

United Sacred Harp Musical Convention in Fyffe, Alabama (field recordings by Alan Lomax and Shirley Collins) (September 12, 1959)

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Essay by Matthew Barton



“If you don’t like it [Sacred Harp singing] you had better stay away from it, because it will get hold of you and you can’t get away!”--Sacred Harp singer and teacher Uncle Tom Denson

“This music can make you love your enemies!”--Marcus Cagle, Sacred Harp singer and hymnist

“They sang at the top of their natural voices, which were rough, harsh, strident and shrill, but the majesty and beauty of the sound was undeniable. It was thrilling and enthralling.” --Shirley Collins

“Here, I thought, is a choral style ready-made for a nation of individualists.”--Alan Lomax

“The Sacred Songs Roll Like Thunder” reads the title of an article by Ted Strongin that appeared in the *“Chattanooga Times”* of September 20, 1959. The kind of singing the article described often leaves even the best writers grasping for words that do justice to it, but invoking the sound of thunder is a good start. Strongin was writing of a two-day meeting, or “convention,” of the United Sacred Harp Musical Association, held in Fyffe, Alabama, the previous weekend, that drew a few hundred singers ranging in age from 12 to 90, singing beloved hymns full bore all day long.

They were sight reading three and four part harmonies written in so-called “shape notes” from an oblong hymnal dubbed a “harp” more than century earlier, and singing in a tradition inextricably intertwined with the history of the country itself.

Some of its roots reach all the way back to England, and the Protestant Reformation, but the catalysts were 18th and early 19th Century New England hymnists, who despaired of the quality of congregational singing that they heard. They thought it well that everyone was singing God's praises together in church, not just trained professionals, though a little training was certainly in order.

To that end, systems of "shape notes" were devised, with the shape of notes on the staff signifying their relative pitch. When learning hymns, singers would first sound out the melody with the syllables "fa," "so," "la," and "me" that corresponded to the triangular, round, square and diamond shaped notes on the staff would then be able to sing assigned parts in a rough but adequate harmony.¹ The approach worked well, and blossomed in unexpected ways. People with no other musical education soon learned to sing three and four part harmonies, and elaborate arrangements were created for both old and new hymns that were enjoyable and satisfying to sing, and at times, even cathartic and thrilling.

After an initial burst of popularity in New England in the early 19th Century, the practice of singing from shape note hymnals made deep inroads in the rural south, and distinctive wider intervals and gapped scales became features of the songs. A particularly strong singing tradition grew up around the hymnal known as "The Sacred Harp," first published in 1844 by B.F. White of South Carolina and E.J. King of Georgia. In many areas, formal church services were only held once a month by circuit riding preachers, and a practice of community shape-note singing on the other Sundays took root. Larger scale "conventions" that often drew hundreds of singers took place in late summer and early fall, the "laying by time" between the planting and harvesting of crops. Sumptuous meals were served on the grounds during these events, and they provided unique and lasting fellowship for the attendees, becoming like gatherings of huge, extended families.

Conventions such as these often drew singers from great distances, and the tempo and pitch of a song were not fixed. When the assembled singers had found the hymn that had been called out, an experienced singer seated near the square would sing the tonic or first note of the song, and everyone in the room would pitch themselves relative to this. Following the leader's tempo, the singers would sing the sound out the melody in a *solfege* known familiarly as "fa-so-la." With the pitch and tempo thus fixed, they would sing the announced hymn, loudly, with great gusto and emotion. Singers used their natural voices with a minimum of vibrato, rather than the stylized *Bel Canto* vocal production of more corporate church traditions in England and Europe, created a powerful heterophonic blend of voices that reflected whatever combination of voices happened to be singing that day. Upon finishing, a few singers might exclaim "good!" or "fine!" and then turn to the next hymn.

Many of the hymns originated in England, the work of beloved hymnists such as Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts. The work of early American composers such as William

¹¹ A scale would be sung "fa, so, la, fa so, la, me." Later, systems that utilized seven distinct shapes that corresponded to the standard "do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do" solfege were used in other hymnals and singing traditions.

Billings and Daniel Read is also included, and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries the Sacred Harp, and other shape note hymnals went through various revisions, with songs being added, dropped and rearranged over time, including later compositions and traditions.

Though commercial 78 rpm recordings of shape notes hymns were made in the 1920s and 1930s, the tradition that had developed by then was above all a participatory one, and recordings were somewhat beside the point for singers. Folklorist and field recorder Alan Lomax had tried to document the “thunder” in 1942 for the Library of Congress, but his lone microphone and disc cutting machine was often overwhelmed by the loud, declamatory style of the singers, and could not fully capture the different vocal parts. Though the recordings were still powerful, and some were even released to the public on 78s and later an album, he left feeling that he had not done justice to a uniquely American tradition.

In 1959, Lomax had another opportunity to record Sacred Harp singing, thanks to a contract with Atlantic Records to produce a series of albums of southern field recordings. Armed with an early portable Ampex stereo reel-to-reel tape recorder and two RCA ribbon microphones, and assisted by English folksinger Shirley Collins, Lomax came to Fyffe to record the United Sacred Harp Musical Association’s 46th annual convention. The technical challenge was to record the four distinct parts that emanated from the four sections in which the singers sat, facing a square, from which the hymns were announced and led. Throughout the day, singers entered the square one by one to lead hymns, usually two, of their selection, which they called out by number. Some were dedicated to family or friends. In this way, most of the over 500 hymns in the book were sung over the two days.

Lomax and Collins arrived in the late morning of the second day. They recorded 32 hymns in the 90 minutes or so before the lunch break. Then, over the course of about five hours, a further 130 hymns were sung and recorded before the convention adjourned in the early evening.

While they are not the most famous of Alan Lomax’s field recordings, the impact of these recordings has been considerable, helping to strengthen and promote a tradition that might otherwise have drifted into history. In 1959, the tradition faced an uncertain future. There were still many singers and conventions, but the rural way of life that nurtured the tradition was beginning to wane, and showed few signs of taking root in urban areas.

Three hymns from the 1959 convention were included in Atlantic Records’ seven album series “Sounds of the South,” which included three hymns from the Sacred Harp. In 1962, the Prestige Folklore label released an entire album of 18 hymns recorded by Lomax and Collins in its “Southern Journey” series. A revised version of this album that included words and notation for the songs was released on vinyl by New World Records in 1977 and then on CD in 1992. In 1997, two full CDs with many previously unreleased

songs were released in Rounder Records' expanded reissue of the Southern Journey series.

These recordings, along with the appearance of Sacred Harp singers in numerous folk festivals and the advocacy of tireless advocates such as Hugh McGraw, one of the participating singers in 1959, led to a new popularity of the tradition not only in the south, but throughout the United States and overseas, and even among the otherwise non-religious. "In Sacred Union Join," a CD released in 2000, was drawn from recordings of the 1999 United Sacred Harp Musical Association, where the 1959 recordings and their impact were specifically celebrated by many of the still living singers and their descendants. The least expected result of all came in 2012 however, when Bruce Springsteen sampled a portion of the hymn "The Last Words of Copernicus" in his song "Death to My Hometown," on his album "Wrecking Ball."

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