

# GIVE ME WINGS

**HOW A CHOIR OF FORMER SLAVES TOOK ON THE WORLD**

Kathy Lowinger

*Received of*

*Allegro. ♩. 92 to 116*

*Slave named*  
*the right and title of said Slave*  
*of all persons whatsoever, and left*  
*to witness my hand and seal*



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In memory of my parents, Martha and Ernest Lowinger,  
and for Alan and James Harnum



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## **CONTENTS**

Introduction		1
Chapter 1	“Never a Slave!”	2
Chapter 2	John Brown’s Body	18
Chapter 3	We Are All in This War	31
Chapter 4	Getting into Paradise	45
Chapter 5	Root, Hog, or Die	66
Chapter 6	Songs for the Right	76
Chapter 7	Sing Up the Walls	91
Chapter 8	Breaking the Chains	108
Chapter 9	The Good We Might Do	121
Afterword		131
Time Line		135
Further Reading		136
Image Credits		137
Acknowledgments		138
Index		139





ELLA SHEPPARD.

Photographed by BLACK.

Page 41



## INTRODUCTION

**E**lla Sheppard was born a slave in 1851, in the southern state of Tennessee. She could expect a life of hard labor serving the people who owned her. Instead, she became a teacher, a musician, and an international celebrity. This book tells the story of how she did it.

The 1800s were a time of great suffering for black people in the United States. For the first sixty-odd years, most were still enslaved in the southern states, even after slavery was abolished in other states and other countries. From 1861 to 1865, the nation was torn apart by a bitter civil war that divided families, ravaged cities and farmland, and left over half a million people dead or disabled. Although slavery was abolished by the end of the war, most ex-slaves had to build their new lives with no jobs, no land, no belongings, and no education.

Ella Sheppard was lucky to enrol at Fisk University, but the school was about to close for lack of money. She and nine other teenaged ex-slaves set out to raise funds to keep the school open. It was far more difficult than they expected, yet they succeeded beyond their wildest imaginings. How did they do it? With music: spirituals and songs from their years of slavery. The songs they sang helped break down barriers between blacks and whites, and those same songs served as important roots for today's music: rock, pop, the blues, jazz, and hip-hop. Their music still says a lot to us today. The story of their courage and determination says even more.

Note that I have not described people of color as "African-American" because in those days, they were barely considered American at all. They were called Negro or colored or black, or many demeaning names. Of those terms, "black" is the most common today, and it is the term I use. Note also that all the quotes from Ella come directly from her diaries or letters.

## Chapter 1

# “NEVER A SLAVE!”

“My baby,” Sarah told her mistress simply, “will never be a slave!”

— *a quote from Sarah Hannah Sheppard, Ella’s mother*

**E**lla was only a scrap of a girl, far too young to be a spy. But that’s what her mistress was asking her to be. Ella traced the rose pattern in the parlor carpet with her bare toe as Mistress Phereby’s voice rose and fell.

“Your ma is a house slave, and there’s no knowing what a house slave might do,” said Mistress Phereby, and she reeled off a list of imaginary sins: “Your ma could throw away a piece of china to keep me from finding out that she broke it, or she could steal a silver spoon. Why, she could hide an egg in her sleeve and then cook it up for your dinner. If she does anything like that, you be sure to tell me, Ella.”

She put a finger under the child’s chin. “And here’s the most important thing. Are you listening to me?” Ella nodded. She was having trouble following what her mistress was saying, but she understood perfectly well that she was just a slave, and she had to do as she was told.

“There’s been talk. All kinds of talk. Why, just one county over, an ungrateful slave poisoned her mistress’s food. If you hear your ma or any of the other slaves plotting against me, you be sure to tell me. Mind, now, this is to be our secret.”

Ella knew she wasn’t expected to reply.

“Because you are a good girl, you may look at this for a moment.” Mistress Phereby handed Ella a kaleidoscope that was standing on an elegant table.

## The Atlantic Slave Trade



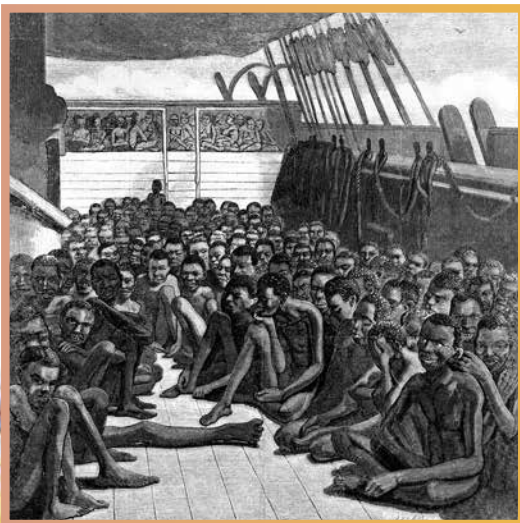
Ella peered into the kaleidoscope, enchanted by the swirling patterns of brilliant blue and purple and red that formed as she turned it. She wanted to turn it once more, but Mistress Phereby snatched it out of her hands.

“That’s enough for now,” she said briskly. “When you have something to tell me, you may look through it again. And remember, what I’ve said is a secret!”

## The Journey into Slavery

How did Africans become slaves? They were captured by rival tribes or African slave dealers, sold to European traders, and forced onto ships for a nightmarish voyage called the Middle Passage. "The place allotted for the sick Negroes is under the half deck, where they lie on the bare planks. By this means, those who are emaciated, frequently have their skin, and even their flesh, entirely rubbed off, by the motion of the ship..." wrote Alexander Falconbridge, a British surgeon who made four voyages on slave ships, in his book, *An Account of the Slave Trade in West Africa*. Many died during the voyage. Others were thrown alive into the sea because they were too weak to fetch a good price at auction.

The voyage from Africa to America was called the Middle Passage because it was the middle of a trade route that was more or less a triangle. On the first side of the triangle, boats carried textiles, guns, and brandy from Europe to Africa. These were exchanged for Africans captured and thrown into slavery, and this human cargo crossed the Atlantic to the Americas—the second side of the triangle—where the slaves were exchanged for sugar, tobacco, and cotton. The same ships then sailed the third leg of the triangle back to Europe. Almost everyone in the Western world had some connection to the slave trade, by producing raw materials, manufacturing the goods, or simply buying the products.



Captive Africans on the deck of the slave ship *Wildfire*.





Work in the cotton fields of the Deep South was back-breaking.

Nobody knows the actual numbers, but it is estimated that between the years 1500 and 1870 more than eleven million Africans were ripped from their homes, marched in shackles onto ships, and forced to live as slaves in a strange, hostile new world in South America, the Caribbean, and North America. Most of them lived in miserable conditions, forced to do back-breaking work and punished severely for the smallest offense.

After 1776, when the United States became an independent country, the “peculiar institution,” as slavery was called, began to die out in the northern states. The businesses there did not require large numbers of laborers. But in the South, where cheap labor was needed to work the vast plantations of sugar, tobacco, rice, and cotton, slavery flourished.



The Hermitage, the plantation near Nashville where Ella Sheppard was born a slave. This print is from 1856, around the time that Ella's father was able to buy her.

Ella Sheppard and her mother, Sarah, were slaves at the Hermitage, a fine plantation that had been built by Andrew Jackson, who became the seventh president of the United States. It was a vast, prosperous place just outside Nashville, Tennessee, with a stately mansion, fields of cotton plants, and cabins where 150 slaves lived.

Ella's history was tangled up with that of the people who owned her. Her great-grandmother Rosa had been the daughter of a Cherokee chief. Rosa had fallen in love with the son of another chief—an African chief—who was a slave owned by Andrew Jackson's relatives, the Donelsons. Though Rosa had been born free, she loved her African chief so much that she

was willing to live as a slave too. That is, except when the owners made Rosa angry. When she got mad enough, she'd stomp home to her tribe. Before leaving, she'd always threaten to lay a curse on the Donelsons if they harmed any of her fourteen children while she was gone. Sarah—Rosa's granddaughter and Ella's mother—was still owned by the Donelson family.

Ella's grandfather on her father's side was not a slave but a slave owner. He was a white planter named James Glover Sheppard. Slave women had no protection from their masters. If a slave-holder wanted to take one of his slaves to his bed, little could stop him. Many children on the plantations could say that their father was also their owner. One of James Sheppard's slaves had his baby, a bright, charming boy named Simon. James Sheppard also had a son, Benjamin, by his wife. Simon grew up as the slave of his own half-brother as well as his father.

When Benjamin Sheppard grew up and married Phereby Donelson, they both brought all their slaves, including Sarah and Simon, to the Hermitage. Simon became a livery man, working with the horses and carriages, and Sarah was a house slave.

Sarah and Simon fell in love. Benjamin Sheppard was fond of his half-brother, so he did something unusual for the time: he let Simon marry seventeen-year-old Sarah. Marriages among slaves weren't recognized as legal, and just about everybody, including his wife, Phereby, told Benjamin that he was being silly, but Benjamin thought that letting his slaves go through an imitation wedding ceremony was a harmless way to keep them happy.

On February 4, 1851, when Simon and Sarah's baby girl was born, the parents were allowed to name their own child. That was unusual too; slave owners had the right to name their slaves whatever they wanted. Sarah called the baby Samuella,





A nursemaid with her young charge, around 1850. The slave is dressed in formal clothing and the baby wears a christening gown.

but it was a long name for such a scrawny little thing. From the first, she was called Ella.

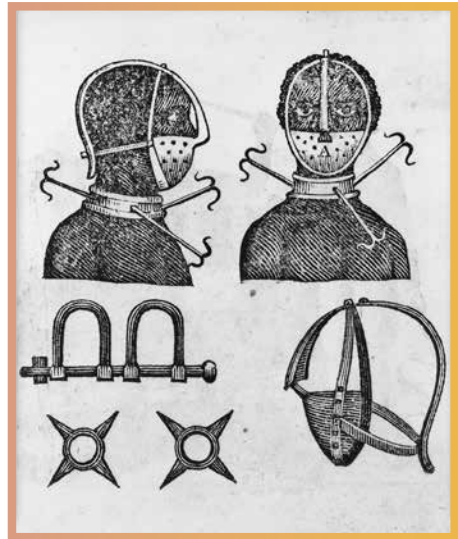
Sarah Sheppard became Phereby Donelson Sheppard's most prized slave. She was in charge of the nursery and knew all the ways to make a house comfortable. She knew how to see to the oil lamps so that they never smoked up the room, and how to pour pitchers of water into Mistress Phereby's copper bathtub without soaking the polished wooden floor. She could mend a satin gown with tiny, even stitches, and she knew the secrets of lacing a corset tight enough to give her mistress a



tiny wasp waist. She never spilled Mistress Phereby's night jar (toilet pot) when she emptied it. House slaves sometimes slept on thin pallets outside white people's bedroom doors, to be on hand day or night, but Sarah was so important that she had her own little room right next to Mistress Phereby's.

Though Phereby Sheppard valued Sarah, like most slave owners, she worried that her slaves would turn against her. That was why she asked Ella to report anything her own mother did. Strange as it was to ask a three-year-old to spy, it wasn't as odd as using a parrot for espionage; slave owners sometimes put parrots among their slaves, thinking that the birds would repeat suspicious words and let them know that trouble was brewing.

Almost everyone involved in the slave trade was obsessed with keeping control over the desperate, frightened slaves. They wanted control partly because slaves were expensive, and nobody wanted to lose one, any more than they wanted to lose a horse or a cow. But slave owners were also terrified that their slaves would rise up against them. They had good reason to be frightened. In Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), in 1791, slaves had carried out the bloodiest revolt in the New World, torching their masters' estates and hacking hundreds of white men, women, and children to death with machetes.



This woodcut shows the brutal iron mask, collar, leg shackles, and spurs a slave might be forced to wear.



A woodcut from 1831 shows horrific scenes from Nat Turner's rebellion. Slave-holders reacted by making conditions even harsher for their slaves.

## The Life and Death of Nat Turner

Nat Turner, a slave in Virginia, was determined to revolt against slave-holders. On the night of August 21, 1831, he led a raid in which almost sixty white men, women, and children were massacred. Though Turner and sixteen people in his band were caught and hanged, his uprising terrified slave-holders all over the South. Their revenge was grim. Nat Turner could read, so there was a brutal crackdown on any slaves caught reading. Innocent blacks were killed for no reason, and their heads were displayed on roadsides as a warning to others who might have ideas of rebelling. Slave owners tightened every control they could think of, regardless of the suffering they caused.

Slave-holders thought that if they took away every shred of the lives their slaves had known in Africa, they would have more control over them. Families were broken apart: husbands and wives, children and parents, were sold away from one another. People from the same African tribes were split up so that they couldn't talk to each other in their own language, because talking might lead to plotting. They couldn't even keep

their own names. Slave-holders sometimes picked names they found humorous; calling somebody who had no power Caesar or Prince was a sick joke. Other names were just plain mean: Teakettle, Mustard, or Donkey. A name like that was a message that the person who bore it wasn't quite human.

Despite all these efforts, slaves found clever ways to hold on to their old lives. When they could, they built their homes to look like the huts they had left behind in Africa. When there were no white people to hear, they called one another by their own names. When parents were sold away at slave auctions, the remaining slaves took care of the children, forming networks of people who considered themselves family.

The slave-holders also didn't allow their slaves to practice their traditional religions. They didn't approve of worship that used dancing and beating drums, and worried that drum-beats could send messages from plantation to plantation. The slaves got around this by holding secret "bush meetings" or "camp meetings." They would slip away after dark to "invisible churches" that might be no more than a marked tree in the forest. We still have descriptions of some of the songs they sang at such meetings, as early as 1700. These "corn ditties" were probably the earliest form of the songs we now call spirituals.

Slaves sang work songs to keep in time with one another on jobs like hoisting a heavy beam or rowing a barge, and to lighten the drudgery of picking cotton under a blazing sun or harvesting rice in a sweltering paddy. Religious songs were part of every prayer meeting, promising a home in heaven as the reward for a lifetime of suffering. And in the rare happy times, there were joyful songs for dancing. All this music—plantation songs, jubilees, and spirituals—was a rich part of the life that slaves struggled to forge for themselves.

Most whites either never heard this “slave music” or didn’t pay attention to it, so the songs became a way to pass on secret messages. Somebody might let everyone know about a secret bush meeting by singing “Steal Away to Jesus.” If a slave suspected that a white person had found out about the meeting, he could sing about “weevils in the wheat” to warn others to stay away.

The songs could also help slaves escape. Many tried to run away, though getting caught meant a vicious beating or even death. Those who did manage to get away traveled through swamps and rivers, where hounds couldn’t track them, and headed north to freedom in a state where slavery was illegal, or on to Canada. Most of them couldn’t have read a map even if they’d had one, so they relied on coded directions passed from one person to another in secret songs like “Wade in the Water” and “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” (“Drinking gourd” was a code name for the Big Dipper, which would help fugitives find their way north by the stars.)

If they survived the snake-infested swamps and the bounty hunters, who hunted them for reward money, fugitives could find help on the Underground Railroad, a chain of courageous people, black and white, who risked their lives to offer runaways shelter, a warm meal, and directions to the next safe house. The Underground Railroad stretched right up to Canada, where slavery had been abolished years before. It might have been invisible, with no tracks and no trains, but the Railroad was as mighty as if it were made of steel.

For most slaves, however, the only escape was death, and Sarah very nearly chose that escape, for herself and her little girl. We don’t know what story Ella had told Phereby Sheppard, but somehow Sarah found out that her daughter





Exhausted slaves escaping with the help of the Underground Railroad. Getting caught would have meant harsh punishment or even death.

had reported on her. She was horrified that her own child was being turned against her. Ella described what happened next: “In agony of soul and despair she caught me up in her arms, and while rushing to the river to end it all, was overtaken by Mammy Viney, who cried out, ‘Don’t do it, Honey! Don’t you take that that you cannot give back.’ She raised her eyes to Heaven and said, ‘Look, Honey, don’t you see the clouds of the Lord as they pass by? The Lord has got need of this child.’” The words of the old slave stopped Sarah in her tracks. She carried Ella up the path that led back to the house and to captivity.

For Ella, a future of hard work wasn’t the worst part of slavery. She expected to grow up having to work, not because she was a slave but because she was poor. If you were a poor child, black or white, you almost certainly worked on a farm or in the mines or in a factory, or you were apprenticed to a tradesman. Half



This little girl is so small she has to stand on a box to reach her machine in a textile factory in Tennessee.

the workforce in the United States' textile mills was made up of children, some as young as seven. Ella's working life at the Hermitage might have started with cleaning away the bugs that gathered on windowsills, or fanning guests on very hot days. If she was lucky she would be spared one of the worst jobs for a child: standing behind the guests' chairs at formal meals. Having to stand perfectly still for hours was torture. But at least Phereby and Benjamin Sheppard weren't harsh or cruel slave owners; they weren't given to whipping or abusing their slaves. They never laid a hand on either Sarah or Ella.

For Ella, and for most slaves, the greatest fear was of being separated, usually forever, from the people they loved. Slaves

Slaves had many reasons to be afraid. The worst was the heartbreak of being “sold away.”

could be sold to anyone, anywhere, without notice. Sarah said later, “From the cradle to the grave, the Negro woman lived in constant dread; no matter how favorably situated with kind and intelligent owners, there was no assurance that on tomorrow she would not be torn

from her children and loved ones and sold to the coarsest and most illiterate master, and subjected to that from which only death could release her.”

Most people who were born slaves died as slaves, but a small number did go free. Other than escaping, there were only three ways to become a “freedman.” (The word referred to women and children as well as men.) Some slave-holders let their slaves keep chickens or grow vegetables or take outside jobs after they finished their regular work. They were allowed to keep any money they made, and by saving—sometimes for years—they might be able to buy themselves and be free. Others held jobs, usually in towns, but had to split their wages with their master. And a lucky few were simply freed, or



“manumitted.” A slave-holder on her deathbed might choose to free her slaves, in case having slaves turned out to be a strike against her getting into heaven.

Benjamin Sheppard decided to allow Simon to start his own livery stable in Nashville. Simon eventually owned several carriages and horses, and he bought his freedom from his white half-brother for \$1,800.

In 1855, when Ella was still a small child, Phereby and Benjamin Sheppard announced that they were leaving the Hermitage. The whole household was moving to their plantation in Mississippi. But this time Sarah wasn't going with them. Simon had managed to raise another \$1,300 to buy his wife and daughter. Sarah began to dream about what it would be like to be free, in a home of her own. That dream ended cruelly when she overheard Phereby admitting to her husband that, in truth, she had no intention of ever letting Simon buy Sarah's freedom. Her husband reminded Phereby that she had given her word to let Sarah go, but Phereby wouldn't budge. “She is mine and she will die mine!” she declared.

In a rage, Sarah confronted her mistress. Phereby's response? She said that she had known Sarah was bound to be upset when she found out she was going to Mississippi. Instead of making her miserable right away, Phereby claimed, she had generously given Sarah weeks of happiness by letting her think she'd be free!

We don't know if Phereby believed her own self-serving explanation, but Sarah certainly didn't. She knew what might lie ahead for her young daughter. Ella's earliest memory was of her “mother's tears over the cruelties of slavery, as she realized that its degradation fell heaviest upon the young Negro girl.”



Sarah swore that if Phereby didn't at least let Simon take Ella, she would kill herself and her child. Phereby knew this wasn't an idle threat. In Nashville, when a woman had found out that she had been sold away from her children, she had called her three daughters to her, slit their throats, laid their bodies out side by side, and killed herself. Phereby gave in. She let Simon buy Ella for \$350. Ella would lose her mother and live with her father in Nashville.

When the Sheppards arrived at the Mississippi plantation, the field slaves, half-starved and dressed in rags, were lined up along the drive to greet them. Phereby and Sarah were so appalled at their condition that they held each other and cried. For the next three years, mistress and slave would work side by side to improve food, shelter, and clothing for the slaves.

A background image of a musical score on aged, yellowed paper with black ink notation, including notes, stems, and clefs, partially visible on the left side of the text block.

## OH, FREEDOM

Oh, Freedom, Oh, Freedom, Oh, Freedom over me.  
Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave  
And go home to my Lord and be Free.

Some historians claim that when Sarah Sheppard set out to drown herself and Ella, she sang the spiritual "Oh, Freedom" to her baby. Some even claim that she wrote the words. Wherever "Oh, Freedom" comes from, it follows the format of a spiritual, combining African rhythms with the structure of European music to create something brand-new. "Oh, Freedom" was a song of hope for those who wanted to escape slavery in this life and for those who dreamed of heaven. Like all spirituals, it has words that are easy to remember, it invites people to sing together, and it is packed with emotion. It is still sung to rally people to the cause of freedom.