

## **THE FISK UNIVERSITY JUBILEE SINGERS ®**

Five years after Fisk University opened its doors in 1866 the University was in dire financial straits and the possibility that the institution would have to be closed hung in the air. This would have been very sad indeed because Fisk was the only university at the time that offered a liberal arts education to “young men and women irrespective of color.”

Mr. George L. White, treasurer of Fisk then and a professor of music, was inspired with the idea of creating a choral ensemble and taking the group on a concert tour to earn funds for the University. In the fall of 1871 without the permission of the Board of Trustees and despite significant discouragement from colleagues Mr. White borrowed money and did take his choral ensemble of five women and four men on a musical adventure.

The first concerts were in small towns and the group earned barely enough to cover expenses. Surprise, curiosity and some hostility characterized early audience response to this group of young black singers who did not perform in the traditional “minstrel fashion.” Mr. White, in a gesture of supreme hopefulness bestowed the name “Jubilee Singers,” a Biblical reference to the year of Jubilee in the Book of Leviticus and likewise gave them the spirit to forge ahead.

Continued perseverance, faith and beautiful voices began to change attitudes among the predominantly white audiences. Eventually skepticism and hostility was replaced by standing ovations and critical praise in newspaper reviews. They sang at the World Peace Festival in Boston and to a full house at the Philadelphia Academy of Music. President Ulysses S. Grant invited them to perform at the White House in 1872 and following their first American tour in 1871 the Jubilee Singers were recognized both nationally and across the world.

In 1873, the Jubilee Singers toured Europe for the first time. Their artistry and sincerity evoked a popular enthusiasm through the courts and concert halls of England, Holland, Scotland, Germany, Sweden and Russia. They introduced the world to the Negro Spiritual and earned more than \$150,000 for Fisk. This money was used in building Jubilee Hall, which is the first permanent building in the south used for educating African Americans.

Under Paul T. Kwami, the current musical director, the Jubilee Singers are an enduring tradition at Fisk and represent the ardor and dreams of youth as well as the tranquility and understanding of maturity. Tennessee Arts Commission worked with the ensemble on the American Masterpiece project funded through the National Endowment for the Arts. The ensemble received the National Medal of the Arts in 2008. Other awards include induction in the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, Music City Walk of Fame, the Academy Honors and the Tennessee Governor’s Folklife Heritage Award. The Fisk Jubilee Singers believe there can and must be peace in this world as well as greater understanding and love among all peoples of this earth. And to this end, the Fisk Jubilee Singers minister through song to the hearts of all who listen to them.

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