

HUNTING FOR THE AMERICAN WHITE SPIRITUAL:
A SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP, WITH DISCOGRAPHY*

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In one of his wiser moments Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The persons who compose our company converse, and come and go and design and execute many things, and somewhat comes of it all--but an unlooked-for result. The individual is always mistaken." This was happily true of one conversation between the head of a young ladies' finishing school and a university professor of German--unlikely material for surprises. The administrator thought he was giving a moment's amusement to his friend with an account of "fasola 'singin-all-day-and-dinner-on-the-ground' conventions in Texas." The improbable consequence of his tale was to launch the middle-aged German teacher into the chief scholarly adventure of his life, the discovery of the American white spiritual. He was to learn that similar singing conventions were held even in Tennessee, the state where he lived, that the singers used books printed in an indigenous variation on standard musical notation (one indicating each degree of the musical scale by a distinctive shaping of the head of the note), and that the musical repertory preserved in these songbooks had been homemade in rural nineteenth-century America.

The professor of German set himself the task of tracking down these songbooks, learning who their compilers and composers were, tracing the history of their use, investigating their relation to American religious history, and identifying the folksong roots of their tunes. The tangible results of his studies were a set of phonograph recordings, many articles, and five books on the American folk spiritual. This is of course a rapid summary of the labors of the late George Pullen Jackson of Vanderbilt University, a distinguished, if accidental, folklorist.

Thirty-eight years have passed since the publication of Dr. Jackson's first book, White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands. For half that time he worked the field virtually alone. Conservative folklorists in those years were cherishing Child ballads, as heirlooms from their noble

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Anglo-Saxon forebears. Liberals on the other hand were even more massively disinclined toward Jackson's spirituals: the Southern rural white Protestant who sang these songs was, as he still is, their least favorite American. In Jackson's lifetime the only significant publication to supplement his own was Edward D. Andrews' The Gift to be Simple, a collection and study of the spirituals of the sect known as the Shakers. This book, however, was not directly stimulated by Jackson's work, but was a by-product of Andrews' fascination with Shaker handicrafts and history. Indeed, only in the last ten years have successors to Professor Jackson begun to explore further than he did the independent denominational song traditions, the contrasting regional developments, or the decade-by-decade evolution within the various branches of the white spiritual. I hope it may be of value to sound archivists to have a survey of what Dr. Jackson and his successors have done, what projects are currently being undertaken, what recordings are now obtainable, and what kinds of field collecting might be encouraged to advance the study of the white spiritual. The moral of my tale will be that there is yet very much to be learned.

The folksong movement on which Jackson focused his attention was born of the union of folk melody with the eighteenth-century New England singing-school tradition. Jackson found this union to have taken place in the first decade of the nineteenth century. He explored the bibliography of the tradition, documented its use of folk melody, argued the case for its having been the matrix from which the black spiritual developed, and proved its survival into the twentieth century, in singings from a number of nineteenth-century songbooks: The Southern Harmony, The Christian Harmony, The Sacred Harp, The Harp of Columbia, and The Harmonia Sacra.

The most distinctive feature of the shape-note tradition--its three- and four-part settings of the folk tunes--was not seriously discussed by Jackson and has not yet been thoroughly studied. This work could be carried out using the printed hymnals; but sound recordings will be invaluable to the investigation of performance styles within the various traditions. Tempo preferences, for example, differ greatly from one place to another. A piece like Wondrous Love, which is printed in four of the songbooks still in use, is taken in central Alabama and Georgia at approximately the tempo indicated in the original nineteenth-century songbooks. In southern Alabama, I am told, the usual tempo is much faster; in North Carolina and Tennessee, I have heard a much slower tempo. The timbre of the singers' voices and the degree of embellishment given the vocal line also differ from place to place. The Harmonia Sacra singing in the

valley of Virginia is characterized by sweetness of tone and a fairly literal rendering of the printed score. A Sacred Harp or Christian Harmony performance further South is sung with voices stronger in character than beauty, and is often marked by considerable "twisting" of the vocal lines. Regional preferences in repertory will also be worth investigating. The Harmonia Sacra singers now perform only one of the so-called "minor" tunes in their songbook, and they seem to enjoy anthems. Christian Harmony singers in North Carolina rarely attempt an anthem, but sing out strongly when Samanthra or French Broad or Leander or Wondrous Love or another "minor" tune is raised. Sacred Harp singers show a marked delight in "fuging tunes". But my examples are intended only to be suggestive. Before we can know the full range of these variations, and what these may imply, we must have a much fuller and more systematic recording of the actual singing.

At the present, this is the situation in regard to sound recordings preserving these singing traditions. Only the Sacred Harp singing has been at all adequately recorded. Commercial recordings of Sacred Harp groups were issued as early as 1922 on labels like Brunswick, Gennett, Okeh, Victor, Columbia, Vocalion, and Bluebird. A discography of these recordings, compiled by Harlan Daniel, has recently been published*, and a few re-recordings from this material are included in Volume 2 of the Folkways album American Folk Music, edited by Harry Smith (Folkways FP-252). Later Sacred Harp recordings fall into two categories, those sponsored by the singers themselves and offered for sale at their conventions, and those made by folklorists and released by such companies as Folkways. The latter usually, though not always, are accompanied by helpful program notes. All recordings from both these sources emulate The Sacred Harp songbook in the heterogeneity of the contents. Not one album has attempted to document the evolution of style within a single tradition. Many of the best folk compositions in the book are not yet to be heard on these recordings.

The other shape-note traditions are only scantily represented on recordings. Folkways issued many years ago a single disc of Tennessee Harp of Columbia singing. There is no available recording from the Harmonia Sacra singings in Virginia. (A recording is said to have once been obtainable locally in Harrisonburg, but I have not seen or heard

*78 RPM Recordings of Sacred Harp Songs: Preliminary Notes Contributing towards a Numerical Check List. JEMF Quarterly, VI, Pt. 1 (Spring 1970), pp. 7-16.

it.) The Christian Harmony book is represented by only a handful of 45 rpm discs, and to my knowledge nothing at all is available from the Southern Harmony singings. The lack of recordings from these last two books is particularly regrettable because they contain many of the best pieces from the early nineteenth-century repertory subsequently omitted from the other books. As usual, folklorists have tended to go collecting only where others have successfully collected before them.

With fairly modest funds an enterprising archivist could quickly build a quite strong collection of tape recordings, since singings from several of the songbooks are held frequently. Directories listing the dates of the singings are published by Christian Harmony, Sacred Harp, and Harmonia Sacra groups. An archive could, moreover, probably build a good collection simply by duplicating the tapes already made by the performers themselves. At the Alabama State Christian Harmony Singing on the last Sunday of this past September (1970) three tape recorders were in operation--mine, that of the president of the convention, and that of a retired Alabama farmer. At the Georgia State Sacred Harp Singing Convention last spring, four machines were taping, including that of the same ubiquitous farmer. He travels wisely to singings, and told me that he expects to tape ten singings in a church one-half mile from his home during the coming year.

But these singings I have described take place in the mainstream of the shape-note tradition. Of groups on the periphery, only one has to my knowledge been adequately studied, that of the south Alabama blacks using The Sacred Harp and a book entitled The Colored Sacred Harp, compiled by black musician named Judge Jackson. Mr. Joe Dan Boyd of Memphis, Tennessee, is currently editing a facsimile edition of the latter songbook and has written a study of Judge Jackson. He has also made films and tapes of the singing, and it is to be hoped that these may soon be obtainable. Other peripheral forms of shape-note singing--such as that of Oklahoma Cherokees or that of Primitive Baptist congregations using Elder C. H. Cayce's book The Good Old Songs--apparently have yet to be recorded.

Although the Primitive Baptist churches are today the strongest supporters of the shape-note tradition which Jackson studied, the books were once popular with many evangelical Protestant denominations. Jackson was aware, however, that there were other groups with independent bodies of folk spirituals. He, with the help of Professor George Boswell, transcribed, for example, a number of Pennsylvania German spirituals. He gave help to Edward D. Andrews in his study of Shaker spirituals, and Jackson

printed in his own Black and White Spirituals two Shaker songs he collected from oral tradition in Kentucky. Jackson also described the congregational singing of unharmonized unaccompanied melodies, principally as used in black services. He did not follow these leads far; he had work enough for one man within his own chosen field.

Through the work of Professor Don Yoder of the University of Pennsylvania we have since learned much about the songs of the "Bush Meeting Dutch" denominations (the United Brethren, the Evangelicals, and the Church of God). His excellent Pennsylvania Spirituals prints 150 songs, most of them melodically distinct from those of the shape-note books. Professors Yoder and Kenneth Goldstein are currently planning a series of recordings from the tapes collected for Pennsylvania Spirituals.

Edward D. Andrews printed some eighty Shaker songs from manuscript sources, but did not attempt to record Shaker oral tradition. When in 1961 Mr. William Randle prepared his massive series of documentary recordings entitled The Shaker Heritage, he included several discs of Shaker singing. Unfortunately he was not familiar enough with Shaker song to guide the singers toward their older folk repertory. A year or so earlier I had discovered that some Shaker songs of the early nineteenth century were still remembered, and I was able to find singers who had grown up in three different Shaker villages. Twenty-five years earlier, when Andrews, Jackson, John Lomax, and Phillips Barry were active, a collector could have had his pick of dozens of Shaker singers and could doubtless have recorded hundreds of Shaker songs now preserved only in some of the 730 surviving song manuscripts or lost altogether. As it was, from my three informants I taped over one hundred early Shaker songs. Forty-five of the best of these songs are included on the disc Early Shaker Spirituals.

Congregational singing of simple unaccompanied melodies was known to Jackson, as was the sometimes-associated practice of lining out a hymn (that is, following the seventeenth-century custom among bookless or illiterate congregations, of having a leader read a line or two of the text for the congregation to sing, and alternating thus between reading and singing through the entire length of the hymn). Jackson, however, was interested in printing the tunes of the white spiritual tradition. He regarded these free-style performances, particularly as he heard them among blacks, as impossible to transcribe intelligibly. He may also have underestimated the prevalence of these styles in white churches and the extent to which the repertory of such tunes differs from the contents of

the shape-note tune books. In the past few years, Professor William Tallmadge of the State University College at Buffalo, New York, has been engaged in recording this repertory. He has conducted his research primarily among the Primitive Baptist and Old Regular Baptist congregations in the Appalachian region of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina. This manner of performance probably also survives elsewhere. A Primitive Baptist preacher in central Alabama praised it to me in September as an especially spiritual kind of singing. He had lined out a hymn the weekend before during a service. The manner is used, without the lining-out delivery, in some churches in Piedmont, North Carolina. The Mennonites in the Valley of Virginia remember, if they no longer practice, this form of singing.

In the English-language tradition this was probably the first form in which indigenous folk tunes were introduced into religious worship. I suspect that Professor Tallmadge will find evidence that the Baptists were singing hymns with folk tunes a good hundred years earlier than Jackson believed, that is, before 1700. It may even be possible to record northern congregations who still adhere to this style. Probably British collectors could also uncover the style in their isles if fewer felt high-church or leftist antipathy for folk religion. At any rate, the even older Scottish Presbyterian psalm-singing tradition has recently been recorded by Professor James Porter of UCLA, and it has survived among the American Reformed Presbyterians.

To this point, I have suggested that the value of sound recordings to the study of the American folk spiritual will lie in the preservation of archaic song styles persisting into the present. But if some repertories, like that of the Shakers, have almost vanished from oral tradition, others are still growing. Archaic as the unharmonized hymn-tune tradition may be, for example, it is not yet moribund. This past August, after attending a Primitive Baptist service in Sparta, North Carolina, I asked the leading singer if he knew a tune for Christ the Appletree, the text of which is printed in some Primitive Baptist songsters, though not in the one used in his church. "No," he said, "I never heard of that song. But if you'll get me the words I'll make you a tune for it." He told me that two of the tunes used in the service that day had been of his making. The pastor of the church had just joined us, and the singer turned to him saying, "You remember when I made up that tune we sang, Walt. The one I taught you as we were driving back over the mountain from Danville." "Yes," said the preacher, "and another one we sang today was one I made up--oh, a long time ago. I was out in the corn field hoeing one day and the tune came to me. I remember I

dropped my hoe and ran to the house to find some words to put to it. I had to look through half the pages of my hymn-book before I could find words that fit it."

Similar creativity continues also among the Christian Harmony and Sacred Harp singers. Each of these songbooks has been republished within the last twelve years, with new compositions added. One of the best pieces in The Sacred Harp is Soar Away, composed in the 1930's by the late A. M. Cagle. Composers of other pieces in the books were present at both the Christian Harmony and Sacred Harp singings which I attended in the past six months.

Jackson's first book had documented the continuing creativity in the Sacred Harp tradition. Still, I had a surprise in the store last September while attending the Alabama State Christian Harmony singing. This convention lasts two days and runs each day from ten in the morning until three in the afternoon. On the first day one singer invited me to what he called a "new book singing" in another church that evening. I anticipated pallid shades of Moody and Sankey and the Blackwood Brothers, and accepted the invitation only because I could not politely decline. It did not even occur to me to arm myself with a tape recorder for the occasion. Indeed the symptoms of decay did abound. A piano accompanied all the singing. The vocal line allotted to the basses was, as I had feared, minimally melodic. Syncopations and chromatic adornments disturbed the music. The cover of the songbook had the look of the old-time funeral-parlor fan. And yet, the singing had enormous vitality. No genteel vibratos shattered the purity of the intonation. The altos whined away, lovely as oboes. The music was clearly a direct development from the earlier shape-note tradition. And it was printed in shape-notes. The firm that had printed the songbook was located nearby, in Birmingham, and one of the publishers was a co-editor of The Christian Harmony. Some of the composers of pieces in the new songbook had themselves been present earlier in the day at the Christian Harmony Singing. And rattling away at the piano was another of the composers, a twenty-some-year-old high school teacher and football coach who plays for church every Sunday and "new book singings" every Saturday, and works at night on a master's degree in mathematics.

Here at a small Alabama country Methodist church was a bridge between the early nineteenth-century American folk spiritual and the modern guitar-swinging revival churches or the electrified and commercialized gospel sounds of Nashville. And the chief lesson to be learned from the occasion was probably not what Robert Penn Warren called

"our own time's sad declension...under the shadow of God's closing hand." It is, rather, that a vital folksong tradition does not merely polish its heirlooms, but carries on a constant re-creation of the materials it has inherited. By this standard, the folk spiritual of the American blacks and whites has been probably the most vigorous branch of American folksong, and is one that flourishes most lustily still. The old boughs continue to bear new fruit; and new shoots put forth, branching from denomination to denomination. Let us hope that these will not remain the least respected of American folksongs, or the least recorded.

DISCOGRAPHY

General Collection

Atlantic 1349: "Southern Folk Heritage Series: White Spirituals." Recorded in the Field and Edited by Alan Lomax (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

The collection ranges from Kentucky lining-out hymns to Alabama Sacred Harp singing to Virginia songs with guitar accompaniment. While not a comprehensive survey of the white spiritual, the recording stands alone in the attempt.

Shape-Note Singing--Sacred Harp

Folkways AHM-4151: "Fasola": 53 Shape-Note Folk Hymns Recorded at an All-Day Sacred Harp Singing, Stewart's Chapel, Houston, Mississippi, by Amelia and Frederic Ramsey, Jr. (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm, 2 discs.

The largest collection and the one best capturing the flavor of the singing conventions. Its program notes are full and helpful. The recording level is distressingly low.

Library of Congress AAFS L11: "Sacred Harp Singing". Edited by George Pullen Jackson (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

The recordings were made in 1942 and sound their age. But the performances show the Alabama singers in fine fettle.

Prestige Int-25007 (OF): "Southern Journey Series, No. 7: All Day Singing from The Sacred Harp. Field Recordings by Alan Lomax (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Recorded at Fyffe, Alabama, in 1959, the renditions are typical of one of the smaller singings--a little ragged in intonation, and blessed with some wondrous voices and bursts of real spirit.

Sacred Harp SH-101: "Original Sacred Harp Singing in Traditional Style: by Sacred Harp Singers (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

This disc and the next three are studio recordings made by a smallish group of the leading Alabama and Georgia Sacred Harp supporters. The sound loses a little of the sonority one is thrilled by in the actual conventions, but gains in clarity. Some of the performances, such as Soar Away on this disc and Sardis on SH-103, show the singers at their very best. A meddling engineer has also supplied a mechanical echo effect. All four of these discs may be ordered from The Sacred Harp Publishing Company, P. O. Box 185, Bremen, Georgia 30110.

Sacred Harp SH-102: "Fa Sol La Music Ablum Sung in Traditional Style: by Sacred Harp Singers of the Southland (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Sacred Harp SH-103: "Sacred Harp Singing at the Old Country Church" (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Sacred Harp SH-104: "Sacred Harp Singing with Dinner on the Ground" (stereo, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Sacred Records G-100-2: "East Central Alabama Sacred Harp Singers". Directed by Elder H. R. Avery (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

This and the next two discs were also recorded for circulation among the singers themselves. All in all, the series is inferior to the recordings issued by the Sacred Harp Publishing Company. The first of the discs, G-100-2, has clarity, but the number of singers is too small for best effect and the performances are rather consistently tame. The second disc, G-100-3, is more spirited, but suffers from engineering difficulties. The third disc is the best of the three. All may be ordered from Elder H. Roy Avery, P. O. Box 269-C, LaFayette, Alabama 36862.

Sacred Records G-100-3: "East Central Alabama Sacred Harp Singers, Directed by Elder H. R. Avery" (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Sacred Records G-100-4: "East Central Alabama Sacred Harp Singers, Directed by Elder H. R. Avery" (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Shape-Note Singing--Christian Harmony

"Christian Harmony Old Time Gospel Singing" by The Deason-Parris Christian Harmony Singers (monaural, 7", 45 rpm)

Record No. 2: Lonsdale and Volunteers

Record No. 3: Faithful Soldier and Among that Band

"Christian Harmony Gospel Singing", The John Deason & Elder Virgil Smith Families (monaural, 7", 45 rpm)

Record No. 1: Ninety Fifth and God is our Refuge

Record No. 2: Long Sought Home and The Happy Time

Record No. 3: True Happiness and This Heavy Load I Lay Aside

These two series were made by leading singers from the Christian Harmony tradition. As studio recordings, they lack the sonority that would bring a grand old piece like Volunteers to life, and the Deason-Smith discs tend to blast. Only one of the pieces, however, is in the Sacred Harp book. The recordings may be obtained from Mr. John H. Deason, 161 Poydras Avenue, Mobile, Alabama 36606.

Shape-Note Singing--Harp of Columbia

Folkways FP-56: "Old Harp Singing", by the Old Harp Singers of Eastern Tennessee, with Notes by Sidney Robertson Cowell (monaural, 12', 33 1/3 rpm)

Strong performances in the slower Tennessee style. The editor unfortunately lopped off the last phrase of Liberty, and the recordings, made in 1949, sound their age.

Shape-Note Singing--Old School Hymnal No. 10

Sovereign Grace CP-5100: The Primitive Baptist Radio Singers, Directed by Elder Roland Green (monaural, 12', 33 1/3 rpm)

This recording illustrates the pernicious influence of urban gentility. The voices have undergone training in public school music and lack color and vitality. The hymnal lifts the melody from the tenor to the soprano line, and alters the other lines, weakening their melodic roles. Along with several similar recordings, it can be obtained from The Baptist Bible Hour, Inc., Box 17032, Cincinnati, Ohio 45217.

Shaker Singing

Shaker Village TV-25548: "14 Shaker Folk Songs", with Introduction by Shaker Brother Ricardo Belden and

Jerome Count, Director of Shaker Village Work Group, Mount Lebanon, Pittsfield, Massachusetts (monaural, 10", 33 1/3 rpm)

The fourteen Shaker songs are performed execrably by a group of city teenagers enrolled at a "work education summer project" in the Berkshires. The reverse side, however, contains an interview with the last Shaker of the Community at Enfield, Connecticut. He discusses Shaker beliefs and talks about the songs, himself singing one fine song.

"The Shaker Heritage", Edited by William Randle from the "American Culture Series" of Western Reserve University Press (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm, 10 discs)

Sides 13-14: "Shaker Music with Sister Lillian Phelps, Sister Mildred Barker, Charles Thompson, and The Shaker Singers" and "Shaker Music, with Sister Mildred Barker and The Shaker Singers". Sides 15-16: "Shaker Music, with Sisters Lillian Phelps, Frances Carr, Mildred Barker, Elsie McCool, Ethel Peacock and Charles Thompson and The Shaker Singers" and "Shaker Music, with Sisters Lillian Phelps, Aida Elam, Mildred Barker, and Charles Thompson and The Shaker Singers."

The singers of Canterbury, New Hampshire and Sabbathday Lake, Maine, join forces for these recordings with the assistance of Mr. Charles Thompson. The repertory for the most part, derives from the liberal era of Shakerism, after 1870, when part-singing, instrumental music and elocution were cultivated with the help of teachers from the outside world. Canterbury was the more "advanced" community and on this disc its members are the instrumentalists. On Side 14 the Sabbathday Lake singers perform a selection of the older songs in the original unharmonized and unaccompanied style. All of the recordings contain illuminating running commentary. The recordings may be ordered either as single discs or as a part of the ten-record set from Sr. R. Mildred Barker, Trustee Shaker Museum, Sabbathday Lake, Poland Spring, Maine 04274.

"Early Shaker Spirituals", Sung By Sister R. Mildred Barker and Other Members of The Shaker Society, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, Edited by Daniel W. Patterson (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

This disc contains solo and group performances of songs "received" by Shakers between the years 1826 and 1870. It includes examples of many kinds of songs once used among the Shakers, and the accompanying leaflet identifies and discusses these.

Lining Out Hymns

Sovereign Grace 6058: "Old Hymns Lined & Led by Elder Walter Evans, Sparta, North Carolina" (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Sovereign Grace 6444: "Old Hymns Lined & Led by Elder Walter Evans, Sparta, North Carolina (monaural, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

These beautiful performances were recorded in Little River Primitive Baptist Church in Sparta. They are sung without instrumental accompaniment and with only occasional touches of improvised harmonizing. Professor Tallmadge says that they nevertheless show in both repertory and manner of performance more influence from the songbook tradition than does Kentucky singing. His view is corroborated by the fact that in his youth, before he received his call, Elder Evans aspired to be a shape-note singing master. The discs are obtainable from The Baptist Bible Hour, Inc., P. O. Box 17032, Cincinnati, Ohio 45217.

Psalm Singing

"I Will Thee Praise" (monaural and stereo, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

"Praise Waits for Thee" (stereo, 12", 33 1/3 rpm)

Believing these items will be of interest, though they are not directly related to the white spiritual tradition, I include them--unheard; word of them arrived as this discography was being typed for the editor's deadline. The recordings are described as performed by "a twelve-voice mixed choir with some minor variations from the way the psalms are sung in most of our congregations." They are released by the Board of Education and Publication, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North American, 738 Rebecca Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15221. Differing performances of Irish psalm singing are reported to be obtainable from the Blue Banner Bookstore, 703 Fort Street, Box 427, Hays, Kansas 67601.

This discography of white spirituals is surely very incomplete. A hint that led to the final entry above was given to me at the ARSC Conference by Mr. Archie Green. I hope that others will follow his lead and send word of additional recordings to Daniel W. Patterson, Curriculum in Folklore, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill 27514.