From birth into slavery as an innocent child to enlistment in the abolitionist movement as a freethinking, established young man, Frederick Douglass’ life experience was far from uniform. His tumultuous childhood and adolescence left him in a perpetual state of transition between masters of varying levels of cruelty; adulthood went on to reveal evils so great as to strip away his desire for freedom and intellectual enlightenment, while also eventually exposing that such desires were necessary and vital to his living. Despite the frequent and considerable variance in his circumstances, Douglass’ character can be defined by certain underlying themes in his personality: courage, righteousness, and confidence. In constructing the soundtrack for a historical epic drama based on the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, one set of tonal frequencies would be selected to support these themes, and contrasted with another set reflecting the dark, forlorn, and desperate times Douglass was subjected to. Each set would be broken into two primary categories: keynote sounds and musical selections.

Keynote sounds would have great purpose in establishing a subconscious perception of the changes in setting for the viewer. For instance, the keynote sounds of a plantation would be significantly different from those heard in a city like Baltimore. Douglass was often “awakened at the dawn of the day by the most heart-rending shrieks of [his own aunt];”[[1]](#footnote--1) he refers to the experience as horrifying and unforgettable, but acknowledges that it became somewhat of a normative occurrence. Over time, in combination with the whipping of other slaves and the procession of various plantation activities, Douglass became desensitized: the shrill screaming, the fiery crack of the whip, the harsh yelling and cursing, the woeful singing, the obediently stifled whimpering—these sounds became the auditory backdrop of daily life. In the city, Douglass was exposed to an entirely different soundscape. The streets bustled with the sounds of clacking shoes and noisy banter; the airspace in the shipyard was ever consumed by shouted orders and violent threats; relative quiet and stillness existed within the Auld household, until punishment was being given. Upon escaping the bounds of slavery and joining forces with the American Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass was exposed to yet another set of keynote sounds—this time in New Bedford, Massachusetts. These ranged from the well-mannered voices of his peers to the soothing, calm tones of his home living with Anna Murray. By contrasting these three sets of keynote sounds, the differences between plantation, city, and suburban life would be dramatized, as well as the disparity between enslavement and tentative freedom. Specifically, the sorrowful, harsh, and jarring tones of plantation and city life would be alleviated by the softer, kinder, and more comfortable sounds of suburban life, mirroring Douglass’ transition from confinement to liberation.

Musical selections would be used to reinforce a negative emotional reaction to the immorality of slavery, and an opposite response to the process of emancipation. One scene in particular that comes to mind is the portrayal of Douglass upon realizing that, “Mr. Covey had succeeded in breaking [him],”[[2]](#footnote-0) and that, “[his] natural elasticity was crushed, [his] intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about his eye [dead]; the dark night of slavery closed in upon him.”[[3]](#footnote-1) To auditorily supplement such an event, I would use the song *It’s All Understood*, by Jack Johnson. The composition utilizes a minor key, slow and lackluster tempo, and a melancholy beat; these factors naturally foster a sense of sadness and solemnity, and would effectively give rise to emotional discomfort when combined with the imagery of a defeated Douglass. On the other hand, a scene with people cheering and showing support for Douglass after a speech could be greatly enhanced by the musical selection *Rox in the Box*,by The Decemberists. The song is up-tempo and has a pleasant swing beat, giving it an overall joyful and celebratory vibe. In combination with the visual image of such a liberated and optimistic man, the scene would support an emotional state of contentment and a sensation of happiness. The holistic effect of music within the historical epic drama would be to strengthen the audience’s emotional connection to the film, and additionally contrast the exceptional and the abysmal in the life of Frederick Douglass.

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Massachusetts: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1845), Chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Ibid., Chapter 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)