

# “Were You There”—Roland Hayes (1940)

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Essay by Randy Jones (guest post)\*



By the end of the 1930's, tenor Roland Hayes (1887-1977) had already accomplished more as a professional concert recitalist than any African American of his or earlier generations. The son of former slaves, Hayes had found substantial acclaim in Europe—including a command performance before British royalty—before returning to the United States for several successful tours. He had also supported the careers of numerous other African American singers, including Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Dorothy Maynor, Edward Boatner and William Warfield.

The Depression had depleted his finances and forced him once again to set up his own engagements. The spreading clouds of war in Europe made it unsafe for him to seek work there. The tenor split his time between concertizing in the United States and making a failed effort to develop the plantation, Angelmo Farms, that he had bought years earlier and named for his mother.

And he returned to the recording studio.

Years earlier, as a struggling young African American musician, Hayes had found the path to a professional career as a concert singer to be virtually untrod. He was determined not only to clear that path for himself, but to make it easier for others who wished to travel it as well. He decided to pay, out of his own limited funds, to make several records on Columbia, a label with an established reputation for quality Classical releases. Among the songs he selected for this 1918 project was H. T. Burleigh's setting of the Negro Spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

The Fisk Jubilee Singers had introduced the world to choral performance of Negro Spirituals—Hayes had been a member of the storied ensemble as a student at Fisk. However, the performance of Spirituals by a concert soloist was a new phenomenon introduced only two years earlier by Burleigh's publication of the song, “Deep River.” Hayes was not only looking to establish his own career, but his recordings would serve as early examples of interpretive approaches to the performance of concert Spirituals.

In *The Black Perspective in Music*, F. W. Woolsey described Hayes' presentation of the song:

The voice is velvety and the enunciation is pure—too pure. The tenor seemed to be condescending to the spiritual and the result is quite unlike the rhythmic and idiomatic conviction he brought to Negro songs later. Hayes explains what happened: “I had set out to become an artist, but I still had to learn that I must approach art personally; I had still to be taught that I, Roland Hayes, a Negro, had first to measure my racial inheritance and then put it to use.”

Despite his own critical appraisal of the performance, Hayes was able to use it and the other recordings to help get the word out to those who could support his career. With funds raised from record sales and concert tickets, Hayes went to England in the hope that he would have a better chance of success than was likely for him in the United States. Hayes gave a critically successful recital at the Royal Chapel of the Savoy on Palm Sunday, 1921, where he featured an *a cappella* performance of the Negro Spiritual, “Were You There.” Authors Christopher Brooks and Robert Sims stated that the tenor’s performance of the Spiritual:

... was such a phenomenon that a photo of it was later immortalized in a bust by Renée Vautier. It captured the tenor in a deep, almost transcendental pose with his head slightly raised and his eyes tightly closed as if he were internalizing the words that he had just sung about the crucified Christ dying on the cross.... Roland caused a few in his dispassionate British audience to drop their heads and shed tears. When he applied his well-developed *messa di voce* to the single word “Oh,” with a stunning portamento, the listeners were totally enthralled.

After Hayes established himself in Europe, he recorded other Spirituals, including his own setting of “Sit Down” with the Vocalion label in 1922. Then, starting in September 1939, he returned to Columbia to record several songs with piano accompanist, Reginald Boardman. One song, however, he recorded unaccompanied, delivering the stark and powerful words and melody with the passion and vocal command he had developed over the years of stage performance.

“Were You There” is a Negro Spiritual in which the singer serves as a witness to the suffering and death of Christ. Author Arthur C. Jones drew direct connections: “In their actual life experiences, enslaved Africans must have recognized the parallels between the crucifixion of Jesus and the hangings, whippings and other violent abuses experienced by members of their own community....”

Hayes selected these verses for his recording:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?  
Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?  
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?  
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?

The tenor's a cappella recording of this song not only featured the *mesa di voce* and portamento of past performances, but demonstrated his interpretative freedom to adjust the tempo of the text's delivery in order to emphasize specific words as Hayes was moved to do at the moment.

This recording of "Were You There" confirmed that Hayes had, indeed, discovered how to plumb the rich musical heritage he had inherited and to express its beauty and power in song.

In a 1994 interview, Hayes' daughter, Afrika, discussed her father's singing:

If you listen to the recordings, it wasn't the voice itself, it was what he did with the voice. Artistry, to me, is more important than the most glorious voice in the world. You could have a voice like a golden bell, with nothing behind it. If I were being a very critical person, I could pick out vocal flaws that my Dad had, but you forget about that. You may not see him, but you hear the artistry, you can picture what is going on in his mind.

"Were You There" was released with "Hear de Lambs a-Cryin'" and "Plenty Good Room" by Columbia Masterworks in 1940. In 2013, the Library of Congress honored the song by adding it to the National Recording Registry.

*Randy Jones is the compiler of the online resource "The Spirituals Database" and author of "Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music."*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.