

Bessie Jones, John Davis & the
GEORGIA SEA ISLAND SINGERS

with MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL and ED YOUNG



**THE
COMPLETE**

FRIENDS OF OLD TIME MUSIC

CONCERT

Bessie Jones, John Davis & the
GEORGIA SEA ISLAND SINGERS

with MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL and ED YOUNG



**THE
COMPLETE**

FRIENDS OF OLD TIME MUSIC

CONCERT

TRACKS

1. INTRODUCTION BY ALAN LOMAX / TRAVELIN' SHOES 2:29

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES, BMI)

DANCES AND CHILDREN'S PLAY SONGS

2. HANDCLAPPING AND CANE FIFE 3:07

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES, BMI-ED YOUNG)

3. BUZZARD LOPE (DANCE) - IN THAT OLD FIELD 2:12

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES-ALAN LOMAX/ODYSSEY PRODUCTIONS, INC. D/B/A GLOBAL JUKEBOX PUBLISHING, BMI)

4. JOSEPHINE 1:14

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES-ALAN LOMAX/LUDLOW MUSIC, INC., BMI)

WORK SONGS

5. GOODBYE MY RILEY O 2:41

(ARR. BY JOHN DAVIS)

6. GO ROW THE BOAT CHILD 1:39

(ARR. BY PETER DAVIS)

7. JOIN THE BAND 1:26

(ARR. BY JOHN DAVIS)

8. SINK 'EM LOW 2:29

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES-ALAN LOMAX/LUDLOW MUSIC, INC., BMI)

COUNTRY BLUES

9. GOING DOWN TO THE RIVER 3:30

(FRED MCDOWELL/HAPPY VALLEY MUSIC, BMI)

10. SHAKE 'EM ON DOWN 3:04

(ORIGINAL COMPOSITION BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON/SONGS OF UNIVERSAL, INC., BMI /

ARR. BY FRED MCDOWELL/UNICHAPPELL MUSIC, INC., BMI)

BIBLE-INSPIRED SONGS

11. ONCE THERE WAS NO SUN 2:40

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES-ALAN LOMAX/LUDLOW MUSIC, INC., BMI)

12. ADAM IN THE GARDEN 1:26

(ARR. BY JOHN DAVIS)

13. WHO BUILT THE ARK 1:38

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES-ALAN LOMAX/LUDLOW MUSIC, INC., BMI)

14. LET MY CHILDREN GO 3:19

(ARR. BY JOHN DAVIS-PETER DAVIS)

15. MY GOD IS A ROCK 4:14

(ARR. BY PETER DAVIS)

16. I HEARD THE ANGELS SINGING 3:11

(ARR. BY MABLE HILLERY)

17. READ 'EM JOHN 1:37

(ARR. BY JOHN DAVIS)

18. KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED AND BURNING 3:32

(ARR. BY FRED MCDOWELL/HILL & RANGE SONGS, BMI)

19. SIGN OF THE JUDGMENT 2:45

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES, BMI)

TRACKS (CONTINUED)

COUNTRY BLUES

20. CHEVROLET 4:22

(ORIGINAL COMPOSITION BY MINNIE LAWLERS - JOE MCCOY/MEMPHIS MINNIE MUSIC COMPANY,
ASCAP / ARR. BY ED YOUNG - LONNIE YOUNG/UNICHAPPELL MUSIC, INC., BMI)

21. WRITE ME A FEW OF YOUR LINES 3:29

(ARR. BY ELI GREEN)

22. DON'T EVER LEAVE ME 3:56

(MABLE HILLERY-FRED MCDOWELL, BMI)

BRINGING IT HOME

23. MARCHING ON THE MISSISSIPPI LINE 3:12

(MABEL HILLERY)

24. DOWN TO THE MIRE 3:18

(ARR. BY JOHN DAVIS)

25. BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR 4:56

(ARR. BY BESSIE JONES-ALAN LOMAX/ODYSSEY PRODUCTIONS, INC.
D/B/A GLOBAL JUKEBOX PUBLISHING, BMI)

Emma Ramsey, John Davis, Bessie Jones, and possibly Henry Morrison performing at the Poor People's March, Washington, DC, June 1968. Photo by Diana Davies.

NOTE ABOUT THE GULLAH LANGUAGE: Although Gullah borrows its lexicon from English, its grammatical structure actually lies in West African languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Twi, and others. In the 1930s, African American linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner noted more than 300 African loanwords and 4,000 personal names used by the Gullah Geechee people in his seminal study *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949). The spellings used for the Gullah Geechee song titles and quotations in this project are based on the work of a team of scholars over a 25-year period that culminated in the *Gullah Nyew Testament* (Gullah New Testament) Bible in 2005.



THE GEORGIA SEA ISLAND SINGERS BY ERIC S. CRAWFORD

Residents of St. Simons
Island perform a tradi-
tional dance. Photo by
CBS, via Getty Images.



The Georgia Sea Island Singers gained national attention during the 1960s and 1970s for their emotionally charged performances of Gullah Geechee spirituals from the secluded African American community on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Most of these singers were born and raised on the island and could trace their ancestry to the enslaved West and Central Africans whose expertise in cultivating long-staple cotton brought great wealth to white plantation owners. Geographic and social isolation, even after emancipation, contributed to strong retentions of their ancestral knowledge of food, art, language, storytelling, and music, known today as the Gullah Geechee culture. During Alan Lomax's first trip to St. Simons Island in 1935, he observed "African words and syntactical features" still in existence in the sea islanders' speech. Even the funeral customs and religious practices were in Lomax's estimation proof of the "part pioneer, part planter gentility, part African" traits among the Gullahs (Association for Cultural Equity 2020).

These strong Africanisms intrigued Lydia Parrish, wife of famed painter Maxfield Parrish, who returned to St. Simons Island for more than 25 winters, collecting music and bringing together the Gullahs in "sings" for white guests. Mrs. Maxfield Parrish, as she liked to be called, spent her first winter on the island in 1912. She would later characterize her first three years as "musically barren winters [of] stillness" that made her question the very existence of the music she hoped to encounter (Parrish 1942, 9). However, Parrish's fortunes changed in 1915, when she happened to hear her housekeeper Julia Armstrong singing one of the old songs as she cleaned the windows. With Armstrong's help, Parrish slowly gained entrée in the Gullah Geechee community and access to music later made popular by the Georgia Sea Island Singers.

Armstrong was one of the Proctor family members, who were well-known singers on the southern end of St. Simons Island. Joe Armstrong, Julia's husband, was an expert in singing sea shanties, such as "Pay Me My Money Down," "Sandy Anna," and "Knock a Man Down." As a leader of stevedore crews, Joe used the call and responses in these songs to synchronize his men's movements while pulling large objects like timber from

left to right
(foreground):
Emma Ramsey,
Bessie Jones, John
Davis, Mable Hillery.
Photo by David Gahr.



one place to another. The popularity of their songs inspired these men to form a local group, called the St. Simons Island Shanty Singers. Willis Proctor, Julia's brother and owner of a local store, was an excellent performer of ring-shout songs, such as "Adam in de Gyaaden" and "Eli, You Can't Stand." Proctor learned these songs from his father Adam Proctor, formerly enslaved at Black Banks Plantation, one of the 14 former cotton plantations on the island. The southern end was also home to Cornelia and Edith Murphy, known for their graceful movements when they performed the counterclockwise ring shout, the most revered ritual of the islanders' religion. Early forms of the secular Charleston and Big Apple dances may have derived from the ring shout.

On the northern end of St. Simons, Parrish met Ben Davis's singing family, which included John Davis, Peter Davis, and Bessie Cuyler. Big John Davis, as he was called, was a former sailor who developed an impressive repertoire of sea shanties, ring-shout songs, roustabout songs, and biblical songs about Moses and John, the writer of Revelations. His brother Peter Davis, a rare bass singer on the island, had a gift for telling stories passed down to him by their uncle John. His account of "Buh Rabbit an' Buh Wolf in de Well" confirms the community's strong retentions of West and Central African animal trickster tales about a Buh rabbit figure who outwits larger animals. Another noted singer/storyteller was Bessie Cuyler, who incorporated distinctive animal sounds in many of her stories. In her book *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*, Parrish captures Cuyler's humorous tale about a guinea hen, goose, duck, turkey, and preacher.

In 1920, Parrish organized the Spiritual Singers Society of Coastal Georgia, which included these fine singers, storytellers, and dancers along with other talented folk artists from the island and nearby communities. This group was the forerunner of the Georgia Sea Island Singers. The group's initial purpose was to perform for wealthy friends of automotive magnate Howard Coffin at his Cloister Hotel or home on Sapelo Island. Coffin's guests included two presidents (Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover), congressmen, and even legendary golfer Bobby Jones, who visited Coffin's palatial estate on

August 6, 1930. Jones was so impressed with the Gullahs' performance that "he requested repeats of several numbers" (Jones 1930). According to observers, Jones eventually "left his group of Atlanta friends" and joined the Spiritual Singers in performing the sea shanty the Gullahs called "Ragged Leevy." For their performances, the Gullahs usually received between a quarter and a dollar each, but Parrish remembers that "during the bleak winters of the depression some of the singers literally sang for their suppers—which they thankfully observed, the Lord had provided" (Parrish 1942, 10).

With the help of Coffin and other benefactors, Parrish established an annual St. Simons Island Folk Festival in 1931 to bring even more attention to Gullah music. She wanted to impress upon the islanders "the high regard in which their music [was] held by white people of importance" (Parrish 1942, 17). There were performances in four main areas of the islanders' music (shouts, play songs, work songs, and spirituals), and judges awarded silver trophies to groups receiving the highest scores. For the festival, Parrish formed a new group, the Plantation Singers, who specialized in secular songs and reenacting scenes from the enslaved past. Only "vouched-for singers of the old songs" could participate in the festival; once approved, they received a button representing their membership in the Singers Society. Parrish stated, "These buttons proclaim to the world that the men, women, and children who wear them are proud to sing the old songs. There is nothing like the weight of numbers to add importance to any movement!" (Parrish 1942, 17). Enrollment in the Singers Society reached more than 1,000.

The folk festival on March 23, 1934, at the Sea Island Casino on St. Simons attracted 100 Gullah singers and an audience of several hundred. Various performing groups sang "Been Down So Low," "Calvary," "Bye and Bye," "Come Out the Wilderness," "Like a Tree by the Waters I Shall Not Be Moved," and "Somebody Calling My Name, Lord Jesus." The Plantation Singers dramatically portrayed the enslaved Africans' rice-growing skills with a "hollow-trunk mortar and heavy wooden pestles to go through the process of threshing the rice." Long-time St. Simons resident Julia Walker then performed the

Rice Scuffle, a dance that showed “how they beat out the hulls with their feet.” Lastly, Josephine Young worked the fanner basket while she whistled for the wind to come “blow away de chaff” (Jones 1934).

After the rice demonstration, Walker and two men performed the Buzzard Lope dance. One man lay upon the stage to impersonate the carrion while the other “two circled and swooped upon him... like buzzards in motion” (Jones 1934). Folklorist Bess Lomax Hawes described the Buzzard Lope as a dance that reflected the “tragic memories of slavery in the Christian 19th century. The handkerchief around which the buzzard dancer circles is the body of a slave, denied burial and thrown out in the woods like a dead animal” (Hawes 1964). The highlight of the festival occurred when the Gullahs formed a circle and began to slowly move around in the ring shout. As the tempo increased, the shouters began “weaving and shuffling, stamping and dancing with bodies twisted in strange contortions” (Jones 1934). The performers at this folk festival established many of the musical and cultural elements



Bessie Jones.
Photo by Diana Davies.

later highlighted by the Georgia Sea Island Singers.

A year before the 1934 folk festival, 32-year-old Mary Elizabeth “Bessie” Jones from Dawson, Georgia, arrived on St. Simons Island and soon afterward joined the Spiritual Singers. Jones recalled, “When I came to St. Simons, John Davis and them were already singing here, and I joined them. I started out singing with Julia Armstrong and them, but we never sang onstage. We were just in the hotel on Sea Island or usually in [white] people’s homes (Jones 1983, 137). Jones’s reference to Julia Armstrong confirms an unbroken lineage of great women leaders within the singing group that continues even today with current leader Frankie Quimby. Armstrong’s mentorship was invaluable in helping Jones become familiar with the distinctive melodic, rhythmic, and linguistic elements in the group’s music.

Jones’s admittance into the Spiritual Singers was “vouched for” by John Davis and Peter Davis, uncles of Cassius Davis, her late husband. She remembered having a pin (button) with the group’s name on it. Initially, Jones and her second husband George planned a short visit to St. Simons, but their plans changed when John and Peter treated George “just like he was Cassius” (Jones 1983, 121). However, the group’s acceptance of her did not diminish the challenges she faced in understanding and finally embracing the Gullah Geechee culture on the island.

When Jones first visited St. Simons with Cassius in 1919, she encountered a Gullah Geechee language very different from her own. “I had never heard Geechee people talk before,” she remembers, “They had the funniest sound I had ever heard in my life when they talked” (Jones 1983, 92-93). In the early 1930s, linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner captured some of this Gullah speech in a rice song on St. Simons sung by Julia Armstrong.

New rice an’ okra—Nana—Nana!

Eat some an’ leave some—Nana—Nana!

Beat rice to bum-bum

Eat some an’ leave some. (Parrish 1942, 226).

In his book *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, Turner traced the word “Nana” (I’ve come) to the Vai people in parts of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Also in the 1930s, field-workers from the Savannah Unit of the Federal Writers Project interviewed Georgia residents who spoke the Gullah language. Floyd White, who provided Parrish with many sea shanties, also gave this account of the mass suicide of enslaved Ibo captives on St. Simons:

Heahd bout duh Ibo’s landing? Das duh place weah dey bring duh Ibos obuh in a slabe ship an wen dey git yuh, dey ain lak it an so dey all staht singin an dey mahch right down in duh ribbuh tuh mahch back tuh Africa, but dey ain able tuh git deah....Dey gits drown. (Georgia Writers’ Project 1986, 185)

Beyond the challenge of learning the language, Jones found she was unable to perform the ring shout, the most important religious dance in the Gullah Geechee culture. This counterclockwise dance requires the shouters to shuffle while keeping their feet on the ground and avoiding the crossing of their legs. Anyone found violating these rules was removed from the ring. As a “come yuh” (visitor) to the island, Jones never learned the complex movements that were second nature to the “bin yuhs” (native islanders); thus, she avoided shouting within the ring. In performances of ring shouts like “Adam in de Gyaaden” and “Walk Daniel,” Jones provided the accompaniment with her exceptional tambourine playing and moved in place, while the other singers performed within the ring. John Davis famously said of her, “Bessie can’t shout. . . but she can walk around just fine” (Hawes 1964).

By the 1950s, Lydia Parrish’s tight control of the Spiritual Singers Society, the group she had founded in 1920, had caused tensions that eventually contributed to the formation of its off-shoot, the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Looking back, Jones remarked that Parrish “had a lot to say about where we’d sing, when we’d sing, how we’d dress and like that” (Jones 1983, 138). Parrish’s glaring omission of John Davis from *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* was another manifestation of discord within the group. On March 30,

1953, Lydia Parrish died and was buried on her beloved St. Simons Island.

Jones was seven months pregnant when Lomax first came to the island in 1935, so she was not among the singers he recorded. However, the two kindred spirits came together when Lomax returned 24 years later. Lomax's use of the Spiritual Singers in the film *Music of Williamsburg* (1960) convinced him of Jones's unique artistry and future as a solo artist. For her part, Jones resisted such thoughts, understanding the importance of communal expression in Gullah Geechee music making. In 1963, Jones asked John Davis, leader of the Spiritual Singers, to select a group of singers for an engagement at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles. He arrived with Mable Hillery, Henry Morrison, and Emma Ramsey. The later addition of John's brother Peter Davis meant there were six core members in the newly formed Georgia Sea Island Singers: Bessie, John, Mable, Emma, Henry, and Peter. Lomax recalled the pressures of national tours: "They decided that there was to be no star but that performance time, credit, and money were to be equally and publicly shared.... These stalwart singers determined to somehow take their heritage to the people, especially the black people of the United States" (Lomax 1981). This kept the group together for a decade of concertizing with an uncompromising dedication to their folk art.

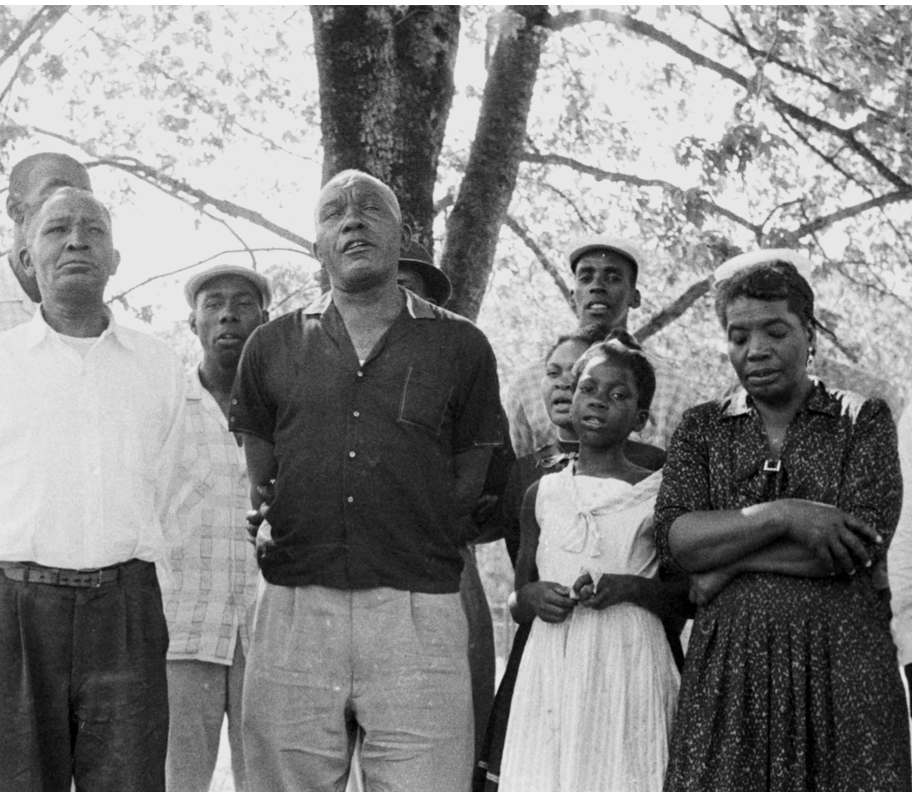
DR. ERIC S. CRAWFORD is a musicologist specializing in the study of Gullah Geechee music. His books include *Gullah Spirituals: The Sound of Freedom and Protest in the South Carolina Sea Islands* (2021) and (with Wilbur Cross) *Gullah Culture in America* (2023). He served as music consultant for the Amazon miniseries *Underground Railroad*.

THE FOLK REVIVAL YEARS

BY NATHAN
SALSBURG



left to right
(front row): Willis
Proctor, John Davis,
unidentified child,
Bessie Jones. Photo
by Alan Lomax.



I asked God for what I'm doing. I asked God long before Lomax called me, I asked the Lord for me to come out. ... When the Lord takes me out of this body, I want to leave something here of me. ... When the world folds in, I want to be here, in my work, in my doing, and with people, among the people. —Bessie Jones (1983, 151)

Alan Lomax first experienced the music of the Spiritual Singers Society of Coastal Georgia, as they were then known, in June 1935. Working with folklorists Zora Neale Hurston and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Lomax recorded several dozen sides of the Singers' sacred material for the Library of Congress, plus some of their tall tales and songs for work and play. He later wrote that the Sea Islanders "kept to the speech of their ancestors and, in some places, still speak dialects in which many African words and syntactical features survive. Their folk and animal tales show a rich admixture of European and African traits at an early stage of blending. Their funeral customs, their religious ceremonies, indeed, their whole way of life bear the stamp of antebellum days" (Lomax 1962).

Returning to St. Simons in 1959, on a two-month field-recording trip throughout the South with a state-of-the-art stereo tape machine furnished by Atlantic Records, Lomax found the islands much changed—through the explosion of the tourist trade, a decline in rural occupations, and the departure of African Americans for Northern cities. But the principals of the Spiritual Singers—Big John Davis (a former sailor and roustabout), fisherman Henry Morrison, and storekeeper Willis Proctor, the group's then de facto leader—were still singing. Moreover, Bessie Jones, who had moved to the island from mainland Georgia, had immeasurably enriched their repertoire.

As a singer and song-bearer of monumental proportions, Jones wasn't the only significant artist met then by Lomax and his assistant, English folksinger Shirley Collins. Just days before alighting at St. Simons, Lomax and Collins had visited the Mississippi Hill Country, where Lomax in 1942 had been the first to document the region's fife-and-drum traditions. Lomax initially worried that he might find, as he had in other sites,

“that the best people had passed away or withered and their communities had gone to pieces” (Lomax 1993, 326). However, to his delight, he found the local fife-and-drum scene alive and thriving, exemplified by the band led by brothers Ed and Lonnie Young of Como. Lomax and Collins also met the elderly Pratcher brothers, Miles and Bob, practitioners of old-time Black country square-dance tunes and reels. What they didn’t expect to find arrived at Miles’s porch one evening. “I shall never forget,” Collins later wrote, “my first sight of Fred McDowell as he walked out of the trees and into the clearing of tiny wooden shacks” (Collins 1997). He had just finished his day picking cotton. Collins admitted that she at first resented the younger man’s intrusion, but when McDowell started to play, she and Lomax realized they were in the presence of a master musician.

As McDowell recalled,

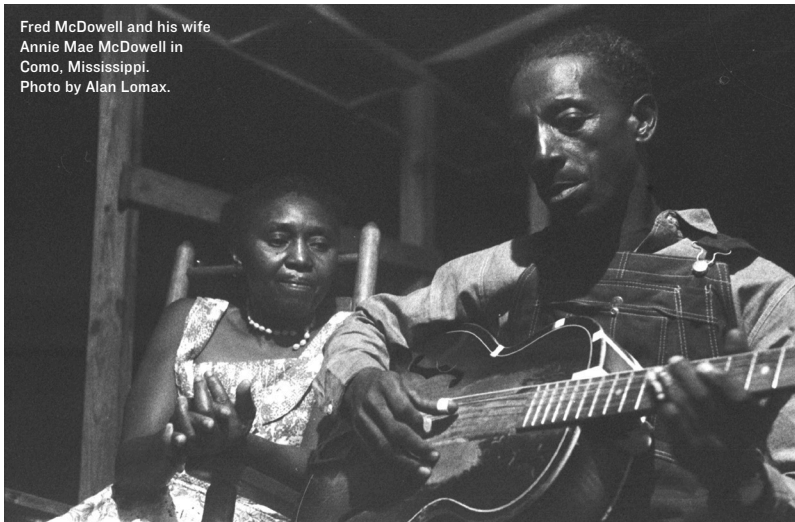
Alan Lomax recorded me for the first time. I remember he was at the Pratcher brothers’ house doing some recording, and somebody sent for me and said I should bring my guitar along. I did come by and played a little for Lomax, and he asked could he come to my house on Saturday night to record, and I said sure. So come that Saturday night, the house is full of people come to hear me recording and wanting to record, too. But right away Lomax said, “I’m not interested in nobody but Fred.” (Cook 1973, 84)

McDowell was a native of Rossville, Tennessee, a deeply musical community just across the Mississippi state line. “There wasn’t hardly any seen who couldn’t play guitar,” McDowell remembered. His uncle, Gene Shields, played slide with a filed-down piece of rib bone from a cow. “I was a little bitty boy when I heard him do that and after I learned how to play, I made me one and tried it too. Started off playing with a pocket knife” (Welding 1965, 4-5). Eventually, he settled on a glass bottleneck, which provided the most clarity and volume. McDowell moved west from Rossville to Memphis in 1926, and around 1940 to the Hill Country, where his sister Fanny Davis had relocated after the death of their mother in Rossville. He became popular at house parties and country

picnics; his driving, droning approach to his instrument exquisitely suited long nights of dancing.

In spring 1960, Lomax returned south for the shooting of *Music of Williamsburg*, a film produced by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation which had hired him as music consultant. He put together an ensemble with the Spiritual Singers at its core, accompanied by Southwest Virginia multi-instrumentalist Hobart Smith, Miami-based Bahamian drummer Nat Rahmings, and Ed Young on fife. “I cannot swear to the authenticity of this reconstructed music,” Lomax later admitted, “but the musically conservative Sea Island Singers gave it their enthusiastic approval” (Lomax 1998). Certainly, the group

Fred McDowell and his wife
Annie Mae McDowell in
Como, Mississippi.
Photo by Alan Lomax.



under Lydia Parrish's direction deserved that description, but not so the group that became the Georgia Sea Island Singers; their collaborations with instrumentalists, particularly Ed Young, were anything but conservative. The leader of a family fife-and-drum ensemble based in Como, Young played some of the oldest surviving African instrumental music in America, which had fused with martial ensembles of the Revolutionary War period. While not outspoken about his role as a culture-bearer, Young shared the Singers' commitment to transmitting the repertoire and performance style he inherited, marked by their own conspicuous African retentions. Living in Memphis and working as a high-school janitor, he traveled home to Mississippi for the weekend picnic dances where his band was a fixture. Young and the Singers made music that was central to Black communal life—its hardships and its joys—and the rapport they shared is obvious: the threading of Young's fife through the fabric of their voices; their polyrhythms recreating the dancers treading the ground of country picnics. "We start out in the middle of a field," Young told Bess Lomax Hawes, "and the grass is sometimes up to your waist, and when we're through, it's all gone. They just dance it right down to the ground" (Hawes 1965).

In 1961, Alan Lomax invited Bessie Jones to New York City for what became a three-month stay, during which they recorded 30 hours of songs, reminiscences, and discussions. The idea was to use this material for an oral biography, as Lomax had done with Dock Reese and Vera Ward Hall (*The Rainbow Sign*, 1947) and Jelly Roll Morton (*Mister Jelly Roll*, 1950). However, the more immediate outcome was Jones's introduction to the folk circuit. Beginning in 1962, and continuing through the 1960s, the newly renamed Georgia Sea Island Singers—led by Jones and John Davis—performed and taught at nightclubs, festivals, summer camps, kindergartens, and workshops across the country. Lomax served as unpaid manager, assisting with the bookings. The Singers did the rest. The profundity of their talent and the clarity of their vision of themselves as tradition bearers and transmitters made for electrifying concerts; they were in high demand.

The Singers were in the right place at the right time. Embodying African American cultural continuity and endurance, they emerged in the thick of the Civil Rights Movement and exemplified collective artistic vigor inseparable from Black folk memory and practice. Frequent participants in movement workshops and teach-ins, they demonstrated songs and dances to organizers and allies of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) at events like “Sing for Freedom: A Festival of Negro Folk Music and Freedom Song,” organized by the SCLC, SNCC, and East Tennessee’s Highlander Center.

At the Friends of Old-Time Music (F.O.T.M.) concert on April 9, 1965, Lomax drew explicit connections between the victories achieved by the Civil Rights Movement and the persistent vitality of African American expressive culture. The Civil Rights Act had become law in July 1964; President Lyndon Johnson would sign the Voting Rights Act in the summer of 1965. Throughout the 1960s, the Georgia Sea Island Singers performed with artists such as Young and McDowell, presenting the depth and breadth of Southern Black folk music to audiences around the country. Moreover, the performers’ deftness as collaborators and improvisers transcended the regional specificity of their respective traditions, brilliantly illustrating the democratic spirit of Black performance traditions. In the words of James Cone: “Black music is unity music....[I]t confronts the individual with the truth of Black existence, and affirms that Black being is possible only in a communal context (Cone 2022, xxiii).

By the time of the F.O.T.M. show, Ed Young and the Singers had recently left California after several weeks leading workshops organized by Bess Hawes at the Idyllwild Arts Foundation. In 1965, Hawes had also made *Buck Dancer*, a short film about Young that featured the Singers as his rhythmic accompanists. Before Idyllwild, the artists had played several nights at Ash Grove in Los Angeles, where Davis had asked Hawes a favor:

[He said] Bess, I want you to come and listen to us every night ... and afterwards I want you to come back and tell us how we’re doing....I want to know if we’re still singing it the same

way. 'Cause when you go out of where you belong, you go sing in different places, you begin to change things...I don't want to change any of this. (Altman 2003)

1972 saw the publication of *Step It Down*, a compilation by Jones and Hawes of 70 of Jones's game songs, "plays," and other coordinated, cooperative activities for children. The Georgia Sea Island Singers had ceased to perform, although Jones and Hillery remained active as solo performers and teachers. John Davis died that same year.

For all the deserved respect and extensive documentation Jones received, one tragedy is that the breadth of Davis's vision, wisdom, and talent was not similarly recognized. As Hillery lamented in a letter to Hawes, "We just waited around to[o] long and did nothing much about what he could have [been] giving to the kids of tomorrow so there goes another great man with such [a] beautiful mind" (Hillery 1972).

Davis's legacy, like that of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, nonetheless endures, especially with discoveries like this concert emerging from the haze of the past into the benighted present like a beacon. They were people who believed the songs and dances of their forebears could change things; they sang and danced and passed them on accordingly. As Bessie Jones prophetically described the mission: "When the Lord takes me out of this body, I want to leave something here of me.... in my work, in my doings, and with the people, among the people. They don't see me but they can see of me" (Jones 1983, 151).

NATHAN SALSBURG is the curator of the Lomax Digital Archive.

PRODUCER'S NOTE

BY PETER K.
SIEGEL

A succession of folklorists and advocates supported and presented the music of the Georgia Sea Islands, beginning in the early 20th century with Lydia Parrish, and later including Bessie Jones and Alan Lomax. The concert documented by this album reflected their efforts and those of two not-for-profit organizations: the Newport Folk Foundation and the New York City-based presenting organization, Friends of Old Time Music (F.O.T.M.).

In 1965, Ralph Rinzler, one of the founders of F.O.T.M., was directing the Newport Foundation's traditional music field research program. Both Rinzler and Alan Lomax served on the Foundation's board. Newport forged partnerships with F.O.T.M., Club 47, and the Philadelphia Folk Song Society to present a series of four short concert tours. These brought music from the rural South, the Bahamas, and the Georgia Sea Islands to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

The New York concerts were presented at the New School on West 12th Street in Greenwich Village, where the folk revival of the 1960s was in full swing. On April 9, 1965, Lomax presented the Georgia Sea Island Singers, joined by Fred McDowell and Ed Young. I had been recording the F.O.T.M. shows since 1962. By the time of the concert, I had a good Nagra tape recorder and a good Sony condenser microphone.

Lomax had worked with the performers to create a number of song groupings, including a set of work songs and a set of songs that told stories from the Bible. Lomax introduced the singers, who entered from the wings singing "Got on My Travelin' Shoes." The percussive sounds of feet dancing on the auditorium's wood stage, augmented on some songs by rhythms pounded out by John Davis's heavy walking stick, provided a driving accompaniment for the group's singing.

Alan Lomax had a gift for bringing together musicians and singers from different traditions, sometimes with spectacular results. When Fred McDowell, a blues singer from Mississippi, played a slide-guitar accompaniment for the Georgia Sea Island Singers' rendition of "I Heard the Angels Singing," the collaboration evoked the spirit of Blind

Willie Johnson. Throughout the evening, the Singers, McDowell, and Young, a cane-fife player from Mississippi, performed separately and in different combinations.

John Davis and Alan Lomax had met three decades earlier, when Lomax first visited St. Simons Island in 1935. It was clear from their good-natured ribbing that the two men liked each other. After Lomax introduced the work song, “Goodbye My Riley O,” Davis commented, “Well, Lomax done tell you all about it, all I have to do is do it now!” Later in the evening, Lomax returned the favor, saying that the next number would be a song “about the sinner going down in the mire of sin and being raised up. John knows all about this. I don’t know where he learned.”

This album includes all the singing and music performed at the concert. The time limit of the CD format, as well as sonic interruptions caused by moving the microphone between songs, made it impossible to include some of the talk and announcements.

PETER K. SIEGEL is a record producer specializing in documentary recordings of traditional music.

The Friends of Old Time Music & Newport Folk Foundation
present

Bessie Jones

& GEORGIA SEA ISLAND SINGERS



&

Fred McDowell

MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUES

APRIL 9

NEW SCHOOL - 66 West 12th Street

Tickets \$2.00: Folklore Center - 321 Sixth Avenue
YU 9 - 1992

Poster by
John Cohen

SONG NOTES

BY ERIC S.
CRAWFORD &
NATHAN
SALSBURG

Members of the Georgia Sea
Island Singers, including
Emma Ramsey (far left),
Bessie Jones (in black hat),
John Davis (in gray cap),
and Mable Hillery (far right).
Photo by Alan Lomax.

1. INTRODUCTION BY ALAN LOMAX / TRAVELIN' SHOES

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Bessie Jones uses her legendary tambourine playing to drive the emotional level of this performance through a gradual acceleration that heightens her vocal improvisations and gives a sense of urgency to the Georgia Sea Island Singers' harmonic responses. The repetitive nature of this song requires Jones to interject new and exciting melodic motives. Her exclamations—"I'm gonna tell the Lord," "Lord have mercy now," and "In the word of God"—come from the Black church. Lomax's introductory remarks about his hope for world peace and integration flow naturally into the group's performance of "Travelin' Shoes." This freedom song was made popular in segregated Birmingham, Alabama, two years earlier by Carlton Reese, a student at Miles College who formed the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights Choir. (ESC)



DANCES AND CHILDREN'S PLAY SONGS

2. HANDCLAPPING AND CANE FIFE

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), ED YOUNG (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Handclapping became an effective tool of protest for enslaved Africans when Southern plantations banned drums following the Stono Rebellion in the 18th century. Although communication over vast areas was no longer possible, the enslaved used their hands to replicate the different pitch levels of their talking drums (tenor, bass, baritone).

Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers demonstrate these handclapping techniques mastered by their ancestors. Joining them is Ed Young, a fife player who frequently performed with the group. Young adds layers of rhythmic and melodic lines that reflect the shared West and Central African musical ties between his Mississippi Delta and the Georgia Sea Isles. (ESC)



3. BUZZARD LOPE (DANCE) – IN THAT OLD FIELD (IN DAT OLE FIEL')

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

The Buzzard Lope dance, performed to the song “In Dat Ole Fiel’,” grew out of the enslaved Africans’ humiliation of simply being thrown in an old field, like a worthless animal, when they died. John Davis’s intricate dance steps, heard on the recording, highlight the only known solo dance performed within the ring shout. This dance has connective threads not only to West and Central Africa, but also to later Black vernacular dance styles in minstrel shows. Bessie Jones’s rhyming couplets inspire the group to perform their responses with two different endings (one high, one low). Mable Hillery’s powerful ascending vocal slide on the word “fiel” in the first response demonstrates her formidable skills as a singer. (ESC)

4. JOSEPHINE

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

The ring play “Josephine” offered Gullah children an early opportunity to practice their shouting steps within the context of a game. According to folklorist Bess Lomax Hawes, the opening spoken call “Josephine” and response “Yes, ma’am” serve to teach “the child responsiveness” and give them a “preliminary taste of the pleasures of antiphonal singing” (Jones and Hawes 1987, 58). Jones said it a bit more succinctly: “When I call Josephine, they answer like the chillun used to answer.” The clave pattern used for “Shout, Shout” reflects the fundamental use of this rhythm in music-making throughout the Sea Islands and global areas of the African diaspora. (ESC)

Ed Young.

Photo by Alan Lomax.

WORK SONGS

5. GOODBYE MY RILEY O

JOHN DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

The sea shanty “Goodbye My Riley O” pays homage to the stevedores on St. Simons Island who created a distinctive body of songs from difficult working conditions. According to historian Margaret Davis Cate, “These were strong, husky men, and they handled the large timbers with skill. As the leader sang a line. . . all pulled together in perfect unison” (Cate n.d.) Because Big John Davis was a leader of these husky stevedores, he knew the importance of the heavy accents on beats one and four of “Riley” that gave his men the needed rhythmic drive to complete their challenging tasks. The accompanying “hunh” sounds and the singers’ low harmonies replicate the grunts of the men as they lifted heavy lumber. (ESC)

6. GO ROW THE BOAT CHILD (GO ROW DE BOAT CHILE)

PETER DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND JOHN DAVIS

Peter Davis learned the rowing song “Go Row de Boat Chile,” also known as “Johanna,” from his grandfather. Prior to emancipation, this type of a work song had a patrol or song leader who sang the call of the spiritual while enslaved oarsmen responded through their synchronized rowing strokes. These boatmen were tasked with entertaining white passengers with these songs during trips to and from plantations along the Sea Islands, but the tempo depended upon the tide and weight of the cargo. Gullah Geechee linguistic elements appear in “de” (the) and “chile” (child), and the avoidance of “s” endings (baby). The melodic lines and syncopated rhythms in “Go Row de Boat Chile” confirm an unmistakable connection to music-making in the West Indies and Caribbean islands. (ESC)

7. JOIN THE BAND

JOHN DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

“Join the Band” is another work song used and perhaps created by the stevedores on St. Simons Island. In contrast to the Negro spiritual “Hope I’ll Join the Band,” which references a heavenly gathering of believers, there is nothing sacred in this version. John Davis’s scatting syllables “bo-bo” and the group’s bluesy harmonies affirm this song’s secular usage at the dock, lumber yard, or railroad where these men labored. Lomax describes this type of work song as conveying “a sense of fun” and an “independent spirit” from Gullah workers who “sometimes worked for whites for cash but otherwise could live independently from fishing, oystering, and farming” (Lomax 1981). Bessie Jones recalled, “John loved to sing funny songs and those old-timey songs...and Lomax couldn’t find it anywhere...but he found it with John” (Jones 1983, 137-38). (ESC)

8. SINK 'EM LOW

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Bessie Jones’s song “Sink 'Em Low” has its origins in her terrifying childhood memories of seeing shackled Black prisoners wearing striped prison clothes and forced to shovel dirt for the construction of highway roads while white armed guards looked for opportunities to punish those appearing to be slacking. Jones’s step-grandfather Jett Sampson told her that “Sink 'Em Low” meant to “shovel way down in the dirt and throw it high,” which was advice the older prisoners gave the younger ones to avoid punishment” (Jones 1965). Jones’s chilling performance, the accompanying harmonies, and the work (hunh) sounds honor those who endured the threat of hound dogs, hard-hearted captains, and unfair judges to march on through to freedom. (ESC)

COUNTRY BLUES

9. GOING DOWN TO THE RIVER

FRED MCDOWELL, VOICE AND GUITAR

Fred McDowell made his first recordings on September 21, 1959, at the Mississippi Hill Country home of his neighbor Miles Pratcher, where Alan Lomax and Shirley Collins had taped songs by Miles and his brother Bob's old-time Black string-band. A native of Rossville, Tennessee, McDowell had long lived in Como (with stints working in Memphis and in the Delta) and frequently performed at the same picnics as Ed and Lonnie Youngs's fife-and-drum band, whose debut recordings took place the same day. "Going Down to the River" is one of the most enduring testaments to McDowell's profound talents as singer, guitarist, and composer. (ns)



10. SHAKE 'EM ON DOWN

FRED MCDOWELL, VOICE AND GUITAR; PROBABLY MABLE HILLERY, TAMBOURINE

Credited with its composition, Bukka White was the first to record “Shake 'Em on Down,” which became a hit for the Vocalion label in 1937. Whether McDowell adapted his arrangement directly from White (from the record or in performance), or from Tommy McClennan’s 1939 “New Shake 'Em on Down,” or simply the popular song’s dispersal via oral transmission, he made it utterly his own. It became his signature piece, so much so that he became known as “Shake 'Em.” (NS)

BIBLE-INSPIRED SONGS

11. ONCE THERE WAS NO SUN (ONCE DEY WAS NO SUN)

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

John Davis’s opening words, “We know that in the beginning God created de ‘heaben and de earth,” establish the biblical story of the creation as a new interpretation of the Negro spiritual “I Heard de Angel Singin’.” On St. Simons Island, Lydia Parrish recorded the more typical version containing the Gullah stanzas “One mornin’ soon,” “Lawd, Ah wuz down on my knees,” and “Well, there’s no weepin’ there” (Parrish 1942, 141). Bessie Jones’s new verses are “Once there was no sun,” “Once there was no moon,” “Do Lord go down,” and “Once there was no man.” The refrain, “I heard de angel singin’,” remains unchanged, but its texts are unrelated thematically to the creation story. Musicologist Eileen Southern terms this a “wandering refrain” or a popular chorus that congregants inserted into any musical setting because they already knew the melody and could instantly participate in the singing. (ESC)

left to right (back row): Emma Ramsey, Ed Young, Mable Hillery,
John Davis, unidentified children. Photo by Alan Lomax.

12. ADAM IN THE GARDEN (ADAM IN DE GYAADEN)

JOHN DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

The ring shout “Adam in de Gyaaden” dramatically portrays the biblical story of Adam hiding from God because of his nakedness. Enslaved Africans learned such stories when forced to attend their plantation owner’s church. Later, within the safety of their small religious structure known as the pray’s (praise) house, they refashioned these texts into songs with new, more personal meanings to them. John Davis’s opening call “Oh Eve” elicits the group’s first response, “Where is Adam,” but Davis’s second call “Oh Eve” provokes the group’s true answer, “Adam in de Gyaaden pickin’ up leaf.” The singers’ use of the singular form of “leaf” has West and Central African linguistic roots, where there is no differentiation in singular and plural nouns. Although this ring shout is an abbreviated version, there remains a sampling of the clave pattern, accelerating tempo, and heightened emotionalism that inspired shouts to last for many hours. (ESC)

13. WHO BUILT THE ARK (WHO BUILD DE ARK)

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

“Who Build de Ark” is another biblical song in a question-answer format. After Bessie Jones’s opening question and the group’s Gullah-infused response “Norah build it,” the subsequent responses “Norah build de ark” and “He cut his timber down” are more energetic and syncopated in nature. The Sea Islanders’ use of “timber” obviously had special meaning because of their expertise in fashioning lumber to build ships, especially the Davis brothers who were experienced stevedores. We may attribute the noticeable absence of Jones’s tambourine playing to her reverence for religious traditions on St. Simons Island. Bess Lomax Hawes explains, “The broom handle was traditionally the only instrument used in Sea Island religious music. The singers had accepted Mrs. Jones’ mainland importation of the tambourine, but none of the native-born Islanders played it” (Hawes 1964). (ESC)



"Accent" (a public affairs presentation of CBS News) program host John Ciardi (far left) and musicologist Alan Lomax (second from left) and singers of St. Simons Island, Georgia. (Photo by CBS via Getty Images).

14. LET MY CHILDREN GO (LET ME CHULLUN GO)

JOHN DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

The Georgia Sea Island Singers' performance of "Go Down Moses" explores musical boundaries well beyond their traditional folk musical style. John Davis's lead vocal displays his extraordinary vocal range and improvisational skills in a gospel-inspired rendition of this well-known spiritual. However, the tour de force is Peter Davis's vocal line, with ascending and descending bass "riffs" from the Black gospel-quartet tradition rooted in the rural South. The group's fast-paced handclapping compensates for the tambourine's absence; their tight harmonies further add to this stellar performance. Of interest is the substitution of "chullun" (Let my chullun go) for the more commonly used "people" (Let my people go). Jones, Davis, and other group members were faithful churchgoers who certainly knew that Exodus 3:11, which is the basis for "Go Down Moses," declares, "bring forth my children out of Egypt." (ESC)

15. MY GOD IS A ROCK (ME GOD IS A ROCK)

PETER DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND JOHN DAVIS

Lydia Parrish describes "Me God Is a Rock" as an "exhorting-sermon" song forged out of the rhythmic interplay between the old-time Black preacher and his congregants (Parrish 1942, 161). In his role as Gullah preacher, Peter Davis shouts "Me God is de rock in de" and his congregation of singers responds "weary lan', weary lan', weary lan'." The group's second response is "He sheltah in de time of storm." Later, Peter Davis introduces familiar rhyming couplets taken from Bible chapters, a common practice among Black preachers even today. In response, the singers offer gospel-flavored "ooh" harmonies reminiscent of the congregational moans and groans heard by observers of 19th-century Black church services. Davis's "exhortations" reach their climax at the ending (chapter 10), when all the singers, especially his brother John, are filled with the spirit. (ESC)

16. I HEARD THE ANGELS SINGING (I HEARD DE ANGEL SINGIN')

MABLE HILLERY (LEADER), PETER DAVIS, BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, AND FRED MCDOWELL, GUITAR

Mable Hillery leads this performance of the St. Simons Island spiritual “I Heard de Angel Singin’.” Although the Sea Island Singers performed a similar version of this song earlier in the concert, the talents of Fred McDowell and Hillery combine to create a blues interpretation. The painful, longing quality of Hillery’s voice joins seamlessly with the bent notes of McDowell’s guitar for an all-too-brief moment in time. (ESC)

17. READ 'EM JOHN

JOHN DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Lawrence McKiver, patriarch of the ring shouters in McIntosh County, Georgia, traces this song to emancipation, when “the slaves had to trust one among them who could read to tell them they were really free. . . None of ’em could read, but John, he around the kitchen a little bit, and he learned to read a little. So they had a letter to tell ’em they was free. So they ask John to read the letter” (Rosenbaum 2013). Learning to read was a risky proposition for enslaved Africans because the punishments were severe. Led by John Davis, this ring shout contains the typical slow build-up to the characteristic clave rhythm usually provided by a wooden stick, which signaled the shouters to begin their counterclockwise shuffling pattern around the ring. Bessie Jones’s tambourine playing has returned full force and Davis’s loud exclamations fuel the intensity in “Read ’Em John.” (ESC)

18. KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED AND BURNING (KEEP YO' LAMP TRIM AN' BURNIN')

FRED MCDOWELL (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Fred McDowell leads this rousing performance of the traditional gospel song “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning.” Although McDowell is featured soloist, John Davis’s interjections engage the audience and heighten the emotions. Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson first transcribed the words of this song from Black soldiers in his 1st South Carolina Volunteers, the first federally authorized Black regiment. Higginson’s efforts capture to some degree the Gullah Geechee language in the song:

“Brudder, keep your lamp trimmin’ and a-burnin’, | Keep your lamp trimmin’ and a-burnin’,

Keep your lamp trimmin’ and a-burnin’, | For dis world most done.” (Higginson 1867).
(ESC)

19. SIGN OF THE JUDGMENT (SIGN OB DE JEDGIMENT)

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Bessie Jones’s tambourine playing returns in the ring shout “Sign ob de Jedgment,” a biblical account of the “end times” when mother is against daughter and father is against son. Jones’s impassioned vocal lines evoke the group’s congregational responses “Oh Lord” and “Oh Yeah.” Nearly 30 years later, the McIntosh County Shouters sang a similar version, “Aye Lord, Time is Drawin’ Nigh,” at the Morton Theatre in Athens, Georgia, on June 25, 1994. Although both versions have similar texts, the McIntosh group’s patriarch Lawrence McKiver adds some new verses: “King Jesus is the rider” and “Sinner run to the rock.” (ESC)

COUNTRY BLUES

20. CHEVROLET

ED YOUNG, FIFE AND VOICE; EMMA RAMSEY, VOICE

Ed and Lonnie Young's brilliant arrangement of Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy's 1930 "Can I Do It for You" was recorded by Alan Lomax and Shirley Collins during their 1959 Como session. It appeared the following year on *Roots of the Blues*, an LP in Lomax's *Southern Folk Heritage Series* on Atlantic Records. Through this medium, it entered the muddy current of the folk revival and its tributaries, with Taj Mahal, Donovan, and Jim Kweskin all recording versions. However, its biggest audience came in 2017, when Mary J. Blige sang it *a cappella* in a Super Bowl advertisement for Chevrolet. In this performance, Emma Ramsey masterfully plays the part of Young's antagonizing amour, with other singers clapping and stomping to approximate the snare and bass drums of the Young brothers' band. (NS)



Emma Ramsey and Ed Young.
Photo by Alan Lomax.

21. WRITE ME A FEW OF YOUR LINES

FRED MCDOWELL, VOICE AND GUITAR

This affecting piece was the first song Fred McDowell ever recorded. Fred learned it from his mentor Eli Green, a legendary though tragically under-recorded singer-guitarist. It calls to mind elements of Bukka White's "Sleepy Man Blues" and Son House's "Death Letter," with a similar emotional heft. (NS)

22. DON'T EVER LEAVE ME

MABLE HILLERY, VOICE; FRED MCDOWELL, VOICE AND GUITAR

In 1966, Mable Hillery left the Georgia Sea Island Singers to pursue a career as a blues artist, first touring the South under the auspices of Bernice Johnson Reagon and Anne Romaine's Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project. In 1968, Hillery traveled to London where she recorded her first (and only) solo record, backed by a British jazz band. Although she enjoyed some modest successes until her death in 1976, they were hardly commensurate with her abilities, clearly on display in this lovely duet with Fred McDowell. (NS)



John Davis and
Mable Hillery.
Photo by Alan Lomax.

BRINGING IT HOME

23. MARCHING ON THE MISSISSIPPI LINE

MABLE HILLERY, VOICE AND TAMBOURINE; EMMA RAMSEY, VOICE

Mable Hillery frequently participated in freedom-song teach-ins throughout the South in the early 1960s, sharing her expansive repertoire of traditional sacred and secular material and also learning others' adaptations of that material for use in civil-rights activities. Firmly in the tradition of politically oriented Black composers like John Handcox, Hillery deftly fuses the Biblical and the topical, with references to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President Lyndon Johnson, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Senator Barry Goldwater, and Governor George Wallace. This appears to be the song's only extant recording. (NS)

24. DOWN TO THE MIRE (DOWN TO DE MIRE)

JOHN DAVIS (LEADER), BESSIE JONES, EMMA RAMSEY, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

Peter Davis explains the meaning of this ring shout as follows: "Now that means humble your heart, humble yourself to the Lord. That's the muck of sin which your heart and mind are all— you know—contaminated in. And then when God pull you out of there, you can be free and shout round. ... It's—it's a holy—it's a holy dance. See, not a noise with your hands. When you sing, you sing; and when you pray, you pray; and when you dance, you dance—but when you shout, you shout!" (Hawes 1964). Based on the biblical verse "Deliver me out of the mire and let me not sink" (Psalms 69:14), this ring shout highlights one member who "gets down on his knees and, with head touching the floor, rotates with the group as it moves around the circle. The different shouters, as they pass, push the head down to the mire" (Hawes 1964). John Davis directs the shouters' movements with his vocal lines "lower and lower" and "when you rise" as the group maintains the chant-like phrase "to the mire." (ESC)

25. BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR

BESSIE JONES (LEADER), EMMA RAMSEY, JOHN DAVIS, MABLE HILLERY, AND PETER DAVIS

This seems an appropriate final selection for *The Complete Friends of Old Time Music Concert* because the Georgia Sea Island Singers often closed their shows with this song, which references the uncertainty of living to see next year or even the next day. After a characteristic slow beginning, Bessie Jones's legendary repertoire of rhythming couplets—such as “God showed Noah by the rainbow sign / No more water, fire next time”—energize the singers who respond with harmonic pleas of “How Long?” The words, “may be gone in some lonesome graveyard,” had special meaning for Jones because she was not born on St. Simons Island and always considered herself an outsider. Even after nearly 50 years of living on the island, she lamented, “Here on the island I'm a visitor, I'm a stranger. . . I know I'm a stranger. Let me die and you'll see where I go. . . I'm going to Stranger's Cemetery” (Jones 1983, 147). When she died on July 17, 1984, Jones, called Mother Courage by Alan Lomax, was buried in Stranger's Cemetery (officially known as Union Memorial Cemetery) on St. Simons Island. (esc)

WORKS CITED

- Altman, Ross. 2003. "Bess Lomax Hawes, Part 2." *FolkWorks*. July 10. <https://folkworks.org/interview/bess-lomax-hawes-part-2>.
- Association for Cultural Equity. 2020. "Bessie Jones: Get in Union." <https://www.culturealequity.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Get%20in%20Union%20-%20Liner%20Notes.pdf>.
- Cate, Margaret Davis. N.d. "Gascoigne Bluff." *Coastal Georgia Genealogy & History*. <http://www.glynngen.com/mdc/gascoigne.htm>.
- Collins, Shirley. 1997. Liner notes to *Fred McDowell: The First Recordings*. Rounder Records (Rounder CD 1718).
- Cone, James H. 2022. *Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. 50th anniversary ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Cook, Bruce. 1973. *Listen to the Blues*. New York: Scribner's.
- Georgia Writers' Project. 1986. *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Hawes, Bess Lomax. 1964. *The Georgia Sea Island Singers*. <https://www.media-generation.net/DVD%20PAGES/Bess/master.pdf>.
- Hawes, Bess Lomax. 1965. *Buck Dancer*. <https://www.media-generation.net/DVD%20PAGES/Bess/master.pdf>.
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. 1867. "Negro Spirituals." *Atlantic Monthly* 19 (June). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1867/06/negro-spirituals/534858>.
- Hillery, Mable. 1972. Letter to Bess Lomax Hawes. Manuscript, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. www.loc.gov/resource/afc2014008.afc2014008_msl815/?sp=34.
- Jones, Bessie. 1965. "Commentary by Bessie Jones on 'Sink 'em Low.'" August 1. <https://archive.culturealequity.org/field-work/central-park-concert-1965-new-york-city-865/commentary-bessie-jones-sink-em-low>.
- Jones, Bessie. 1983. *For the Ancestors: Autobiographical Memories*. Collected and edited by John Stewart. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Jones, Bessie, and Bess Lomax Hawes. 1987. *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Jones, Mary Wyle. 1930. "Bobby Jones Leads Spiritual Singers." *Atlanta Constitution*, August 7.
- Jones, Ralph. 1934. "Negroes of Coastal Georgia in Annual Contest at Sea Island Casino Sing and 'Shout' Original Spirituals and Work Songs of Slavery Days." *Atlanta Constitution*, April 1.
- Lomax, Alan. 1962. Liner notes to *Georgia Sea Islands, Volume I: Southern Journey*. Prestige International (25001).
- Lomax, Alan. 1981. Liner notes to *Georgia Sea Island Songs*. *New World Records* (80278). <https://nwr-site-liner-notes.s3.amazonaws.com/80278.pdf>.
- Lomax, Alan. 1993. *The Land Where the Blues Began*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lomax, Alan. 1998. Liner notes to *Earliest Times: Georgia Sea Islands Songs for Everyday Living*. Rounder Records (Rounder CD 1713).
- Parrish, Lydia. 1942. *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands*. Music transcribed by Creighton Churchill and Robert MacGimsey. New York: Creative Age Press.
- Rosenbaum, Art. 2013. *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia*. Photographs by Margaret Newmark Rosenbaum. Music transcriptions and historical essay by Johann S. Buis. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Welding, Pete. 1965. "Interview with Fred McDowell." *Blues Unlimited*, no. 24 (July-August).

CREDITS

Produced by Peter K. Siegel

Produced in cooperation with the Association for Cultural Equity and the Lomax Digital Archive;
Nathan Salsburg, curator

Recorded, edited, and mastered by Peter K. Siegel

Recorded on April 9, 1965, at a concert presented by the Friends of Old Time Music and the Newport Folk Foundation at the New School, New York City, on a Nagra III tape recorder with a Sony C37-A microphone

Recording data: 25 tracks; 20 tracks previously unreleased

Music and culture consultant: Eric S. Crawford

Liner notes by Eric S. Crawford, Nathan Salsburg, and Peter K. Siegel

Alan Lomax's photos from the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Diana Davies' photos courtesy of Ralph Rinzler Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution; David Gahr's photos courtesy of the David Gahr Archive

Concert posters by John Cohen

Executive producers: Maureen Loughran, Daniel E. Sheehy, and John Smith

Production manager: Mary Monseur

Production assistant: Kate Harrington

Editorial assistance by James Deutsch and Carla Borden

Art direction, design & layout by Visual Dialogue

Special thanks to Anna L. Wood, Sarah Bryan, and Edward Haber

Smithsonian Folkways is: Sophie Abramowitz, digital marketing and distribution specialist; Paloma Alcalá, sales associate; Cecille Chen, director of business affairs and royalties; Logan Clark, executive assistant; Toby Dodds, director of web and IT; Will Griffin, licensing manager; Kate Harrington, production assistant; Helen Lindsay, customer service; Maureen Loughran, director and curator; Mary Monseur, production manager; Sahara Naini, inventory coordinator; Jeff Place, curator and senior archivist; Sophie Sachar, marketing and promotions assistant; Laura Shanahan, social media coordinator; Sayem Sharif, director of financial operations; Ronnie Simpkins, audio specialist; John Smith, associate director; Jonathan Williger, marketing manager; Brian Zimmerman, mail order manager, sales and customer service specialist.

booklet cover image: (left to right) Mable Hillery, John Davis, Emma Ramsey, Ed Young, Bessie Jones, unidentified man, Peter Davis. Photo by David Gahr.

booklet back cover image: Bessie Jones on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Photo by Diana Davies.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In this way, we continue the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the production, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Folkways, Arhoolie, A.R.C.E., Blue Ridge Institute, Bobby Susser Songs for Children, Collector, Cook, Dyer-Bennet, Educational Activities, Fast Folk, Folk Legacy, Mickey Hart Collection, Monitor, M.O.R.E., Paredon, Right on Rhythm, UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music, and Western Jubilee Recording Company recordings are all available through:

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Mail Order

Washington, DC 20560-0520

Phone: (800) 410-9815 or 888-FOLKWAYS (orders only)

Fax: (800) 853-9511 (orders only)

To purchase online, or for further information about Smithsonian Folkways Recordings go to: **www.folkways.si.edu**. Please send comments and questions to **smithsonianfolkways@si.edu**.



SMITHSONIAN
**FOLK
WAYS**
RECORDINGS

Smithsonian

Bessie Jones, John Davis & the
GEORGIA SEA ISLAND SINGERS

with MISSISSIPPI FRED McDOWELL and ED YOUNG

Bessie Jones, John Davis, and the Georgia Sea Island Singers gained wide renown during the 1960s and '70s for their powerful performances of traditional songs from the Gullah Geechee community on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Most in the group were born and raised on St. Simons and could trace their ancestry to the enslaved Africans who worked on the island's cotton plantations. Throughout the '60s, the Georgia Sea Island Singers were prominent voices in the Civil Rights Movement, bringing centuries of Black musical tradition to the struggle. This previously unheard recording captures their complete Friends of Old Time Music concert of April 1965, at which they were joined by legendary bluesman Mississippi Fred McDowell, cane fife player Ed Young, and folklorist Alan Lomax, who acted as emcee. The album showcases a variety of traditional music from the Island and beyond, including work songs, spirituals, children's songs, and Mississippi blues.

- 1. INTRODUCTION BY ALAN LOMAX / TRAVELIN' SHOES**
2. HANDCLAPPING AND CANE FIFE **3. BUZZARD LOPE (DANCE)-**
IN THAT OLD FIELD **4. JOSEPHINE** **5. GOODBYE MY RILEY O**
6. GO ROW THE BOAT CHILD **7. JOIN THE BAND** **8. SINK 'EM LOW**
9. GOING DOWN TO THE RIVER **10. SHAKE 'EM ON DOWN**
11. ONCE THERE WAS NO SUN **12. ADAM IN THE GARDEN**
13. WHO BUILT THE ARK **14. LET MY CHILDREN GO**
15. MY GOD IS A ROCK **16. I HEARD THE ANGELS SINGING**
17. READ 'EM JOHN **18. KEEP YOUR LAMP TRIMMED AND**
BURNING **19. SIGN OF THE JUDGMENT** **20. CHEVROLET**
21. WRITE ME A FEW OF YOUR LINES **22. DON'T EVER**
LEAVE ME **23. MARCHING ON THE MISSISSIPPI LINE**
24. DOWN TO THE MIRE **25. BEFORE THIS TIME ANOTHER YEAR**

Produced and recorded by Peter K. Siegel

Produced in cooperation with the Association for Cultural Equity



SMITHSONIAN
**FOLK
WAYS**
RECORDINGS

Smithsonian

LC 9628

Smithsonian Institution
Washington DC 20560-0520
folkways.si.edu | SFW CD 40258

©© 2024 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

Erratum

SFW 40258 – The Complete Friends of Old Time Music Concert

Track 23 on this album, “Marching on the Mississippi Line,” was written by Mable Hillery. It is misspelled in the track list as Mabel Hillery. This mistake has been corrected in our records to ensure royalties are going to the correct source.