

110TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. RES. 69

Recognizing the African-American spiritual as a national treasure.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 5, 2007

Mr. MENENDEZ (for himself, Mr. REID, Mr. COBURN, Mr. OBAMA, Mr. DURBIN, Mr. BIDEN, Mr. LEVIN, Mr. FEINGOLD, Mrs. DOLE, Mrs. CLINTON, Mr. LAUTENBERG, and Mr. KENNEDY) 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 in the history of the United States, the first expression of a 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 an original genre of music, now known as spirituals;

Whereas Calvin Earl, a noted performer of, 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 represent only 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 in the United States, remarked that 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 section 2(a)(1) of the American Folklife Preservation Act (20 U.S.C. 2101(a)(1)) states 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 the Nation, including
9 their original music and oral history; and

10 (3) encourages the people of the United States
11 to reflect on the important contribution of African-
12 American spirituals to United States history and to
13 recognize the African-American spiritual as a na-
14 tional treasure.

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