

109TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

S. RES. 407

Recognizing the African American Spiritual as a national treasure.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 28, 2006

Mr. MENENDEZ submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the
Committee on the Judiciary

RESOLUTION

Recognizing the African American Spiritual as a national
treasure.

Whereas, since slavery was introduced into the European colonies in 1619, enslaved Africans remained in bondage until the United States ratified the 13th amendment to the Constitution in 1865;

Whereas, during that period of the history of the United States, the first expression of that unique American music was created by enslaved African Americans who—

(1) used their knowledge of the English language and the Christian religious faith, as it had been taught to them in the New World; and

(2) stealthily wove within the music their experience of coping with human servitude and their strong desire to be free;

Whereas, as a method of survival, enslaved African Americans who were forbidden to speak their native languages, play musical instruments they had used in Africa, or practice their traditional religious beliefs, relied on their strong African oral tradition of songs, stories, proverbs, and historical accounts to create this original music, now known as spirituals;

Whereas Calvin Earl, a noted performer and educator on African American spirituals, remarked that the Christian lyrics became a metaphor for freedom from slavery, a secret way for slaves to “communicate with each other, teach their children, record their history, and heal their pain.”;

Whereas the New Jersey Historical Commission found that “some of those daring and artful runaway slaves who entered New Jersey by way of the Underground Railroad no doubt sang the words of old Negro spirituals like ‘Steal Away’ before embarking on their perilous journey north.”;

Whereas African American spirituals spread all over the United States, and the songs we know of today may only represent a small portion of the total number of spirituals that once existed;

Whereas Frederick Douglass, a fugitive slave who would become one of the leading abolitionists of the United States, remarked that the spirituals “told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. . . .”; and

Whereas the American Folklife Preservation Act (Public Law 105–275; 20 U.S.C. 2101 note) finds that “the diversity inherent in American folklife has contributed greatly to the cultural richness of the nation and has fostered a sense of individuality and identity among the American people.”: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That the Senate—

2 (1) recognizes that African American spirituals
3 are a poignant and powerful genre of music that
4 have become one of the most significant segments of
5 American music in existence;

6 (2) expresses the deepest gratitude, recognition,
7 and honor to the former enslaved Africans in the
8 United States for their gifts to our Nation, including
9 their original music and oral history; and

10 (3) requests that the President issue a procla-
11 mation that reflects on the important contribution of
12 African American spirituals to American history,
13 and naming the African American spiritual a na-
14 tional treasure.

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