

FREDERICK TILLIS

Freedom

New World Records 80455

Spiritual Routes

A map of Frederick Charles Tillis' life could be drawn by tracing a line from South Texas through Louisiana and Kentucky to New England. But a geographic map would not track the psychic and spiritual route taken. Tillis' journey from his birthplace in South Texas to Amherst, Massachusetts, where he now lives and works, a short distance by air, was an arduous march.

Born in Galveston in January 1930, in the America of the Great Depression, before World War II and *Brown v. Board of Education*, Tillis grew up amid the de facto apartheid segregating blacks and whites in Texas. At age eleven Tillis studied trumpet and saxophone, while playing in local jazz ensembles. At the age of nineteen, he earned his B.A. at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, then studied composition with Philip T. Bezanson at the University of Iowa, earning an M.A. in 1952.

In that year, Tillis joined the United States Air Force and served as a bandsman at Webb Air Force Base in Big Spring, Texas. It was there that I met him. The armed forces had only recently been desegregated. Hoping to avoid the draft and the Korean winter, many college graduates like me joined the Air Force to find that we had unwittingly enlisted in the experiment of military integration.

Tillis and I were both assigned to an air base where foreign and American pilots were taught to fly jets. The military band of black, white, and Hispanic musicians played parades, retreats, graduations, and officer's club dances. We marched in Fourth of July parades in hot Texas towns where courthouse drinking fountains were still marked "White Only" and "Colored Only," which meant that none of us drank. Tillis won quick promotions, to staff sergeant and director of the military and the jazz bands. He also won respect as a performer (trumpet and saxophone), and conductor and arranger, impressing me by writing down Lee Konitz's enigmatic improvisations on "Skylark" from a recording. He already had broad tastes. It was in the Tillis home off-base where he and his wife, Louise, lived, that I first heard Schoenberg's String Quartets, *A Survivor From Warsaw*, and Berg's *Wozzeck* (in the Mitropoulos live recording). And we analyzed all of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas, with me playing them on an upright barracks piano painted Air Force blue!

After leaving the military in 1956, Tillis studied with Samuel Adler at North Texas State University, then took his Ph.D. at Iowa in 1963, concentrating on serial composition. He later taught at Wiley College, at Grambling State University, at Kentucky State University, and finally at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he and his family have lived since 1970.

Unlike those whose protest took active forms of demonstration and confrontation, Tillis took his stand as an artist--composing, teaching, lecturing, improvising on soprano and tenor saxophones, and writing books of poetry. He says that these varied pursuits are one thoroughfare of art, a "spiritual journey." For him, "music and all of the other arts belong to one family that nurtures the human spirit and soul."

A black composer schooled in jazz and European classical music traditions, Tillis matured as a composer during the great Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. In his catalog of 104 compositions, the

earliest work is a 1950 Passacaglia for Brass Quintet inspired by Bach's organ Passacaglia in C minor. In 1968, he deliberately adopted a compositional style rooted in the thematic and harmonic materials of the spiritual. Spirituals claim a significant place in American music, from the pre-Civil War period in Afro-American churches in the deep South through their popularization and spread in the late 1870s by such groups as the Fisk Jubilee Singers in Tennessee and the Hampton Singers of Virginia, and the arranging and publication of them later by such composers as Frederick J. Work, John W. Work, R. Nathaniel Dett, T. P. Fenner, and Clarence Cameron White. Major black artists such as tenor Roland Hayes and bass-baritone Paul Robeson included spirituals in their concert programs. And composers such as William Grant Still and James Weldon Johnson used spirituals in their writing, as did others. The spiritual as spontaneous folk music was thus transformed from its origins in church singing to sophisticated styles of art music. The spiritual has declined in popularity among African-Americans during the twentieth century, however, giving way to gospel and other forms, yet its content has not been lost, due to extensive collecting, recording, and scholarly study.

An interest in the spiritual as a rich trove of musical materials for composition led Tillis to embark on a long series of works based on the form. In 1978 he wrote *Spiritual Cycle* for soprano and orchestra and in that same year, on commission from Columbia Records, composed "Three Symphonic Spirituals" for orchestra. In 1980 he began a systematic examination of the genre and by 1990 had produced 14 "Spiritual Fantasies" for various combinations of instruments. Other Tillis works delve into African elements, for example, the Niger Symphony (1975) and *Secrets of the African Baobab*, a ballet (1976). Some works stem from Latin and Japanese traditions; Asian influences are important in his later works. Why this pan-culturalism? Tillis replies, "Three quarters of the world's cultures use the pentatonic scale, a profound linkage within the family of man. This five-note scale is the basis of the spiritual and also the music of Asian cultures, and it is therefore natural to use it to express our interrelatedness, our world brotherhood."

Several of Tillis' concert works are rooted in spirituals. *Festival Journey*, for percussion (drum set) and orchestra written for and premiered by Max Roach on commission from the Atlanta Symphony in 1992, is one of four such concertos. The others are *Ring Shout Concerto* (1974) for percussion and brass, written for and first played by Max Roach; the Concerto for Trio Pro Vivo and Chamber Orchestra (1980); and Concerto for Piano and Jazz Orchestra (1980), first performed by the Billy Taylor Trio and the Springfield, Massachusetts, Symphony Orchestra.

The chamber works on this disc provide examples of Tillis' use of the spiritual in intimate settings for chorus, string quartet, and solo song with piano. Like a voice crying in the wilderness, the solo soprano saxophone improvisation on *Motherless Child* opens the disc. Recorded in a single take in 1989, the high-pitched B-flat member of the sax family is encouraged to be its often piercing self. The spiritual melody, stripped of harmony, is dignified and plaintive. The variations open into melismatic and rhythmic figures, sometimes with breaks between, sometimes connected. The final statement of the tune ends in a long, sustained, unembellished tone underlining the text's final phrase, "a long way from home."

Spiritual Fantasy No. 12, (Suite for String Quartet), is a quartet of spirituals written in 1995 and premiered by the Lark Quartet in Amherst. Each section is named for the source of its motivic and psychic impulse. Thus, the four sections are named, "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See," "Wade in the Water," "Crucifixian (*sic*) (He Never Said A Mumbelin' Word)" and "I'm A-Rollin'." The composer has written of this work, "The composition of the *Spiritual Fantasy* for string quartet pays tribute to the essence of the musical expressions of pathos and triumph over worldly obstacles

encountered by a people who found hope and strength through faith in God.”

Sympathy, to a text by Paul Laurence Dunbar, leads from an expansive brass introduction to a litany of words by the chorus that sets the stage for a soprano solo. Like a cantata, it unfolds in words, melody, harmony, and textures. (Dunbar (1872-1906), whose reputation rests primarily on his poems in Negro dialect, produced far more work in non-dialect forms of poetry, short stories, plays, and novels. The first black writer to try to live by writing and one of the first to attain national prominence, Dunbar collaborated with composer Will Marion Cook as lyricist and librettist on three musical theater works, including *In Dahomey* (1902). His texts have been a source of inspiration for many composers including Harry Burleigh, Henry Cowell, Charles Cadman, Howard Swanson, J. Rosamond Johnson, Ulysses Kay, Henry Hadley, John Alden Carpenter, and William Grant Still.)

About *Freedom* for a cappella SATB choir, the composer has written:

“*Freedom* uses 18 words reflecting the mood and feelings that overcame me upon hearing of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The text uses ‘associated imagery’ and sonic expression to communicate the sorrowful character of the music. Put succinctly, the words are not arranged in a literal order of meaning.”

Tillis creates musical environments for his own poetry in the four songs presented here. Richly textured with intricate contrapuntal and rhythmic structures, they flow with improvisational freedom. In setting his texts fairly straight with some word repetition, the composer preserves the poetic line, natural word speed, and flow. Contrapuntal piano accompaniments support vocal lines that have the flavor of, but do not quote, any spiritual directly. *Beyond Shades of Doubt* and *Singing for the Sake of My Soul* were premiered in 1993 by Paula Stark with Nikki Stoia, pianist; *The Rain Forest* and *The Best Times* were premiered in 1995 by Jon Humphrey, tenor, also with Ms. Stoia, a University of Massachusetts at Amherst faculty member, at the piano. These singers are heard here with pianist Nadine Shank, who is also on the faculty.

—Howard Klein

Howard Klein is a pianist and Director of Artists and Repertory for New World Records.

SYMPATHY (*Paul Laurence Dunbar*)

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

 When the first bird sings and the first bud opens,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals--
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting--

I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,--
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings--
I know why the caged bird sings!

FREEDOM (*Frederick Tillis*)

misery
suffering
pain
anguish
distress
freedom
wretchedness
despair
poverty
agony
degradation
destitution
grief
humiliation
rejection
despondency
abasement
affliction

BEYOND SHADES OF DOUBT (*Frederick Tillis*)

Beyond a shade of doubt
There are things that give relief
Beyond the shadow of death
There is peace and no reason for grief.

There are people on this earth who live on dreams
People who float on thin air, seemingly without a care
And they are blessed by being in tune
With the harmonies of shifting sands and winds.

There are people who move on this earth
Who travel not in the shoes of the un-dead
But walk, instead, in the constant spirit of the newly born.

THE RAIN FOREST (*Frederick Tillis*)

Deep in my dream

A well of loneliness
Grew inside of me--(Lord).

In the rain
A forest of mellowness
A world of peace, not stress
Churns slowly inside, so free.

I felt the pain of ecstasy
With the swell of you
And your memories,
Your reveries.

Binding and surrounding me
Like a lush, warm womb of vegetation
In the heaven of the rain forest,
Lo, the robust sounding rain forest.

Now the scheme of my dream
A swell of totalness
Grows deep and wide in me--(Lord).

I feel the strain of melody
Of ecstasy, and the depth of you
And your memory beside the sea,
The rain forest in my dream.

SINGING FOR THE SAKE OF MY SOUL (*Frederick Tillis*)

I ride on the wind--
And sail on the wings of clouds
Dreaming of things which never can be told
Singing for the sake of my soul.

I fan the fires of faith
And dare the demons of despair
Dreaming of time and ideas new and old
Singing for the sake of my soul.

Soaring through peaks and valleys
I glow like the robin's red breast
Embracing memories, some faint and some bold
Singing for the sake of my soul.

I tread in troubled waters against rising tides
And remember to hold trust and keep hope alive
Whether in the heat of summer or in winter's bitter cold
Singing for the sake of my soul.

THE BEST TIMES (*Frederick Tillis*)

Let the best times
Be remembered
When they echo
In voices of splendor.

Let the best songs
Sound joyfully
As they ring
In the walls and halls freely.

Heaven and hell
Are equal partners
In the victories and defeats
Along life's gains and retreats.
Things that appear new
Are often disguised forms in repeat.

Let the best dance
Be saved for the last
When the wind stands still
And nothing else seems to pass.

Let the strong waves
Bounce around freely
Against the banks of the shore
Because the moon and the tides will again be low.

The Lark Quartet has appeared at the Lockenhaus Festival in Austria, the Beethoven Festival in Moscow, the Musicades Festival in Lyon, the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival in Germany, and at Mexico's San Miguel de Allende Music Festival as quartet-in-residence. They have also performed at New York's Lincoln Center, the National Gallery and Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and St. Paul's Ordway Theater, as well as in Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Baltimore, Chicago, and Atlanta. Tours abroad have taken the quartet to China, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Switzerland, and Great Britain. They have won top prizes in the 1991 London International String Quartet Competition; the 1991 Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition in Australia; the 1990 Paolo Borciani Competition in Reggio Emilia, Italy; the 1990 Karl Klinger Competition in Munich; and the 1986 Banff Competition in Canada. In 1990, they received the coveted Naumburg Chamber Music Award in New York. They are currently in residence at Ohio University, and have recorded for Arabesque and Decca/Argo. 1996 marks the tenth anniversary of the Lark Quartet.

Richard Du Bois, conductor, has been a professor of music at the University of Massachusetts since 1956. He received his B.M. at Heidelberg College, his M.M. at the American Conservatory of Music, and his Ph.D. at the University of Iowa. As director of the University Chorale, he has carried concert tours to Moscow, Leningrad, Austria, France, Poland, England, Japan, Italy, Spain, and Australia. In addition, he has served as conductor for all-state, district, and festival choruses

throughout New England and the Midwest. Mr. Du Bois is a past president of the Massachusetts American Choral Directors Association.

Paulina Stark, soprano, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, received her B.A. and M.A. degrees from Rice University. She has sung numerous leading roles with the Houston Grand Opera and the Opera National de Monte Carlo, as well as appearing as a soloist with the Hallé Orchestra, the Jerusalem, CBS, Houston, Dallas, and Syracuse Orchestras, under the direction of Sergiu Comissiona, Lawrence Foster, Lukas Foss, Eduardo Mata, and Sir John Barbirolli. She has also presented recitals and conducted master classes throughout the United States. Ms. Stark is a member of the visiting faculty at New England Conservatory and the Vocal Institute of the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her television and radio appearances include all-Spanish recitals and other broadcasts on NET, CBS, BBC-England, Kol Israel, National Argentine Television, and NPR. She has recorded for Centaur, Spectrum, and Opus.

Nadine Shank, piano, is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts. She received her B.M. from Oberlin Conservatory and her M.M. from Indiana University. She has studied with Menahem Pressler, Sanford Margolis, and John Wustman. Ms. Shank has made solo and chamber appearances in the United States, England, and Germany, and toured in the American and British Virgin Islands. She is a winner of the Rudolph Serkin Prize at Oberlin Conservatory, the concerto competition at Interlochen, and the concerto competition at Indiana University, as well as MTNA and National Federation of Music Clubs competitions. She has appeared as a soloist with World Youth Symphony Orchestra and the Indiana University Philharmonic, and as the orchestral pianist for the Springfield Symphony Orchestra. Ms. Shank has recorded for CRI, Open Loop, and Spectrum Records.

Jon Humphrey, tenor, is the Philip Bezanson Professor of Music at the University of Massachusetts. He received his B.M. degree from Baldwin-Wallace College and his M.M. from the University of Illinois. He has appeared as a soloist with many major symphony orchestras and choral societies, including the Cleveland, Atlanta, Detroit, Boston, New York Philharmonic, Indianapolis, San Francisco, and Philadelphia orchestras, and the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston. He has performed on national tours with the Robert Shaw Chorale, and New York Pro Musica, the Marlboro Music Festival, and with the Gächinger Kantorei of Stuttgart. He has also participated in the Aspen, Meadowbrook, Casals, Mostly Mozart, Oregon Bach, Blossom Music Center, Saratoga, and Marlboro festivals. Mr. Humphrey has recorded for RCAVictor, Decca, Columbia, Telarc, Orion, and CBS.

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Produced by: Frederick Tillis; Elizabeth Ostrow (*Spiritual Fantasy No. 12*)
Digital mastering: Jeff Baust, Soundmirror, Inc., Jamaica Plains, MA.
Motherless Child was recorded August, 1989 in Sage Hall, Smith College, Northampton, MA. and
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Freedom was recorded 1970 by Mark Custom Records EF/Century Recording, Holyoke, MA.
The Rain Forest and *The Best Times* were recorded February, 1995 and *Beyond Shades of Doubt* and *Singing
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FREDERICK TILLIS (b. 1930) 80455-2
FREEDOM

1 *Motherless Child* (publ. P & P Publications) 7:14
Frederick Tillis, soprano saxophone
Spiritual Fantasy No. 12 (publ. American Composers Alliance)
2 Nobody Knows the Trouble I See 6:28

- 3 Wade in the Water 4:33
- 4 Crucifixion (He Never Said A Mumbelin' Word) 4:48
- 5 I'm A-Rollin' 7:15

The Lark String Quartet: Eva Gruesser, violin; Jennifer Orchard, violin; Anna Kruger, viola; Astrid Schween, cello

- 6 *Spiritual Fantasy No. 9 (Sympathy)* (publ. American Composers Alliance) 11:29

University of Massachusetts Chorale, Richard Du Bois, conductor

- 7 *Freedom* (publ. Southern Music Publishing Co.) 7:50

University of Massachusetts Chorale, Richard Du Bois, conductor

- 8 *Beyond Shades of Doubt* (publ. P & P Publications) 7:44

Paulina Stark, soprano; Nadine Shank, piano

- 9 *The Rain Forest* (publ. P & P Publications) 7:33

Jon Humphrey, tenor; Nadine Shank, piano

- 10 *Singing for the Sake of My Soul* (publ. P & P Publications) 4:52

Paulina Stark, soprano; Nadine Shank, piano

- 11 *The Best Times* (publ. P & P Publications) 4:30

Jon Humphrey, tenor; Nadine Shank, piano

All compositions BMI.

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