The African American Spiritual has its origins in the religious practices of 18th- and 19th-century American slaves who converted to Christianity during the great awakening revivals. The earliest spirituals were African-style ring shouts, based on simple call and response lyrics chanted against a driving rhythm produced by clapping and foot stomping. Participants would shuffle around in a ring-formation and “shout” when they felt the spirit. More complex melodies and verse/chorus structures began to evolve, reflecting the influence of European American hymn singing, and accompaniment by guitar, piano, and percussion became common. Vocal ornamentations (slides, glides, extended use of falsetto), call and response singing, and blues tonality characterized these folk spirituals. In the reconstruction period black college choirs such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers arranged folk spirituals into four-part harmony, a form that became known as the concert spiritual. A blend of African and European musical practices, the spiritual epitomizes the sycretic (blended) nature of much American folk music resulting from the mixing of Africans and Europeans in the Americas.

The texts of many spirituals are taken from Old Testament themes and stories. The slaves were particularly moved by Old Testament figures like Daniel (who was saved from the lion’s den), Jonah (who was delivered from the belly of the whale), Noah (who survived the flood), and David (who defeated the giant Goliath) who struggled and triumphed over adverse conditions. The plights of the Israelites and their escape from bondage to the promised land was an especially powerful story retold by the spirituals:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
O let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
O let my people go!
Go Down, Moses,
Away down to Egypt's land.
And tell old Pharaoh,
To let my people go!

The spiritual’s emphasis on redemption and deliverance in this world have led historians to suggest the songs had double meaning for the slaves—they affirmed their belief in the Bible as well as their trust that a just God would deliver them from the evils of slavery. The spirituals are thus seen as expressions of religious faith and resistance to slavery.

In the 20th-century spirituals evolved into the more urban, New Testament–centered gospel songs. Following the first “great migration” of southern African Americans to urban centers like Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia in the post–World War I years, a new genre of black American sacred songs known as gospel began to appear. Unlike the anonymous folk spirituals, gospel songs were composed and copyrighted by songwriters like Thomas Dorsey and Reverend William Herbert Brewster, and by the 1930s were being recorded by urban church singers. Some, like Mahalia Jackson, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the Ward Singers, turned professional and reached national and international audiences through their tours and recordings. But most gospel singing remained rooted in African American church ritual, and to this day can be heard in black communities throughout the north and south.

Musically, gospel is a blending of spirituals, blues, and the song sermons of the black preacher. Gospel songs are usually organized in a 16- or 32-bar verse/chorus form, often featuring call-and-response singing between a leader and a chorus. Blues tonalities are common, and singers are known for their intensive vocal ornamentations, which include bending and slurring notes, falsetto swoops, and melismas (groups of notes or tones sung across one syllable of a word). Gospel singers often end a song with a prolonged section of improvisation that combines singing, chanting, and shouting in hopes of “bringing down the spirit.” Lyrics are most often New Testament–centered, focusing on the redeeming power of Jesus and the singer’s personal relationship with the Savior.

Although gospel lyrics are strictly religious in nature, gospel music derives much of its sound from blues and jazz. Likewise, gospel music has been a source for various secular styles, including early rock and roll, soul music, and most recently gospel rap. During the Civil Rights era the melodies of old spirituals and gospel songs were used with new lyrics expressing the need to overcome Jim Crow segregation.