



Music and the Underground Railroad

A Presentation by Kim & Reggie Harris

Performance Guide



www.kimandreggie.com

A special thanks to Walton Arts Center in AR for their assistance in preparation of this guide.

KIM & REGGIE HARRIS PRESENT: MUSIC & THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

A GUIDE FOR PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE THEATRE KNOWING HOW TO HANDLE THE EXCITEMENT IS THE FIRST STEP

LIVE THEATRE

When young people attend a live theatrical performance for the first time, they often do not realize how different it is from watching a movie or television show. Because the performers and audience are together in the same room, they are creating the event together.

A live presentation has not been prerecorded with the mistakes edited out. This makes it riskier for the performer and more exciting for the audience. It also means that the audience has a real contribution to make to the overall experience. Audience members affect those around them, as well as the performer. The more energy and attention the audience “gives” to the performer, the more the performer can give to the audience!

BEING AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

A theater is an energetically charged space. When the “house lights” (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, everyone feels the thrill of anticipation. By discussing appropriate audience behavior as a class ahead of time, the students will be much better equipped to handle their feelings and express their enthusiasm in appropriate ways during the performance.

HERE ARE SOME KEY WORDS

CONCENTRATION

Performers use concentration to focus their energy on stage. If the audience watches in a concentrated way, this supports the performers and they can do their best work.

QUIET

The theater is a very “live” space. This means that sound carries very well, all over the auditorium. It also means that other audience members and the performers can hear any sounds in the audience. This can destroy everyone’s concentration and spoil a performance.

RESPECT

Applause is the best way for an audience in a theater to share its enthusiasm and to appreciate the performers. It is acceptable to applaud if the audience is spontaneously responding to a well-received moment in the performance. It is customary to continue clapping until the curtain drops or the lights on stage go dark.

COMMON SENSE

The same rules of behavior that are appropriate in any formal public place apply to the theater. If audience members conduct themselves in orderly, quiet ways, with each person respecting the space of those around him/her, everyone will be able to fully enjoy the performance experience.

“Preparing Students for the Theater” is adapted from the Music Center of Los Angeles Education Department’s performance guide.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

MUSIC & THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD is a multimedia exploration of slavery and the quest for freedom, presented in story, song and narratives developed by Kim & Reggie Harris.

The performance is a dynamic and carefully researched presentation that incorporates interchangeable songs, stories, interactive participation with the audience and an award winning DVD segment that highlights important aspects of this powerful historical chapter in America.

As a result of their years of performing experience, Kim and Reggie Harris present a seasoned performance, sharing a passion for the subject, their familiarity with educational “best practices,” and incorporating the principles of Universal Learning Design (the need to address various learning styles and abilities in every audience). The Harris’ are able to adapt any performance to fit the needs of each situation whether it be K-2, middle - high school, college, intergenerational family or the general public.

Therefore, a set “Order of Performance” is not usually listed. Songs in the performance, however, will most often include: “Oh Freedom,” “Wade in the Water,” “Steal Away,” “Free at Last,” “No More Auction Block,” “Let Us Break Bread Together on our Knees” and other spirituals as well as stories “in the tradition.”

Stories are used to highlight and connect the audience with the material and give historical background in a narrative way.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

KIM & REGGIE HARRIS are internationally known singers, song leaders, songwriters, and teaching artists who reside in Middleburgh, New York. Their music ranges from traditional songs and spirituals to folk/rock and jazz. The Harris’ perform throughout the world, teaching and building community through music and storytelling. They are celebrated as artist/educators whose music is both entertaining and inspirational.

Their recording “Steal Away: Songs of the Underground Railroad” is included in many museum and library collections and is widely used as a resource all over the world. The Harris’ were featured performers in the 1988 and subsequent editions of textbook series, “World of Music,” by Silver Burdett. They have developed educational materials for over 25 years in their roles as educators and presenters—and as workshop leaders—in the Art in Education Partnership Program for the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, as well as at other centers of the arts and learning through the US and Canada.

You may purchase their CDs and receive information about other educational materials produced by Kim and Reggie by visiting their website: www.kimandreggie.com or at or at Appleseed Recordings. www.appleseedmusic.com.

You can write to Kim and Reggie at P.O. Box 18871, Philadelphia, PA 19119

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Slavery came to North America almost as soon as the first settlers came to these shores. Slaves were considered the property of the men and women who owned them, and were treated as such. Like cattle or horses, the slaves were often called “stock.” Slaves were mostly never in control of their lives or their fate. They were not considered smart or even human; were not allowed to go to school, and in many cases, were punished or beaten if they taught themselves to read.

From the time they were born, slave masters controlled their every action. If slaves married, it was not a legal wedding nor was it officially recorded. When their children were born, few birth certificates were issued. Families were often separated at their owners’ discretion. If the master could get a good trade, he did not think twice about selling a mother away from her children.

Slaves might learn that there could be a better life from “shepherds” (those who travelled into slave territory to encourage escape) or hear information through the “Black grapevine” and try to make an escape. Although there were slaves in the North, many African-Americans living there were free, and jobs could be found. Further north in Canada, the slave laws in the United States did not apply, so slaves reaching the border were forever free.

About the Performance...

What was the Underground Railroad?

The Underground Railroad was a term that was popular in the United States to designate a system of steps, from the South to Canada, which existed before the Civil War. This route allowed slaves to escape to freedom. The system stretched across northern states like Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Michigan and the New England states. Along the way, many families let the escaped slaves stay in their homes during the day, since the slaves had to travel mainly at night.

Although the system was called an “underground railroad,” it was neither underground nor a railroad. It was called “underground” because it was a secret, and “railroad” because railroad terms were used as codes. For example, escaping slaves were called “packages” or “freight.” The routes were called “lines,” the stopping places “stations,” and the people who aided the slaves were “conductors.”

Why did slaves sing spirituals?

African-American Spirituals rose from the ordeal of slavery. These songs have rhythmic appeal, great beauty, and Biblical themes that express a range of emotions. Each song probably began as the inspiration of a talented individual among the slaves, and was formed by the group. The songs passed from person to person, making the original authors anonymous. They are songs of faith and also songs of freedom.

One way in which spirituals were used as codes for escaping slaves can be seen in the song, “Steal Away,” which could be sung in the night as a signal of an impending escape. “Green trees are bending” in the lyric could suggest that a good time to escape would be springtime, when flowers and trees were blooming and temperatures were more conducive to travel.

If you look into the night sky towards the north, you will see two star constellations that we call the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper. Slaves used hollowed-out gourds for water dippers. So to follow the drinking gourd meant to follow the North Star, which is in the handle of the Little Dipper, to head north towards freedom.

Many people consider spirituals to be one of America’s greatest contributions to the world of music.

This program celebrates works of African-American artists, educators, inventors, explorers, scientists, poets, and other heroes and heroines from every walk of life that might not be well known to students.

Using music, both original and traditional, the Harris’ work follows a long tradition of African-American music.



Classroom Connection

Activity: *Free At Last*

Goals:

- To introduce students to Dr. Martin Luther King
- To teach students how a song from history influenced and had meaning for the great black leader.

Background:

Over the border in Canada and in free states, groups of escaped slaves would sometimes gather, waiting for new escapees to cross over into freedom. When this happened they would sing “Free at Last” in celebration as the newly freed slaves prayed, cried, and jumped for joy.

This song was a favorite of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He quoted from it in his famous “**I Have a Dream**” speech. “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I’m free at last!”

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Discuss “freedom” with students.
- 2) What freedoms did slaves not have? (Type of workplace, family relationships, schooling, location of home, food, etc.)
- 3) What would it be like to gain these freedoms after not having them?
- 4) Would any aspects of becoming “free” be scary?
- 5) Why are personal choices important?

Discuss Dr. Martin Luther King and his importance to American history with your students. Ask why they think he chose to quote the song “Free At Last” at the close to “I Have a Dream.”

Sing the song “Free At Last” together with your class and teach them the words and music to this song of joy.



In the Classroom...

Free At Last

Free at last, free at last, I thank God I'm free at last; Free at last,

Free at last,..... I thank God I'm free at last. O free at last.

1. 2. FINE

1. 'Way down yonder in the grave-yard walk, I thank God I'm
2. On a my kness when the light pass'd by, I thank God I'm
3. Some of these morn-ings, bright and fair, I thank God I'm

free at last,..... Me and my Je. sus gain' to
free at last,..... Tho't... my soul... would...
free at last, Gain' meet... King Je.... sus.....

meel and talk,.... I thank God I'm free at last, O
rise and fly,..... I thank God I'm free at last, O
in the air,..... I thank God I'm free at last, O

D.C.

In the Classroom (continued)....

Activity: Freedom Train

A classroom activity based on the Underground Railroad for students in grades 2-5

Goal:

- To enrich the study of an amazing part of American history: the escape of slaves on the Underground Railroad

Objectives:

- This lesson is designed to:
 - Teach two songs sung by the escaping slaves and their rescuers
 - Identify several meanings used by slaves in their escapes
 - Explain the meaning of codes and their uses
 - Encourage participation in singing and other activities

Background:

The story of the Underground Railroad is actually many stories. People from all walks of life, free and enslaved, all colors and creeds, worked together toward one end: the defeat of slavery in America.

Between 1830 and 1860, thousands of slaves fled to freedom in Canada, to free states in the United States, and west into the territories. They were on a train with no engine and no tracks—The Underground Railroad. During these years, quiet heroes and sheroes, backed by their belief in freedom, helped runaway slaves by hiding them in secret rooms, showing them the way through dangerous territory, and providing food and transportation between stops on the secret routes.

In most slave states, it was illegal to teach slaves to read. Many different methods had to be devised to help fugitive slaves escape and find their way through unfamiliar places. Codes were devised and messages were passed along through songs. The codes and songs sent information as well as messages of hope and freedom.

Preparation:

In the classroom or another large area, set up six stations where different activities will take place.

Let the starting and finishing point be a centralized area where all students can sit together.



In the Classroom (continued)....

Freedom Train (continued...)

Introduction to Activity:

With the stations arranged and all the students sitting together in the middle, introduce the idea of slavery, people being sold at auction and separated from family and friends.

Explain that the **Underground Railroad was not a train**; it was people helping slaves to escape. Slaves also helped themselves and each other to find freedom.

Teach the song “**Trampin**” to the class. The word “heaven” was a code word; it meant a place to be free. “Trampin” was a walking song. Some slaves had to walk hundreds of miles to freedom.

Ask your students, “Have you ever walked a long way?” “Why?” “Was it for a good cause?” “How did you feel when you reached the destination?”

The Activity:

After the singing, send the station-masters to their positions and **divide the class into six groups**. Send groups of students to each station, beginning at **station #1** and ending at **station #6**.

At each station, the station-master asks them to find or do something. As the students complete the task at each station, each receives a symbolic emblem to pin on their belt from the station-master.

Logistics:

While students wait to begin the stations, and after they have completed the last station, they can use the extra time to draw pictures of the Underground Railroad, or draw their classmates at the station.

The waiting or returning students could also make belts for the station master, which have all the same emblems but also one extra - **a red heart** as a reward for helping slaves get away.

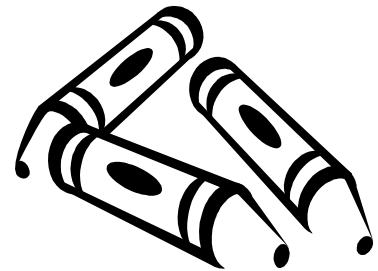
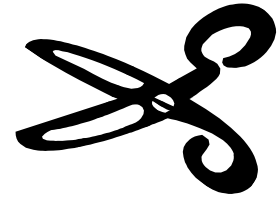


In the Classroom (continued)....

Before Getting Started:

Supplies & Materials:

- Paper & Crayons for each student
- CD Player with the CD "Steal Away"
(available from Kim and Reggie- information available under "About the Performance")
- Belt-sized cloth strips (1 per student)
- Safety pins (6 per student, 7 per station-master)
- Emblems cut out of construction paper or cloth
(1 of each per student)
 - Gold Star
 - Green Moss (shaped like a cloud)
 - Blue Water (shaped like a wave)
 - Brown Box (square)
 - Silver Key
 - Black Musical Note
 - Red Heart (1 for each of the 9 station-masters)
- Scissors
- Large diagram of the Big & Little Dipper (North Star)
- Wooden chair or chair dressed like a tree
- Masking tape for preparing tree
- 2 Long strips of blue cloth (2 yds x 1') for water
- 1 Large box
- 1 Bowl of cornmeal and water mixture
- 1 Bowl of raw bacon (slab if possible)
- Paper towels & napkins
- 5x8 cards with instructions for the station-masters



Questions for Discussion:

1. How far would the students walk to get to freedom? How far could you walk in a night or day? Would they be able to walk in a town? To the next state? To Canada? What conditions would make this journey hard?
2. Explore a map that includes Canada. If a relief map is available, imagine the natural obstacles you might face on the trip north.
3. If students found a runaway dog in their yard, would they return it to their owner? What if they found a runaway slave, would they return the slave to the owner? Why or why not? What are some differences between a runaway slave and a runaway dog?
4. What are some examples of codes used today? (Morse code, sign language, Braille. Students may think of others). Why are these codes needed?

In the Classroom (continued)...

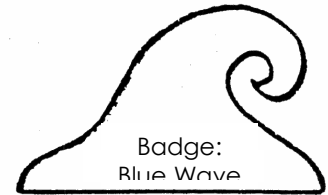
Description of Stations (5-10 minutes per station)

- 1) **North Star:** At this station students locate the North Star on the diagram provided. They identify the Big Dipper as the Drinking Gourd. It resembled gourds that the slaves hollowed out and used for drinking out of barrels. Ask the students if they can think of other code names for the Big Dipper. Can they think of other ways to find the North Star (using sunrise and sunset)?



- 2) **Moss and Slave Food:** At this station, students will look for moss growing on the North side of the tree. This helps identify North when clouds cover the stars or the sun. The students will also see and touch examples of slave food (corn meal and bacon). Escaping slaves might have to eat their food cold if it was too dangerous to light a fire. (Ask students to touch the food and wipe their hands on a napkin.)

- 3) **Water:** Slaves walked through water to cover their scent from the slave catchers and the hounds used to track runaways. At this station, the station-masters (4 needed here) wave the cloth (one at each end) to indicate water. The runaways have to walk through this “water” to earn their badge.



- 4) **Box:** Henry “Box” Brown escaped by mailing himself to freedom. Each student can take a turn sitting in the box. How would it feel to be in a box for a week? What would you bring along to keep inside the box? How would you breathe? How heavy is the box with a person inside?

- 5) **Secret Houses & Codes:** At this stop, the students make up secret door knocks and handshakes for the Underground Railroad. How else can they find the right people to help them escape (a special light in a window, a brown scarf worn by the station-masters)?



- 6) **Free At Last!** At this stop, the runaways have finally made it to freedom. Students should sing along with the recording on “Free At Last!” or they can sing without it! (Recording available from Kim and Reggie-information available under “About the Performance”).

Summary:

After all the students have completed the stations, gather and sing “Free At Last!” together (with the CD if you have one). Ask your students to reflect on their experiences on the “Railroad” and to make up their own verses for the song. Several students may want to show the drawings they have made, or some of the secret handshakes or door knocks created at station #5. Present station-masters with their belts!

In the Classroom (continued)...

TRAMPIN' (Traditional)

Chorus

I'm trampin' trampin', trying to make heaven my home
I'm trampin' trampin', trying to make heaven my home

Well I've never been to heaven but I've been told
Tryin' to make heaven my home
The streets up there are paved with gold
Trying to make heaven my home

Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down
Trying to make heaven my home
Sometimes my soul feel heavenly bound
Trying to make heaven my home



Code Words:

Freedom Train: a term used to describe the Underground Railroad

Drinking Gourd: a term used for the Big Dipper (pointing to the North Star)

Heaven: a Free State or territory where a fugitive slave could be free

Station: a place or sanctuary where runaway slaves could be sheltered

Station-Master: a person in charge of a hiding place for fugitive slaves

Underground Railroad: a secret means of helping slaves escape to freedom

Underground: a word that means under the earth, or something that is secret. Railroad is a means of transportation—a way to get people from one place to another; The Underground Railroad.

In the Classroom (continued)...

Geography

- On the map of the United States, find the states that were in the Union in the 1840's.
- On your map, label the slave states and the free states with an S or a F.
- Draw a possible route which the slaves could use to reach Canada.
- Research the ways people make a living in the slave states and the free states. List them. Why did the South keep slavery longer than the North?



“Where the big river meets the little river,
Follow the drinkin’ gourd.
For the sailor boy’s a-waitin’ for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the drinkin’ gourd.”

Supplementary Materials: Historical and Cultural Websites

- The Spirituals Project: <http://www.spiritualsproject.org>
A great resource for information and context about the spiritual in form and history.
- Sweet Chariot: <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/>
A site dedicated to historical information about spirituals and the role of music, from its African foundations to the freedom songs in present day America.
- National Underground RR Freedom Center
This organization has a museum devoted to "The Underground Railroad" and programs that educate the public about modern slavery and human trafficking. <http://www.freedomcenter.org/>
- Negro Spirituals: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/twh/higg.html>
(An eyewitness Article in the Atlantic Monthly from 1867)
- Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/Douglass/Autobiography>
(In his own words, the great abolitionist talks about spirituals and code songs)

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Study Guide Creative by Sonja Decker
Design by Donna Van Renselaar
Updated by Reggie Harris and Kristen Shilt
November 2011

To contact or to purchase additional educational materials
from Kim and Reggie write to:
Kim & Reggie Harris - PO BOX 18871
Philadelphia, PA 19119 www.kimandreggie.com

To book Kim and Reggie Harris contact:

Joann Murdock at Artists of Note, Inc – PO Box 11, Kaneville, IL 60144 (630) 557-2742 or jmurdock@artistsofnote.com