VOLUME ONE
MUSIC OF THE BAHAMAS
RECORDED AND EDITED BY SAMUEL B. CHARTERS

BAHAMAN FOLK GUITAR

Photo by A. R. Danberg

JOSEPH SPENCE
One of the women listening to him play kept asking Spence to sing, and when he protested that he didn’t sing she answered, “What do you mean you can’t sing? You got a mouth to talk!” He sang the spiritual I’M GOING TO LIVE THAT LIFE, and he was partially correct in his estimate of his own vocal abilities. He can sing, but the words are unintelligible. The chanted verses are freely recited biblical material in an involved rhythmic development, but it is difficult to understand even occasional words. Somehow, though, this takes very little away from the performance. The rough shout and the rhythmic guitar, set against each other, create an excitement and brilliance that is unforgettable.

From the swaying deck of a small boat, standing off the barrier reef, the coast line of Andros Island is a ragged, littered shore of deserted beaches and low headlands. The prevailing winds sweep toward the shoreline, and the sea surges across the reef to the warm shallows off the beach. The occasional sails of native fishing boats dance uncertainly in the haze of the afternoon sun. Boats draw close to pass, and voices call across the water. The island is quiet, except for the cries of small birds in the trees. There are small settlements along the shore. A few houses in the trees behind the beach, with the boats pulled into a creek or anchored in the deeper water off shore. Women in bright dresses hunt along the beach for shells, and children play in the water. From the scattered houses there are narrow roadways, scraped into the coral through the heavy brush, leading to smaller settlements a mile or so behind the shore. The outlines of small stucco houses can be seen on the low ridges.

It is a poor island, except for the few weeks in the early winter when the boats have come in from the crawfish beds with the money from the season’s catch. There are small farms back in the brush, but a few plantings exhaust the thin soil covering the crumbling coral. There are a few pigs, and small herds of goats, but fish is the most important food, with rice brought from Nassau on the fishing boats. The interior of the island is deserted, covered with shallow lakes, or pine barrens, with mosquitoes and flies filling the air. Andros has been dogged with such endless bad fortune that many of the older natives feel the island is haunted.
Except for a handful of white residents in two or three of the larger settlements, the people of Andros are descend- 
ed from the Bahaman slaves. They are deeply religious, 
most of them Church of England, the others Catholic. The 
island’s poverty has left them sensitive and dissatisfied, 
and many of the younger people are trying to live in the 
colonies’ overcrowded capitol city, Nassau, on the island 
of New Providence. The life in the settlements is difficult 
and monotonous. Music is the only creative expression of 
the island’s people, and religious singing and instrumental 
music have become an intensely important part of their 
lives.

The most important instrument on Andros is the guitar. 
Almost every young man plays the guitar, tuned to an 
older English tuning, with the lowest string a tone lower 
than the modern tuning. They carry their instruments 
with them as they walk to friends’ houses in the darkness, 
and take them in the small boat cabins when they are at 
sea. Often, they use the instrument to accompany singing, 
but more often it is played as a solo instrument. Women 
from different settlements, meeting in the small coastal 
mail boat, will argue about the guitar players in their set-
tlements, trying to convince each other that the musician 
from their settlement is the best on Andros. Most of the 
men play the instrument with their fingers, rather than 
with a flat pick, and the music is usually from the church 
hymnals.

There was one man on Andros that the women never 
argued about. His name was Joseph Spence, from a settle-
ment called Small Hope, a few miles north of Fresh Creek, 
in northern Andros. Spence was the best guitar player any 
one on Andros could remember hearing.

I heard Spence one hot afternoon in the settlement of 
Fresh Creek. A group of men were building a house, and 
Spence was sitting on a pile of bricks, playing for them. I 
cought myself looking behind the wall the men were work-
ing on, to see if there was another guitar player with him. I 
had heard a number of guitar players in the Bahamas and 
in the South, but I had never heard anything like Spence. 
His playing was stunning. He was playing simple popular 
melodies, and using them as the basis for extended 
rhythmic and melodic variations. He often seemed to be 
improvising in the bass, the middle strings and the treble 
at the same time. Sometimes a variation would strike the 
men and Spence himself as so exciting that he would sim-
ply stop playing and join them in the shouts of excitement. 
One of the men sent for a bottle of rum, and the others 
shifted back to work.

Spence talked easily, calling to his friends as they passed. 
He was about fifty, making his living as a stone mason in 
Nassau, playing for occasional weddings or parties. He was 
a large, powerful man, his hands strong and quick. His 
sister and her husband still lived in Small Hope, and he 
hand sailed to Andros from Nassau to spend a few weeks. 
The American recession had forced many young 
Bahamans, in the United States on labor contracts, to 
return to Nassau, and there was serious unemployment. 
Spence knew he could always live at Small Hope; so he had 
come to the island until there would be jobs in Nassau. He 
was seeing his friends, playing his guitar for them.

He was willing to record, emptied his bottle of rum, and 
we walked to the other side of the settlement, picking up 
a crowd of young girls and children as we walked. He sat 
down, joked with the girls, then played without a break 
of hesitation for nearly an hour. Then he sat listening to 
what he had played, laughing, nodding his head at 
exciting moments, and exchanging remarks with the 
people gathered around him. Late in the afternoon he 
stood up, smiling, and with the children still around him, 
he and the girls began walking toward the beach. I could 
hear him playing as they walked along the path. I never 
saw him again.
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Remastered by Pete Reiniger

Photos by A. R. Danberg

Reissue album design by Natalia Custodio

Proofread by
Chloe Joyner and
Lillian Selonick

Smithsonian Folkways executive producers:
Huich Schippers and
Atesh Sonneborn

Production managed by
Fred Knittel and
Mary Monseur

Smithsonian Folkways is:

Madison Bunch, royalty assistant;
Cecille Chen, director of business affairs and royalties;
Toby Dodds, technology director;
Claudia Foronda, sales, customer service, and inventory manager;
Beshou Gedamu, marketing assistant;
Will Griffin, licensing manager;
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Atesh Sonneborn, associate director;
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Please send comments and questions to smithsonianfolkways@si.edu.