

# Religious Songs & Drums in the Bahamas

Recorded by Marshall Stearns

Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4440



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1953

MUSIC LP



THE BAPTIST-METHODIST CHOIR  
CHURCH OF GOD SERVICE  
DRUMS

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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#### Foreword by Harold Courlander

This album of recordings samples two diverse streams of music in the Bahamas, and illustrates how unlike musical influences may defy acculturative processes under conditions of close proximity. Church music of the kind included in this collection has drawn almost exclusively upon the United States mainland for its inspiration, although the Bahamans have through their own interpretation of the music given it some new twists. As Mr. Stearns points out in his introduction, American recordings have fed and nourished this stream of spirituals and gospel singing to the point where one must regard it as simply an offshoot of a large continental musical style. What is most interesting about it is the manner in which it is performed in the Bahamas. Having taken it over, Bahamans have reserved the right to regard it as raw material to be used as freely as desired. In one of these pieces, for example, you will detect the melodic line of the spiritual "No Hiding Place," but the rendition is quite specialized and unusual.

The drumming music, on the other hand, is clearly non-continental in inspiration. It belongs to a large and vigorous rhythmic tradition that extends throughout the West Indies in varying degrees of intensity to the eastern shores of Central and South America. This tradition is African. In certain parts of the West Indies it has survived with great vigor, and it has survived most strongly where it has continued to be associated with religious and ceremonial practices, as in Haiti, Cuba, and Trinidad, for example. Where the cohesive force of religious practice has disappeared, the African-type music has lost its dynamism, with the result that it has tended to disappear in the flood of modern West Indian music or popular music from the United States. In some instances it has simply disappeared, in others it has undergone such intensive hybridization that very little is left of the original.

Available information indicates that this Bahaman drumming is today primarily secular in character, though further study may indicate that religious motifs persist. In any case, the fact that it has survived in the Bahamas at all is of special interest. The

claves -- known in the Bahamas as "cleavers" -- appear to be an importation from the Spanish-speaking islands. The drums themselves are no longer carved, but made the easy way, out of kegs. But the use of the saw as a complement to the drums is a rare and ingenious innovation. It appears to be an adaptation -- as is the wash-board in American Negro folk music -- of the scraping instrument of West African origins. In West Africa, and in early days in the West Indies, the notched scraping stick was often used along with drums. Notched gourds called guayos are commonly used today as scraping instruments in Cuba, Puerto Rico and elsewhere. In the Bahamas -- as recorded here -- the saw is employed for the same purpose. It is played by scraping the saw teeth with a knife, and it is flexed to produce different tones as though it were played with a violin bow.

This collection does not pretend to survey the wide field of Bahaman folk music, but simply presents two interesting and contrasting aspects of such music in the Bahamas today.

#### Introduction and Notes on the Recordings by Marshall W. Stearns

Of all the islands in the West Indies, the Bahamas have been the closest to the U.S.A., both geographically and culturally. Although Columbus discovered the Bahamas in 1492 the first actual European settlement consisted of about 70 Puritans exiled from Bermuda in 1649. The islands had been claimed by England previously, but French and Spanish raids continued for the next 150 years. In one period of 15 years, the Spaniards attacked the islands 34 times, and in 1779 occupied Nassau for a year. In 1783, the Bahamas were ceded to England by the treaty of Versailles.

The influence of the U.S.A. was felt at an early date. In 1784, pro-British Americans, fleeing from the American Revolution, began to arrive in the Bahamas from New York, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia. Some of them brought slaves with them and, for the first time, the number of Negroes exceeded the number of whites. The Americans tried to introduce the large-plantation system but found the soil unsuitable for both sugar cane and cotton. So, instead, a "task work" system established itself, consisting of small gangs who were free to quit after a certain amount of work was done. By 1807, when the slave trade was banned, the Americans were returning to their homeland.



Another factor was at work. In 1801, there were 752 free Negroes in the Bahamas; in 1831, there were 2,991. This transition was aided by the Slave Code of 1826 which made manumission relatively simple. Further, although the abolitionists were never very active in the Bahamas, the restrictions on the slaves were comparatively light. When all slaves in the British Empire were freed in 1834, the change in the Bahamas -- unlike Jamaica and other English possessions -- was uneventful. As late as 1832, however, British men-of-war were dumping captured cargoes of contraband Africans in Nassau, thus renewing direct connections with the African continent.

Throughout its early history, the outstanding economic fact about the Bahamas, unlike the "Sugar Islands" of the West Indies, was its grinding poverty. It was one of the poorest British Colonial possessions. Occasional booms, due to piracy, the arrival of American refugees, and blockade running during the Civil War and Prohibition, were each followed by tragic recessions. During one economic recession, Bahamians settled in Key West, Florida. An important fact emerges from this general account: the Bahamas were more or less left alone because they offered no opportunities for economic gain.

The folk music of the present day in the Bahamas suggests a meeting of British and African traditions in somewhat different proportions than elsewhere in the West Indies, with infiltrations from the nearby Spanish-and French-speaking islands, and a strong influence from the U.S. mainland through popular music as heard through radio and phonograph recordings. Today, the latest "rhythm and blues" hits in Harlem -- a large body of current recordings unheard by the general American public -- are played simultaneously on juke boxes in the "native" quarter of Nassau. The Bahamian calypso singer, Blind Blake, attributes much of his success to the recordings of blues singer Bessie Smith.

**SIDE I, Bands 1, 2, 3. THE BAPTIST-METHODIST CHOIR.** This mixed troupe of a dozen singers, lead by Miss Euma Shachan at the piano, was assembled by Mr. Charles H. Weir to illustrate old-time religious singing. Mr. Weir had spent several years in the U.S.A., working with choral groups among Southern colleges and he remembered the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The soloist is a girl in her teens, Miss Dorothy Major. With a few qualifications, this music has been strongly influenced by American gospel singing, which developed from the spiritual and the blues during the last fifty years. Fortunately, we are in a position to judge the extent of this influence. Miss Mahalia Jackson of New Orleans made a recording of "In the Upper Room" a few years ago (Apollo 262). She is accompanied by both piano and organ, plus a mixed choir which sings a call-and-response phrase in the conventional harmony popularized long ago by the Mills Brothers and others. In the Bahama version, Miss Major is ac-

companied by a similar group and a piano, but the harmony employed in the call-and-response is not quite conventional. It is noticeably less European and, at the same time, produces a lighter, looser rhythm. Further, it has more of a group feeling. The overall form, nevertheless, is identical.

**SIDE I, Bands 4, 5, 6. CHURCH OF GOD SERVICE.** These selections are from the evening service of the Church of God in Nassau. The Church of God, also known as the Sanctified or Holiness Church, is presided over by Bishop Alvan C. Moss, who was born in Crooked Island in the Bahamas, lived in Panama during World War I, and was converted in Florida in 1920. For the last thirty years he has been known as the most powerful preacher on the islands and his churches have prospered mightily. He has followed the American pattern of evangelism. In the U.S.A., The Church of God has been gradually lifting the old ban against dancing and the use of musical instruments decreed originally by the Baptist and Methodist denominations; first the piano, tambourine, and drums were added, and more recently an occasional cornet, trombone, or fiddle appeared. The practice still meets with considerable opposition, however, and Elder Beck of Buffalo, for example, was sharply criticized in 1953 for allowing the instrumentally accompanied recording of his sermonette "Winehead Willie, Put That Bottle Down" to be issued. His reply was that he just couldn't see the devil having all that good music.

In the church of Bishop Moss, in the Bahamas, however, the use of instrumental accompaniment has outrun the American practice by far. At one time during the service recorded here, there were 16 instruments, with trumpeter L. L. Dean featured, accompanying the service in a style strongly reminiscent of early New Orleans marching jazz. The instruments included all the horns of a brass band, plus guitars, fiddles, clarinets, and cymbals. In the first two selections, the microphone was placed to pick up the band; in the last two selections, it was placed near the front of the congregation to pick up the handclapping of a group of six-to ten-year-old girls.

**SIDE II, Bands 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. DRUMS.** The question as to why relatively primitive drumming survived in the Bahamas, while it disappeared early in the parallel case of the U.S.A., is difficult to answer conclusively. The so-called "Fire Dance" is believed by many to have an African source. Currently, it has been energetically revived for the tourists. "The Jumping Dance" is the traditional name for this dance, in which the performers leap over burning coals. If there is any connection between "The Jumping Dance" and West African religious survivals, it has yet to be documented. The drums are nail kegs covered with goat skin; they are played with the bare hands.

The "Ring Play" is a circle dance similar to other circle dances of the West Indies, but it is social rather than religious, as are the "Heel and Toe Polka" and the "Jook Dance." (The origin of the word "jook" is unknown, but it may be noted that a Juka Dance has been reported variously in the West Indies.) The drummers are Alfred Henderson, known as "Tojo," who solos on the "Ring Play" and "Heel and Toe Polka." On the "Fire Dance," drummer Gabriel Adderley is added, as well as on the "Jook Dance." On the "Jumping Dance," a third drummer, Harcourt Symonette, is added. Wendell Roker plays the claves, and Howard Johnson the saw -- which is played by scraping a knife across the saw teeth. Carnival music, which employs the same rhythms, customarily adds a cow-bell to the drumming.

The basic rhythm of all these pieces seems to be a kind of samba, to which unique local steps are danced. The same rhythms are used at the Junkanoo Carnival (alleged to be named after an African named John Canoe) on New Year's eve. None of the drummers could remember a time when these rhythms had not been played and all were quite concerned in playing them correctly. On the "Jumping Dance," for example, it was agreed that Adderley should "knock" first, Henderson second, and Symonette third, while Roker played the "cleaver" (claves) and Johnson the saw.

The open survival of drums in the Bahamas, in spite of the active opposition of the Protestant churches there and elsewhere at an early date, may perhaps be due in some measure to the failure of the large-plantation system, which in the U.S.A. brought with it repressive measures and the strict prohibition of drums. The "task-work" system, in the Bahamas probably established a relaxed cultural climate more favorable to the West African traditions -- elements of which have survived -- mixed and transmuted to be sure.

I should like to acknowledge here the unfailing cooperation and assistance of Mr. Reginald G. Nefzger and the staff of the British Colonial Hotel, Mr. G. Ralph Kiel, and Mr. and Mrs. Etienne Dupuche.

#### CREDITS:

Drawing by Mrs. Marshall Stearns  
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