Singing songs from slavery

By Tenley Garrett

Jordan Hearsey, 11, joins Mary Williams in singing a civil rights anthem at the Historic Stagville Plantation. (Photo by Tenley Garrett)

Historic Stagville, home to one of the largest preserved plantations in North Carolina, sits just within Durham city limits. On March 3, Historic Stagville welcomed Mary D. Williams, a UNC alumna and gospel singer, as she led audience members in a musical performance, "Songs from Slavery." The performance reflected musical practices found on the plantation more than 150 years ago.

Williams' hour long performance engaged the audience with historical accounts, personal anecdotes and songs. Many of the songs utilized the "call-and-response" musical format; Williams sang a single line, and the audience members would repeat it back to her, often accompanied by clapping or foot stomping with the rhythm. Although many scholars would call her work performance art, it does not convey its full character, she said.

"I'm going to take you into my culture as an African-American, and on behalf of the ancestors of African-Americans, and I'm going to take you on this journey from slavery up into the Civil Rights movement," Williams said.

Her performance is especially significant this year, she said, because it celebrates Frederick Douglass' 200th birthday.

But before any introduction was made, Williams marched slowly up to the podium, moving her eyes slowly between each audience member while singing Angela Davis' "Freedom is a Constant Struggle" in her deep, thunderous voice:

"They tell me freedom has been a constant struggle,
We've been struggling for so long…
We must be free."

The agony and melancholy in her voice could be felt as it reverberated throughout the small room, perhaps filling each audience member with a somber sense of the struggle of which Williams sang.

Perhaps the most insightful piece of information Williams gave to her audience was regarding the operational and practical purpose that music served for many enslaved persons on plantations in the American South. Since literacy was uncommon among populations of enslaved people, songs became instrumental in communication and messaging across plantations, she said.

For example, Williams said the lyrics "Wade in the Water" suggest to enslaved people that they had to cross a river in order to escape their plantation. The words "the lord calls my name by thunder" can be deciphered in terms of symbol and metaphor. If "thunder" is taken to mean rain, Williams said that this wording indicates the enslaved individual's understanding that tracking dogs cannot properly hunt during a rainstorm, making this an ideal time for an enslaved person to attempt escape. Similarly, songs like "Heaven on My Mind" likely referred to escaping the South, in addition to the expectation of a heavenly afterlife.

After singing songs pertaining to the time during which Douglass was enslaved, Williams then brought the audience to the Civil Rights era. She focused specifically on the incident in Southwest Georgia where children no more than 10 years old were taken to jail in response to the freedom marches of the Albany Movement:

"I hear God's children, they're praying for mercy . . . Bells getting higher, buses are comin', open them cells!"

One of the audience members, Jordan Hearsey, 11, joined Williams in leading the audience in song. After the performance he said he didn't realize how important song was in communication for enslaved people.

"I think it was great. I learned that [enslaved people] used song to say that they were free, and the masters didn't find out because they didn't [understand]," he said.

Beverly McNeill, a volunteer at the Historic Stagville site for more than 15 years, was thrilled by the performance.

"I thought it was really fantastic," she said. "She got a lot of good history in, and of course she's a phenomenal artist."

Additionally, she said that the performance brought important moments in history to life for the modern audience.

"I think she makes history accessible, which I think is really important, because we don't do a very good job teaching about this period," McNeill said.

The site's assistant manager, Vera Cecelski, had a history with Williams prior to her Stagville performance. Aside from being a fan of her music as a teenager, Cecelski had the privilege of meeting Williams last fall on the Stagville property, while Williams was conducting research as part of her scholarship.

"We went down to the slave quarters at Horton Grove, and in one of those buildings, in that tiny dark room, she sang for the group of students," Cecelski said. "She was spontaneously moved by being in the space and feeling the energy of that space."

Williams' voice, she said, brought life to an otherwise quiet, inanimate place:

"Her voice filled up the house and overflowed it and ran out the windows and just made the whole space come alive. And in that moment, as we were both walking out together we looked at each other and we realized she had to come back. More people have to hear this, the energy and the life that these songs bring to these spaces that, for the most part, can feel empty to people."

For Williams, her passion for the musical practices and gospel songs that were so formative to the culture surrounding America's slave past comes from her own upbringing and family.

"A lot of the music started with my grandmother just singing to me, while I was spending time with them in Smithfield. And the more the music was sung, the more it resonated with me," Williams said.

When she was young, Williams didn't fully grasp the meaning of the words she sang. But whenever she had a question about a song, her grandmother would share everything she knew as it related to their own family's history. Today, Williams' storytelling and musical performance illustrates an epic journey — one burdened by tragedy, trial and hardship, but all throughout full of hope.

"It's important to me to sing the songs of my ancestors," she said, "the songs that brought them to a place."