

**WIREFRASS SACRED
HARP SINGERS
Desire for Piety**

New World Records 80519

On almost any Sunday between the months of March and October, the season most conducive to travel and outdoor dinner-on-the-grounds, Sacred Harp devotés join with fellow songsters at the County Line Church in Slocomb, or the Mount Sinai Church in Henry County, or the Union Grove Baptist Church in Dale County, or at any one of a dozen or so churches in the southeast Alabama counties of Barbour, Coffee, Dale, Geneva, Houston and Pike, to form the square and sing fa-sol-la. Approximately fifteen African-American Sacred Harp singings occur annually in the Wiregrass region of southeast Alabama.

A singing tradition characteristically associated with white culture in the Deep South, southeast Alabama has enjoyed a vibrant African-American Sacred Harp tradition for well over a century. The Henry County Convention celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1980.

During a typical singing, the participants arrange themselves in a square according to voice part, the basses facing the trebles and the tenors facing the altos. Each singer takes a turn standing in the center of the square, choosing a song, and leading the singers first through the notes of the song and then through the lyrics, a practice emanating from the traditional singing-school classes (the group of singers is often referred to as the class).

The singing style takes its name from the songbook *The Sacred Harp*, first published in Philadelphia by B. F. White and E. J. King. The singing style, however, predates the publication of the book. The itinerant singing-school master was a common phenomenon in Colonial New England, and various masters competed in their efforts to devise an instructional system whereby congregations could be taught to sing "by note." By the eighteenth century, religious songbooks were commonly employing "shape notes" to indicate the sounds on the European musical scale of fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi. From the fuguing tunes of William Billings to the popular melodies of Jeremiah Ingalls, religious songs found widespread circulation in hymn books such as William Walker's *Southern Harmony*, which was popular throughout the South in the early nineteenth century.

The important innovation introduced into the singing-school tradition in the "Second Great Awakening" years of the early 1800s was the idea, first utilized by New Englander William Law, of assigning differently shaped note heads corresponding to each of the musical syllables—triangle for fa, circle for sol, square for la and diamond for mi. As the singing-school tradition declined in New England, new shape-note songbooks, such as *Kentucky Harmony*, *Virginia Harmony*, *Union Harmony*, and *Southern Harmony* gained widespread popularity in the South. It was in this setting that *The Sacred Harp* made its initial appearance in the Deep South in 1844. Despite the rapid decline of four-shaped tune books in the latter half of the nineteenth century, *The Sacred Harp*, in its various revisions, has maintained a popularity and currency in the South unequalled by any of the other shape-note songbooks.

It is the Cooper revision, first published in Dothan, Alabama, in 1902, that is used by both white and African-American singers in South Alabama. W. M. Cooper prefaced his edition with the statement,

"The selections are from the old *Sacred Harp*, remodeled and revised, together with additions from the most eminent authors, including new music." The "remodeling" Cooper referred to was the transposing of a number of songs into lower, more easily sung keys (although, in practice, singers find their own comfortable key which may or may not correspond to the printed key). The "revising" was the standardization of the alto part in all selections, a significant change followed by later revisers. The "additions" were a number of gospel songs.

The inclusion of a number of more contemporary songs in Cooper's 1902 revision was, at least partially, in response to the surge in popularity, among both whites and African-Americans in southeast Alabama, of seven-shape-note gospel music. Beginning in the late 1880s, it took on new vitality, with a flurry of publishing activity signaling the birth of Southern gospel music.

Many of the melodies in *The Sacred Harp* were adopted from traditional tunes, including Celtic jigs and dance tunes. Typical of folk tunes, they are often in the Ionian and Aeolian modes and occasionally the Mixolydian and Dorian. The song texts are taken mostly from the verses of popular eighteenth and nineteenth century hymnists, most notably Isaac Watts and Charles Worley. The Cooper revision of *The Sacred Harp* was again copyrighted in 1907, 1909, 1927, 1949, 1960, and 1992, and is currently published by the Sacred Harp Book Company of Samson, Alabama.

On a day of a typical African-American Sacred Harp Singing, the participants arrive casually in the late morning, seat themselves in the square according to voice part, and begin to sing. A dinner break occurs in the early afternoon, and the singers enjoy a covered-dish "dinner-on-the-grounds" (or in the church basement) prepared by the women. The most intense and emotional singing typically occurs after the dinner break. Each singer takes a turn leading the song of his choice. He walks to the middle of the square, calls out the song's page number and waits for the designated tuner to key the song. Singers are discouraged by the other singers from repeating a song that has already been sung, or "used." This proscription is often dispensed with, however, if the singer is particularly young, particularly old, or if the song has special significance to the individual song leader (perhaps the favorite song of a recently deceased relative).

Every singer is given an opportunity to lead a song. Often, older or more infirm singers will request younger singers to lead their songs for them. The motions of the song leaders are highly stylistic and often emotional. Young children are taught in singing school to mark time with their right arm while holding the book in their left. Typically, a singer will stand in place at the center of the square while leading the singing of the notes. When he begins to lead the lyrics portion of the song, he will often begin to "walk time," rhythmically pacing from one side of the square to the other, being careful never to turn his back on the tenor section. This "walking time" is unique to the African-American tradition. As a singer grows more confident he develops his own distinctive leading style. During fuguing songs in particular, he may gesture to each section of the square as its part joins in. Skilled song leaders often elicit applause or other emotional responses from the group. Occasionally a singer may fall into a state of spiritual ecstasy and "get happy." The episode might include a personal testimonial followed by a repeat of the last verse or refrain from the previous song. The singings break up around 5 P.M.

The Songs

The Happy Sailor, p. 388, key of B-flat Major. Written in 1859 by B. F. White, the original compiler of *The Sacred Harp*, this is a favorite of southeast Alabama singers, and is heard at nearly every singing.

This particular rendition is performed in a bit slower a tempo than is typical.

Blooming Youth, p. 442 top, key of C Major. The lyrics, written by hymnist Thomas Gibbons in 1769, are set to a tune written by Henry G. Mann in 1869. Although part of the active repertory, this song is not sung with great frequency, which may help explain some of the tentativeness heard during the note-singing portion of the song.

Weeping Pilgrim, p. 417, key of F Major. Written by J. P. Reese (or Rees) in 1859, this song exhibits a more contemporary camp-meeting-influenced melody. As is true of a number of songs in *The Sacred Harp*, this song changes tempo, beginning in a moderately paced 2/4 time, switching to a slow-paced 3/4 time at the beginning of the chorus, and then back to 2/4 for the end of the chorus.

There We Our Jesus Shall Adore, p. 470, key of G Major. The lyrics to the song come from *Charles' Hymns and Spirituals*, first published in 1803. The tune was composed by Sarah Lancaster in 1869. Alabama's African-Americans are particularly fond of fuguing tunes and tend to sing them with greater enthusiasm with a faster tempo than in their homophonic hymns, and heavy accenting at the beginning of each measure. This song exhibits those features.

Bound for Canaan, p. 82, Key of B-flat Major. A favorite of Sacred Harp singers all over Alabama, the lyrics to this song were written by John Leland in 1793 and set to a traditional tune arranged by E. J. King, one of the co-compilers of the original *Sacred Harp* in 1844. As is true of many songs in *The Sacred Harp*, the content focuses on death and deliverance from "this vain world of sin."

Cuba, p. 401, key of G Major. With music and lyrics written by J. H. Bolen and H. S. Reese (or Rees) in 1859, this song reflects the mid-nineteenth-century emphasis on preaching and evangelism—"Go, preachers, and tell it to the world."

Firm Foundation, p. 72, key of B-flat Major. The lyrics to this song first appeared in *Rippon's Selections* in 1787 and are set to a traditional tune arranged by Z. Chambless in 1844. Many African-American Sacred Harp song leaders sing slightly ahead of the group anticipating their follow, often slurring or holding the first syllable for an extra beat or two.

Florida, p. 203, key of E Minor. The lyrics to this rather mournful song were written by Isaac Watts in 1719 and set to a tune composed by Truman S. Wetmore (or Witmore) in 1803. Many of the singers feel minor mode singing to be much more difficult than major mode, and don't often "page" songs in that mode. The more accomplished singers, sensing the group's lack of confidence in singing in the minor mode, sing particularly loudly and powerfully in an attempt to "carry" a song the group is finding difficult.

Desire for Piety, p. 76, key of C Major. This is among the favorite songs of African-American Sacred Harp Singers in southeast Alabama. Anonymous lyrics are set to a tune written by B. F. White in 1874. The lively tempo and evangelical lyrics ("Hallelujah," "Cry Amen") make this a good "shouting" song.

Ragan, p. 175, key of F Major. Anonymous lyrics are set to a traditional tune arranged by W. F. Moore in 1869, and, once again, the theme is one of death and salvation. The song leader is singing slightly ahead of the group.

Struggle On, p. 400, key of E-flat Major. The lyrics and music were written by H. S. Reese in 1859. At various points in the song we hear one of the participants, in the spirit, interjecting "Hallelujah" or "Amen," a common occurrence at African-American Sacred Harp singings.

Ninety-fifth Psalm, p. 36 bottom, key of A Major. Another favorite fuguing tune of Sacred Harp singers everywhere, "Ninety-fifth Psalm's" lyrics came from Isaac Watts in 1707 and are set to a tune from *Patterson's Church Music*, first published in 1813. The song leader is Buell Cobb, a noted scholar of Sacred Harp music. It is not uncommon to find white singers at African-American Sacred Harp singings. As the distinctive African-American tradition becomes more fragile, Sacred Harp singing is slowly desegregating.

Fallen By The Way, p. 114 bottom, key of F Major. This nineteenth-century composition is another example of utilizing tempo change to help illustrate the message of the song. It begins in a slow 3/4 tempo with expressions of failure and despair. "I feel I've fallen by the way." The song then changes to a more brisk and upbeat tempo as the sinner finds Jesus and redemption.

Happy Home, p. 377 top, key of A Major. Composed by J. R. Reese in 1859, this song is uncharacteristically upbeat as compared with most songs in the *The Sacred Harp*. At least one of the singers is inspired to hand-clapping and affirmative interjections—"Yes, indeed!"

Coronation, p. 63, key of A-flat Major. Joyful anthems are rare in *The Sacred Harp*, but this is one sung with some frequency. The song was written by Edward Perronet in 1779 and set to the music of Oliver Holden, composed in 1793. Bass singers are particularly fond of singing the duet with the trebles at the beginning of the chorus.

The Dying Boy, p. 399, key of F Major. Where many songs in *The Sacred Harp* repertory focus on death, this 1859 composition by H. S. Reese is darker than most, since there is no mention of heaven or redemption. "The Dying Boy" is often sung as the Memorial Lesson, a time to remember those singers who have passed on in the previous year.

The Father's Boundless Love, p. 331 top, key of C Major. With lyrics written by John Newton in 1779 and set to the music of D. P. White in 1850, this song focuses on the three elements of the Trinity, reflecting the emphasis on the Holy Spirit which came out of the Second Great Awakening.

The Christian's Flight, p. 466, key of F Major. Eighteenth-century composer William Billings once commented, "There is more variety in one piece of fuguing music than in twenty pieces of plain song, for while the tones do most sweetly coincide and agree, the words are seemingly engaged in a musical warfare." With lyrics written by Philip Doddridge in 1755 and music by W. F. Moore in 1866, this song, with its fuguing in the beginning of the chorus, provides an example of that "musical warfare" that has endeared *The Sacred Harp* to so many singers over the years.

Give Me Just a Little More Time, *Silver Gleams*, p. 115, Stamps-Baxter, 1958. Most of the African-American Sacred Harp Singers in Southeast Alabama also participate in seven-shape, or "new book" gospel singings. Composed by Albert Brumley, this song was a favorite of National Heritage Fellowship winner Dewey Williams, who leads it here, one of the rare instances where a non-Sacred

Harp song is sung at a Sacred Harp singing. Williams died in late 1995, three months shy of his 98th birthday.

—Henry Willett

Henry Willett, *Director of the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture in Montgomery*, has been researching Alabama's folk traditions for over twenty years. He recently edited the book/compact disc package *In the Spirit: Alabama's Sacred Music Traditions*.

The **Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers** have performed at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Newport Jazz Festival, on national broadcasts, regularly on the local WOZK-AM radio station, and on television broadcasts in southeastern Georgia.

The Performers

Treble Emma Mae Jackson McKenzie Ernst
 Estella Snells
 Alice Williams

Alto Pauline Jackson Driggs
 Bernice Harvey
 Mary Jackson
 Janice Jackson Johnson
 Ruth Jackson Johnson
 Cleona B. Stinson
 Leola Whitehurst

Tenor Damascus Crittenden, Sr.
 Dovie Dee Jackson Reese
 Edward Snells

Bass John C. Jackson
 Henry Japheth Jackson
 Shem C. Jackson
 Dewey Williams

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Sacred Harp Bicentennial Celebration. Southern Alabama Baptist Convention. Prestige 106-751230.
White Spirituals from The Sacred Harp. The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention. New World 80205-2.

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DESIRE FOR PIETY: SONGS FROM *THE B. F. WHITE SACRED HARP* WIREGRASS SACRED HARP SINGERS 80519-2

- 1 The Happy Sailor (B. F. White) 2:07
- 2 Blooming Youth (Henry G. Mann) 2:11

- 3 Weeping Pilgrim (J. P. Rees) 3:20
- 4 There We Our Jesus Shall Adore (Sarah Lancaster) 2:28
- 5 Bound for Canaan (E. J. King) 2:04
- 6 Cuba (J. H. Bolen and H. S. Rees) 2:03
- 7 Firm Foundation (Z. Chambless) 2:42
- 8 Florida (Truman S. Wetmore) 2:30
- 9 Desire for Piety (B. F. White) 2:00
- 10 Ragan (W. F. Moore) 3:01
- 11 Struggle On (H. S. Rees) 3:06
- 12 Ninety-fifth Psalm (Colton) 3:00
- 13 Fallen By The Way (W. R. McCoy) 2:39
- 14 Happy Home (J. P. Rees) 2:48
- 15 Coronation (Oliver Holden) 2:58
- 16 The Dying Boy (H. S. Rees) 2:00
- 17 The Father's Boundless Love (D. P. White) 1:35
- 18 The Christian's Flight (W. F. Moore) 3:15
- 19 Give Me Just a Little More Time (Albert Brumley) (publ. by Stamps-Baxter Publishing)
3:42

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