

VOLUME ONE

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FS 3844

MUSIC OF THE BAHAMAS

RECORDED AND EDITED BY SAMUEL B. CHARTERS



BAHAMAN FOLK GUITAR JOSEPH SPENCE

M
1681
B2
M987
1959
v.1

Cover design by Ronald Clyne

MUSIC LP

MUSIC OF THE BAHAMAS

COMING IN ON A WING AND A PRAYER
THERE WILL BE A HAPPY MEETING IN GLORY
BROWNSKIN GAL

I'M GOING TO LIVE THAT LIFE
FACE TO FACE THAT I SHALL KNOW HIM
JUMP IN THE LINE

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BAHAMAN FOLK GUITAR

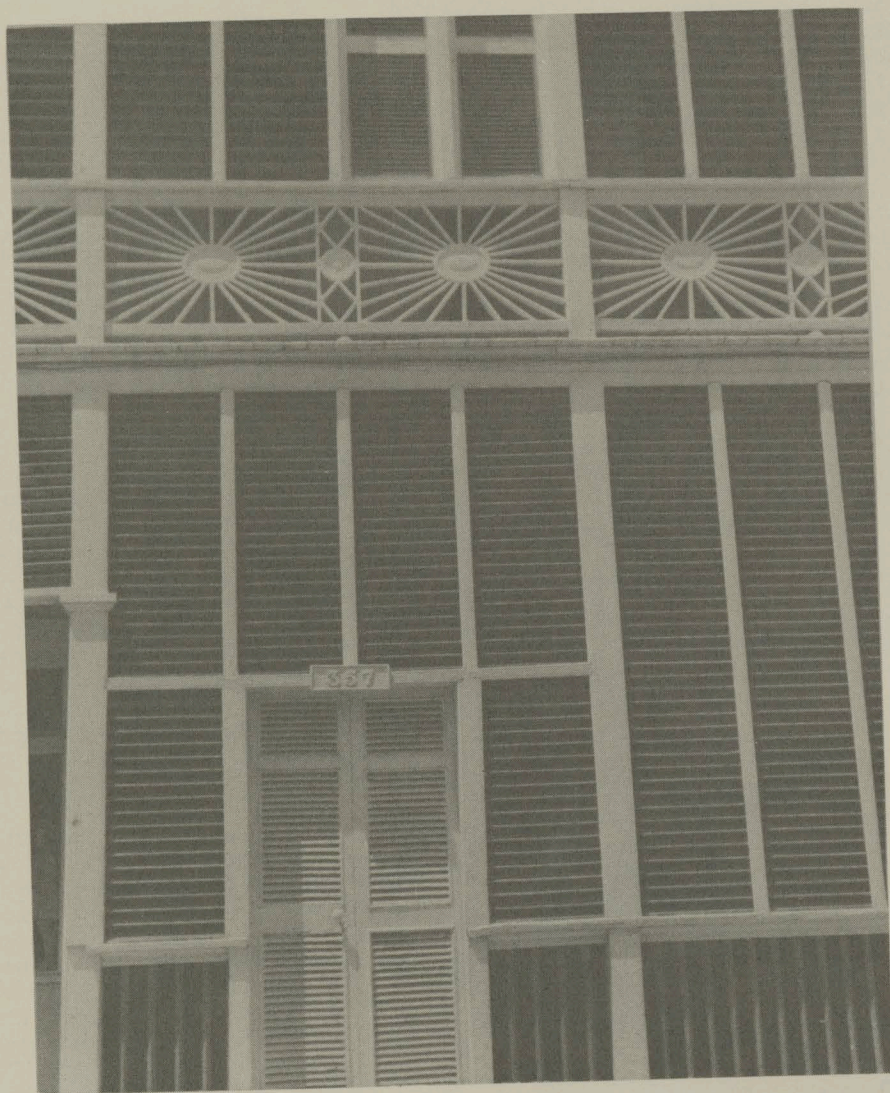


Photo by A. R. Danberg

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From the swaying deck of a small boat, standing off the barrier reef, the coast line of Andros Island is a ragged, littered shore of deserted beaches and low headlands. The prevailing winds sweep toward the shoreline, and the sea surges across the reef to the warm shallows off the beach. The occasional sails of native fishing boats dance uncertainly in the haze of the afternoon sun. Boats draw close to pass, and voices call across the water. The island is quiet, except for the cries of small birds in the trees. There are small settlements along the shore. A few houses in the trees behind the beach, with the boats pulled into a creek or anchored in the deeper water off shore. Women in bright dresses hunt along the beach for shells, and children play in the water. From the scattered houses there are narrow roadways, scraped into the coral through the heavy brush, leading to smaller settlements a mile or so behind the shore. The outlines of small stucco houses can be seen on the low ridges.



Photo by S.B.Charters

A NASSAU STREET

It is a poor island, except for the few weeks in the early winter when the boats have come in from the crawfish beds with the money from the season's catch. There are small farms back in the brush, but a few plantings exhaust the thin soil covering the crumbling coral. There are a few pigs, and small herds of goats, but fish is the most important food, with rice brought from Nassau on the fishing boats. The interior of the island is deserted, covered with shallow lakes, or pine barrens, with mosquitoes and flies filling the air. Andros has been dogged with such endless bad fortune that many of the older natives feel the island is haunted.

Except for a handful of white residents in two or three of the larger settlements, the people of Andros are descended from the Bahaman slaves. They are deeply religious, most of them Church of England, the others Catholic. The island's poverty has left them sensitive and dissatisfied, and many of the younger people are trying to live in the colonies' overcrowded capitol city, Nassau, on the island of New Providence. The life in the settlements is difficult and monotonous. Music is the only creative expression of the island's people, and religious singing and instrumental music have become an intensely important part of their lives.



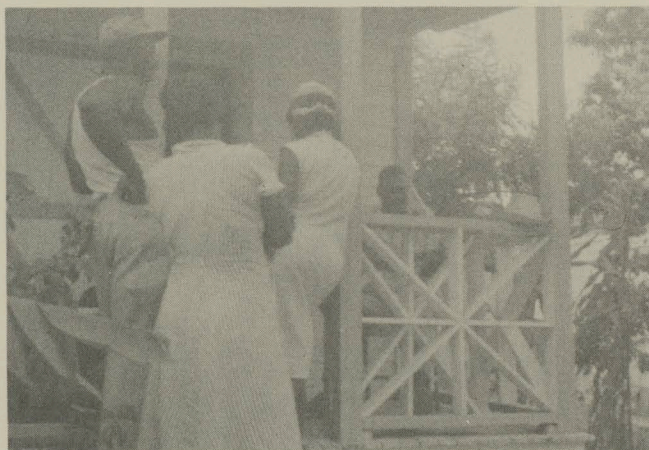
BAHAMAN SLOOPES

Photo By S. B. Charters

The most important instrument on Andros is the guitar. Almost every young man plays the guitar, tuned to an older English tuning, with the lowest string a tone lower than the modern tuning. They carry their instruments with them as they walk to friends' houses in the darkness, and take them in the small boat cabins when they are at sea. Often they use the instrument to accompany singing, but more often it is played as a solo instrument. Women from different settlements, meeting in the small coastal mail boat, will argue about the guitar players in their settlements, trying to convince each other that the musician from their settlement is the best on Andros. Most of the men play the instrument with their fingers, rather than with a flat pick, and the music is usually from the church hymnals.

There was one man on Andros that the women never argued about. His name was Joseph Spence, from a settlement called Small Hope, a few miles north of Fresh Creek, in northern Andros. Spence was the best guitar player any one on Andros could remember hearing.

I heard Spence one hot afternoon in the settlement of Fresh Creek. A group of men were building a house, and Spence was sitting on a pile of bricks, playing for them. I caught myself looking behind the wall the men were working on, to see if there was another guitar player with him. I had heard a number of guitar players in the Bahamas and in the South, but I had never heard anything like Spence. His playing was stunning. He was playing simple popular melodies, and using them as the basis for extended rhythmic and melodic variations. He often seemed to be improvising in the bass, the middle strings and the treble at the same time. Sometimes a variation would strike the men and Spence himself as so exciting that he would simply stop playing and join them in the shouts of excitement. One of the men sent for a bottle of rum, and the others drifted back to work.



SPENCE AND HIS AUDIENCE Photo by A.R.Danberg

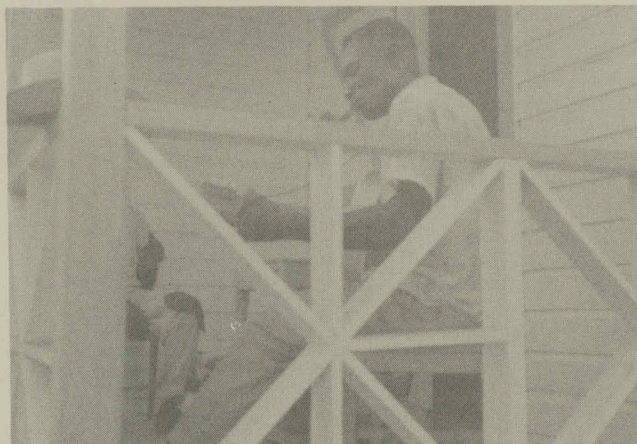
Spence talked easily, calling to his friends as they passed. He was about fifty, making his living as a stone mason in Nassau, playing for occasional weddings or parties. He was a large, powerful man, his hands strong and quick. His sister and her husband still lived in Small Hope, and he had sailed to Andros from Nassau to spend a few weeks. The American recession had forced many young Bahamans, in the United States on labor contracts, to return to Nassau, and there was serious unemployment. Spence knew he could always live at Small Hope; so he had come to the island until there would be jobs in Nassau. He was seeing his friends, playing his guitar for them.

He was willing to record, emptied his bottle of rum, and we walked to the other side of the settlement, picking up a crowd of young girls and children as we walked. He sat down, joked with the girls, then played without a break of hesitation for nearly an hour. Then he sat listening to what he had played, laughing, nodding his head at exciting moments, and exchanging remarks with the people gathered around him. Late in the afternoon he stood up, smiling, and with the children still around him, he and the girls began walking toward the beach. I could hear him playing as they walked along the path. I never saw him again.

Joseph Spence, guitar and occasional singing. Recorded at Fresh Creek Settlement, Andros; Bahamas Islands, July 23, 1958. Recording by S. B. Charters; technical assistant, A. R. Danberg.

In the Bahamas today there are three distinct musical styles. The older "anthem" songs of the religious settlements are still popular, but the younger people sing many "spirituals" from the southern United States. In Nassau there is a popular "folk song" style used for dancing and parties. Spence is one of the few Bahaman musicians able to play in each of the styles with intense, creative excitement. COMING IN ON A WING AND A PRAYER is an American popular song from the 1940's, THERE WILL BE A HAPPY MEETING and FACE TO FACE are older anthems, I'M GOING TO LIVE THAT LIFE is a spiritual, and BROWNSKIN GAL and JUMP IN THE LINE are popular Nassau dance melodies.

One of the women listening to him play kept asking Spence to sing, and when he protested that he didn't sing she answered, "What do you mean you can't sing? You got a mouth to talk!" He sang the spiritual I'M GOING TO LIVE THAT LIFE, and he was partially correct in his estimate of his own vocal abilities. He can sing, but the words are unintelligible. The chanted verses are freely recited biblical material in an involved rhythmic development, but it is difficult to understand even occasional words. Somehow, though, this takes very little away from the performance. The rough shout and the rhythmic guitar, set against each other, create an excitement and brilliance that is unforgettable.



JOSEPH SPENCE Photo by A.R. Danberg

BAHAMAN MUSIC ON FOLKWAYS RECORDS.

FE4440 RELIGIOUS SONGS AND DRUMS IN THE BAHAMAS - Recorded by Marshall Stearns, in Nassau.

FW6824 GOSPEL SONGS FROM THE BAHAMAS - Recorded by Marshall Stearns, in Nassau.

to be released.

ANTHEMS, WORK SONGS & BALLADS FROM THE BAHAMAS - Recorded by S. B. Charters, on Andros Island. Album No. FS 3845

HYMNS & DANCES FROM THE BAHAMAS - Recorded by S. B. Charters, on Andros Island. Album No. FS 3846

SIDE ONE

Band 1. COMING IN ON A WING AND A PRAYER

Band 2. THERE WILL BE A HAPPY MEETING IN GLORY

Band 3. BROWNSKIN GAL

SIDE TWO

Band 1. I'M GOING TO LIVE THAT LIFE

Band 2. FACE TO FACE THAT I SHALL KNOW HIM

Band 3. JUMP IN THE LINE