



JOSEPH SPENCE

ENCORE

UNHEARD RECORDINGS
OF BAHAMIAN GUITAR
AND SINGING

JOSEPH SPENCE: ENCORE

UNHEARD RECORDINGS OF BAHAMIAN GUITAR AND SINGING

1. Won't That Be a Happy Time? (1:15)

(Adger M. Pace-Barber Edwards)

2. Out on the Rolling Sea (3:08)

3. Down by the Riverside (3:17)

4. Bimini Gal (2:41)

5. The Crow (3:05)

6. In Times Like This (1:48)

(Ruth Caye Jones/New Spring Publishing, Inc., ASCAP)

7. Death and the Woman (2:28)

8. Give Me That Old Time Religion (2:32)

9. Run Come See Jerusalem (3:30)

(John Roberts)

10. Brown Skin Girl (2:16)

(Norman Span/Music Sales Corporation o/b/o
Campbell Connelly & Co. Ltd., ASCAP)

11. The Glory of Love (2:42)

(Billy Hill/Shapiro Bernstein & Co. Inc., ASCAP)

12. Great God What Do I See and Hear? (2:36)

(William Bengo Collyer)

13. That Glad Reunion Day (2:59)

(Adger M. Pace)





AN EXTRAORDINARY MUSICAL MIND

BY PETER K. SIEGEL

Joseph Spence (1910–1984) occupies a rare place in the world of music: that of a radical innovator whose performances stayed squarely within the folk traditions of his community. His work is like no one else's, yet it is quintessentially Bahamian, incorporating African rhythms, the harmony and counterpoint of traditional Bahamian singing, and elements of the more formal hymn-singing he heard in church.

To listen to Joseph Spence is to gain access to an extraordinary musical mind. Bahamian folksongs and spirituals become small masterpieces of improvisation, rich with exploration and surprise. Sometimes he seems to combine the sophistication of the worldliest avant-garde jazz virtuoso with the uninhibited joy of a very young child.

Spence—as he was known to friends and family members—was born in the settlement of Small Hope on Andros Island, the largest island in the Bahamas and one of the least accessible, due to its inhospitable coastlines and swampy interior. As such, Andros was a place where Bahamian music traditions thrived, substantially undisturbed by tourism or commercialism, well past the middle of the 20th century.

On the west coast of Andros, the island's isolation was enforced by a 20,000-square-mile expanse of shallow waters known locally as “the mud” (Craton and Saunders 1992, 144).

The shallowness that prevented ships from approaching the shore also made the area a prime location for sponge fishing (known as sponging), a major industry in the Bahamas from the late 1800s to the 1930s. The work was carried out by the crews of small sponging boats. Shallow water was essential because the sponges had to be individually harvested from the sea's coral floor by a crewman known as a hooker in a dinghy above.

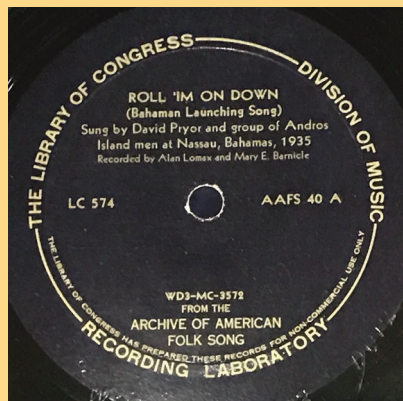
Living on their boats for weeks or months at a time, the spongers endured the long, dark nights by singing together, forging a new tradition called rhyming, which began, flourished, and ended in the 20th century. A rhyming group included a lead singer (the "rhymers"), who improvised fast-paced, syncopated verses against a background typically provided by bass and treble (tenor) singers. The rhymers' subjects included stories from the Bible or accounts of local storms or drownings.



Old postcard showing sponging boats and dinghies. Courtesy Peter K. Siegel.

As a young man, Joseph Spence worked as a sponger on the mud, bringing his guitar to play for himself and to accompany rhythmers. His multivoiced guitar style was shaped by his understanding of the distinct rhythmic and melodic roles played by the lead, bass, and treble singers of the rhyming tradition.

In 1935, folklorists Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle visited the Bahamas, where they made recordings in Nassau, Cat Island, and Andros for the Library of Congress. In 1958, music historian/writer/producer Sam Charters, who had heard the music that Lomax and Barnicle had recorded in Andros, went there seeking the musical intensity captured in those recordings. He found it in Joseph Spence, Frederick McQueen, and John Roberts. It was an unlikely coincidence that Charters met Spence in Andros, as Spence had moved to Nassau decades earlier and was in Andros only to visit his sister Edith, who still lived there.



A 78rpm Library of Congress record of Bahamian music recorded in 1935, like the one that inspired Sam Charters to go to Andros (Charters 1992). Courtesy Peter K. Siegel.





The brief meeting of Spence and Charters produced the Folkways album *Music of the Bahamas, Vol. 1, Bahaman Folk Guitar* (FS 3844, 1959), which drew praise from musicians Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder, and which the *New Yorker* more recently called “a miraculous field recording” (Petrusich 2018).

On certain songs, Spence sang powerfully and offered his personal lightning-fast version of rhyming. Other pieces were primarily instrumental works that did not include sung or rhymed verses, but were punctuated and propelled forward by energetic vocalizations that included abbreviated lyrics, exclamations, and near-scat singing.

Spence played almost exclusively in the key of D, using a “drop D” tuning in which the lowest string was tuned to a D rather than an E, which provided a resonant bass note to anchor his performances. Additionally, he usually tuned his entire complement of strings lower than standard pitch, sometimes by as much as a whole step.

Joseph Spence profoundly influenced several celebrated guitarists. A few have achieved near-mastery of his style, but Spence’s style can be seen as a language, a vehicle for the nuances of spontaneity, joy, inquisitiveness, and exuberance at the heart of his music. Others could learn the language, but only Spence could use it to convey his unique personal relationship to the world.

PRODUCER'S NOTE

The catalyst for all the recordings on this album was a concert of Bahamian music presented in New York City by the Friends of Old Time Music (F.O.T.M.) on May 16, 1965. The concert was the New York leg of a short three-city tour organized by the Newport Folk Foundation, with shows in Boston and Philadelphia as well.

Ralph Rinzler, one of the three directors of the all-volunteer F.O.T.M., had been hired as director of field research by the Newport Foundation. For the May 16 concert, he wore both hats. Pete Seeger had traveled to Nassau on behalf of the Foundation to locate Spence and other singers for the tour. Frederick McQueen was scheduled for the tour, but did not actually participate. In addition to Spence, the participating singers were: Spence's sister Edith Pinder, a highly accomplished rhym-er; Ethel McPhee, a traditional singer and the wife of Rev. W.G. McPhee, a strong supporter of Bahamian traditional music; and Stanley Thompson and Clifford Ellis, both outstanding rhymers. Sam Charters served as onstage presenter.

I was one of a few F.O.T.M. volunteers who handled various chores related to putting on the concerts, which included showing the musicians around town during their visits to New York. I had also become the person who recorded the concerts on an informal basis.

The New York concert was originally scheduled for Friday, May 14, between the Boston and Philadelphia shows, but it was later moved to Sunday, May 16. As a result, the musicians had a one-day layover in New York that Friday. I was asked to host Spence and his sister Edith that day.


Based on everything I knew about Spence, I thought he would love the observation deck atop the Empire State Building, then the world's tallest building. I was right. Ever a seeker of new perspectives, Spence drank in the city from high above. There he purchased a "snow globe" Empire State Building souvenir that he displayed on his mantle in Nassau for the rest of his life.

We then went to the 31st Street apartment where I lived with my parents. I recorded Spence playing my guitar. That session produced six of the selections on this album. Five more tracks are

The Friends of Old Time Music & Newport Folk Foundation
present

MUSIC OF THE

BAHAMAS



Joseph Spence

GUITAR INVENTIONS

**Frederick McQueen
& Bahama Singers**

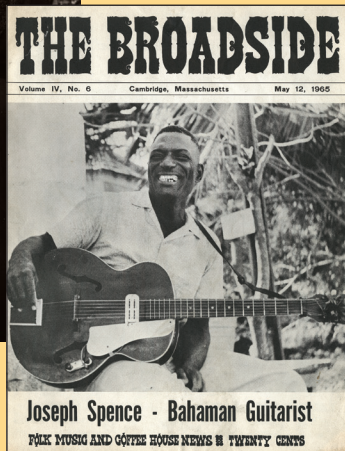
RHYMING TUNES, ANTHEMS & SONGS

Sun. **MAY 16** 8:30
NEW SCHOOL - 66 West 12th Street
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1965 poster by John Cohen.



Ethel McPhee, Joseph Spence, and Edith Pinder in New York for the 1965 concert.
Photo by Ann Charters.



Boston Broadside published the week of the tour.
Courtesy Peter K. Siegel.

from the concert of May 16. Jody Stecher and I recorded the two remaining songs in Nassau in June 1965.

Joseph Spence owned a black hollow-body archtop f-hole guitar that appears to have been manufactured by Harmony. He played it either unamplified or through a small guitar amp on which appeared the words "Joseph Spence, the voice from heaven." He played that guitar at the F.O.T.M. concert and on the Nassau recordings on this album. For the recordings made at the 31st Street apartment, he played a Martin D-28 flat-top acoustic guitar.

After the 1965 tour, Spence made several more trips to the United States. He performed at the Newport Folk Festival in 1966 and at concerts sponsored by the Boston Blues Society in 1971 and 1972. In addition to his Folkways recordings, Spence recorded for Elektra, Nonesuch, Rounder, and Arhoolie.

Throughout his life, Joseph Spence remained confident but unassuming and gregarious but approachable. He was a friendly, generous man who seemed to value his music and his family in equal measures. In Nassau, he worked as a musician, a stone mason, and a carpenter. He was proud of his music and of the house he himself had built, which he named "Louise Cottage" for his wife. He might like to be remembered by his own words, captured at a 1965 recording session: "I play for the world."

KNOWING JOSEPH SPENCE BY GUY DROUSSART

I was born in Antwerp in 1949 and spent part of my childhood in Africa. I went to Australia in the late 1960s. During my stay there as a migrant worker, a friend who collected records introduced me to American folk music, particularly country blues. Back in Europe in 1971, I began to collect records in Zurich. It was around that time that I first encountered the music of Joseph Spence on his Folkways album and *The Real Bahamas* (Nonesuch Records H-2013, 1966), and those field recordings have inspired me ever since.

In the fall of 1976, I spent several months in the United States, traveling across the country on a Greyhound bus, hoping to meet some of the musicians I had heard on records. In Washington DC, I visited the Library of Congress, where I heard Joseph Spence's rare Elektra album (*Happy All the Time*, EKL-273, 1964) for the first time. After my journey ended in Miami in May 1977, I took the opportunity to spend a few days in Nassau looking for Joseph Spence. A tip from Taj Mahal, who had visited Joseph and Louise Spence a few years earlier, helped me find their home, Louise Cottage on Cedar Lane in Culmerville.

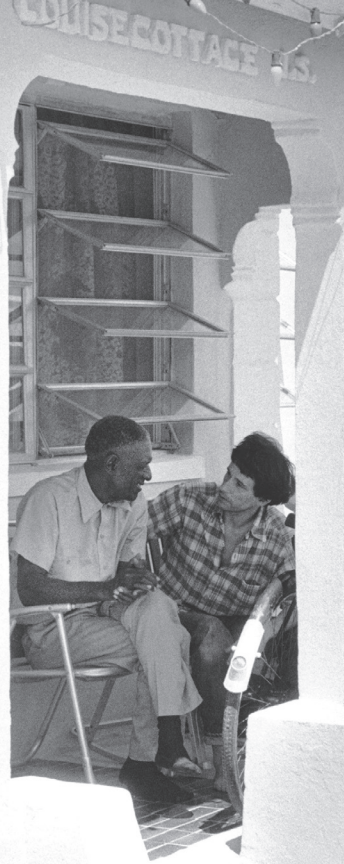
Meeting Joseph Spence and hearing him play the guitar over the course of a few days was beyond all my expectations. His warm hospitality and the sound of his music touched me deeply. Back in Zurich, I began to correspond with him and in the following years I returned to

Nassau several times to spend time with him. Spence was working then as a night watchman at the Oakes Field Primary School, where he played piano occasionally, while during the day you could often find him playing a game of checkers with friends in a Grant's Town barber-shop. He introduced me to his sister Edith Pinder and her family in Bain Town, as well as to several other musicians and singers including Frederick McQueen. He urged me to visit his birthplace in Andros, where I met John Roberts.

Joseph Spence died at his home in Nassau on March 18, 1984 after a long illness. At his funeral, the Transfiguration Baptist Church choir sang "Won't That Be A Happy Time?" at the request of his wife Louise. Spence's own rendition of that song can be heard on this album.

Guy Droussart took most of the photographs included in this album, and generously shared his knowledge of Joseph Spence's life and music.

Joseph Spence and Guy Droussart at Louise Cottage, 1978. Photo by Eva Wittwer.



SONG NOTES

BY PETER K. SIEGEL

1. Won't That Be A Happy Time? is one of the hymns in Spence's repertoire that came from two shape-note hymnals published by James D. Vaughan of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee: *Harmony Heaven* (1934) and *Crowning Harmony* (1940.) Both were popular in the Bahamas, and this particular hymn appears in *Harmony Heaven*. This is Spence's only solo recording of the song, although he also recorded it as an accompanist for his wife Louise, who sang it on *The Real Bahamas* (Nonesuch Records H-2013, 1966). At Joseph Spence's funeral service in Nassau on March 25, 1984, the choir sang "Won't That Be A Happy Time?"

2. Out on the Rolling Sea was one of the most widely performed anthems during the heyday of rhyming. Anthems were the older religious songs of the Bahamian settlements, as contrasted with newer spirituals that had their roots in the United States. "Out on the Rolling Sea" was recorded by Frederick McQueen, John Roberts, and previously by Joseph Spence himself. This version, recorded at the F.O.T.M. concert, provides an excellent example of Spence's unique rhyming style, with his sister Edith holding down a strong lead vocal beneath the rhyming, and the other singers on stage providing background support.

No. 96.

WON'T THAT BE A HAPPY TIME?

ADGER M. PACE.

BARBER EDWARDS.

1. When our life on earth is end-ed and we reach the oth-er shore,
2. There will be no more of sor-row, when we reach that love-ly place,
3. When we join that host now sing-ing their e-ter-nal song of praise,

With our voic-es sweet-ly blend-ed with the loved ones gone be-fore,
On that hap-py, glad to-mor-row, we shall see our Sav-iour's face,
Love-ly trib-utes to Him bring-ing, bless-ed An-cient of our days,

All the bells of glo-ry then will sweet-ly chime; (will sweet-ly chime;)
And shall live with Him for-ev-er in their chime; (that sun-ny chime;)
Oh the glo-ry of it all will be sub-time; (will be sub-time;)

Praising Christ our lov-ing Sa-viour, with that ho-ly, hap-py throng,
By the crys-tal riv-er flow-ing, we shall lin-ger day by day,
Thru the count-less years in glo-ry, o'er its love-ly hills to roam,

I, S. All the saints of by-gone a-ges will be there to swell the song,
See-ing Him, to know His fa-vor, we will sing the tri-umph song,
Happy there, for-ev-er know-ing God has wiped all tears a-way,
We shall live and not grow hoar-y, it is our e-ter-nal home,

Far ho-yond where tempest-rag-es, we'll find the Sav-iour's praise pro-long,
COPYRIGHT, 1924, BY JAMES D. VAUGHAN AND A. M. PACE.

WON'T THAT BE A HAPPY TIME? Concluded.

FINE

Brother tell me, won't that be a hap-py time? (a hap-py time.)

CHORUS.

be a hap-py time, a hap-py time? joy will sweet-ly
Won't that be a hap-py time? Bells of joy will sweet-ly

chime, will sweet-ly chime, O-ver yonder in that fair and sun-ny chime, that sun-ny chime;

No. 97.

AMAZING GRACE.

JOHN NEWTON.

WM. WALKER.

1. A-maz-ing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me;
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears re-leased;
3. Thru ma-n-y dan-gers, toils, and snares, I have al-ready come;
4. The Lord has prom-ised good to me, His Word my hope re-creates;
5. Yes, when this heart and flesh shall fail, And mor-tal life shall cease,

I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind but now I see.
How pre-cious did that grace ap-pear, The hour I first be-lieved.
The grace that brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.
He will my shield and por-tion be, As long as life en-dures.
I shall pos-sess with-in the veil, A life of joy and peace.

I shall pos-sess with-in the veil, A life of joy and peace.



3. Down by the Riverside is an old, often-recorded spiritual that derives its text from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah (2:4):

And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

4. Bimini Gal was among the songs that Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle recorded in Nassau in 1935. Sung by the Nassau String Band, that recording prominently featured tenor banjo and appeared on *Deep River of Song: Bahamas 1935, volume 2* (Rounder Records 82161-1832-2, 2002).

5. The Crow is a dance tune associated with a dance of African origin. In a 1939 audio recording, Zora Neale Hurston, the anthropologist, author, folksong collector, and performer, explained it as follows:

Dr. Herskovits [Anthropologist Melville Herskovits] says that he saw the background of it in West Africa, of the crow. The crow in some ways seems to be sacred in Africa. But what they're talking about is what we know in the United





States as a buzzard. And the buzzard comes to get something to eat, and they are talking about it. And they dance it. And one person gets in the center, and imitates the buzzard, and the rest of them follow in the background. [sings:] "Oh, Mama come see that crow, see how he flies" (Hurstons 1939).

6. In Times Like This was composed during World War II by Ruth Caye Jones, a Pennsylvania evangelist and gospel songwriter. It was recorded by Mahalia Jackson and by Albertina Walker & The Caravans.

7. Death and The Woman, performed here by Spence and his sister Edith, is a variant of one of the most haunting of all ballads, "Conversation with Death." A gospel version of the song was recorded as "Oh Death!" in 1927 by the Pace Jubilee Singers and an old-time country version was recorded as "Money Cannot Buy Your Soul" in 1939 by the Anglin

Brothers. Dock Boggs recorded “Oh Death” in 1964 for his Folkways album *Legendary Singer and Banjo Player* (FA 2351). Ralph Stanley’s “O Death,” as performed in the motion picture *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, won a Grammy award in 2001.

8. Give Me That Old Time Religion is a widely disseminated American traditional spiritual dating to the 19th century. It was published as “’Tis the Old Time Religion” in the hymnal *Crowning Glory No. 2* (Bilhorn 1891, 191). Countless 20th-century traditional singers performed and recorded it. The song’s simple three-chord structure makes it an ideal jumping-off point for Spence’s improvisations.

9. Run Come See Jerusalem is a well-known ballad that recounts the sinking of the *Pretoria* in 1929, when a record-breaking hurricane devastated the Bahamas. Particularly hard-hit was Andros Island, where three ships, including the *Pretoria*, were caught in the storm. Two of the ships survived, but the *Pretoria* sank at the entrance of the Fresh Creek Harbor Channel, drowning 27 people (Neely 2013). The song, sometimes called “Pytoria,” was recorded by Bahamian traditional singers Frederick McQueen, John Roberts, and Blake Alphonso Higgs (Blind Blake), and by folksingers Pete Seeger, the Weavers, Arlo Guthrie, and Odetta. According to Sam Charters, John Roberts composed the song (Charters 1959, 8).

A song called “A Great Storm Pass Over,” sung by a group of men from Andros Island,

provides a detailed account of the Hurricane of 1929. It can be heard on *Deep River of Song: Bahamas 1935* (Rounder Records 11661-1822-2, 1999).

In a recorded interview, Joseph Spence recalled how as a 19-year-old living in Andros, he had witnessed the tragedy from a hill near his home and had run to the harbor to help retrieve the bodies of the victims (Spence 1965). This is Spence's only known recording of the song. The verbal exclamations included in this performance make clear that his memory of that storm-wracked September day remained vivid almost 36 years later.

10. Brown Skin Girl was recorded by a number of prominent calypsonians, including King Radio (Norman Span) and Lord Invader (Rupert Grant). Harry Belafonte later included it in his smash hit album *Calypso* (RCA Victor LPM-1248, 1956). Its lyrics include these lines:

*Brown skin girl, stay home and mind baby.
I'm going away on a sailing boat
And if I don't come back, stay home and mind baby.*

In some versions, the departing dad seems to be a fisherman heading to sea or to neighboring islands to pursue a better catch. In others, he may be an American serviceman, leaving as the United States recalls its troops from their Caribbean bases at the end of World War II.

Sam Charters suggested that Spence may have learned the song while entertaining tourists on the docks in Nassau (Charters 1992).

11. The Glory of Love was composed by the prolific pop songwriter Billy Hill and recorded by everyone from Benny Goodman to Otis Redding. Big Bill Broonzy recorded a more traditional-sounding version. Like many other traditional musicians, Spence performed a song he liked without worrying about whether it was a proper folksong.

12. Great God What Do I See and Hear? is a hymn sung in Bahamian churches during Advent in the weeks before Christmas. Spence's performance of this very old song reflects the influence of the more formal church music he heard on his many visits to Cat Island, the birthplace of his wife Louise. This is his only known record of the song.





13. That Glad Reunion Day, written by the prolific hymn composer Adger M. Pace (1882–1959), appears in the shape-note hymnal *Crowning Harmony* (1940). Spence's first Folkways album, *Bahaman Folk Guitar*, includes his solo recording of the song, as "There Will Be A Happy Meeting in Glory." Here it is performed by Spence and his relatives, Edith, Raymond, and Geneva Pinder. Edith was a skillful rhymers who used floating verses that migrated from song to song. In "That Glad Reunion Day," she employs lyrics that she also used in her version of "I Bid You Goodnight," which became known throughout the world after the Incredible String Band, Grateful Dead, Aaron Neville, and many others learned and performed it.



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Credits

Produced by Peter K. Siegel

Guitar and singing by Joseph Spence

Singing by Edith Pinder, Raymond Pinder, Geneva Pinder

Recorded, edited, and mastered by Peter K. Siegel

Tracks 9 and 13 recorded by Peter K. Siegel and Jody Stecher

Recording data:

Track 4 "Bimini Gal" previously released as part of the Smithsonian Folkways box set *Friends of Old Time Music*.

Tracks 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 12 recorded May 14, 1965 at the home of Peter K. Siegel, New York, NY

Tracks 2, 4, 5, 7, 11 recorded May 16, 1965 at a concert presented by the Friends of Old Time Music and the Newport Folk Foundation at the New School, New York, NY

Track 9 recorded June, 1965 at the home of Joseph and Louise Spence, Nassau, Bahamas

Track 13 recorded June, 1965 at the home of Edith, Raymond, and Geneva Pinder, Nassau, Bahamas

Recorded on a Nagra III-B tape recorder with a Sony C37-A microphone

Annotated by Peter K. Siegel and Guy Droussart

Music and culture advisor: Guy Droussart

Cover photo by Guy Droussart

Concert poster by John Cohen

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Louise Spence's copies of *Harmony Heaven* and *Crowning Harmony*, marked with her name.
Courtesy Guy Droussart.

SFW CD 40242

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SMITHSONIAN
**FOLK
WAYS**
RECORDINGS

1. **Won't That Be a Happy Time?**
2. **Out on the Rolling Sea**
3. **Down by the Riverside**
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6. **In Times Like This**
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9. **Run Come See Jerusalem**
10. **Brown Skin Girl**
11. **The Glory of Love**
12. **Great God What Do I See and Hear?**
13. **That Glad Reunion Day**

Recorded and produced by Peter K. Siegel

Encore is a new album produced from previously unheard archival recordings by the legendary Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence, made in 1965 at the height of his career. Spence's radically innovative guitar style transformed elements of Bahamian traditional music into adventurous, joyful improvisations and influenced players worldwide. His powerful singing stemmed directly from the *rhyiming* tradition created by Bahamian sponge fishermen early in the 20th century. The music is punctuated by Spence's unique, sometimes otherworldly vocalizations including humming, short bursts of lyrics, and near-scat singing. Some of the recordings include singing by Spence's sister Edith Pinder and her family members Raymond and Geneva Pinder. Producer Peter K. Siegel captured these performances at Spence's only New York concert, at the performer's cottage in Nassau, Bahamas, and at Siegel's apartment in Manhattan.