted historian, leader and activist since the 1960s Civil Rights movement, Vincent Harding in his seminal work, There is a River, believes that "Go Down Moses" was either
written or inspired by Denmark Vesey, a free Black who in Charleston, South Carolina, planned a massive slave revolt:

Go down, Moses  
Way down in Egypt land.  
Tell ole Pharoah,  
Let my people go!

"Go Down, Moses" is also well known to many. I can remember playing it in the high school band. But it did not sound like this. This was another song that Blacks used to spread the word of their plans for freedom. It was used in the Underground Railroad and in more overt forms of resistance. It relates the plight of the enslaved African to that of the early Israelites. Perhaps along with "Steal Away," "Go Down Moses" was among the favorites during the Civil Rights era especially in the churches where many of the marches and boycotts were organized.

The last of the spirituals is "My Lord, What a Mornin." While it reveals a sadness concerning the human condition of the Blacks, the verses have a dual meaning. "My Lord what a mornin when the stars begin to fall" later refrains into "You'll hear the trumpet sound to wake the nation's underground." This seemingly is a reference to the signal that will be given to join the Underground Railroad to freedom. In fact, in later years when the slave owners figured out the meaning of some of these songs, they banned the songs, the gathering of slaves in large numbers and even their religious services. During the U.S. Civil War, African American soldiers sang these songs as they gathered in circles at evening camp meetings, much like their mother and fathers sang in circles in Africa. A white company commander, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson was so moved by the words and rhythms of the songs that he wrote about them in his 1870 book, Army Life in a Black Regiment.

The last part of the recording is a medley of hymns. Just as Hank heard the spirituals as a youth, Charlie heard and sang these hymns with his family. The hymns unlike the spirituals were written down and their origin can be traced. These songs were written by whites but unlike the spirituals they were sung by Black and white people. It is interesting to note that some of the earlier white musicologists tried to claim that the Blacks could not have written the "Negro Spirituals" because their intelligence and human condition would not have allowed them to construct such melodies. The African Americans never minded singing the hymns realizing that they too were full of hope and beauty. As for the earlier claim that Blacks stole from the earlier hymns, ethno-musicologists have clearly refuted this showing the intricate links between the Spirituals--their African rhythm, melody and lyrics--and the Black experience in America.

The first of the hymns, "Abide with me! Fast Fall the even tide" was written in 1847 by Scottish-born Henry Francis Lyte. Most of his life was spent preaching among the fisherman and sailors in Lower Brixam, England. In 1861, William Henry Monk, doctor of
Music and choir director of King's College, Cambridge, put Lyte's verse to music and it has been with us ever since.

"Just as I am Without One Plea" was written by the Englishwoman Charlotte Elliot in 1836. Sick and frail most of her life, the song first appeared in the second edition of a work called "The Invalid's Handbook." The song reflected her thoughts about her conditions. Feeling dismal and unworthy because of her ailments, she asked a visiting minister what she must do to be saved. His response was that God would accept her just as she was. Thus the words, "Just as I am." It is no wonder that this song was adopted by those that sang the spirituals. The music was written in 1849 by William B. Bradbury a noted composer of the time.

"What a Friend we Have in Jesus" is known to many people. Although some attribute the words to Horatius Bonar, it was in fact written by Joseph Scriven, with the original title "A Song in the Night." Born in England in 1820, he emigrated to Canada in 1845. He learned about his mother's illness in far off England and unable to visit her, wrote her a letter and poem. Later a friend came upon it and Charles C. Converse set it to music around 1875.

The last of the hymns, "Amazing Grace," was written in 1799. Although arguably one of oldest songs presented here, it still retains its vibrancy. Perhaps that is because many of us sang it in church but also know the renditions by Aretha Franklin, Joan Baez and Mahalia Jackson. It too has been used as a song by anyone in need of hope regardless of color or creed. The song was written by Sir John Newton, a reformed ship captain of slave ships and slave trader. The words reflect his "seeing the light."

"Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I'm found
Was Blind but Now I see."

These songs performed here as well as the entire body of Negro Spirituals were first performed in public by The Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn. in 1871. The Jubilee Singers later travelled to Europe on a triumphant tour to raise funds to keep the ensemble alive. Here nine young African-American men and women (eight of whom were born under slavery) went to Europe to seek funds unobtainable at home. In Europe they were gloriously received.

In 1925, the young Paul Robeson again awakened the world to these songs. The New York Times critic wrote about his concert at the Greenwich Village Theater, "It's their cry from the depths, this universal humanism, that touches the heart....Sung by one man, they voiced the sorrow and hopes of a people."

A few years later in 1939, the great diva Marian Anderson was asked to perform her rendition of these songs at Constitution Hall, the theater of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Because of its policy of racial segregation, the DAR would not
allow the concert to be held there. One great lady saved the day. Then First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and others arranged for Ms. Anderson to sing at the Washington Monument with more than 75,000 people—Black and white—braving the cold on Easter Sunday to hear her sing to the world the music of her people. Mrs. Roosevelt was a champion of civil rights. She had long prodded her husband, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to sign an anti-lynching law, to resign from a racially restricted country club in Georgia, and to open up the New Deal to Blacks.

In the 1940s Duke Ellington performed some of these songs at Carnegie Hall. However, it was during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s that the “Freedom Singers” and other groups like activist and scholar Bernice Johnson Reagon began to resurrect the legacy of these songs and put them to use as they protested the segregation of the Jim Crow south.

In the mid-1970s Archie Shepp and Horace Parlan, recorded an album, "Goin Home," in duet form that placed before jazz audiences renditions of the spirituals as did Hank Jones of earlier recorded versions of "It's me O Lord." In recent years both opera soprano Kathleen Battle and mezzo-soprano to soprano diva Jesse Norman have sung and recorded the spirituals together at Carnegie Hall and in separate works.

In 1994 we also witnessed an important tribute to Negro spirituals with the 26-part series Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Musical Traditions, produced by National Public Radio in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution under the guidance of Prof. Bernice Johnson Reagon.

I first heard my grandmother sing these songs as she washed the clothes of the rich white people in the Piney Woods of Alabama during the Civil Rights era. I later heard them as a student at Fisk University on many lonely nights as I watched the Jubilee Singers rehearse in the chapel 100 years after their founding. And there I pondered the fate of my country, of Vietnam, and myself, as many of my friends went off and died unwillingly in a war that was not their own. And today as a scholar and activist, these songs remain with me.

In music as beautiful as the words of Tubman, Douglass and DuBois, Mr. Jones and Mr. Haden place these haunting melodies before us. Hear the plea, sing along, cry, and then smile the smile of a triumphant people who have endured all, resisted the bitterest of oppression, then and now; and yet have kept alive their spirit, their hope and their dignity. Wake up and shout "My Lord What a Mornin," and then "Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand"..."Lifting Them as You Rise." And ask yourself as Dr. DuBois did "Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs ring true?" Just listen to Hank and Charlie, and you will have the answer.

-- Maurice Jackson
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Maurice Jackson is an historian of colonial North America focusing on issues of race and slavery and of revolutionary struggles in 17th and 18th century America, England, France and Haiti. But it is as a jazz lover, educator and 20-year social activist in Washington, D.C., that I know him best. Ruth and I consider Maurice, his wife, Laura, and their children, Lena and Miles among our dear friends.

Maurice has just began work on his doctoral dissertation. He later plans to write a social biography on the French-born Anthony Benezet (1713-1784), who moved to Philadelphia, became a Quaker and was a leading figure in the anti-slavery movement in France, Britain and America. Benezet founded the African Free School in Philadelphia where he taught Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, founder of the A.M.E. church.

Charlie Haden
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