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## Activity 3: Song Lyrics Analysis Exercise

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### Introductory Activity

- Can pupils think of songs today with hidden meanings? Are there any songs they know with double meanings? Do we still have protest songs today?

Songs sung on the plantations often had double meanings so they could be used as a way to carry messages around the enslaved communities.

The enslaved Africans would often sing while they worked to create a rhythm to drive their tedious hard labour. Songs ranged from stories of great joy to more sombre lyrics of hardship and sadness. Spiritual songs often fused together traditional African style with characteristics of European religious hymns. "Swing Low Sweet Chariot", "Go down Moses" and "Steal Away" are some of the most famous examples of these songs.

While drumming was treated with suspicion and often banned by the plantation owners because it might be sending out messages, singing was encouraged as a way of lifting spirits. However, many songs carried secret messages of rebellion with words such as 'train' referring to a train of people who would hide enslaved Africans as they made their way to freedom from the South to the North of America. The song 'Steal Away' includes the lyrics "My Lord, he calls me, he calls me by the thunder"; the word thunder would be replaced with times and places for escape.

More information about spirituals can be found at [www.blackvoices.co.uk](http://www.blackvoices.co.uk)



Drumming was not permitted on plantations because the plantation owners feared uprisings.

Here are some examples of lyrics from slavery songs. What do you think they might mean?

*Swing low sweet chariot comin'  
for to carry me home  
Goin' over Jordan, goin' over home*

Because the songs often referred to biblical stories they could have perfectly innocent meanings too. Many Spiritual songs have different versions because they have been passed from generation to generation verbally.

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Now try and find the hidden meanings in these well known songs; Freedom Train, Go Down Moses, and Steal Away:

#### Freedom Train

*(sung as a round)*  
*This 'ole freedom train*  
*is such a long time in a comin'*  
*And there's none who can't afford it*  
*So you'd better jump aboard it singing*  
*Freedom, Freedom*  
*Freedom, Freedom, Freedom*

#### Go down, Moses

Chorus:  
*Go down, Moses, way down in*  
*Egyptland*  
*Tell ole Pharaoh: Let my people go*

Verse 1:  
*When Israel was in Egyptland*  
*Let my people go.*  
*Oppressed so hard they could not stand,*  
*Let my people go.*

Verse 2:  
*"Thus spoke the Lord", bold Moses said,*  
*Let my people go.*  
*"If not I'll smite your firstborn dead,"*  
*Let my people go.*

Verse 3:  
*"No more shall they in bondage toil"*  
*Let my people go.*  
*"Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,"*  
*Let my people go.*

#### Steal Away

Chorus:  
*Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.*  
*Steal away, steal away, steal away home,*  
*I ain't got long to stay here.*

Verse 1:  
*My Lord calls me, he calls me by the*  
*thunder;*  
*the trumpet sounds with-in-a my soul,*  
*I ain't got long to stay here.*

Verse 2:  
*My Lord calls me, he calls me by the*  
*lightning;*  
*the trumpet sounds with-in-a my soul,*  
*I ain't got long to stay here.*