

FEATURE

Jubilee Singers kept school afloat

By Anne Navarro
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The story of a brave group of former slaves who used their voices to keep their financially troubled university afloat as well as battle prejudice and oppression is the subject of "The American Experience" series' absorbing documentary, "Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory," airing Monday, May 1, 9-10 p.m. EDT on PBS (check local listings).

Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn., was opened by the American Mission Association to educate former slaves. It taught the freed slaves how to count their wages, write the new names they had chosen for themselves, and read the ballot and the Bible.

The Jubilee Singers started as an inspired fund-raising experiment for the impoverished school by its treasurer, George Leonard White. Although charged with keeping the school financially sound, White's passion was music. At the school he found that many of the students were gifted singers and formed a choir.

His idea to take these singers on the road to raise money for Fisk met with resistance even before he left: parents were

afraid to let their children go; fellow school teachers opposed the tour; and the American Mission Association refused to help, fearing that the chorus' appeal for funds would jeopardize their own fund-raising activities.

"Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory" describes the rocky beginning these young people and their determined leader had as well as the success that brought funds and fame when they began singing Negro spirituals. The secret music of the slaves that had been sung behind closed doors and in the fields was now shared with people everywhere the Jubilee Singers went, and the songs' moving simplicity brought tears to their audiences' eyes.

Eventually they would perform for presidents and queens, tour the United States and Europe, and establish songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "This Little Light of Mine" as a cherished part of the nation's musical heritage.

But the Jubilee Singers did more than this. They challenged the prejudicial barriers that divided the nation and proved that African-Americans were educable. As their popularity grew, the hotels, railways and steamship lines they stopped at began to integrate their facilities. Even boards of edu-

cation opened schools for black children.

Yet the singers' main objective was always to raise enough funds for the nearly destitute Fisk University to remain open and active. These were strong and talented young people with great faith who made an indelible mark on history.

Dion Graham's soothing voice narrates the story, which skillfully presents the compelling story of these courageous young singers. Throughout the documentary by co-writer, producer and director Llewellyn Smith, vintage photographs of the singers and their performances are shown. The program also features today's Fisk Jubilee Singers performing many of the spirituals the original chorus sang on their tour.

One frustrating drawback of the documentary is that, while several historians and a few other individuals offer insightful comments throughout the program, they are not identified.

"Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory" is a well-spent hour that is both entertaining and informative for all age groups.

Navarro is on the staff of the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.



CBS/CNS

'Jesus' on CBS

Actor Jeremy Sisto portrays Christ in the upcoming made-for-TV movie "Jesus" to air in May on CBS.

'The '70s' plot cluttered, cute

By Anne Navarro
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The major themes and events of the '70s, as well as some frivolous ones, are tackled in the ambitious miniseries "The '70s" airing Sunday-Monday, April 30-May 1, 9-11 p.m. EDT each night, on NBC.

There is no doubt that the 1970s had a profound impact on sex, race, government, environment and morals in the United States. "The '70s" tries to capture the decade's essence by presenting a fictional story about four twentysomething friends and weaving the politics and popular culture of the period into their lives. But its flaws are soon apparent as the program tries to get its short arms around everything from the Vietnam War to polyester leisure suits.

The stirring opening scene introduces the four friends, Byron, Eileen, Christie and Dexter, as they witness the tragic murders of rioting students by the National Guard at their own school, Kent State University. This cataclysmic event influences each of them to leave Kent State to pursue their own destinies.

The four-hour miniseries intersperses archival news footage of major events such as the American withdrawal from Saigon and the excruciating gas shortage, as well as the Jonestown Massacre and the 25-hour blackout in New York that unleashed a terrible crime spree. The classic '70s music is also prominent as are the cultural fashion touchstones of puka beads, Afros, bell-bottoms and mood rings.

The dramatic soap opera ending of the first episode will probably have audiences tuning in for the next, but director Peter Werner's heavy plot is too cluttered and the pat ending in which the four characters' lives are neatly summed up is too cute for its own good.

Although the use of historical events of the 1970s as a backdrop provides some perspective on the decade, the program is driven by the fictional story. And while the majority of the violence shown comes from actual news clips, there is some violence involving the characters as well as a few references to casual sex, making it adult fare.

Navarro is on the staff of the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

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