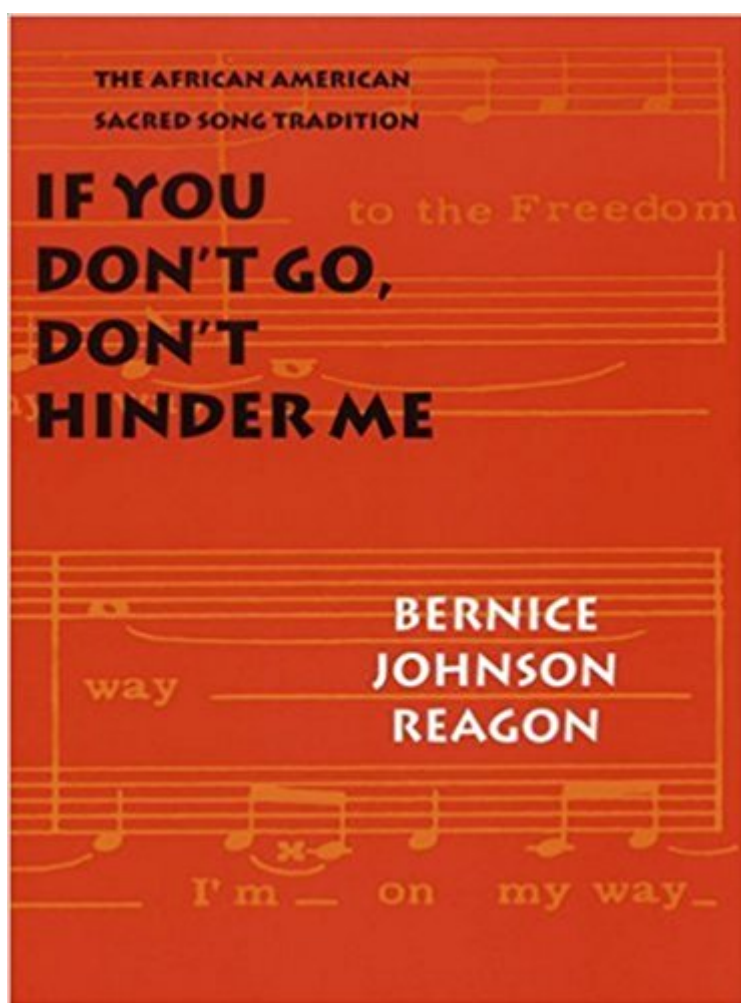


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# If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition (Abraham Lincoln Lecture Series)



## Synopsis

How do you survive leaving everything you know to try to reconstruct your life and future in a new way? What do you carry with you on your journey to the new place?Â Migration looms large as a theme in twentieth-century African American life. Bernice Johnson Reagon uses this theme as a centering structure for four essays that examine different genres of African American sacred music as they manifested themselves throughout the twentieth century and within her own life. The first essay examines the evolution of gospel music by looking at the work of Charles Albert Tindley, Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Reverend Smallwood Williams, Roberta Martin, Pearl William Jones, and Richard Smallwood. In the next essay Reagon relates the story of Deacon William Reardon and the prayer bands that carried the tradition of South Carolina spirituals through the twentieth century in the communities of Washington DC, and Baltimore. The concert spiritual tradition is the subject of the third essay, and the final essay explores how stories about African American women of the nineteenth century became a source of strength for Reagon in her development as an African American woman, singer, fighter, and scholar.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, an award-winning African American female a cappella group, writes eloquently of gospel music and the migration of black people in the U.S. that helped nurture and spread the sacred music. Reagon maintains that studying gospel requires

studying the great migration between 1915 and 1949, when 15 million blacks left the rural South and its brutal racism. That migration is the "centering structure" of four essays on the development of gospel music, essays that document changes in the themes of old songs from slavery through more current spirituals, all of which evoke the search for freedom and deliverance. The music changed from a striving for freedom up North, or more likely in the hereafter, to a freedom in the here and now and wherever black people lived. In this slim but powerful book, Reagon uses song lyrics and the history of the music and its composers, including Charles Albert Tindley and Thomas Andrew Dorsey, to put into context the spirit of African American oral tradition and the evolution of gospel music. Vanessa Bush

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"Short but eloquent and pedagogically useful. . . . [a] combination of crisp scholarly narrative with passionate opinion in treating this fiercely complicated subject. . . . This short book serves to remind us that no deployment of postmodern theoretical apparatus can measure up to honest and vigorous reflection coupled with clarity concerning whose voice is being heard at a given moment."-Chris Goertzen, *Journal of American Folklore* -- Chris Goertzen \* *Journal of American Folklore* \* "In the four historical essays that make up *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me*, Bernice Johnson Reagon ratchets up the hybrid essence of the historical essay by adding . . . another genre: autobiography. . . . And justifiably so, for African American spirituality, as revealed through its many musics, defies the telling of its evolution either through music criticism or historical narration. In a phrase Reagon heard during childhood, this tradition is all about 'making a way out of no way'. . . . Reagon's life-particularly her accomplishments as a singer, historian, and civil rights activist-imparts structure to her essays where the music alone would resist it. As founder and lead singer of the award-winning female ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock, she has lived and breathed all forms of African American religious music. . . . As a cultural historian who now serves as a curator emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution and as a distinguished professor of history at American University, Reagon challenges conventional historical methods as useful tools to seek out the deeper meanings of black musical spirituality."-Washington Post \* Washington Post \* "Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock, an award-winning African American female a cappella group, writes eloquently of gospel music and the migration of black people in the U. S. that helped nurture and spread the sacred music. . . . In this slim but powerful book, Reagon uses song lyrics and the history of the music and its composers including Charles Albert Tindley and Thomas Andrew Dorsey, to put into context the spirit of African American oral tradition and the evolution of gospel

music."-Booklist \* Booklist \* "In 1996, the University of Nebraska invited Reagon to present a series of lectures on the sacred song tradition, and these talks provide the essence of the four chapters in this excellent volume. . . . The bibliography is significant and valuable."-Choice \* Choice \*

This is a terrific short book on the Black sacred music tradition in the US. Based in four lectures given by Bernice Johnson Reagon (ethnomusicologist, singer, one of the original Freedom Singers in the early '60s and founder of the tremendous a capella women's group Sweet Honey in the Rock), the book has the virtue of being grounded in talk, adapted into four chapters that treat four cornerstones of the tradition Reagon has followed and been devoted to illuminating and delivering for decades. She treats the music and the history as inseparable. She focuses on her personal groundings. Her talk on gospel moves from early master songwriters Charles Albert Tindley ("Stand By Me") and Thomas Andrew Dorsey ("Precious Lord") through that quick singular moment in pop song when \*everyone\* could hear the Edwin Hawkins Singers' gospel breakthrough ("Oh Happy Day") and on to super-sophisticated contemporary composer Richard Smallwood's rise out of the milieux of late '60s Howard University, when the historic black college was in fact resistant to Black song. A second talk treats a single figure, Deacon William Reardon Sr., whose 1930s migration north out of South Carolina to Washington, DC, and role as "songleader" in the Southern Baptist church there, is taken as one exemplary 20th century story of the Great Migration. A third talk works with spirituals, noting racist presumptions in early scholarship on Black song, the rise of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and shift into concert halls and respectability, and the personally foundational teachings of Reagon's high school chorus director in late 1950s Georgia. Her fourth and last chapter lands on freedom songs, intertwined with illuminations of Black history via W.E.B. Du Bois, and centering on three crucial women: Bessie Jones, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman, "singing mothers who were fighters, whose lives taught me another way to be in this world." That's her closing note, and it couldn't be more right on. There's a concise bibliography, pointing to the important works by scholars such as Horace Boyer, and to the literature behind this little book. Bernice Reagon is gifted here in her ability to deal with so vast a subject ("the African American Sacred Song tradition") in such a fair minded, inspired, and appealing narration. For sure, there are more substantiated and less personally grounded works out there (her own big book from the Smithsonian, *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers*, aforementioned Horace Boyer's *Golden Age of Gospel*, Anthony Heilbut's early *The Gospel Sound* all recommended) though this is a sweet work that hits the nails. Short of having had the chance to hear her deliver these words, you couldn't do better at locating a quick path to the

source.

Bernice has the right to write the book she wanted to write, or rather, give the speeches she wants because most of this book is transcribed speeches and lectures. I was looking for objective historical and musicological writing about African American religious music, but instead Reagon provides a number of statements of her pride in, her glory of, and her spiritual value for Black religious music. Little objective information is provided. Of course, for those looking for such praise and for those looking for the spiritual values that Reagon discusses, this is a wonderful book. She is a great writer and speaker and is exceedingly clear. Had I approached this book this way, I would not have been disappointed.

In *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me*, Bernice Johnson Reagon provides an inside view of sacred music traditions within African American culture. Through personal anecdotes and descriptive narrative, she introduces to some and reminds others of the richness of gospel music, the congregational song tradition, spirituals and freedom songs, weaving a story of how music has supported and sustained a people through tremendous adversity. Through a series of four essays, Reagon addresses much more than styles of music. She weaves a story of how African American sacred song tradition has provided spiritual and emotional sustenance through challenging political, social and economic landscapes. She also shows how music from this tradition has been used to encourage, empower, and educate Black people throughout U.S. American history. If you want to read a personal account from one who has actually lived the music as opposed to someone presenting an objective observation about the music, then this book is for you.

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