

## Case Study in Lyrics

### Religious references in “*Dry Bones*”

The song ***Dry Bones*** was composed by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), an African American poet from Florida who became one of the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. He was a prominent figure opposing racial oppression in the US.

***Dry Bones*** draws from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel and can easily be seen as a metaphor for African American liberation. It has been respectfully performed since then by African American performers and by the general public as an expression of African American vernacular. It has also had a life both as a secular and also a religious children’s song about bones. Some versions have wholly embraced the religious implications while others have completely removed any religious reference. To the best of my knowledge this song has never been a part of the “Minstrel” tradition of exaggerated, derogatory depiction of African American language and culture.

### Use at IAA

The intention of teaching this song at IAA was to

- Sing a compelling and accessible song with a strong participatory component.
- Demonstrate the use of a song with visuals teaching about anatomy.
- Present an example of an African American who migrated for better opportunities and who wrote a song emphasizing collective action.
- To tie in a song to the Halloween holiday. (Skeletons)

My dilemma as a teacher involved the refrain “Now hear the word of the Lord.” I was concerned that removing that line would remove the song from the context intended by the author and make it just a song about bones. After running it by the K and 1 teachers and getting their (rushed) approval we tried it out. The song went well but the “Lord” invocation didn’t feel right. A student volunteered his family version “Now shake those skeleton bones” which instantly seemed preferable for the following reasons.

- It was volunteered by a participant from his own experience,
- It offered a strong participatory conclusion to the verse and chorus,
- It didn’t overtly pander to the Halloween theme or needlessly trivialize the original metaphor.

This alternative version was used for the remaining 5 classes with great success.

This case study shows some thoughts around lyrical appropriateness. Most folk songs are weighted with controversial associations. Lyrics have to be carefully curated and often adjusted on the fly. This essay in its final form will be included in teacher material provided as part of the ONE Sings program.

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