

Let it Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals

By Ashley Bryan
2007, Atheneum Books for Young Readers



Reviewed by
Enicia Fisher

Ashley Bryan, a Coretta Scott King Award winner, offers another colorful addition to the music lover's library with *Let it Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals*.

Bryan, who "grew up to the sound of his mother singing from morning to night," shares his love for song and the cultural tradition of gospel music with children through his multi-layered, multi-colored illustrations that suggest a vision of a joyful, harmonious multi-cultural society.

The fiesta of color begins with "This Little Light of Mine," followed by "Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In," and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Bryan renders each verse with a two-page spread, the text consistently laid out on the bottom of each page. Vibrant scenes flow freely across the pages with a riot of color reminiscent of African textiles or crazy quilts.

The final pages of the book include simple musical scores for each song (melody line only), along with a note from the illustrator. He explains the roots of these songs—the "Negro Spiritual" tradition with its rich oral history created by African American slaves who were forbidden to read or write but freely sang with a spirit that could not be oppressed. Bryan ends his note with an invocation, "May the spirit move you to make them your own."

While the biblical text may preclude many classroom teachers from using the book, the folk song tradition invites individuals to adapt the text according to students' own interests. For example, "Don't Let Satan Blow It Out" could easily be adapted to "Don't

Let Anyone Blow It Out" for a non-religious yet spirited song.

It may be more difficult to remove biblical references from "Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In," but with a little bit of imagination and creativity, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" could become a "think globally, act locally" theme song by altering the text to "We've got the whole world in our hands." This adaptation fits nicely with the illustrations for this song, which convey different types of housing from around the world and lots of natural and wildlife imagery promoting an environmental theme.

Layered construction paper collage work, while intricately rendered by Bryan, could inspire many young

artists to get out the scissors and glue. Possible classroom projects include a collaborative book based on a chosen song; its many pages could be illustrated individually by each student, using a construction paper collage to give it a consistent visual style. The book would easily serve as a springboard for cultural or history lessons, but at the same time it calls for readers to let the spirit sing out in the simplicity of raising a variety of voices in united songs of freedom and joy.

Enicia Fisher has a master's degree in music education from the University of Kansas and writes book reviews for national publications.

