



*Photos courtesy of Richard J. Hatch.*

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# The Life and Choral Works of Jester Hairston

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“He has shown thousands, if not millions of people, that music is love.”<sup>1</sup>

—Eugene Thamon Simpson

The years 2025 and 2026 mark two significant anniversaries for actor, singer, arranger, composer, and choral director Jester Hairston: the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth (July 9, 1901) and 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death (January 18, 2000). Over the course of his lifetime, he was revered by many in the industry, earning numerous awards, including a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, multiple honorary doctorates,<sup>2</sup> and he is the only known individual to have an ACDA National Convention dedicated in their honor (March 11, 1989).<sup>3</sup>

In the preface of his book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’*, ACDA Past President André Thomas noted Hairston’s significant impact on his perception and interest in the spiritual genre.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Donald Neuen mentioned Hairston’s influence in his 2023 Robert Shaw Choral Award acceptance speech, noting that “[Hairston] taught me how to feel the ‘inside’ of the Spiritual.”<sup>5</sup> Although choral directors from earlier generations likely recall Hairston with great fondness and respect, many today may be unfamiliar or only faintly acquainted with Hairston’s life and works. In addition, academic literature concerning Hairston’s published works is sparse. This article will reintroduce the choral community to Jester Hairston through an overview of his life, published oeuvre, and discussion of selected works.

## Biographical Overview

Jester Hairston was born in Belews Creek, North Carolina, on July 9, 1901. The family moved to Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1902 following the death of his father, and he was raised by his mother and grandmother. Hairston's first exposure to the spiritual genre—which would later become the focus of his career—occurred in the evenings when his grandmother would sit in the yard with her friends singing spirituals and sharing stories about their time in slavery.<sup>6</sup>

Hairston's musical training began in primary school, where he learned to read music by the fourth grade.<sup>7</sup> In addition to music, Hairston was a skilled football and basketball player. Due to the racial prejudices of the era, however, he was not permitted to play for most universities in his home state. As a result, Hairston enrolled at Amherst College in 1920, where he majored in agriculture, played quarterback for the school's football team, and sang in the glee club.

Financial struggles plagued Hairston throughout his collegiate pursuits, requiring him to frequently pause his academic endeavors. During his stints in and out of college, he began taking private voice lessons with Vincent Hubbard.<sup>8</sup> In 1927 he enrolled in the music program at Tufts University with Professor Leo Rich Lewis, made possible in part by a loan from Anna Laura Kidder, whom he met through a mutual friend.<sup>9</sup> In total, it took Hairston nearly ten years to complete his undergraduate degree.

After graduating from Tufts in 1929, Hairston moved to New York City and soon joined the Hall Johnson Choir. Early on, Hairston requested to serve as Johnson's assistant conductor; however, Johnson did not believe Hairston possessed the required musical training to serve in this capacity and provided him with additional training and mentorship. Every day, for about two years, Hairston rehearsed a group of sixteen to eighteen friends in Johnson's home as Johnson observed and provided constructive feedback.<sup>10</sup> Toward the end of this training, the Hall Johnson Choir was hired to perform weekly on the *Maxwell House Radio Show*. Because Johnson and the choir were preparing to leave on tour, he informed the program that he would send his assistant conductor, Hairston, with an ensemble. During this thirteen-week residency, Hairston's skills were put to the test, as he was required to pro-

duce a new choral arrangement each week.<sup>11</sup> Following the experience, Hairston realized a need for additional training and enrolled in the Juilliard Conservatory from October 1932 to January 1933.<sup>12</sup>

In 1936 the Hall Johnson Choir was hired as the on-screen talent for the Warner Brothers film, *The Green Pastures*, leading Hairston and the ensemble to Hollywood, California. During their seven-year residency, the choir was hired for thirty projects, including the Oscar-nominated film *Lost Horizon* (1937) with music by famed Russian composer Dimitri Tiomkin.<sup>13</sup> For this film, Hairston assumed leadership of the ensemble as Johnson took ill.<sup>14</sup> Impressed by his work, Tiomkin told Hairston, "If I do another picture in Hollywood, I want you to be my conductor and arranger."<sup>15</sup> In 1943 the Hall Johnson choir returned to New York, and Hairston remained in Hollywood to pursue a career in film music.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Hairston's career began to flourish as a choral conductor, arranger, and actor in film. Tiomkin was true to his word and hired Hairston on most all his films that utilized a chorus. During these decades, Hairston is known to have worked on sixty-eight films as a musician with both Tiomkin and other prominent composers of the era.<sup>16</sup> Possibly Hairston's most significant contribution to film music occurred in 1944 when he established the first known integrated film choir in Hollywood.<sup>17</sup>

In 1949, Hairston began a collaboration with Walter Schumann (1913–1958) and his ensemble, The Voices of Walter Schumann. Through this partnership, Hairston met David Lawson, who invited him to lead a ten-day high school choral festival at College of the Pacific (now University of the Pacific). Following the event, teachers wrote to Hairston inquiring how they could purchase his arrangements. Learning of the interest in Hairston's songs, Schumann encouraged and managed the publishing of Hairston's works with a "gentlemen's agreement" that Hairston would not publish with anyone else.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the 1950s, Hairston's works grew in popularity, leading to guest appearances throughout the states.

Hairston received his first major acting role in *The Alamo* (1960), starring alongside John Wayne and Richard Widmark. His popularity in the entertainment industry and skill as a musician caught the eye of the U. S.





*Jester Hairston and Dimitri Tiomkin leading an integrated Hollywood film choir. Photo courtesy of dimitritiomkin.com.*

State Department, and he was sent throughout the world as a Goodwill Ambassador, leading choirs and teaching them about the spiritual genre. Between 1986 and 1991, Hairston regularly appeared in the television sitcom *Amen* as elderly church member, Rolly Forbes. During the later part of the twentieth century, Hairston continued to appear in film and television as an actor and toured throughout the world working with choirs until his death on January 18, 2000.<sup>19</sup>

### Overview of Published Works

As of the release of this article, fifty-four of Hairston's published works are still available for purchase (Table 1 on the next four pages). Table 2 on page 24 lists additional published works by Hairston that have been discontinued and are no longer available. Table 3 on pages 24 and 25 identifies arrangements of his original works by other composers. Due to the limited access of Hairston's discontinued works, this article provides an overview of Hairston's fifty-four available works, with attention given to six selected works.<sup>20</sup>

Although Hairston released a few works during the 1940s in conjunction with his film career, his publishing endeavors did not fully take off until he met Walter Schumann in 1949. Between 1950 and 1960, Hairston

published a total of thirty-eight works, a staggering 72 percent of his currently available oeuvre. The remaining fifteen works were published during a twenty-six-year period from 1961 to 1987. An explanation for Hairston's concentrated publishing activity during the 1950s is unknown. Two possible explanations may be inferred, however. First, having arranged music since the 1930s, Hairston likely had a large catalog of unpublished works ready for release. Evidence for this can be observed in the fact that he published thirteen works be-

tween 1950 and 1952. Second, Hairston possibly limited his publishing activity after 1960 due to his increased activities as a clinician, appearances as an actor in more prominent film and television roles, and the death of Schumann.

As a composer, Hairston was known for his arrangements of spirituals. Not surprisingly, twenty-seven (51%) of Hairston's published works are representative of the spiritual genre. Hairston's emphasis on the spiritual results, in part, to most of his works being arrangements (70%), unaccompanied (75%), and based on a sacred text (81%).

Possibly the most interesting feature of Hairston's published choral works can be observed in his affinity for divisi soprano and SSATB voicing. Table 4 on page 25 lists the various ensemble voicings utilized by Hairston. Twenty of his works incorporate SSATB voicing, with almost two-thirds of his works utilizing divisi soprano. In contrast to this soprano divisi, Hairston rarely divides the altos or tenors with only five and twelve works, respectively. Hairston also favors the mixed chorus, with all but one of his works published for this voicing. Alternative voicings (SAB, SSA, SSAA, and TTBB) are available for select works and listed in Table 1 on pages 20-23.

Reasons for Hairston's preference of soprano divisi

**Table 1. Jester Hairston's Published Works**

Title	Year Published	Voicing	Instrumentation	Additional Notes
Amen	1957	SATB, solo; SAB; SSA; TTBB	Unaccompanied	
Angels Rolled De Stone Away	1960	SSATB; TTBB	Piano	Easter spiritual
Christmas Gift	1955	SSATBB opt solo; SAB	Piano	
Christmas in de Tropics	1970	SSATBB, solo	Unaccompanied	
Crucifixion	1952	SAATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Deep River	1951	SATTBB, alto solo	Unaccompanied	
Dis Ol' Hammer	1957	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Dis Train	1954	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Don't Be Weary Traveler	1955	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Elijah Rock	1955	SSATB; SSA	Unaccompanied	
Free at Last	1960	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Arranged by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson
Give Me Jesus	1960	SATB, soprano solo	Piano	Arranged by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson
Go Down in de Lonesome Valley	1965	SSAATBB	Unaccompanied	
Go Tell it on the Mountains	1967	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
God's Gonna Buil' up Zion's Wall	1960	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Cover page indicates the work was arranged by both Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson. However, Wilson's name is not included with Hairston's on the first page of music.

Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road	1965	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Tenor solo listed on cover page. However, a solo is not indicated in the score.
Goodbye Song	1967	SATB	Piano	
Gossip, Gossip	1959	SSATB	Piano	Original composition by Hairston and Betty Hall Jones.
Great God A'mighty	1959	SSATBB; TTBB	Unaccompanied	
Hand Me Down	1951	SATB	Unaccompanied	
Hold My Mule While I Dance Josey	1960	SSATB	Unaccompanied with optional piano	Includes body percussion
Hold On	1955	SSATTBB, solo	Unaccompanied	
Home in dat Rock	1957	SSAATB, alto solo and narrator	Piano	Theme and variation form
I Can Tell the World	1959	SATB	Unaccompanied	
I Want Jesus	1958	SATB	Unaccompanied	
In Dat Great Gittin' Up Mornin'	1952	SATBB, tenor solo; SSATTBB	Unaccompanied	
It's All Over Me	1952	SATTBB, alto solo	Unaccompanied	
Joshua Fit De Battle of Jericho	1952	SSAATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Let the Church Roll On	1978	SATB, solo; SSAA	Unaccompanied	

Continued on the next page

Table 1 continued

Title	Year Published	Voicing	Instrumentation	Additional Notes
Live-A-Humble	1955	SSATBB	Unaccompanied	
Lord, I Don't Feel Noways Tired	1987	SATB, tenor solo	Unaccompanied	
Mary, Mary, Where is Your Baby?	1950	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Described by Hariston as an original spiritual.
Mary's Little Boy Chile	1956	SSATTB, solo	Piano	Described as an original Christmas spiritual based on West-Indian Rhythms.
Negro Spirituals & Folk Songs	1960	SATB (divisi)	Piano and Unaccompanied	Includes sixteen arrangements by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson.
No Ne Li Domi (You Can't Dance with Me)	1971	TTBB	Unaccompanied	Words and Music by J.M.T. Dosoo and Hairston
Oh, Holy Lord	1950	SATTBB; SSAA	Unaccompanied	
Oh, Rocka My Soul	1950	SSATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Our Troubles Was Hard	1961	SSATB, opt. tenor solo	Unaccompanied	
Poor Man Lazrus	1950	SATB; SSA; TTBB	Unaccompanied	
Ring de Christmas Bells	1972	SSATB, solo	Piano	
Rise Up, Shepherd, and Foller	1974	SATB	Unaccompanied	
Sakura, Sakura/ Song of the Cherry Blossoms	1959	SSAATBB/SSA	Piano	No indication is given that the piano is for rehearsal only, even though it directly doubles the voices throughout. In a video recording of Hairston conducting the work, the piano is used.

Scandalized My Name	1959	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile	1952	SSATTBB, soprano solo	Unaccompanied	
Steal Away	1951	SATTBB	Unaccompanied	
Swing A Lady Gum-Pum	1956	SSATB	Unaccompanied	The soprano 2 part is identified and included on the alto line.
Tataleo	1971	SATB, short spoken solo	Unaccompanied	Song in "Ga" language from Ghana, West Africa. Composed by Hairston and Ishmael Adams.
That Old House is Ha'nted	1970	SSATB, solo	Piano	
Two Encores (1. Sittin' Round the Fire; 2. Uncle Johnny's Mule)	1968	SSATB	Unaccompanied	Imitates barbershop harmony style
We're Goin' To That Ball	1967	SSATB	Piano	
What Kind O' Shoes You Gonna Wear	1959	SSATBB	Unaccompanied	
Who'll Be a Witness for My Lord?	1957	SSATB	Unaccompanied	
Wonderful Counselor	1952	SSATTBB, solo	Unaccompanied	
You Better Mind	1960	SSATB	Piano	This work is also included in <i>Spirituals and Folk Songs</i>





**Table 2. Discontinued Works by Hairston (Not accounted for in the analysis of Hairston's music)**

Title	Year Published	Voicing	Instrumentation
Band of Angels	1940	SATB	Unaccompanied
Faith Unlocks the Door		SATB	
He's Gone Away		SSA	
I'll Take Sugar in My Coffee-O	1975	SATB, opt. soprano solo	Piano
I'm a Travelin' Man	1963	SATB, baritone solo	
Lay Yo' Head in De Winduh, Jesus			
Little David, Play on Your Harp	1976	SSAATB	Unaccompanied
Long John Done Gone		SSATB, baritone solo	Unaccompanied
Pay Me My Money Down		SA	Piano
The Song of the Trolley			
Wade in de Water	1950	SATB	Unaccompanied
When I Was Sinkin' Down	1977	3-part treble	Unaccompanied
The Wolf and the Dog		SA	

**Table 3. Arrangements of Hairston's Works (Not accounted for in the analysis of Hairston's music)**

Title	Arranger	Year Published	Publisher	Voicing	Instrumentation
Band of Angels	Tom Fettke	2008	Jubilate Music Group	SATB, SSA	Piano, rhythm section (guitar, bass, drums)

Continued from the previous page

Calypso Lullaby	Joel Raney	2009	Hope Publishing Company	SATB, SAB, Two-Part	Piano with optional flute, 3 octave hand- bells, bass guitar, and percussion
The Christmas Spiritu- als of Jester Hairston	William Ryden	1988	Bourne Co.	Two-part	Piano
I'll Take Sugar in My Coffee-O (discontinued)	Nathan Scott		Alfred Music	SATB	
Mary's Little Boy Child	Valerie Shields	1996	Bourne Co.	SSA	Keyboard, 2 trumpets (or flutes) and optional string bass
Mary's Little Boy Child	Ed Lojeski	2008	Hal Leonard	SATB, SAB, SSA	Piano, guitar, percus- sion, and electric or string bass
Mary's Little Boy Child	Stan Bowsher		Bourne Co.	TTBB	

**Table 4. Ensemble Voicings in Hairston's Published Choral Works**

Voicing	Number of Selections	Voicing	Number of Selections
SSATB	20	SSATTB	1
SATB	12	SSAATTBB	1
SSATBB	5	SAATTBB	1
SSATTBB	4	SSAATB	1
SATTBB	4	SATBB	1
SSAATBB	2	TTBB	1

## Spiritual Arrangements

### *Elijah Rock*

SSATB, unaccompanied

(Also available for SSA)

Duration, 2:30

Bourne Co., 1955

Ranges



and limited alto/tenor divisi are unknown. However, one explanation may stem from an awareness of high school ensemble needs during the era. As previously mentioned, Hairston initially started publishing his works after leading a ten-day high school festival at College of the Pacific. He regularly returned each summer for this event and led other clinics with high school ensembles throughout the country. In choral ensembles, it is common to have an abundance of treble voices and a lack of tenor-bass voices, an issue that was also prevalent throughout Hairston's career.<sup>21</sup> Having regularly worked with high school students as a clinician, it is possible that Hairston favored SSATB voicing to accommodate for this imbalance of treble and tenor-bass voices.

### Selected Works

To demonstrate Hairston's inspirational and compositional proclivities, six works were selected as a representative survey of Hairston's published collection. They are divided into three categories: spiritual arrangements (*Elijah Rock* and *Hold On*), Christmas (*Mary's Little Boy Chile* and *Christmas Gift*), and folk/secular (*No Ne Li Domi* and *Goin' Down that Lonesome Road*). The works were selected for their interesting musical features, historical background, and serve as examples of Hairston's interest in fictional narratives, sound effects, and diverse cultures. In addition, general information (voicing, instrumentation, duration, publisher, year of publication, and vocal ranges) as well as performance considerations are provided for each work to aid choral directors with repertoire selection and score study.

To view a playlist with recordings and interviews, scan the QR code below or use the URL to find the playlist on YouTube. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRtGXXHxkiY&list=PLsyAGxXV7Z-GtCuL1IVp\\_WyAJCqbfBetF](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRtGXXHxkiY&list=PLsyAGxXV7Z-GtCuL1IVp_WyAJCqbfBetF)



YouTube Playlist QR Code

*Elijah Rock* is a highly popular spiritual that has been a thematic source for many arrangers throughout the past century. Considering its popularity, it is surprising to learn that *Elijah Rock* would have likely been lost to time if not for the work of Hall Johnson and Jester Hairston.

In 1932, while serving as the assistant conductor of the Hall Johnson Choir, Hairston and Johnson were informed by a chorus member of a former enslaved man living in Keyport, New Jersey. According to the member, the elderly man could sing spirituals that "probably no one in the world [knew] anything about."<sup>22</sup> Recounting the story in his autobiography, Hairston wrote:

We went way down there one day to Keyport, New Jersey and got down there about 9 o'clock in the morning and played all day with his great, great grandchildren. There were so many of them. That evening we got into his house. The room was so small and there were so many great grandchildren... They said, "If you ignore him, he might sing for you." So I didn't pay him any mind. I led his family all sittin' around in these songs, ... everything but a spiritual. After a while, he felt left out. So he hunched me in the ribs and said, "You boys know this song?" So I said, "What is it, sir?" And he sings, "Elijah Rock shout, shout. Elijah Rock."<sup>23</sup>

As the man sang, Hall Johnson quickly and discreetly notated the tune. Upon leaving, Johnson told Hairston,

“Jester, I believe we have a gem here.”<sup>24</sup> Both Hairston and Johnson later published arrangements of the tune in 1955 and 1956, respectively.

Performance notes for the interpretation of *Elijah Rock* were discussed by Tim Sharer in the September 1979 issue of the *Choral Journal*.<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to note that Hairston originally intended the work to be “staged and lighted,” starting with the basses standing alone on a dimly lit stage.<sup>26</sup> As the song progressed, additional voice parts were to walk on stage as the lights increased in brightness.

Additional performance suggestions include utilizing a “slow and methodical” tempo and avoiding a break between the words “shout, shout” (Figure 1).<sup>27</sup> The latter recommendation is curious, as all available recordings produced under Hairston’s supervision incorporate a subtle lift between these words. Reasons for this interpretive discrepancy are unknown. It is possible that Hairston’s tempo and rhythmic concerns stem from the arrangement produced by his mentor and colleague, Hall Johnson, who notated a faster tempo and quarter note quarter rest pattern on the text in question (Figure 1). In Hairston’s interactions with ensembles, singers also familiar with Johnson’s arrangement may have unconsciously exaggerated a rhythmic break, leading Hairston to suggest these performance recommendations.



**Figure 1.** Hairston and Johnson’s Approach to *Elijah Rock*.

Additionally, reasons for Hairston’s suggested “slow and methodical” tempo may stem from his use of syncopation in Figure 1, which may encourage some ensembles to rush, as well as a response to Johnson’s use of a faster tempo in his arrangement.

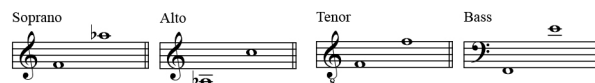
## Hold On

SSATTBB, unaccompanied, solo

Duration, 2:35

Bourne Co., 1955

Ranges



Hairston was an exceptional storyteller, often creating fictional narratives to enhance his works. He stated, “Sometimes, I conjure up a situation and make an appropriate story to go along with the song if I can’t find the authentic story.”<sup>28</sup> By understanding Hairston’s fictional narrative, performers and audience are able to gain insight into the emotional and musical context of the work as envisioned by the composer.

*Hold On*, for divisi mixed chorus, serves as one example of Hairston’s use of fictional narrative. For this work, Hairston imagines a revival meeting in which a sinner sits on the mourner’s bench receiving prayer. During the service, a deaconess comes over and tells the sinner,

The only way... that you’ll be able to reach heaven is to keep your hand on the plow... If you’re plowing with a plow in the field, and you hold on firmly to the handles, and press down hard, you get a straight furrow. But if you take one hand off that plow... that plow is gonna wiggle.<sup>29</sup>

In Hairston’s story, the plow symbolizes Jesus and a spiritual need to hold firmly to Him.

Throughout the work, the melody is passed between the tenor and soprano, with the supporting voices accentuating the melody through a rhythmic delay, entering on beat two. This rhythmic feature, in combination with Hairston’s use of syncopation, gives the song a lurching effect, imitating the “wiggle” of the plow.

A solo is indicated in measure 5, occupying the tenor staff; however, there is no indication when the solo should end or what the remaining tenor section should sing. In a recording produced by Hairston, a group of tenors perform the solo, implying that it is optional.<sup>30</sup> If utilizing a tenor solo, this author suggests ending the

solo in measure 21, with all the tenors joining the soloist during each repetition of the text, “Keep yo’ hand on de plow, Hold On.”

## Christmas

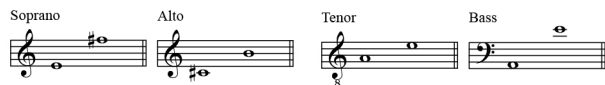
### *Mary’s Little Boy Chile*

SSATTB, piano, solo

Duration, 3:00

Bourne Co., 1956

Ranges



In addition to his spiritual arrangements, Hairston’s holiday songs are among his most popular, particularly *Mary’s Little Boy Chile*. Subtitled, “Calypso Christmas,” the work is described as “an original Christmas Spiritual based on West-Indian Rhythms.”<sup>31</sup> Initially titled “He Pone and Chocolate Tea” (cornbread and chocolate tea), the song was composed as a birthday gift for a friend from the West Indies.<sup>32</sup> In 1954, Hairston revised the tune, recording it with The Voices of Walter Schumann under the title *Calypso Christmas*. The choral octavo for *Mary’s Little Boy Chile* was published two years later in 1956 and was soon recorded and released by Harry Belafonte in December the same year. Initially, Hairston was not credited by Belafonte for the work. This oversight was quickly cleared up in court.<sup>33</sup> Solo variations have since been recorded by several other artists, most notably Harry Connick Jr., Tom Jones, John Denver, and Boney M., making it possibly his most recognizable original composition.

Interestingly, the original 1954 Voices of Walter Schumann recording is accompanied by a flute, bells, and percussion. Alternatively, the published choral octavo and a later recording produced by Hairston are limited to piano accompaniment. The variation in these recordings may suggest flexibility with the instrumentation of Hairston’s published works, further supported by similar discrepancies discussed later in the article (*Christmas Gift* and *Goin’ Down Dat Lonesome Road*).

Recordings of *Mary’s Little Boy Chile*, featuring Hairston as soloist, can be found on YouTube or accessed using the QR code on page 26.<sup>34</sup>

*Mary’s Little Boy Chile* is of moderate difficulty, utilizing lively syncopated rhythms, and relies heavily on the use of a soloist. The method used for notating the solo may be challenging for some singers, as the second and third verses are notated separately on the final page of the octavo. The work is accessible to most high school ensembles capable of the divisi, as the music is highly repetitive, with the chorus singing only two motives comprising a verse and chorus. Although accessible, the work’s greatest challenge is its use of syncopation. During each chorus, the choir performs two measures of music entirely on the off-beat (Figure 2). According to Hairston, while leading a choir in Madagascar, the song’s rhythm proved to be a challenge. During the dress rehearsal, the ensemble continually performed the rhythm incorrectly, to which Hairston informed them that he would stop and rehearse the mistake in front of the audience if it were incorrect during the performance. Hairston was true to his word, stopping the concert to correct the rhythm.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 2. Rhythmic Syncopation in *Mary’s Little Boy Chile*

### *Christmas Gift*

SSATBB, piano, optional tenor solo

(Also available for SAB)

Duration, 2:30

Bourne Co., 1955

Ranges



*Christmas Gift* for divisi mixed chorus and piano, is an original holiday song with words and music by Hairston and serves as a second example of his interest and



aptitude for storytelling. Upon reading the text, one might find the work to be self-centered and narcissistic.

Christmas Gift, hand it here!  
Christmas Gift, won't you hand it here!  
Christmas Gift, hand it here!  
I said it first so now hand it here!

However, this negative perception is quickly dismissed once the reader understands the traditional holiday game that inspired the work. According to Hairston, early Christmas morning one friend would knock on the door of another friend's house and then quickly hide. Upon opening the door, the hidden friend would jump out and the two friends would race to exclaim, "Christmas gift!" The friend who said it last would then have to give the other a small gift.<sup>36</sup> Hence the phrase, "I said it first so now hand it here!" Anecdotally, Hairston noted that an individual would sometimes knock on the front door and then sneak in through another entrance to surprise their friend from behind to win the game.<sup>37</sup>

Composed in the style of jazz, the work is structured in a repetitive verse-chorus form. The optional tenor soloist sings each verse supported by the wordless vocables of the ensemble. The wordless vocables, or scat singing, utilized during the verses simulate the sonorities of a jazz band, with the basses imitating the double bass (i.e., "boom") and treble voices imitating the brass section (i.e., "duwah").

Although only piano accompaniment is notated in the score, a recording of The Voices of Walter Schumann, with Hairston singing the solo, incorporates both a drum set and double bass. This recording is available on YouTube and can be accessed using the QR code on page 26.<sup>38</sup>

## Folk/Secular

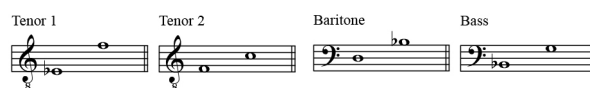
### *No Ne Li Domi (You Can't Dance with Me)*

TTBB, unaccompanied

Duration, 2:35

Bourne Co., 1971

Ranges



Hairston regularly collaborated with his contemporaries throughout his career. Seven of his published works were written in collaboration with another composer (refer to Table 1). During the second half of the twentieth century, Hairston expanded these collaborations to a global level, leading choirs throughout the world as a Goodwill Ambassador for the U. S. State Department, expanding his knowledge and appreciation of diverse cultures. The Ghanaian folk song *No Ne Li Domi* (You can't dance with me) represents both Hairston's collaborative spirit and interest in diverse cultures.

*No Ne Li Domi*, for tenor-bass chorus, was written in collaboration with Ghanaian composer Jonathan Michael Teye Dosoo. Incorporating a macaronic text in both English and Adangbe (indigenous Ghanaian language), the work tells the story of a dance contest in which a boy refuses to dance with a girl because she is a poor dancer.<sup>39</sup> Predominantly in Adangbe, the text is short and highly repetitive, with a pronunciation guide provided on the last page of the octavo, making it accessible to tenor-bass ensembles that can manage the divisi.

Musically, the work is highly influenced by Western tonality, imitating Glee club sonorities of the mid-twentieth century, which are possibly a result of Hairston's involvement. It should also be noted; use of percussion is not indicated in the score but acceptable considering the Ghanaian dance basis of the work. According to Jude Nwankwo, dancing in Africa requires instrumental accompaniment. As such, *No Ne Li Domi* would be incomplete without percussion.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Nwankwo also notes the collaborative nature of composer and

performer in African music.

In a traditional African setting, performers are collaborators in the compositional process. It is common for choral composers to compose the choral parts and leave the percussion section for the players to improvise, thus collaborating with the composer.<sup>41</sup>

Although improvisation is recommended, percussionists should aim to play in a Ghanaian style, which features distinct characteristics.<sup>42</sup>

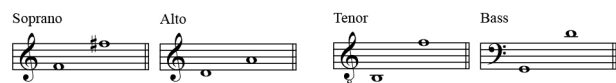
## ***Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road***

SSATB, unaccompanied

Duration, 4:40

Bourne Co., 1965

Ranges



*Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road* (1965) is considered by Hairston to be one of his best works.<sup>43</sup> The piece is identified on the title page as a work song but described by Hairston as a protest song.<sup>44</sup> This protest sentiment can be observed in the recurring text that concludes each verse, "But I won't be treated disa way." In addition, the song's climactic moment occurs in the fourth verse with the text, "Been kicked all aroun' dis ol' town, But I won't be treated disa way," and is set in a declamatory fashion through the frequent use of accents. Considering the cultural climate of the mid 1960s, and his description of the work as a protest song, *Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road* could arguably be considered Hairston's musical contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.

*Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road* is dynamically set in an arch form, beginning softly with finger snaps and whistling, building to the previously mentioned climactic moment, and concluding once again with snaps and whistling that gradually fade away. Hairston's use of finger snaps and whistling serve as an example of his affinity for various sound effects.<sup>45</sup> In addition to *Goin'*

*Down Dat Lonesome Road*, effects such as snaps, claps, whistling, and nonsense syllables, can be observed in ten additional works.<sup>46</sup>

When comparing the published score for *Goin' Down Dat Lonesome Road* with recordings featuring Hairston, several interesting discrepancies appear. First, in a 1974 educational video series on the history and performance of music by Black composers, Hairston incorporates piano accompaniment and replaces the whistling with a harmonica.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, additional recordings directed by Hairston perform the score as notated.<sup>48</sup>

Hairston's willingness to alter his work through the inclusion of piano and harmonica may suggest flexibility in the interpretation and performance of his music. In 1974, when this video was recorded, Hairston would have extensively worked with ensembles throughout the world of varying ages and capabilities. For the recording in question, Hairston may have realized the ensemble's need for additional support and adjusted accordingly. A second discrepancy in the published octavo appears on the cover page which indicates the work includes a tenor solo. However, no solo is marked in the score, and no known recordings produced by Hairston include a soloist.

## **Performance Considerations**

A complete discussion of spiritual performance considerations is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>49</sup> The following serves to identify a few performance considerations specific to Hairston's music.

As most of his works were published over five decades ago, Hairston's oeuvre occasionally utilizes outdated language and objectionable subject matter. Conductors should be aware of the use of gender specific language and antiquated lyrics that do not represent inclusive language. The most surprising use of objectionable subject matter is found in the song *Home in Dat Rock*. Structured as a theme and variation, the work progresses through various musical styles, with the second variation imitating Stephen Foster and the minstrel show. The narrator's text in the score reads,

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, white minstrel men  
blacked their faces and tried to imitate the

slave entertainers. This is probably the way our song would have sounded had Stephen Foster arranged it for a minstrel show.<sup>50</sup>

While the performance of minstrel music is highly objectionable today, Hairston did not shy away from the subject.


Throughout his works, Hairston frequently notates dialect in the score. Interestingly, upon first joining the Hall Johnson Choir, Hairston avoided dialect in favor of the New England pronunciation he learned at Tufts University. To Hairston's surprise, upon asking Johnson to serve as his assistant conductor, Johnson replied that he was considering removing him from the choir due to his lack of dialect.<sup>51</sup> Hairston quickly adopted dialect to remain in the ensemble. Regarding the inclusion of dialect in performance, Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson wrote:

Another debatable point in the singing of these songs is the extent to which ... dialect should be used. After all, they were created in dialect. Much of their charm is enhanced by the dialect. In performance, when all dialect is eliminated, the singing sounds unnatural and affected. On the other hand when most choirs, either Negro or White, attempt to render them in meticulous dialect, the performance sounds stilted. Probably the wisest course is to introduce dialect which is natural to the music and universally accepted.<sup>52</sup>

In connection with this concern of stilted performances, Hairston and Wilson noted the importance of sincere heartfelt expression when performing spirituals. According to Hairston and Wilson, this expression should manifest through physical movement including facial expression, hand clapping, and the rhythmic swaying of the body. However, they also noted that clapping, which primarily occurs in secular works, should be limited in spirituals unless performed in a "spirit of religious ecstasy."<sup>53</sup>

### Conclusion

The published choral works of Jester Hairston were

highly popular during the second half of the twentieth century. Directors may be familiar with his more popular works; in recent decades, however, many of Hairston's compositions and arrangements have become overshadowed. It is this author's hope that directors continue to program Hairston's well-known works while discovering his less familiar pieces, further preserving the musical legacy of this beloved choral director, arranger, and composer. 

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Eugene Thamon Simpson, "Eugene Thamon Simpson—Rowen College—1994 Interview," YouTube Video, 26:14, September 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxRtGXHxkiY&t=53s>.
- <sup>2</sup> There is conflicting information as to the exact number. An editorial introduction to Hairston's autobiography claims he received "at least five honorary doctorate degrees," while other sources list four or fewer.
- <sup>3</sup> "1989 National Convention to Be Dedicated to Jester Hairston," *Choral Journal* 29, no. 7 (1989): 25. André Thomas was asked to lead the conference in Hairston's setting of *Poor Man Lazarus*.
- <sup>4</sup> André J. Thomas, *Way over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007), xiv.
- <sup>5</sup> Donald Neuen, Robert Shaw Choral Award acceptance speech (March 2023, Cincinnati, Ohio). Printed in *Choral Journal* 64, no. 2 (September 2023): 53–55.
- <sup>6</sup> Jester Hairston, "The Story Song – Black American Folk Music," YouTube Video, 13:27, August 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28JKN4ZKucM>.
- <sup>7</sup> Jester Hairston, "ACDA Jester Hairston Video," YouTube Video, 1:04:24, October 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sn801ortqmk>.
- <sup>8</sup> Jester Hairston, *Jester Hairston: My Black Hollywood and the Legacy of the Spiritual*, ed. Richard Hatch (2013), 95.
- <sup>9</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*.
- <sup>10</sup> Jester Hairston, "ACDA Jester Hairston Video." According to Hairston, this musical training took place every day due to a lack of employment opportunities during the Great Depression.
- <sup>11</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 128.
- <sup>12</sup> Juilliard Office of the Registrar, e-mail to author, January

- 3, 2025.
- <sup>13</sup> Micah Bland, "Jester Hairston's Film Music Career," *The Journal of Film Music* 11, no. 1 (2024): 5–21, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jfm.23542>.
- <sup>14</sup> Micah Bland, "Jester Hairston's Film Music Career."
- <sup>15</sup> Jester Hairston, "ACDA Jester Hairston Video."
- <sup>16</sup> The exact number of Hairston's film music credits is unfortunately unknown as he was frequently uncredited.
- <sup>17</sup> A thorough discussion of Hairston's film music career is beyond the scope of this article. For more information about Hairston's career in Hollywood, see Bland, "Jester Hairston's Film Music Career."
- <sup>18</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 289.
- <sup>19</sup> A musical theatre production about the life of Jester Hairston is currently in the works. See, <https://jestermusical.com/> for more details.
- <sup>20</sup> *Negro Spirituals and Folk Songs* by Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson has been excluded from the statistical analysis in this article, as the work is a collection of sixteen arrangements, which cannot be accurately categorized in a statistical analysis.
- <sup>21</sup> J. Terry Gates, "A Historical Comparison of Public Singing by American Men and Women," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 37, no. 1 (1989): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3344951>.
- <sup>22</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 428.
- <sup>23</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 429.
- <sup>24</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*.
- <sup>25</sup> Tim Sharer, "Jester Hairston: Background and Interpretation of 'Elijah Rock,'" *Choral Journal* 20, no. 1 (1979): 34.
- <sup>26</sup> Tim Sharer, "Jester Hairston."
- <sup>27</sup> Tim Sharer, "Jester Hairston."
- <sup>28</sup> Jester Hairston, "Jester Hairston: The Afro-American Slave Song (1978)," YouTube Video, 2:19:06, August 6, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLTRyEK2i2s&t=1s>.
- <sup>29</sup> Jester Hairston, "The Afro-American Slave Song."
- <sup>30</sup> Based solely on listening, it cannot be determined if it is the entire tenor section or a small group singing the solo. Jester Hairston, "Hold On! Arr. Jester Hairston," YouTube Video, 2:37, July 7, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dpYx\\_NDFrY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dpYx_NDFrY).
- <sup>31</sup> Jester Hairston, *Mary's Little Boy Chile* (Bourne Co., 1956).
- <sup>32</sup> John Shearlaw and David Brown, *Boney M* (Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1979), 105.
- <sup>33</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 318.
- <sup>34</sup> Jester Hairston, "Mary's Little Boy Chile arr. Jester Hairston," YouTube Video, 3:08, July 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFRDQrOkG7s>.
- <sup>35</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 395.
- <sup>36</sup> Jester Hairston, "The Afro-American Slave Song."
- <sup>37</sup> Jester Hairston, "The Afro-American Slave Song."
- <sup>38</sup> The Voices of Walter Schumann, "Christmas Gift: The Voices of Walter Schumann, Jester Hairston (Baritone Soloist) (1955)," YouTube Video, 2:27, December 9, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CYYZTqOpImE>.
- <sup>39</sup> J.M.T. Dosoo and Jester Hairston, *No Ne Li Domi* (New York: Bourne Co., 1971).
- <sup>40</sup> Jude Nwankwo, e-mail to author, June 4, 2025.
- <sup>41</sup> Jude Nwankwo, e-mail to author.
- <sup>42</sup> Jude Nwankwo, e-mail to author.
- <sup>43</sup> Jester Hairston, "Teaches the Story Song: Black American Folk Songs," YouTube Video, 12:40, August 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W32GNt72kuY&t=3s>.
- <sup>44</sup> Jester Hairston, "Teaches the Story Song."
- <sup>45</sup> Albert McNeil, "Albert McNeil Jester's Choral Contributions," YouTube Video, 8:41, August 19, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duyhxaq\\_6Qw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duyhxaq_6Qw).
- <sup>46</sup> Additional works utilizing sound effects include, *Dis Ol' Hammer*, *Dis Train*, *Gossip Gossip*, *Hold My Mule While I Dance Josey*, *Home In Dat Rock*, *Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho*, *Our Troubles Was Hard*, *Ring de Christmas Bells*, *Swing a Lady Gum-Pum*, and *That Ole House*.
- <sup>47</sup> Jester Hairston, "Teaches the Story Song."
- <sup>48</sup> Jester Hairston, "'Goin Down That Lonesome Road' Rowen College," YouTube Video, 5:29, August 24, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkV\\_17lq8kU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkV_17lq8kU).
- <sup>49</sup> For more information on performing spirituals, see André J. Thomas, *Way over in Beulah Lan'*; Felicia Raphael Marie Barber and Andre J. Thomas, *A New Perspective for the Use of Dialect in African American Spirituals: History, Context, and Linguistics* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021); Randy Jones, *So You Want to Sing Spirituals: A Guide for Performers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); and Anton E. Armstrong "Practical Performance Practice in the African American Slave Song," in Heather Buchanan and Matthew W. Mehaffey, eds. *Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir, Volume 1* (GIA Publications, Inc., 2005).
- <sup>50</sup> Jester Hairston, *Home in Dat Rock* (Bourne Co., 1957), 5.
- <sup>51</sup> Jester Hairston, *My Black Hollywood*, 127.
- <sup>52</sup> Jester Hairston and Harry Robert Wilson, *Negro Spirituals and Folk Songs* (Bourne Co., 1960), 6.
- <sup>53</sup> Hairston and Wilson, *Negro Spirituals*.