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Hey There! Welcome to episode 14 of Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast for music-loving families. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so happy to have you joining me today.

The month of February is Black History Month. It is a time to center and celebrate the culture and contributions of African Americans in the past and present. With that in mind, today we are going to focus on a couple of musical styles that are deeply rooted in the traditions of the African-American church: African American Spirituals and gospel music.

The roots of gospel music are not well documented as early recordings were lost and stories behind the songs weren't written down. We can trace American gospel music back to the 17th century with songs often referred to as African American Spirituals. Because it was against the law at the time to teach an enslaved African person how to read or write, call and response spirituals -- where one person sings a solo and the group follows -- were very popular, because they gave everyone the chance to participate in worship. Listen to this example of a call and response spiritual.

Many of the words of spirituals during this time reflected the sorrow and sadness of enslaved people about being held in captivity and bondage, and express a deep longing for heaven. As enslaved people heard Christian hymns, they began to see parallels with their own experiences and stories from the Bible -- such as the Jewish peoples captivity in Babylon.

Some spiritual songs are believed to have contained coded messages about escape using the Underground Railroad or messages to notify others about camp meetings, which were gatherings where slaves would come together to worship and commune. One such spiritual is "Deep River", which some believe contained a coded message about a camp meeting along the Ohio River. Regardless of whether or not the spiritual contains a coded

message, the lyrics also share how they are looking forward to heaven, where they would truly be set free.

Following the emancipation of slaves in the South, Fisk University in Nashville sent its all black choir of nine men and five women on a world tour to raise funds for educating newly freed slaves in Tennessee and beyond. This group was called Fisk Jubilee Singers and they sang spirituals such as “Deep River” to parts of the U.S. and Europe who had never before heard this type of music. Spirituals became a popular type of song as more audiences became aware of it.

In the 20th century, a new style of music sort of evolved from these spirituals into something we call gospel music. Horace Clarence Boyer, a teacher, historian and entertainer, says that “Spirituals spoke to the community; gospel speaks to one person.” Thomas Andrew Dorsey, who was born in 1899 and died in 1993, was known as “the father of gospel music”. His best-known work, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” was performed by famous gospel singer Mahalia Jackson and was a favorite of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dorsey wrote this gospel song after his wife died during childbirth.

Dorsey formulated the style of gospel music, which combined Christian praise with rhythms of jazz and blues. He founded the first black gospel music publishing company, Dorsey House of Music. His gospel works are in the hymnals of nearly all English-speaking churches worldwide. To check out full length videos of the songs you heard in today’s episode, visit my show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/14. I’ll also share with you links to additional performances of African American spirituals and gospel songs for you to listen to in my listening calendar until our next episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs in two weeks. Again you’ll find all that at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/14.

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Thanks so much for joining me today for this tiny glimpse of some of the musical contributions of African Americans in celebration of Black History Month. I look forward to connecting with you again soon!