

CDSS Sings—Singing Across the Color Line: Reflections on *The Colored Sacred Harp*

by Jesse P. Karlsberg

CDSS's Year of Song responds to current debates about cultural appropriation and the asymmetrical power structures that inform our song choices and singing styles. Although hip-hop and other popular genres have been at the center of these debates, lovers of traditional song and dance can also benefit from reexamining the racial histories of the music forms we hold dear. How might cultural, social and racial histories effect the choices we make about what and how to sing? In this issue's installment of CDSS Sings, I delve into the story of *The Colored Sacred Harp* and share a song from the book to shed light on the racial history of Sacred Harp singing, one of the traditional music styles frequently programmed at CDSS camps and dance weekends. *The Colored Sacred Harp's* history and its current use have much to teach us about the politics that inform our decisions to embrace more inclusive musical repertoires.

Diverse populations across a wide swath of the southern United States have sung from *The Sacred Harp* for well over a century. Singing conventions flourished in the late 19th-century, not only in the predominantly white southern upcountry long associated with the style, but also in areas with roughly equal black and white populations, such as the Wiregrass region of Alabama, Georgia and Florida and the red clay hill region of Mississippi. Although a clear majority of these post-reconstruction-era singings were white institutions, black singers established and maintained well-attended conventions. In the 20th-century, when different editions of *The Sacred Harp* competed for singers' attention, white and black singers in a given region typically sang out of the same version, settling on the most easily attainable edition. Yet as I explore in my 2015 dissertation "Folklore's Filter: Race, Place, and Sacred Harp Singing," only white singers participated in the regular revisions of these books that added new songs and removed those that had fallen out of favor. Frustrated by his inability to get his shape-note compositions published in a locally edited version of *The Sacred Harp* in 1927, Judge Jackson, a prominent black singer from the southeastern Alabama corner of the Wiregrass region, took matters into his own hands. Jackson compiled a supplement featuring dozens of his own songs and those of family and friends, arranging

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them into *The Colored Sacred Harp*, typeset and printed in Chicago. Jackson included just a single white-authored song in the 1934 collection.

Used today at just two annual singings alongside two editions of *The Sacred Harp* and a related seven-note shape-note tunebook called *The Christian Harmony*, *The Colored Sacred Harp* never enjoyed broad popularity. At its peak, the tunebook was adopted by only a handful of local singings. Not intended to displace the other *Sacred Harp* editions in local circulation, *The Colored Sacred Harp* demonstrated black singers' separate but not quite equal participation in the Sacred Harp tradition thanks to the strictures of segregation.

The Colored Sacred Harp is well-known by contemporary Sacred Harp singers despite its minimal use. The tunebook filtered into public consciousness via folklore scholars in the 1930s and 1940s who set the stage for the folk revival of the 1960s and 1970s. A 1941 article

by black musicologist John W. Work III on black Sacred Harp singers from the Alabama Wiregrass introduced this particular population to a scholarly audience. Folklorists in search of research subjects and folk festival acts in the 1960s headed off in search of Work's original singing subjects. Black singer Dewey President Williams, who led monthly radio and television programs featuring Sacred Harp, gospel music, and preaching, in the area, jumped at the opportunity to take the show on the road when invited to Washington by folklorists Ralph Rinzler and Joe Dan Boyd, who visited the Alabama Wiregrass in the 1960s. Performances by Williams's group at the 1970 and 1976 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife and the 1971 Montreal Man and his World Expo primarily featured singing from *The Sacred Harp*, but always included a few selections from *The Colored Sacred Harp* as well. At these events, Williams sometimes commented on the complicated relationship between Wiregrass black singers and *The Sacred Harp*. Speaking from a Washington stage in 1970, Williams prefaced a performance of WONDROUS LOVE by noting, that "[t]his is the whites' *Sacred Harp* book. And we sing from

Remember Me

by T.Y. Lawrence, April 6, 1932

While I am in this life re - mem - ber me. While go - ing

While I am in this life re - mem - ber me. While go - ing

While I am in this life re - mem - ber me. While go - ing

The first system of the musical score for 'Remember Me' consists of four staves. The top three staves are vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, and Tenor) and the bottom staff is the bass line. The music is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The lyrics are: 'While I am in this life re - mem - ber me. While go - ing'.

through this vale re - mem-ber me. When I am gone to rest, to live with

through this vale re - mem-ber me. When I am gone to rest, to live with

through this vale re - mem-ber me. When I am gone to rest, to live with

The second system of the musical score continues the vocal parts and bass line. The lyrics are: 'through this vale re - mem-ber me. When I am gone to rest, to live with'.

all the blest, Please take my soul with Thee to live for aye.

all the blest, Please take my soul with Thee to live for aye.

all the blest, Please take my soul with Thee to live for aye.

The third system of the musical score concludes the piece. The lyrics are: 'all the blest, Please take my soul with Thee to live for aye.'

Tune typeset by Jesse P. Karlsberg

both [it and *The Colored Sacred Harp*] in Alabama.”¹ Even as Williams asserted black singers’ claim to both editions, he describes the *The Sacred Harp* as “white,” naming the political, economic and social inequality that had historically constrained black participation in Sacred Harp singing.

The Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers’ many performances and recordings ultimately rendered their particular style and repertoire synonymous with black Sacred Harp singing. Their popularity helped dispel the myth of Sacred Harp’s whiteness cultivated by white folklorists since George Pullen Jackson first framed the style as music of isolated Scotch-Irish southerners in his 1933 *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*. The group’s popularity also overshadowed the breadth and diversity of black Sacred Harp singing networks and the various tunebooks they adopted. In addition to their festival performances, Wiregrass Singers’ recordings documented the group’s distinctive style: full of ornaments and featuring regular call and response between Williams and the rest of the group, flat or neutral thirds, and other characteristics common among a range of black vernacular music forms often associated with antebellum or even West African cultural retentions. In the late 20th century, the network of black Sacred Harp singings in the Alabama Wiregrass contracted as its organizers aged and younger family members’ interest in the singings waned. *The Colored Sacred Harp*’s long decline eventually culminated in the 2009 cancellation of the last historically black annual singing using the tunebook alongside *The Sacred Harp*. As numbers at that historic singing dwindled in the 1990s and 2000s, a small number of white Sacred Harp singers from the area, including long-time editors of the region’s *Sacred Harp* edition Stanley Smith and Tommie Spurlock, joined Williams and other black singers to bolster the group’s fading numbers. Smith, in particular, took on an increasingly active role as long-time black participants died. Today, only two recently established singings in Montgomery, Alabama, use *The Colored Sacred Harp*, with each devoting about a half hour of singing to the book.

At these Montgomery singings, Smith draws on his long involvement in and support of black singings to facilitate contemporary singing out of the tunebook. Smith embraces rhythms that deviate from the book’s written notation and a pattern of dynamic emphasis called “accent” that he learned orally from years of attending singings. Smith’s longstanding involvement with the Wiregrass singers makes it

1 Sacred Harp Singers, *Festival Recordings, 1970: Wade and Fields Ward with Kahle Brewer; Sacred Harp Singers*, CD transfer, 1970, fp-1970-rr-0039, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

possible for him to transmit an embodied knowledge of the repertoire and style to a largely unfamiliar and mostly white singing class. And yet, Smith sounds different from the *The Colored Sacred Harp* recordings featuring Williams’s group in both studio and festival settings. Comparing the two singers, it is clear that Smith avoids mimicking black affect or the improvisatory call-and-response that characterized Williams’s vocal leadership of his ensemble of black Sacred Harp singers.

Smith’s perpetuation of *The Colored Sacred Harp* at the Montgomery singing demonstrates both an ethical approach to the crossing of musical color lines and the challenges these crossings pose. When we sing, we make choices about matters such as how we sound and what tone to use, or whether and how to ornament our singing. These choices are not neutral—they carry the long history of cultural appropriation of black musics that extends at least to the minstrel shows that dominated the popular entertainment landscape of the mid-nineteenth century. Making historically-informed and ethically-engaged choices requires an embodied knowledge of our music’s cultural histories and legacies. In Smith’s case, decades of friendship and singing fellowship with the children of *The Colored Sacred Harp*’s compiler affords him access to the music’s intended interpretation that he tries to respectfully pass on to the next generation of white *Colored Sacred Harp* singers.

In Thomas Y. Lawrence’s REMEMBER ME from *The Colored Sacred Harp*, Lawrence pleads to God to “remember me” “while going through this vale [of life]” and “when I am gone to rest.” We might interpret Lawrence’s text metaphorically: how can we maintain the traditions we care about now and also ensure their survival? REMEMBER ME is a good song, with a flowing melody and harmony parts, and an expansive chordal palette. Singers should be able to render the song with ease. But taking our cues from Smith, we might honor and remember the community that formed Lawrence and Williams by sensitively adopting a characteristic aspect of singing from the book: accent. Like most Sacred Harp singers, black singers from the Alabama Wiregrass emphasized the third and especially the first beat of every measure while backing off the unaccented second and fourth beats. But this particular group uniquely rendered accented beats with a slightly staccato pulse. (Watch the recommended multimedia extras to hear accent in practice.) If you choose to sing REMEMBER ME, consider accenting the song in homage to the world and legacy of its composer.

The choices we make when we sing songs initially performed in a context different from our own can help bridge vast differences of time, space

and culture. Our repertoire choices can facilitate respectful tributes to dear friends while highlighting often marginalized histories. Yet these same choices, if they allow for mimicry of affect, can easily turn well-intentioned efforts into caricatures that reaffirm marginalization. As we embrace more inclusive musical repertoires, let's pay careful attention to the choices we make, drawing on our shared embodied knowledge to sensitively remember and perpetuate songs and styles with which we are intimately familiar. Reflecting on the complicated racial politics that brought *The Colored Sacred Harp* to our attention, let's also consider the histories—personal and political—of our own corners of the vast landscape of traditional song and dance.

Multimedia Extras

- Black Sacred Harp singers from the Wiregrass region sing at a celebration of Dewey President Williams's 81st birthday, and Williams speaks about the tradition, in this 1979 film shot in Ozark, AL, and directed by Landon McCrary. YouTube video of a VHS tape dubbed from a 166 mm print. 17:22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aCHWxc3pT8>.
- H. Japheth Jackson, son of *Colored Sacred Harp* compiler Judge Jackson, leads a 1990s-era Dothan, Alabama, television program featuring singing from *The Sacred Harp*. Stanley Smith and Tommie Spurlock (third from right and fifth from left, back row, respectively), two longtime white supporters of black Sacred Harp singing in the Wiregrass region, join an aging group of area black singers. YouTube video. 29:33. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Cat1HyEeFM>.
- Stanley Smith speaks about *The Colored Sacred Harp* and leads a song from the book at a 2012 singing in Montgomery, Alabama. YouTube video. 3:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y9Kc4Y3G5k>.

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Musicians Column, cont. from p. 13
organizers. Some dances book out a year or more, some only a month or two. Some dances happen all year long, some take the summer off. When one or more of the dances don't work, look for others in the area. Is there a Waltz Night, or (if your band knows how to play for one) an English country dance? There are a lot of possibilities, and you may need them to build a tour. When things change, make sure that all band members are still available for the evolving tour.

To all dance musicians: Thank the organizer in your band for setting it all up, and have a great trip!

Dave Firestine plays mandolin and other string instruments with STEAM! (below) and The Privy Tippers, and can be found at the epicenter of Carp Camp at the Walnut Valley Festival (CA).



Dance & Sing Your Brains Out This Summer

PINEWOODS, Plymouth, MA

- Family Week, July 16-23
- Harmony of Song & Dance, July 23-30 (with *Contra Dance Callers Course*)
- English Dance Week, July 30-Aug 6
- American Dance & Music, Aug 6-13
- Early Music Week, Aug 13-20 (with *English Dance Leaders Training in Music & Accademia*)
- Campers' Week, Aug 20-27

OGONTZ, Lyman, NH

- Family Week July 31-Aug 7 (with *American Dance Musicians Course & Teachers Training Course*)

TIMBER RIDGE, High View, WV

- Adult & Family Week, Aug 14-21 (with *American Dance Musicians Course & Square Dance Callers Course*)

and a BRAND NEW WEEK: CAVELL, LEXINGTON, MI
Dance, Music & Spice, Aug 14-21



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