

Mahalia Jackson *I Sing Because I'm Happy*

Recorded, compiled and annotated by Jules Schwerin

Smithsonian Folkways Special Products SFSP90002

Originally issued in 1979 as Folkways 31101 and 31102,
with the title *I Sing Because I'm Happy* volumes 1 and 2.

Mahalia Jackson's songs appear courtesy of Sony Special Products.

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This cassette has been issued to complement *Got To Tell It* by Jules Schwerin, published by Oxford University Press in 1992. Look for the book in your bookstore or order directly from Oxford University Press. Selections from Mr. Schwerin's interviews with Mahalia Jackson have been combined with four gospel songs that illustrate her style. On this tape you can hear the voice of a great figure of American music, reminiscing about her past and singing about her beliefs.

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SFSP90002

Mahalia Jackson

I Sing Because I'm Happy

Mahalia[®]
Jackson

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Interview with Songs • Recorded, compiled and annotated by Jules Schwerin



Released in conjunction with the book by Jules Schwerin *Got To Tell It: Mahalia Jackson, Queen of Gospel*, published by Oxford University Press, 1992



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Side A

He's Got the Whole World in His Hands (London/Henry), Recollections

of Early Childhood, *Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho* (Traditional),

Recollections of Music in New Orleans, *I Sing Because My Soul Is*

Happy (Traditional)

Side B

Recollections of Violence in New Orleans and the Role of the

Church, *I Sing Because My Soul Is Happy* (Traditional), Recollections of

Musical Influences, *The Lord's Prayer* (Traditional)

HOW THESE RECORDINGS CAME TO BE MADE: AN INTRODUCTION BY JULES SCHWERIN

These cassettes are excerpts from tape-recorded conversations I had with Mahalia Jackson, the celebrated gospel singer, early in 1952, in her Chicago living room. They complement the biography I have written about her, published by Oxford University Press in October 1992. Included with Jackson's responses are several songs sung by her, provided through the courtesy of Sony Special Products.

In these selections from her remembrances of her childhood and teenage years in segregated New Orleans we have chosen vignettes of her early life, her religious and musical education, and her passionate reverence for singing the gospel. My encounters with Mahalia Jackson in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans prior to the Civil Rights Movement, reveal the character of the great singer and the volatile social milieu in which she grew up and attained international fame.

By mid-summer of 1951, I had completed the first of what became three short fictional films, based upon actual places and events in rural America. The film is called *Indian Summer*, and is concerned with the struggle of farmers of the high Catskill Mountains, on the west branch of the Delaware River, to save their land from being flooded to provide multitudes in New York City with fresh drinking water. I was subsequently in search of a companion idea that could complement the completed film. Fortuitously, I discovered a likely protagonist in Mahalia Jackson, performing at a Sunday afternoon outdoor church revival in the New York City suburb of White Plains.

A group of local Baptist congregations had joined together to present her to black churchgoers who were unfamiliar with Jackson's rising star in gospel singing. In Chicago she had been brought to a wider public through the courtesy of the stellar Chicago radio raconteur, Studs Terkel. Jackson soon reached eclectic, racially mixed audiences and her reputation spread through the facility of her Apollo recordings.

In White Plains, in the open-air concert shed, I found myself in a black sea of jubilant parishioners—a thousand people from local black

churches—gathered for a Jackson “down home” whirlwind, under a blue sky and hot sun. The combination of her spiritual power and monumental voice created the most dazzling, gloom-chasing revival Westchester County had ever experienced. Her Sanctified Church style was awesome: moans and groans and shouts built to shivering climaxes, an exaltation of the life-force in a voice that lifted the thousand souls into a state of astonishment. I had never heard or witnessed such a performance before, though I had been nurtured by the jazz and blues of some of the greatest black musicians and singers in the New York night clubs and saloons. From the early thirties to the time of which I write I heard great artists including Billie Holliday, Huddie Ledbetter, Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Joe Sullivan’s sextet, but never the gospel—never Mahalia Jackson’s foot-stomping, hip-swaying, syncopated velocity and hackle-raising affirmations.

In her pink, floor-length organza gown, her black beehive fall piled high atop her head, she swayed, rocked, hand-clapped, shouted and snapped her fingers. She was a monumental body of a woman, with her skirt rippling about her two hundred pounds; yet she moved lightly as a feather, a whirlwind with the sensual vitality of an adolescent girl. She moved about the stage, between the microphone stand and the piano and organ where Mildred Falls, her accompanist, reigned with her powerful chords, her bounces and triplets perfectly matched to Jackson’s virtuosity.

Years later, Jackson said that she had always visualized herself as a peacock flaunting its feathers, all spread out in display.

After the crowd dispersed, I made my way backstage to meet the artist, whom I found seated on a bench, fanning herself, her shoes off. She was taking the kudos of her admirers modestly, and doubtless because I was the sole white face among them, she looked at me as I waited my turn to shake her hand.

After I introduced myself and expressed my awe at the musical experience she had just given me, Jackson gave me her full attention and I began to explain why and how I had come to the concert. I identified myself as an independent film maker, and spoke of my plans to add two more stories to the one I had already completed. She agreed to meet me at a New York screening room the following

week, with Mildred Falls. The screening of *Indian Summer* could not have been more successfully received. The Catskill drama of farmers, albeit white, forced off their land, was not an unfamiliar story to the black women. After we shared a meal, I told them of some ideas that were not yet fully formed in my head: a parallel, real-life drama of black people—their claim on freedom, the end of segregation, and the right to own the land on which they had lived and worked for generations.

Exhausted, but emboldened by Jackson’s promise of collaboration, I left the women at their hotel. Without Jackson, I could not break through to the black community of New Orleans, and from just the little bit of her personal history that she had begun to share with me, I felt certain it would be a wonderful second film in the trilogy.

Months later, after the lawyers had done their business, I flew to Chicago to have a “get-acquainted” session with Jackson. In her South Side ranch-style house, with its green and gold plush living room, we began a three-day marathon of talk.

I placed a small Wollensack recorder on the coffee table. At first I started and stopped it to match Jackson’s initial ambivalence. We agreed that we needed to create a chemistry of mutual trust, to dispense with deep-seated cultural bias and walls of preconceptions. I began to ask questions about her origins, her reasons for moving north to Chicago—trying not to impose my own prejudices and ignorance of black culture and history. I had to have her confidence, or what I was planning would never work. She had to trust me enough to collaborate; prejudice works both ways.

To her credit, Jackson helped me get over my initial wariness as a stranger in the house. Our meetings became sandwiched between family, friends, and neighbors. There was always a traffic jam in her kitchen, a constant cooking and serving meals, talking and gossiping. So as not to lose a beat of it, she traipsed back and forth from my question-web and recording machine in the living room—fleeing them to join the hubbub in the kitchen, to take charge of the cooking altogether, leaving me alone to stare at the Wollensack. As we talked, she replied to my questions with increasing candor. But she was being utterly herself as she introduced me to soul-food, Southern-style: fried

chicken, chitterlings and greens, pigs' feet, corn bread, and beer. Jackson invited me into the kitchen to taste the goodies, where everyone was standing about, bemused, curious about my responses: the white fellow in the living room who was going to make a movie about Mahalia. Food was very important. The excitement in the kitchen was as if it were for holiday preparations.

In the interviews, Mahalia Jackson painted the scenes of her growing-up, and I sensed her pleasure in collaborating in what had become for both of us a labor of love. Despite the disparity in our backgrounds, we found the way to come together—the vulnerability that comes when private experiences are shared.

I saw the second film emerging: New Orleans, stripped of its white tourist trappings; black voices against colonialist segregation; community feeling and solidarity, held together by the glue of the church and the promise of the Gospel.

Jackson's title for our projected film was a good one: *Way Back In Those Days...* and the recorded recollections of her days of growing up in New Orleans proved to be a rich memory bank of black Americana. She exposed the debased character of the life of the segregated black person in those days; the viciousness of Mardi Gras, stripped of its bland white trappings. And she parted the curtains on the origins of her glorious vocal style and gospel music. She spoke of the influence of the minister's tremulous sermon...of listening to the early records of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey on a neighbor's "His Master's Voice" phonograph...of attending popular black lawn parties where Bunk Johnson, King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, among many, performed their "indecent music" when they weren't working in white bordellos. Jackson believed it would have been impossible for any alive and artful black person to have lived in New Orleans in those pre-1920 years and remain unaffected by the musical artfulness that merged into the life and atmosphere of the city. The very air one breathed, she said, was rooted in a loose musical beat and melody that had evolved out of the drum rhythms of West Africa, the Caribbean islands, and slavery itself.

As for music lessons, they consisted of going to church with her family, listening to the choir, and singing with the congregation. The source of her gospel art was the Evangelical Sanctified Church adjacent

to the wooden house she and her family lived in close to the railroad tracks and the Mississippi River. Born into the Baptist faith in 1912, Jackson preferred the sanctified version where the white-robed churchly band of "angels" would "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." She adored their rhythm section that consisted of guitar, tambourine, cymbals, and snare drum. She loved the syncopated music that merged with the call-and-response of the choir and the congregation. She always paid homage to the glory of the old minister who led the service in a sing-song, sad chant. She reminded me that the minister's chant was literally the way on which she had modeled her own magical style of singing.

In her early teens, Jackson left the dirt-covered roads of her neighborhood and followed the migration of New Orleans musicians to Chicago. There she worked as a maid, cook and washerwoman. Later she made her living as a beautician and her mark singing in the choir of the Greater Salem Baptist Church.

Over the years, Jackson battled with fellow musicians who encouraged her to sing jazz and the blues. But despite the similarity of the rhythms, she refused to sing anything but gospel because, she said, it was the music of hope and it expressed "the love of God." She reminded her critics that she was a woman and an artist who refused to surrender to despair despite her years of poverty and segregation.

A few weeks after our recording sessions, I flew to New Orleans and met Jackson at her brother's house on the dirt road she had left almost fifty years before. She had driven from Chicago in her lavender Cadillac, but that didn't protect her from being molested by a Louisiana state trooper who arrested her for speeding and took her to a town marshal who fined her \$250 on the spot. They would have fined her more, she told me, but that was all the cash they found on her person.

In New Orleans, Jackson drove about the city and outskirts to help me choose locations for the film and to meet the black ministers and their congregations that were going to comprise our "cast of hundreds." Segregated New Orleans kept me from treating Jackson to dinner in the famous restaurants of that city and introducing her to my envious white friends who resided in the Garden District of the French

Quarter. But with Jackson at the wheel of her car (I was seated at a suitable distance from her in the rear) we went all over "back-a-town" and along the levee and the railroad tracks, the docks and the riverfront. Everywhere we went in the black community, it was clear from the freely expressed convictions of the people that their traditional passivity would soon explode into active resistance.

Unfortunately, after months of negotiations, I failed to obtain sufficient financing to produce the film. The investors I spoke to in New York were convinced that gospel songs and the theatrical genius of Mahalia Jackson had no commercial future. Jackson was as heartbroken as I was; but she had other jobs to do and in two years her name was a household word; she had surged ahead to the commercial zenith of the recording industry. Urged on by her agents, Jackson accepted the profitable, but stereotyped, "darky" role in the Universal Pictures remake of *Imitation of Life* in 1959. In the middle fifties, through the strenuous efforts of Dinah Shaw and other white entertainers, Jackson broke through the racial bias of television and film.

For a time we continued to be friends. When she came to New York I helped her preserve her true self on the growing number of television programs that booked her. They would light her face without proper shadings, or seat her in an old-mammy rocking chair, a scarf or bandanna on her head. It was all so innocent in those days, but it was the style to direct a black artist to retain the "Negro" image in the years that preceded the Civil Rights Movement.

And then our contacts vanished altogether...and all that remained of that "happening" was the tape of her life that had brought us together.

In time, Jackson became acquainted with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and was instrumental in arranging with Chicago's Mayor Daley to obtain a city-owned theater in which to introduce Dr. King to the citizens of Chicago. Dr. King was encouraging the development of the civil rights movement in the city, despite the resistance of a large group of Baptist preachers who had refused him access to their pulpits.

Jackson joined King in his great march on Washington, when he gave his historic and memorable "I Have a Dream" speech (which may be heard on Folkways 5592, *We Shall Overcome: Documentary of the*

March on Washington). She had avoided Malcolm X's movement because of his attacks on King's nonviolent strategy in the Civil Rights Movement. She believed that she had become politicized through her singing appearances and through the Gospel.

Mahalia Jackson died in Chicago on January 28, 1972. She was sixty years old, and according to the doctors, she died because of a heart ailment. No doubt that is true, but she had sung her heart out so long, her glorious voice had begun to fade away, and her spirit that had fought to find success and freedom rebelled at long last.

In Chicago, life virtually came to a standstill when more than forty thousand mourners passed her coffin and said goodbye at both the Greater Salem Baptist Church and the city-owned Arie Crown Theater on the lake shore. Many celebrated personages paid their respects, including Mayor Richard J. Daley, Coretta Scott King, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sammy Davis, Jr., Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin, Clara Ward and her surrogate son, Brother John Sellers. Mrs. King, given a standing ovation, praised Jackson for being "black...proud...and beautiful." She said that her husband has said: "a voice like this comes, not once a century, but once a millennium." Later, those who could, sang. Aretha Franklin, who took the gospel music from her father's church in Detroit and infused it with the popular rhythm and blues, sang "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" working the hymn higher and higher, her strong voice rebounding off the high walls of the Arie Crown Theater. Dolores Barrett Campbell sang "Until Then." Robert Anderson sang Jackson's big commercial hit "Move On Up A Little Higher" accompanied by her famous longtime associates Mildred Falls and Willie Webb. When a news photographer asked Clara Ward to smile for a picture on the stage near the rose-covered coffin, she said: "This is not a good day for smiling."

Following the funeral, her coffin was flown to New Orleans. Jackson had finally come back home. Ten thousand mourners filed past her coffin in the city before it was escorted twelve miles to the Providence Memorial Park in Metairie, a New Orleans suburb. She was buried with tears and love. Then a new procession formed at the grave and moved back to the city in the gospel tradition—bands burst forth with medleys of gospel music and the crowds were high-stepping

and swinging to the Dixieland sound. Jackson had moved on up a little higher.

In June, 1975, CBS-TV agreed to sponsor the film I had had to abandon in 1957 for lack of funds and lack of sponsors who believed in Mahalia Jackson, then hardly known to white America. It took about seven months to produce in New York, Chicago and New Orleans. The great jazz archives of Tulane University and the Jazz Museum of New Orleans provided many rare photographs of the early days, and the giants of what Jackson called "indecent music." Kenneth and Caroline Kolb, local jazz buffs of New Orleans, helped assemble pictorial materials and paved the way for a self-conscious Yankee producer. Studs Terkel, the Chicago chronicler of Division Street, who had given Jackson access to large radio audiences when she was still virtually unknown, agreed to reminisce about his discovery of her, and the meaning of her talent. "Her art was her work; her work was her art."

The film appeared during the summer of 1975 under the auspices of CBS-TV News: "Got to Tell It." It is ironic that it took the film maker sixteen years to make the film, but the subject, the greatest voice in gospel music, had to pass from the scene first. The art, in the interim, had become "commercial" and the "artist" had reached the top-most rung of "stardom." Such is the power of the success syndrome that the passionate expression of Mahalia Jackson had to be diffused until she had achieved the heights of show-business acclamation in her nationwide concert and television programs, and her frequent and durable recordings.

Jules Victor Schwerin
July 1992

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- Many of Mahalia Jackson's great performances have been reissued by Columbia Records on compact disc.

CREDITS

- Recorded, compiled and annotated by Jules Schwerin
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