



# Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County, TN

## Legislation Text

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A resolution recognizing the Fisk Jubilee Singers on the occasion of their 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and their first-ever Grammy Award.

WHEREAS, Nashville's Fisk Jubilee Singers have won their first-ever Grammy Award for their album, *Celebrating Fisk! (The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Album)* and are celebrating bringing African-American music around the world since 1871. *Celebrating Fisk!* won the Grammy for Best Roots Gospel Album at the 2021 Grammy Awards; and

WHEREAS, the Fisk Jubilee Singers are vocal artists and students at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, who sing and travel worldwide. The original Fisk Jubilee Singers - a group of former slaves, - introduced "slave songs" to the world and were instrumental in preserving this unique American musical tradition known today as Negro spirituals; and

WHEREAS, on November 16, 1871, a group of unknown singers -- all but two of them former slaves and many of them still in their teens -- arrived at Oberlin College in Ohio to perform before a national convention of influential ministers. After a few standard ballads, the chorus began to sing spirituals -- "Steal Away" and other songs "associated with slavery and the dark past, sacred to our parents," as soprano Ella Sheppard recalled. It was one of the first public performances of the secret music African Americans had sung in fields and behind closed doors; and

WHEREAS, in the decade following the Civil War, this group of young ex-slaves in Nashville, Tennessee set out on a mission to save their financially troubled school by giving concerts. Treasurer George Leonard White proposed traveling first through cities in the North, then on to venues across Europe. The Jubilee Singers introduced audiences to the power of spirituals, the religious anthems of slavery; and

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

WHEREAS, funds raised by the Fisk Jubilee Singers during their international concerts were used to construct the school's first permanent building, Jubilee Hall. One of the oldest structures in use at Fisk University, Jubilee Hall is designated as a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior. This beautiful Victorian Gothic building houses a ceiling-to-floor portrait of the original Jubilee Singers, commissioned by Queen Victoria of England as a gift to Fisk University; and

WHEREAS, Nashville is known as 'Music City', as a result of the Fisk Jubilee Singers' visit with Queen Victoria in England. During this visit, the queen declared that Nashville must be a 'Music City' because of the beautiful performances by the group; and

WHEREAS, through touring, the ensemble raised what today would be millions of dollars, but they paid a terrible price. George White lost his wife to typhoid fever and nearly died of a pulmonary hemorrhage himself. Contralto Minnie Tate's voice was torn to shreds. Tenor Benjamin Holmes's nagging cough was caused by tuberculosis. They faced discrimination on the road and from the press; and

WHEREAS, their sacrifices created significant change, as their contributions extended far beyond Fisk University, and they introduced the world to the power of spirituals and challenged racial stereotypes on two continents. "In their wake, hotels, railways, steamship lines, and boards of education integrated their facilities. The Fisk Jubilees not only introduced the world to the music of black America, they championed the liberties of all Americans," says Andrew Ward, co-writer of the documentary and author of "Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers."; and

WHEREAS, October 6, 2021 will mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Fisk Jubilee Singers. The album *Celebrating Fisk! (The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Album)* is part of a full "Year of Jubilee" honoring this historic and important group. Winning their first Grammy begins the celebration; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting and proper that the Metropolitan Council recognizes The Fisk Jubilee Singers for their recognition of receiving their first ever Grammy Award and honor the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the group.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT OF NASHVILLE AND DAVIDSON COUNTY:

Section 1. The Metropolitan Council hereby goes on record as recognizing The Fisk Jubilee Singers on the occasion of their historic Grammy Award and as celebrating the group's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

Section 2. The Metropolitan Council Office is directed to prepare a copy of this Resolution to be presented to President Frank L. Sims; Dr. Paul T. Kwami; Mike Curb, Jubilee Singers Endowed Chair of the Fisk Jubilee Singers; and students, alumni, faculty, staff and trustees of Fisk University.

Section 3. This Resolution shall take effect from and after its adoption, the welfare of The Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County requiring it.