CODED SPIRITUALS

A spiritual is a religious song, often in the Christian African American tradition, which expresses ideas of a personal closeness and relationship with God. African American spirituals often make use of certain musical idioms. Among these are “call and response” in which one phrase is answered with another. Another characteristic is the use of “syncopated rhythm”, the accenting of a beat that would not normally be accented or the absence of a beat where one would usually be accented. Spirituals are highly emotional songs. They often express intense feelings of joy and sorrow. It is also common in African American spirituals to compare the believer or the church to figures from the Old Testament. In African American history, especially during the experience of enslavement, spirituals were sometime coded, meaning that the meaning was intentionally disguised from the slave holders and other whites through use of words or phrases understood by the singers, but not by the slave holders. An example would be to refer to the Free States as “the promised land” or the slave holders as “Pharaoh”. Historians still debate the extent to which spirituals were intentionally coded. In any case, listeners often interpreted lyrics that referred to the suffering of biblical heroes as referencing their own personal suffering and drew strength from such songs.