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RBF RECORDS Album No. RBF 19 ©1971 RBF Records, 701 Seventh Ave., N.Y.C., USA Band h. Soney In The Rook - away by Blind

COUNTRY GOSPEL SONG

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Compiled and Annotated by Samuel Charters

This is a collection of religious music recorded in the southern American states in the 1920's and 1930's, and it includes both white and black performers to give some suggestion of the relationship and the difference between the two musical styles. There is a white congregation, Ernest Phipps and His Holiness Singers, and a black, Rev. J. M. Gates and his Congregation. There is a solo white gospel singer accompanying himself on the guitar, Alfred G. Karnes, and the black solo singer Lonnie McIntorsh, also self-accompanied on the guitar. There is a suggestion of the older shape-note singing in the Freeman Quartet, and almost a blues style in the singing of Blind Willie Johnson. Unlike the blues and southern white song - which reflect the deep separation of the two cultures . the white and the black religious song show a closer relationship in both text and style. There are, of course, strong differences, but religion and the church are important to both societies, and it is the same religion, with the same symbolic figures and the same appa-ratus of legend. It is also one of the most intensely felt experiences for both white and black in the rural South, and the music is often vividly realized. It is some of the greatest folk music that has been recorded in the United States, from these first be-ginnings to the later performances of men like Bozie Sturdevant, Reverend C. L. Frank-lin, and Reverend Gary Davis. Like the greatest blues, and the greatest mountain ballad, it is a clear glimpse into the soul of rural America.

SIDE A

Band 1. I Know That Jesus Set Me Free - sung by Ernest Phipps and His Holiness Singers

Revival Protestantism has long emphasized the estatic trance as a way to find Christ -"getting the Spirit" - in the emotionalism of the revival meeting - "I feel him coming" - the magic of vision and acceptance. And since the fervor of the great revival movement in the early 19th Century there has been a strong emphasis on music as a method of inducing the trance. This is also a characteristic of many African religious ceremonies, but the two movement: probably have no real relationship to each other. The Shaker groups in the United States and England were using the circle dance to induce ecstasy in the 18th Century, and some of the most unique aspects of Shaker ceremonies were reflected in the later "camp meetings" and revivals. Phipps' group is white, with a folk approach to the gospel song, but with what has come now to be considered black styles of hand clapping and rhythm. This kind of singing can still be heard throughout the white South, just as it can be heard in store front churches—white, black, and Puerto Rican,—in the northern urban ghettos. The recording was done in the late 1920's, with voices, clapping, piano, mandolin, and stringed instruments.

Band 2. To The Work - sung by Alfred G. Karnes

Karnes, also a white singer from the late 1920's, seems to have performed mostly religious songs of the style characteristic of late 19th Century evangelism. He didn't record songs of folk background, but his guitar style has clearly been influenced by at least the emotionalism of the revival tent. One of his best known recordings "I'm Bound For The Promised Land" is in a kind of finger strum with heavy bass runs played with the thumb. The guitar style is more conventional, but it has a strong excitement in the repeated rhythmic phrase.

Band 3. God Moves On The Water - sung by Blind Willie Johnson

Johnson was one of the greatest of the black religious singers to make records in the period before World War II, and there was enough response to their release that there was an effort made to record him extensively. Between December 1927, and April 1930, in five séssions, he did thirty of his songs, and they are a remarkable emotional and musical achievement. Two reissue lps have been assembled from this material, one on Folkways label, the other RBF 10, and they give a deep insight into his music. "God Moves On The Water" is from the fourth session, in New Orleans on December 11, 1929, and is another version of the Titanic story.

Band 4. Honey In The Rock - sung by Blind Mamie Forehand

Unlike Blind Willie Johnson, Blind Mamie Forehand made only one record, two songs ac-companied by A. C. Forehand, who was probably her husband. A. C. Forehand recorded two songs in Memphis on Friday, February 25, 1927, and the next Monday he returned to the studio with Mrs. Forehand. She sounds nervous, almost a little afraid, but there is a sensitive sincerity, a touching naivete in her singing. The light bell sound could be comething like an Indian temple bell, which she is playing herself.

Band 5. My Mother Is Waiting For Me In Heaven Above - sung by the Smith Brothers

A sentimental gospel song, of the type still popular in rural areas throughout America, but sung with the same sincerity as Blind Mamie Forehand. One of the many "brother" duets of early country music, recorded in the late 1920's.

Band 6. The Lion And The Tribes Of Judah sung by Lonnie McIntorsh

Many religious songs, as they were passed along from singer to singer, lost many of their details as years passed, and this seems to have happened to "The Lion And The Tribes Of Judah." McIntorsh later recorded with a small gospel group, but he was recorded alone for the first session in Memphis in early 1928.

Band 7. Just As Soon As My Feet Strike Zion, Lord I Won't Be Troubled No More -sung by Rev. J. M. Gates and congregation

Gates was one of the most successful of the gospel ministers to record, and his imagination was richly fertile in his treatment of both traditional gospel material and contemporary events. At a typical Gates session he would do something like "Joe Louis' Wrist And His Fist" and then, within a few moments, "Job And His God." He had the same kind of immediacy of response that marks the best blues of Lightning Hopkins, and his performances matched his conceptions, roughly shouted, excited, and beautifully structured in their exposition of theme. His church was in At-lanta, but he seems to have spent much of his time away from the city recording and appearing in other churches. This recording is from the mid-twenties, done in Chicago with members of his congregation.

SIDE B

SIDE B Band 1. Lonesome Valley Band 2. The Little Black Train - sung by the Band 2. Carter Family

The Carter Family, A. P., Sarah, and Maybelle, were in many ways the beginning - with Jimmie Rodgers - of modern country music in

the United States. Their records and song the United States. Their records and song books sold everywhere, and they broadcasted regularly through the 1930's. It was a period when radio was new, and it had a much greater importance than it does now. Their radio work, almost as much as their recordings, sold their music to every part of the South. They sang every kind of country song, including many gospel songs - among them these two traditional songs, probably of southern black origin, though in this performance the style, both vocal and instrumental, is clearly in the white mountain tradition.

Band 3. Jesus Lover Of My Soul - Uncle Dave Macon

It's difficult to relate the violence and racism of American society to its lingering religiousity, but the same people who could maintain its system of racial prejudice and political repression could also pretend to a kind of vague Christianity. Both country performers and blues performers were expected to know and sing a few religious songs, and they often recorded both kinds of music. The blues performers usually used a pseudonym, since there was considerable hostility to the idea that the same man could sing both kinds of song, but the white performers didn't have this difficulty. Uncle Dave Macon, an exuberant veteran musician and entertainer from Georgia, was better known for his ballads and country songs, but like the Carter Family he also did religious music, and this is one of his earliest gospel recordings.

Band 4. Walking With My Saviour - sung by the Freemen Quartet

Although this is from the 1920's it reflects the responsive singing of the widely known old shape-note style, and many other groups were to take from this source material, as the Freemen Quartet has done here.

Band 5. Wouldn't Mind Dying - sung by Blind Mamie Forehand

This is perhaps not as distinctive as "Honey In The Rock," but it is her only other recording, and has the same simplicity and gentle expressiveness.

Band 6. Take Your Burden To The Lord - sung by Blind Willie Johnson

This is from the same New Orleans session as "God Moves On The Water," but an unknown female singer has joined him for the responses. It is a traditional religious song, widely known throughout the rural United States.

Band 7. Went Up In The Clouds Of Heaven - sung by Ernest Phipps and his Holiness Singers

From the same session as "I Know That Jesus Set Me Free."



