African-American slaves performed a wide variety of spirituals and other Christian music. Many of these songs were coded messages of subversion against slaveholders, or which signaled escape. The title of this spiritual as arranged by Harry T. Burleigh refers to crossing the river Jordan, which was a symbol in many spirituals not only of a wish to reach heaven, but also of a yearning to be freed from slavery (Jones).

Developed in the 19th century, minstrel shows were a popular form of entertainment in the antebellum and Reconstruction periods. Minstrel shows included both black and white entertainers who wore blackface, and the shows mocked African-American music and culture through racial stereotypes. Beginning in 1906, Burleigh ran a vaudeville show for St. George's Men's Club in New York City. He served as musical director, where performances included more than the racial mockery typical of minstrelsy. The 1907 program reveals only one ragtime tune typical of the Zip Coon character (a dominant racial stereotype).

Ragtime music, syncopated music primarily performed on the piano, contributed greatly to the development of harmonic and melodic complexities of later African-American music (Jones). Though Burleigh called ragtime “the old plantation melody caricatured and debased,” many of Burleigh’s compositions such as “The Frolic” used syncopated rhythms that were clearly influenced by ragtime (Snyder 322).