

Georgia Sea Island Songs

New World Records 80278

by Alan Lomax

Along the east coast of the United States from Maryland to Florida is a chain of low, often wooded and fertile islands separated from the mainland by marshes and bays and reachable only by boats that thread through shallows. On these islands, remnants of past ways of life have lingered on into the present. Old English dialects and ballads survive in Maryland and North Carolina, and the blacks of the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia remember the speech, the tales, and the music that their ancestors developed on their encounter with Europeans. Through the Sea Island lore runs the positive, life-giving current of black style, for in these communities the African cultural heritage was least changed.

The islands near Charleston, Savannah, and Brunswick (off which St. Simons lies) were the site of large, rich plantations, in which slavery reached its peak of productivity. The warm and humid marshland, which produced bumper crops of rice, was far more unhealthy for British settlers than for their black slaves, who were accustomed to the tropics and relatively immune to its diseases. Moreover, the blacks, with their African experience as riverine fishermen, rice growers, and tropical gardeners, were prepared for life in the Sea Islands, while the white colonists were not. Even in the days of slavery the white population was sparse in the area; it was not uncommon for a plantation with six or seven hundred slaves to have no more than one or two whites living on it.

In spite of the efforts of reformers and critics, plantation owners were afraid to allow their slaves to receive education or religious instruction. Left to themselves, the blacks reconstituted their African culture. speaking Creole English, whose style, syntax, and vocabulary show marked ties to Africa, and continuing a strongly African nonverbal culture in music, dance, and interaction pattern. Since people from various tribes were mixed on the plantations, these nonverbal traditions cannot be attributed to any single tribe or area. They are, rather, pan-African or pan-West Central African. since these were the zones the slaves were taken from. Melville Herskovits in his book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958) has shown how much of the total shape of African culture survived in the New World.

This pan-African southern-black folklore, the product of the black collective, arose in the squalor and isolation of the slave barracks and work gangs. Yet, although the slaves lived under degrading conditions, they were neither demoralized nor degraded. Both their reminiscences and their lore show them to have been a healthy and positive people in spite of slavery. The reasons, I believe, are that they shared a rewarding African cultural heritage, that they faced a common oppressor, and that as creative human beings they were constantly inventing and remaking a new lifestyle out of their experience in this new environment and in contact with a number of European, African, and Caribbean cultures.

Open to naval attack, the Sea Islands were occupied by Union troops early in the Civil War. Black regiments were formed, and many island blacks had the opportunity to fight for their own freedom. One of their officers, Bostonian Colonel Higginbotham, heard his black recruits sing the hitherto unknown spirituals. Through his published account of these songs, the North became aware of the profound creativity of the people for whose liberation they were sacrificing treasure and life. In the

published and arranged spirituals the world could perceive the African soul at work, transmuting the values of the Christian tradition into a fresh and touching lyricism. What the printed page could not convey was the truly African pattern that shaped the performances of the spirituals, a style characterized by constant overlapping, part crossing, and polyrhythms between leader and chorus by clapped accompaniment, by improvisation, syncopation, and shifting vocal qualities, and yet by marvelous concert.

This style continued to thrive in a remarkably pure form on the Sea Islands because, after the Civil War, much of the land was turned over to the ex-slaves. They fished and gathered oysters and shrimp in the bayous; they gardened and farmed. Sometimes they went to the mainland to work as stevedores, but they preferred to remain in their own communities, where folk custom adjudicated by their own leaders could settle most disputes and where they could develop their own way of life. As a consequence, customs tales, and music of the islands represent black American folklore in its pristine state. (The lore closely resembles that of the Bahama Islands. During the American Revolution many Royalist planters from the Sea Islands fled with their slaves to the Bahamas. Bahamian folk music is in a very real sense the foster child of the Sea Islands.)

Lydia (Mrs. Maxfield) Parrish, wife of the painter, had much to do with the authenticity of the songs in this collection. After she settled on St. Simons Island she spent many years collecting the native songs and working for their preservation (see Bibliography). She sponsored the formation of a society of the best singers and dancers, the Spiritual Singers of Georgia, whose members each received a button distinguishing him or her as a “Star Chorister” and signified that he or she was a folk singer and dancer in the old tradition. The regular meetings and performances of this group afforded an opportunity for the best singers on the island to continue their art and to keep alive a remarkable body of songs and an even more remarkable musical style, very African in character. I first heard them when I visited St. Simons in 1935, in the company of Zora Neale Hurston, the great black folklorist, who had worked with Mrs. Parrish. When I returned twenty-five years later with a stereo rig adequate to record this multipart music, I was greeted as an old friend. During that visit I recorded Group A (as designated in the notes that follow), led by surviving members of the original island singers, Joe Armstrong and Willis Proctor.

In 1961 I went back to the island looking for musicians to perform the black music in a film about Colonial Williamsburg and then recorded the songs performed by Group B. After the picture was shot, members of its folk-music cast stayed on for an extra day, and the islanders had the opportunity to sing with the sort of accompaniment the slaves sometimes had—a cane fife, a one-headed drum of the type still used in the Bahamas, and a reconstructed fretless, bowl-shaped “slave” banjo, played with abandon, and with the total approval of the black cast, by white Hobart Smith. I cannot swear to the authenticity of this reconstructed music, but there can be no question that the conservative Sea Island singers enthusiastically approved of it. These performances are designated as Group C.

These stalwart singers determined to somehow take their heritage to the people, especially the black people of the United States—as Bessie Jones put it, to “teach the chillun.” Mrs. Jones came for a long stay with me, and we worked together for months on problems of presentation. I prepared a flyer and circulated it to twenty friendly colleges across the country. When bookings came, we spent days working out how the songs should be introduced and presented and how the group—the Sea

Islands Singers, composed now of Big John Davis, the community leader; Bessie Jones, song leader; Peter Davis, bass; Henry Morrison, Emma Ramsay, and Mable Hillary—could stay together under the pressure of national tours. They decided that there was to be no star but that performance time, credit, and money were to be equally and publicly shared and that no single member was to book a concert without the permission of the whole group. This decision kept the group together for a decade of concertizing all over the country with no loss in authenticity. Their most prized experience was as staff culture-workers for the whole of the Poor People's March in Washington, where they taught their music to many thousands of other blacks.

The work of these Sea Island Singers has now unhappily come to an end. John Davis, Henry Morrison, Emma Ramsay, Mable Hillary, and Bessie Jones are all deceased. However, their spirit remains as each August the Georgia Sea Island Festival, dedicated to their memory, is held in St. Simons, Georgia.

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Spirituals

Religion in black Africa involves the active worship of high gods—the creators of the universe—and of a pantheon of lesser immortals and ancestral spirits who control such elemental forces as fire and water and sex and are ever-present participants in the affairs of their worshipers and descendants. Elaborate feasts, group singing of praise songs, drumming, and vigorous erotic dancing invite the deities to manifest themselves in the bodies of the congregants. The gods, having possessed the chosen ones, eat, drink, dance, make merry, and, it is hoped, advise the apprehensive, heal the sick, admonish the wicked, and bring good fortune. This vital religious tradition has taken many forms in the black communities of the New World. In Brazil, where the tradition was least disturbed, Yoruba cults preserve songs and ceremonials in a pure African form. The *voudun* cults of the Caribbean continue the whole style of worship, including sacred drumming, sacrifice, and trance possession by specific spirits, but in an acculturated form and using Creole languages; here the music is clearly African in style, though the melodies have a regional color. In the black folk religion of the United States, acculturation has gone even further; the language, ideas, and melodism of Protestantism have been adopted along with the English language, but the shape of the service and of the songs, with their focus on group participation, rhythmic activity, and possession (shouting and getting happy), persists. Anyone who wishes may participate in one of these moving Afro-American religious experiences by visiting one of the Holiness or Sanctified churches found in most black communities.

The southern slaves could not reestablish their own religions because drums, large assemblies, and African languages were interdicted. The slaves were usually forbidden to read and allowed only limited access to the religion to which they had been summarily converted. They nonetheless made a great deal out of the scraps of Christian learning they had. Everywhere they held praise meetings, often in secret, where they created songs that voiced their anguish and their hopes in cryptic words whose meaning they, not their masters, understood. At this time frontier America was on fire with the New Awakening, rejoicing in the break with the established church and in each man's freedom to seek salvation on his own. This libertarian religious fervor had a very different significance to the

enslaved and oppressed blacks. Going to heaven—crossing the River Jordan—to them meant freedom from slavery and from endless toil. Their conversion cleansed them of a burden of hate and doom that was otherwise crushing. Beaten and tormented, they identified with the sufferings of Jesus and of the children of Israel and adopted as their own the heroes of the Old Testament—Moses, Joshua, David, Ezekiel—who had won victories against impossible odds, with God on their side.

Like the religious praise songs of Africa and the Caribbean, their spirituals invoke the powerful names of the biblical heroes in a context of ecstasy and veiled allusion. The earliest type (like “Kneebone,” “Daniel,” and “Read 'Em, John”) demands that the worshiper “shout”—that is, dance his praise in a prescribed fashion leading to trance. The older shouts were dramatic; the dancers flapped their arms to imitate angels' wings or held out their hands as if reading from Bibles, like John the Revelator. The whole performance was extremely African in style. The participants danced in a loose circle, counterclockwise, in tight rhythmic coordination but not in unison, each one improvising in his own way on the movement pattern. They leaned forward facing the earth, knees bent (“gimme the kneebone bend”), feet flat to the floor, moving in a sliding, shuffling step, seldom lifting and never crossing their feet. Foot crossing—the prominent trait of European dance—was regarded as sinful and was forbidden in the “shout” or sacred dance of the blacks.

All dancers clapped and sang, their voices breaking out in individualized but familiar patterns of rhythm, melody, and changing vocal quality that complemented the lead. The short-phrased leader-chorus form, so typical of Africa, invited total participation and permitted endless experiments in syncopation, in brief tonal and rhythmic comment, in textual improvisation. During the service the performances ran long, ten minutes to an hour, so that the brief melodies and their shifting polyrhythmic and polyparted support received a high polish before people sang and danced themselves out or got happy and shouted all over the church. Just as the singers were not restricted to one tonal quality but could play over the whole range of vocal qualities (moaning, cooing, sobbing, growling, and so on), so the dances were not limited to repetitive movement but could break out into brief, surprising improvisations. Yet the whole group was united in its strict adherence to the beat of the feet on the floor and the orchestra of hands.

This special amalgam of primitive Christianity and African religious style gave the blacks a feeling of unity, of hope, at times even of joy, in spite of slavery and its aftermath in Reconstruction. It also produced a large body of noble and touching songs probably unmatched for singability and worldwide popularity. They came from a people generally regarded in that period as ignorant, uncouth, and hopelessly miserable. A good many were created on St. Simons Island by the ancestors of these singers and are still sung there beneath the moss-hung live oaks.

Track 1

Moses

John Davis, leader; Peter Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morrison, and Willis Proctor. Group B.

I asked John Davis if he knew “Go Down, Moses,” and he replied, scornfully, “Why, everybody know that. Here's one everybody *don't* know.” He looked down. The silence gathered. Then he began to sing in a hoarse whisper, as if he was talking in a graveyard hideout of run-away slaves. His text is full of the cryptic language of the freedom movement: Harriet Tubman and other

“conductors” on the Underground Railway were called Moses; the chariot was a symbol of escape into heaven and at times of the Underground Railway; horses running, the heavenly river rolling, and the angels moaning presaged rebellion or war. None of this was made specific by John and Peter and the other singers, but they seemed to voice it. In no other song they sang was there so much passionate assenting-groans and aha's from Peter's bass, cooing approval from the tenor, moaning in the background when the angels were moaning. For me this is the spiritual at its noblest, black singing style at its finest; and I am certain that everything was completely improvised in a performance that arose immediately in response to my query.

Moses, Moses, don't you let King Pharaoh overtake you,
In some lonesome graveyard.

Hm, hm, I hear the chariot comin', (3 times)
In some lonesome graveyard.

Moses, Moses, I hear the horses runnin', (3 times)
In some lonesome graveyard.

Hm, hm, I hear Jordan rollin', (3 times)
In some lonesome graveyard.

Mother, mother, don't you let your daughter condemn you, (3 times)
In some lonesome graveyard.

Hm, hm, I hear the angels moaning, (3 times)
In some lonesome graveyard.

Jordan, Jordan, let the children over, (3 times)
In some lonesome graveyard.

Track 2

Kneebone

Joe Armstrong, leader; Bessie Jones, Jerome Davis, John Davis Peter Davis, Henry Morrison, Willis Proctor, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

Joe Armstrong was the oldest (and in many ways the best) of all the Sea Island singers I met. He had a strange and honeyed way of releasing a pitch, lowering it slightly and softening it as the other singers chimed in under him, one part after another, while the clapping hands wove together layers of crossed rhythms. Armstrong was ninety when he recorded this, yet his voice rings clear and true in the oldest, the most African of the Sea Island songs. Parrish says there was another version for rowing, where the oarsmen bent to their knees. When this song was performed as a shouting spiritual, the singers bent their knees to lower themselves toward the ground—a piece of choreography that is characteristically African. In fact, this seems to be a pagan piece, invoking the

bones of the ancestors, calling them morning and evening, then ceremonially requiring the worshipers to bend their knees to the earth in the traditional African gesture.

Kneebone in the mornin',
Ah-ah, kneebone,
Bend my kneebone to the ground,
O Lord, kneebone bend.

Kneebone, didn't I tell you,
Ah, kneebone,
Kneebone, didn't I tell you,
O Lord, kneebone bend.

Kneebone, didn't I call you,
Ah-ah, kneebone,
Kneebone, didn't I call you,
O Lord, kneebone bend.

I call you in the mornin',
Ah, kneebone,
Call you in the evenin',
O Lord, kneebone bend.

Bend my kneebone to the ground,
Ah, kneebone
Bend my kneebone to the ground,
O Lord, kneebone bend.

Kneebone, Zacharias,
Oh, kneebone
Kneebone,
O Lord, Kneebone bend.

Kneebone, didn't I call you,
Oh, kneebone,
Kneebone, didn't I call you,
O Lord, kneebone bend.

I call you in the mornin', *etc*
Bend my kneebone to the ground, *etc*
Kneebone, Zacharias, *etc. (Repeat)*
See here, didn't I call you, *etc*
Call you in the mornin', *etc*
Bend my kneebone to the ground, *etc*

Bend my kneebone to the ground,
Ah, kneebone,
Kneebone in the momin'
O Lord, kneebone bend.

Kneebone, Zacharias,
Ah, kneebone,
Kneebone, Zacharias,
O Lord, kneebone bend.

Track 3

Sheep, Sheep, Don't You Know the Road

Bessie Jones, leader; John Davis, Peter Davis, Henry Morrison, and Willis Proctor. Group B.

Bessie Jones, the leader of the many churches she has helped to build, sings this spiritual with great drive and right *at* the listener, with the clear intention of converting the unconverted. In true African style the path for the sheep into the fold of the church is laid out in images of sound—the playing (improvising and syncopating) of the song, the chanting of prayers, the sound of rhythmically marching or dancing feet, the clapped polyrhythms. In this performance clapping begins simply but takes on great tension as the piece gets under way and Bessie's friends lay in their voice parts. So far as I know this spiritual was never previously recorded.

Leader: Sheep, sheep, don'tcha know the road?

Group: Yes, my Lord, I know the road. (*Repeat 2 lines*)

L: Don'tcha know the road by the playin' of the song?

C: Yes, my Lord, I know the road.

L: Don'tcha know the road by the singin' of the song?

C: Yes, my Lord, I know the road.

L: Don'tcha know the road by the prayin' of the prayers?

C: Yes, my Lord, I know the road. (*Repeat 2 lines*)

L: Sheep, sheep, *etc.*

L: Don'tcha know the road by the marchin' on home? *etc.*

A pause, then Sheep, sheep, *etc.*

L: Don'tcha know the road by the clappin' of his hands? *etc.*

L: Now, young sheep, don'tcha know the road? *etc.*

L: Don'tcha know the road by the prayin' of the prayers? *etc.*

L: Sheep, sheep, don'tcha know the road? *etc.*

Track 4

Live Humble

John Davis, leader; Bessie Jones, Jerome Davis, Peter Davis, Joe Armstrong, Henry Morrison, Willis Proctor, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

Sung by John Davis with the same fervor he injected into his favorite social diversion, discussing and arguing Bible doctrine, as far as he knew it. The early black religionist was often totally or nearly illiterate, for plantation owners did not encourage slaves to learn to read. The first black preachers picked up what they could by ear at the meetings they were permitted to attend and from what they could spell out of the Bible itself. Men have told me they could read, but only one book, the Bible. Such men, however, endowed with the great oratorical gifts of the African and inspired by the message of consolation and hope that Christianity had for their people, created an oral folk religion where the stories of the Old Testament were dramatized in vivid and touching language and the prophetic books were given a fresh moral significance. Often these sermons were sung or half chanted, with the congregation joining in on the chorus. This is one such, perhaps garbled in spots, but carrying us back to some long-ago Sunday when an inspired minister composed this religious poem asking his congregation to wait a little longer till the freedom bell rang for them.

Chorus

Live humble, humble,
Humble yourself, the bell done rung.
(Humble yourself.)
Live humble, humble,
Humble yourself, the bell done rung.

The bell done rung, the angel done sung,
The Lord done brought our hearts and tongue, m'mh—
I wonder what-uh Satan keep a-grumplin' 'bout,
He chain' in Hell uh-where he can't get out.

The Lord come along about the birth a' day,
He took the little baby and put his soul away.
You'd best live humble, you'd best live mild,
You'd best live like-uh some true-born child.
The windin' sheet is gonna win' us in,
A coffin lid is gonna hold us fast.
I was standin' at the sea of glass,
The sea of glass stood a magnifier,
I'm gonna join God's heavenly choir,
The Lord gonna raise my voice on higher,
Cryin', (*Chorus*)

The bell done rung, the angel done sung,
The Lord done brought our hearts and tongue.
It was something like Jericho wall,
Away on the island the water fall.

Zion' children got trouble in mind,
A-how long it rain now, cal) you tell?
Forty long day's and nights it fell,
The water got 'long about the sill of the do',
They all went up into the upper flo'.
The water got 'long about the roof of the house,
They heist the window and they all pitch out,
Cryin', (*Chorus*)

Well, the bell done rung, the angel done sung,
The Lord done brought our hearts and
tongue.
God sent Jonah to Ninevey Land,
Jonah went a contrary course,
The captain on the vessel got trouble in mind,
He say, "Go down, sailors, and search the deck,
Jest see can't you find no sleeper there."
The sailor went down about the lowermost deck there,
They found ol' Jonah there fast asleep,
He said, "Wake up, Jonah, wake up, man,
My God-a-mighty gonna 'stroy the lan'," *Cryin', (Chorus)*

Track 5

Daniel

Willis Proctor, leader; Bessie Jones, Jerome Davis, John Davis, Peter Davis, Joe Armstrong, Henry Morrison, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

The next oldest of the singers, Willis Proctor, was for many years the acknowledged leader of the Sea Island singers. Daniel, whose faith in the Lord brought him safe out of the lions' den, was a favorite of black preachers and songmakers. This is an early praise song in his honor, a shout whose successive verses cue the dancers in the choreography they are to pursue.

Walk, believer, walk, O Daniel, (*2 times*)
Walk, I tell you, walk, O Daniel. (*2 times*)

Shout, believer, shout, O Daniel, (*2 times*)
Shout, I tell you, shout, O Daniel. (*2 times*)

Give me the kneebone bend, O Daniel.

On the eagle wing.

Fly, I tell you, fly,
Fly the other way, Daniel.

Fly, believer, fly.

Rock, believer, rock.
Shout, believer, shout,

Shout, I tell you, shout.
Shout the other way, Daniel.

Gimme the kneebone bend.

Rock, believer, rock.

Track 8

O Death

Bessie Jones. Group A.

In *voudun* there are gods and demigods of death and of the cemetery who come to the dancing ground and possess some of their worshipers; now vehicles through which the deities can communicate with mortals, the possessed advise, gossip, eat, dance, and socialize with the congregants. Thus Bessie Jones's dramatic dialogue between Death and the reluctant sinner might just as well have its roots in an African tradition as in the popular religious poems and dramas of medieval Europe in which death was so frequently personified.

Chorus

O Death in the mornin', (3 *times*)
Spare me over another year.

Well, Death walked up into the sinner's gaze,
Says, "B'lieve you have waited now a little too late,
Your fever now is one hundred and two,
Have a narrow chance if you ever pull through."
(*Chorus*)

He cried, "O Death,"
Cryin', "O Death in the mornin',
O Death,
Death, spare me over in another year.

Hey, what is this I see,
Cold, icy hands all over me?
You say, "I am Death, no one can excel,
I span the doors of Death and Hell."
(*Chorus*)

“No, you heard God's people sing and pray,
You would not heed, you just walked away,
You would not even bend your knee,
Now you got to come and go with me.

(Chorus)

“Well, I'm gon' fix your feet so you cannot walk,
'M fix your tongue where you cannot talk,
Close your eyes and you cannot see,
And you got to come and go with me.”

(Chorus)

“Well, Death, consider my age,
And do not take me in this stage,
Because all of my wealth is at your command,
If you'll just move your cold, icy hand.”

(Chorus)

He cried, “No no,
O Death in the mornin',
No no,
Lord, spare me over in another year.”

Track 7

Read 'Em, John

John Davis, leader; Willis Proctor, Bessie Jones, Jerome Davis, Peter Davis, Joe Armstrong, Henry Morrison, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

The majority of black folk heroes have been named John—Old John the trickster slave; Little John the precocious hero of the fairy tale; John Henry the hammer man; but, perhaps most important of all, John the Baptist, John the forerunner, John the prophet of change, John of the Revelations who foretold the end of all things, the destruction of the wicked and the ascent of the persecuted and the good into heaven. Of all these the unquestioned favorite was John the Revelator, doing what the slave was not allowed to do—reading, reading with an authority no one else could match, of the doom of his masters, of the end of their wicked world.

John brought the letter
And laid it on the table.
No one can read 'em like ol' John,
Read 'em, le' we go.

Chorus

O read 'em, John, read 'em, (3 times)
O read 'em, lemme go.

(Repeat)

One by one, two by two,
Three by three, and four by four,
No one can read 'em like ol' John,
Read 'em, le' we go.
(Chorus)

Track 8

Beulah Land

John Davis, leader; Bessie Jones, second; Henry Morrison, Nat Rahmings (drums), Alberta Ramsay, Emma Ramsay, Ed Young (fife), and Hobart Smith (banjo). Group C.

Here we have a classic illustration of George Pullen Jackson's assertion that the blacks often drew on white religious melodies for their spirituals, as we see how black treatment could transform somewhat dreary pieces into sparkling, memorable music. The most modern spiritual in this collection, perhaps derived from the well-known white hymn of the same title, is so joyfully syncopated, so broken up into tricky parts, and so ornamented with clapping, fife playing, and banjo breaks that the original is, as far as I am concerned, superseded.

Chorus
Beulah land, Beulah land,
I've got a home over in Beulah land.
(Repeat)

Well, I've got a home in Beulah land,
Not goin' ta stop until I reach that land.
Well, I'm not so p'ticular 'bout I reach that land,
But I'm gonna meet mother in Beulah land
(Chorus)

Way down yonder in Jordan's shore,
Where we meet we'll part no more.
Not so p'ticular 'bout part no more,
Gonna meet my mother in Jordan's shore
(Chorus [2 times])

Down in Babylon, on that old field,
He (*words unintelligible*) wheel.
Well, not so p'ticular 'bout that (*words unintelligible*) wheel,
But I just want to know how the chariot feel. (Chorus)

W down yonder on (*words unintelligible*) Jordan shore,
Angels say that time will be no mo'.
Well, some come crippled, some come lame,
All come hoppin' in my Jesus' name.

(Chorus)

Well, Jordan's river it's chilly and col',
It chills your body, but not your soul.
Well, I'm not so p'ticular 'bout the body and soul,
I gonna meet my mother in Beulah land. *(Chorus)*

I've got a home in Beulah land,
Not goin' ta stop until I reach that land.
Not so p'ticular 'bout reachin' that land,
Gonna met my mother in that Beulah land.
(Chorus)

Well, I'm got a home in Beulah land,
Not goin' ta stop until I shake her hand.
Well, I'm not so p'ticular jus' 'bout shakin' her hand,
Lord, gonna meet my mother in Beulah land.
(Chorus)

Secular Songs

It was probably fear of uprisings that led the slaveholders to discourage slave religious meetings. But dancing was encouraged on the slave ships and sometimes during weekends and always on holidays on the plantations. The whites realized how important dancing sometimes was to black morale, and they also were well aware that blacks generally excelled them in the art. In fact, the first inventions in native white American music and theater were imitations of black choreography: blackface ballet performed for General Washington in Philadelphia, and by the 1830s the American musical theater was born in the minstrel show, with the blackface performers dancing and singing to the slave's banjo. Moreover, as they had in Africa, the blacks in the New World lightened their labors by singing as they worked—clearing land, hoeing and picking crops, handling animals, loading cargo, in the kitchen, everywhere. Work thus was transformed into a sort of collective dance, giving the group the courage and stamina to accomplish otherwise impossible tasks.

Tracks 9-17 present a collection of the oldest types of black songs for dancing and for work, with tunes and rhythmic patterns and a sense of fun that have almost disappeared in other parts of the South. Here one must remember that after slavery was abolished this music lived on and grew among a free people. The Sea Islanders sometimes worked for whites for cash but otherwise could live independently from fishing, oystering, and farming.

Track 9

The Buzzard Lope

Bessie Jones, leader; Joe Armstrong, Jerome Davis, John Davis, Peter Davis, Henry Morrison, Willis Proctor, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

In this piece the dancers form a ring, and a piece of cloth representing a dead animal is dropped into the center. A male dancer, his shoulders hunched up around his ears, his arms spread out, comes

highstepping into the ring. He is the buzzard. He spots the carrion and suddenly stoops over, then circles, crouching lower and lower, his head thrust far forward like a bird's, approaching, fluttering away, coming closer, until finally he swoops low and snatches the cloth with his teeth or fingers and whirls away like a bird of prey with its meat. The cloth is replaced and the dance repeated, each dancer enacting the part of the buzzard in his own way.

Common enough in the West Indies, such miming dances are rare in America. The song tells of a time when the slave was not properly buried when he died but was simply cast out in a field. In it the slave speaks: "You can throw me anywhere, treat me any way, since Jesus, the King, owns me, chooses me, and will meet and save me.

Chorus

Leader: Throw me anywhere, Lord,

Leader and Group: In that old field.

(Repeat)

L: Don't care where you throw me,

L, G: In that old field,

L: Since my Jesus own me,

L, G: In that old field.

(Chorus)

L: You may beat an' bang me,

L, G: In that old field,

L: Since my Jesus save me,

L, C: In that old field.

(Chorus)

L: Don't care how you treat me,,

L, G: In that old field,

L: Since King Jesus meet me,

L, G: In that old field.

(Chorus)

L: Don't care how you do me,

L, G: In that old field,

L: Since King Jesus choose me,

L, G: In that old field.

(Chorus)

(Repeat ad lib)

Track 10

Raggy Levy

John Davis, leader; Peter Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morrison, and Willis Proctor. Group B.

In this black stevedore's song (part of the family that inspired so many better-known chanties) made for lifting or pulling heavy weights, the pulls come at the end of every pair of lines. The meaning is obscure. The song peers back into a long-dead time of rising soon (early) in the morning to sit by the fireplace and breakfast off sweet potatoes roasting in the ashes, and of fences built by hand of piled-up stones. Who Mr. Sippelin was or what ill fate overtook poor Raggy Levy to reduce him to a jaybird's condition I could not determine. However, it's a great song for singing.

Leader: Oh, Raggy Levy,
Group: Oho! Raggy Levy,
L: Oh, Raggy Levy,
G: Poor boy, he's ragged as a jaybird.

L: In the mornin',
G: Oho! soon in the mornin',
L: In the mornin'
G: When I rise, I'm goin' ta sit by the fiah.

L: Mr. Sippelin,
G: Hi gonna build me a stone fence,
(Repeat)

L: Sweet potato,
G: Oho! Sweet potato,
L: Sweet potato,
G: Poor boy, got two in the fiah,

L: Mr. Sippelin,
G: Hi gonna build me a stone fence.

L: Sweet potato,
G: Oho! Sweet potato,
L: Oh, sweet potato,
G: Poor boy, got two in the fiab.

L: Old Mr. Sippelin,
G: Hi build another stone fence.

L: Raggy Levy,
G: Oho! Raggy Levy.
L: Raggy Levy,
G: Poor boy, just raggy as a jaybird.

Ain't I Right

Henry Morrison, leader; John Davis, Peter Davis, and Willis Proctor. Group A.

Henry Morrison generally sang the baritone part. When he took the lead it was with his own songs—this one a bitter work-song comment on the niggardly ways of white plantation owners, set to dramatic rhythmic accompaniment.

Massa killed the big old bull,
Give us people the lead to pull,
Ain't I right? (2 times)
Just be right?
Ain't I right?
Ain't you right?
Ain't I right?

Massa kill the big old duck,
Give us people the bone to suck.
Ain't I right? Etc

Massa kill the big ol' duck
Give us all the bone to suck,
Ain't I right? Etc
You damn right.

Farmer kill the big old bull,
Give us meat all to pull,
Ain't I right? Etc

Well, all the massa done for me,
Gimme a little piece of meat,
Ain't I right? Etc

Track 12

See Aunt Dinah

Bessie Jones, leader; John Davis, Henry Mordson, Nat Rahmings (drum), Alberta Ramsay, Emma Ramsay, and Ed Young (fife). Group C.

The blacks became expert in traditional British folk-dance styles, including the step dance and formation dances like the Virginia reel. This is the song to which they swing partners, do-si-do, and circle to the right in their Saturday-night version of the Virginia reel.

Chorus

I'm gwine away,
See Aunt Dinah,

I'm goin' away,
See my Lord.

One of these days an' it won't be long,
See Aunt Dinah,
Look for me and I'll be gone,
See my Lord.
(Chorus)

'Way down yonder in the ol' cornfield,
See Aunt Dinah,
Blacksnake popped me on my heel,
See my Lord.
Popped my whip and I done my best,
See Aunt Dinah,
Run my head in the hornet's nest,
See my Lord.
(Chorus)

Preacher comm' in mama's house,
See Aunt Dinah,
Set there and eat 'til his tongue fall out,
See my Lord.
Am' but the one thing I dislike,
See Aunt Dinah,
Futtin' on airs and ballin' the jack,
See my Lord.
(Chorus)

One of these mornin's an' it won't be long,
See Aunt Dinah,
Look for me and I'll be gone,
See my Lord.
I know something that I ain't gonna tell,
See Aunt Dinah,
I'm goin' ta live in a coconut shell,
See my Lord.
(Chorus)

(Ad lib)

Track 13

Walk, Dilly Abbot

Willis Proctor, leader; John Davis, Peter Davis, Bessie Jones, and Henry Morrison. Group A.

Another dancing song that might be sung on either secular or religious occasions. To some the texts of these Sea Island pieces may seem fragmentary, sometimes meaningless and repetitious, but that is the effect of print. They are marvelously singable; they curl and crackle off the tongue; they tickle the ears. They are audacious and successful experiments in making English—the language that taxed Shakespeare and Sullivan—singable. The sure touch of the Afro-American brought a fresh singing language into being. And on this album you hear some of its pristine first essays.

Leader: Oh, walk, Billy Abbot,
Group: Weavin' low,
L: Walk, Billy Abbot,
G: Weavin' low,
L: Oh, walk, Billy Abbot,
G: Weavin' low.
(Repeat 2 lines)
L: Shout, Billy Abbot,
G: Weavin' low.
(Repeat)
L: Shout, I tell you,
G: Weavin' low.
(Repeat)
L: Swing your partner,
G: Weavin' low.
(Repeat 3 ties)
L: Walk, Billy Abbot,
G: Weavin' low. *(Repeat 3 times)*

(Ad lib)

Track 14

Reg'lar, Reg'lar, Rollin' Under

Bessie Jones, leader; John Davis, Henry Morrison, Nat Rahmings (drum), Alberta Ramsay, Emma Ramsay, Hobart Smith (banjo), and Ed Young (fife). Group C.

When I looked through the literature of black folk music for what seemed the oldest published black dance song from Virginia, I finally hit on this tune. I taught it to the Sea Island singers and the group who recorded the music for the film about Colonial Williamsburg. It was an immediate hit, and soon they were improvising on this theme as if (in Mississippi, Georgia, and Virginia) they had always known it. In fact, in recent years Bessie Jones has begun to explain to me what the text tells us about the slave experience. This performance demonstrates the excitement generated by the group's encounter with Ed Young's Mississippi fife music.

Leader: Oh, rollin', rollin', under,
First group: Oh, gimme the gourd fuh drink water.
(Repeat twice)

Leader: Don't need no gourd fuh drink water,
Second group: Oh, gimme the gourd fuh drink water.
(Repeat twice)

Track 15

Pay Me
(arr. Lydia Parrish)

Joe Armstrong, leader; Jerome Davis, John Davis, Peter Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morris, Willis Proctor, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

A stevedore song long ago preempted and made famous by the Weavers. Its text reflects the independent spirit of the Sea Island workers when they went to Brunswick to labor along the docks.

Chorus
Pay me, oh, pay me,
Pay me my money down.
Pay me or go to jail,
Pay me my money down.

Think I heard my captain say,
Pay me my money down,
Tomorrow is my sailin' day,
Pay me my money down.
(Chorus)

Wish I was Mrs. Alfred Jones's son,
Pay me my money down.
I'd stay in the house and drink good rum,
Pay me my money down.
(Chorus)

Track 16

Carrie Belle
John Davis, leader; Bessie Jones, Willis Proctor, Henry Morrison, Peter Davis, Jerome Davis, and Ben Ramsay. Group A.

This has been used by Georgia workers as a spike-driving song on the railroad, a chopping or hoeing chant, or (as here) as a stevedore hauling chant. It is the simplest and most primitive member of the "Lonesome Road" song family.

Carrie Bell (hunh!), don't moan (hunh!),
Don't you hang your head (huuh!) and cry (hunh!).

Chorus

Ain't gonna hurt nobody (hunh!), oh no (hunh!). (2 times)
I'm goin' ta carry to de Al- (hunh!) -amo (hunh!).

Ever since/ I lay/ it almost in the bar/room door./
I said I'll never/ get drunk/ no more./
(Chorus)

When I pawn/ my watch/ and I pawn/ my chain./
Then I pawn/ my dia/mond ring./
(Chorus)

Carrie Belle,/ don't weep,/ Carrie Belle,/ don't moan./
Don't you hang/ your head/ and cry./
(Chorus)

Ever since/ I lay/ in the bar/room door./
Said I'll never/ get drunk/ no more./
(Chorus)

Track 17

Laz'rus

Henry Morrison. Group B.

A variant of the work-song ballad about black Laz'rus, who defied the work-camp bosses, robbed the commissary, and was then hunted down and killed. The first stanza, which has a suggestive undertone, belongs to a favorite bawdy song of the Southeast.

I ax Aunt Dinah,
Do her dog run rabbit?
(Repeat)

Aunt Dinah said, "No, no, no,
Aunt Dinah said, "No."

Well, I see old Laz'rus
Up on the commissary counter,
(Repeat)
He walked away, 'way, 'way,
He walked away.

Well, I ax Aunt Dinah
Do her dog run rabbit?
(Repeat)

And Dinah said, "No, no, no,"
Aunt Dinah said, "No."

Well, I tell the high sheriff
To go and find-a me Laz'rus.

(Repeat)

Well, I tell the high sheriff,
Go and find-a me Laz'rus,
Find 'im live, dead, dead alive.

Track 18

The Titanic

Bessie Jones, leader; John Davis, Henry Morrison, Nat Rahmings (drum), Alberta Ramsay, Emma Ramsay, Hobart Smith (guitar), and Ed Young (fife). Group C.

When the great luxury liner *Titanic* went down after a head-on collision with what some balladeers called an "ice bug," the religious people of the South took this as a sign that man had attempted too much and that God was showing His resentment of man's arrogance. The magnificent steamship had been held the greatest mechanical triumph of the twentieth century. Only the rich and powerful were supposed to be on board. Rumor had it that blacks, including the prize-fighter Jack Johnson, had been denied passage. For the poor of the rural South, then, especially for blacks, the tragic end of the great ship symbolized the essential vulnerability of the world that gave them so little. Ballads like the following were composed and sung by bards up and down the South and linger on in folk memory today.

Chorus

God moves on the water,
April the 14th day,
God moves on the water,
Everybody had to run and pray.

Titanic left Southampton

With all their sport and game,
But when they struck that iceberg,
I know their mind was changed.

(Chorus)

Their mothers told their daughters,
On a pleasure trip they may go,
But when they struck that iceberg,
They haven't been seen anymore.

(Chorus)

One man, John Jacob Astor,
A man with pluck and brains,
While this great ship was sinkin',
All the women he tried to save.

(Chorus)

He was warned by a freight boat,
Captain Smith would not take heed,
But instead of givin' a warnin'
He ran with greater speed.
(Chorus)

He kissed his wife a last time
When the boiler did explode,
He helped her in the lifeboat,
Sayin', "I won't see you anymo!"
(Chorus)

The story of the shipwreck
Is almost too sad to tell,
One thousand and six hundred
Went down forever to dwell.
(Chorus)

Well, the 14th day of April,
It was in nineteen hundred and twelve,
The ship had a wreck by the iceberg,
It went down forever to dwell.
(Chorus)

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- 1 MOSES 4:10
John Davis, leader, with Group B
- 2 KNEEBONE 2:07
Joe Armstrong, leader, with Group A
- 3 SHEEP, SHEEP, DON'T YOU KNOW THE ROAD 2:18
Bessie Jones, leader, with Group B
- 4 LIVE HUMBLE 3:44
John Davis, leader, with Group A
- 5 DANIEL 2:08
Willis Proctor, leader, with Group A
- 6 O DEATH 2:45
Bessie Jones, leader, with Group A
- 7 READ 'EM, JOHN 2:01
John Davis, leader, with Group A
- 8 BEULAH LAND 4:15
John Davis, leader, with Group C
- 9 THE BUZZARD LOPE 1:58
Bessie Jones, leader, with Group A
- 10 RAGGY LEVY 1:05
John Davis, leader, with Group B
- 11 AIN'T I RIGHT 1:33
Henry Morrison, leader, with Group A
- 12 SEE AUNT DINAH 3:01
Bessie Jones, leader, with Group C
- 13 WALK, BILLY ABBOT :54
Willis Proctor, leader, with Group A
- 14 REG'LAR, REG'LAR, ROLLIN' UNDER 2:16
Bessie Jones, leader, with Group C
- 15 PAY ME 1:23
Joe Armstrong, leader, with Group A
- 16 CARRIE BELLE 3:29
John Davis, leader, with Group A
- 17 LAZ'RUS 1:36
Henry Morrison, leader, with Group B
- 18 THETITANIC 3:30
Bessie Jones, leader, with Group C

Group A: Joe Armstrong, Jerome Davis, John Davis, Peter Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morrison, Willis Proctor, Ben Ramsey

Group B: John Davis, Peter Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morrison, Willis Proctor

Group C: John Davis, Bessie Jones, Henry Morrison, Nat Rahmings (drums), Alberta Ramsey, Emma Ramsey, Hobart Smith (banjo and guitar), Ed Young (fife)

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