

Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40031

BEEN IN THE STORM SO LONG

Spirituals,
Folk Tales
and
Children's
Games
from
John's Island,
South Carolina



Smithsonian/Folkways Records
Office of Folklife Programs
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600
Smithsonian Institution
Washington DC 20560
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Digitally remastered by Randy Kling at Disc Mastering, Nashville, Tennessee.

Front cover photograph of the Moving Star Hall Singers by David Gahr.

Design by Nancy Jean Anderson.

Art direction by Scott Billington.

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A Collection of Spirituals,
Folk Tales and Children's Games from Johns Island, South Carolina.



Photograph by Robert Yellin

In the Words of the Collectors, November 1989

This collection of spirituals and shouts, prayers, folk tales, children's games, was recorded on Johns Island, South Carolina, in the early 1960s. Johns Island is one of a cluster of islands just south of Charleston including Wadmalaw, Edisto, Yonges, James and Kiawah. These islands hold in common a Gullah folk culture with survivals that are among the oldest forms of African American folk life to be found in the United States today. "Gullah" refers to the English Creole language spoken by older community members as well as to the culture as a whole, and is apparently derived from a word for "Angola." With their strong African/English Creole heritage, the sea islands

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Been in the Storm So Long

—taken from the spiritual sung here by Mrs. Mary Pinckney—is an appropriate title for the collection, for as we write these notes, the sea islands have just experienced the worst storm in a century, Hurricane Hugo, which devastated nearby Charleston and left trees and houses strewn around the islands as well. But the people, strong and resilient, have survived.

For generations these low flat islands, covered with swampy marshes, rich farm land, and forests of live oaks draped with Spanish moss, were isolated from mainstream America because

they were accessible only by boat. Life on the islands was self-contained and traditions were passed down through families. Sea islanders are descendants of black landowners, freed from slavery after the Civil War. They are the inheritors of a rich folk culture which includes unique speech patterns, worship practices, stories and beliefs, crafts, foodways, healing practices and especially songs.

But these ways are changing fast. The islands are inevitably becoming part of the mainstream as tuning in radio, television, and tape players replaces singing and storytelling in living rooms; as more modern churches draw people to worship; and as newcomers move to the island to live in the tourist developments springing up along the coast. It's fortunate then, that we have these recordings. They will be important to younger people coming of age in the islands as well as to the rest of us.

Some of the recordings were made in Moving Star Hall, built in 1913 as a "praise house" for the community. Worship patterns continue here that evolved during slavery times on the plantations. A distinctive example is the religious "shout" in which complex hand and foot rhythms are added

to the singing as the spirit mounts. In contrast to the more modern mainline churches on the island with their electric organs and their robed choirs, Moving Star Hall was the worship space for an older religious expression. Here each person would take a turn when moved by the spirit—to testify, to pray, to preach, or to raise a song. On special occasions, and particularly on Christmas and New Years Eve, there were all night "watch" meetings.

A small group of singers from the hall began to travel in the early 1960s to share their music and wisdom at folk festivals and concerts around the country. The Moving Star Hall Singers are descendants of Joe Bligen, one of the truly great singers of the Johns Island community. His daughter, Mrs. Janie Hunter, told us that he began learning songs at the age of twelve and died when he was seventy-five. She and her brother Benjamin are carrying out the promise they made to their father that they would keep his songs alive. In turn they have taught the repertoire to their children and grandchildren, to neighbors and to friends. In 1984 Mrs. Hunter was given a National Heritage Award by the National Endowment for



Benjamin Bligen, a lead singer, fishing. Photograph by Robert Yellin.



Photograph by Robert Yellin.

the Arts for her conscious work in passing her heritage on to younger members of the community.

We lived on Johns Island from 1963 to 1965, and Guy had spent several winters there previously working in a literacy and citizenship school developed by the Highlander Folk School. We recorded more than sixty hours of material, including several all-night watch meetings. Those recordings, along with more than 100 photographs taken by Robert Yellin, our collaborator on a book about Johns Island, have been placed at the Avery Research Center in Charleston with the understanding that they be available to island residents as well as to scholars. During the time we lived in the sea islands, we helped to organize a series of regional festivals. We also nurtured an exchange between folk artists like those on Johns Island and young activists involved in the Civil

Rights Movement. Since 1965 we have returned to the islands regularly and stay in touch with people. This past year we interviewed many of our old friends in order to update the book we collected about life on Johns Island, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?* It was reissued by the University of Georgia Press in October, 1989.

Guy & Candi Carawan
New Market, Tennessee
November, 1989

In the Words of the Singers, 1966

About the Songs: Mrs. Janie Hunter

"All these songs go way back yonder in slavery time, when them old people didn't have nothing to do but grow sweet potatoes and corn and grind corn grits, and then they sat down and taught us these old songs. Always it was families together, we sit down by the old chimney fire and were taught these old songs like Ezekiel in the Valley and Jonah Man and See God Ark, and the story of Mary and Jack—that's a true life story.

"We sing these old songs because we made our daddy a promise. He tell us that one of these days he gonna leave us, but 'though he leave us he still be with us as long we we keep these old songs up. We promise him, long as we live,

we sisters and brothers, we will remain singing these songs.' Ask the Watchman' is my father's famous song, and when we sing that song, we just feel like he's here with us.

"Remember Me': That song always lets you know that God always will remember you. That's a real heart-warmin' song, in the high meter and in the low meter. And when you say 'Oh, Lord, do remember me,' that's just like you're praying. You always feel like when you sing that song, the Lord is looking after you. High meter means you sing 'em fast and clap; low meter means you sing 'em slow without clapping. Sometimes you sing one verse slow, then go on off fast and shout with 'em, shout and clap.

"See God Ark'": The old man sang that. You know Benjamin can sing that and he still can't sing it as much as the old man did. Oh he was a singer. He must have learned these songs from his older people, 'cause he said his older people were singing people too. They were raised up on Johns Island too.

"Ask the Watchman How Long': That's a special New Years song. When you get on your knee to watch and everybody have it in mind how long before we see the New Year coming in, we all praying and hoping that we'll see the New Year, so that song was made up for that. When you get off your knee and we see another new year, then everybody sing that song and get happy off it for they're glad to see the New Year.

"Ezekial in the Valley': That's a song from part of the Bible. Ezekial was a prophet, and Jesus command Ezekial to go in the valley and preach to the bones. Ezekial say 'Lord, what could I preach to the dry bone? When I preach to the live they don't espound.' And Jesus told him to go and preach anyhow—tell them dry bone that they must hear the word of the Lord, for the time is now at hand."

**We Been Climbing on the
Rough Side of the Mountain:
Mr. John Daes**

"From the time I have sense enough to recollect in this world, we have trouble and crosses, ups and downs. We been climbing on the rough side of the mountain. Climbing up, falling back, grabbin' bottom.

"Way back yonder, in 1893, we had to work for something to eat. Work on the White folks' farm, move from place to place, eat with stick or spoon. Get oshter, fish, crab, and 'tato. Get corn meal, carry 'em to the mill and grind 'em and eat corn meal. Sweet potato. All that just to bring us this far. And I say thank God that I live to see light come into the world. Wise man from all part of the world come into this world. The world is lifting up more and more.

"My old parents didn't see these things—automobile, airplane. We come from rowboat time. Had to row from home to town and back. Sometime I have to stay a whole day; have to wait on the tide, all that to row. And God spare us live to see this day.

"We used to drive with ox and cart, haul wood with old oxen, plow with oxen. All that. Today no oxen. Nothing but car and truck and bus and trailer and all kind of thing like that.

"Old days you couldn't eat noth-



Photograph by Robert Yellin.

ing but 'tato and peas and corn and corn flour and crab and all like them. Well these days it's Christmas every day now. Anything you want now you get 'em. In them days back if one somebody kill a hog in the community, you think it was Christmas by the hog only. But now, eat hog meat any day you want. Go from store to store to get the thing you want. It's Christmas every day now for we. Light come into the world. Them times we had to buy, and money was so little, you can't see your way to buy but what you need for live. Had to make out 'til we leave the white folks' place and then start to come up. It's a blessing we see the day. Everybody lifting up. God put a way to your brains to catch on to these things, that you may have bread to carry you 'til He ready for you. The world is comin' up and is wise and wise and wise until we all can get some bread from God. Man ain't able to give 'em, God put 'em into that man that he can share around to the next brother."

**Now the World Is Nothing But
White People: Mrs. Alice Wine**

"When I were growing up, I must have seen one White man in my life. And I was so scared of that White man I never see his face. You might see but two White man in the whole Johns Island then. But now the Island is full of White people. There so many White people it seem like they always one now. Before then you wouldn't see no White people there in six or seven months. But now, the world is nothing but White people. White people!

"The Bible says you must love your fellow mans, 'gardless of what color you are, you must love em. Ain't no need for I love my color, hate you. Cause God don't please with it. Cause we all is God's children. We must love one another. Cause He don't care for ugly, and very little care for pretty. Cause we know all is His children, see?

"The church doesn't do a thing for you no more than preach a sermon. That's all the preacher do for you. But you got to live a

life living right here. The way you walk and the way you talk, the way your action—there's your sermon right there. You preaching your sermon before you die.

"The way you treat people, that's your heaven right there. Now if you born dumb, you just dumb. If you're a mean person all your life, you're just a mean person; people can't say good for you. If you're a good person all your life, that's all people will say is he's a good person. Got to first have heaven here before you have Heaven. If you have speck in your heart, you can not get in God's kingdom. I never been up there yet, but I feel about it."

**For further information on the
Sea Islands:**

Books:

Carawan, Guy and Candie. *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life?* The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words, and Their Songs. Revised and expanded Edition. Photographs by Robert Yellin and others. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989 [1966]. This book has an extensive bibliography which cites books, articles, records, films and videotapes.

Ain't You Got a Right To the Tree of Life? may be purchased from the Highlander Center, Box 370, Route 3, New Market, Tennessee.

Granger, Mary, editor. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes.* Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940].

Jones, Bessie and Bess Lomax Hawes. *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage.* Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985 [1972].

Jones-Jackson, Patricia. *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands.* Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987.



Moving Star Hall Singers performing "Row Michael Row" at the Newport Folk Festival, 1964.

Joyner, Charles. *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Recordings:

Georgia Sea Island Songs, collected by Alan Lomax (New World Records NW 278).

Georgia Sea Islands, Southern Journey, Vol. 2 (Prestige International 25002).

McIntosh County Shouters: Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia, recorded by Art Rosenbaum (Folkways FE 4344).

Sea Island Folk Festival: Moving Star Hall Singers and Alan Lomax (Folkways FE3841). Many of the songs on this album appear on this Smithsonian/Folkways release. The original album, including commentary by Alan Lomax, continues to be available on cassette through the Smithsonian by mail order. See separate box for address.

So Glad I'm Here, Bessie Jones (Rounder 2015).

Step It Down, Bessie Jones (Rounder 8004).

Film:

Gullah Tales, by Gary Moss. 29 min., color, 16 mm or videotape. Georgia Endowment for the Humanities, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

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ERRATA

SFW40031 - Been in the Storm So Long

In the track listings, the artist name on Track 12 “Been in the Storm So Long” incorrectly states the artist as “Mrs. Mary Pickney in her living room.” The correct spelling is “Mrs. Mary Pinckney in her living room.”

