

One of the great distinctives of African music is the beat, the rhythm. Forcibly transported to America, African rhythms have been at the heart of all significant musical trends in this country over the past 200 years, from the ragtime to rap. Though the songs on God Don't Never Change come from a host of traditions – black spirituals, folk songs, 18th century hymns, gospel blues, and jubilee – it is that insistent, incorruptible beat that unites them. If the spirituals and gospel music really are “religion with rhythm,” and folk music really is the authentic music of the people, then these carefully chosen songs echo the pulse of a faith-seeking people. They may be composed, anonymous, spontaneous, adapted, arranged or assimilated. But all celebrate the heartbeat of God.

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1. My God Called Me This Morning

The famed Fairfield Four perform a haunting acapella version of this song on one of their later releases. It is thought to be a “field holler” but it could be a traditional mountain ballad, a re-worked old hymn or a spiritual. The lyrics do have the “double-voicedness” of the best spirituals – referring to both heaven and the underground railroad at the same time.

2. You Got To Move

This is another traditional with equally cloudy origins. Mississippi Fred McDowell, Rev. Gary Davis, Aerosmith, The Blind Boys of Alabama and The Rolling Stones have all recorded this folk spiritual with its haunting lyrics of the relentless inevitability of God's call.

3. When This World Comes To An End

Possibly an old camp meeting hymn, also recorded by Maggie Hammons Parker and the legendary Hammons Family from West Virginia, Mike Seeger and Tim O'Brien. This recording features Odessa Settles, the daughter of Walter Settles who was the incomparable tenor in the Fairfield Four.

4. Going To Heaven To Meet The King

Adapted from a very rare 45 by Mattie Moss Clark who is one of the founders of the modern mass choir sound as well as the mother of the Clark Sisters and brother (Bill Moss and the Celestials).

5. Rock In A Weary Land

Another traditional religious song of uncertain origin, one that doesn't appear in the earliest collections of spirituals. Since this is a counting song, like “Children Go Where I Send Thee,” it probably dates from the 19th century.

6. Sampson and Delilah

Also called “If I Had My Way I’d Tear This Building Down”, the best-known version is by the Rev. Gary Davis but few renditions can match the power of Texas slide guitar master Blind Willie Johnson. When sung through vocal chords shredded from a lifetime of street corner singing, you can hear every year of Johnson’s short, brutal life. He was once arrested in New Orleans while singing this song—the authorities thought he was advocating the overthrow of the Customs House which stood, quite coincidentally, behind him!

7. Denomination Blues

With his mysterious one-of-a-kind self-made fretless zither (variously identified as a Doceola, a Celestophone and a Phonoharp), Washington Phillips was another gospel blues man from the 1930s, singing mostly in and around Central Texas. Denomination Blues, also called That’s All has appeared in the repertoire of dozens of artists in dozens of styles; Sister Rosetta Tharpe even had a swing jazz hit with it in the 1940s.

8. Joy Joy

Included on the album “Let Us Go Into The House Of The Lord” by the Edwin Hawkins Singers which featured “Oh Happy Day”. This is one of the first true gospel praise and worship songs although the origin of the lyrics and melody are lost in time.

9. God Don’t Never Change

Another traditional spiritual associated with Blind Willie Johnson who freely borrowed from other songs and traditions. His most famous song, Dark Is The Night, Cold Is The Ground was one of the few 20th century pieces of music placed on Voyager satellites when they were launched into space in the early 1960’s.

10. I’m Going To Live The Life I Sing About In My Song

Thomas Dorsey called himself “The Father of Gospel Music” and while that may not be exactly true, no one did more to spread the word on this uniquely American combination of spirituals, jubilee and blues. Dorsey introduced gospel’s greatest artist, Mahalia Jackson, to the world and wrote some of its most enduring songs, including Take My Hand, Precious Lord and Peace In The Valley.

11. Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning

The legendary blind gospel blues guitarist, the Rev. Gary Davis was not above singing (and living) the blues on Saturday night and singing the gospel on Sunday morning. Bob Dylan, Bob Weir and Stephan Grossman all took guitar lessons from Davis in Harlem. “Keep Your Lamp” has a particularly tortuous history, with possible roots in hymns from the 18th century, southern and black gospel, folk music and bluegrass.