

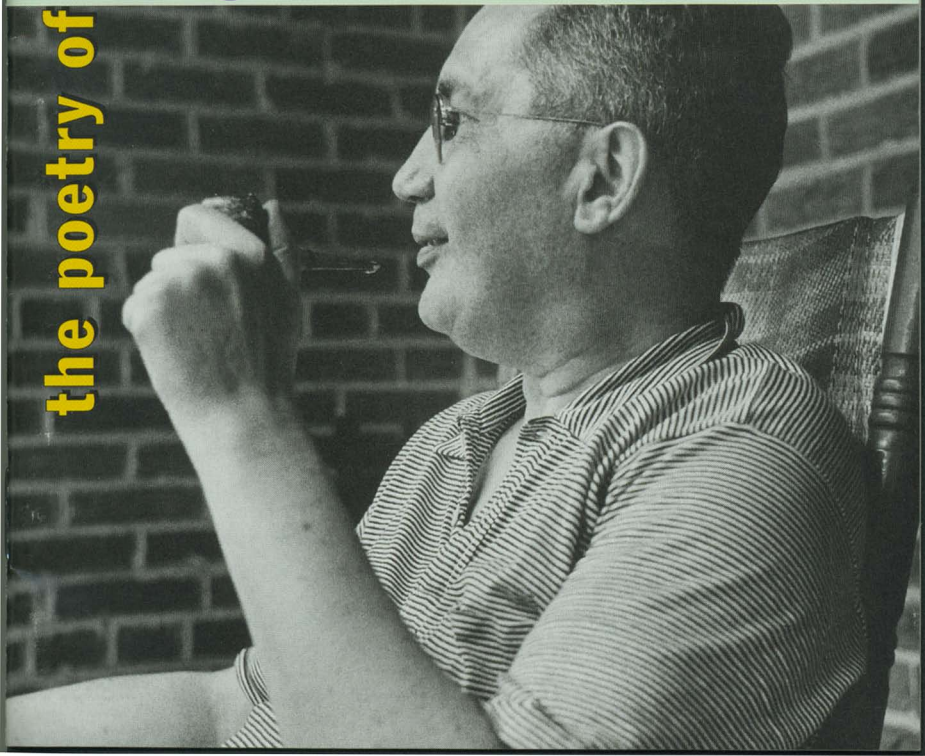


Smithsonian/Folkways

Sterling A. Brown

read by the author

the poetry of



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the poetry of

The Complete Folkways Readings 1946-1973

Compiled by Yusef Jones • Annotated by Dr. Joanne V. Gabbin
Smithsonian/Folkways SF 47002

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Sterling Brown and Folkways Records: A Brief History

Yusef Jones

With a quick glance at Folkways's African American spoken word catalog, one will find the poetry of Sonia Sanchez, Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, and Ishmael Reed, and the speeches of Angela Davis, Frederick Douglass (read by Ossie Davis), and W. E. B. DuBois. Add to this lineup of eminent personalities the voice with no equal, Sterling Allen Brown, and Folkways covers more than a century of African American creative thinking.

The Poetry of Sterling Brown captures twenty-one poems from three Folkways albums: *An Anthology of Negro Poets* (Folkways 9791: 1966), *Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown Read from Their Work* (Folkways 9790: 1952), and *Sixteen Poems of Sterling Brown* (Folkways 9794: 1973). It is likely that Folkways was the first company to record Brown reading his

own poetry. During the early 1940s, Folkways founder Moses Asch recorded Brown reading "Ma Rainey" and "Long Gone," which were released on *Negro Poets* in 1966. Because of the lack of accurate written information in Asch's files, it is not clear whether Brown recorded more than these two poems during the first session. In 1952, Asch released a record of Brown with the Bard of Harlem, Langston Hughes, each reading his own work. According to music historian Frederic Ramsey, Brown's six poems on that 1952 release were actually recorded in 1946.

In May 1963, at Howard University's Ira Aldridge Theatre, Sterling Brown was honored. Writers, students, and colleagues took to the podium to praise this great teacher. Brown spoke and read his poetry, and

most of the poems on this recording were recorded at this tribute. Ramsey deserves much credit for recording many of the poems on this compilation, and for his dedication to documenting one of this century's great minds, since it was he who first suggested that Asch record Brown in the early 1940s.

In the archives of Folkways Records there are eight reel-to-reel tapes recorded April 1, 1963, of Sterling Brown reading the works of other famous American poets: Edwin Arlington Robinson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, Mark Twain, e.e. cummings, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and several others. Like a great jazz horn player interpreting one of Duke Ellington's classics, Brown reads these poems with a graceful lucidity as if he had written them himself. It is

unclear why these tapes were not issued as an album; perhaps it is their length (Brown's reading of Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" runs more than sixteen minutes). We do not know whether Asch considered releasing these recordings at a future date, and there is no available correspondence between him and Ramsey to tell us. Of greater importance, in any case, are the poems here.

Newly mastered, annotated, and available for the first time on CD, Smithsonian/Folkways's *The Poetry of Sterling Brown* marks a continuation of Folkways Records's dedication to the traditions of the spoken word. Here Brown's own compositions, remastered for today's audio standards, speak for themselves with strength, passion, and endurance.

The Poetry of Sterling A. Brown

Joanne V. Gabbin

From the time we first hear Sterling Brown's voice reciting "Long Gone," we know that we are in the presence of a large and vibrant soul. The deep resonance of his voice with its rumbling bass brings us willingly into his world of stoic heroes and southern roads.

I don't know which way I'm
travelin'—

Far or near,
All I know fo' certain is
I cain't stay here.

Ain't no call at all, sweet woman,
Fo' to carry on—
Jes' my name and jes' my habit
To be Long Gone. . . .

(Track 1)

Sterling A. Brown—poet, critic,
legendary teacher, irreverent

raconteur—whose life spanned the first eighty-eight years of the twentieth century, is gone, but fortunately for us his voice remains. His is the voice of the poet that captures the blues moan of lost and long gone loves, the chant of saints who pray to be in the number, the tragic-comic cry in the face of injustice and violence, and the jubilee songs of endurance and perseverance. Smithsonian/Folkways has allowed his voice to come alive in its excellent recording, *The Poetry of Sterling Brown Read by the Author*. Folkways has culled some of the best representative readings of Brown's favorite and most memorable poems in this collection. Alive with the rhythm, music, and vocal virtuosity that I was fortunate to hear on many occasions, these recordings immortalize this legendary voice and allow us to hear it again and again at our pleasure.

The man who would capture the authentic nuances of black people was born in Washington, D.C., on May 1, 1901, in a house at Sixth and

Fairmount. He was the last of six children and the only son born to Reverend Sterling Nelson Brown and Adelaide Allen Brown. The young Sterling grew up on the campus of Howard University, where his father had taught in the School of Religion since 1892. A preacher's kid, Sterling was brought up hearing the hymns and spirituals sung at Lincoln Temple Congregational Church, where his father pastored. Later in life, when he became a devotee of blues and jazz, he had no difficulty combining and synthesizing these forms, generally considered antithetical, in his work. Though Brown's fun-loving personality rejected his father's penchant toward sobriety and reserve, the Reverend Brown's standards of integrity and spiritual strength made an indelible mark on his character. In the poem "After Winter," Brown tenderly remembers the days with his father on a farm near Laurel, Maryland.

He snuggles his fingers
In the blacker loam
The lean months are done with,
The fat to come.

His eyes are set
On a brushwood-fire
But his heart is soaring
Higher and higher.

Though he stands ragged
An old scarecrow,
This is the way
His swift thoughts go,

*"Butter beans fo' Clara
Sugar corn fo' Grace
An' fo' de little feller
Runnin' space."*

(Track 12)

Brown is the "little feller" who remembers his father as hopeful, loving, and bound to the soil. The depth of feeling in the poem serves to suggest the extent of his father's impression on him. The young Sterling

inherited a love for poetry and books from his mother, Adelaide Allen Brown. Brown recalled that she read widely and had a great facility with reading poetry.

My mother read . . . Longfellow, she read Burns; and she read Dunbar—grew up on Dunbar—"Lias! 'Lias! Bless de Lawd!" "The Party," and "Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass. . . ." We lived on Eleventh Street then above Lincoln Temple Church, and I remember even now her stopping her sweeping . . . now standing over the broom and reading poetry to me, and she was a good reader, great sense of rhythm.

(Interview, May 14, 1973)

It is this inherited sense of rhythm, unmistakably sure, that we hear in Brown's poetry.

Through his poetry we also come to know ourselves in all our beauty and

ugliness, truth and treachery, confidence and insecurity, humor and pathos. Brown created portraits of the blues singing roustabout Calvin "Big Boy" Davis, the phlegmatic Old Lem, the flamboyant Sporting Beasley, Ma Rainey, the irrepressible Slim Greer, whose images parade before us as convincing portraits of ourselves. He took our speech with the rich cadences of backwater blues and field hollers and transformed it into poetry that touches our soul.

Brown's most significant achievement was his subtle adaptation of song forms, especially the blues, to his poetry. Experimenting with the blues, spirituals, work songs, and ballads, he invented combinations that, at their best, retain the ethos of folk forms and intensify the literary quality of the poetry. Because these folk forms were conceived and developed in the matrix of the folk community, they were products of folk aesthetics. In his introduction to the "Folk Literature" section in *The Negro Caravan* (1941),

Brown gave a convincing view of how the folk, for instance, pulled from a common storehouse in producing the spirituals. He explained that individuals “with poetic ingenuity, a rhyming gift, or a good memory” composed or remembered lines out of the folk tradition and—in conjunction with the group, and with its approval—shaped the stanzas. As these songs were passed from one generation to the next, the songs were changed, updated, and sometimes lost. The folk artists who created the blues created in solitude, yet their blues messages intimately touched their listeners. Blues singers conveyed their listeners’ preoccupation with love (in all its varieties), their misfortunes and losses, their wisdom and resilience.

In the hauntingly melancholic “Long Track Blues,” Brown becomes the blues singer with a poetic intensity that allows us to understand more than the railroad lore of the early twentieth century, more than lost or unrequited love. We hear in his words something

about permanent loss, death, and an end that may not round into a beginning.

Red light is my block,
Green light down the line;
Lawdy, let yo’ green light
Shine down on that babe o’ mine.

(Track 8)

Stepping up the tempo in “Puttin’ on Dog,” Brown cleverly alternates stanzas that echo the rhythms and rhyme of a children’s game song with ballad stanzas. The poem tells of old Scrappy, a flamboyant showoff, who runs up against badman Buck.

Look at old Scrappy puttin’ on dog,
Puttin’ on dog, puttin’ on dog,
Look at old Scrappy puttin’ on dog,
Callin’ for the bad man Buck.

(Track 18)

Or let us consider the sorrowful lines of “Sharecroppers.” Here Brown

is successful in suggesting several of the qualities, themes and idioms we associate with the spirituals. In the poem the victimization of the steadfast sharecropper is punctuated by his “wife’s weak moans” and his “children’s wails.”

Then his landlord shot him in the
side
He toppled, and the blood gushed
out.

But he didn’t mumble even a word,
And cursing, they left him there for
dead.

Clothed with sacrifice and hope, the
sharecropper gives up no secret but
one.

“We gonna clean out dis brushwood
round here soon,
Plant de white-oak and de black-
oak side by side.”

(Track 3)

What Black folk expressed in story, proverb, and song, Brown considered and absorbed in his poetic imagination and infused in his poems. Besides the song forms themselves, he adopted themes and symbols from the folk storehouse; catastrophe, hardship, superstition, religion, poverty, murder, death, loneliness, travel, and courage are among the ideas that Brown handles with originality. In “Break of Day,” Brown tells the tragic story of Big Jess, who “fired on the Alabama Central.” Big Jess had a pleasing woman, name of Mame, and “had a boy growing up to be a fireman, just like his pa.” Yet Jess was denied his full “man’s right to life and happiness when he was ambushed and killed by “crackers” who “craved his job.”

Mob stopped the train crossing
Black Bear Mountain

Shot rang out, babe, shot rang out.
They left Big Jess on the Black Bear
Mountain,
Break of day, baby, break of day.

Sweet Mame sits rocking, waiting
for the whistle
Long past due, babe, long past due.
The grits are cold, and the coffee's
boiled over,
But Jess done gone, baby he done
gone.

(Track 7)

In presenting Big Jess's story, Brown avoids a sentimental and melodramatic treatment by conveying it in the form of a ballad/work song. Written in an idiom that is direct, terse, and brimming with the vernacular of the railroad song, the poem is marked by a series of caesuras that punctuate the lines. Through repetition and well-placed emphasis, Brown intensifies the tragic circumstances of Big Jess's bid for a decent life. His refusal to quit his job and his laugh in the face of intimidation were, for Brown, badges of courage.

With a remarkable ear for the idiom, cadence, and tones of folk speech, Brown absorbs its vibrant

qualities in his reading. Brown naturalizes black dialect, softens and elides the sounds, and captures the inflection, the timbre, the racial sound of the vernacular. Brown effectively creates the accent of the Creole patois in "Uncle Joe," the twangy drawl of the sheriff in the "Ballad of Joe Meek," and the edgy crackle of the old woman's voice in "Remembering Nat Turner." All these accents add to the expressiveness of his reading/performance.

Part of Sterling Brown's effectiveness as a poet lies in his ability to reproduce the dialect of black rural folk. When Brown began writing poetry in the 1920s, there was a tendency among many writers to discard dialect and indict it because of the spurious, often demeaning, conventions that had come to be associated with it. In 1922, James Weldon Johnson, writing in the preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, recognized that black writers were breaking away from the use of conventionalized dialect and called for

originality and authenticity in racial expression that would not limit the poet's emotional and intellectual response to life. Ten years later, Brown, with the publication of *Southern Road*, came as close to achieving Johnson's ideal of original racial expression as any American poet had before. Johnson, introducing Brown's poetry to the American public, said, "[Brown] infused his poetry with genuine characteristic flavor by adopting as his medium the common racy, living speech" of black life. What Johnson applauded in 1932, we treasure today as we hear Brown exploring with uncompromising honesty the range of folk responses.

The genius of his achievement is amplified when we hear him perform his poetry. We become intensely aware that the poems take on added dimension because of his voice. I will never forget the first time I heard Sterling Brown read "Old Lem." It was in the spring of 1972 when I met Sterling and Daisy Brown. I felt at

once in the presence of two people who carried the mantle of the past as gossamer. Their brilliance, infectious humor, and great depth of feeling and understanding endeared them to me. They shared with me their stories, anecdotes, and personal legends in the cozy setting of their home at 1222 Kearney Street on the northeast side of Washington. I still remember their eyes, with one telling, the other listening, and both remembering so many unspoken things. That is the way I first experienced "Old Lem." Brown's voice intones.

I talked to old Lem
and old Lem said:

"They weigh the cotton
They store the corn
We only good enough
To work the rows;
They run the commissary
They keep the books
We gotta be grateful
For being cheated."

(Track 6)

I saw Daisy, Sterling's wife since 1927, respond to his reading with fresh and genuine emotion. As he read, they both seemed to remember the man who was lynched in a county south of Atlanta in 1935 and their own anger and feeling of powerlessness as they recalled other lynchings, too many to remember decently. It was one of those special moments when we became one in our understanding.

During the next seven years, until Daisy's death in 1979, they brought me into the circle of their special memories. On several occasions, they would talk about the luminaries of Howard University where Brown taught for more than fifty years, or tell me stories about Calvin "Big Boy" Davis or Leadbelly, or invite me to the basement to hear an old recording of Bessie Smith's "Backwater Blues" from their marvelous record collection. They would always brighten when they talked about the Virginia Seminary days when they first met. Brown, often with a rakish twinkle in

his eyes, would tell how he was attracted to the auburn-haired beauty, Daisy Turnbull. In his poem "Conjured," Brown captures the lasting magic that she held over him.

"She done put huh little hands
On the back uh my head;
I cain't git away from her
Twill I'm dead."

(Track 13)

It was also in the rural communities surrounding Lynchburg that Brown met the people who would open up his poetic sensibility to black folk culture and unstop the wellsprings of his literary power. The people as steeped in the traditions of the spirituals, blues, aphorisms, old lies, and superstition of folk life as they were in the rich soil of the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains taught the young seminary professor something of folk humor, irony, fortitude, and shrewdness.

The poetry that came out of these experiences vibrates with new nuances and depth. We hear in "Sam Smiley," the first ballad that Brown wrote, his masterful use of irony. Sam, a black soldier returning from the war in France, finds that his sweetheart is in jail. He soon learns the full circumstances of her tragic fall; however, he cannot save her from her shame and from the "narrow gaping hole" that eases it. Sam—whom "the whites has taught . . . to rip a Nordic belly with a thrust of bayonet"—"sent a rich white man his woman's company to keep." The ubiquitous mob completes the scenario. Brown has the man who had danced to cheer the steerage on his return home buckdance "on the midnight air"

(Track 11).

This same ironic tone can be heard in "Transfer." However, in this poem the poet's irony is edged with a steely

rage as he recounts the tale of a man who broke the Jim Crow law because "he didn't say sir" on Atlanta's Peachtree trolley line.

And then the motorman brained
him with his crank,
And the conductor clubbed him
with his gun,
But before they could place the
nickels on his eyes,
The cops rushed up to see justice
done.

The ballad ends with the man's
message hard won in the streets
and prisons of the land.

"I stayed in my place, and my place
stayed wid me,
Took what was dished, said I liked it
fine:
Figgered they would see that I
warn't no trouble,
Figgered this must be the onliest
line.

"But this is the wrong line we been
ridin',
This route doan git us where we
got to go.
Got to git transferred to a new
direction.
We can stand so much, then doan
stan no mo'."

(Track 9)

The intensity that we hear filtered through the character's voice emanates from Brown's own familiarity with an integrity that demanded militance. In the 1930s as the national editor of Negro affairs in the Federal Writer's Project, he battled racist state directors who were determined to keep blacks off their payrolls and to keep libelous and stereotypical treatment of black images in their publications. In the 1940s, often with resistance from his own colleagues, he struggled to gain acceptance for courses in black literature at Howard University, where there was still an overzealous attempt to imitate white institutions. During

the McCarthy period in the 1950s, Brown was interrogated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, along with several of his colleagues, for alleged subversive activities, and refused to back down from a radical adherence to the principle of academic freedom. By the 1960s, when Howard University students were testing their own militance, they discovered Sterling Brown. Students would crowd into his basement lined with shelves of books and phonograph records and talk well into the night about Marxism, Pan Africanism, civil rights, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and non-violence versus direct action. Sometimes the discussions would give way to an impromptu reading by the "Prof," and Brown would invariably read "The Ballad of Joe Meek." The poem outlines the exploits of a "fighting fool" who started out as a mild mannered man curious about the rough treatment of a black woman. The ballad ends with Joe talking in a different way.

"Ef my bullets weren't gone,
An' my strength all spent—
I'd send the chief something
With a compliment.

"An we'd race to hell,
And I'd best him there,
Like I would of done here
Ef he'd played me fair."

(Track 19)

In this poem and others, Brown becomes the African voice, the eloquent griot who makes the past emerge into the present by dint of his virtuoso skill. Those who have heard Brown read his poems, tell his remarkable "lies," or give his irreverent toasts are convinced of the power of this man whom Sonia Sanchez calls in her tribute poem "griot of the wind glorifying red gums smiling tom-tom teeth." Perhaps nowhere is his power more evident than in his signature poem, "Strong Men." Taking the leitmotif from Carl Sandburg's line,

"The strong men keep coming on," Brown celebrates the indomitable spirit of black people in the face of racism and economic and political exploitation. As Brown recounts the horrors of the Middle Passage, the scourges of slavery, and the humiliation of economic peonage and social segregation, his message is not merely one of unrelieved suffering and victimization but one of stoicism. Evoking the sound of spirituals and seculars, Brown allows these songs with all of their remembered stoicism and irony to transport the listener from the past to the present.

*They dragged you from homeland,
They chained you in coffles,
They huddled you spoon-fashion in
filthy hatches,
They sold you to give a few gentlemen
ease.*

*They broke you in like oxen,
They scourged you,
They branded you,*

*They made your women breeders,
They swelled your numbers with
bastards. . . .
They taught you the religion they
disgraced.*

*You sang:
Keep a-inchin' along
Lak a po' inch worm. . . .*

*You sang:
Bye and bye
I'm gonna lay down dis heaby load.*

*You sang:
Walk togedder, chillen,
Dontcha git weary. . . .
The strong men keep a-comin'
on
The strong men git stronger.*

Much of the force of the poem may be attributed to syntax. Brown launches most of his lines with heavily stressed verbs that are preceded by contrasting pronouns "they" or "you" which must also be strongly stressed. The cadence of the poem suggests the

rhythm of a martial approach which quickens and becomes more pronounced as the poem reaches its conclusion.

*What, from the slums
Where they have hemmed you,
What, from the tiny huts
They could not keep from you—
.....
One thing they cannot prohibit—
The strong men . . . coming on
The strong men gittin' stronger.
Strong men . . .
Stronger . . .*

(Track 21)

Brown also becomes the African American voice, the elegant trickster, the bodacious badman, the heroic strong man, as he juggles wit, understatement, irony, and humor with inimitable style. Perhaps nowhere else does Brown take humor more as his metier than in the Slim Greer tales. A favorite of many generations, the

character is based on a virtuoso tall-tale teller whom Brown met waiting tables at the Hotel Jefferson in Jefferson City, Missouri. In the Slim Greer tales, we find the hero in humorous situations that obliquely comment on the absurdity of Southern racism. In "Slim in Hell," the joke exposes Southern racism and oppression with a kind of laughter out of hell. Brown's unsuspecting hero makes a discovery on his visit to hell.

*St. Peter said, 'Well,
You got back quick.
How's de devil? An' what's
His latest trick?'*

*An' Slim say, 'Peter,
I really cain't tell,
The place was Dixie
That I took for hell.'*

*Then Peter say, 'You must
Be crazy, I vow,
Where'n hell dja think Hell was
Anyhow?'*

(Track 4)

Informing this poem are not only the familiar images found in hell and brimstone sermons of the folk tradition but also subtle allusions to the Orpheus and Eurydice story in classical Greek mythology. Slim, like the favored Orpheus, is allowed to go to the underworld and is allowed to leave it. Here also is Cerberus, the terrible dog that guards the entrance to the infernal regions, now transformed to a "big bloodhound . . . bayin' some po' devil's track." By a synthesis of two viable traditions, Brown created this ballad through a process that he called "cross-pollination." Brown's achievement was significant. He linked the early stirrings of expression with present literary development, affirming the breadth of the black creative experience in America. He made the necessary connections between folk culture and self-conscious literature, identifying in his own poetry his debt to the folk. He also managed to eliminate the much-touted gulf between the particular racial

experiences and the so-called
“universal” experience since he
recognized no distinction.

Because Brown’s poetry succeeds in
expressing the universality of human
experience, in bridging the experience
of one generation with the next, it has
a timeless quality. Poems that appeared
in *Southern Road* in 1932 have a
strong sense of contemporaneity when
heard today. In “Remembering Nat
Turner,” Brown retells in eloquent free
verse the historic story of the fiercest
of the black insurrectionists. As we
figuratively follow the path that Nat
Turner took from Cross Keys to
Jerusalem, we get his story from blacks
who “had only the faintest
recollections” of who he was, and
from an old white woman whose
memory of Nat’s deeds had been made
concomitantly more vivid by an
inherited sense of hysteria or dulled by
present-day inconsequence.

‘Ain’t no slavery no more, things is
going all right,

Pervided thar’s a good goober
market this year.
We had a sign post here with
printing on it,
But it rotted in the hole, and thar it
lays,
And the nigger tenants split the
marker for kindling.
Things is all right, now, ain’t no
trouble with the niggers
Why they make this big to-do over
Nat?’

(Track 20)

Another reason for the lasting appeal
of his poetry is his ability to draw some
of the most memorable portraits in
American literature. In his poems we
meet Sporting Beasley, Slim Greer,
Old Lem, Joe Meek, characters that are
now considered national treasures.
Brown directs us:

Good glory, give a look at Sporting
Beasley
Strutting, oh my Lord.

Tophat cocked one side his
bulldog head,
Striped four-in-hand, and in his
buttonhole
A red carnation; Prince Albert
coat
Form-fitting, corset-like; vest
snugly filled,
Gray morning trousers, spotless
and full-flowing,
White spats and a cane.

Step it, Mr. Beasley, oh step it till
the sun goes down.

(Track 10)

Brown with a measured irony and
equally measured hyperbolic humor
acquaints us with a man for whom
exaggeration is small compensation for
all that Sam Beasley has lost or never
had. Sporting Beasley is allowed to
forget the insults and drabness of his
inconsequential life as he, resplendent
with Prince Albert coat, white spats,
and cane, struts it “till the sun goes

down.” In a tone that is decidedly
mock epical, the speaker describes the
bon vivant at a concert as he strides
down the aisle to his seat in row A and
majestically pulls out his opera glasses
amid the laughter of the crowd. One
of Brown’s folk transplanted in the city,
Sporting Beasley is a character based
on a hero from Brown’s youth named
Sporting Daniels, “who used to walk
up and down in front of the Howard
Theater in Washington, D.C., in all his
sartorial excellence.” In actuality,
Sporting Daniels did strut into a huge
auditorium about twenty minutes late,
walked slowly down the aisle to give
those seated ample time to admire his
clothes and cane, and, once at his seat
in the very front of the auditorium,
pulled out opera glasses in order to see
the gigantic Paul Robeson in concert.

Brown achieves in these portraits
truth in representation because of his
willingness to refrain from idealizing
his subjects and his insistence upon an
approach that eschews sentimentality
and special pleading. For example,

Brown's masterful portrait of Uncle Joe may be attributed to his keen observation and his excellent ear for dialect. We hear Unc' Joe, the garrulous old Creole, in a one-sided dialogue with the narrator, expounding on educating his children and standing up to the gratuitous threats and intimidation of the Whites and Cajuns in his parish. With a penchant for humor and understatement, Unc' Joe smiles at the narrator and says, "You know, I gret big liar, me . . . / But still I kin do what I gots to do. / And dats no lie." When the narrator concludes "Unc' Joe, c'est drole," we agree (Track 16).

Invariably Brown's poetry reveals an exploration of selfhood, a celebration of the strength and stoicism of Black people, and an abiding faith in the possibilities of their lives. Brown becomes myth-maker, keeper of the images, preserver of values and definitions. In his poetry and in his life, Brown does not glorify or belittle race. His quest is to explore the

wellsprings of the racial strength and endurance that he so often celebrates. In "Children's Children," Brown chastises those who would deny their heritage and identity.

They have forgotten
What had to be endured—

That they, babbling young ones,
With their paled faces, coppered
lips,
And sleek hair cajoled to Caucasian
straightness,
Might drown the quiet voice of
beauty
With sensuous stridency;

And might, on hearing those
memoirs of their sires,
Giggle,
And nudge each other's satin clad
Sleek sides. . . .

(Track 14)

His message is conveyed in language that is "simple, sensuous, and impassioned." As vivid and vibrant as a Romare Bearden collage, Brown's poetry displays strikingly imaginative, metaphoric language somehow kin to that of the unknown bards. Whether Brown is describing the beautiful fallen woman whose life has been twisted by the corruption of Rampart Street in "Cloteel" or the young healer in "Parish Doctor" who tells the parishioners that "he's the best conjuh doctor. . . North of New Orleans," we sense in Brown's characterizations his intimacy with their humanity.

Brown's poetic sensibility experiments with diverse elements in literature and culture, amplifies understanding through performance, confronts the tragic-comic conditions of life, and attests to the continuity of black creativity. In "Ma Rainey," one of Brown's finest poems, he skillfully brings together the ballad and blues forms and, demonstrating his inventive genius, creates the blues ballad. In this

brilliant portrait of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, the husky-voiced mother of the blues, Brown allows us to see her make her entrance on stage with a sequined gown hugging her short, stocky frame; an elaborate gold necklace encircling her cleavage; tasseled earrings; and a brilliant gold-toothed grin. But even more than giving us a vivid portrait of the venerated blues singer, he draws an emotional portrait of the people who flocked to hear "Ma do her stuff."

'An' some jokers keeps deir laughs
a-goin' in de crowded aisles,
An' some folks sits dere waitin' wid
deir aches an' miseries.'

(Track 2)

Brown effectively frames these portraits with a performance. Ma Rainey is on stage articulating the pain and suffering of her people. She sings "bout de hard luck / Roun' our do' / . . . 'bout de lonesome road / We mus'

go . . . " Her power over her audience emanates from her ability to translate the chaos and uncertainty of their lives into terms that can be understood and confronted. When she sings "Backwater Blues," she catches "hold of us somekindaway."

In the final analysis Brown's poetry, too, has the effect of getting "hold of us dataway." Through his poetry, Brown offers us a kind of clairvoyance, a sure vision, that gives guidance, warning, admonishment, and encouragement. When we flounder in confusion, fear, and divisiveness, Brown offers us in "Sharecroppers" the images of blacks and whites who became comrades in mutual struggle. When our children cast their heads down in collective shame upon first learning that their ancestors were slaves, Brown's "Strong Men" speaks to them of endurance, resilience, and strength of character. When we find it comfortable to forget our past and

expedient to deny who we are, Brown shows in "Children's Children" the tragic emptiness and falseness of the "babbling young ones" who "have forgotten / What had to be endured." Even when we take ourselves too seriously and view life as through a veil of tears, Brown sends us Ole Slim Greer:

Talkinges' guy
An' biggest liar,
With always a new lie
On the fire.

Remarkably balanced in his approach, Brown brought to American literature a voice rich in racial memory and resonant with messages of struggle and strength. When he died on January 13, 1989, I lost a dear friend and mentor, and the literary world lost a champion. Now what remains is his voice resonating with dignity and truth. This remarkable collection is his legacy to all of us.

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About the Annotator

Joanne V. Gabbin is the author of *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition*, the first full-length critical study of Brown's life and work. Published originally in 1985, the book has recently been reprinted by the University Press of Virginia. Dr. Gabbin, Professor of English and Director of the Honors Program at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, met Sterling Brown in 1972 when she was a graduate student at the University of Chicago. Their meeting convinced her that he would be the subject of her dissertation and this began a long, close friendship that did not end until his death in 1989. She says that one of her most fulfilling moments as a critic and scholar was when Sterling told her from his hospital bed in November, 1988, that she was one of the few scholars who really understood and appreciated his work.

Related Recordings on Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings

Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs (SF 40010, CD and cassette).

Negro Folk Music of Alabama, Volumes 1-6 (Folkways cassette 4417, 4418, 4471, 4472, 4473, 4474).

The McIntosh County Shouters: Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia (Folkways cassette 4344).

Field to Factory: Voices of the Great Migration (African American spoken word) (SFSP cassette 90005).

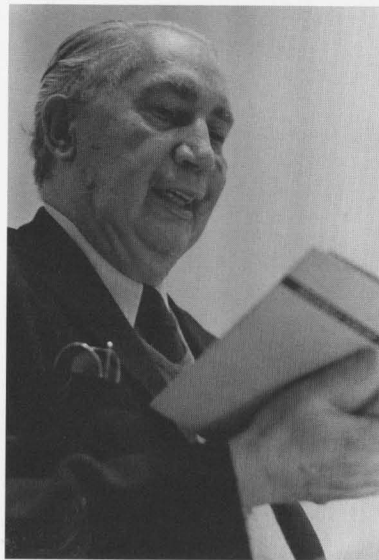
Big Bill Broonzy Sings Country Blues (Folkways cassette 31005).

Lightnin' Hopkins (SF 40019, CD and cassette).

The Voice of Langston Hughes: Selected Poetry and Prose (SF 47001) available on CD and cassette.

Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music, conceived, compiled, and annotated by Bernice Johnson Reagon, Volumes I-IV (SF 40072, 40073, 40074, 40075, CD and cassette).

Anthology of Negro Poets: Readings by Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Margaret Walker, and others (Folkways cassette 9791).



Sterling Brown reading at Boston by Roy Lewis.

Credits

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Compiled by Yusef Jones

Annotated by Dr. Joanne Gabbin

Production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters

Editorial assistance by Ed O'Reilly and Lori Elaine Taylor

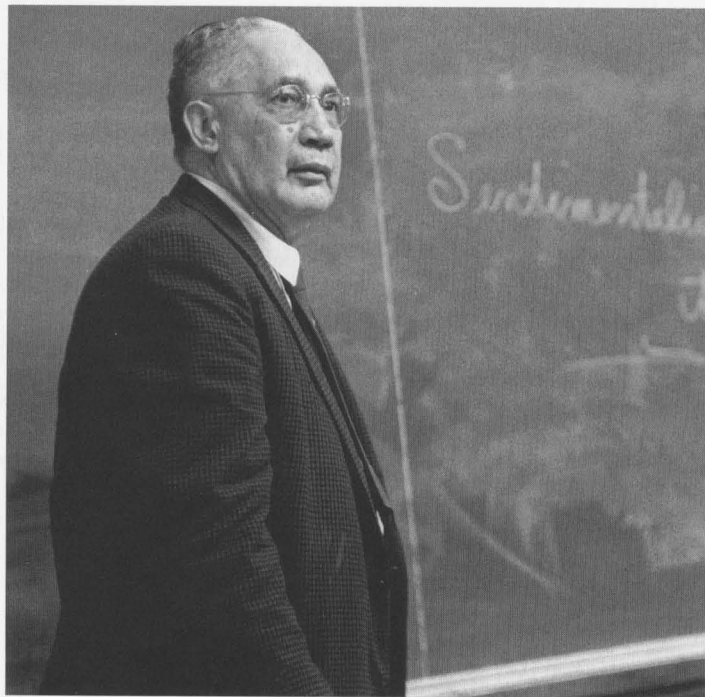
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Front cover photo: Sterling Brown at home by Frederic Ramsey

CD booklet back cover photo by Roland Freeman

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Sterling Brown in a University classroom by Roy Lewis.

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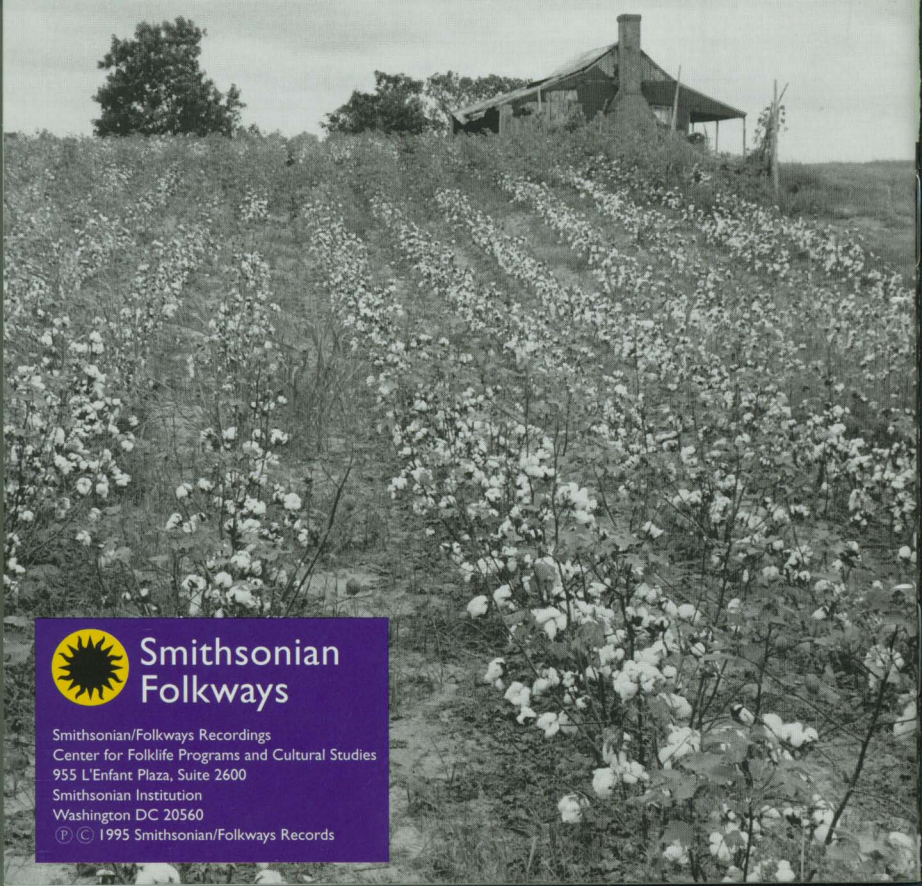
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Songs
of the
Old Regular Baptists

LINED-OUT
HYMNODY FROM
SOUTHEASTERN
KENTUCKY

VOL. 2



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



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SFW CD 50001

LC 9628



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1. SWEET GLORIES RUSH UPON MY SIGHT 4:36
2. AMAZING GRACE 2:39
3. I LONG TO SEE THE SEASONS COME 4:17
4. PRECIOUS MEMORIES 5:31
5. STREETS OF GOLD 3:19
6. ATTEND YOUNG FRIEND 6:32
7. O! WHEN SHALL I SEE JESUS 4:34
8. JESUS GRANT US ALL A BLESSING 5:17
9. MUST JESUS BEAR THE CROSS ALONE 4:05
10. THE LORD WILL MAKE A WAY 6:01
11. A POOR WAYFARING STRANGER 7:55

AND STATEMENTS BY SEVERAL OF THE SINGERS

SONGS *of the* OLD REGULAR BAPTISTS LINED-OUT HYMNODY FROM SOUTHEASTERN KENTUCKY VOL. 2

The oldest English-language religious music in oral tradition in North America, the lined-out, congregational hymnody of the Old Regular Baptists is heard in the heart of the coal-mining country of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. In this rare, beautiful, and heartfelt music lie the roots of the high, lonesome mountain sound of elaborate melodic turns and graces. Produced in collaboration with the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, this is the second of two Smithsonian Folkways albums devoted to their music; the first was SFW CD 40106.



I. SONGS

1. SWEET GLORIES RUSH UPON MY SIGHT 4:36
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II. STATEMENTS BY

12. DON PRATT :30
13. TOBY BREEDING :36
14. JIM FIELDS :20
15. JOHNNIE FIELDS :09
16. SQUIRE WATTS :07
17. ELWOOD CORNETT :10
18. PAUL SPARKMAN :07
19. HARVE CREECH :24
20. RUTH FRAZIER :10
21. KATHY CORNETT :12
22. GRETHEL FIELDS :10
23. EMORY CAUDILL :06
24. JAMES CAUDILL :11
25. JOHN WALLHAUSSER :17
26. JEFF TITON :31
27. ELWOOD CORNETT :32

INTRODUCTION

Jeff Todd Titon

IN THE HEART OF THE COAL MINING COUNTRY IN THE Southern Appalachian Mountains lies one of the oldest and deepest veins of the British-American melodic tradition. Folk music collectors have been here for more than a century, recording ballads and fiddle tunes. An equally rich, and certainly more vigorous, tradition rests in the area's religious music, particularly in the lined-out singing of the 15,000 or so Old Regular Baptists in this region. But unlike the ballads and the dance music, this hymnody is not well known outside central Appalachia. It has not entered into any folk music revivals, and until recently very little of it has been available on recordings. Yet Old Regular Baptist singing is a regional and national treasure that deserves to be honored, celebrated, encouraged within its community, and made available to the world outside.



To honor the music and its community, in 1997 the Smithsonian Institution invited a group of Old Regular Baptists to demonstrate their singing at its annual Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., and issued an album of their singing (Smithsonian Folkways CD SFW 40106). Like that first album, this second album represents the old way of singing, for the current generation of Old Regular Baptists and for the generations to come. It, too, is the result of a friendship and collaboration among Old Regular Baptists in southeastern Kentucky and two visitors, professors from Berea College and Brown University, who have long felt the drawing power of this culture and its music. The first album (SFW 40106) contained extensive notes concerning the Old Regular Baptists, their beliefs, history, and music. What follows is a summary of those notes, along with a listing of the song tracks and statements that comprise this second album. We are grateful to Dan Sheehy, Pete Reiniger, and Mary Monseur of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings for their help in bringing this project to fruition.

Elwood Cornett, Moderator (elected leader) of the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, says: "We Old Regular Baptists are a peculiar people. We sing differently. Some say our worship has a sad and mournful sound. But I've never heard a more beautiful melody, and the sound of the worship causes my heart to feel complete." Outsiders, calling this sound mournful, attribute to the singing what they hear in it. Yet to Old Regular Baptists the sound of the singing is not mournful but joyful: deeply felt and profoundly moving; worshipping God and therefore glorious.

Old Regular Baptists form a close-knit community. They are concentrated within their central Appalachian region in the upper South, and in certain Kentucky counties — Letcher, Knott, Perry — there are more Old Regular Baptists than members of any other religious denomination. In addition to a geographical community, they also form a moral community of shared beliefs. In the Notes to the first album, CD SFW 40106, Elwood Cornett described the people:

The Old Regular Baptist members come from many walks of life. Some are highly educated — some are not. Some are well off financially — some are not. Some are old — some are young. We come together as equal children of God. We do not say we are better than someone else. We are totally unconcerned about the opinions of modern theologians. Each person has an individual relationship with God, and that spiritual relationship overshadows everything else.

We hold family and place in high regard. Children are taught by the light of the life of Christians much more than either written or oral words. Sincerity and humbleness and reverence are marks of God's people. The Old Regular Baptists may travel far and wide, but they are anxious to return to the place where they grew up. They want to hear those special sounds and see familiar scenes. Those that move away return often and are likely to return for retirement. It is my desire to not sound self-righteous, but I humbly proclaim

that I have found home. It has been decades since I searched for a people to fellowship with. I have found just what I was looking for. These are my people. This is my home!

According to John Wallhausser, professor emeritus of religion at Berea College, Kentucky, the beliefs and traditions of the older Baptist denominations in the Southern Appalachian Mountains are found in layers, like seams of coal. The earliest layers are composed of 16th- and early 17th-century Reformation beliefs and creeds — particularly the theology of John Calvin. The next layer consists of 18th-century pietism and the revival movements in New England and the American frontier. Finally, one finds the theological controversies of the 19th century which led Old Regular Baptist churches to consolidate and preserve their traditions, their “old-fashioned way.” Twentieth-century efforts by Appalachian churches to hold on to their past have kept much of that past intact. Consequently, we can still discern today the remarkable heritage of the mountains: the Old Regular Baptists’ distinctive way of being “in the world but not of the world.”

THE SINGING

When sung in the Spirit of God, these songs bring people closer to God and to each other. This experience is most truly felt by a Christian saved by grace, and yet many speak of how the sound of the singing drew them powerfully even when they were children and did not understand its full meaning. Worship, not history or the way the songs are put together, is the most important aspect of the music.

Old Regular Baptist singing also has its own particulars. The singing is very slow. It gets along without a regular beat; you can’t tap your foot to it. These stately melodies are very elaborate, and they come from the old Anglo-American folk music tune stock, not from classical music or from popular songs written to make money. The group sings in unison, not in parts (harmony), but each singer is free to “curve” the tune a little differently, and those who are able to make it more elaborate are admired.

Old Regular Baptist congregational songs consist of rhymed, metrical verse in a series of stanzas to which a repeating tune is set. Song books are kept at the pulpit and passed around to the song leaders. These books have words but no musical notation. The oldest lyrics are the 18th-century hymns, written chiefly by familiar American or English devotional poets and hymn writers such as Isaac Watts. These fill the Old Regular Baptists’ two favorite song books, the collections *Sweet Songster* and the *Thomas Hymnal*. The leader sings the very first line, and the congregation joins in when they recognize the song. After that, the song proceeds line by line: the leader briefly chants a line alone, and then the group repeats the words but to a tune that is much longer and more elaborate than the leader’s chant or lining tune. Music historians call this procedure “lining out.”

Tunes are passed along from one singer, one generation to the next among the members of these close families and church communities. Singers learn by following and imitating others, not by reading notes. Some of the melodies are quite old, while others are more recent compositions in the same folk-song style. Old Regular Baptist song rhythm is governed, not by metronome time, but by the breath and spirit. “We believe in being tuned up

with the grace of God and His Holy Spirit; and when that begins, it makes a melody, makes a joyful noise,” said Elder I. D. Back.

The Old Regular Baptist way of singing derives from the music of the 16th-century English parish church. In 1644 the Westminster Assembly of Divines, a group appointed by the English Parliament, recommended the practice of lining out, and it was adopted in Massachusetts a few years later. By the end of the 17th century it had become “the common way of singing” among Anglicans and other Protestant denominations (except Lutherans) throughout Britain and her colonies. African Americans learned it and carry a parallel tradition today, calling the repertory “meter hymns” or “Dr. Watts.”

As settlers moved during the 18th and early 19th centuries into the frontier South, to the Shenandoah Valley and later across the Cumberland Gap, they carried “the common way” (now called “the old way”) of singing with them. Most Appalachian settlers from the English/Scottish borderlands were familiar with this music, for it had lingered there well into the 18th century even after it had declined in southern England and the urban parts of the American colonies. The Old Baptists used well-known secular tunes and composed other, similar-sounding tunes to carry the sacred texts. Nineteenth-century camp meetings gave rise to spiritual songs — usually easily sung, rapid choruses with refrains; but the more conservative Old Baptist ancestors of the Old Regulars resisted the new gospel music. They also resisted musical notation in shaped notes, a reform designed to drive out “the old way of singing.” Shaped notes (diamonds, triangles, squares, and circles that aided in learning to sing by sight) spread via singing schools from New England to Appalachia and the South in the 19th century and were featured in such prominent Southern hymn collections as the *Southern Harmony*

and the *Sacred Harp* and in various gospel hymn collections from the late 19th century onwards. The greatest challenge to “the old way of singing” today comes from the gospel songs on radio and recordings. Some Old Regular Baptist churches have succumbed to part-singing and many include a far higher percentage of gospel hymnody, but in the Indian Bottom Association most remain steadfast in keeping the older, lined-out hymnody.

Old Regular Baptist singing is what it is today because the people continue to believe strongly “In the Good, Old-Fashioned Way,” as the title of one of their songs has it. They have preserved this remarkable way of worship in song not for the sake of tradition but because, in the words of Elwood Cornett, “There’s some special connection between a human and God Almighty and somehow that’s released by that sound. People who don’t understand it may call it a mournful sound, but to me it’s the most glorious sound I’ve ever heard.”

THE RECORDINGS

The eleven songs and the succeeding statements were sung and spoken by members of the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, a group of churches located chiefly in southeastern Kentucky, and also by visitors Wallhausser and Titon. After the singing, Elwood Cornett asked for volunteers to say what the singing means to them. Excerpts from those spontaneous statements follow the songs on this album. Song leaders and speakers are identified by name in the notes that follow.

The stereo recording was made on a digital audiotape recorder (DAT) by Jeff Todd Titon, on March 9 and 10, 2002, in the Defeated Creek Old Regular Baptist Church, Linefork, Kentucky.

SONGS (followed by references to the pages where they can be found in song books in use by Old Regular Baptists. For a key to the abbreviations of the song book titles see below.)

1. SWEET GLORIES RUSH UPON MY SIGHT

led by Toby Breeding. BHB, 1991, p. 79; SS, p. 237; ORBSB, 1989-90, p. 76

2. AMAZING GRACE

led by Elwood Cornett. BHB, 1991, p. 5; SFS, 1995-96, p. 11; NBSB, 1989, p. 105; ORBSB, 1989, p. 3; TH, no. 405; SS, p. 23

3. I LONG TO SEE THE SEASONS COME

led by Jim Fields. TH, no. 458; SS, p. 147

4. PRECIOUS MEMORIES

led by Merle Caudill. BHB, 1991, p. 155

5. STREETS OF GOLD

led by John Riedy. BHB, 1991, p. 189; ORBSB, 1989-90, p. 113; SFS, 1995-96, p. 151

6. ATTEND YOUNG FRIEND

led by Charles Shepherd. NBSB, 1989, p. 70; SS, p. 29

7. O! WHEN SHALL I SEE JESUS

led by Elwood Cornett. NBSB, 1989, p. 62; TH, no. 391

8. JESUS GRANT US ALL A BLESSING

led by Don Pratt. TH, no. 231

9. MUST JESUS BEAR THE CROSS ALONE

led by Bonnell Watts. TH, no. 556; BHB, 1991, p. 59; SFS, 1995-96, p. 39

10. THE LORD WILL MAKE A WAY

led by Squire Watts. BHB, 1991, p. 82; ORBSB, 1989-90, p. 91; SFS, 1995-96, p. 128

11. A POOR WAYFARING STRANGER

led by Mike Halcomb. SFS, 1995-96, p. 101; NBSB, 1989, p. 25

KEY TO SONG BOOK ABBREVIATIONS:

BHB *The Baptist Hymn Book*, edited by Dorothy Osborne. Ashland, KY: Dorothy Osborne, 1991.

NBSB *The New Baptist Song Book: A Collection of Good Hymns, Songs, and Ballads*, by Foster Ratliff and Roland H. Conley. Salyersville, KY: R.H. Conley, 1980.

ORBSB *Old Regular Baptist Song Book*, edited by Elders Roy B. Akers and Baxter Osborne. Ashland, KY: Baxter Osborne, 1980.

SFS *Some of Our Favorite Songs*, by C. B. Smith. Pippa Passes, KY: C.B. Smith, 1988.

SS *The Sweet Songster, A Collection of the Most Popular and Approved Songs, Hymns, and Ballads*, by Edward W. Billups [1854]. Rpt. Wayne, WV: Arrowood Bros., n.d.

TH [Thomas Hymnal] *A Choice Selection on Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Use of the Baptist Church and All Lovers of Song*, by Elder E. D. Thomas [1877]. Rpt. Wayne, WV: Arrowood Bros., n.d.

Booklet cover photo: *Defeated Creek Church, Linefork, KY.*

Traycard photo: *Original Indian Bottom land where in the 19th century the Association's first church was located.*

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