

UNITED SACRED HARP CONVENTION

THE ALAN LOMAX RECORDINGS, 1959



Introduction.

Alan Lomax's recordings of the 56th annual convention of the United Sacred Harp Musical Association in Fyffe, Alabama, were the first made of four-part "fa-so-la" singing in stereo. Lomax had, as he later wrote, "tried and failed, as had many others, to record this music monaurally" at the Sacred Harp Singing Society of Birmingham, Alabama, in 1942 — a collaboration with the pioneering shape-note scholar George Pullen Jackson. In '59 he hoped to "finally do justice to [its] haunting beauty." Over the course of the two-day convention, nearly two hundred songs, memorial lessons, and prayers passed over the heads of his two-track Ampex recorder, with Alan's notations filling the margins of his notebook: "stately," "militant," "lively," "marvelous," "fascinating performance," "exciting sound," "wonderful sound."

Selections from the Fyffe convention were first issued on "All Day Singing From 'The Sacred Harp'," the seventh volume in the Prestige International label's twelve-volume "Southern Journey" series of Lomax's 1959-1960 recordings. That record identified the song leaders but referred to the convention attendees as "The Alabama Sacred Harp Singers," an identification that was first used in 1928 on the two Columbia records cut by an assemblage of singers under the direction of J.C. Brown and Whitt Denson. That handle suggested and has come to be misinterpreted as a cohesive singing ensemble that "performed" under that name. Most Sacred Harp singings, however, are not performative; for many participants — and certainly for most of those whom Lomax recorded in 1959 — singings provide an opportunity for worship, fellowship, and paying tribute to departed family and friends. A number of shape-note-singing groups, in addition to that of Brown-Denson, appeared on commercially released records in the pre-war recording era (the first being the Original Sacred Harp Choir in 1922; the most prolific being J.T. Allison's Sacred Harp Singers in 1927 and '28) and many have made appearances over the years in folk and heritage-festival contexts, but these shouldn't be confused with the singing, like the one at Fyffe, as a social and religious event.

*Lomax was, however, ultimately dissatisfied with two-track stereo's capacity for capturing Sacred Harp singing in all of its breadth and depth, and in 1982 he visited North Georgia's Holly Springs Convention with a six-person video-crew and eight-track tape machine.

From Alan Lomax's introduction to "White Spirituals from The Sacred Harp: The Alabama Sacred Harp Convention," New World Records, 1977:

Listeners may be surprised to learn that the fiery choral sound recorded here comes not from somewhere in southern Russia or the Caucasus but from a rural white singing convention in northern Alabama. Even more astonishing is the fact that the hundred-odd farmers, country lawyers, tradesmen, and their wives and children, were sight-singing from printed scores composed in some cases by members of the chorus. They were using *The Sacred Harp*, a compendium of 573 four-part folk hymns, which has been the bible of the southern rural singing-school movement since 1840. During the 1940s I had tried and failed, as had many others, to record this music monaurally. In 1959 I returned to the South with a modern-day stereo machine, hoping that with this equipment I could finally do justice to the haunting beauty of Southern congregational singing, black and white. My old friends invited me to a weekend singing convention in a country church in Fyffe, a village in the low red hills of Northeastern Alabama. When we [Lomax and his assistant, the English singer Shirley Collins] arrived at ten o'clock that summer Saturday morning the singing had been in progress for an hour, and it went steadily on until lunchtime, when all adjourned to the long picnic tables set up under the post oak trees. Lunch was fried chicken, ham, potato salad, hot biscuits and compone, and every kind of cake and pie known to the cooks of Northern Alabama. I think the congregation enjoyed seeing us stuff ourselves almost as much as they did our struggles to mike their lively triple-forte choralizing. They were kindly, rural folk, whose summer recreation is to meet and sing together from *The Sacred Harp*.

Promptly at two o'clock the chairman formally called the convention to order again. The school assembled in the nave of the church—about forty people in rows around four sides of a hollow square, both sexes and all ages in each group—with a participating audience of about sixty in the pews. The committee had already made a list of song leaders, containing the name of every experienced singer present; and the chairman now called the first conductor into the center of the square of singers, each of whom had a copy of *The Sacred Harp* in hand. The conductor immediately called out the page number of his first hymn, and in seconds every singer had found the page, an oldster had sung the tonic pitch and the conductor, with vigorous straight movements of his right arm, had launched his scholars in a sol-fa rendition of the tune. Following the easy path of the shaped notes, they rehearsed the tune, and then, without a pause, sang the verses of the hymn, all four parts at full volume — generally in quick time — right to the final note. There was no sentimental ending, and no time to reflect before the next song was called for, located, pitched, rehearsed, and quickly caroled, and another leader summoned. Matters proceeded so briskly that in one day a hundred songs had been performed, and before the weekend was over all the favorites in the book had been heard, and everyone, down to the children, had conducted a set.

There was much changing of sides and parts as the session wore on, for every well-practiced Sacred Harper knows all the parts of all the songs in the book and can function on any side of the square. All conducted capably, but when one of the old-timers stepped before his scholars, he carried them with more swing. Yet there were no stars, just as there was no prettying up of the voice. The atmosphere was totally democratic, all participants displaying confidence in their natural voices, each adding his own embellishments and variations to the written part. The combination of musical skill and passionate individualism creates a thrilling choral texture, far from the studied polish of a classically admired blend, but nonetheless an original and fascinating way of performing counterpoint. The effect is not just of four individualized parts but of two-score emotion-filled variations on them. I wondered if this was not the way much early European polyphony was originally sung, before the singers were drilled and subdued. Here, I thought, is a choral style ready-made for a nation of individualists.

The meeting at Fyffe was intensely moving. The voices of the speakers trembled with feeling. One old gentleman told me, as he slapped his palm down on his songbook, "I believe that every living word in that there book is as true as gospel." The convention ended with a memorial service for members who had passed away since the last meeting, and in the closing moments tears coursed down sunburned cheeks. The Sacred Harp folk feel they belong to a big family that will someday be singing its harmony with the angels.

From an impromptu on-camera commentary by Lomax, shot during the 1982 Holly Springs Sacred Harp Convention, Holly Springs, Georgia:

Northwest Europe, and that includes the Anglo-American tradition, has the most durable collection of four-square melodies — four, eight, or six-phrase melodies — of any area we know about in the world. These melodies are so attractive, and they're so powerful, many of them go back at least 500 or 600 years, certainly in manuscripts, and many of them at least 1000 years. They've been reused for dance songs, work songs, love ballads, hymns, and then the hymns turning into love songs and dance tunes again. That's happened in Sacred Harp tradition — many of the Sacred Harp melodies are old-fashioned square dance tunes that once were sung as hymns and before that as ballads again. We've heard versions of "Barbara Allen" today; we've heard — one of the most powerful songs is "Wondrous Love." That goes... "Oh what wondrous love is this, oh my soul, oh my soul" was once sung. "My name is Captain Kidd as I sail, as I sail." A ballad about one of the great pirates; came out of England. But before that, that tune was sung as a love song, and as a witching song. These clear four-square melodies have been so satisfying to the people of these misty British islands and nearby Scandinavia and Western France that they've been satisfied to have that and almost nothing else in their repertory. They didn't have a whole lot of musical instruments; they didn't have an enormously complex choral tradition, as they did in Germany. But there were these spots where there was singing in harmony: in Southern England, in Cornwall, in Wales, and in the western part in Britain, there was singing in harmony. And that tradition, which flowered in the music of Bach — that choral tradition which is sort of North-Central European has been kept alive in this Sacred Harp stuff, and nowhere else in the United States. It's very old, this singing; this way of singing harmony. It's exciting that it is multi-melodic and each of the parts is an old-fashioned West European song, like "Barbara Allen" or "The Braes of Balquhidder," or like "Captain Kidd," or like "Soldiers' Joy." And it's that passion for melody that's so important in the British-American tradition is alive here, and I suppose the Sacred Harp book is one of the great collections of West European melody — that includes things that came out of the Reformation and in the three or four hundred years since that. And then it's set to the poetry of the great religious poets: Isaac Watts, and John Wesley, and then Daniel Read, and then many others who came along after them. And who — we have to remember that these Reformation people were not just casual religious rebels. They were political as hell; they were fighters for freedom. And they were fighting for the kind of democracy that's represented in the Sacred Harp meeting, where everybody has a vote, where everybody gets to sing, where everybody gets included and where nobody can outdo anybody else. The West European fellowship community is so superbly represented in this.

And, well, the other big thing of course, is the relation of the single individual to all eternity. You know, I think the most extraordinary thing that happened to our ancestors when we landed here was the fact that the authority of the established church was broken. And that was almost more important than the political revolution: every jug was on its own bottom, spiritually as well as politically and economically. Every man had his own personal relationship to God, to heaven, to morality — he was responsible for himself. And Americans took this burden first. This was what made their faces so flinty. This is why they had to have such a strong and rigid morality. That's what made it possible for them to go as individuals and in small groups across the Appalachians into the unknown, and survive as human beings, and establish quiet, orderly communities as single families. They could carry the whole culture on their own shoulders. This was the first group of people who'd ever done this in all of history. Before, you know, West Europeans had their pagan festivals; they had their Christmas, they had their Easter, they had all sorts of community festivities. But these people were shorn of all that, and they had just their relationship to their own life purpose and to God, and that iron is so clear in these songs. I think that's part of the reason for the tragic character of these songs — the individual's sense that he's totally responsible for his own destiny. And all of the people I've seen here today, they have that burden and that privilege. That's one of the things that makes the men so damn happy! They're saying, "We're really men!" You know? And our ancestors were men and could not just face danger, but face God without an intervening religious structure, without an established church to help them. I think that's in this thing too. [George Pullen] Jackson said this, you know. I think he the first person that saw it...

I think that the result of all these factors that we've been talking about... that these people are of Welsh origin with a Welsh musical style; others are really Irish with the Irish blas — the Irish ability to embellish — and others, four-square singers from Aberdeenshire and others; Cornishmen with the bosky, sweet harmonies of Southern England. All these things are blended into the Sacred Harp singing book and singing fraternity. They have put together the whole of Britain. You know, Britain is a culture of many cultures, but all those cultures were melded together in the Appalachians and in the square dance and in the religious music, particularly in The Sacred Harp. It sums them all up; it contains them all, and that takes a long time. It took 150 years and was a work of tremendous genius by the people who did it. And you feel it all shimmering in this magnificent music ... and the result is that we have an American music that matches the best singing of Eastern Europe. It's as wild and splendid and full-bodied and multi-parted and multi-dimensional as the music of the Ukraine or Macedonia or the music of the Caucasus where I suppose the greatest of all polyphonic choral music resides. And I think that the sound that we recorded today will simply knock the hats off the Russians when they hear it! And seeing their faces: these people look like a whole bunch of Russian peasants singing their religious songs and the sound isn't too different. There's that too, which is so incredible. That the whole thing could have balled itself up in all this; that the Reformation and Scots-Irish and Cornwall and Lord knows what else could have produced for us a music that's the match of any polyphonic music in the world. That's what Sacred Harp is for American culture. And I think that someday, not too far, we'll have thousands of Americans singing it. Hundreds of thousands! Look what happened to bluegrass! I mean, after all, the banjo was just hanging on the wall forty years ago. Nobody played the banjo. The banjo is an everyday American [past]time, beautifully played. The thing is that it's harder to learn how to sing. It'll take longer with this.

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