

Chapter 5

MUSIC

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Music has always been a part of the church with repertoires changing and adapting over time. In the beginning, there was no piano, but the members sang "lined hymns", a practice continued to this very day. Spirituals were sung during the brush arbor period (1834-1866). In his book, *Slave Religion*, Raboteau explained further where spirituals arose:

Unable to read the Bible for themselves and skeptical of their master's interpretation of it, most slaves learned the message of the Christian Gospel and translated it into songs in terms of their own experience. It was in the spirituals, above all, that the characters, themes, and lessons of the Bible became dramatically real and took on special meaning for the slaves."

Often times the true meaning behind these spirituals was taken for granted. According to Raboteau, the true essence of the spirituals came from communal songs, heard, felt, sung, and often danced with hand clapping, foot-stomping, head-shaking excitement. At the prayer meeting the spiritual was sung in its full communal and liturgical setting. These spirituals often were improvised. One elder member of Piney Grove confirmed this conclusion. Timothy Starling recalled: "Many of the songs that we sang in the cotton fields were made up there on the spot. It was all [sic] dependent upon what we felt like singing about that day."

Another early musical style practiced at Piney Grove was "lining out" hymns, a practice which dates to seventeenth century English parish churches and is still found in certain sects of both white and black Protestant churches. According to Melva Wilson Coston in *African American Christian Worship*, rather than keeping the Euro-American structure, African Americans reshaped or improvised hymns in a folk-like manner according to African aesthetic ideals. To sing hymns as they were heard in formalized settings did not lend itself to the social and spiritual bonding required of Africans in Diaspora. This was a process of making music all their own.

The Black Metered music was a special style of "metered hymn singing" beginning with, but not limited to, hymns by Isaac Watts, whose religious poetry became

popularized during the Great Awakening religious movement of the 1730s. It was influenced by the a cappella “call-and-respond” technique used both in spirituals and in the “lining tradition” of early Euro-Americans. The process consisted of the chanting or “tuning” of one or two lines of text in “singing” or recitative (Sprechgesang) fashion by a presenter, deacon, preacher, or song leader, ending on a definite pitch. The congregation “surged in”, often before the line is completed. It was the song leader’s task not only to set the pitch, but also to project loudly, clearly, and enthusiastically enough so as to encourage full participation by the congregation. Metered hymn singing in African American worship, dating from early nineteenth century (ca. 1807 or 1810), continues today. It was practiced mostly by African American Baptists in Southern rural communities along with other forms that reflected the constantly expanding repertoire of music forms and styles of worship.

According to Johnnie B. Jones, Piney Grove’s oldest surviving member, the church has sung seven shapenote tradition for as long as he could remember. In the notes to his seminal recording *Traditional Music of Alabama: African American Seven Shapenote Singing*, Steve Grauberger writes, “The tradition of African American ‘shapenote’ singing is ostensibly rooted in early British singing school practices that were transferred to New England colonies in the 1700s.” New England ministers of the period were not pleased with the singing skills of their congregations. Itinerant singing school teachers who had some musical training began traveling throughout the region leading singing schools, which were designed to improve congregational singing. As an aid to teaching, they increasingly used special tunebooks which replaced standard music notation with a simplified system of four specially-shaped noteheads. This earlier four-shape system was gradually replaced beginning in the mid-1800s by a seven-shape system, with a different shaped notehead for each pitch of the major and minor scale. The purpose of the shapenote singing tradition was to improve the quality of singing in congregations and to simplify the music notation from the standard forms so that a novice singer could learn to sing without a working knowledge of pitches or key signatures. New Englanders eventually abandoned the shapenote and singing school tradition, but in the 1800s it gained a strong foothold in the South. By the late 1800s, formal singing conventions using shapenote tunebooks were held across the region, and they became an important social and religious outlet for many communities, including those in Randolph County.

A distinctive feature of shapenote singing is that the singers sing the note names—do-re-mi-a-sol-la-ti-do—before singing the words to the song. According to Dr. R. Dortch, author of *Short Talks on Music*, it was important that the participant practice the scales frequently in order to sing the notes of a song. The seven shapenote music had two connected staves for each line of music. The connected staves are also called the grand staff. On top were the soprano and alto lines. The tenor and bass lines were on the lower staff. The music was sung in unaccompanied four-part harmony. The

introduction of the seven shapenote system most likely began at the same time in both the Anglo-American and African American communities during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Singing schools met frequently in the African American communities in both Alabama and Georgia. At Piney Grove, however, most of the participants did not attend a formal singing school. In Randolph County, all of the instructions for shape note singing were taught within the local churches. The singing teachers were usually people who knew the notes, and ensured that students sang the proper notes correctly. Many of the people once active in the seven-shape note singing tradition have long since died, and there are few left to teach the tradition. Johnnie B. Jones first learned the tradition when he was about sixteen years old. He was a student of Mr. Saul Richardson and Mr. Eddie Smith at their homes in their spare time. Deacon Leonard Greene of Virgil Chapel was instrumental in promoting the tradition as was the Knighton family in Benevolence, Georgia. The key figures in Randolph County that remained as of 2004 included Jones, of the Piney Grove Missionary Baptist Church, Ethel Baldwin and Rozell Johnson, of Benevolence Missionary Baptist, Dora Gilbert, of Pleasant Grove A.M.E. and Mattie Dixon of Saint John A.M.E.

Songbooks for this tradition were ordered from music companies that printed songs in the shape noted formats, such as Stamps-Baxter, A. J. Showalter, and Vaughn. New books were published yearly. A few of the older participants still utilized a handful of songbooks collected over the years. Participants kept the old songbooks when the shape note tradition participants began to die out. Some participants distributed photocopies of a particular selection in preparation for the singings and conventions.

One of the most popular shapenote song was "*My Heart Is Filled With Song*" published in 1939 by the A.J. Showalter Company in Dalton, Georgia and listed in the Sparkling Songs as song number 30. (See Figure No.1)

Songbooks used by two members of Piney Grove, Pluma and Eligh Calloway illustrated some of the other books used in the area. Annie Murphy, the granddaughter of the Calloway's and the church secretary, had saved a few of their songbooks. In her collection, she had a Sparkling Songs and a series of songbooks published by the Stamps-Baxter Music & Printing Company, Humble Hearts, 1945, Crowning Joy, 1957, Silver Gleams, 1958, Perfect Joy, 1959, and Dawning Light, 1960. There was also one songbook entitled Heavenly Songs published in Atlanta, Georgia by the J. M. Henson Music Company in 1956.

The majority of the singings and conventions took place in churches and were racially segregated as was typical in neighboring states. Whites did attend some singings and conventions in Randolph County in the 30s through the late 50s. However, they did not actually take part in singing itself. The majority of those that attended were African Americans. In Randolph County, only a few churches other than Piney Grove were still active in the conventions and singings that practiced the seven-shape note tradition. The remaining active churches included: Mount

Vernon Missionary Baptist, Virgil Chapel Missionary Baptist, Pleasant Grove A.M.E., Benevolence Missionary Baptist, Antioch Missionary Baptist, and Mitchell Grove Missionary Baptist churches.

People came from miles around to participate in the sings and conventions. However, the tradition slowly began to decline from one generation to the next. One example was the Georgia/Alabama Singing Convention. The Georgia/Alabama Singing convention is still active, although in reduced numbers. The most recent singing convention convened at New Salem C.M.E. Church in Benevolence, Georgia on February 23, 2003. Held every three months, a delegate from each church attended it to make a financial contribution. Unfortunately, there were only eight to nine churches left in the convention, and all the participants were members of churches that were located in Georgia. The churches represented the following counties in the southwest Georgia area: Randolph, Stewart, and Quitman. All of the Alabama churches had long since dropped out. Membership had fallen as a consequence; no one had filled their places. In addition, Piney Grove was no longer a part of the convention, although Mr. Jones was in attendance. This surviving convention provides insight into the format for singing conventions in the area that Piney Grove has been involved with in the past.

Participant numbers at the convention ranged from thirty to forty. The participants, who were all African Americans, ranged in ages from late 30s to late 80s. Most of the participants were female. Conventions always began promptly at Noon. Unlike, the Alabama convention, participants did not arrange themselves in the *hollow square*, an arrangement in which participants were seated according to voice part, for example, sopranos, tenor, alto, bass, and trebles. An individual stood in the center of the square. Then he stated the page number and title of the song they were about to sing. The *keyer* or *pitcher* would then *pitch* the song for the individual. In Randolph County, there was more of a grouping according to churches, for example, all New Salem participants sat together. However, this was not to say that the participants did not arrange themselves within their group according to voice part. In essence, there were no special seating arrangements. The participants did not *walk in time* either. In conventions and singings in the early days an individual walked to the beat of the music, as he or she sang.

The order of service was similar to that of regular worship services in African American Baptist churches and the eastern Alabama conventions. There was devotion, a scripture, roll call of churches, and then two singing sessions, the financial report, and finally the benediction. For instance, during the Georgia/Alabama Singing Convention, a Deacon Joe Jarrell and a Deacon Charles Jones began devotional services with a very traditional hymn, "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone." As they lined the hymn, the congregation responded with uplifted voices. Deacon Joe Jarrell, when he knelt at a chair, offered prayer for the participants and the convention. Devotional services continued with a spiritual/gospel song that was led by Deacon

Charles Jones entitled, "Take Hold to My Hand Lord". A scripture was then read, Psalm 136:1:10.

Throughout the convention, there was a mixture of both spirituals and seven shape note songs. After the church roll call, the singing sessions began. In this convention, participants sang at least three sessions. In the first session each church sang one selection either a spiritual or a shape note song. However, while in earlier times, the singers at the convention no longer sang the shape notes first, as was in hallmark of shapenote singers, but rather simply sang the words. During the second session, each church sang a selection and made a financial contribution or "go 'round the table' or 'sing and pay'. The participants did not shout much or give evidence of being 'slain in the spirit.' They were much more reserved as was typical of the shapenote tradition. At the conclusion of this event, they ate a light supper.

Piney Grove had three choirs who alternated Sundays: a Senior choir, a Junior choir, and an Adult choir. The most distinctive characteristic of the Senior Choir was its unchanged musical style. From its origins, the Senior Choir had only sung shape notes. The Senior Choir participated in the founding of the First Sunday Singing conventions in Randolph County in the late 1940s-early 1950s. The purpose of the singing convention was to raise money for the church building fund. During the singing conventions, invited guest choirs from the local churches attended, sang a selection, and made a donation to the church. Deacon Johnnie B. Jones asked the church's permission to host the Singing Convention on the 3rd Saturday and Sunday in July of 1965, but that was during the same time as the church's annual revival. The Senior choir was very active in assisting various building projects of the church. For example, in 1971, the Senior choir purchased carpet for the church floors.

The Senior choir often participated in the seven shapenote tradition at what was known as the Fifth Sunday Sing. The Fifth Sunday of a month was commonly set aside for singings in the African American community because rural churches only met once a month and the preacher usually had another church for the remaining Sundays. They were also held after church services as well. For example, a Fifth Sunday Singing was hosted at the Piney Grove Missionary Baptist Church immediately after Sunday school. Like singing conventions, the singings usually began around noon and closed near 3 p.m. In the early days of the tradition, a sing lasted until late evening and often encompassed a weekend. On Friday evening, the delegates conducted the business session, and on Saturday the singing began and continued until late evening; and on Sunday, after Sunday school, the singing convened and continued until late afternoon. Therefore, it was a communal and fellowship type activity for participants of the tradition, which included meals. The Fifth Sunday Singing resembled the Georgia/Alabama Singing Convention in that the participants were mostly female, and the average participant's age ranged from the mid-30s to the late 80s.

Shapenote singing in Randolph County and the Piney Grove Missionary Baptist

Church is a dying tradition. Johnnie B. Jones firmly believed that in order to keep the African American shapenote singing alive two ingredients were essential: a younger generation sincere interest in the shapenote singing tradition, and the support of the pastor. Jones felt that if there were not any youth involved in the shape note singing the tradition lacked the ability to survive. He also believed that the pastor of the church had to display an interest in the shape note singing tradition. Jones' believed that the pastor demonstrated interest when he participated in the singings and encouraged the members of the congregation to participate also.

The Junior choir, organized in January 16, 1973, reorganized on October 28, 1989. Members of the Junior Choir ranged in age from five to seventeen years old. An interesting characteristic about the Junior choir was that in its infancy stage, it sang shape-note songs. Once it was a part of the previously described First Sunday Night Singing at Piney Grove. Eventually, in the late 1970s, the Junior choir stopped participating in the First Sunday Night Singing. However, some time later the Junior Choir, renamed Piney Grove Choir No. 2, rejoined the First Sunday Night Singing. Piney Grove Choir No. 2 continued to sing acapella shape-note songs until the church hired its first pianist, Gary Slaughter. Slaughter was the son of Reverend W. Slaughter of Dawson, Terrell County, Georgia. Later, the name of the choir reverted to the Piney Grove Missionary Baptist Church Junior Choir, and the choir began to sing more contemporary gospel songs with instrumental accompaniment and gradually moved away from the seven shapenote tradition. Also, the Junior Choir celebrated their choir anniversaries annually. The Junior Choir anniversaries were modeled after the Adult Choir, and observed in the same manner.

The Adult Choir was an offspring of the Senior Choir organized in May 1993. It consisted of adults from ages eighteen to fifty years old and up. It started because of the vast changes in music and the generational changes within the Piney Grove church. The "younger" generation wanted to sing with the accompaniment of instruments and use more contemporary gospel music. The Piney Grove Adult Choir hired the second pianist in the church's history, Willie Floyd Carter. Willie F. Carter, was born and raised in Cuthbert, Randolph County, Georgia, had the gift of music from a very young age, and played for various churches within the community. He was also a member of Perfect Praise Men of God (MOG) Gospel Group. Carter was the musician for Piney Grove Adult Choir from 1993-2003. The Adult Choir sang accompanied by keyboard, piano, and drums. It also celebrated annually. Each year, local church choirs of different denominations got invitations to the choir anniversary. The invited guest choirs sang one or two selections and gave a donation to the choir. This event was practiced in most of the local African American churches in rural Southwest Georgia. Choir anniversaries, however, verged on extinction by 2001. In Randolph County, many church choirs ceased to participate in other church choir anniversaries. The reason for this decline is probably generational. However, this tradition is still practiced in other rural areas of South Georgia.

The music of the Piney Grove Missionary Baptist Church was very traditional initially. However, gradually, the music changed with new generations. Contemporary gospel had taken the place of the shapenote tradition. According to Coston: Black Gospel music referred to both a genre of musical composition and a vocal or instrumental performance style. Both represented a composite of a variety of musical expressions: Spirituals, metered hymns, improvised hymns, blues, ragtime, jazz, and nineteenth-century Euro-American gospel hymns. The term *modern* applied to Gospel songs perceived that emerged in the 1960s and continued to overlap with newly evolving forms. In 1957, the Newport Jazz Festival featured traditional Gospel music and the sacred Gospel sound became an acceptable worldly musical idiom. Gospel music soon “hit the charts” and there was little if any distinction between Gospel music for worship or for entertainment. Contemporary Gospel music emerged during the 1980s and supplemented other sounds heard in some Black worship services.

Contemporary gospel has taken the place of the shapenote singing tradition in Randolph County. Such artists and groups as Kurt Franklin and Keith “Wonder Boy” Johnson and the Spiritual Voices, Lee Williams and the Spiritual QCs, Doc McKinsey, Dottie Peebles, and Mary Mary have taken the lead in African American Gospel music. The youth, a vital key to keeping the church’s music tradition alive are interested in these contemporary artists and music styles.





Left, participants in the Central Singing Convention, right to left standing: Ruthie Fair, Luster Rogers, Loretha James, Wonnie Brookins, and others; seated in hat Dora Gilbert, St. John's AME Church, Cuthbert, Georgia, 6-29-03, photo by Laurie Kay Sommers.

Right, Johnnie B. Johns (foreground), Dora Gilbert and others; seated front Wonnie Brookins at the Central Singing Convention, St. John's AME Church, Cuthbert, Georgia, 6-29-03, photo by Laurie Kay Sommers.

FOOTNOTES

Raboteau. Slave Religion, 225.

2 Ibid, 226.

3 Timothy Starling, Interview, April 14, 1998, Cuthbert, Georgia.

4 Costen. African American Christian Worship, 96-100.

5 Ibid.

6 Grauberger, Steve. Traditional Music of Alabama Volume 2: African American Seven Shapenote Singing (Alabama Traditions 202), Montgomery, Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 2002. [www. Arts. State.al.us/actc/volume2/VOL2.html](http://www.Arts.State.al.us/actc/volume2/VOL2.html), page 4.

7 Lornell, page 86-89.

8 Dortch, Short Talk on Music.

9 Grauberger, page 6.

10 Johnnie B. Jones. Interview, April 14th, 2003.

11 Johnnie B. Jones, Interview. April 14th, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.

12 Johnnie B. Jones. Interview. April 14, 2003, and Ethel Knighton, April 15th, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.

13 Ibid.

14 Georgia/Alabama Singing Convention, February 23, 2003, Benevolence, Georgia.

15 Ethel Baldwin, Interview, April 15, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.

16 Kuanita Murphy. "The African American Sacred Harp in Randolph County, GA: A Dying Tradition", May 8th, 2003, Valdosta State University.

17 Johnnie B. Jones, Interview, February 2, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.

- 18 Kuanita Murphy, "The African American Sacred Harp: A Dying Tradition in Randolph County, Georgia." May 2003, Valdosta State University.
- 19 Johnnie B. Jones, Interview, February 2, 2003.
- 20 Georgia/Alabama Singing Convention, February 23, 2003, Benevolence, Georgia and Murphy, May 2003.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Traditional Music of Alabama: African American Seven Shapenote Singing (Alabama Traditions 202) www.arts.state.al.us/actc/volume2/VOL2.html
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- 25 Ibid.
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- 29 Johnnie B. Jones, Interview. February 2, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Piney Grove, Minutes, December 16, 1964.
- 32 Ibid, April 17, 1971.
- 33 Costen. African American Christian Worship.
- 34 Piney Grove, Minutes. March 2002.
- 35 Ethel B. Knighton, Interview. April 15th, 2003. Cuthbert, Georgia.
- 36 Georgia/Alabama Singing Convention, February 23, 2003, Benevolence, Georgia.
- 37 Johnnie B. Jones. Interview. April 15th, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.
- 38 Johnnie B. Jones. Interview. April 15th, 2003, Cuthbert, Georgia.
- 39 Piney Grove. Minutes. January 1973 and October 1989.
- 40 Ibid, February 19, 1972.
- 41 Ibid, December 13, 1985.
- 42 Ibid, January 17, 1986.
- 43 Ibid, October 18, 1985.
- 44 Ibid, October 1989.
- 45 Piney Grove. Minutes. May 14, 1993, page 40.
- 46 Ibid, September 17, 1993, page 52.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid, October 19, 2003.
- 49 Ibid, September 23, 1994.
- 50 Coston, pages 96-100.
- 51 Murphy. "The African American Sacred Harp in Randolph County, GA, 10

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