



spirituals & shout songs
from the georgia coast

the mcintosh county shouters

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1. **Jubilee** Freddie Palmer, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan 2:23
2. **Believer, I Know** Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers 3:40
3. **I Come to Tell You** Venus McIver, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan 4:36
4. **Walk with Me** Venus McIver, leader, with group; stick and tambourine by Brenton Jordan 4:41
5. **Drive Ol' Joe** Venus McIver, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan 3:31
6. **Went to the Burial / Sinner Weep So** Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers 5:31
7. **Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit** Freddie Palmer, leader, with group; tambourine by Brenton Jordan 4:06
8. **Move, Daniel** Freddie Palmer, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan 2:38
9. **I Won't Turn Back** Freddie Palmer, leader, with basers; tambourine by Brenton Jordan 2:37
10. **Oh, My Loving Mother** Freddie Palmer, leader, with group; tambourine by Brenton Jordan 2:51
11. **Army Cross Over** Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers 4:44
12. **Walk Through the Valley in the Field** Freddie Palmer, leader, with group 3:34
13. **Daniel Saw That Little Stone** Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers 2:41
14. **In the Field We Must Die** Freddie Palmer, leader; Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers 2:36
15. **Oh, Lord, I Want You to Help Me** Venus McIver followed by Freddie Palmer, leaders, with group; stick and tambourine by Brenton Jordan 4:42
16. **I Wade the Water to My Knees** Carletha Sullivan, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan 3:07
17. **This May Be Our Last Time** Venus McIver, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan 3:30

(All songs arranged by the McIntosh County Shouters)



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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The McIntosh County Shouters performing the ring shout in the Bolden Home Lodge, 2015.

Photo: Margo Newmark Rosenbaum

“I know I’m the one that got the songs alive today. And I don’t mind talking with a person on my heritage. I can bravely talk about my heritage, because my people come over the rough side of the mountain. Understand?”

—Lawrence McKiver

Introduction

Art Rosenbaum

This is the second Smithsonian Folkways recording of the McIntosh County Shouters. The first, *The McIntosh County Shouters: Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia*, was issued in 1983 as a Folkways LP (FE 4344). Three years earlier the singers, shouters, and a stick-man percussionist had formed a group to perform the ring shout outside their home community—a tiny Gullah/Geechee settlement with a ring shout tradition unbroken since slavery days. The group, related by marriage and blood, belonged to the third generation out of slavery. All the members of the original McIntosh County Shouters have passed on, but the next generation continues to perform the ring shout in and beyond their community with authenticity combined with the artistic creativity needed to bring a venerable tradition into a new day. This album includes shout songs—songs performed exclusively in connection with the ring shout—heard on the first release, along with several others not previously recorded, as well as some spirituals. Over the years the group has appeared at major venues, such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the Kennedy Center, and Carnegie Hall, and has garnered acclaim and awards, notably the National Endowment for the Arts’ National Heritage Fellowship in 1993. They have been the subject of documentaries: *Down*

Yonder: The McIntosh County Shouters (Georgia Public Television, 1986) and later HBO's *Unchained Memories*. The older of today's Shouters will ruefully state that their shout does not match the power, beauty, and centrality to the community it had in the time of "their old aunties" and "the old ancestors." But Brenton Jordan, the youngest of the Shouters—a stick-man and songster totally dedicated to the tradition—is optimistic that it will survive long into the future. Its roots are deep, and its power is strong.

The McIntosh County Shouters' home community is Bolden, aka Briar Patch, on the coastal mainland of Georgia; it is a few miles north of the McIntosh County seat, Darien, where the mighty Altamaha River flows into the Atlantic. Bolden consists of modest houses strung along a two-lane highway or set back on narrow roads; it has no stores and is barely recognizable to a passing motorist as a distinct settlement. Most of the yards are dirt, but great live oak trees, bearded by Spanish moss, give a solemn dignity to the scene. The Mount Calvary Baptist Church, gleamingly white and well kept, called "the stopping place of the shout," is the spiritual home of most of the people. Across the road, and less conspicuous, is the Bolden Home Lodge, built in the early 20th-century style of the old-time praise houses, which serves as a kind of community center.

The elements of the slave ring shout, to be described more fully below, come from West Africa. The ring shout is also related to Africa-derived traditions in Brazil, Cuba, and many other locations in the African diaspora. In places like Bolden/Briar Patch and St. Simons Island along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts, distinctly African and Afro-Caribbean cultural forms survived longer than they did inland. There are many reasons why: the areas were closer to the points of slaves' debarkation; tribal and language groups who retained African skills such as rice cultivation (particularly Mende peoples from Sierra Leone) were not broken up as much on the coast during slavery times; before the Emancipation, slave owners often left supervision to black overseers due to the difficult climate, with the result that there were fewer whites in proportion to blacks than farther inland; and post-Emancipation, many blacks gained possession of parcels of land—and although life remained a struggle, they could work their own farms and live in relatively cohesive communities.



Lawrence McKiver, Bolden GA c. 1995
photo: Margo Newmark Rosenbaum

This African American (or Afro-Atlantic) culture that is concentrated on the mainland and barrier islands along the coast from South Carolina through Georgia to Florida is known as Gullah/Geechee. Formerly, in South Carolina, “Gullah” was the term for the creolized English dialect with many African survivals, and the attendant related culture. “Geechee,” perhaps derived from Georgia’s Ogeechee River—or, alternatively, adapted from West African groups such as Kissi—was the common term in Georgia. Despite the romantic notion that Gullah/Geechee culture is strongest on the barrier Sea Islands, gentrification and high taxes have made inroads in black communities on many of the islands. Bolden, though, is a mainland community close to an interstate highway; after fishing and farming played out, people could still travel to work in paper mills, on docks, and other jobs in places like Brunswick to the south or Savannah to the north. Hard times in the last century did cause some people to emigrate, but many stayed—and some returned to a community with an enduring identity and traditions. Interestingly, two early and distinctly African traditions continue to be carried on in the coastal mainland of McIntosh County: Mary Moran is a nonagenarian of Harris Neck who can sing a song in the Mende language she learned from her mother—who in turn had it from her slave-born mother, Amelia Dawley, who sang it in 1933 for linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner. (See *The Language We Cry In*, the 1998 documentary by ethnomusicologist Cynthia Schmidt of Moran’s trip to the place of origin of the song in Sierra Leone.) The other important survival is the ring shout in Bolden, continuing in community tradition at annual Watch Night shouts and in the performances of the McIntosh County Shouters.

(In these notes the capitalized “Shouters” refers to the organized performing group; “shouters” refers collectively to the group and others in the community who carry on the tradition.)

The Shout

The present recording, along with its predecessor, offers the audible elements of the ring shout tradition. Hearing the shout songs and accompanying rhythm of hand-clapping and a stick beaten on a wooden floor provides an important but nevertheless incomplete representation of the ring shout. For a broader understanding one must see the shuffling, counterclockwise dance-like movement of the shouters. The ring shout—the word “shout” derives from an Afro-Islamic term for a sacred dance, “saut,” and does not refer to vocalization—is a fusion of call-and-response singing, the percussion of hand-clapping and (in Bolden) the beat of a stick on a wooden floor, and the movement of shouters in a counterclockwise circle. Drums having been generally forbidden to slaves, the stick turned a church or praise house with a wooden floor into a resonant chamber. The basic percussion that drives the ring shout is, with variations, a 3 + 3 + 2 rhythm.

A “songster” will “set” or begin a song, slowly at first, then accelerating to an appropriate tempo. These lines will be answered by a group of singers called “basers” in a call-and-response pattern. The stick-man sits next to the leader, and the basers will add to his rhythm with hand-clapping and foot-patting. The songs are special shout songs, at one time called “running spirituals,” that for the most part form a repertoire separate from spirituals, jubilees, and later gospel songs. Sometimes participants pantomime the meaning of the verses—for example, extending their arms in the “eagle wing” gesture to evoke friends urging a slave to fly from the master’s whip (see track 8).

In the movement, as the Bolden shouters confirm, the feet must not be crossed. The basic form of the shout step practiced, with variations, throughout the Gullah/Geechee region was best described by Bess Lomax Hawes, who worked extensively with the Georgia Sea Island Singers on St. Simons: “The principal rules are these: the circling motion is continuous; the feet leave the floor as little as possible, especial care being taken that...the legs do not cross—the trailing foot never passes the leading foot. SHOUT: A rapid shuffling two-step, the back foot closing up to but

never passing the leading foot: step (R), close (L), step (R), close (L)” (Jones and Hawes 1972; see also Gordon 1931 for descriptions of various shout forms).

The shout was forged in the ante-bellum period from African, Afro-Islamic, and Caribbean elements; there also was inflow from white hymnody. The tradition served to honor the ancestors, worship the newly found Christian God, and provide community cohesion and emotional release during the time of enslavement. The shout often incorporated biblical themes and dealt with apocalyptic ones, as in “Lay Down, Body”; coded protests against slavery, as in “Move, Daniel”; or described everyday plantation vignettes, as in “Hold the Baby.” When the Emancipation arrived, a new, celebratory, and hopeful spirit entered the shout tradition, and at least two shout songs dealt specifically with this momentous event: in “Read Em, John,” a slave named John, one of the few who had circum-



5.
McIntosh County shouters c. 1986
Photo Margo Newmark Rosenbaum

vented the prohibition on learning to read, was implored by his fellow slaves to read the notice on the table that they were indeed free; and “Jubilee,” heard here as well as on the earlier recording of the McIntosh County Shouters, has the triumphant lines, “Shout my children, you are free!”

Before many black churches were organized, shouts took place in homes and praise houses. When churches did permit the shout, it was always after formal prayer meetings, when benches were pushed back; then the ring shout proceeded on the wooden floor. In the case of Bolden’s Mount Calvary Baptist Church, when a new building was constructed with fixed pews (“a dead church, with concrete floor,” Deacon Cook lamented), an annex with a wooden floor was added, in large part to provide a place for the Watch Night shout.

The ring shout has a historic association with the period between Christmas and New Year’s, when the crops had been taken in, normal work was suspended, and the slaves looked forward to a harvest festival with feasting, visiting, and recreation, including the ring shout. This practice, common throughout the slave states, had a darker side as well: Frederick Douglass wrote in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that “the license allowed [between Christmas and New Year’s, when masters would cynically bet on which slave would get most drunk,] appears to have no other object than to disgust the slaves with their temporary freedom, and to make them as glad to return to their work, as they were to leave it” (1845, 255). When freedom arrived, however, these manipulative strategies of the masters ceased, and the season became joyful, springing from the community and not by leave of the masters. In many communities, Watch Night became identified with the Emancipation, the waiting on New Year’s Eve of 1862 for the announcement of freedom. In Bolden, Watch Night is mainly thought of as a welcoming in of a new year—“another new year, and I ain’t gone.” There, the ring shout has been performed after midnight every Watch Night since the Emancipation. Old-timers like Lawrence McKiver remembered the shouting season beginning on Christmas, with a shout in the church, and lasting to New Year’s Eve, when the Watch Night Shout took place again in the church. In the week between the holidays, feasting and shouting took place throughout the community. One of the oldest members of the community at this writing, Benjamin Skipper, born May 6, 1924, remembers:

It was a community thing.... People came from all over McIntosh County...it was the most exciting time of the year. To me it was a form of entertainment, I just enjoyed watching the older folks participate in the activity of shouting.... [People] were all over, outside, inside, everywhere. Inside couldn't hold half of the people. They would have bonfires outside, would gather, horse and wagon was the transportation back in those days. [During the shout season]... you could hear...the singing from miles away, and you knew where it was coming from and you couldn't wait to get there and join the crowd. You just wanted to be a part of it.... It was a joyful, a joyful feeling.

McKiver recalled that the movement of the ring shout was at times vigorous enough to shake wooden houses from their stone sills. The following day folks would return to set the houses back on their foundations.

Into the latter 19th and early 20th century, the ring shout continued to be part of the religious and social life of the Gullah/Geechee people. In some places, forms of the shout emerged in which there was no ring movement, the shout instead being performed in place by the leaders, basers, and those who provided percussion by foot-stomping and hand-clapping. The shout's influence spread widely, even to areas where the old-style ring shout had been forgotten or unknown. Elements of the shout survived in Pentecostal churches, and in later gospel call-and-response singing. And the term "shouting" is used to this day in many black churches to describe vigorous motion, "falling out," getting possessed by the Spirit. Shouting is fervor and movement, not vocalization.

While in large part the shout is internalized experience relating the practitioners to God and ancestors, there is also an element of display and, in Bolden, an articulated set of proper performance standards that the shouters are expected to meet.

The McIntosh County Shouters

The McIntosh County Shouters were not the first in the Gullah/Geechee region to perform the shout for outsiders. African American residents of St. Simons Island and the adjacent mainland had a rich heritage of shout songs, spirituals, work chanteys, ring plays, and folk tales; Alan Lomax and Zora Neal Hurston encountered them in 1935, and Lomax again recorded them in the 1950s. Lydia Parrish had organized them in the 1920s into a performance group and published material she collected from the region in *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942). Originally called the Spiritual Singers of Georgia, the group became known as the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Community ring shouts had faded away by the 1930s, but the shout songs continued to be performed vigorously by the Sea Island Singers. In the late 1970s, even though many of the earlier members had passed on, Frankie and Doug Quimby maintained the group and directed the annual Georgia Sea Island Festival on St. Simons. The festival included modern gospel, blues, and white styles of music such as bluegrass; still, the Quimbys were criticized by many in the black community for presenting “that old slavery stuff,” for largely white audiences. Frankie and Doug were proud of the old heritage, however, and made no apologies. I recall sitting in their kitchen in the late 1970s, discussing these issues. The Quimbys also mentioned then having heard of a community two counties north along the coast, where the old-time ring shout was still performed on Watch Night, to the beat of a broomstick. Wouldn’t it be good to invite these McIntosh County folks to the festival? Not long afterwards, two folklorists we were working with, Fred Fussell and George Mitchell, met Deacon Cook, and through him, Lawrence McKiver in Bolden. McKiver agreed to form a group to perform the ring shout on St. Simons. Until then the tradition had remained totally within the community.

At the 1980 festival, the McIntosh women in the ring wore head-rags and long, old-fashioned skirts, as did women in the “baser” cluster. The men singing and beating the stick were in overalls and wore straw hats. At that time, Deacon Cook and Lawrence McKiver introduced the shouts. McKiver had a strong Geechee accent and down-home vernacular, and was willing to reveal encoded meanings—often protests

against slavery and repression—to modern audiences. Cook spoke in a more poetic and formal style. The following year, the group was invited to the National Folk Festival at Wolf Trap Farm Park.

In later years, Professor Bettye Ector and, recently, Vanessa Carter replaced McKiver in introducing the group. The “narrators” have become more didactic, with frequent mentions of “heritage.” The stage performances have become more rehearsed, in the interest of what Ector frankly called “showmanship.” Yet even today, an essential integrity has remained, supported both by the attention of wider audiences who appreciate the group’s authenticity, and by the continuation of Watch Night shouts in Bolden. These involve people from the community who are not in the performing group, along with those in the organized group. Perhaps due to the fact that some of the basers are also in the church choir, there is more frequent use of harmony, part-singing. Brenton Jordan’s addition of the tambourine to some of the shout songs, as well as some of the spirituals, is a newer development. Yet these modifications are to be expected in a living tradition, both in community and outside performance.

In addition to reasons cited earlier for the persistence of African cultural forms along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts, when they were dying or being greatly modified elsewhere, is the influence in Bolden of tradition-bearers like Lucille Holloway, Lawrence McKiver, Rev. Nathan Palmer, and many more. The shouters are literally, in the words of Freddie Palmer, “one family of people,” descended from slave-born London and Amy Jenkins—London born near inland Jessup and Amy in Bolden. The Jenkinse were by all accounts the main source of the shout practice and songs that have come down through the generations. All the McIntosh County Shouters are related by blood or marriage, and trace their lineage from the Jenkinse, who had seven daughters (Celia, Lizzie, Sarah, Nancy, Martha, Emmaline, and Charlotte) and two sons (Esau and Henry). The tradition was strongest among the women. Their poise and skill in the shouting and singing brought forth respect and admiration in the later generations. The men who married into the Jenkins family, men with names like McKiver and Holloway, may well have brought songs into the community repertoire—and some of the shout songs have been found in variants from South Carolina to Florida—but many of the Bolden songs have not been recovered elsewhere.



McIntosh County Shouters 1994
 back: Freddie Palmer, Harold Evans, Lawrence McKiver
 Front row: Odessa Young, Carletha Sullivan, Venus McIver, Vertie
 McIver, Thelma Ellison
 front: Benjamin "Jerry" Reed photo: Margo Newmark Rosebaum

Going “on the road” has not always been smooth for the McIntosh County Shouters. Early on, some respected members of the Bolden community disagreed with the decision of their relatives and neighbors to perform the shout for the public. Later, there were schisms within the group. More recently, there has been some discomfort that others outside the community have attempted to perform the ring shout. Still, as individual group members relate in interviews below, in the second decade of the 21st century, the group continues, energized by outside interest and by their inner commitment to—and pride in—the tradition.

Three 21st-Century Shouters: Freddie Palmer, Carletha Sullivan, and Brenton Jordan

Interviews were conducted in Bolden Community, McIntosh County, Georgia, in July 2015 by Daniel E. Sheehy, Pete Reiniger, Art Rosenbaum, and Charlie Weber.

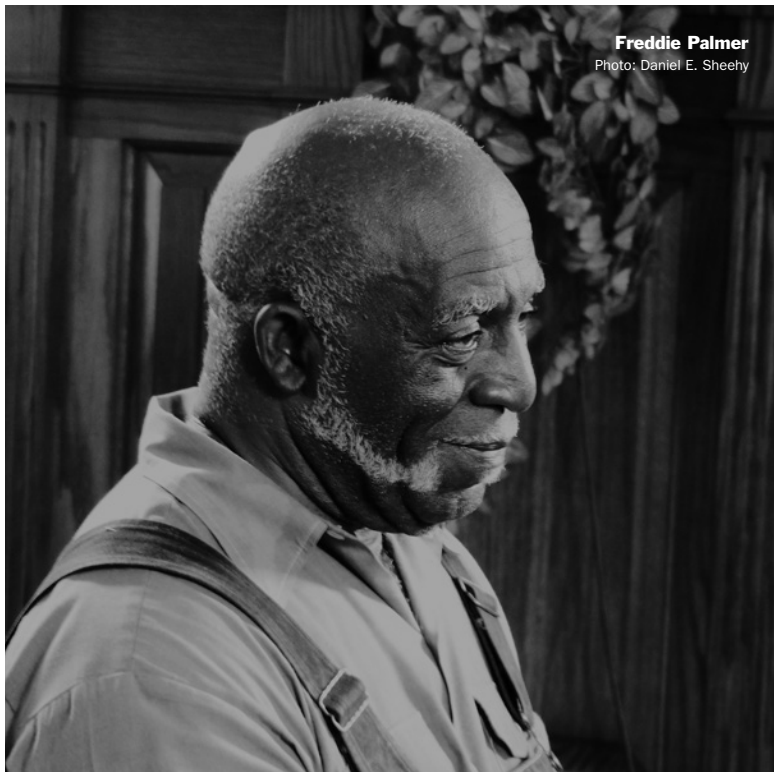
Freddie Palmer: “Gullah culture, that’s me”

Freddie Palmer was called an “energized charismatic songster” by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. In his early years, he did many kinds of work, including cutting crossties with an old-time “gator tooth” cross-cut saw. Since retiring from a paper mill in Savannah, he usually starts his day with a computer game, then goes around to help his neighbors with any electrical or plumbing work that needs doing, though “I’m not an electrician or a plumber.” He joined the McIntosh County Shouters five years after it was organized, but his start in the shout goes back to his boyhood. Standing near the Bolden Home Lodge, the praise house–like wooden building made by his grandfather Joseph Palmer, and later in the new church sanctuary, he recalled the early shouts: *“I watch my aunties and my uncles and my grandmother in them days to set one side, they would sing and the shouters would come around and we had a little... pot-bellied stove in there, move the seat back, and they was shouting, that was one of the greatest things I ever saw. When those... callers, what you would call them, would start, singers would start singing, the ladies go round, and I would get in there, go round with them, I didn’t know what I was doing, but I got in there and followed them round and round, so that’s how I learned.”* Sometimes the elders would “bob” or “pop” a kid out of the ring who was not performing the shout correctly, but according to Palmer, *“[they] didn’t have to pop, all they had to do was look. And that was it, you know what that mean—if they look two times, you know what that mean, too! You just get in, follow them, and you learn. Nothin’ they could teach you—you watch them, you get in there and you do what they do.”*

Gradually Freddie came to understand both the artistic and spiritual components of the

Freddie Palmer

Photo: Daniel E. Sheehy



shout. “Well, Odessa Young, Lucille Holloway, they know how to, they could glide across the floor, without any problem.... Spiritual, all this is spiritual, they do the spiritual shout.... It was the feeling from the song, I used to wonder why they do that, but now I know. You can tell when someone just singing, or when they singing from the spirit. You can see the difference.”

Freddie Palmer’s main influence as a songster was his uncle, Rev. Nathan Palmer, who lived and sang vigorously past the age of 100, although he never participated in the group that performed for the public. According to Freddie, “Uncle would just hit a song, anywhere, like I say he just—he was my mentor, I just watched him, he could hit them songs, and right on tune. That was something to see.”

With his powerful baritone voice and emphatic gestures, Freddie Palmer is indeed “charismatic” on stage. Yet his singing style is totally traditional. Asked about the old-fashioned garb the Shouters wear for their performances, he explains: “Jeans, overalls. They call them ‘over-haul.’ Working in the fields, that’s what they had, bib overalls. That was reminiscent of slavery, they wore them in the fields. Them slave songs, that’s part of it. The women get their long frocks, head-rags. Reminiscent of grandma days. For they didn’t go round, grandma didn’t go out the house les’n she had something on her head...that was part of what they believe in, that’s what they did. This was part of slavery, when we perform we got to look like it, in that time, working in the fields. That’s my best assumption on that one.”

Carletha Sullivan: “We have a lot of strong women”

The seven daughters of London and Amy Jenkins, the “old aunties” and “old ancestors” in the memory of 20th-century Bolden shouters, were the main conduit for the family/community ring shout tradition through the years. Carletha Sullivan, the oldest of today’s group, smiled as she affirmed that the “strong women...have a bad reputation! That we dominate men. But that’s not necessarily true. We just don’t step back. We step up to the plate and do what we have to do.... We have a lot of family values, and we try to bring the children up to be strong... [and] in the church.”

Carletha is urbane and formally educated, as are her children and grandchildren—she has

lived in Germany and is retired from working with the McIntosh County Sheriff's Department—yet she has strong roots in the shout. Her introduction to the tradition was through her mother, Oneitha Ellison: *"I remember my mother used to bring me to the shout when I was a girl. And she was one of the founding members of the McIntosh County Shouters.... [She was] quiet. But she was a smooth shouter. But she just glide across the floor. I can't shout anything like her. In fact, I don't think anyone shouts like the older shouters."*

Today Carletha explains that her *"role in the group is to try to keep the group together. I'm a 'Shouter slash manager,' I guess."* Her exposure to the tradition started at an early age: *"Yes, I was probably about six or seven. We would stay all night long. From Christmas Eve to New Year's Eve, but they would have the shout the entire week. They would shout at the church on Christmas Eve, until Christmas morning. And then they would go to someone's house, and shout, and shout from house to house, during the week. Then on New Year's Eve, they would come back to the church and shout until New Year's Day."*

Carletha recalls that when they first organized the performing group, "people thought it was a disgrace." Many disapproved of the dialect and of presenting slave traditions to the public. As Carletha explains: *"Because when I was a girl, all the other people in McIntosh County used to tease the people from this community, because we spoke in the dialect. And when Mr. McKiver and them went out first—I wasn't in the group—I had people to come and tell me, 'You need to tell your mother and them they shouldn't do that. It's a disgrace.' Because of the way they talk. And they just thought it was bad. Now, since Gullah's becoming so popular, everybody wants to—they want to do it now. I always spoke in Gullah, since I was a girl."* Once major outside recognition came to the performing group, others in the area began to appreciate the tradition, sometimes, in Carletha's view, not for the best reasons: *"...they want to travel, too, they think there's money in it—but it's not. It's just a lot of work, it's no money. You'd never get rich, shouting."* But they did get honor and gratification. Carletha recalls performing in Carnegie Hall: *"Oh, it was beautiful! And they introduced us 'all the way from Briar Patch, Georgia'! It was nice. It was the first Folk*

Carletha Sullivan

Photo: Daniel E. Sheehy



Masters, and we did the opening for it, in Carnegie Hall."

Carletha can articulate the intricacies and imperatives of the shout idiom. She maintains that spirituals are easier to sing than shout songs. In the shout, all the elements must work together: *"You can't get out there and move around; you gotta shout to the beat, if you're not shouting to the beat—it's not as easy as it looks.... If you would notice, sometimes when they start a song—we don't start shouting as soon as they start the song. We have to wait until we get the beat, and then we start shouting. But I see some people—they think they're shouting, I guess, but like I said, you got to shout to the beat of the stick and the hand-clapping [and] if that stick's off, you can't shout."* Another important point: *"One thing about a shout song—you can take this to the bank—if you don't speak in a dialect—I know people that sing shout songs, you cannot sing a shout song unless you speak in a dialect. In the Geechee, Gullah-Geechee dialect...."*

Carletha is the mother of Carla Jordan, shouter, and grandmother of Brenton Jordan, stick-man and songster. She is especially proud of Brenton. *"Brenton, he's gifted, he's talented. But, he inherited his rhythm. Seriously.... And he can beat that tambourine like you have never heard that tambourine beat before.... And also he can beat the drums. He can beat that stick.... He's an 'old soul.' An 'old soul.' He hung around his great-grandmother, not me. But my mother. A lot, and he learned a lot from her. He just picked up a lot of things that younger children were not interested in. He was interested in what the old people were doing, more so than the children. That's why I say he's an old soul in a young body."*

Brenton Jordan: "Sitting on a Diamond Mine"

Stick-man and songster Brenton Jordan is the youngest of the Shouters. College educated and savvy about modern popular culture, involved in social media, he is nonetheless deeply rooted in the tradition, and he can fuse a faithful vocal and percussion rendering of the tradition with his personal creativity, within the idiom. Born in 1986, Brenton was exposed to the organized group all his life, as well as Watch Night shouts. At the age of eleven he got a "sit-down," where he

learned that the history and hardships that sustained the community and family were embedded in the ring shout tradition. He realized that, *“Whoa! you’re sitting on a diamond here, you’re sitting on a diamond mine... bigger than yourself.”*

“My early memories of the shout, Watch Night, just sitting there watching the men and the women get together in the church annex... as a child, you don’t understand what’s going on. Once you become of age, you are able to comprehend... you’re sat down and told what the shout is—how it came into the family. I would spend a lot of my time with my great-grandmother... and on very rare occasions she would actually grab the broom from out of the corner and she would teach us a shout song. And I remember shouting with her around a pot-bellied stove in her living room. But it wasn’t until my great-grandmother actually sat me and my cousins down and gave us our family history... [that I understood] one of the most important things for us is to know where we came from. That was instilled in me, from my great-grandmother to my grandmother to my mother—always remember those who came before you, and the things they had to endure. I was lucky to have a great-grandmother until I was eleven years old. She was one of my biggest friends... someone I admired. I loved her to no end, I still love her to this day. She was a powerhouse, fun to be around—you couldn’t help but smile.... Of course there were some things that were kept out of the eyes of the children. But it was a big thing of remembering, so that it does not die, needs to be passed on, so that you yourself can enjoy the fruits of their labor, enjoy the things that they had to give. Back then, it wasn’t that they had money, the thing they had to give you was culture, history, morals, and values. Those are the things that I continue to hold on to.

Benjamin Reed was the stick-man when I was growing up.... I learned by watching. And then I would go home, using a baseball bat... I’d get in trouble for making so much noise! By the age of five I started learning how to beat the stick, by the age of six I actually tried my hand at shouting. And boy, that was interesting! You learn by watching.... So it took courage to (lapses into Gullah), took courage t’get out deah.... They would let you go, and if they saw that you were doing it correctly, you were left alone.... And even if your foot was a little off, they’d let you alone, because,

over time, he'll get it, or she'll get it. If they saw that you were playing, they'd give you a look... If you didn't sit down, they'd literally hit you, or push you out the way. Those are your two options! But for me, I got left alone. I learned to shout by the age of six, and at the age of nine, I tried my hand at leading my very first shout song—"John on the Island," which I lead now. And I remember leading it in front of Lawrence [McKiver]. And every now and then if I got messed up or jumbled up in the words, he could feed me the line.... And from then on, I wanted to learn more songs, because the language in the singing, I found it cool. To hear Lawrence's old voice, the way it would crack and rise and fall, I found it to be fascinating. Growing up with the Gullah dialect... I wanted to maintain and hold on to those old traditions and old words just as much as I possibly could."

Brenton believes that a good stick-man needs to have *"a big personality and a lot to give.... You have to feed those who are sitting down. Because if they're sitting down and they feel that rhythm...it starts to creep up their spine, they're gon' pat their foot, gon' shake their leg, they're going shake. And if you are a shouter, you can't help but move."*

Brenton has become proficient in African dance. He is also aware of performance traditions in Africa and the African diaspora that are related to the shout: *"There are so many styles that are in the Caribbean that are so similar to the ring shout. Kongo from Haiti. There's some elements of it among the Garifuna people of Honduras and Belize. There are forms of it in Jamaica, Kumina. There's forms in Brazil. And what they do, the men would be in the middle, playing capoeira, and when the slave master would walk by, or come close, the women would crowd around the men to move around them in that counterclockwise ring. And the foot movements were just like the shout.... They're shouting!"*

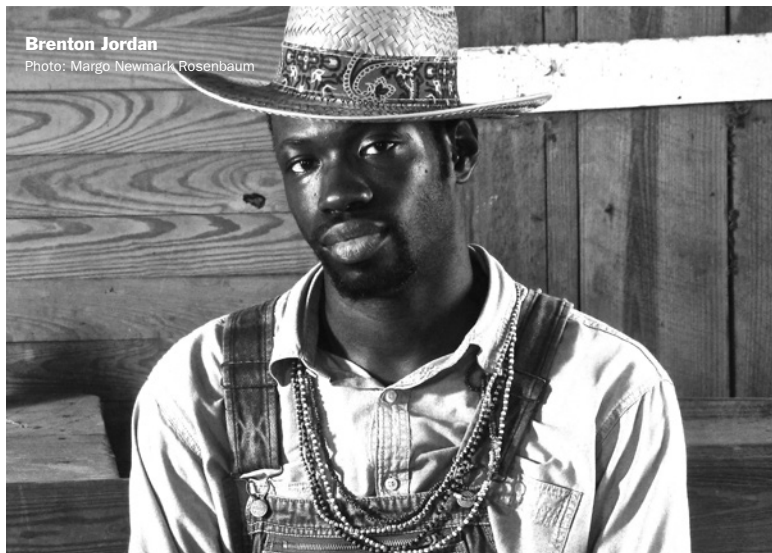
On March 29, 2016, the McIntosh County Shouters gave a powerful performance to a diverse crowd in the Morton Theater, a restored black vaudeville house in Athens, Georgia. They left little doubt about whether the shout tradition will live on. But let Brenton Jordan have the last word:

"Hopes for the McIntosh County Shouters? Honestly...for there to be others in the community, the lineage of Amy and London Jenkins, in the blood-line of Amy and London Jenkins, to

realize the gold mine that we have. Not gold as money, or finances, but gold in the sense of history, and tradition; for them to grab hold of that, actually want to maintain it. To keep it going, want it to survive. To take the time to learn. Learn how to clap, learn how to shout, learn the songs, the meanings of the songs. For me I would want—this has survived for over 300 years, to the present day, and my hope, my wish, my dream, is for it to survive another 300 years after I'm gone. That would be my biggest hope."

Brenton Jordan

Photo: Margo Newmark Rosenbaum



The Shout Songs and Spirituals

1. Jubilee

Freddie Palmer, leader, with basers; stick by
Brenton Jordan

Lawrence McKiver said that “Jubilee” was sung and shouted at the Emancipation. Freddie Palmer frequently exclaims “We are free!” before “setting” the song. The verse in which the leader implores the responding singers—“Jubilee need some basers”—goes to the heart of call-and-response; the text expresses the bitter understanding that the masters were happy enough that their slaves held Christian worship services on Sunday, yet contemptuously called them “Monday devils” the next day. I recorded a performance led by Lawrence McKiver in 1983 that can be heard on Folkways FE 4344. Lydia Parrish collected a similar song, “My Soul Rock on Jubilee” (1942). Eric Crawford has pointed out that this song is a variant of “Rock ‘O Jubilee” #33 in Allen, Ware, and Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867).

2. Believer, I Know

Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers

This shout song has special meaning to Brenton Jordan, as it was the last one he learned from Lawrence McKiver before McKiver died in 2013 at age 97.

3. I Come to Tell You

Venus McIver, leader, with basers; stick by
Brenton Jordan

Lawrence McKiver, who recorded this shout song for me in 1994, recalled that it was the “special song” of his mother, Charlotte Evans. As it has not been recovered elsewhere, it probably comes directly from the Jenkins slave shout song tradition. Happily it has moved into the active repertoire of today’s McIntosh County Shouters. Venus McIver’s verses differ somewhat from those of her cousin, Lawrence McKiver (there are two alternate spellings of the family name). She ends her singing here with the wordless humming, or “moaning,” of the melody, so that the devil can’t understand

the words that hide in the mind of the singer. This practice is rare in shout song performance but occurs occasionally in old-style African American hymn or spiritual singing. Here the moaning is particularly effective over the percussion of the sticker and the clappers.

4. Walk with Me

Venus McIver, leader, with group; stick and tambourine by Brenton Jordan

This is an old, traditional spiritual, widely sung in African American churches, that has only since the 1950s appeared in hymnals (according to Hymnary.org). It has been recorded by Mahalia Jackson, who sings “pilgrim journey” instead of the “tedious journey” that the older versions use as a metaphor for life’s struggles. It is usually sung to the pentatonic melody the McIntosh County Shouters use here, although Brady “Doc” and Lucy Barnes of Athens, Georgia, used a diatonic major key with guitar accompaniment.

5. Drive Ol’ Joe

Venus McIver, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan

I recorded this shout song from Lawrence McKiver in 1994. It has not been recorded elsewhere, so it must have been handed down in the Jenkins/Palmer shout song tradition. Freddie Palmer explains: “Well that was an old slothful fella, they were trying to get rid of. He was a troublemaker. And so they just ‘drive him out the window! Drive him down the road,’ just get rid of him.” Lawrence McKiver gave a more detailed explanation. Joe was a traitor to his fellow slaves. “Joe was a guy—we call him a ‘cheese eater,’ he would tell the old slave master everything that the slaves do, stay on the good side...and the slaves didn’t like him, you see. They didn’t want him around. See, the slaves would steal from the master, anything they could get, and Joe go and tell the owner. So therefore they didn’t want him.... I had an auntie Sarah, she could really sing that song. She was a Jenkins, after she married she was a Jackson.” McKiver described his mother and aunts performing this shout, waving handkerchiefs at an imagined “Joe” to banish him from their midst, as do today’s Shouters.

6. Went to the Burial / Sinner Weep So

Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers

The youngest of the McIntosh County Shouters delivers a powerful lead in one of the most moving of the shout songs, faithful to the tradition but animated by his creative re-phrasing of the verses and the overall feeling for the song. Alan Lomax among others has commented on the personal closeness to God and the Savior embodied in many African American religious songs, in contrast to the stark distance in white folk hymnody. Here the story of Jesus's burial is told in the first person and brought into the near present: The song and shout put the participants in the shout there at the event, with Mary and Martha. From the burial, the song returns, with improvisation and repetition, to the crucifixion.

7. Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Freddie Palmer, leader, with group; tambourine by Brenton Jordan

This is a hymn, not a shout song; variants of it appear in many hymnals. Nevertheless, the McIntosh County Shouters deliver it in a shout song-like call-and-response manner. The title and theme are from Matthew 5:3 and may

derive from John Wyeth's *Repository of Sacred Music* (1813), "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Another related hymn is "Hark, the Voice of Jesus Calling" #318 from *Lutheran Worship* (1869), which includes the words: "If you cannot speak like angels / If you cannot preach like Paul / You can tell the love of Jesus / You can say He died for all."

8. Move, Daniel

Freddie Palmer, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan

In many of the shout songs the basers' response is about equal in length to the leader's line; in most it is shorter, as in "Blow, Gabriel," where the basers' responses are "Judgement!" then "Judgement Bar!" In "Daniel" a single word, the name Daniel, suffices, while there is also a refrain sung by the leader and basers in unison. According to the Shouters of Bolden, Daniel is not the Daniel of the Bible but a slave who has stolen meat from the master's smokehouse. The performance was intended to fool the master into thinking the slaves were "having a party" and doing an innocuous dance. However, the song and accompanying movements in the ring

shout were directions to Daniel to help him flee the master's punishment, the "whip lash" that Lawrence McKiver specified. Daniel was a "fast runner," who could "pick it up and put it down!" as McKiver said with admiration. The movements in "Daniel" require the shouters to pay close attention to the leader's verses, and are particularly compelling and varied: the "shout" is the typical ring shout shuffling movement (as always, the feet must never cross); "go the other way" reverses the normal counterclockwise movement; "rock" signals a somewhat suggestive but never "out of the way" rocking of the hips by the shouters; and "the eagle wing" is an extension of the shouters' arms pantomiming an eagle flying away.

For a performance by the Georgia Sea Island Singers see *Georgia Sea Islands, Vol. I*, Prestige International LP 25001; McKiver and the earlier McIntosh County Shouters can be heard singing "Daniel" on Folkways FE 4344.

9. I Won't Turn Back

Freddie Palmer, leader, with basers; tambourine by Brenton Jordan

This song melds elements from the old spiritual "I'm On My Way to Canaan Land" (or "Freedom Land") with more modern gospel and anthem forms.

10. Oh, My Loving Mother

Freddie Palmer, leader, with group; tambourine by Brenton Jordan

This old gospel song is widespread in the southern traditions of both black and white singers. It incorporates a key line from the famous hymn "Rock of Ages," composed by the 18th-century Englishman Augustus Toplady. The present song pre-dates the Carter Family's influential 1930 recording (Victor VI 40293); it is a camp meeting-style song, easy to pick up and vary the repetitious verses without relying on a hymnal. In most instances, the first line ends: "When the world's on fire." The Shouters use an appealing variant in the Geechee dialect, "When the worl' is done wi'cha"—when the world is done with you. Incidentally, it shares its basic melody with the early country song

“Little Darling, Pal of Mine,” and either or both songs were used by Woody Guthrie for what can be called our folk national anthem, “This Land Is Your Land.”

11. Army Cross Over

Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers

This shout song, with its fragmentary biblical references, projects an image of bravery and struggle, one that certainly carried a coded message of resistance and eventual victory to the slaves who sang it, and passed it down to today’s shouters. Lawrence McKiver told me that this was one of the songs that “bracket off from the Bible, such as ‘Joshua, my army cross over,’ touching words from the Bible” (interview, February 12, 1994). There are two versions sung at the time of the Civil War in *Slave Songs of the United States*: William Francis Allen collected one in Port Royal, South Carolina; another came from Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, commander of a regiment of freedmen troops who surely also connected biblical with current battles, in Sapelo Island, in McIntosh County, very close to the mainland Bolden community. Brenton

Jordan sings some verses that McKiver did not provide and that are not in the Allen collection.

12. Walk Through the Valley in the Field

Freddie Palmer, leader, with group

This simple but forceful song is the only shout song in the Bolden repertoire that is sung in unison by the group and is not antiphonal—call-and-response—although a leading singer, in this case Freddie Palmer, provides the cueing words to the verses, each with the same AABA structure. The performing group frequently uses this shout onstage to begin their set, entering to its cadence.

13. Daniel Saw That Little Stone

Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers

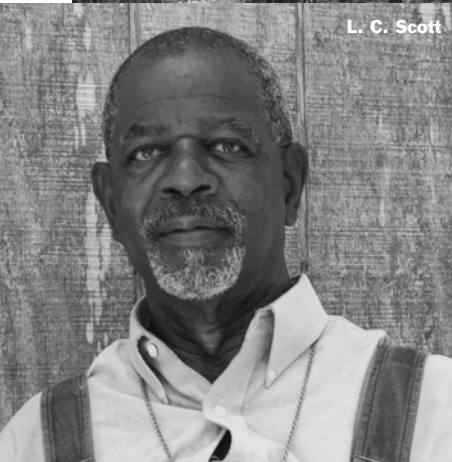
This shout song stems from Daniel 2:45, “Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and break them to pieces.” Freddie Palmer interpreted the song’s meaning: “That was the story about Daniel, when he—the king had a dream and the king couldn’t find nobody to interpret the



Alberta Sallins



Carla Jordan



L. C. Scott



Carolyn Palmer

Photos: Daniel E. Sheehy

dream, and they said well, I got one more, got Daniel, Daniel prayed, got the vision, he saw the gold mountain, and he saw the stone come rolling, out of the mountain. Daniel saw that little stone, come rolling, rolling, the stone come rolling from Babylon, roll out the mountain. The stone was there, no hand didn't cut it, the stone was just rolling. And that stone smashed up! So that's where that come from. And King Jesus is that little stone."

14. In the Field We Must Die

Freddie Palmer, leader; Brenton Jordan, leader and stick; with basers

This shout song expresses the inevitability of death as insistently and forcefully as any song could. In a traditional performance of this shout, the leader will vary the repetitious verses ad lib, almost as a preacher would riff on a basic text or message, perhaps even longer than the rendition here, until the shouters tire. I asked Lawrence McKiver whether the "field" meant the fields in which his slave ancestors toiled; he provided a broader interpretation of the metaphor: "No, no, that mean in this world. The world is just like a field, understand....

That's the field of your trials and your life" (in Rosenbaum 1998, 142).

15. Oh, Lord, I Want You to Help Me

Venus McIver followed by Freddie Palmer, leaders, with group; stick and tambourine by Brenton Jordan

This is a spiritual, not a shout song, but here it is reinforced by the stick and clapping percussion the McIntosh County Shouters use for the shout, with the added tambourine. Like many spirituals and gospel songs not specific to the ring shout, however, it does reference the shout: "while I'm down here shouting." Its line structure is AABA, making it easy to follow in congregational singing, and it is set to one of the fine old pentatonic melodies.

16. I Wade the Water to My Knees

Carletha Sullivan, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan

One of the finest shout songs in the Bolden repertoire, this song was closely identified with the late Lucille Holloway, who sings it on Folkways FE 4344. Sister Holloway, who never joined the group to perform outside the community, was a respected songster with a fine ability to execute

subtle melodic variations, some of which are notated by Johann Buis (see Rosenbaum 1998, 117). Holloway's was a song of noble resignation to the inevitability of entering the cold waters of death, evoking perhaps the story of the Ibo people who walked into an inlet on St. Simons to their deaths when they realized that they had crossed the sea into slavery. Today's shouters suggest that the song refers to slaves crossing streams in the flight from slavery. Carletha Sullivan's variant adds the prospect of rising again "with my faith." In her words, "That song, it was about the slaves, when they were trying to get away, and they had to go through the woods, through swamps and brooks.... It was a pretty cruel time... and if you're wading—And that's where the part comes in, 'it chills my body, but not my soul, cause you're gonna endure, you're gonna endure, no matter what.'"

17. This May Be Our Last Time

Venus McIver, leader, with basers; stick by Brenton Jordan

In the repertoire of the Bolden shouters the older traditional African American spirituals have been distinct from the "shout songs." However, "This May Be Our Last Time" does double duty as a spiritual and a shout song. Here the group performs it as a traditional shout song, with Venus McIver "setting" the song, starting slowly and then accelerating to shout tempo. The response of the basers and the percussion of the stick and clapping complete this performance as a shout. The stick and the clapping depart from the usual 3 + 3 + 2 and use a highly syncopated and "swinging" rhythm.

Leader: This may be our last, this may be our last,
Oh, oh, this may be our last,
It may be the last time, I don't know.
Well, it may be the last time we see each other.
Basers: It may be the last time, I don't know.

Venus McIver

Photo: Daniel E. Sheehy



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Moving Star Hall Singers and Alan Lomax, *Sea Island Folk Festival*, Folkways FE 341.

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Highway sign from Mt. Calvary Baptist Church, Bolden, McIntosh County Georgia.

Photo: Daniel E. Sheehy

Credits

Leaders: Brenton Jordan, Venus McIver, Freddie Palmer, and Carletha Sullivan

Basers, clappers, and shouters: Carla Jordan, Carolyn Palmer, Alberta Sallin, L. C. Scott, and Carletha Sullivan
Stick-man and tambourine: Brenton Jordan

Produced by Daniel E. Sheehy and Art Rosenbaum

Engineered and mixed by Pete Reiniger

Recorded at Elevated Basement Studio, Savannah, Georgia

Assistant engineer: Shane Baldwin

Mastered by Charlie Pilzer at Airshow Mastering,
Takoma Park, Maryland

Research assistance by Keisha Martin

Annotated by Art Rosenbaum

Photos by Daniel E. Sheehy and Margo Newmark
Rosenbaum

Executive producers: Daniel E. Sheehy, Huib Schippers,
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Smithsonian Folkways

spirituals & shout songs from the georgia coast

the mcintosh county shouters

1. Jubilee
2. Believer, I Know
3. I Come to Tell You
4. Walk with Me
5. Drive Ol' Joe
6. Went to the Burial / Sinner Weep So
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14. In the Field We Must Die
15. Oh, Lord, I Want You to Help Me
16. I Wade the Water to My Knees
17. This May Be Our Last Time



Acclaimed upholders of the African American ring shout, the McIntosh County Shouters keep the faith, form, and fervor of the generations-old tradition rooted in their small community of coastal Georgia. Companion songs to the shuffle-step devotional movement called “shouting” have resisted slavery, strengthened spirit, and left us a cultural keystone for the future. Through their classic shout songs and spirituals, the Shouters beckon us to remember the past while envisioning the future of the African American cultural legacy.

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