

Sacred Music/Spirituals/Hymns influences on Gospel & Blues Music

by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman

Some years ago I was in the Mississippi Delta to give in-school/Blues In The Schools presentations and present an all day blues history/teaching seminar at the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, MS.

While I was at the B.B. King Museum there was a program being presented in the lobby/coffee/gift shop area by Mr. Golden, an older Black gentleman, in his late 70s I'd guess, a former field hand in the cotton fields, on subject of cotton picking/labor in the 'old days', and he brought along lots of items to 'show and tell' about, cotton sacks, tools, photos, etc.

In the course of his presentation he asked if anyone had questions, since I was doing a presentation on blues history and teaching blues history at the museum on the following day. I asked Mr. Golden about what was sung in the fields in this area of Mississippi. There were also some older, over 70, black ladies present who work as docents at the museum. They all responded to my question with the same/similar answers ...

"When our parents were in the fields working with us we generally sang Dr. Watts hymns. Somebody would suggest we 'Hey, sing an old Dr. Watts hymn!' And we would proceed to sing a song like "Father I stretch my hand to thee." "When our parents were not in the fields with us we would frequently sing blues songs."

This was fascinating to me. I proceeded to ask about who Dr. Watts was, but Mr. Golden and the docents/ladies could not tell me anything about Dr. Watts. All they knew was that the hymns they most frequently sang were taught to them from Dr. Watts' book.

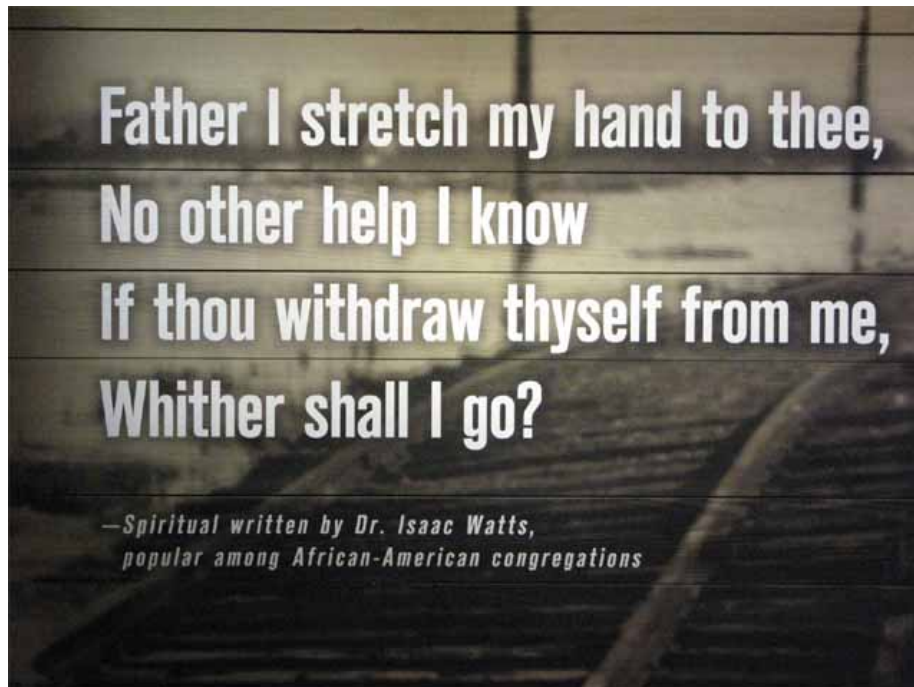
I then proceeded to go in to tour the B.B.King museum, and the first thing I saw when I walked into the museum was the photo/lyrics on the wall, facing the entrance as you walk into the museum. (Please see the enclosed photo.) Now I had a 'lead' on Dr. Watts. I went into the lobby and got one of the docent/ladies who had taken much time in telling me about 'singing in the fields.' I showed her the mural with the lyrics and she said, "Oh, now we both know a little bit about Dr. Isaac Watts. He's the one who wrote the hymn books we learned from."

What I learned from this is that the hymns of Dr. Isaac Watts were frequently taught in Black churches in this region and frequently sung in the fields while working. I was still very curious to know more about Watts, so I followed up by looking for information on Dr. Watts online, and judging by what I read about Watts at various web sites, he was/is a famous English hymn writer and composer, and was very prolific in his contributions to Christian hymnal history/annals. A 'testament' to my ignorance on the subject of Christian hymnal history/annals.

Perhaps some might say, "What? You've never heard of the great Dr. Isaac Watts?"

Well, no, I hadn't. I learned something.

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This is the huge mural with the quote from a hymn by Dr. Isaac Watts that prominently hangs on the wall at the entrance of the B.B. King Museum & Delta Interpretive Center in Indianola, MS.