

## THE SACRED HARPERS AND THEIR SINGING SCHOOLS

by Joe Dan Boyd

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"This is not listener's music. It is singer's music." Thus Dr. George Pullen Jackson explained not only the perplexity experienced by the urban listener when first exposed to Sacred Harpers' "dispersed harmony," but also the fervor of the traditional singer—whose feeling for this old-timey, unaccompanied singing is a form of non-denomination "old-time religion."

Also known as *shape-note*, *four-note*, and *fasola music*, Sacred Harp singing (a term derived from the song book used) stands alone as the survival of a tradition which saturated the South after first being disseminated through similar books by "Yankee singing school masters" of the colonial Northeast. Their art was derived from elements in mid-seventeenth century European "polyphony," Old English solmization, and the uniquely American shaped, patent or character note heads. Though in the Northeast this cultural antique surrendered with little struggle to the subsequent seven-shape do-re-mi invasion, which in turn lost the all-out war with the unshaped "round head" notes, Southern resistance via the Sacred Harp simply went "underground"—or, more accurately, was ignored by that community of reformers which Dr. Jackson labeled the Better Music Boys. And not until publication in the 1930s of Dr. Jackson's patient, thorough scholarship did it become clear that the singing would endure with the ancient song tunes, whose durability was probably never seriously threatened.

Dr. Jackson's scholarship, which resulted in the tradition's "white spiritual" designation, and that of his disciples, has created a Sacred Harp "mysti-

que" which has filtered into the folk tradition itself, adding strength to an already persistent survival of these folk hymns, religious ballads and camp-meeting choruses. Fasola folk sing today, as always, primarily for the pure joy of voicing praise to God, but with the added knowledge that their rite preserves and perpetuates an important stream of this nation's cultural history.

The Sacred Harp singers use only four note names (fa, sol, la, mi) for the seven tones of the scale. Each has its characteristic shape for rapid reading, the position on the printed staff indicating its pitch (since there are two fa's, two sol's and two la's in the scale). Songs of the Sacred Harp are written in four harmonic parts: bass, alto, tenor (melody), and treble (high harmony), with all parts except bass sung by both men and women. Since the melody-carrying tenor is accorded only token dominance, casual listeners sometimes complain of a "chanting noise with no tune," while devotees invariably praise the strong "austere, manly sound." As Dr. Jackson phrased it, "There is no effeminate ear-tickling in the Sacred Harp songs."

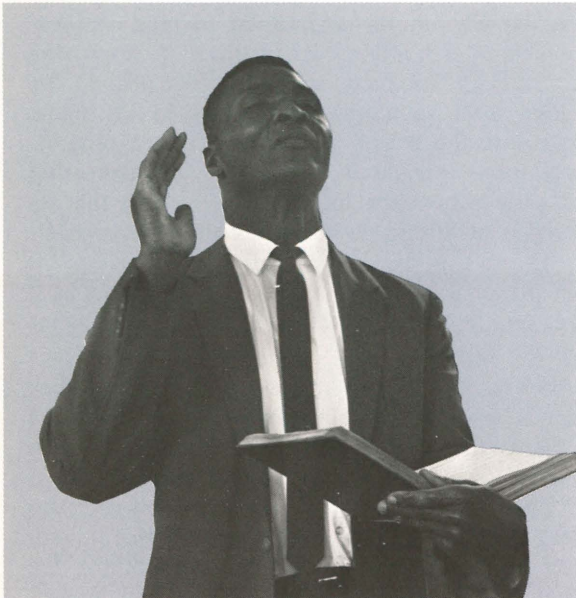
Since four-shape composers include a separate staff for each voice, and arrange harmony by placing voices in a "four-staff-ladder" fashion, the *Sacred Harp* pages have retained that traditional oblong shape characteristic of early singing-school manuals. And, as Dr. Jackson explained: "The twenty pages or so of 'Rudiments of Music' at the beginning of the book represent a feature brought to America from England over 200 years ago."

These "rudiments" were intended to facilitate both self-instruction and the courses of study arranged by the traveling singing school teachers who set up shop for days or weeks at a time. It is to such singing schools that we may attribute the growth and survival of Sacred Harp singing. Dr. Jackson called the singing schools "the beginning of all group singing" and "the cradle of musical democracy in the South." While no longer widespread, Sacred Harp singing schools nevertheless continue to strengthen the tradition and introduce youngsters to it.

For instance, Hugh McGraw, executive secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company (Denson Revision), taught a week-long night school last year at Double Springs, Alabama. And, despite the ethnic limitations suggested by George Pullen Jackson's "white spiritual" term, Negro Dewey Williams teaches a Sacred Harp singing school "every year or so" at Slocomb, Alabama.

Black singers have adopted or adapted the "white spiritual" tradition in at least three geographic areas, the three-corner juncture of southeast Alabama, southwest Georgia and northwest Florida; Union County, New Jersey (via Alabama migration), and northeast Texas. In fact, Judge Jackson (1883-1958) spearheaded publication in 1934 of a *Colored Sacred Harp*, featuring compositions largely by Alabama blacks. Though out of print, his book continues to supplement use of the "standard" *Sacred Harp* (Cooper Revision) at some of that state's black singings.

Actually, four versions of the *Sacred Harp* are used today: the J. L. White edition to a limited extent around Atlanta, Georgia; the James edition at some south Georgia singings; the Cooper edition along the Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas, and the Denson edition in most of Georgia and Alabama. Users of the Cooper and Denson editions far outnumber the others, and the Denson book appears to be the most dynamic, having been revised as recently as 1960 and 1966.



Japheth Jackson, son of Judge Jackson, who compiled the *Colored Sacred Harp* in 1934, leads 'Concord' at the annual Judge Jackson Memorial Singing, in April 1969 at the Union Grove Baptist Church near Ozark, Alabama.

Photograph by Joe Dan Boyd

It is the purpose of the *Sacred Harp* section of the Smithsonian Institution's 1970 Festival of American Folklife to introduce the entire tradition, with emphasis on the singing school aspect. Each day, members of the *Sacred Harp* community will conduct a "mimi-lesson" in fasola "rudiments" just as they have always been taught. In addition, authentic *Sacred Harp* singers will present a daily abbreviated singing, allowing visitors to participate.

Thus, Festival visitors may attend singing schools, ask questions, see and hear actual singings, or—with sufficient motivation—begin a journey toward becoming proficient four-shape singers and composers. While each day's singing school will be conducted by a qualified instructor, all participating singers welcome discussions with visitors.

The tradition beckons!

The Folklore Society of Greater Washington has a group which meets one Sunday a month to sing *Sacred Harp* hymns and to share a pot-luck supper. Residents of the Washington area who are interested should write to P.O. Box 19303, Washington, D. C. 20036. Others around the country who would like to start their own singing gatherings may write for hymnals and records to: *Sacred Harp Book Co.* (for Cooper revision)

P.O. Box 46

Troy, Alabama 36081

Hugh McGraw (for Denson revision)

P.O. Box 185

Bremen, Georgia 30110

"This Festival is like the visible part of an iceberg," notes James Morris, Director of The Division of Performing Arts and originator of the event. The non-visible support is the research, documentation and direction supplied by countless scholars, institutions and interested, creative people across the nation. A few such programs are reviewed here both to under-score our gratitude for their aid and in the hope that those who enjoy the Festival and seek a deeper understanding or involvement with the fields of folklore, folklife, cultural anthropology and history will be aware of a few of the avenues open for work in these areas.

The Smithsonian's Office of Academic Programs provides a number of research positions at the Institution annually. Richard Lunt, grant recipient for the 1969-1970 year surveys his field research leading up to his doctoral dissertation on an aspect of folk technology and its relation to a regional industry and tradition; Alan Jabbour and Joe Hickerson of the Library of Congress Archive of Folksong review programs and services of this unique section of the Music Division; Richard Dorson, Director of Indiana University's Folklore Institute provides insight into undergraduate and graduate programs in folklore and folklife; and Peter Smith, research associate in the American Studies Program, introduces a relatively new area of research and documentation, industrial archeology.

Ralph Rinzler