

Judge Jackson and the African-American Shape-Note Singing Tradition

The practice of shape-note singing originated in colonial New England in the interest of creating a musical tradition that was distinctly American. With its cultivation, and dissemination into the American South, it became part of many rural identities. With its evolution, one might wonder, is there an African-American shape note tradition?

In the 1700s the formation of singing schools popularized New England churches in an attempt to teach interested parties music fundamentals and to improve the quality of congregational singing in worship services. The practice was revolutionized by William Little and William Smith who published *The Easy Instructor*, the first songbook of hymn tunes composed solely with pitches *fa*, *sol*, *la*, and *mi*—each pitch carrying its own designated note-head shape. *Fa* was a triangle, *sol*—a circle, *la*—a square, and *mi*—a diamond. Tammy Kernodle explains that each note having its own shape helped novice singers identify “the relative pitch of a song whether one was singing the syllables or the song text.” Likewise, “it eliminated the problem of having to transfer pitches to different lines and spaces of the staff when the key changed from song to song.”¹

The practice of shape-note singing grew with the First Great Awakening and began to move south into areas such as Ohio, Missouri, Kentucky, and Virginia, eventually

¹ Tammy L. Kernodle, “Shape Note Singing,” in *Encyclopedia of African American Music* Vol. 3, P–Z, ed. Emmett G. Price III (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 862.

disappearing from urban areas in those regions during the industrial revolution, to later find a significant and more permanent home with congregations in the deep south. As is still the practice today, shape-note singing is an extracurricular activity, taking place outside of traditional worship services. A shape-note gathering can be an all-day affair—starting with prayer and a devotional, continuing with uninterrupted singing through the day, and followed by a late-afternoon covered-dish meal. Kernodle relates, “in the rural South, shape note singing became an integral part of social and recreational life as singing schools slowly disappeared in lieu of annual local and regional gatherings. In time, local areas and congregations created what became known as singing communities, which annually gathered with other groups within a particular region or state for ‘conventions.’”²

The history of African-American participation in the Shape-Note singing tradition stems from the communities of the “Wiregrass” region of Southeastern Alabama before the American Civil War. The coastal areas in the region had a large population of free Africans as well as poor white settlers who could not afford slaves. These two communities were economically dependent on each other and also intertwined socially. One such instance was the tradition of shape-note gatherings, where Africans—free and otherwise—joined whites for singings in an unsegregated capacity. It was not until after the American Civil War, when whites in this region were offered better economic opportunities—and Jim Crow laws took effect—that the gatherings became segregated.³

² Kernodle, 863.

³ Barbara L. Hampton, liner notes to *The Colored Sacred Harp, Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers*, New World Records 80433, CD, 1993.

The primary collection of tunes used was the *Sacred Harp* (1844), which underwent three important revisions. One by W.M. Cooper in 1905, one by J.L. White in 1911; and one by Denson in 1935.⁴ In 1927, the Cooper edition underwent its own revision process in which submissions were made for inclusion in the new publication. When Judge Jackson, a prominent African-American member of the community made his submissions, they were rejected from publication. The tenacious Mr. Jackson decided to print his own publication under the endorsement of the Dale County Colored Musical Institute and Florida Union State Convention and so came *The Colored Sacred Harp*, a collection of 77 shape-note tunes, 76 written solely by African-Americans. The singular tune written by a non-African-American, was composed by Bascom F. Faust, a white banker who helped Jackson by investing one-thousand dollars in the project. Jackson provided the rest of the money himself.⁵

The Colored Sacred Harp was published in 1934 by a company in Chicago. Sadly, the publication wasn't immediately adopted by the African-American community. One reason is that shape-note singing is steeped in tradition. Consequently, it takes a long time for new tunes to be welcomed into practice, if welcomed at all. Another reason is that resentment brewed among members of the African-American community who submitted tunes to Jackson for publication with the understanding that they would receive profits from the book. Jackson, intent to wait until the book was successful before dispersing funds, was slow to follow through. One reason is the unfortunate timing of publication—the Great

⁴ Henry Willett, "Judge Jackson and the *Colored Sacred Harp*," in *In the Spirit: Alabama's Sacred Music Traditions*, ed. Henry Willett (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1995), 50–51.

⁵ Willett, 52–53.

Depression, when families could not spare money to purchase books for leisure.⁶ One complaint was that *The Colored Sacred Harp* was printed with a soft cover but cost twice as much, and sometimes three times more, than similar songbooks.⁷

Regardless of cost and politics, Jackson's book marked important evolutions in shape-note tune publishing. Upon first observation, one might notice that the tunes in *The Colored Sacred Harp* are titled differently than their white counterparts. The tunes in the original *Sacred Harp* are mostly named after the localities of the New England singing schools from which they stem. The titles of the *Colored Sacred Harp* tunes have topical names. For instance, "Am I A Soldier of the Cross," "He Died That We Might Live," and "The Lord is Coming" are all thematically-titled tunes in Judge Jackson's collection. One glaring difference is that all the tunes in Jackson's collection are written in four parts, whereas most of the tunes in its competing volumes are in three. Another noticeable characteristic is the presence of tunes based in a "call and response" format, a technique borrowed from African singing traditions. Jackson's tune book still has the formal qualities of its Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Namely, the tunes lend themselves to strophic homophony and are harmonically prone to intervals of fourths and fifths, instead of thirds. Also, there a number of fugal tunes included. Like with the original tradition, crossover is encouraged between the voices, meaning that both men and women can be heard on a single voice part.⁸

Henry Willett writes: "Although not totally accepted by the African-American singing community, *The Colored Sacred Harp* was never totally rejected. The Judge Jackson

⁶ Willett, 54–55.

⁷ Joe Dan Boyd, "Judge Jackson: Black Giant of White Spirituals," *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 330 (Oct.–Dec. 1970): 450.

⁸ Hampton

honorary sing was established in 1935, the year after the publication of *The Colored Sacred Harp*. Then, as now (the Jackson sing continues to be held each year on the third Sunday in April), participants set aside periods for singing from *The Colored Sacred Harp*.⁹

However, Willett notes an important irony. Though *The Colored Sacred Harp* is celebrated by these African-Americans once a year, its true recognition is given by modern, mainstream *Sacred Harp* groups outside the rural south that seek to acknowledge diversity and inclusion in their practice.¹⁰ A striking criticism of *The Colored Sacred Harp* is that of George Pullen Jackson, who argued that many of the tunes in Judge Jackson's collection were derived from European settlements, and did not have African roots.¹¹ What he failed to mention is that many of the tunes from the Anglo-Saxon *Sacred Harp* were prone to innovation from the Africans living in antebellum Alabama and worshipping in the same "Camp Meetings" as their white neighbors.¹²

Regardless of this criticism, the African-American shape-note tradition continued to be a part an integral part of religious folk music in Alabama's "Wiregrass" region. In 1993 the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers released a 14-track compact disc recording of tunes from *The Colored Sacred Harp*, making its tradition accessible to anyone with a compact disc player. This marks an incredible milestone of the tradition, as it was only in 1992 that an African-American submission was selected to be included in an Anglo-Saxon printing of shape-note tunes.¹³

⁹ Willett, 55.

¹⁰ Willett, 55.

¹¹ Boyd, 448.

¹² Hampton

¹³ Hampton

Though we know the most about the Alabamans of the African-American shape-note tradition, there are other thriving groups as well. Chiquita Walls notes that unlike the black shape-note singers in Alabama, Mississippians are not able to trace their history as clearly. Additionally, singing groups in Mississippi tend to be narrowly focused and unaware of the meetings and practices of other groups, even within their own state.¹⁴ Fortunately, the Mississippi delta region has benefitted from the organizational efforts of Ms. Walls who compiled and published the “African American Shape Note and Vocal Music Singing Convention Directory for the Mississippi and Areas of Northeast Alabama.” Likewise, Walls has written about her experience participating in Mississippi’s conventions. She identifies a practice that is quite different than one would find at the gatherings in Southeast Alabama.

Walls relates:

The Black Sacred Harp State Singing Convention uses the *do re mi fa sol la ti* scale, whereas in other states, the *fa sol la fa sol la mi* scale is used. The fact that the black *Sacred Harp* singers of Mississippi transpose the four note scale to seven notes as they sing is a result of their decision to use B.F. White's four-note Sacred Harp songbook published in 1844 with the rudiments outlined in William Walker's seven-note *Christian Harmony* songbook published in 1866. The consequences of this adapted singing style has made the Black Sacred Harp State Singing Convention one of the most outstanding and exceptional within the shape note genre.

The seven-note tradition is not limited to Mississippi, it is practiced within African-American shape-note gatherings in West Georgia where it is noted that the “more lively” seven-note tradition lends itself to “an expressive style that at times causes singers and

¹⁴ Chiquita Walls, “Mississippi’s African American Shape Note Tradition,” David Warren Steel’s Professional Website, last modified March 15, 2017, accessed April, 23, 2017, <http://home.olemiss.edu/~mudws/articles/walls.html>

listeners to get up from their seats and praise God by clapping, shouting, or raising their hands.” This interactive setting continues to foster what is a most important facet in shape-note singing, its role as a social gathering. These singing groups, typically meeting once a month, continue the old tradition of the “all-day sing” and shared meal.¹⁵ Historically, the church has always been the heart of the African-American community, especially in the deep south. John Work writes, “it circumscribes the social activity completely, and demands that it exclude not only immorality but other things secular as well, restricting its members to those activities that are religious in atmosphere even if not wholly in intent.”¹⁶

It is in this spirit that many African American lovers of shape-note singing fear that the practice is in decline. Current proponents note a fading interest in the part of young people and worry that the important tradition and its history could die with its aging population of notable participants.¹⁷ Their fear is substantiated by the record of an African-American shape-note singing tradition in East Texas that completely disappeared in the 1900s.¹⁸ Derrick Fox suggests a changing focus in musicological research from such traditions toward the practice of contemporary gospel music.¹⁹ Likewise, when considering sacred music from the African-American population, emphasis has always been given toward the Negro spiritual, especially in academic settings.

¹⁵ Lacey Head and Sarah Foreman Reeves, “A West Georgia Tradition: African American Shape Note Singing,” Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service—Museum on Main Street: Stories from Main Street, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.storiesfrommainstreet2.org/exhibits/show/africanamericanshapenotesingin>.

¹⁶ John W. Work, “Plantation Meistersinger,” *The Musical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1941): 101.

¹⁷ Walls

¹⁸ Kernodle, 866.

¹⁹ Derrick Fox, “African American Practice of Shape-Note Singing in the United States,” *Choral Journal* 56, No. 5 (Dec. 2015): 50.

Fox writes:

Churchgoers reared in the traditional black church believe the line between sacred and secular music has been blurred; they tend to favor more conservative participatory forms of worship such as seven-shape gospel singing. These members attribute the diminishing participation in seven-shape gospel singing to the rising popularity of the solo-driven, performance-based, contemporary black church worship.²⁰

Even so, as Jared Wright notes, “religious song content has remained very similar throughout the African experience in America, from orally passed on spirituals to modern gospel.”²¹ No matter the future of the African-American shape-note singing tradition, it will always be a part of recorded history. Perhaps the tradition is best captured by the refrain of *The Colored Sacred Harp* tune “This Is My Hope”:

*God’s praises, God’s praises, sing His praise in ev’ry land, ev’ry tongue awake the silent tongue to sing, Let ev’ry nation arise and sing Gods praise.*²²

²⁰ Fox, 50.

²¹ Jared W. Wright, “‘Heaven’s Really Gonna Shine’: African American Note Singing in the New South,” MA thesis, University of West Georgia, 2014.

²² H. J. Jackson, *The Colored Sacred Harp*, 3rd Revised Edition, (Montgomery, AL: Brown Printing, 1992), 34–36.

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