

A Century of African American Song

A Personal Statement

This collection of songs represents one hundred years of music produced by American composers and poets of color—the best of us. Some identify(ied) as Negro, some African-American, some Black, some men, some women, and some insisted they were beyond classification, adamant that their work speak for itself. Unfortunately, too many of these voices have been stifled from inclusion in our American story thus far. But the time is right, and the fruit is ripe for the picking. The harvest has come in, and the first fruits of the fields yield a bounty of beauty so remarkable that silence is no longer an option. In fact, it is annihilated. Where once the famed halls of old lived on solely in black and white, they are now alive and brimming in technicolor, vividly representative of truth and creative vision—Heaven.

The songs collected here are a mere sampling of the finest of those neglected voices. Most are from our published archives. Some have been recorded from transcriptions of sound recordings. Are they “art” songs? Are they popular songs? Is it jazz, Bebop, or blues? Is it “classical” music? It is music, in all cases. Music to be enjoyed and reflected upon. Performed with integrity and informed enthusiasm by all who would approach it. Resist the urge to classify and segregate. Enjoy the creativity and savor the sounds of words and music dancing together as one in each singular work of art.

Twenty-two songs is by no means exhaustive, but it is a beginning. It is the product of years of researching and collecting and waiting for the rest of the world to get hip to the vibe. Some of these songs I have been performing since the lessons of my first voice teacher, David Nott, who insisted I always honor the music of those who came before me. He bequeathed to me stacks of music, cultural curiosity, and a fascination with the fantastic. Some of these songs were entrusted to me by mentors

and friends: Paul Sperry, Michael Boriskin, Michael Barrett, Joel Sachs, Cheryl Selzer, and Steven Blier, who knew their value and insisted their friend accept the invitation of this music’s calling. Some songs and their stylings came from renowned collectors and interpreters: Adele Addison, George Shirley, Reri Grist, Louise Toppin, Barrington Coleman, and others. Some came directly from composers and composer friends, like George Walker, Tania León, and Anthony Davis. And all thanks and gratitude to Dr. Willis Patterson for his *Anthology of Black American Art Song*, from whence all blessings flowed.

Thank you to my friend and collaborator of many years, Lynn Raley, my fellow displaced-Mississippian, for sharing his passionate love of music and humanity. And a huge thanks to Judy Sherman and Jeanne for taking on this project with such love and care.

—James Martin

The Songs

How fitting that this album begins with two songs by **Harry Thacker Burleigh** (1866–1949) of Scranton, PA, best known for his published arrangements of spirituals, beginning in 1901 with *Plantation Melodies, Old and New*. His most famous arrangement was perhaps “Deep River,” still regarded by many as the definitive version. In 1892, a few months after Burleigh entered the National Conservatory of Music in New York, the great Czech composer Antonín Dvořák was appointed its director. Burleigh and Dvořák soon became fast friends, spending evenings together in which Burleigh would sing spirituals and plantation songs. Many have speculated that the haunting English horn melody in the Largo of Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony had its inspiration from those evenings.

Burleigh composed over two hundred original songs. Here are two, published during the height of his success as an acclaimed baritone soloist. First is the

touching parlor song “**Elysium**,” with text by James Weldon Johnson (more famous as author of “Lift Every Voice,” set to music composed by his brother, J. Rosamund Johnson). The second, “**Ethiopia Saluting the Colors**,” is an unashamedly melodramatic setting of Walt Whitman’s poem of the same name. For Whitman, “Ethiopia” represented the Black race. An old slave woman, wearing a turban the colors of Ethiopia, salutes the American flag as she watches General Sherman’s troops march by. When a passing Union soldier asks, “Who are you, dusky woman?”, the woman tells of “the cruel slaver” that brought her across the sea as a little child, captured “as the savage beast is caught.” Burleigh’s piano part imitates the sound of snare drums and briefly quotes the tune “Marching Through Georgia.”

On a radio broadcast in 1959, the great American bass-baritone Paul Robeson told a story about “**Lil’ Gal**,” **J. Rosamund Johnson’s** (1873–1954) setting of the poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906). “Years ago in Harlem, NY, when I used to sing it, my wife Eslanda says that every girl I happened to look at thought I was singing it just for her. Well, maybe that’s the way it should be with a song like ‘Lil’ Gal.” Dunbar was one of America’s very first influential Black poets, gaining an international reputation early on. Born to parents who had been enslaved in Kentucky, Dunbar has been criticized for his use of Black dialect in his poems, but Langston Hughes spoke admiringly of being brought up on Dunbar’s poems, and Robeson went so far as to call him “our Robert Burns.” In recent years, Dunbar’s reputation as a great poet has been reclaimed. Johnson’s music, along with his decision to omit the second of Dunbar’s three verses, transforms it from a light lyric poem into a fervent love song.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and ’30’s was fertile ground for many of the artists included in this collection, arguably laying the foundation for all African American writers and composers since. One of its most prominent and influential figures was Langston Hughes (1902–1967), the playwright, novelist, poet, and activist.

In this collection of twenty-two songs, eight are set to texts by Hughes.

In 1933, Frederick Stock conducted the Chicago Symphony in **Florence Price’s** (1887–1953) Symphony No. 1 in E minor, making her the first Black woman to have a work performed by a major American orchestra. A gifted pianist as well, Price studied at the New England Conservatory in Boston, and her song accompaniments reflect a deep understanding of the instrument. Her “**Song to the Dark Virgin**” mirrors the powerful eroticism of Langston Hughes’ poem in the piano’s rolling chords and rising arpeggios, which reach their culmination under the words “Would that I were a flame, / But one sharp, leaping flame / To annihilate thy body, / Thou Dark One.” Price was in touch with Hughes during the time she set this, and the song was introduced to the public by none other than Marian Anderson.

Before Marian Anderson came into the world’s consciousness on a cold Easter Sunday in 1939 for performing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, after being refused permission by the Daughters of the American Revolution to sing in Constitution Hall, many African American opera and concert singers had already established themselves as artists of note. The first of these pioneering singers was Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1817–1876), a former slave. Many more followed, including Sissieretta Jones (1868–1933), who sang in Carnegie Recital Hall with Harry Burleigh in 1892. Among the male singers was the lyric tenor, **Roland Wiltse Hayes** (1887–1977). Like Burleigh, Hayes arranged many of the spirituals and Negro folk songs he would present in concert with his pianist and fellow arranger, Percival Parham. In fact, it is difficult to know exactly who arranged which of the songs presented here. It is widely assumed that the simpler arrangements like “**Lit’l Girl**” were Hayes’ and those, like the more pianistically elaborate, “**O Le’ Me Shine**,” were Parham’s.

Hall Johnson (1888–1970) began his musical life as a professional violinist and violist, and played in James Reese Europe’s orchestra as well as in Will Marion

Cook's Syncopated Orchestra. He is perhaps better known today as an arranger and choral conductor. His Hall Johnson Chorus was featured in over thirty feature-length films, including "The Green Pastures" of 1930. In the convict/work song "**On the Dusty Road**" we encounter the effective combination of Langston Hughes' poetry, Toy Harper's melody, and Hall Johnson's evocative arrangement, which couples blues-tinged harmonies with sounds of sprinkling water and images of exploding TNT.

"**The Negro Speaks of Rivers**" is another Langston Hughes poem, by his own account written in the fifteen minutes it took him to cross the Mississippi River on a boat. A powerful poem that has been described as "suffused with the image of death and simultaneously the idea of deathlessness," it is matched by the powerful music of **Howard Swanson** (1907–1978). The song's premiere by Marian Anderson on January 15, 1950 in Carnegie Hall, proved to be a career-changer for Swanson. The next two songs by Swanson are set to texts by Hughes, followed by one by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Like Florence Price, Swanson consulted with Hughes while composing both "**Pierrot**" and "**Night Song**." "Pierrot" is a musically witty ride through the unbalanced mind of the clown Pierrot. With "**A Death Song**" we return to the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, set as a peaceful, slowly-rocking lullaby. The narrator's wish is to be buried in a place that is familiar and loved.

"**Harlem Sweeties**" by **Dorothy Rudd Moore** (1940–2022) is from the 1990 song cycle *Flowers of Darkness*. Touching the boundaries of jazz, boogie-woogie, and doo-wop, her setting evokes the metaphorical delights and temptations of Harlem's elite neighborhood, Sugar Hill.

"**Harlem Blues**" is another walk through the streets of Harlem, mentioning historical landmarks, the Black newspapers *The Age* and *The News*, and notable performers like James Reese Europe and bandleader "Happy" Rhone. The music is by **William Christopher Handy** (1873–1958), known widely as the first musician to

attempt to codify what could not be codified: the Delta blues. W. C. Handy's importance as a musical pioneer cannot be overstated. Not only were his compositions ground-breaking, he was a great band leader, and discovered major talents like William "Willy" Grant Still (see below). Handy and his brother published at least ten of Still's early songs and ran one of the first and most formidable Black music publishing companies in the country. Without his talents many of these artists would have been penniless or banished into obscurity.

Margaret Bonds (1913–1972), pupil of Florence Price and a formidable pianist herself, shows us "**The Way We Dance (in Harlem)**" by way of Langston Hughes and a boogie bass line. In "**To a Brown Girl Dead**", Countee Cullen's dark text is supported by Bonds' rich, slow-moving harmonies.

The "Dean of African American Composers" was **William Grant Still** (1895–1978), the first African American composer to be extensively published and performed. "**Grief**" is a sophisticated composer's musing on the possibilities of a single note, floating over a series of related chords—where it might go, and how it might possibly resolve. Also known as "Weeping Angel with Pinions Trailing," the song's last measure leaves the oft-repeated note to step upward on the word "stands," a surprise to listeners—and perhaps composer—alike.

In "**David**," we meet **Hall Johnson** the composer. As an arranger he would often go beyond the traditionally-styled spirituals of Burleigh and Hayes, incorporating sophisticated rhythmic counterpoint and imaginative harmony. In his own song, "David," we are treated to his simpler, tender, and sentimental side.

Quincy Troupe, born in 1939, is a gifted writer whose poem "**Bells**" already internally reflects the rhythms and quicksilver improvisations of Bebop. So it is no surprise that **Anthony Davis** (b. 1951), steeped in jazz, Indonesian gamelan, and experimental music, applies a wide spectrum of colors and rhythm that effectively

bring out the essence of Troupe's poem.

As both a benediction and a prelude to three dark songs about the lynchings of African Americans that close this album, we have **H. Leslie Adams'** (b. 1932) unique reading of Langston Hughes' enigmatic poem, "**Prayer.**" Although Hughes was not known to be religious, he was forever fascinated with how Christianity permeated African-American culture. Here he and Adams pose the probing existential question, "Which way to go?"

Of all the composers represented in this album, **Robert Owens** (1925–2017) is arguably the most prolific. After World War II, Owens moved to Europe. He lived mostly in Germany and France between 1946 and 1957, studying piano with the great Alfred Cortot, and making a solo concert debut in Copenhagen in 1952. In 1957, he returned to the United States to teach at Albany State College in Georgia, where he experienced firsthand a kind of racism he had not so overtly encountered in Europe. On a trip to New York, he met Langston Hughes. The meeting proved life-changing, for he began immersing himself in Hughes' poetry. Over time, he was to set forty-six of Hughes' poems to music. In the spring of 1959, he showed Hughes two completed song cycles of his poems. After hearing them, Hughes commented, "My God, they just sound so much more beautiful with music." That year Owens returned to Europe, where he also became an actor. The multi-talented ex-pat has a body of work spanning multiple opuses, including more than eighty art songs. Most of Owens' settings are of Langston Hughes poems, but here are his inspired, dramatic readings of Claude McKay's "**The Lynching,**" "**If We Must Die,**" and "**To the White Fiends.**" Appropriate to the texts, Owens' music is cinematic and angry. But it is also elegant, and full of the beauty and hope of the Black American artist.

—*Lynn Raley and James Martin*

Baritone **James C. Martin** is an award-winning concert, recording, and theatrical performer whose career has taken him to leading concert halls and theaters across the United States, Canada, Europe, Israel, Taiwan, and Thailand. His repertoire includes Handel's *Messiah*, the requiems of Mozart, Fauré, and Verdi; the works of Bach, Handel, and Mendelssohn; and the music of Black American and contemporary composers. Operatic roles include Mozart's Don Giovanni, Figaro, and Papageno; Puccini's Marcello and Sharpless, alongside musical theater roles of Bill Starbuck, Billy Flynn, Billy Crocker, the Leading Player, and Joe from *Show Boat*. As a teaching artist he has served at The Juilliard School, the Metropolitan Opera Guild, New York City Opera, Dickinson College, Millsaps College, and Jackson State University. He is the founder of DayStars, a creative-arts day camp for inner-city school children and guest music director for St. Thomas Playhouse. His Bachelor of Music is from Illinois Wesleyan University. His Master of Music is from The Juilliard School, where he was also a member of the Juilliard Opera Center. James Martin can be heard on the Naxos, Albany, Copland House Blend, and New World Records labels.

Pianist **Lynn Raley** has performed across the United States, Canada, The Netherlands, Thailand, and Taiwan. His commitment to new music has brought him engagements at the Santa Fe and Florida international festivals of electro-acoustic music, the NewMusicNewCollege series (Sarasota, FL), and contemporary music festivals in Texas, Florida, Alabama, and Tennessee. Raley was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the National Chiao Tung University's Institute of Music in Taiwan during 2012–13. His solo recital of American music at the Taipei International New Music Festival was followed by a tour around the island performing new works by Taiwanese composers, sponsored by the International Society for Contemporary Music. Raley can be heard on the Leonarda, Capstone, and Nimbus labels.

Elysium

(James Weldon Johnson)

Your lips to mine,
My heart's desire,
Let my soul thrill
To their passionate fire;

The world melts away
In the glow of your kiss
And leaves just you and me
This perfect hour of bliss.

Ethiopia Saluting the Colors

(Walt Whitman)

Who are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human,
With your woolly-white and turban'd head, and bare bony feet?
Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?
('Tis while our army lines Carolina's sands and pines,
Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia come'st to me,
As under doughty Sherman I march toward the sea.)

Me, master, years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd,
A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught,
Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought.

Your lips again
Press them to mine,
One more full draught
Of their nectarous wine:

In the folds of your arms
Lull me softly until
There comes the wondrous calm
Of love, so deep and still

No further does she say, but lingering all the day,
Her high-borne turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye,
And courtesies to the regiments, the guidons moving by.

What is it fateful woman, so bleary, hardly human?
Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red, and green?
Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?

Li'l Gal

(Paul Laurence Dunbar)

Oh, de weathah it is balmy an' de breeze is sighin' low.
Li'l gal,
An' de mockin' bird is singin' in de locus' by de do',
Li'l gal;
Dere's a hummin' an' a bummin' in de lan' f'om eas' to wes',
I's a-sighin' fu' you, honey, an' I nevah know no res'.
Fu' dey's lots o' trouble brewin' an' a-stewin' in my breas',
Li'l gal.

Whut's de mattah wid de weathah, whut's de mattah wid de breeze,
Li'l gal?
Whut's de mattah wid de locus' dat's a-singin' in de trees,
Li'l gal?
W'y dey knows dey ladies love 'em, an' dey knows dey love 'em true,
An' dey love 'em back, I reckon, des' lak I's a-lovin' you;

Dat's de reason dey's a-weavin' an' a-sighin',
thoo an' thoo,
Li'l gal.

Don't you let no da'ky fool you 'cause de clo'es he waihs is fine,
Li'l gal.

Dey's a hones' hea't a-beatin' unnerneaf dese rags o' mine,
Li'l gal.

Cose dey ain' no use in mockin' whut de birds an' weathah do,
But I's so'y I cain't 'spress it w'en I knows I loves you true,

Dat's de reason I's a-sighin' an' a-singin now fu' you,
Li'l gal.

Songs to the Dark Virgin

(Langston Hughes)

I.

Would
That I were a jewel,
A shattered jewel,
That all my shining brilliants
Might fall at thy feet,
Thou dark one.

II.

Would
That I were a garment,
A shimmering, silken garment,
That all my folds
Might wrap about thy body,
Absorb thy body,
Hold and hide thy body,
Thou dark one.

III.

Would
That I were a flame,
But one sharp, leaping flame
To annihilate thy body,
Thou dark one.

On the Dusty Road

(Langston Hughes)

Dusty Road!
This dirt is heavy
My spade is light

This road I'm building
Don't turn left nor right

Better not turn, Lord,
Better not turn.

Good old bulldozer, pushin' up the groun'
A mighty mover,
Change the world aroun'

Change the world aroun', Lord,
Change the world around'.

My back is bendin',
But I come up straight,
My work ain't endin'
Til this road runs straight.

That mighty TNT,
I drills a hole
TNT explodin',
Tear body from soul,

Body from soul, Lord
Tear your body from your soul

That li'l old tractor
Pulls its weight tenfold
Takes more'n a tractor Lord,

To pull trouble out my soul,
To pull trouble out my soul.

Water truck come sprinklin',
Water truck it spray,
Water truck it cool down
the dust I raise today.

Dusty road!

Lit'l Girl

(Traditional)

Lit'l Girl! Lit'l Girl!
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you go to the spring?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you water my cows?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you count my lambs?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you feed my sheep?
"Yes, Ma'am"

*By Hall Johnson after Toy Harper,
lyrics by Langston Hughes
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Lit'l Girl! Lit'l Girl!
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you feed my ducks?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you give 'em some corn?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did the ducks lay eggs?"
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you take 'em to the house?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did you give to the cook?
"Yes, Ma'am"
Did she fix some bread?

"Yes, Ma'am"
Did she give you any?
"Yes, Ma'am"

Did the bread taste good?
"Yes, Ma'am!"

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(Langston Hughes)

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in
human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans,
and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Pierrot

(Langston Hughes)

I work all day,
 Said Simple John,
 Myself a house to buy.
 I work all day,
 Said Simple John,
 But Pierrot wondered why.

For Pierrot loved the long white road,
 And Pierrot loved the moon,
 And Pierrot loved a star-filled sky,
 And the breath of a rose in June.

I have one wife,
 Said Simple John,
 And, faith, I love her yet.
 I have one wife,
 Said Simple John,
 But Pierrot left Pierrette.

For Pierrot saw a world of girls,
 And Pierrot loved each one,
 And Pierrot thought all maidens fair
 As flowers in the sun.

Oh, I am good,
 Said Simple John,
 The Lord will take me in.
 Yes, I am good,
 Said Simple John,
 But Pierrot's steeped in sin.

For Pierrot played on a slim guitar,
 And Pierrot loved the moon,
 And Pierrot ran down the long white road
 With the burgher's wife one June.

Night Song

(Langston Hughes)

In the dark before the tall Moon came,
 Little short Dusk was walking along.

In the dark before the tall Moon came,
 Little short Dusk was singing a song.

In the dark before the tall Moon came,
 A lady named Day fainted away in the
 Dark;
 Before the tall Moon came.

A Death Song

(Paul Laurence Dunbar)

Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass,
 Whah de branch'll go a-singin' as it pass.
 An' w'en I's a-layin' low,
 I kin hyeah it as it go
 Singin', "Sleep, my honey, tek yo' res' at las'."

Lay me nigh to whah hit meks a little pool.
 An' de watah stan's so quiet lak an' cool,
 Whah de little birds in spring,
 Ust to come an' drink an' sing,
 An' de chillen waded on dey way to school.

Harlem Sweeties

(Langston Hughes)

Have you dug the spill
 Of Sugar Hill?
 Cast your gims
 On this sepia thrill:
 Brown sugar lassie,
 Caramel treat,
 Honey-gold baby
 Sweet enough to eat.

Let me settle w'en my shouldahs draps
 dey load
 Nigh enough to hyeah de noises in de road;
 Fu' I t'ink de las' long res'
 Gwine to soothe my sperrit bes'
 If I's layin' 'mong de t'ings I's allus knowed.

Peach-skinned girlie,
 Coffee and cream,
 Chocolate darling
 Out of a dream.
 Walnut tinted
 Or cocoa brown,
 Pomegranate-lipped
 Pride of the town.

Rich cream-colored
To plum-tinted black,
Feminine sweetness
In Harlem's no lack.
Glow of the quince
To blush of the rose.
Persimmon bronze
To cinnamon toes.
Blackberry cordial,
Virginia Dare wine—
All those sweet colors
Flavor Harlem of mine!
Walnut or cocoa,
Let me repeat:
Caramel, brown sugar,

Harlem Blues

(W. C. Handy)

You never can tell what's in a woman's mind
And if she's from Harlem, there's no use o' tryin'
Just like the tide her mind comes and goes, like March weather,
When she will change, nobody knows,

The woman I love, she just turned me down,
She's a Harlem Brown

A chocolate treat.
Molasses taffy,
Coffee and cream,
Licorice, clove, cinnamon
To a honey-brown dream.
Ginger, wine-gold,
Persimmon, blackberry,
All through the spectrum
Harlem girls vary—
So if you want to know beauty's
Rainbow-sweet thrill,
Stroll down luscious,
Delicious, *fine* Sugar Hill.

Of²-times I wish that I were in the ground,
Six feet underground,
She idolized me as no other could, then surprised me
Leaving a note that she was gone for good.

And since my sweetie left me Harlem ain't the same old place,
Though a thousand flappers smile right in my face,
I think I'll mooch some home-made hooch and go out for a lark,
Just to drive off these mean Harlem Blues.

Ah there's one sweet spot in Harlem,
It's known as striver's row,
Dicty folks some call 'em
Live there and you should know,
That I have a friend who lives there
I know he won't refuse
To put some music to my troubles
And call 'em Harlem Blues.

Now, you can have your Broadway, give me Lenox Avenue,
Angels from the skies stroll Seventh and for that thanks are due,
To Madam Walker's Beauty shops and Poro system too,
That made them Angels without any doubt.

There are some spots in Harlem where I'm told it's sudden death,
To let a body see you stop to catch your breath,
Yet if you've never lived in Harlem, so the old saw saith,
"you have really been camping out."

Mama, listen to those Harlem Blues
o'er the radio phone
Oh, those times recall 'em,
remember Happy Rhone
And the Clef Club dances led by
Jim Europe's jazzy band,
Sweet memories,
Change your mind once more and
Come to your Harlem man.

The Way We Dance in Harlem

(Langston Hughes, from *Tropics After Dark*)

Ain't you heard about the music Chicago style
The kind of music that drives you wild
Ain't you heard about the way we dance it out
Then lemme tell you what it's all about
First, you grab your gal like a her-cat, Jack
And jitterbug her lightly then you throw her back
Let your hips swing loose when you're moving
Swing most anyway long's you groovin'

You take it slow while she gets way down,
You're feelin' acrobatic then you throw her round,
Then you separate and take a solo
That's the way we dance in Chicago!

Jump back and boogie!
Aw, boogie woogie!
Pack a little
Truck a little

Now if anyone here is still in doubt
As to what this jitterbuggin's all about
I'll expostulate all that I know
'bout the way we dance in Chicago!

O Le' Me Shine

(Traditional)

O le' me shine!
Shine, le' me shine.
Shine like a morning star.
As Moses shine, O le' me shine,
Shine!
As Moses shine, O le' me shine
Shine like a morning star.

As David shine, O le' me shine,
Shine!
As David shine, O le' me shine
Shine like a morning star.

If you can shine, le' me shine!

As I went down to the valley to pray,
Shine,
I met old Satan on my way
Shine like a morning star
O what do you reckon old Satan said to me?
“Go back old man, you’re too old to pray!”
Shine like a morning star.

“You’re too old to pray, but you’re too young to die.”
Shine.
“You’re too old to pray, but you’re too young to die.”
Shine like a morning star.

Oh, get out the way an’ a-let me shine!
Oh, get out the way an’ a-let me shine!
As Jesus shine, O le’ me shine,
As Jesus shine, O le’ me shine,
Shine like a morning star.

To a brown girl dead
(Countee Cullen)

With two white roses on her breasts,
White candles at head and feet,
Dark Madonna of the grave she rests;
Lord Death has found her sweet.

Her mother pawned her wedding ring
To lay her out in white;
She’d be so proud she’d dance and sing
to see herself tonight

Grief
(LeRoy V. Brandt)

Weeping angel with pinions trailing
And head bowed low in your hands.
Mourning angel with heart-strings wailing,
For one who in death’s hall stands.

Mourning angel silence your wailing,
And raise your head from your hands.
Weeping angel on your pinions trailing
The white dove, promise, stands!

*By William Grant Still, lyrics by LeRoy V. Brandt
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David
(Dwight Strickland)

When it’s summer
And I’m lying on the beach,
I know Heaven’s
Never really out of reach.

Looking upward
To that star-bright night above,
I hear David singing little psalms of love.
In a pasture wide as Heaven,
Surely all will be forgiven;
I can sleep, you can sleep, we can sleep.

There’s a comfort sweetly ringing
In the sound of David’s singing,
That the shepherd tending stars will tend
his sheep.

So, in winter or in summer,
In the town or on the beach,
I know Heaven’s never really out of reach.

Looking upward
To that star-bright night above,
I hear David singing little psalms of love.
In a pasture wide as Heaven,
Surely all will be forgiven;
I can sleep, you can sleep, we can sleep.

There’s a upward
To that star-bright night above,
I hear David

Singing little psalms of love
And I can sleep, you can sleep, we can
sleep.

Bells

After Gustaf Sobin
(Quincy Troupe)

eye am hearing bells in the music of poetry, bells
inside laughter tinkling like silver, bells rinsed in colors, shapes
& forms washing wave after sonorous wave, bells washed through
Wind chimes, swept through morning's first breaking light, rolling
Bells shivering in damp cool speech hip language seduces
& imitates, bells coursing through syllables spilling from lips,
Bells tinkling through raindrops, pooling on rooftops,
Spreading like rosebuds, airborne on wind tongues,
Drizzling down storm drains, riding water through whirlpools,
Drop by dropping drop, bells spooling electric
Through hearts in sacred Himalayan mountains of tiberian buddhists,
Bells swirling through pooling deep eyes of lovers, trilling inside bright voices
Raised by small children, bells seducing through winds that play games
With our minds, with the way we hear time slipping through our ears,
& there are bells heard in kisses when sucking lips meet, vibrating
electric bells, strolling bells, breeze-blown bells that tongue
through fragrant afternoons of spring/time,
bells in silver dewdrops shimmering down bright green leaves

By Hall Johnson, lyrics by Dwight Strickland
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that land and float like rafts skimming surfaces of glass-blue rivers,
bells that dive through sparkling waterfalls like voices or solos
rinsed with clear welling sounds that tickle our senses
like crystal runs of bill evans laying down clues, bells slicing through,
in flight, the way a thief steals through the night's deep music, like a sleuth,
the way blues tiptoe over piano keys dropping bell notes here
& there, as chords shimmy-shangling through the thick night air rinsed
In shimmering, electric beauty, bells that render us spellbound,
as when the heart seduces sound by locking pure
rhythm that is light, conjuring, bells that speak in voices dazzling,
church bells that ring inside seductive sweet strides of dancing women,
as when bells roll through their hips swaying lyrical, incredible magic, & eye heard
bells in the heat of summer language making sweet flowers rise,
heard bells in the voice of pavarotti's "nessun dorma,"
heard bells clanging & rolling through the square fronting westminster abbey
heard bells in the sound of african dew mornings rising, trumpet blaring,
saw bells in the silver ice of hale-bopps streaking comet tail,
heard bells ringing throughout plazas of freedom everywhere—
but not from the cracked fluke bell squatting mute in Philadelphia—
heard bells inside all beauty heard or seen anywhere,
bells, bells, splendid sweet bells,
heard bells in the seduction of great poetry singing,
heard bells ringing through the luminous language of sweet birds
riffing, bells, bells, splendid sweet bells,
swelling inside the air's sweet music

Bells is published by Schott Music Group.

Prayer

(Langston Hughes)

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lord God,
I do not know.

The Lynching

(Claude McKay)

His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds
came to view

The ghastly body swaying in the sun:
The women thronged to look, but never a
one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in
fiendish glee.

If We Must Die

(Claude McKay)

If we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry
dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though
dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common
foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us still be
brave,

And for their thousand blows deal one
death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous,
cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but—fighting
back!

To the White Fiends

(Claude McKay)

Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by
you?
Be not deceived, for every deed you do
I could match—out-match: am I not Africa's
son,
Black of that black land where black deeds
are done?

But the Almighty from the darkness drew
My soul and said: Even thou shall be a light
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,
Thy dusky face I set among the white

For thee to prove thyself of highest worth;
Before the world is swallowed up in night,
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!

*"Harlem Sweeties," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers,"
"Night Song," "Pierrot," "Song to the Dark Virgin,"
"Prayer," and "The Way We Dance in Harlem," all by
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WIDE AS HEAVEN:

A CENTURY OF SONG BY BLACK AMERICAN COMPOSERS

JAMES MARTIN, baritone; LYNN RALEY, piano

H. T. Burleigh (1866–1949)

1. *Elysium* 1:55
2. *Ethiopia Saluting the Colors* 5:40

J. Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954)

3. *Li'l Gal* 3:32

Florence B. Price (1887–1953)

4. *Song to the Dark Virgin* 2:01

Hall Johnson (1888–1970)/

Toy Harper (unknown)

5. *On the Dusty Road* 4:00

Traditional

6. *Lit'l Girl* (arr. Roland Hayes) 0:58

Howard Swanson (1907–1978)

7. *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* 5:26
8. *Pierrot* 2:51
9. *Night Song* 1:52
10. *A Death Song* 2:57

Dorothy Rudd Moore (1940–2022)

11. *Harlem Sweeties* 3:34

W. C. Handy (1873–1958)

12. *Harlem Blues* 5:13

Margaret Bonds (1913–1972)

13. *The Way We Dance (in Harlem/Chicago)* 1:55

Traditional

14. *O Le' Me Shine* (arr. Roland Hayes) 2:06

Margaret Bonds

15. *To a Brown Girl Dead* 1:38

William Grant Still (1895–1978)

16. *Grief* 2:33

Hall Johnson

17. *David* 3:43

Anthony Davis (b. 1951)

18. *Bells* 5:30

H. Leslie Adams (b. 1932)

19. *Prayer* 2:27

Robert Owens (1925–2017)

- Three Songs for Baritone, Op. 41* 10:02

20. *The Lynching* 4:20

21. *If We Must Die* 2:27

22. *To the White Fiends* 3:15

Wide as Heaven:

A Century of Song by Black American Composers



James Martin, baritone Lynn Raley, piano



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