

# BESSIE JONES



# GET IN UNION

*Bessie Jones with the Georgia Sea Island Singers and others  
Recordings by Alan Lomax, 1959-1966*

# TRACKS

01. Sheep Sheep Don't You Know the Road [1b]
02. You Better Mind [1a]
03. Plumb the Line [3]
04. O Day (Yonder Come Day) [1b]
05. Moses Don't Get Lost [1a]
06. Blow Gabriel [1a]
07. Got To Lie Down (How Shall I Rise) [3]
08. Sometimes [1a]
09. Shoo Turkey [3]\*
10. Gator [3]
11. Adam In the Garden [1a]
12. Daniel In the Lion's Den [1a]
13. Little David, Play On Your Harp [1a]
14. You Got to Reap Just What You Sow / Just A Little Talk With Jesus [4]
15. Go Wash In That Beautiful Stream [3]\*
16. How Much I Owe\* [3]
17. O Mary Don't You Weep [1a]
18. Throw Me Overboard [3]
19. Going To Chattanooga [3]
20. See Aunt Dinah [1b]
21. John Henry [3]
22. Sink 'Em Low [1b]
23. Diamond Joe [3]
24. Live Humble [1a]
25. Get In Union [1b]
26. Elephant Fair [3]
27. Uncle Ned [3]
28. That Suits Me [2]
29. Got On My Traveling Shoes [5]\*
30. No Hiding Place Down Here [3]
31. O Death [1a]
32. Dead and Gone [3]
33. Prayer [1a]
34. Sign of the Judgment [1a]
35. This Train Is A Clean Train [3]
36. The Devil Been to My House Today [3]\*
37. Turkle Dove [1b]
38. Beulah Land [2]
39. Let Me Fly [1b]
40. Walk Daniel [1a]
41. I'm Gonna Lay Down My Life for My Lord [1b]
42. Sandy Ree (Sangaree) [3]\*
43. Way Down Yonder In the Brickyard [3]
44. Bob Young's song and whoop [3]

45. Read 'Em, John [5]
46. Before This Time Another Year [5]
47. Once There Was No Sun [5]
48. There Was An Old Lady from Brewster [5]
49. Little Johnny Brown [5]
50. Prodigal Son [3]
51. Down to the Mire [3]\*
52. Take Me to the Water [6]
53. Drinking That Wine [6]
54. Once There Was No Sun [6]
55. One Morning Soon [6]
56. There Is More Love Somewhere [3]\*
57. Buzzard Lope [1a]
58. One of These Days (I) [1a]
59. One of These Days (II) [3]
60. Goodbye Everybody [3]\*

\*Previously unreleased.

## Personnel:

- [1a & 1b]. Georgia Sea Island Singers (not all singers, with the exception of Bessie Jones, sing on every performance): Joe Armstrong, George Cohen, Jerome Davis, John Davis, Peter Davis, Jerry Harris, Leola Harris, Bessie Jones, Viola McQueen, Henry Morrison, Willis Proctor, Ben Ramsey, Emma Lee Ramsey.
- [2]. John Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morrison, Alberta Ramsey, and Emma Lee Ramsey with Hobart Smith (vocal and banjo); Ed Young (fife); Nat Rahmings (drum).
- [3]. Bessie Jones.
- [4]. McKinley Peebles (vocal and guitar) and Bessie Jones.
- [5]. John Davis, Peter Davis, Mable Hillery, Bessie Jones, and Emma Lee Ramsey, with Rev. Gary Davis (vocal and guitar, "Shoes" and "Before This Time").
- [6]. Mable Hillery, Janie Hunter, Bessie Jones, and possibly Alberta Ramsey.

## BESSIE JONES : GET IN UNION

**A**lan Lomax first visited the Georgia Sea Island of St. Simons in June of 1935 with folklorists Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. There they met an ensemble called the Spiritual Singers Society of Coastal Georgia, organized two years earlier by Lydia Parrish (wife of painter Maxfield Parrish). Parrish had dedicated herself to preserving the spirituals, ring-plays, and shouts of the island's rich, isolated folk culture, with its roots running deep through the Antebellum South to West Africa. That summer, Barnicle, Hurston, and Lomax recorded several dozen sides of the Singers' sacred material for the Library of Congress, plus a handful of their tall tales and songs for work and play. Lomax later wrote that the Sea Islanders "kept to the speech of their ancestors and, in some places, still speak dialects in which many African words and syntactical features survive. Their folk and animal tales show a rich admixture of European and African traits at an early stage of blending. Their funeral customs, their religious ceremonies, indeed, their whole way of life bear the stamp of antebellum days. Yet this is no decadent culture. It has simply grown strong around a conservative base that is part pioneer, part planter gentility, and part African."



Returning to St. Simons in 1959, on the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, Alan found the islands much changed—through the rise of the tourist trade, a decline in rural occupations, and the departure of African Americans for northern cities. But the principals of the Spiritual Singers—Big John Davis (a former sailor and roustabout), fisherman Henry Morrison, and hack-driver and storekeeper Willis Proctor, the group's de facto leader—were still singing, and that they had been significantly enriched by a profound new element: Bessie Jones.

A singer and song-bearer of monumental proportions, Mary Elizabeth Smith Jones had been raised in Dawson, in South Georgia, in a large and deeply musical family. If someone couldn't sing, they played an instrument. She learned many of her songs from her mother, Julia—a dancer, singer, and autoharp player—and her step-grandfather, Jet Sampson. Sampson, who was born in Africa in 1836 and sold into slavery as a child, taught young Bessie about the slave experience and “the old ways.” With the further formative musical experiences of church, school, and social functions, she was steeped in song.

*I remember a hundred games, I suppose; I would say a hundred because there are so many of them. We had all kinds of plays; we had house plays, we had outdoor plays. Some of the plays have songs, some have just plays—you know, just acts or whatnot.... In my time coming up, the parents they would give quiltings and they would have songs they would sing while they were quilting and we would listen at those songs. And we would have egg crackings and taffy pullings and we would hear all those things—riddlesees and stories and different things. That's why I'm so loaded.... And then I has a great remembrance of those things, that's another thing about it.*



Jones' connection to the community on St. Simons Island was through her first husband, Cassius “Hatchet” Davis, John Davis' nephew, who died in 1926. Bessie spent the rest of the decade following Hatchet's death on an itinerant circuit, harvesting cotton in South and East Georgia and working odd jobs across coastal Florida—from taking

in laundry in the Keys to cooking in Miami to cultivating new ground on Marco Island. It being a few years before she would be born again in the Holiness Church, she gambled, sang the blues, and even made and sold moonshine. She met George Jones, who would become her second husband, in 1928; the pair then spent several seasons following the crops up the Eastern Seaboard from Florida to Bridgeport, Connecticut, and back. George had kin in Brunswick, Georgia, from which the St. Simons Island ferries departed (and which Bessie hated; she later recalled being overjoyed by the news, in 1924, that a causeway had been built), but when they stopped in to visit the Davises on St. Simons, Bessie recalled, Hatchet's family took George in "just like he was Cassius," and he convinced his wife to settle on the island.

Bessie was welcomed into the close-knit community of the Spiritual Singers Society. The twenty years since Lomax's last visit had given the Singers ample time to get their songs and dances in union with Jones' massive repertoire—one comprised, in Bess Lomax Hawes' words, "of the finest songs of the black tradition, songs that were so profound, true and compelling that they were adopted immediately by the [group]." (If there had ever been any hesitation, it was expressed only jokingly by Big John Davis, who later said of her: "Bessie can't shout, but she move just fine.") Alan recorded nearly sixty pieces from the group that fall, and he returned in April of 1960 for more recordings and interviews before bringing the singers to Williamsburg, Virginia, to provide music for a film recreating the diverse cultural moment that was the early colonial era. The Singers were teamed up with Bahamian drummer Nat Rahmings, who had traveled from Miami; Mississippi Hill Country fife-player Ed Young (then living in Memphis); and Blue Ridge multi-instrumentalist Hobart Smith from Saltville, Virginia. Lomax wrote of the session following the shoot:



*The musicians stayed on for what turned out to be a day of extraordinary music-making and musical cross-fertilization. The Sea Islands sang with slavery-era accompaniment: the fife, the one-headed drum, and a four-string, fretless banjo. Hobart Smith picked the bowl-shaped "slave" banjo with abandon, Ed Young blew thrilling litany phrases on his cane fife, and Nat Rahmings played a drum of a type once used on St. Simons and still played in the Bahamas. I cannot swear to the authenticity of this reconstructed music, but the musically conservative Sea Island singers gave it their enthusiastic approval.*

It was here in Williamsburg where Bessie recalled experiencing a "call to teach," as she told anthropologist John Stewart, co-author of her *For the Ancestors* autobiography.

*We went there to sing together, but God works in mysterious ways. Before we started they asked me to sing this lullaby for the baby's birthday; I think Lomax had told them how much I like children, I don't know. But when I got up, I said I was glad to do it because this is where my grandfather was brought up at, and that gave me a head to speak right there. When I said that, they stopped the beer right there, and everything, and I was getting ready to sing to the child, but wasn't nobody saying nothing. Then something told me, "You got to tell them everything in your mind." It was at the Queen's House. The waitress and manager just stood there 'cause nobody wasn't taking anything. They were looking straight at me.*

*I had already thought to myself that I wasn't going to be no Coastal Georgia Singers because that was a lot of them people. I had enough sense to know I couldn't ride on their names. If I did I'd have to sing like they did and do what they said do. And so, well, I answered, "Georgia Sea Island Singers." Sea Island is coastal too, so I didn't get off the water. There wasn't anybody in the room besides Lomax, his secretary [Dena Hirsch] and myself, and I named it Georgia Sea Island Singers.... There will be the Georgia Sea Island Singers as long as the children keep it up, even if after I'm dead and gone.*

The rest of her life would be shaped by this role: at once teacher, presenter, interpreter, and witness.

*It's great to me when I'm singing and can think to myself that I'm singing something I need to sing. And I think to myself when I'm singing something that my old foreparents and the other folks of that tribe along in those days knew, that if their spirits came around me, I believe they would be rejoicing.*

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Later in 1960, Lomax's St. Simons and Williamsburg recordings of the Singers appeared on LPs in Atlantic Records' Southern Folk Heritage Series and Prestige International's Southern Journey. Both credited a group rechristened as the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Bessie recalled being asked by Lomax, "What would you call yourself?"

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The Singers—like their champions Lydia Parrish, Alan Lomax, and his sister Bess Lomax Hawes—saw their group not just as a vehicle for preserving Southern black oral traditions but for teaching them. Over the course of three months between late Summer 1961 and the Spring of 1962, Lomax, his wife Antoinette, and Bessie Jones recorded over fifty hours of interviews, stories, and songs. And these weren't simply for documentation purposes; Alan and Bessie were devising a large-scale pedagogical project—teaching the old-time songs, plays, and lore of the black South to children and adults alike, all across the country; from extended workshops through UCLA (then and Yale (the latter through a Duke Ellington Fellowship) to morning plays with elementary-school students in Connecticut or Coastal Georgia.

They also worked up a formula for the Singers to become an independent touring group. (Although Jones told Stewart that Lomax first resisted this idea, insisting that she'd be better off as a solo artist, especially if she learned to play the guitar...). Throughout the 1960s and '70s, they made appearances at the Newport Folk Festival (1963), the Poor People's March on Washington (1968), and at Jimmy Carter's inauguration (1977), as well as on college campuses and at nightclubs like Los Angeles' Ash Grove. They were, however, ever mindful of their roles not just in presenting their traditions but representing them too. John Davis said as much to Bess Lomax, backstage at the Ash Grove, in 1963: "Singing in front of these people might change what we do, because of what they do. We need someone to let us know if we're changing the way we do things."

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**B**essie Jones was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1982, by which time she had given up touring, weakened by leukemia. She died in Brunswick, Georgia, on July 17, 1984.

In the introduction to the second edition of *Step It Down*, Bess Lomax Hawes wrote:

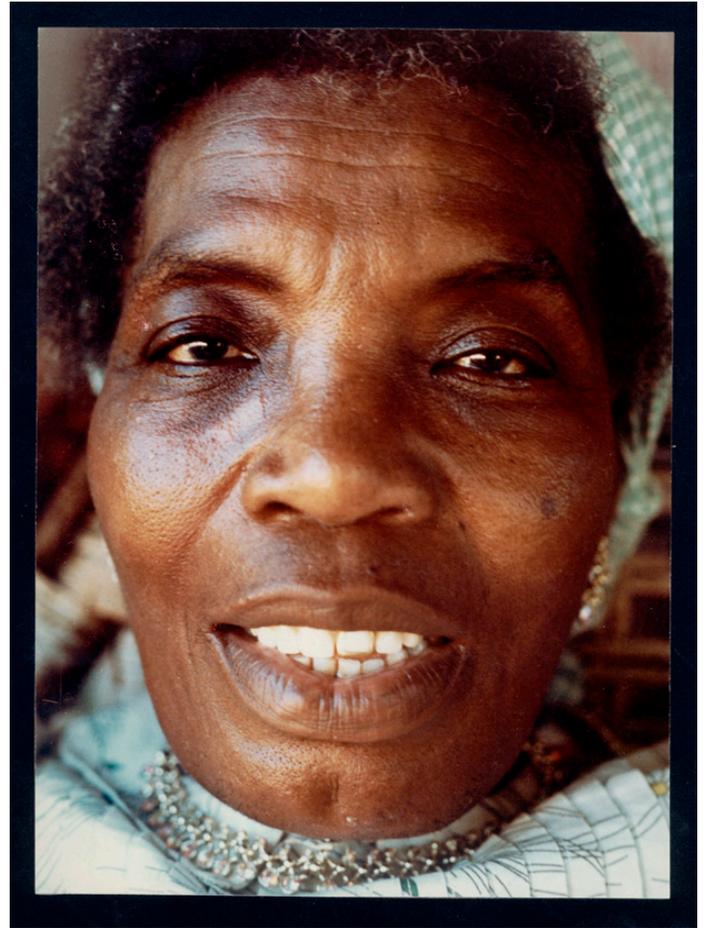
*There are more books to be written about Bessie Smith Jones, more explorations that should be mounted into the depth and range of her experience, her art, her determination to keep the faith with those who came before her, to keep on singing the songs the way they were supposed to be sung. We have not yet begun to learn all that she had to teach nor listened to all that she had to say.*

This set is merely an introduction to and an overview of the diversity of Bessie Jones' art (and that of her friends and colleagues in the Georgia Sea Island Singers), as

documented by Alan Lomax. For discussions of her profound religious faith, her devotion to the young and the elderly, and her commitment to and pride in her ancestors—these being the three primary animating forces in her life and her art—see *For the Ancestors: Autobiographical Recollections* (with John Stewart, 1983) and *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* (with Bess Lomax Hawes, 1972; 2nd ed., 1987).

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Glynn County, Georgia's "Golden Isles," have experienced dramatic changes. While not as exclusive as neighboring Sea Island, where the average single-family dwelling sells for over \$3 million and the 2004 G8 Summit was held, St. Simons has become exponentially more affluent than any of its farmers, fishermen, housekeepers, or cooks could have begun to imagine several decades ago. This seismic economic shift has also endangered much of the already fragile African American community on the island—its social networks, livelihoods, and historic sites. In 2000, a group called the St. Simons African-American Heritage Coalition was established by a group of citizens concerned with the dissolution of their traditional ways of life at the hands of unscrupulous developers and the concomitant spike in property taxes. In addition to agitating for sound historical preservation and economic development that would benefit all of the island's residents, the Heritage Coalition organizes an annual Georgia Sea Island Festival that celebrates the storied African-American history of St. Simons and the other Sea Islands. At the time of this writing, Bessie Jones' former daughter-in-law Frankie Sullivan Quimby serves as its director.



# on THE sessions

Alan Lomax's 1959 and 1960 sessions with the Georgia Sea Island Singers, held in St. Simons Island, Ga. [1a & 1b], and Williamsburg, Va., in 1960 [2], are discussed above, and comprise much of "Get In Union." The set, however, has provided us with the opportunity to present for the first time a number of recordings from Lomax's later sessions with Bessie Jones.

[3] None of the fifty hours of tape Lomax and his wife Antoinette Marchand recorded with Bessie in 1961 and 1962 was intended for release. The songs therein were casual performances interspersed among childhood recollections, biblical exegesis, ghost stories, herbal healing tips, and were punctuated by car horns and assorted urban ambience. The sixteen pieces included here are among the more effective of those she sang for the Lomaxes over those months, and provide particularly evocative evidence of the breadth of her repertoire.

[4] Nothing is known about Lomax's meeting with McKinley Peebles, in New York City, in late 1961, in the midst of Alan's sessions with Bessie Jones, although it's presumed that they were introduced by Peebles' friend and busking colleague, Gary Davis. Peebles was a native of Tidewater Virginia who had made a record for the Paramount label in 1926 under the name Sweet Papa Stovepipe. After the Second World War, he relocated to New York City, where he could frequently be seen playing parks and street corners from the Village to Harlem. Under the guise of "Reverend" McKinley Peebles he would perform sacred songs, often as a duo with Rev. Davis. When he sang two of these numbers for Lomax, Bessie stepped in to provide harmonies.

[5] Stranger is that very little is known about the August 1965 concert presented by the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park, and billed as a celebration of Southern African-American traditional music and its antebellum echoes. Organized and MC'd by Lomax, the event provided urban audiences a window into the black South at the height of the Civil Rights struggle. It featured Ed Young and the Southern Fife and Drum Corps; Gary Davis; and the Georgia Sea Island Singers (John Davis, Emma Lee Ramsey, Mable Hillery, Peter Davis, and Bessie Jones), all of whom improvised collaborative performances on stage.

[6] The Singers didn't perform at the 1966 Newport festival but Bessie was in attendance with her colleagues Mable Hillery and Alberta Ramsey, as well as the singer and storyteller Janie Hunter from Johns Island, South Carolina. The several songs they sing together here were likely arranged, albeit casually, for the benefit of Lomax, who, with a crew, was filming that year's festival.

The entirety of these sessions are available for streaming through the Online Archive of the Association for Cultural Equity at [research.culturalequity.org](http://research.culturalequity.org).

# CREDITS

Recorded by Alan Lomax, 1959–1962, 1965, and 1966.

Compiled and annotated by Nathan Salsburg.

Text by Anna Lomax Wood and Nathan Salsburg.

Color portrait of Bessie Jones by Diana Davies, 1966. Used courtesy of the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution.

Other photos by Alan Lomax.

Layout by Kiki Smith-Archiapatti.

Mastered by Timothy Stollenwerk, Stereophonic Mastering; additional mastering by Nathan Salsburg.

Recordings and photos by Lomax from the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

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