The Original Jubilees Come to Life
Written and directed by Dr. Paul T. Kwami

In this concert performance, Dr. Kwami and his current students pay tribute to the original nine Fisk Jubilee Singers and their rich legacy. By experiencing the personal stories of the trailblazers who paved the way for future generations of this world-renowned ensemble, audiences may learn the significance of the Negro Spirituals and their values in today’s culture and share in the unique bond of this special choral ensemble.
The Fisk Jubilee Singers

Organized as a choral ensemble in 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers® have played an essential role in introducing and sharing the tradition of the Negro spiritual with the world. This remarkable ensemble has traveled the world singing sacred songs and raising funds to support Fisk University for the past 150 years. Today, the ensemble continues to perform globally and is comprised of Fisk University students who are selected annually through an audition process. The ensemble has been inducted into the Music City Walk of Fame and the Gospel Music Hall of Fame. In 2008, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were also awarded the National Medal of Arts, the nation’s highest artistic honor by President George W. Bush. Most recently, the Fisk Jubilee Singers won a 2021 GRAMMY® for Best Roots Gospel Album for “Celebrating Fisk! (The 150th Anniversary Album).”

Since 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers have had 16 musical directors. Mr. George L. White was the first. He named the singers Fisk Jubilee Singers after the biblical reference (Leviticus 25) to the year of the “jubilee” in which Hebrew Law required that all slaves be set free. Jubilee became a term applied to the choral style of singing these traditional melodies, and it was adopted in the names of most groups who sang in this style. (Source: Singing Our Song Educator Kit)

Fisk University and the Jubilee Singers

In 1866, barely six months after the end of the Civil War and just two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, three men (John Ogden, Reverend Erastus Milo Cravath, and Reverend Edward P. Smith) established the Fisk School in former Union Army barracks. These men shared a dream of an educational institution that would be open to all, regardless of race, and would measure itself by “the highest standards, not of Negro education, but of American education at its best.”

However, only five years after it opened, the school was in dire financial straits. Hoping to raise money to save the school, Fisk treasurer and music professor George L. White gathered a small group of students and set out on a concert tour, taking the entire contents of the University treasury with them for travel expenses.

During their concert tours, the Jubilee Singers introduced much of the world to the spiritual as a musical genre. In the process, they also raised funds to preserve their University and build Jubilee Hall (pictured right), the South’s first permanent structure built for the education of black students. Today, Jubilee Hall, designated a National Historic Landmark by the US Department of Interior in 1975, houses a painting of the Jubilee Singers, commissioned by Queen Victoria during the 1873 tour as a gift from England to Fisk.

Response to the Jubilee Singers

In their historical context, the Jubilee Singers made quite a political statement. Surprise, curiosity and some hostility were the early audience response to these young black singers who did not perform in the “minstrel fashion,” a blackface spectacle with racist overtones which was common during this time period. In fact, the Jubilee Singers made a point of not including any of the jokes, dances, or popular tunes that would have been associated with the minstrel show. Even more impressive for the time period, they insisted on performing for integrated audiences, performed songs with pointed meanings, and would not accept discriminatory treatment while on tour. Standing firm in their beliefs, the Jubilee Singers continued to tour and sing, regardless of the obstacles they faced. They broke racial barriers in the US and abroad, all the while raising money in support of their school. It wasn’t easy, but eventually skepticism was replaced by the standing ovations and critical praise the students deserved.
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Written and Directed by Dr. Paul T. Kwami, Musical Director

Steal Away to Jesus  Arr. Thomas Rutling
Rise! Shine! For Thy Light is A-Comin  Arr. John W. Work III
Kristen Jones, soprano.
The Gospel Train  Arr. Thomas Rutling
Kemani Iwu, tenor
Show Me the Way  Arr. Thomas Rutling
I’m A-Rolling  Arr. Thomas Rutling
Reign, Master Jesus  Arr. Thomas Rutling
Elise Golden, soprano

CAST
IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Minnie Tate ............................... Elise Golden
Greene Evans ............................. Tory Westbrook
Isaac Dickerson .......................... Hezekiah Robinson
Jennie Jackson .......................... Kristen Jones
Maggie Porter ............................ Trinity Hervey
Ella Sheppard ............................ Imani Suitt
Thomas Rutling .......................... Kemani Iwu
Benjamin Holmes ........................ Jeffrey Casey
Eliza Walker .............................. Eren Brooks

Additional spirituals to be selected from the following.

Done Made My Vow, arranged by John W. Work III
Ain-A That Good News, arranged by William L. Dawson
My Lord, what a Morning, arranged by Harry T. Burleigh
Run, Mourner Run, arranged by John W. Work III
An’ I Cry, arranged by Noah F. Ryder
Great Day, arranged by Paul T. Kwami
Elijah Rock, arranged by Jester Hairston
Down by the Riverside, arranged by Paul T. Kwami
Old Time Religion, arranged by Moses Hogan
Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham, arranged by John W. Work III
Rockin’ Jerusalem, arranged by John W. Work III
Walk Together Children, arranged by Moses Hogan
The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers® 1871

In 1871, the original nine Fisk Jubilee Singers gathered for a group portrait. The Civil War had ended only six years earlier, and the choir was preparing a performance tour to raise money for their school. The day they departed, October 6, is now celebrated as Jubilee Day at Fisk University in their honor.

From left: Minnie Tate, Greene Evans, Isaac Dickerson, Jennie Jackson, Maggie Porter, Ella Sheppard, Thomas Rutling, Benjamin Holmes, and Eliza Walker

Ella Sheppard b 1851 Soprano

Ella Sheppard’s father bought her out of slavery when she was three years old and fled to Cincinnati. At 15 she came to Tennessee to be a teacher, then used her small earnings to enroll at Fisk University. She was 17 years old when the Fisk Jubilee Singers left for the first tour. She continued with all three tours of the US and Europe and became Assistant Director of the Singers. After she married in Washington DC, Ella and her husband settled in Nashville where she became a prominent speaker on African American and Women’s Issues. Ella Sheppard is buried in Nashville’s Old City Cemetery.

Jennie Jackson b 1852 Soprano

The granddaughter of a man enslaved at the home of President Andrew Jackson, Jennie Jackson was born free because of a deathbed decree from her mother’s slave holder. In fear of being re-enslaved, they fled into hiding. She joined the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1872 where she was recognized for her outstanding soprano voice. Jennie performed with the singers for five years. She continued to sing and lived in Cincinnati with her husband until her death in 1910.
Maggie Porter b 1853 Soprano

Born a slave in Lebanon, Tennessee, Maggie Porter’s family was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. As a teenager she was able to attend school, teach, and then enroll at Fisk for two years. She went on to teach in other schools for freed slaves. George White asked Maggie to return and join his choir soon to depart on tour. She toured with the Fisk Jubilee Singers for seven years and remained in Germany before returning to Nashville. With her husband she had a successful career singing with former Jubilee Singers and toured the US, Canada and Europe. Maggie and her husband settled in Detroit, and at her death in 1942 she was the last living member of the original nine singers.

Minnie Tate b 1857 Alto

Minnie Tate, the youngest of the original Jubilee Singers was born in Nashville, Tennessee. Her grandmother had been enslaved in Mississippi, and upon emancipation the family headed toward Ohio, but settled in Tennessee. Minnie was born after her mother moved to Nashville. She was educated in her mother’s home which she had opened as a school for other black children. She was 16 years old when she departed on the first tour to Europe.

Eliza Walker b 1857 Alto

Born into slavery near Nashville, Mary Eliza Walker joined the Fisk Jubilee Singers at age 13. She toured with the choir then married a fellow Fisk Jubilee Singer, Thomas Crump. While living in Nashville the couple performed together and organized other local performers for concerts. Later they moved to Chicago where Thomas was a Pullman Porter. They lived in Chicago and Eliza managed the Walker Jubilee Singers who also toured performing many of the same repertoire.

Isaac Dickerson b 1852 Tenor

Orphaned at the age of five, Isaac Dickerson lived his early life enslaved in Wytheville, Virginia. After he was freed, he made his way to Chattanooga, learned to read and write, and attended a mission school in Memphis that was burned in the Memphis Riot of 1866. After a short time working as a teacher, he came to Nashville to attend Fisk, and joined the singers in their first tour of the US and Britain. While on tour he was invited to attend school at the University of Edinburgh where he became a minister and stayed to preach in London. He died suddenly at age forty-eight, remembered fondly by his congregation and choir.

Thomas Rutling Tenor

Born into slavery in Wilson County, Tennessee Thomas Rutling learned to read and write from his sister after his plantation owner was captured by the Union Army. He was later recommended for entry to the American Missionary Association’s Fisk School. He earned his tuition by waiting tables for Fisk’s teachers, a skill he had learned in his former plantation’s dining room. Rutling was asked to join the tour in 1871 and continued with the Fisk Jubilee Singers for seven years in all of their tours. Following the tours, he returned to Europe, became a voice teacher and began arranging and performing in churches. He remained in Europe and lived in England until his death on April 26, 1915.

Greene Evans b 1848 Bass

Born into slavery on a large plantation near Memphis, Tennessee, Greene Evans was emancipated following the Civil War. He attended school and worked in Memphis, then came to Nashville and Fisk University in 1872. Evans participated in the first tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and was admired not only for his singing but also for his oratorical skills. Following the tour, he returned to Memphis to work as deputy wharf-master and was elected to the Memphis City Council. Later he served for two years in the Tennessee General Assembly. With his wife and young daughter, Greene Evans moved to Chicago where he lived until his death in 1914.

Benjamin Holmes b 1846 Bass

Benjamin Holmes arrived in Chattanooga, Tennessee after being sold from his birthplace in Charleston, South Carolina. While in Chattanooga, Holmes worked in his new owner’s hotel and by age 14 he had learned to read and write. Three years later in 1863 when the Union Army occupied Chattanooga, Holmes volunteered his service to General Jefferson Columbus Davis for the duration of the war. After returning to Tennessee he worked for a barber, then came to Nashville for education at Fisk University. He taught in local schools to earn his tuition. Holmes toured with the Jubilee Singers, but ultimately quit the group after clashes with the director George White. Benjamin Holmes died in Nashville at the young age of 28.
Discussion Questions

- **Take a closer look:**
  - What is a portrait? What do you expect to see in a portrait?
  - What are your observations of the portrait of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers?
  - What do you know about photography in 1871 compared to how we capture images today?
  - What if this portrait came to life for just a short while? What would you want to ask the original Fisk Jubilee Singers?
  - How would you create a portrait of your class? How would it be similar? How would you pose? How would you dress?
  - Imagine your class portrait is viewed 150 years from now. What do you think the viewers would learn or wonder about you?

- **Have Character:** Discuss the values listed on this page that were demonstrated by the original Fisk Jubilee Singers* and have continued to be important values of the Jubilee Singers throughout the years. As you mention each value, ask students to give you a definition of what each one means. Have students consider a person (past or present) that they feel exemplified these values.

- **Our Class Our Legacy:** Create your own fictitious (or real!) performance group to represent your school or your class. Working in small groups, decide what form of artistic expression you would include (songs, plays, dance, or forms of visual art.) How would you express what is important to you and your group? Where would you travel? Compare the antique photographs of the Fisk Jubilee Singers* on their website to the contemporary images of the singers, including the photograph on the first page of this guidebook. How are they different? How are they the same? What type of portrait or picture would you take to capture your group?

- **Jubilee:** Conduct a word study of “jubilee.” What does it mean? Why would the group use this word in their name? Encourage students to draw a picture that shows what the word represents, or what its meaning makes them feel.

- **Take a Stand**
  - What does it mean to take a stand for something? Have you ever stood up for something?
  - What challenges might you face by taking a stand for something?
  - Is it easy or hard to stand up for something you believe in?
  - What issues are important to you today?

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The following values, which the original Fisk Jubilee Singers demonstrated, are still important values for today’s Jubilee Singers.

- Leadership
- Courage
- Commitment
- Dedication
- Self confidence
- Love and respect for one’s culture and heritage
- Selflessness
- Recognition and use of one’s talent
Dr. Paul Kwami D.M.A. (Musical Director) – Professor Paul T. Kwami is the Musical Director of the multi-award-winning Fisk Jubilee Singers® and Coordinator of the Fisk University Music Discipline. Kwami was born in Ghana, West Africa, into a musical family with his father becoming his first music teacher. He studied music at Ghana’s National Academy of Music and taught there until immigrating to the U.S., becoming a student at Fisk University where he joined the Fisk Jubilee Singers®. He studied music at Western Michigan University and graduated with the Master of Music degree. He received the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree from the American Conservatory of Music. In the spring of 1994, Kwami served as part-time director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers® and became the full-time musical director in the fall of 1994. He is the first African to direct the ensemble, the first to hold the Curb-Beaman Chair position and the first named as the Mike Curb Jubilee Singers Endowed Chair. During Kwami’s tenure, the Fisk Jubilee Singers have received several awards including the first GRAMMY®, the first Dove Award, the Recording Academy Honors and the 2008 National Medal of the Arts. The ensemble also has been inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, the Music City Walk of Fame and the American Classical Music Hall of Fame. He is the Executive Producer of the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ recordings, “Rise, Shine, Fisk Jubilee Singers Live in Concert.” He is the Co-Executive Producer of “In Bright Mansions” and “Fisk Jubilee Singers® Celebrating Fisk!” the 150th Anniversary album. Under his directorship, the Fisk Jubilee Singers® have performed in many great venues in Italy, Spain, Bahamas, the United Kingdom, Germany, Ghana and the United States of America.

Sources

Official website of Fisk University: http://www.fisk.edu

Official website of the Fisk Jubilee Singers: http://www.fiskjubileesingers.org/

Fisk University John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library Special Collections

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division https://www.loc.gov/item/2010647805/


*Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory*, a PBS award-winning television documentary series, produced in 1999 by WGBH/Boston. In addition to the film, the website includes biographies, articles, a timeline, and Jubilee Songs with lyrics. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/singers/


Andrew Ward, Independent Contributor for BlackPast.org

BlackPast.org (www.blackpast.org) is the largest free and unrestricted website on African American history currently on the Internet. Founded on February 1, 2007 in Seattle, Washington, the site now has over 10,000 pages of information.

Recommended websites to learn more about each singer:

Ella Sheppard  www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/singers-sheppard/
Jennie Jackson  www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/jackson-jennie-1852-1910/
Maggie Porter  www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/singers-porter/
Minnie Tate  www.blackthen.com/minnie-tate-youngest-member-fisk-university-original-jubilee-singers/
Eliza Walker  https://usctwillcotn.blogspot.com/2017/02/
Isaac Dickerson  https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/dickerson-isaac-1852-1900/
Thomas Rutling  https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/singers-rutling/
Greene Evans  https://tennsos.org/TSLA/aale/evans.htm
Benjamin Holmes  https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/holmes-benjamin-m-1846-1875/