

Folklife Today

January 2019: Kumbaya: Stories of an African American Spiritual

John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I'm John Fenn, and I'm here with my colleague Stephen Winick.

Steve: Hi everyone!

John Fenn: we're both Folklorists at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. I'm the head of Research and Programs, and Steve is the Center's writer and editor, and the creator of the blog *Folklife Today*. We're going to be talking about a real classic, the old spiritual "Kumbaya."

Steve Winick: And, in case you don't know the song we're talking about, we recently held an old-time music jam, and the Grammy-Winning musicians Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer agreed to lead us all in "Kumbaya." Let's hear it!

[Recording from jam]

Kumbaya!

Kumbaya My Lord, Kumbaya

Kumbaya My Lord, Kumbaya

Kumbaya My Lord, Kumbaya

Oh Lord, Kumbaya

Someone needs you!

Someone needs you, lord Kumbaya

Someone needs you, lord Kumbaya

Someone needs you, lord Kumbaya

Oh Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's Crying!

John Fenn: Steve, earlier this year some of our blog's research on "Kumbaya" was featured in the New York Times, right?

Steve: Yes, that was an unexpected pleasure!

John Fenn: How did that come about?

Steve Winick: Well, we originally did this research back in 2009. And, um, spoiler alert...the upshot is that some of the first really reliable evidence for "Kumbaya" comes from coastal Georgia and the Gullah-Geechee community. So we know a gentleman of that community, Dr. Griffin Lotson, who is the Mayor pro tem of Darien, Georgia. And along with others within the community, he went to work to advocate for the song. It ended up being declared the first State Historical Song of Georgia by the Georgia state Senate, and our research was cited in the legislation. Here's how the resolution sounded being read on the floor of the Georgia Senate:

Georgia Voice 1: Senate Resolution 293 By: Senators Ligon of the 3rd, Watson of the 1st, Jackson of the 2nd, Hill of the 4th, Cowser of the 46th and others A
RESOLUTION Recognizing Georgia's first state historical song, known worldwide as "Kumbaya" ; and for other purposes. WHEREAS, the Library of Congress has documented American folk songs throughout the nation's history; and WHEREAS, the first director of the Archive of American Folk-Song at the Library of Congress, Robert Winslow Gordon, pioneered early efforts to record folk songs by

transporting his heavy wax cylinder recorder by rail, car, horse, and boat to remote regions of the nation; and WHEREAS, Mr. Gordon traveled to Darien and the Sea Islands of Georgia in 1926 to record numerous folk songs in the Gullah Dialect, also known as the Sea Islands Creole Dialect; and WHEREAS, Mr. H. Wylie, an African American of Gullah-Geechee heritage, gave permission for him to record the spiritual folk song "Come by Here"; and WHEREAS, the Library of Congress states that this is the first known recording of "Come by Here," a song that came to be known as "Kumbaya" ; and WHEREAS, "Kumbaya," first recorded in Georgia, has become a song with national significance in American culture. NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE that the members of this body recognize this historical song of Georgia and its significance to our state and to the Gullah-Geechee culture. That concludes the order.

Georgia Voice 2: Is there objection to adoption of the resolution? The Chair hears none. And the resolution is adopted! [Gavel strike.]

John Fenn: Legislation is always a good outcome for Library of Congress research!

Steve: yeah, we like that gavel! And, so do news outlets, it turns out...or at least the New York Times did. So their correspondent on race relations, John Eligon, did a really nice article in February 2018.

John Fenn: So, how did you get interested in "Kumbaya?"

Steve: Well, "Kumbaya" is kind of a special song in that, in addition to being a great spiritual, it's become a metaphor for feel-good activities that project kind of a superficial unity, so "joining hands and singing Kumbaya" has come to mean, sort

of, "pretending we're all on the same page." When you live in Washington, which is a political town, that meaning for "Kumbaya" becomes even more noticeable.

John Fenn: I guess that's become part of the song's meaning through the folk revival, but what's the basic meaning of the song? What does "Kumbaya" even mean?

Steve Winick: So, we've become accustomed to pronouncing it "Kumbaya" because we see the way people spell it, beginning with "K-u-m." It looks like a foreign-language word. But it's actually an English phrase, simply "Come by Here," pronounced in the way a speaker of the Gullah-Geechee dialect in Georgia or South Carolina might speak. Dr. Lotson explained this to the Georgia Senate:

Griffin Lotson: Kum-ba-ya. Or better known, for us, that's from the Gullah-Geechee, as Come-by-here [accurate Gullah-Geechee pronunciation]. Thank You!

John Fenn: So it might be better to not copy someone's accent, and just say "Come by here."

Steve: yeah, ordinarily I think we would do that...but if you do, people often don't know you're talking about the song, so you have to compromise, and use the known title a lot of the time.

John Fenn: So... the song "Come By Here" is literally asking for God to show up.

Steve: Exactly. The singer's really just asking God to come by and intervene when a loved one is in need. So when someone is sick, or dying, or in trouble. Let's hear the great Bessie Jones:

Bessie Jones [singing]:

Come by here, my Lordy, come by here

Come by here, my Lordy, come by here

Come by here, my Lordy, come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here

Somebody need you lord, come by here

Somebody need you lord, come by here

Somebody need you lord, come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here

John Fenn: Was there any particular event that got you and other staff members looking into the song?

Steve Winick: In 2006, the *Chicago Tribune* did a story about the song, saying it was a shame it had gotten this wishy-washy reputation, and then essentially saying the origins of the song were in dispute. Some people said it was an African American folksong, but a white songwriter from New York also claimed to have written it. And in that way that newspapers do, it just presented both sides and then said "whichever one is true, it's a good song."

Fenn: And you wanted to get to the bottom of it?

Steve Winick: Well, let's say we thought, it must be possible to find out more...or to say something more conclusive.

John Fenn: So how did you go about researching this?

Steve Winick: at the American Folklife Center, we keep subject files on individual songs, and we hold on to answers to questions that get asked frequently, so we're not reinventing the wheel every time someone asks about a particular song. So the first thing I did was, I went to the subject file for Kumbaya. Since the late 1950s, we've gotten questions about the origin of "Kumbaya" numerous times, and all the answers we've given trace the first appearance of the song to a book that came out in 1932 called "The Carolina Low Country."

We also had a researcher come here in 2003, who went through our collections of 1920s recordings on wax cylinders. He wrote an article on "Kumbaya" in a music education journal. Now, he didn't find any cylinders with the song we now call "Kumbaya" on them. He did find a disc recording, though, from 1936, which is pretty cool:

Ethel Best and Group [singing]:

Well, somebody need you lord, come by here

Well, somebody need you lord, come by here

Somebody need you lord, come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here

Come by here, lord, come by here

Come by here, lord, come by here

Come by here, lord, come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here

Well, somebody's sick lord, come by here

Somebody's sick lord, come by here

Somebody's sick lord, come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here

SW: That was Ethel Best, from Raiford, Florida, singing "Kumbaya" in 1936.

John Fenn: So, very cool, but also kind of a dead end. A researcher already looked for recordings earlier than 1932 and didn't find them. What made you look again?

Steve Winick: Oddly enough, it was Pete Seeger. I'd read a number of interviews where Pete said, "I heard a cylinder recording of 'Kumbaya' from Georgia or South Carolina made in the 1920s." So in 2007, we had a symposium honoring the Seeger family, which I coordinated for AFC. Pete was our guest, and I got to spend a little time with him. And I was able to ask him just personally "so, where did you hear this cylinder?" And he said "why, it was right here in the Library of Congress!"

John Fenn: Wow, so what did you do next?

Steve: I went down to the reading room and consulted with my good friend Todd Harvey of the reference staff, who suggested the first place I should look. And as luck would have it, Todd is right here with us! So, Todd, where would I look for a cylinder from Georgia or South Carolina in the 1920s?

Todd: Well, the main cylinder collection that would be likely to contain an item from that time and place was made by Robert Winslow Gordon. He was the founding head of the Archive of American Folk Song here at the Library of Congress in 1928. Gordon had spent the previous couple of years in and around Darien, Georgia, making recordings, and he brought those cylinders with him when he came to the Library. He also brought a manuscript collection, which we have here as well.

Steve: And we're library nerds, so tell us about the card catalog!

Todd: Well, Gordon made a card catalog for his manuscripts and cylinders. And one kind of unusual thing about it is that he knew that traditional songs often go by more than one title, so he made cards not only for song titles but for what he felt were key phrases in the song.

Steve Winick: And what Todd just said is key, because as I said, "Kumbaya" is just a phonetic representation of someone's pronunciation of the words "Come by Here," so by looking for that phrase in the catalog, we found a manuscript and a cylinder, both from 1926, both of which contain versions of "Kumbaya."

John Fenn: Great. So tell us about this manuscript version:

Steve Winick: So the manuscript version of "Kumbaya" or "Come by here" was collected by a high school student as part of a school project, in 1926. The student's name was Minnie Lee, and her teacher was a man named Julian Parks Boyd. Boyd had the idea of giving his students a folksong collecting project as an assignment. Like most collectors back then, they didn't have recording equipment, they just

wrote it down. And in this case, they collected only the words. But the words Minnie Lee collected are:

Somebody's sick, Lord, come by here
Somebody's sick, Lord, come by here
Somebody's sick, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, Won't You Come By Here

Somebody's dying, Lord, come by here
Somebody's dying, Lord, come by here
Somebody's dying, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, Won't You Come By Here

[Sings] Somebody's in trouble, Lord, come by here
Somebody's in trouble, Lord, come by here
Somebody's in trouble, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, Won't You Come By Here

John Fenn: So, this is a collection made by a high school student and turned in to her teacher. How did it end up in the archive at the Library of Congress?

Steve Winick: Before coming to the Library, Gordon was known throughout the country as one of the "go-to" people for folk song queries, and also collected folksong texts, because he wrote a column in Adventure magazine about folksongs. It was called "Old Songs that Men Have Sung," so naturally a lot of people call it "Songs that Old Men Have Sung." But whatever you call it, it was a very influential column, and people all over the country sent him their songs, both individually in letters, and as large collections. Julian Parks Boyd ran this

collection project with his students, and he didn't keep all the songs, but the ones he thought were real folksongs he compiled into a manuscript with over a hundred songs, and he sent that to Gordon. Gordon brought it with him when he first came to the Library of Congress, and we have it today in the American Folklife Center.

John Fenn: Did Boyd go on to be a folklorist too?

Steve Winick: Not really, and what's interesting to me is that this story of "Kumbaya" also opened up one of the little hidden stories of the archive, which is Julian Parks Boyd's story. He only taught high school in Alliance, North Carolina for one year. He was very interested in folksongs, but it turns out the local school board wasn't. So he sent the manuscript to Gordon in February 1927, but kept corresponding with him briefly after that. And in March, he wrote to Gordon, "The school board and the community in general seem to think that collecting folksongs is an obnoxious practice, for some uncertain reason. The seniors were righteously indignant—it was the one thing that had thoroughly aroused their interest." He said that the school board in Alliance "fits Woodrow Wilson's definition of a board: 'long, wooden, and narrow.'" And that explains why I am going to pursue my doctorate at Pennsylvania next year.

John Fenn: So he went to the University of Pennsylvania?

Steve Winick: Yes, to pursue a doctorate in history. And he went on to become one of the most prominent historians and Librarians in America. He eventually served as Head Librarian and Professor of History at Princeton, as the founding treasurer of the Society of American Archivists, and as president of the American Historical Association AND the American Philosophical Society. So, as a historian, he's best

known as the editor of a definitive edition of the papers of Thomas Jefferson, and you don't get much more prominent as a historian than that.

John Fenn: So that must have been it for Boyd and folklore.

Steve Winick: Well, not quite. In one of his letters, he alludes to making a plan for a collecting trip to the Outer Banks, sponsored by the Duke University folklorist Frank C. Brown. As a folklorist, I'm sure you know what Brown is most famous for.

John Fenn: You mean the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, a massive multivolume set of books.

Steve Winick: Exactly. It's one of the standards that all folklore reference collections have on the shelf. So I just wondered if any of Boyd's songs could have ended up in that collection. I went down to the Reading Room to consult it, and sure enough, some of his songs are in there. And the amazing thing is, Minnie Lee's version of "Kumbaya" is in there, but no one writing a history of the song ever mentions it.

John Fenn: why do you think that is?

Steve Winick: Well, it's kind of a library nerd and a folklore nerd reason, but it really shows the importance of indexes. Boyd gave the song the title of "Oh Lord Won't You Come By Here." Since the editors of the Brown collection never saw another version with another title, that's how it's indexed in the Brown collection. And if you're looking for a song you know might be called "Kumbaya" with a K or "Come by Here" with a C, you're not likely to look under O for "Oh, Lord."

John Fenn: But you and Todd located Boyd's version in our collection.

Todd Harvey: Right, and that's because Robert Winslow Gordon had the advantage of comparative perspective, and he was diligent about indexing. He noticed that there were five songs in his collection with the phrase "Come By Here" in them, and that some of them were actually CALLED "Come By Here" by the singers. So he cross-indexed all of them with the phrase "come by here" in his card catalog. Since we still have that catalog, Steve was able to just look through all the "Come by Here" songs to find out which we'd consider to be versions of "Kumbaya."

Steve Winick: And not all of them were, right? I remember we found one about Daniel and the Lion's Den.

Todd Harvey: right! Well, that's an interesting song, and it has the phrase "Come By Here" in it, but it turns out not to be a version of "Kumbaya"

Unidentified Singer [sings]:

Daniel in the lion's den

Daniel in the lion's den

Daniel in the lion's den, in the lion's den

Oh, Daniel in the lion's den

Oh, Daniel in the lion's den

Daniel in the lion's den

Daniel went to God in prayer

Oh, Daniel went to God in prayer

Daniel went to God in prayer, to God in prayer

Daniel went to God in prayer, yes

Daniel went to God in prayer

Daniel went to God in prayer

The Angel locked the lion's jaws

The Angel locked the lion's jaws....

John Fenn: So the most exciting thing you rediscovered was the 1926 cylinder recording, which DOES contain the song "Kumbaya."

Steve Winick: Yes, and it really is a great piece of history. I don't want to suggest that it was a new discovery. In fact, we only knew to look for it because other people had heard it in the past, including as I said, Pete Seeger. But over the years we had always answered reference questions by saying the earliest known version was a 1932 book publication, and a number of researchers had come to the archive to research the history of the song, and somehow they had all missed this particular cylinder, so it IS sort of a re-discovery.

John Fenn: is it the only sound recording of the song from such an early date?

Steve Winick: It's the only one, we think, that survives. Gordon recorded four songs that he indexed with "Come by Here." but sadly, one was broken and one was lost before the cylinders found their final home here at the Library of Congress. One of them was "Daniel in the Lion's Den," which isn't a version of Kumbaya. So of those four sound recordings, only one survives that is the song we now know as "Kumbaya."

John Fenn: All right, so what do we know about it?

Steve Winick: From Gordon's notes and an announcement on the cylinder itself, we can be pretty certain that the singer's name was Henry Wylie, and that it was recorded in Darien, Georgia on April 17, 1926.

John Fenn: Great, let's hear it!

Henry Wylie [sings]:

... need you Lord, come by here,
Somebody need you, Lord, come by here,
Somebody need you, Lord, come by here,
|Oh, Lord, come by here.

Now I need you, Lord , come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

Come by here, Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

In the morning see Lord, come by here
In the morning do Lord, come by here
In the morning see Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

[inaudible section]

Oh, Lord , come by here.

I'm gon' need you, Lord, come by here

I'm gon' need you , Lord, come by here

I'm gon' need you, Lord, come by here

Oh, Lord , come by here.

Oh , sinners need you, Lord, come by here

Sinners need you, Lord, come by here

Sinners need you, Lord, come by here

Oh, my Lord, won't you come by here

In the mornin' mornin' , won't you come by here

Mornin' mornin' , won't you come by here

In the mornin' mornin' , won't you come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here.

John Fenn: So—when you first heard this, you weren't actually playing back the cylinder, right?

Steve Winick: That's right! Most analog sound technologies degrade each time you play them. So in the 1970s we transferred most of our cylinder collections to reel-to-reel tapes. And now we're digitizing them. So in our reading room, after you look in the card catalog and find the cylinder number, you first check if it's digitized, and if so we'll serve you a digital file. If not, you page through a concordance which tells you which reel of tape it's on, and we'll fetch you a reel of tape! This was about ten years ago, so it was tape.

John Fenn: That's still pretty old-school! So what can we say about it musically?

Steve Winick: well, for that I defer to our folklife specialist Jennifer Cutting, who transcribed the cylinder's music for me.

JC: The thing that most struck me was that I thought it was much more interesting musically than most revivalist recordings. I really thought the syncopated rhythm stood out. So a revivalist recording would have the sung syllables fall regularly on the beat, something like this [claps and sings]: Come by here, my lord, come by here. [Speaks]: And this one is much more syncopated, so it sounds more like this: [claps and sings]. Come by here, my lord, come by here. Come by here, my lord, come by here.

Steve: yes, and as we know from our other collections here at the American Folklife Center, this is really typical of that area of Georgia and South Carolina. It sounds like the main vocal of a "ring shout," without the handclapping or responses from group members. Alan Lomax recorded the great Sea Island Singers in that tradition, and we've recently recorded the McIntosh County Shouters, and this version of "Kumbaya" or "Come by Here" sounds like it might fit right in with those collections.

John Fenn: Let's hear something from the Shouters.

Eli-ee - ay-Lord

Eli, I can't stand

John on the island I hear him groan

Eli, I can't stand

Eli-ee-ay-o-Lord

Eli, I can't stand

John on the island, John on the island

Eli, I can't stand

John on the island, John on the island

Eli, I can't stand

Eli- ee -ay-Lord

Eli, I can't stand

John went to heaven John went to heaven

Eli, I can't stand

John went to heaven John went to heaven

Eli, I can't stand

Eli- ee -ay-Lord

Eli, I can't stand

John Fenn: So, Steve, you said that both contextual evidence and something on the cylinder clued you in to the time and place and name. Could you explain that a bit more?

Steve Winick: Well, the easiest way to do that is to listen to the announcement on the cylinder.

John Fenn: All right, let's hear it:

[Mumbled announcement from the end of the cylinder]

John Fenn: Wow, that's hard to make out.

Steve: Right. But, the contextual information can help us interpret it. Judith Gray, our coordinator of Reference, was the person who showed me the paper files that go with Gordon's cylinders, including the notes and the tape concordance that I mentioned, and she's agreed to join us. So what can those files tell us about the Gordon cylinders?

JG: Well, Gordon didn't write down a precise date for most of his cylinders, but he did write it down for some of them. And he numbered the cylinders themselves, plus the songs on them, sequentially. So even if we don't have a date for a given cylinder, we can usually establish with certainty that it was recorded between two specific dates. In this case, the cylinder is numbered A389. It's one of the undated cylinders, but all the dated items in Gordon's numbering system from A290 through A434 are from April, 1926; the last precisely dated cylinder before "Come By Here" is dated April 15, 1926 and the first after it is dated May 3, 1926, so we can be pretty certain it was recorded between those dates. We also know that Gordon was staying in Darien, Georgia, at the time, and he wrote down the singer's name as H. Wylie.

Steve Winick: So with that information, let's listen again.

[Audio: Mumbled announcement from the end of the cylinder]

SW: Knowing the possible dates, and "H. Wylie," and Darien as a likely place, I hear, "Sung by Henry Wylie, Darien Georgia, April the seventeenth."

John Fenn: So now we know there are two versions from 1926. How does this help us establish a history of the song?

Steve: Well, after the song became really popular, in the 1950s, people started to claim they wrote it. But these versions predate those claims.

John Fenn: How DID it become popular?

Steve: There was an organization called the Cooperative Recreation Service in Ohio run by Lynn and Katharine Rohrbaugh. They compiled songbooks for camps, schools, churches, and recreational clubs for kids. And in 1955, they printed a version of "Come by Here" that had been collected by a professor at Baldwin Wallace College from a missionary named Melvin Blake, who had returned from Angola. Interestingly, in their first printings of the song, they spelled "Kumbaya" as K-o-o-m-b-a-y-a. It was probably these early printed versions that led a lot of people to pronounce it as "Koombaya" instead of "Come by yah." By the later 1950s, they realized it should be pronounced more like "come by here," so they changed the spelling. But the funny thing is that they only changed the double o to a u. So that gave us the title we know today, but it didn't clear up the pronunciation for a lot of people!

Anyway, a year or two later, they collected another version from a man named Van Richards of Liberia, who was at that time a student at Ohio State, and they published that in another book.

John Fenn: so there are a lot of African connections with this song.

Steve: Right, and they assumed it was an African song because however they spelled it, "Kumbaya" looked like an African word to them. In fact it turns out the song was being brought over there by American missionaries. But they said it was

African in their books. And this is why when the song first became popular, a lot of people thought it was an African song.

John Fenn: And some people still do think that, right?

Steve Winick: Yeah, and that's another reason that our evidence from 1926 is helpful—it establishes that the earliest versions come from Georgia and the Carolinas, not Angola and Liberia.

John Fenn: So it was these camp songbooks that made it popular! That would explain why the song is still associated to this day with singing around a campfire, or with kids at camp.

Steve Winick: Yes, that's right! And the song also entered the folk revival, and interestingly enough, Robert Winslow Gordon's successor as head of our archive was a big part of that story.

John Fenn: Is this the great Joe Hickerson?

Steve Winick: It is indeed, and Joe has some interesting things to tell us about "Kumbaya" as well. Joe, when did you first hear "Kumbaya?"

Joe Hickerson: I first heard "Kumbaya" when a bunch of us from Oberlin College drove to the April, 1957 Swarthmore College folk festival. Two of the performers there, Tony Saletan and Peggy Seeger, from the Cambridge Massachusetts area, both sang Kumbaya. Peggy had learned it from Tony. The following Wednesday, Peggy Seeger motor scooted into Oberlin on her way to Chicago to audition for the Gate of Horn. We spent all evening singing, including Kumbaya. And then a

group of us, five guys, got in a car and drove to Chicago and spent the weekend there. In the evenings, we did street singing. We didn't know the word "busking." We did street singing in Chicago, with Peggy Seeger, and we sang "Kumbaya" a lot. And three weeks later, Tony Saletan came to the Oberlin College folk festival, and sang it again. Tony said that he learned it in 1956, from the Cooperative Recreation Service in Delaware, Ohio, who had it listed as an Angola folksong.

Steve Winick: Interesting! So that establishes the connection from the Cooperative recreation service to you, Joe. So how did you continue spreading the song?

Joe Hickerson: During my senior year, a group of eight of us, eight enthusiastic, square-jawed Oberlin College students, formed the group "The Folksmiths." And we toured in the summer of 1957 to a bunch of summer camps, a few resorts, and a hootenanny in New York City which was sponsored by Sing Out! Magazine and featured Pete Seeger. There were probably two thousand people there. And well over four thousand people we sang "Kumbaya" to. And as far as I know, no one had ever heard it before.

John Fenn: You also made the first revival recording of "Kumbaya." How did that come about?

Joe Hickerson: During our tour we made two demo tapes with four songs on each, including "Kumbaya." We sent one to Kenneth S. Goldstein and one to Moses Asch at Folkways records. Kenny sent us a positive response, but Moe Asch simply said, "Yes! Let's make a date!" So we agreed to record for Folkways about four days after the end of our tour. We spent two days rehearsing in the barn next to the house that Pete and Toshi Seeger built in Beacon, New York, because we

had to figure out what we were going to sing and how. And then we made the recording for Folkways in New York City on August 17, 1957. The LP, Folkways FA2407, was entitled "We've Got Some Singing to Do," and was issued February, 1958.

Folksmiths [Harmony singing with banjo and guitar:]

Kumbaya my Lord, Kumbaya

Kumbaya my Lord, Kumbaya

Kumbaya my Lord, Kumbaya

Oh, Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's singing, Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's singing, Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's singing, Lord, Kumbaya

Oh, Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's sleeping, Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's sleeping, Lord, Kumbaya

Someone's sleeping, Lord, Kumbaya

Oh, Lord, Kumbaya

John Fenn: Now, Steve, you had mentioned disputed origins for the song. Do the 1926 manuscript and cylinder help here?

Steve Winick: I really think they do. So, there was an evangelist from New York named Marvin Frey, spelled "F-R-E-Y". And he claimed to have written "Come by Here." And a lot of people accepted his claim, and some still do. He didn't register copyright on the song until the 1970s, but he claimed to have written the song

much earlier, in 1936. He was 18 at that time. This means that when the version in the book *The Carolina Low Country* was published, he was 14, and when that version was pointed out to him, he tried to argue that it was really not that much like his song at all—but of course, it's a lot like his song.

John Fenn: So, let's see...when this cylinder and Minnie Lee's manuscript were created, Marvin Frey was only...8 years old, right?

Steve: Right, so it's clearly impossible for him to have composed "Come by Here" as a truly original song, though he might be able to claim he adapted it.

John Fenn: anything else we know about Frey?

Steve Winick: well, he was a colorful character who in the 1970s decided to claim copyright on a bunch of spirituals, and who knows if he really wrote any of them? But "Kumbaya" is an interesting case because despite a lot of evidence that he didn't write it, he managed to convince the Cooperative Recreation Service to recognize him as the author. He did it by first getting his lawyer to contact them and say "I wrote this song, and you need to credit me" and then negotiating down from a demand for royalties. We actually have his correspondence with them in the archive, because we have the Cooperative Recreation Service's files.

John Fenn: So how did that work?

Steve Winick: Because the Rohrbaughs had published the song in 1956 and 1958, they actually had an earlier copyright than Frey. But they didn't plan to use their copyrights to make money. They believed it was a traditional song and they didn't want to sue Joan Baez or anyone else for royalties. So he said, "well, I'll waive any

claim to royalties from you, and grant you royalty-free use of the song forever, if you assign those 1956 and 1958 copyrights to me.” That seemed like a good deal to them: they didn’t intend to ask for royalties from anyone else, so all they really needed was immunity from being charged royalties themselves, and they got it with this deal. And what Frey got was the legal right to claim an actual registered copyright from 1956, which predated all the folk revival versions.

John Fenn: So, hypothetically, he could try get royalties from Joan Baez and everyone else who recorded the song.

Steve Winick: In theory. But his widow says that as a devout Christian, he didn't believe in suing people over it. His whole goal was to spread the gospel through music, so it wouldn't make sense to insist on money from those who sang the song. He just wanted the credit. In any case, we don't really know, because the story told by the Cooperative Recreation Service files on this matter basically ends when they reach their agreement with Frey. We don't have many records of anything Frey did later.

John Fenn: So this is a delicate question, but do you think he was lying?

Steve Winick: Well, I wouldn't say that. He claimed that he based the song on a spoken prayer he heard in Oregon, and it's certainly possible that his memory was somewhat faulty. That he actually heard a sung version, and then adapted it. Most songwriters have had that experience of thinking they wrote a melody and then realizing it was something they had heard. Actually, the great songwriter Paul Williams told a story about that during the ASCAP "We Write the Songs" concert here at the Library in 2015.

Paul Williams: Now there was a day in Jamaica many years ago, when I sat down with a blank piece of paper, wrote a song that I thought was going to be as big a rock and roll hit as my brother's song "Driftaway." I wrote something brilliant. I got a little sleep. I got up and I listened to it. And I realized I had rewritten "O Little Town of Bethlehem!"

Steve Winick: More than that, like all of us, Marvin Frey didn't always tell exactly the same story. Joe Hickerson remembers him saying it was a song fragment that he heard, rather than a prayer, but his written accounts in the archive and elsewhere say it was a prayer.

One thing I came across that's interesting is his widow saying that Pete Seeger gives the credit for "Kumbaya" to Frey. But that's not quite true. At the Seeger symposium that we held in 2007, Pete expressed the opinion that Marvin Frey sincerely believed he'd written the song, but not that he actually did write it...and we captured his comments on video!

John Fenn: Great, let's hear Pete!

Pete Seeger: You should know that...if you don't know it already...that many times songwriters think have written a melody, and they're only remembering an old melody from years before. It happened to the man who thought he wrote "Kumbaya," "Come by Here, Lord." He wrote it as a slow processional. But Joe Hickerson some 20...15 years ago, played me tapes. They had recordings of it sung as a very fast song, [sings] "Come by here, my Lord come by here, oh, lord, come by here."

John Fenn: You can really tell that Pete heard the cylinder from the way he sings the song!

Steve Winick: Yeah, it's great!

John Fenn: So anything else you'd like to say about this classic?

Steve Winick: Well, part of this research has been about giving credit where it's due, so we really should thank our colleagues Todd Harvey and Ann Hoog and Judith Gray, who helped with the cylinders and the manuscripts, and with the Cooperative Recreation Service files. And of course, Jennifer Cutting who helped with the music. And then there's the whole American Folklife Center staff, processing and cataloging and getting these collections ready so we can find the items we need.

And I really do think the best outcome of this research is giving credit for this wonderful song to the communities that did the most to create it: The Gullah Geechee community in Georgia and South Carolina, as well as neighboring African American communities throughout the Southeast. From what we can tell, it really is their song. And helping to prove that, and support their culture, has been an honor for all of us here at AFC.

John Fenn: Let's hear what Griffin Lotson said about this to the Georgia Senate, and then hear his group The Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters, perform Henry Wylie's version of the song:

Griffin Lotson: We're very proud to be here with this historical song, as it was said by the Senator. Very few people in the world knew that this song was centered

here in the state of Georgia. And we're so proud to be here for this historical moment, for Georgia to have its first historical song, here in the state of Georgia, and any other state in the United States of America. It was 1926 when this song was recorded by Robert Winslow Gordon. It wound up being over in the Library of Congress in the folklore section. We've been working with the folklore section in Washington, DC, and to our amaze, and in our closing, the song was recorded here in Darien, Georgia. I'm a descendant of the Gullah Geechees, what we call here in the state of Georgia and in the southeastern part of the United States.

Gullah Geechee Ring Shouters [singing]:

Oh, Lord, come by here.

Now I need you, Lord , come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

Come by here, Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

In the morning see Lord, come by here
In the morning do Lord, come by here
In the morning see Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

Steve Winick: That's the kind of thing that makes research worthwhile!

John Fenn: Indeed. Thanks for producing this podcast with me, Steve.

Steve Winick: Thank you, John! We should also thank our other voices, Joe Hickerson, Griffin Lotson, the late Pete Seeger, and all the great singers, especially Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer. And we thank Smithsonian Folkways for the right to use the Folksmiths recording.

John Fenn: And of course, we should credit our fantastic engineer, Jon Gold, and our many colleagues in the American Folklife Center and throughout the Library of Congress.

Steve Winick: You know, with all these thank yous, I think we're going to have to all join hands and sing "Kumbaya" one more time. Thanks for listening to the Folklife Today Podcast! And let's have Bessie Jones sing us out!

Bessie Jones [singing]:

Come by here, my Lordy, come by here

Come by here, my Lordy, come by here

Come by here, my Lordy, come by here

Oh, Lord, come by here

Somebody need you lord, come by here

Somebody need you lord, come by here

Yes, there's somebody need you lord, come by here

Now, Oh, Lord, come by here

Yes, we're down here praying, Lord, come by here
Down here praying, Lordy, come by here
Down here praying, Lord, come by here
Now, Oh, Lord, come by here

Lord, the liars keep lying, Lord, come by here
The liars keep lying, Lord, come by here
The liars keep lying, Lord, come by here
Now, Oh, Lord, come by here

Yeah, the gamblers keep gambling, Lord, come by here
The gamblers keep gambling, Lordy, come by here
The gamblers keep gambling, Lord, come by here
Now Oh, Lord, come by here

Won't you come by here, Lordy, come by here
Come by here, Lordy, Come by here
Won't you come by here, Lordy, come by here
O, Lord, come by here

We're calling your name, good Lord, come by here
Calling your name, good Lord, come by here
We're calling your name, good Lord, come by here
O, Lord, come by here

We're asking you to save us, Lordy, come by here

Asking you to save us, Lordy, come by here

We're asking you to save us, Lordy, come by here

O, Lord, come by here

Yes, I know you got the power, Lord, come by here....