



Revelations Is 50, But Its Mighty Power Goes Back 140 Years

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By Wendy Perron

Watching Matthew Rushing and Renee Robinson in *Revelations*, I was laughing and crying at the same time. I could weep because of his soft undulations in “Wade in the Water,” and laugh with the way she flutters her fan at the other women in the last section. They are so *in their element*, like fish in water. In the encore, Matthew was having such a good time that he was reckless onstage. (He is actually now listed as Guest Artist.)

The joy is made palpable because of the suffering that came before. That was Ailey’s genius, but it is also the genius of the traditional songs that *Revelations* grew from.

In an archival film clip shown before *Revelations*, Ailey tells of the songs he heard in church as a child. The history of those gospel songs, or Negro Spirituals as they were called, goes way back to when they were called “sorrow songs.”

It was the singing of these songs, some of them now in *Revelations*, that was the basis the whole effort to recapture black culture since the Civil War ended. In his small, history-changing book *The Souls of Black Folk*, the scholar W.E.B. Du Bois praises the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Started in 1871 this student group toured the U.S. with the sorrow songs, deeply stirring people wherever they went—often to theaters that did not allow blacks in the audience. (Find about more about them click [here](#).)

Here is what Du Bois wrote in 1903: “The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. ...It remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people... Their singing stirred men with a mighty power.... The Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again.” (Read his whole chapter on sorrow songs [here](#).)

It was the stirring, irresistible nature of these songs that convinced Du Bois that the talent and soulfulness of black artists could create a renaissance in Harlem. And he was right. In the 1920s and 30s Harlem blossomed into a hub of musical, literary, and visual arts (and dance, tangentially). It evolved into the “Black Is Beautiful” movement of the 1960s, which was fertile ground for the birth of *Revelations*.

So when I wonder why *Revelations* always rouses American audiences to peak emotions, I look back on how deep in our history it goes.