

## Go Tell It On The Mountain

The African-American Spiritual song “Go Tell It On The Mountain” was collected from an oral folk music tradition by John Wesley Work, Jr. in collaboration with his brother Frederick Jerome Work. The song dates back to 1865, was later performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and finally published in 1907. The choral arrangement by Bruce Saylor was composed especially for soprano Jessye Norman in 1990. The YouTube section below includes a video of this performance.

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### Lyrics:

*Refrain*

*Go, tell it on the mountain,  
Over the hills and everywhere  
Go, tell it on the mountain,  
That Jesus Christ is born.*

The shepherds feared and trembled,  
When low above the earth,  
Rang out the angels chorus  
That hailed our Savior's bi--rth.

*Refrain*

While shepherds kept their watching  
o'er silent flocks by night,  
Behold, throughout the heavens  
There shone a holy li--ght

*Refrain*

*Refrain*

And lo! When they had heard it,  
They all bowed down to pray,  
Then travelled on together,  
To where the Baby la--y.

*Refrain*

Down in a lowly manger  
The humble Christ was born  
And God sent us salvation  
That blessed Christmas mo--rn.

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## Go Tell It On The Mountain

*From the Introduction to the Boosey & Hawkes Sheet Music:*

This setting was composed especially for *Jessye Norman at Notre-Dame: A Christmas Concert*. The performance took place at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, December 20, 1990, with Miss Norman, and the Choeur Regional Vittoria d'Ile de France, Michel Piquenmal, director. Lawrence Foster was the conductor.

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"**Go Tell It on the Mountain**" is an [African-American spiritual](#) dating back to at least 1865 that has been sung and recorded by many gospel and secular performers. It is considered a [Christmas carol](#) because its original lyric celebrates the [Nativity](#): "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere; go tell it on the mountain, that [Jesus Christ](#) is born."

In 1963, [Peter Yarrow](#), [Noel "Paul" Stookey](#), and [Mary Travers](#), along with their musical director, [Milt Okun](#), adapted and rewrote "**Go Tell It on the Mountain**" as "Tell It on the Mountain", their lyrics referring specifically to [Exodus](#) and employing the line "Let my people go," but implicitly referring to the [Civil Rights](#) struggle of the early '60s. The song was recorded by [Yarrow, Stookey and Travers](#) on their [Peter, Paul and Mary](#) album [In the Wind](#) and was also a moderate hit single for them. (US #33 pop, 1964). Civil rights activist [Fannie Lou Hamer](#) used this rewritten version of the song as an anthem during the mid-1960s.

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Enthusiasm pervades this truly splendid black spiritual, "**Go Tell It On The Mountain.**" Probably created in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century, the vigorous, full-bodied, and highly moving nature of this folk masterpiece has made it one of the the up-and-coming favorites of the holiday season. In roughly a century it has carved a substantial niche for itself without benefit of the pop music or conventional religious establishments. What is the secret of "**Go Tell It on the Mountain**"? Simply, it is an aggregate of very positive "e" words. Add to enthusiastic the terms energetic, ebullient, exciting, emphatic, esthetic, and excellent as well as others, and you have a true composite of the song.

Although generally considered as anonymous, this fine musical work may have been composed by a person named Work. Nashville-born Frederick Jerome Work (1880-1942), a black composer, teacher, and scholar has been attributed as the author of the song by his equally accomplished nephew, John Wesley Work (1901-1967). This claim is hard to prove either way. Both men were intimately and substantially affiliated with the collection, arrangement, and dissemination of the black spirituals, and John Work adapted the lyrics and the music of "Go Tell." Most likely, Frederick Work only discovered and preserved the song, but it is possible that he was the author of this inspired jewel, the greatest of all American folk carols.

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The contribution of unknown African American slaves to Christian music is remarkable. As a largely uneducated people, longing for freedom, suffering incredible cruelty and humiliation, many still somehow managed to encounter the powerful touch of the Holy Spirit in ways that manifested themselves in songs of unparalleled majesty and beauty.

Even more amazing than the songs themselves is the fact that any survived at all. Many of these composers of spirituals could not read or write. For the most part, their works were unpublished for decades and passed along only in the oral tradition. A few songs were spread from the fields to small slave churches along roads via work gangs, and eventually to white churches and even large concert halls in both the South and North. Many, however, were lost, their inspirational lessons in song forgotten, as were the testimonies they contained. Perhaps all of them would have been gone had it not been for a very special American family and the dynamic voices of a college choir.

Not long after the Civil War, a man named John Wesley Work was an African American church choir director in Nashville, Tennessee. A scholar as well as a musician, Work had a deep interest in music that defined the experience of the Negro in America. One of the few educated African Americans in the South, Work felt the new generation of black southerners might best understand the importance of spirituality by learning the songs their ancestors sang during the days of slavery.

In Work's choir were several members of the Fisk Jubilee Singers from the nearby black college of the same name. As work influenced the jubilee Singers with his thoughts and music, the singers would pass that influence to the world through their uplifting arrangements of Negro spirituals. During an era when few Negroes were able to travel more than a few miles from their birthplace, the Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the world, appearing in England before Queen Victoria and at the White House in front of President Chester Arthur. Their music revealed a passion for life and living that few people had ever experienced, and they became a monumental force in first exposing the musical talents of African Americans.

John Work passed his love of music and history onto his son, John Wesley work II. The latter became a folk singer, composer, and collector of Negro spirituals, and, eventually, a professor of history and Latin at Fisk College. His wife was the music teacher for the Jubilee singers. Along with Work's brother, Frederick, this second generation of Works kept the flame of spiritual music burning brightly and saved a huge number of Negro folk songs from being lost or forgotten.

There will always be some debate over who first uncovered the song "**Go Tell It On The Mountain,**" but Frederick Work was one of the first to note the song's power and potential. The song had come from the fields of the South, born from the inspiration of a slave's Christmas, and

it was unique in that, of the hundreds of Negro spirituals that Work family saved from extinction, few had been written about Christmas. Most, as would seem only natural, centered on earthly pain and suffering, and the joy and happiness that only heaven seemed to offer. Yet here, standing against the backdrop of such haunting spirituals as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” was “**Go Tell It on the Mountain,**” a triumphant piece that embraced the wonder of lowly shepherds touched by God at the very first Christmas.

John II and Frederick studied the words and the basic melody to “**Go Tell It On The Mountain.**” Not wanting to change the dramatic impact of the song’s lyrics, they left them intact, but the brothers did rearrange the music into an anthem-like structure that would suit choirs such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Beginning in the 1880’s, that group took the song to the world.

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### **John Wesley Work, Jr. & Frederick Jerome Work**

John Wesley Work is said to have been the first black collector of Negro folksongs, and was most likely born on August 6, 1871 in Nashville, Tennessee. His father, John Wesley Work, was a church choir director in Nashville, where he wrote and arranged music for his choirs. Some of his choristers were members of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers.

He attended Fisk University in Nashville where he studied Latin and history. Singing in the Mozart society while at school sparked an interest in Negro spirituals in Work. Following graduation, Work went on to teach for a year, studying for one year at Harvard University, and a year as a library assistant at Fisk University. In 1898, he received a Master’s degree from Fisk and took an appointment as a Latin and Greek instructor.

While teaching, Work became a leader in the movement to preserve, study, and perform Negro spirituals. He organized Fisk singing groups about 1889. With the help of his brother, Frederick Jerome Work, John Wesley Work, Jr., collected, harmonized, and published a number of collections of slave songs and spirituals. The first of these collections was *New Jubilee Songs as Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers*, in 1901.

Among the other solo songs he published, the spiritual, “**Go, Tell It On The Mountain**” was issued in 1907. In 1915, Work published “*Folk Songs of the American Negro.*”

For as many as eighteen years, Work trained and performed with professional and student groups of the Jubilee Singers. His wife, Agnes Haynes Work, was a singer who helped train the Fisk group. Because of negative feelings toward Black folk music at Fisk, he was forced to resign in 1923.

John Wesley Work, Jr. then served as president of Roger Williams University in Nashville, until his death on September 7, 1925.

One son, Julian, became a professional musician and composer. Another son, John Wesley Work III became famous in his own right as a collector, composer and educator at Fisk. He wrote American Negro songs and spirituals; a comprehensive collection of 230 folk songs, religious and secular in 1940. Additional biographical materials on this son follow.

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## **Jessye Norman**

**Jessye Norman** (born [September 15, 1945](#)) is a four time [Grammy award](#) winning African American opera singer.<sup>[1]</sup> Norman is one of the most admired contemporary [opera](#) singers and recitalists, and is one of the highest paid performers in classical music.<sup>[2]</sup> A true [dramatic soprano](#) with a majestic stage presence, Norman is associated in particular with the roles of Aïda, Cassandre, Alceste, and Leonora in *Fidelio*.<sup>[3]</sup> Norman is known for the direct and emotionally expressive qualities of her singing and for her formidable intellectual understanding of the music and its style, as well as first-rate musicianship.<sup>[4]</sup> As a performer, she is known for her magnetic and dramatic personality, and, with her imposing physical presence, cuts an impressive, "just enormous" figure before audiences. According to Curt Sanburn in *Life*, Norman on stage creates the perception of one who "veritably looms behind her lyrics."<sup>[5]</sup> Norman's public manner combines an apparent hauteur with flashes of disarming humor, putting her squarely in the venerable operatic tradition of the [Diva](#), to the extent that many credit her as the inspiration for the title character in the 1981 French film *Diva*.<sup>[6]</sup>

The combination of scholarship and artistry contributed to her consistently successful career as one of the most versatile concert and operatic singers of her time. Often cited for her innovative programming and fervent advocacy of contemporary music, she has earned the recognition of "one of those once –in-a-generation singers who isn't simply following in the footsteps of others, but is staking out her own niche in the history of singing."<sup>[12]</sup>

Norman is most often referred to as a [dramatic soprano](#) but unlike most dramatic sopranos, Norman has become known for roles more traditionally sung by other types of voices. From her student days Norman had been selective about her repertoire, heeding her own instincts and interests more than the advice of her teachers or requests of her management. In the beginning of her career, this tendency put her at odds with the Deutsche Opera and compelled her to seek out musical works on her own that she felt were more suitable to her vocal skills. Norman told John Gruen of the *New York Times*, "As for my voice, it cannot be categorized - and I like it that way, because I sing things that would be considered in the dramatic, mezzo or spinto range. I like so many different kinds of music that I've never allowed myself the limitations of one particular range."<sup>[8]</sup>

Some vocal critics assert that Norman is not a dramatic soprano but has in fact a rare soprano voice type known as a [Falcon](#). The Falcon voice is an intermediate voice types between the soprano and the mezzo soprano that is similar to the dramatic soprano but with a darker-color.<sup>[15]</sup> Norman, however, refuses to place any labels on her voice.

Over the years Norman's technical expertise has been among her most critically praised attributes. In a review of one of her recitals at New York City's Carnegie Hall, New York Times contributor Allen Hughes wrote that Norman "has one of the most opulent voices before the public today, and, as discriminating listeners are aware, her performances are backed by extraordinary preparation, both musical and otherwise." Another Carnegie Hall appearance prompted these words from New York Times contributor Bernard Holland: "If one added up all the things that Jessye Norman does well as a singer, the total would assuredly exceed that of any other soprano before the public. At Miss Norman's recital ... tones were produced, colors manipulated, words projected and interpretive points made—all with fanatic finesse."<sup>[8]</sup>

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## **Bruce Saylor**

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Composer BRUCE SAYLOR holds degrees from The Juilliard School, from the City University of New York where he received his Ph.D. He has also studied at the Accademia di S. Cecilia in Rome under a Fulbright Scholarship.

A native of Philadelphia, Bruce Saylor received his bachelor's and master's degrees from The Juilliard School of Music, where he studied with Hugo Weisgall and Roger Sessions. Under a Fulbright grant, he studied with Goffredo Petrassi at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome. From 1992–1994 he was the Brena and Lee Freeman Composer in Residence at Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he composed *Orpheus Descending* based on a play by Tennessee Williams. He wrote two choral pieces for the visit to New York City of Pope John Paul II in 1995, and he composed original music and carol settings for two best selling CDs of Jessye Norman. He was asked by Ms. Norman to write the Inauguration Day cantata *O Freedom!* which she sang at President Clinton's Second Inaugural in 1997. In 2000, he premiered chorus and orchestra pieces for Franklin and Marshall College, The Dedham Choral Society, and the Riverside Symphonia. He is at work on chorus and orchestra pieces for the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and Incontri di Musica Sacra Contemporanea in Rome.

In works that range from full-length opera ("Orpheus Descending" for Lyric Opera of Chicago) to solo piano ("Liberating Chemistry"), Saylor has been commissioned and performed by major orchestras, chamber groups and soloists. The winner of more than 35 awards in his field, he has received honors from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Society of Arts and Letters, the

American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation.

He has composed the music for two holiday CDs for the great American soprano Jessye Norman, and also the music she sang at President Clinton's Second Inaugural, at the Rheims Cathedral Eclipse Spectacular, and arrangements for the evening-length "The Sacred Ellington," which Miss Norman has taken around the world.

He is also active as a music scholar, and he has publications in *Musical Quarterly*, *Musical America*, *CMS Symposium*, *Contemporary Music Newsletter*, *Musica Judaica*. A particular interest of his is the music of Henry Cowell: he wrote the article on Cowell for the New Grove Dictionary.

Bruce Saylor teaches at Queens College and lives in New York City with his wife the mezzosoprano Constance Beavon and their four daughters.

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### **Audio Links and Discography**

*If you subscribe to iTunes, BuyMusic, Rhapsody or a similar service, keyword in "Go Tell It On The Mountain" and then you can listen to a sample from each artist.*

### ***YouTubes***

Jessye Norman (Bruce Saylor Version): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YC418ZC2M4>  
Aretha Franklin: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-HHh-pSkiA&feature=related>  
Dolly Parton: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpSGps6Uqco&feature=related>  
Peter, Paul and Mary: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0nAyWVp-hY>  
James Taylor: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifEUn1AxDYo&feature=related>  
Simon and Garfunkel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW42-3pd9eE>

### ***These select recordings can be purchased online:***

Jessye Norman (Bruce Saylor Version): <http://www.amazon.ca/At-Notre-Dame-A-Christmas-Con/dp/B00000413Q>  
James Taylor: <http://www.amazon.com/James-Taylor-at-Christmas/dp/B000I0QK74>  
Toby Keith: <http://www.amazon.com/Classic-Christmas-Toby-Keith/dp/B000UOE76Y>  
Take 6: <http://www.amazon.com/We-Wish-You-Merry-Christmas/dp/B00002DD96>  
Golden Gospel Singers: <http://www.amazon.com/A-Capella-Praise/dp/B000V5NYPW/>  
Mark Hayes: <http://www.amazon.com/Go-Tell-Mountain/dp/B00129QCKK/>

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## **References:**

The above article about the song “**Go Tell It On The Mountain**” was extracted from these websites. For more information, please read the articles:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go\\_Tell\\_It\\_on\\_the\\_Mountain\\_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go_Tell_It_on_the_Mountain_(song))

<http://tinyurl.com/6mxwr6>

<http://tinyurl.com/5tgfm6>

<http://tinyurl.com/5ulade>

[http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/Biographies/john\\_wesley\\_wor\\_k.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/john_wesley_wor_k.htm)

<http://tinyurl.com/6he5ro>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessye\\_Norman#Concert\\_and\\_recital\\_work](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessye_Norman#Concert_and_recital_work)

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/chemistry/breslow/symposium/saylor.html>

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/music/faculty/saylor.html>

Book: “If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me,” Bernice Johnson Reagon

Book: “Stories Behind The Best Loved Songs Of Christmas,” Ace Collins

Book: “The Christmas Carol Reader,” William Emmett Studwell, Frank Hoffmann, B Lee Cooper

Book: “The Music Of Black Americans,” Eileen Southern