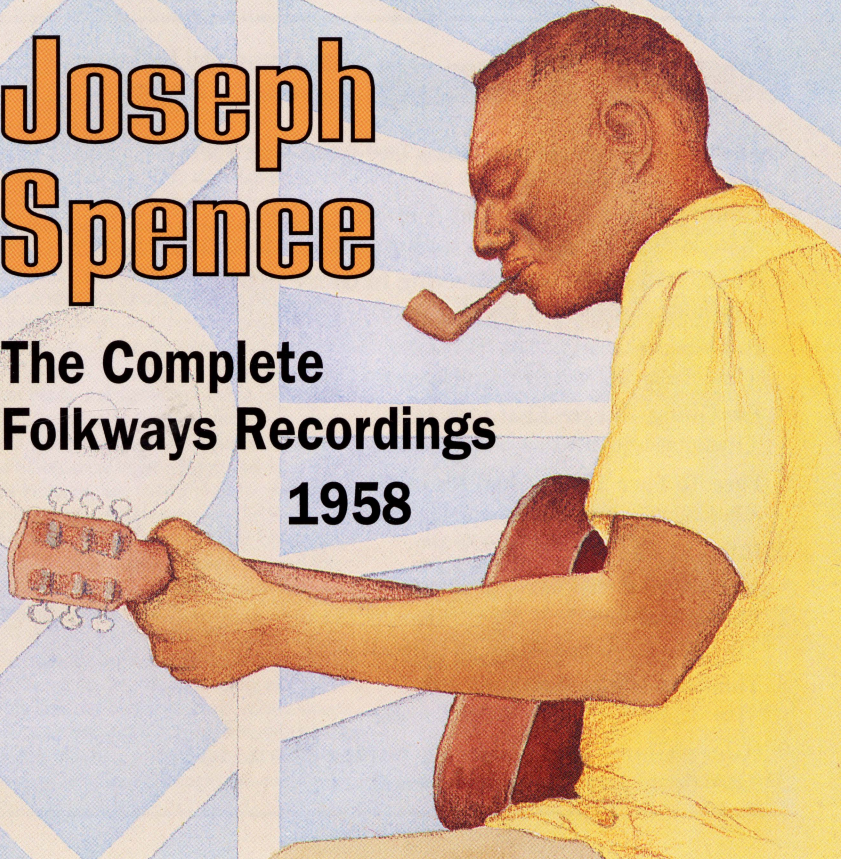


# Joseph Spence

**The Complete  
Folkways Recordings  
1958**



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Originally issued in 1959 as FS 3844 and in 1964 as Folkways FS 3847

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## Joseph Spence — An Introduction

by Samuel Charters

When I came to Andros with Ann Danberg in the summer of 1958 the island still was isolated and almost empty. Less than nine hundred people lived in small fishing settlements scattered along the almost three hundred miles of the island's east coast. The center of the island was a mosquito-ridden swamp, and the west coast — facing Florida across the dangerous currents of the Gulf Stream — was a stretch of mud flats that made it almost impossible for boats to land. In some of the settlements we were told that people from Europe and the United States were beginning to buy land along the beaches, but in our months there the only whites we saw were on the large sailing vessels that sometimes tied up at the dock at Fresh Creek. To us it seemed like we had stepped back into a place that had become lost in time.

We traveled from one settlement to another on the small, handmade fishing sloops, and from the sun-bleached decks of the sloops the coastline was a ragged, littered shore of empty, blindingly white beaches and brush-covered headlands. Usually we could see

sails of other sloops edging along the coast and we would pull close enough to hail each other across the slack currents. Few of the settlements had any kind of wharves or piers for the boats to tie up. Sometimes we climbed from the worn decks into even smaller handmade dinghies, passing the tape recorder and our bags down to each other. At some of the settlements the sloops simply grounded on the soft sand and we jumped into the water. I held the recording equipment over my head as we waded in to the beach.

The island was desperately poor. A thriving sponge fishing industry had been wiped out by a disease that attacked the sponges in 1938, and the few attempts to start some kind of farming or industry on the island had failed with such discouraging regularity that most of the natives felt that Andros was haunted. There were strong local traditions describing the spirits who lived in the center of the island, and after a frightening night when we were trapped on the beaches between two



settlements we decided the traditions could have some basis in reality.

We had come to Andros to look for traditional Bahaman folk music. Most of the music of Nassau and the other islands had been influenced by tourism and the calypso music of Trinidad that had become widely popular, but in the collection of the Music Library at the University of California in Berkeley I had found a small 10-inch 78 rpm record of songs that Alan Lomax had recorded in the Bahamas in the 1930s. The songs were different from anything I had ever heard, and the notes to the record said that the older Bahaman music was to be found on Andros. Even in the earlier period Andros had been one of the least visited islands of the Bahamas. Not only was the island too swampy for any kind of extensive farming, it was arduous sailing into the prevailing winds to get there, and the native boats were often helpless in the winds and currents.

When you go out into a new part of the world with a tape recorder to look for music you always dream that someday you might find a new performer who will be so unique and so exciting that their music will have an effect on anybody who hears

it. One of the few times it ever happened to me was in our first few weeks in the Fresh Creek Settlement on Andros. We went out one day about noon to walk from the small house we'd rented to the headland close to the mouth of the creek. Some men were working on the foundation of a new house, and as we came close to them we could hear guitar music. It was some of the most exuberant, spontaneous, and uninhibited guitar playing we had ever heard, but all we could see was a man in a faded shirt and rumpled khaki trousers sitting on a pile of bricks. He had a large acoustic guitar in his lap. I was so sure two guitarists were playing that I went along the path to look on the other side of the wall to see where the other musician was sitting. We had just met Joseph Spence.

As I wrote the first time I tried to describe the experience of hearing him play,

...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.

Most of the young men on Andros played the guitar, and often they carried their instruments with them when they walked through the settlements at night. Sometimes we'd heard the women arguing about which guitarist was the best they'd heard. No one mentioned Spence because he didn't come from Fresh Creek, and he lived in Nassau, where he worked as a stone mason. He'd come to Fresh Creek to see some friends, and while he was waiting for them to break off their work so they could eat lunch he was playing the guitar to hurry the work along. When we asked the women later about Spence it seemed that of course they all knew about him, but he was so much better than anyone else that they couldn't talk about him the same way.

When he finished the bottle of rum, Spence walked over to our little house, gathering most of the people in the settlement that afternoon along behind him. Since the house was too small for everyone

to hear him play we did the recording on the porch. He did a version of a popular island folk song to warm up and tune the guitar, then without stopping to do much more than laugh and joke with the women between the pieces he recorded the instrumental solos that became the first Folkways LP, and then one side of a subsequent Folkways release. There was some discussion between him and the women about his singing. He growled occasional words and phrases of the piece he was playing, as much to help him keep track of where he was as it was to actually "sing" something. He tried to explain to one of the women that he couldn't sing, but she scoffed at him, saying, "What do you mean you can't sing? You got a mouth to talk!"

When he'd played as much as he wanted we paid him the little money we had and he walked off with the people who'd come to hear him and for the rest of the afternoon he sat in the shade playing Bahaman checkers, which involves a lot of shouting, a loud slamming of checkers, and usually a supply of rum to keep everything going. We could hear him shouting to friends and laughing until the men he'd come to see finally got through working.

For the rest of the summer the tapes we had done with Spence simplified the collecting we were doing. When the young men came to us with their guitars we played them a little of Spence, and if they still wanted to play for us after they'd heard him then we listened. Also people knew more what we wanted to find, and they talked to us about other musicians. It was at Fresh Creek that we first were told about the legendary singer Frederick McQueen, and a few weeks later we found him in the Lisbon Creek settlement on the southern half of the island.

When we got back to New York with the tapes I decided that Spence's music was so exciting that I wouldn't include it in the collections of traditional Bahaman music that I wanted to present to Moses Asch at Folkways. I would do a separate Spence album. I wasn't certain, however, that Moe would be interested in doing a whole LP with an unknown Bahaman folk guitarist, so I only used six of the pieces Spence had recorded so Moe could release the album as a lower-priced ten inch LP. To further tempt him we sold Folkways the three albums of music we had collected for \$50 apiece — \$150 for the whole summer's work, and for all it had cost us to get from

New York to Andros and then live and travel while we were there.

In a few weeks it was clear that there was going to be a lot of excitement over Joseph Spence. I was living in the Village in a sculptor's loft, and I was playing a lot of music with people like Dave Van Ronk and anyone else who dropped by the loft. Later in the winter I moved in with Dave in the tenement where he was living on MacDougal Street, above the Village Folklore Center. This was as close to the center of the new folk music scene as it was possible to get, and I played the Spence tapes for anyone who came by. It was just at the moment when everyone was trying to learn how to finger pick the guitar, and Spence was a revelation.

Two or three years after the album came out Pete Seeger called and asked how he could get in touch with Spence so he could bring him up for the Newport Festival Foundation. It seemed like Spence was about to break through to a larger popularity. But he didn't become a major figure in the folk music revival. Instead it was musicians like Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, Lightning Hopkins, Robert Pete Williams, and Skip James who became the

names people associated with all the excitement. Spence continued to be idolized by guitar players and the first album continued to sell steadily. Many guitarists tried to imitate what he'd recorded that afternoon on our porch, but it turned out to be almost impossible to get beyond the mechanics of his style into the freely rhythmexuberance of his individual pieces.

In 1964 I was asked by the Newport Foundation to travel with Spence and two Bahaman singers for a tour through New York and Boston, and I could see immediately why Spence would have difficulty becoming a part of the new scene. With him when he arrived were two women family members who were deeply religious. With them, he didn't drink, he didn't laugh much, and he mostly performed religious music. They also thought he should sing the hymns, and to help him they sang along. Instead of the loose, exuberant guitar player I'd seen on Andros, here was an intimidated and often uncertain gospel musician who didn't know what anyone expected of him.

Also, when I'd recorded him in 1958 he'd been unemployed for a few months and

he'd been playing nearly every day for friends in his own settlement of Small Hope, a few miles north of Fresh Creek. His work in Nassau as a stone mason was hard on his hands, and he didn't have much time to practice. It was exciting to see him again and occasionally there were moments of guitar playing that had some of the uniqueness of his playing four years before, but I spent most of the time when we were driving from city to city singing with the "rhymer" and the bass singer who had come from the Bahamas with Spence. I did some recording with him in a Village apartment, but of all the things I recorded on the tour the most vivid was a rhyming version of "It's A Long Way to Tipperary" performed by the two singers.

For me, even though there were other albums with Spence's music released from time to time over the next thirty years, it is these performances from 1958 that are the Spence I remember.

These recordings appeared on *Music of the Bahamas, Vol. 1: Bahamian Folk Guitar FS3844* and *Bahaman Ballads and Rhyming Spirituals, FS 3847*.



## The Fresh Creek Recordings

1. **Coming In On A Wing And A Prayer**
2. **There Will Be A Happy Meeting In Glory**
3. **Brownskin Gal**
4. **I'm Going To Live That Life**
5. **Face To Face That I Shall Know Him**
6. **Jump In The Line**
7. **Bimini Gal**
8. **The Lord Is My Shepherd**
9. **(Glory, Glory) When I Lay My Burden Down**

*Recorded at Fresh Creek Settlement, Andros, July 23, 1958*

When Spence recorded for us in 1958 he was in his late forties — he was born in Small Hope on August 3, 1910 — and he told a young Swiss enthusiast named Guy Droussart that he'd been playing the guitar for dances since he was fourteen. When we met him he'd been living in Nassau for more than thirty years. There was even a period of two years in the 1940s when he and his wife Louise worked in the southern United States doing migrant farm work. With the money they made they were able to return to Nassau in 1946 and

he built a small stone house where they lived for the rest of their lives. After the Folkways release he was visited by a number of other musicians, among them Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal, and there were occasional trips to the United States. He also recorded with his sister and friends. In his later years he worked as a night watchman, and he died in Nassau in 1984 at the age of 73.

Spence's repertoire reflected his many years as a musician. One of his best pieces was a

version of the American World War II popular song *Coming In On A Wing And A Prayer*. He managed to growl part of the lyrics on every chorus — "There is one motor gone, but we'll still carry on, Coming in on a wing and a prayer" — but the excitement was in his improvisation. Often the approach had some of the techniques of jazz improvisation. One chorus would embellish the melody with chord material in the treble strings, then the next chorus would be in the middle of the guitar, with a distinct melodic variation played in a legato phrasing and set against the basic duple rhythm in a three beat pattern. This was a common jazz technique from the 1930s, but it wasn't used by many folk guitarists.

At the same time that he was extending the rhythmic possibilities of the melody he kept the music solidly in place with the noisy tapping of his foot, the steady bass pattern that he played with his thumb, and the growling bits of the melody that he sang through clenched teeth, since most of the time he kept his pipe in his mouth. All of this was performed at a headlong rush, and there was no way he could have thought out what he was going to play before he was playing it. Most of the

Bahaman guitarists kept their instruments in a "D" tuning — with the low E string tuned down a whole tone to D — which gave them some possibilities to use more open strings as they played, but Spence used every string of the guitar in ways most of us hadn't even considered before.

For several years he had entertained on the Nassau docks, sometimes accompanying singers like Frederick McQueen, but usually he was by himself. The folk songs he recorded, *Brownskin Gal*, *Jump In The Line*, and *Bimini Gal*, probably come from this period, although he could have been performing them when he was still a teenager. He played them as over-and-over dance melodies, and since the most important thing about them was to keep them danceable he did less of the more complex variations.

Guy Droussart found two shape-note hymnals from Tennessee in Spence's house, and many of the hymns and anthems sung in the Bahamas today were included. Spence's performances of pieces like *Face To Face That I Shall Know Him* have many of the characteristics of shape-note singing, including contrapuntal melodies and strongly outlined bass note harmonies. At

the same time he slyly embellished the melodies and harmonies with his own more complex rhythmic patterns.

Like many musicians whose playing is uniquely individual, Spence also felt himself as part of a long tradition of Bahaman folk music. He was one of the rare musicians whose own abilities are so unusual that they in turn reshape the tradition from which they've come. It isn't possible to think of Bahaman music — and finger picked acoustic guitar music — without thinking of Spence, and at the same there is no one like him. There isn't much more a musician can accomplish than this, but Spence, with his friendly laugh and his characteristic shake of the head when he was praised, certainly wouldn't think he'd done even that much.

#### **Credits:**

Recorded at Fresh Creek Settlement,  
Andros, The Bahamas, July 23, 1958, by  
Sam Charters.

Reissue compiled and annotated by Sam  
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Many Folkways recordings are distributed by Rounder Records. The rest are available on cassette by mail order from the Smithsonian Institution. For information and catalogs telephone 202/287-3262 or write:

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In 1958, when Sam Charters ventured throughout the small island of Andros in the Bahamas, he encountered the guitar music of 47-year-old stonemason Joseph Spence. The recordings made that day revealed a guitar master of startling originality. Spence's incomparable style earned him immediate recognition for its beautifully unorthodox synthesis of rhythm and melodic improvisation. These are the earliest recordings of Joseph Spence, some of the finest recordings of traditional music ever issued.



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