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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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1. SWEET GLORIES RUSH UPON MY SIGHT 4:36
2. AMAZING GRACE 2:39
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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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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.

