

IMAGINED SPACE IN SACRED HARP SINGING

BY

JONATHON M. SMITH

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Gabriel Solis, Chair and Director of Research
Professor Donna A. Buchanan
Professor Gayle Magee
Associate Professor Michael Silvers

ABSTRACT

This study explores the meaning of space in Sacred Harp singing. A shape-note singing practice with roots in the nineteenth-century American Southeast, Sacred Harp has expanded across the US and into Western Europe and Australia over the last several decades. Space has meaning beyond geography for Sacred Harp, however. Observers, scholars, and participants have intercepted Sacred Harp's relationship to places through "imaginaries"—culturally determined conceptions that give meaning to places, communities, and histories even if they are not accurate representations. I focus on two overlapping imaginaries that have had an enormous impact on Sacred Harp: the southern imaginary and the Celtic imaginary. Both rely on essentializing and exoticizing caricatures in order to define a regional character and impart specific values to the places they describe. I reveal how literary and historical tropes of "southernness" have informed interpretations of Sacred Harp beginning in the early twentieth century. I follow this narrative through the twentieth century and up to the present, investigating how perceptions of what makes Sacred Harp "authentic" or "traditional" are determined in part by southern imaginaries. In addition, I trace the simultaneous impact of Celtic imaginaries through the assertion that shape-note singing in the American Southeast was maintained by "Anglo-Celtic" singers whose ancestral music found expression in the musical forms of Sacred Harp. Beyond simply revealing the inaccuracies and limitations of these imagined narratives, I am interested in the work that they do to interpret, represent, and even construct Sacred Harp's musical and social practices. I show how the construction of an imagined "upland South" populated by people with Celtic ancestry whitewashed the complicated racial histories of the southeast US that gave form to *The Sacred Harp* and the communities that sing from it. I explore how imagined ties to the Celtic world have formed actual social connections among

Sacred Harp communities on either side of the Atlantic. I reveal how contemporary singers have queered the spaces of Sacred Harp singing—not only by creating spaces within the singing community for expressions of sexual diversity, but by reorienting numerous aspects of Sacred Harp practice to better accommodate a diverse range of contemporary participants, including in new virtual spaces. Through this study, I demonstrate that imaginaries are more than just superficial historical narratives, but active concepts laden with cultural meaning that help define, represent and construct Sacred Harp singing.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Places and spaces carry significant social, cultural, and performative meaning within the music culture of Sacred Harp singing. Within the past several decades, questions about where and how the music is situated have risen to the forefront, engendering a vibrant and often contentious discourse. As Sacred Harp singing has transformed from an emphatically Christian hymnody practiced exclusively in the southeast US into a global network of communities that claim belonging to an overlapping “tradition,” participants have been forced to confront how the geographical, conceptual, and social spaces of Sacred Harp can (or cannot) accommodate these shifting dynamics. My attention to the diverse meanings that participants associate with geographical and social locations offers a new framework for understanding Sacred Harp in its current state—places and their social meanings are central to many of the key questions surrounding conceptions of tradition, authenticity, and how participants frame their identity as singers through lenses of gender, race, and sexuality, especially as the geographical and cultural spaces of Sacred Harp are rapidly changing. The argument of this study is that meanings of place and space are both diverse and contested. By exploring the ways this community creates and interprets the social meaning of place, I articulate a more detailed picture of contemporary Sacred Harp and develop a new understanding of the culturally-constructed nature of concepts including history, tradition, and authenticity that have often gone unchallenged, and indeed have frequently been asserted as the core of the music’s value. In doing so, I offer a richer perspective on the music’s significance and social impact than a less nuanced understanding can.

While the geographical expansion of Sacred Harp singing has been a powerful force driving change and eliciting introspection, place and space mean far more than simple geography

within this music culture. Sacred Harp singers invest locations, real and imagined, contemporary and historical, with important values, plotting points of meaning on a map with both spatial and temporal axes. Countries and regions matter within Sacred Harp discourse, but so do smaller, more discrete places, including churches, historical markers, and landscapes—and the particular sites that a singer values as the most important to their singing practice reflect their specific understanding of what “tradition” means and even how the music should sound. Not all of the significant spaces of Sacred Harp are physical places: social realms are equally important. Sacred Harp singers come together in a variety of social contexts both inside and outside of singing conventions, including socials (both organized and informal), public demonstrations, and at folk festivals or other invited performances. New forms of social interaction among participants are emerging in the rapidly expanding virtual spaces of Sacred Harp, new means of communication opened up by the digital revolution. The boundaries between these physical, virtual, and discursive spaces are not always clearly demarcated, as online conversations, for example, help shape the meaning of physical places. Furthermore, singers with diverse backgrounds and belief systems find ways to “queer” the spaces of Sacred Harp, reorienting practice to accommodate a broader spectrum of participants. This study explores how Sacred Harp singers create, represent, interpret, and fashion meaning through real, imagined, and virtual spaces.

1.1 Placing Sacred Harp

Sacred Harp singing differs substantially from other forms of Christian hymnody. The eponymous shape-note hymnal, first published in 1844 in Georgia, drew extensively from extant repertoires of American hymns composed specifically for unaccompanied performance—

including music of the late colonial and early federal Northeast, alongside early nineteenth-century southern shape-note tunes. Early Sacred Harp singers developed a social structure, modeled on political conventions, which drew “delegates” from wide areas together at annual all-day singing events (typically referred to as “singings” or “conventions”). In the interest of maximizing participation, they intentionally avoided sectarian hymn texts and disassociated their conventions from denominational oversight. The result was a civic organization based around what was then a fairly broad conception of Christianity; religious in nature, but not aligned with any particular church or doctrine (B. E. Cobb 1978).

Many describe Sacred Harp history and practice in detail, so a brief description of key terms will suffice for this study.¹ Sacred Harp singing is a music community based around *The Sacred Harp*, an oblong hymnal utilizing a four-shape notation system to aid in reading music—it was one of many contemporary “shape-note” tunebooks (Figure 1.1).² Sacred Harp events are called “singings,” though in a few locales, mainly southeast Georgia, they are called “sings.” Many are annual events that last all day or a full weekend (these are called all-day singings or conventions); others happen more frequently where local communities gather for a few hours on an informal basis (usually called “local singings” or “night singings”). Participants sing with no musical accompaniment. They usually think of themselves as untrained, yet singing Sacred Harp *does* take practice and is a crafted skill. Each singer is given the opportunity at singings to lead one or two songs of their choice which is called a “lesson,” a term held over from the practice of singing schools. Each song is pitched by a designated “keyer” who is skilled in offering the

¹ For detailed lists and explanations of Sacred Harp terminology see Buell Cobb’s works, *Like Cords Around My Heart* (2014, vi-xv) and *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (1978, 1-29).

² The most popular books include the *Christian Harmony*, *Southern Harmony*, *Missouri Harmony*, *New Harp of Columbia*, *Shenandoah Harmony*, and *Social Harp*, although there are many others.

starting pitches of every song in the hymnal without the aid of a pitch pipe or similar device.

Sacred Harp singing is not a choral performance and there is no stage. Singings generally take place in small churches or meeting rooms, leaving little room for an audience, though listeners frequently sit near the back if they attend. Since it is not a performance, little emphasis is placed upon performance-oriented details like breathing, tempo, or dynamics. Each individual leader sets the tempo of their chosen song. In general, singings are understood to be religious events, although they are not associated with any particular denomination (even if they take place in a church). Prayers are given before singing, before a meal, and after singings.

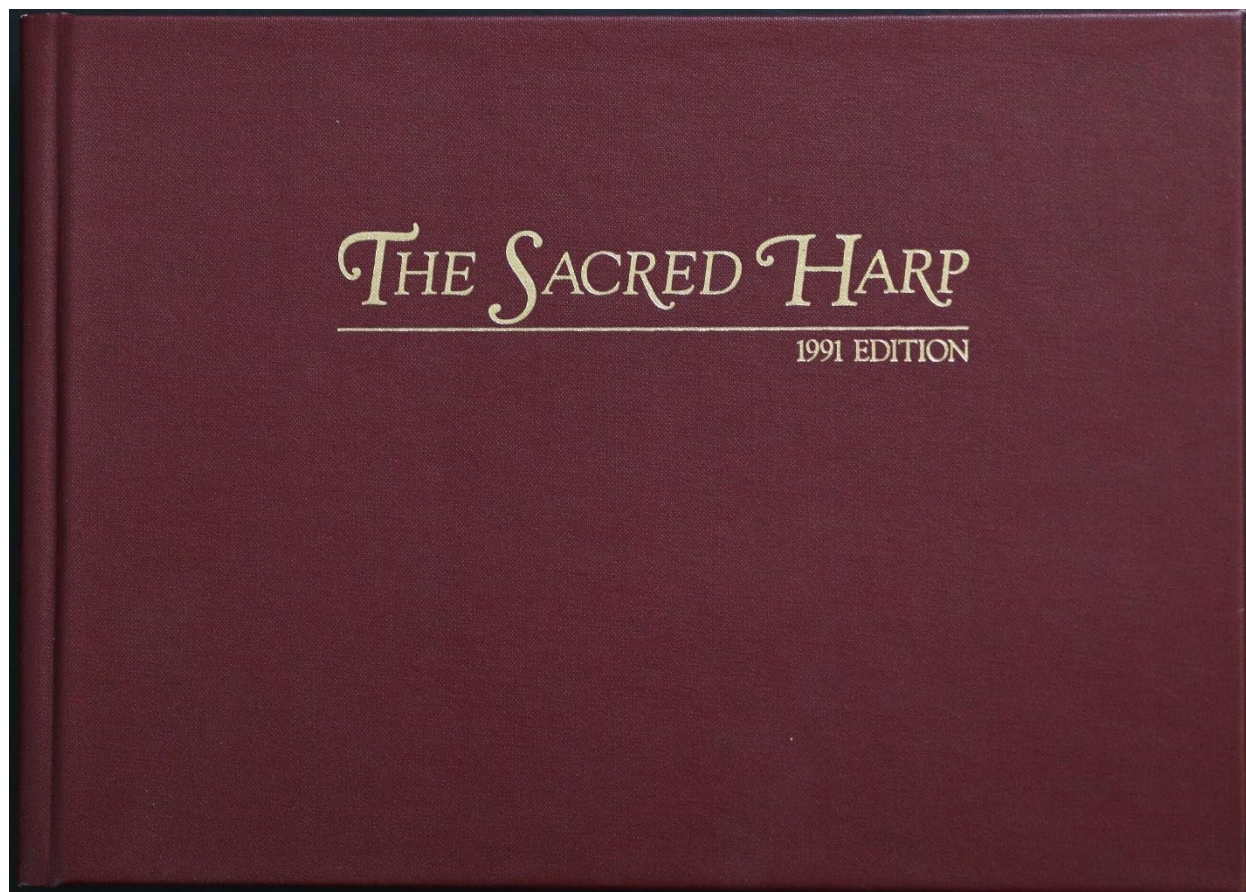


Fig. 1.1: *Sacred Harp* songbook. The current edition of the *Sacred Harp* (1991, “Denson” revision).

More than just a form of music, the strong social organization of Sacred Harp engendered a realm of activity beyond the music—important social spaces, institutions with opportunities for participation in leadership capacities, and a common language shared only among singers. As a result, identifying as a Sacred Harp singer came to signify more than just casual participation, but a potentially significant aspect of one's social identity. This sense of a belonging to a unique community was intensified over time as Sacred Harp became increasingly removed from popular Christian hymnody, and as four-shape notation gradually disappeared from other contexts, making Sacred Harp singing even more distinct from other music forms and social activities.

Sacred Harp singings have continued uninterrupted over the intervening 170 years. In the early twentieth century, musicologists and folklorists brought national attention to the music, claiming it as an important but overlooked part of American cultural patrimony. In the 1960s and 70s, individuals far from Sacred Harp's homeland who had been introduced to the music through folk music channels began to form their own singing communities based around the organizational structure of southern conventions. With the enthusiastic support of longtime southern singers, they began establishing their own regular singings and conventions in diverse regions of the United States (Bealle 1997). In the twenty first century, that growth has continued within the US and expanded rapidly in other parts of the world. Sacred Harp groups now meet regularly in over twenty countries in Europe, Asia, and Australia ("Fasola.Org - Sacred Harp and Shape Note Singing" n.d.).

This accelerating outward expansion has driven an era of rapid and significant change in the music culture of Sacred Harp. Concurrent with this geographical reconfiguration has been a dramatic shift in Sacred Harp's social terrain. Singers of vastly different ethnic, cultural, religious, and political backgrounds have entered the music culture, accommodated by the

music's longstanding ecumenicalism. Even though Sacred Harp has always embraced participants with divergent social viewpoints, the degree of ideological diversity that it now represents is unprecedented within its history. It is important to note that this increasing diversity has not been uniform—communities vary widely, in both Southeast and North, in the US and other nations. In some singing groups, members are tacitly assumed to be religious, even specifically Christian, while in others, very few of the participants are religious, and some may be overtly nonbelieving. The same goes for attitudes toward other critical social issues, including ideological positions about gender and sexuality, political affiliation, and race/ethnicity and its relevance to the music culture.

1.2 Meaningful Places

The concurrent expansion in the geographical and the social spaces of Sacred Harp has challenged long un-questioned notions of authenticity and tradition for both active participants and enthusiast. In particular, it has encouraged participants to argue for specific communities and practices as “traditional,” while seeing others as novel or even inauthentic. I am not interested in defining what “authentic” means in the context of Sacred Harp performance, but in understanding the multiplicity of ways in which participants use the construct to understand and shape their musical and social practices. Crucially, there is no clear consensus among Sacred Harp singers defining the exact meaning of these terms—individual singers and singing communities interpret authenticity in ways that support their own particular values and the values that they understand as central to Sacred Harp. As such, Sacred Harp singers engage in a generally civil but often contested discourse. Through written and verbal expressions, symbolic

gestures, and performance practices, they argue for a specific understanding of what the authentic tradition of Sacred Harp constitutes, and, by extension, what values are the most important.

The meanings of places and spaces are a critical part of this discourse. One of the most forceful, but least interrogated claims to authenticity is asserting the South as the arbiter of tradition. “The South” signifies more than just geography. In referring to the physical region of the United States, I use the terms “Southeast” and “southeastern.” I use the terms “South” and “southern” to denote a cultural region—one with contested borders and a multiplicity of definitions that I explore in detail in chapters 3 and 4. As the birthplace of Sacred Harp, the South is a kind of imagined homeland, seen by many singers as the authentic core around which other localized Sacred Harp communities orbit, closer or farther away depending on the degree to which they successfully emulate the original southern version. In practice, however, Sacred Harp has never been a monolithic “tradition” even in the Southeast US; claims that a particular practice is authentically southern, therefore, are often meaningless apart from the significance that they hold relative to the claimant’s own understanding of what Sacred Harp means. Nonetheless, the mythology of “true southern Sacred Harp” maintains potency, particularly in a period of rapid geographical expansion. In a way, this idea creates a type of Sacred Harp mythology—part of a larger rhetoric that is often repeated in discussions among many singers.

The Southeast is not the only site that singers identify as a wellspring of Sacred Harp authority—other singers point to New England or the United Kingdom as even earlier (and therefore more authentic) sources of the “tradition.” Nor are countries or geographical regions the only places that participants view as representing authenticity. Graves of composers, singers, and hymn writers; churches and other buildings important for their connection to historical

figures or as sites of longstanding Sacred Harp conventions; and even the homes or farms of singers can all serve as sites of pilgrimage—and the places that one privileges can articulate a particular understanding of the meaning and values of Sacred Harp in contradistinction to others. Interrogating how all of these places function as ideological constructs—sites of meaning in addition to physical places—provides an important perspective on the current state of Sacred Harp, while offering a framework for investigating other music cultures and communities, giving an opportunity to explore beneath long-held assumptions and illuminate how participants meaningfully place their own identity and practices.

1.3 Rethinking Space

New approaches to the study of place and space offer additional insight into contemporary Sacred Harp singing. While some singers emphasize the importance of “tradition” as a justification for adhering to longstanding norms of practice, others seek to reorient practice to better reflect and support their own values. In interventions large and small, overt and subtle, singers subvert conventional practice and refashion Sacred Harp space as queer space—following Sarah Ahmed’s conception of “reoriented” spaces that invert expectations and expand the possibilities of engagement with physical and social spaces (Ahmed 2006, 13). Although sexual orientation is an important facet of this concept, as David Shneer and Cayn Aviv describe, “queering” a space can mean opening it to multiple viewpoints, questioning hegemonic assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender, politics, and religion, for example (Shneer and Aviv 2006, ix–4). Different Sacred Harp communities have engaged in different queering processes that reflect their own needs and perspectives—some have found ways to make singings less

overtly religious, while others have worked to make the singing more welcoming to ethnic minorities. Perhaps the most obvious form of queering that Sacred Harp spaces have seen over the past several decades is an intentional restructuring to include female participants in more leadership roles. While numerous southern singers have found ways to queer the spaces of Sacred Harp in its original territory, in emergent singing communities, which are frequently much more diverse, these issues have come to the forefront. Examining how participants reorient Sacred Harp into queer spaces will provide a much better understanding of how current singers frame their practice as simultaneously traditional and contemporarily relevant.

Another type of space that has played a critical role in contemporary Sacred Harp is virtual space. Despite the fact that singers now live in many corners of the globe, they are better connected than at any time in history. Prior to the advent of the internet, Sacred Harp singers published numerous local and regional newsletters as a means of keeping in contact. Over approximately the past twenty years, singers have kept pace with evolving technology, staking out virtual spaces to augment the social space of the music culture. First with websites and email discussion lists, and now with social media groups on a range of platforms, virtual spaces provide forums for singers to engage at any time and from any location in the kind of discourse that once took place only when physical interaction was possible. Even the music itself is beginning to expand into virtual space; singers frequently post audio and video documents of singings, sometimes with the implicit aim of claiming a particular practice as “traditional.” More directly, spurred by the COVID-19 Pandemic, several Sacred Harp communities employed technology to create virtual singings using a variety of digital platforms and these spaces are now an essential component of contemporary Sacred Harp experience. Understanding how Sacred

Harp groups function as networked communities requires an exploration of their as yet largely uncharted virtual realms.

It is important to note that these virtual spaces are not merely extensions of physical spaces, as rules and standards of behavior do not always carry over into virtual territory. This is of particular significance within the music culture of Sacred Harp because electronic gathering places have challenged the longstanding convention that singers maintain social harmony by avoiding the discussion of potentially divisive topics while at singings. In the new virtual spaces of Sacred Harp, however, singers are frequently exposed to each other's political and ideological viewpoints with which they may disagree. So, while the advent of digital communication has enabled singers to stay better connected than ever before, it has also had a filtering effect with both positive and negative results. In some instances, singers have become close to participants in faraway communities with similar values or interests, but in others, singers have engaged in public disagreements or even ended friendships because of the open and often unintentional "over-sharing" that virtual spaces have facilitated. Just as singing communities have had to recalibrate their practices to accommodate the widening geographical terrain of Sacred Harp, they have had to adapt to the new social realities engendered by the expanding virtual territory that Sacred Harp occupies.

Sacred Harp has expanded and developed beyond the borders of existing scholarship, offering an important opportunity to reevaluate the music culture. Ethnomusicological, anthropological, and other critical approaches to issues surrounding place and space provide a valuable perspective for understanding Sacred Harp in the present, as so many of the key issues being debated revolve around contested visions of how the music and its practice relate to physical, conceptual, and discursive sites. What places do singers claim as Sacred Harp's

original homeland, and how do conceptions of nationality, regionalism, and community identity play into this discussion? What does the ideal singing space look like to a range of different participants—and how have some singers found ways to queer the spaces of Sacred Harp to better support their personal or community values? What kinds of engagement are possible in the new virtual spaces of Sacred Harp, and how have these interactions reinforced or subverted conceptions of tradition? As I address these complicated and intertwined questions about place and space, I go beyond merely charting the borders of Sacred Harp’s expanded terrain, but explore in detail how diverse members of the interlocking communities of this music culture continue to derive relevant contemporary meaning from Sacred Harp singing.

1.4 Sources and Methodology

Sacred Harp singing has been the subject of academic research since the early twentieth century, providing a substantial catalog of primary and secondary sources that have been critical to this work. While many of these sources are primarily focused on the eighteenth and nineteenth century origins of the music within the *Sacred Harp* hymnal, there is a solid corpus of ethnographic studies that explore the cultural contexts of Sacred Harp. Reviewing these sources, however, confirms the need for this study, which fills at least two significant gaps in the scholarship. First, all of the significant ethnomusicological accounts reinforce a conceptual divide between “traditional” singing in the Southeast and “revival” or “diaspora” singing elsewhere. In interrogating the basis for this perception, I call into question its continuing legitimacy as I approach Sacred Harp as a network of complexly integrated communities rather than a binary of traditional/imitation. Second, this study extends the scholarship on Sacred Harp

into the present—since the last major work on the music culture was completed, groups in over twenty countries have joined the larger body of Sacred Harp. This dramatic development has initiated rapid change and sparked new avenues of discourse that have previously not received extended scholarly consideration.

Beyond offering new ground for scholarship, this study reconsiders many of the conclusions of earlier accounts, many of which are still surprisingly influential despite their omissions and biases. In particular, I question the conclusions of early to mid-twentieth century writers which have become canonical sources for many singers. Most notably, George Pullen Jackson framed Sacred Harp singing through the lens of early twentieth-century conceptions of race and nationality that reinforce outdated, problematic conceptions of race and music. Beginning in 1933 with *White Spirituals of the Southern Uplands*, he claimed to trace an unbroken chain from the culture of Elizabethan England through the American Colonial period and thence directly to his own era, imagining southern singers as isolated, authentic remnants of an original “Anglo-Celtic” American culture that had otherwise vanished (Jackson 1933). Furthermore, he used this viewpoint to counter claims of the originality of Negro Spirituals, proffering Sacred Harp singing as an older, more authentic form of American music, which he dubbed the “white spiritual.” Despite the primitivist and white supremacist assumptions inherent in his approach, his work formed the basis of much scholarship on Sacred Harp until the end of the twentieth century, and during that time, his viewpoint became prevalent in both internal and external accounts of Sacred Harp singing. In exploring the influence of Jackson’s work on how current participants interpret places and regions as authentic, I address the problematic assumptions at play in attempts to define what exactly constitutes the music’s “southern tradition.”

Another canonical text that has helped define many participants' understanding of the meaning of place and space for Sacred Harp is Buell Cobb's *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and its Music*. First published in 1978, the book offered a useful corrective for many of Jackson's claims, by investigating the music culture as a contemporary phenomenon practiced by modern people. Augmented with a new volume published in 2013, *Like Cords around My Heart: A Sacred Harp Memoir*, Cobb's work does much to counter the one-dimensional stereotyped southern "Uplander" that Jackson and his era constructed as the image of the Sacred Harp singer (B. E. Cobb 2014). Cobb's perspective as a former academic with personal and family ties to Sacred Harp made him an ideal writer for an audience of singers, not just scholars, and as a result, his work was readily accepted as part of the canon that many participants look to as defining Sacred Harp history and practice. Cobb counters many of Jackson's essentializing suppositions and was among the first to recognize the racial diversity within Sacred Harp's history and practice. However, as his work was produced in a very different context, when Sacred Harp was limited almost exclusively to the southeast, it has been used to reinforce an unquestioned understanding of southern exceptionalism that, I posit, has helped maintain conceptions of regional identity as an inborn and natural phenomenon, rather than a cultural construction among participants and observers of Sacred Harp.

In the past two decades, three important critical academic studies have helped create a scholarly framework for ethnographic approaches to Sacred Harp. John Bealle's *Public Worship, Private Faith*, 1997, was among the first extensive criticisms of early twentieth-century Sacred Harp scholarship, and treats the practice as a "cultural object" in addition to a music form. Bealle took a wide view of Sacred Harp's history, investigating the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century cultural needs that sparked its emergence, then following its trajectory right up to the

late-twentieth-century revival at the time of his writing. In each of these eras, he identifies a common thread of Sacred Harp as a means of individual religious expression within a group performance setting. He traces the non-sectarian approach of the book's editors up to the remarkable religious diversity of participants who were joining Sacred Harp communities in the 1990s. Bealle notes the nebulous nature of terms like "authenticity" and "tradition," and questions how southern/non-southern identities inform participants' experiences, but because of the breadth of his scope, he is unable to devote extended attention to these issues. Furthermore, his account ends prior to the emergence of Sacred Harp as a global practice. Nonetheless, as I explore these themes in much more depth, Bealle's historical account has served as an important source.

In the twenty-first century, two important works on Sacred Harp have taken an ethnographic, rather than a primarily historical approach. Sociologist Laura Clawson's *I Belong to This Band, Hallelujah!: Community, Spirituality, and Tradition Among Sacred Harp Singers* (2011) offers useful perspectives from singers in both southern and other communities—along with a cautionary tale illuminating some of the potential pitfalls for discussions of the meaning of place and space (Clawson 2011). Her work is limited by its frequent use of language that presumes an unquestioned acceptance of the South as the authentic source of Sacred Harp tradition, which she interprets as a result of family ties that bind singers across generations in close-knit communities. She further presumes a clear separation between "traditional" southern singing and Sacred Harp in other areas, which she interprets as merely emulating southern tradition with varying degrees of success. My experience with Sacred Harp in a number of geographical and cultural contexts demonstrates the limits of this approach. I interpret "southernness" as a fluid category, a malleable cultural construct that individuals can embrace—or react

against—in complex and meaningful ways. I further question the idea that Sacred Harp in the South is predicated exclusively on unbroken multigenerational ties of family participation. Instead, I recognize that many southern singers are neither members of “singing families” nor have been lifelong participants. In this study, I explore how the myth of this kind of experience forming the “southern tradition” has been expressed by and in turn fueled a variety of imaginaries of place and space.

Despite this, Clawson does offer a useful framework for an important part of my project. Her work is among the most thorough explorations of the meanings that singers associate with particular Sacred Harp “sites”—primarily churches closely associated with particular singing communities in the Southeast. I take up this project in much more detail, documenting how the choice of which sites to visit, identify with, or emulate have important ramifications for individual singers. While I disagree with her characterization of some singing locations as more “authentic” to an original Sacred Harp aesthetic than others, her work began to establish the relevance of considerations of place and space in Sacred Harp, and offers a variety of perspectives that have informed my own investigations.

Of the recent critical studies of Sacred Harp singing, the most relevant to my own project is ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller’s *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism*. Miller offers extensive consideration of the space of singings themselves, exploring how the “hollow square” arrangement of singers operates metaphorically as a social site with a panoply of diverse meanings for different participants, ranging from the communal to the spiritual (Figure 1.2). In addition, her work critically interrogates conceptions of region as they inform singers’ understanding of tradition and practice—she questions stereotypes of southern identity, while demonstrating how singers from the Southeast have learned to capitalize on those

very stereotypes within the broader music culture of Sacred Harp (K. Miller 2008). In addition, Miller offers a model of an ethnographic study that gets to the core of critical social and cultural issues without losing sight of the music itself, and how the specifics of performance practice variously counter or reinforce cultural conceptions. While Miller makes occasional reference to place and space, my extensive investigation of that realm of inquiry offers a useful counterpoint to her argument. In particular, I question much more directly the easy divisions between south/not-south, tradition/imitation, exploring how individuals are able to navigate between and amongst different singing communities, adapting their performance of both music and identity to cross these culturally constructed boundaries.



Fig. 1.2: Image illustrating the “hollow square” seating arrangement. Photograph from the Keystone Convention, Philadelphia, PA, January, 2020 (photo by the author).

This dissertation breaks new ground in the scholarship on Sacred Harp singing by exploring the geographical expansion of the music culture into new and diverse parts of the globe—and into new virtual spaces. This new reality calls for a new perspective, problematizing longstanding assumptions that singers were either traditional southerners, or revivalist others. How does singing in Poland differ from singing in Ireland or South Korea, and how does the existence of Sacred Harp in any of these places impact the experience of singers in different regions of the United States? How do Sacred Harp’s virtual spaces offer new venues for familiar practices and discourses—and how do these spaces open up entirely new forms of expression and representation?

As I address these questions, I rely not only on the sources listed above, but on a range of other models from various academic fields to inform my process. Ideas concerning place and space are prevalent in the humanities, sometimes to a point where the terms lose their meaning (often by becoming interchangeable). A substantial body of scholarship on place and space, however, will help me usefully employ these terms with focused critical intent as a means of understanding how Sacred Harp singers deal with physical and social environments. I rely on works from the field of cultural geography including Robert D. Sack’s “The Power of Place and Space” (1993), Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities* (1991), and Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974) as beginning points in a framework for interpreting the intersections of culture and space, each of which has guided my methodological approach.

In searching for deep connections between music, performance, and space, I rely on methods similar to Jeff Tilton’s *Powerhouse for God*. Rather than simply expounding on the religious themes of musical texts, Tilton actively sought out the underlying structures of and relationships between forms of music and forms of worship. In addition, he recognized the

significance of small subsets of religious groups, including families and communities, within a larger organization, which has direct parallels for the study of Sacred Harp singing. Titon offers a useful model for considering music and place in cultural context while recognizing that music cultures are not necessarily monolithic communities (Titon 1988).

My investigation of the cultural context of Sacred Harp singing draws on Beverly Patterson's method of considering factors beyond musical sound and religion in the study of a cappella singing. Patterson's book, *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches* (1995), identifies several social realms in which Primitive Baptist singing takes place. She traces the religious, social, and aesthetic context of singing, following each strand of inquiry separately, as well as exploring the margins where they overlap. Although her scope is limited to Blue Ridge area members of the Primitive Baptist church, Patterson's incisive exploration of the cultural situation of musical practices serves as a model for my investigation of a form of music whose relationship to place involves not only religious practice, but a wide variety of social practices (B. B. Patterson 1995). While Patterson and Titon's work are not directly related to Sacred Harp singing, their subject matter is connected within the broader fabric of North American hymn singing, especially in rural settings in Appalachia and the Southeast. Their methodologies not only document contemporary musical practices within these areas, but also interact with musical processes—most importantly finding and understanding the deep meanings of music for these communities.

This study takes an ethnographic approach—in order to understand the meanings and values associated with places and spaces in Sacred Harp, I have conducted interviews with a wide range of participants. A few important ethnographies in music of the Southeast act as a model for my own work: Jeff Todd Titon's *Powerhouse for God* and Beverly Bush Patterson's

Sound of the Dove both consider music in differing Southern Baptist denominations and how the music functions outside of the church in the wider (although local) community. In my interviews, I have met with singers in the Southeast as well as outlying singing communities, both in the US and abroad, while ensuring that the participant base for my study represents the diverse cultural viewpoints that are frequently omitted from accounts of Sacred Harp singing. I am grateful for the many connections and friendships that I have forged over the last seventeen years as a participant in Sacred Harp singing that have allowed me to undertake this work.

In addition to primary research through interviews, I utilize close readings of existing sources to help me understand the significance of place and space in the practice of Sacred Harp singing. Many relevant sources have not been subject to any scholarly scrutiny, including numerous articles on Sacred Harp published in newspapers and magazines, as well as posts, blog entries, and audio-visual material uploaded to social media sites by Sacred Harp singers. I also attend to audio recordings and their liner notes, exploring how representations of Sacred Harp through words, images, and recorded sounds are constructed to reinforce specific interpretations of what Sacred Harp means in particular places and spaces. Although few of these sources have been carefully considered, I demonstrate the important role they play as cultural documents.

1.5 Theorizing Imaginaries

My theoretical perspective is informed by the concept of the “imaginary.” As Claudia Strauss has critiqued, the terms “imaginary” and “imaginaries” are frequently used in the social sciences with an implicit, superficial understanding. “Imaginary” or “imagined” are often employed as stand-ins for “culture” or “cultural beliefs” with no engagement with the terms’

complexity or theoretical underpinnings (Strauss, 2006). Anderson and Taylor's usage of "imagined community" and "social imaginaries," respectively, are the most commonly cited works defining these terms; they describe them as addressing "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings," expressing the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and widely shared sense[s] of legitimacy..." (Taylor 2004, 106). While I reference these constructions of imaginaries, I rely more on Castoriadis' usage of "abstraction, reification, and homogenization" (Strauss 2006, 323). He describes the imaginary as "the capacity to see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is" (Castoriadis 1987, 127). As Claudia Strauss explains, these "imaginaries give meaning to symbols, goods, and institutions" (Strauss 2006, 324). Further, I follow Strauss' position as I move beyond abstraction in using ethnographic methods and aim to "study concrete materials and symbolic conditions...the understandings, emotions, and desires that individuals develop as they experience these conditions" (Strauss 2006, 323).

I also rely for my formulation of this concept on musicologist and early music specialist Scott Reiss, who described a "Celtic imaginary" as he grappled with questions of tradition, heritage, and notions of authenticity within the broader world of Celtic music. Reiss draws from Arjun Appadurai and his theory of "-scapes," which describes the fluid nature of human interaction on a global scale. Appadurai asserts "the image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice...The imagination has become an organized field of social practices,...and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ("individuals") and globally defined field of possibility" (Appadurai 1990). Framing the global imaginary in this way, Reiss asserts that individuals are able to claim belonging to a part of the broader Celtic community,

whether by genetic heritage (Irish, Scottish, etc. born or descent), or by simply imagining their own participation in the larger community. This idea broadens Benedict Anderson's pivotal work on imagined communities—moving beyond nationalism toward an all-encompassing and variable definition of what it means to be part of an imagined community.

Furthering the imaginary as a theoretical tool, Laura Bieger, Ramon Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz co-authored a collection of essays to explore the imaginary and transnationalism within American studies. Drawing upon numerous scholars such as Appadurai, Anderson, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jacques Lacan, and Charles Taylor, the authors push to fully realize the potential usefulness of the imaginary and its direct effect on human interaction in a transnational setting. The authors state that the imaginary is a “productive force” and that the real itself depends on the existence of the imaginary:

... the imaginary is not separate from reality, an addendum or a surplus, [or] somehow less important than the world *out there*. Rather, the real itself depends on the existence of an imaginary. We cannot understand the *reality of the real* without mediating it through the imaginary. Whatever is real is accessible to us only if it is imagined as real. It becomes real not as an individual act or as the result of an individual faculty—the imagination—but by drawing on already existing forms and patterns—imaginaries that have an important social function (Bieger, Saldivar, and Voelz 2013).

As a theoretical tool, the concept of “imaginaries” usefully informs the study of Sacred Harp because singers interpret the music and its practices not as a monolithic entity, but as an array of complex and fluid images and associations that change over time—yet, in the aggregate, form salient markers of individual and collective identities. Imaginaries are not only a conduit for remembering past experiences, but also work to create *new* experiences through performative acts including music, in which imagined places, histories, people, and sound engender a physical reality which in turn opens further venues of imagination. Accordingly, Sacred Harp participants

possess ideas about history, what “tradition” means and constitutes, and how they situate themselves within the larger, concentric Sacred Harp community—itsself a kind of broader imaginary fashioned of numerous constituent imaginaries.

The concept of the imaginary central to my study of Sacred Harp singing because it acts as a nexus for a number of theoretical constructs which I employ within my broader discussions of the social fabric of the Sacred Harp community, focusing on the “Celtic imaginary” as formulated by Reiss, and its relationship to what I describe as the “southern imaginary.”

Individuals repeatedly tell me, or tell others in open discussion, what is important to them and why they sing. These explanations, often accompanied by anecdotes, range from personal family histories to purely musical interests. Most singers in the broader, transnational community identify as being part of such a community, but each for a different reason. Some singers claim a special connection (and often allegiance) to singing communities (and singers) in the Southeast and this is often further complicated by their understanding of the meaning attached to a specific region, family, or singing style/practice within the Southeast.

Yet others focus their sense of identity more with the United States (those from Europe, for example) as an important, originating site of the singing tradition. Numerous and nuanced variants of these identities cut through the larger fabric of the Sacred Harp world—region and borders, personal history, personal identification (sexuality and gender), political affiliations, historical roots, religious identities and affiliations, singing styles, songbooks, places where people sing, etc.—all of these factors further complicate how individuals identify with and imagine themselves within the singing community. And, all these factors are intricately intertwined with imaginaries—understandings of place and space that are conceptual more than cartographic, and therefore deserving of serious scrutiny. Furthermore, the ways in which

imaginaries are conceived, represented, and expressed have very real effects on human subjects. As I explore, Celtic and southern imaginaries and the formulations of “authenticity” which they are employed to support can be put to purposes as disparate as offering Queer people access to religious spaces—or reinforcing white supremacist discourses. Accounts of Sacred Harp that use any of these individual imaginaries as their sole interpretative lens will miss the breadth of Sacred Harp’s complicated historical and contemporary meanings as experienced by diverse subjects.

1.6 Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for understanding the impact of imaginaries on Sacred Harp by interrogating representations and appropriations of Sacred Harp singing beginning in the early twentieth century. As I reveal, many imagined conceptions of “southernness,” “authenticity,” and “tradition” depend on the work of scholars, cultural critics, and musicians who brought their own preconceptions to their study of Sacred Harp—and constructed imagined conceptions of Sacred Harp in order to support their broader musical and cultural projects. Whether as an idealized, authentically American music form, a romanticized relic of the “Old South,” or as an idyllic expression of community music-making, these observers developed a discursive framework for understanding Sacred Harp singing whose influence continues into the present. My work is pioneering in investigating how this discourse is expressed not only through written accounts, but through music. I begin by critiquing the work of foundational figures such as George Pullen Jackson, Charles F. Bryan, and Donald Davidson, and then explore how their influence is manifest in a range of musical arrangements of Sacred Harp music or appropriations

of Sacred Harp “style” in musical works produced throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. While scholars have largely overlooked this body of work as inauthentic representations of Sacred Harp singing, I show how their perpetuation of early twentieth-century essentializing rhetoric has played an important role in maintaining the imaginaries that continue to define Sacred Harp.

Chapter 3 traces the impact of this discourse on the music culture of Sacred Harp singing. I shift my focus from observers to participants as I explore “southern imaginaries”—imagined constructions of the wide range of cultural realms Sacred Harp singers engage with as they grapple with what “the South” means to their music and to their identity. I begin by considering constructions of place and space as they inform singers’ experience of Sacred Harp through meaning-laden sites. These include physical places that are important numerous to participants—sites can be real places but are often imagined by singers when they are unable to be physically present in those places. Sites include regions, but also churches, cemeteries, and social spaces like singers’ homes. I then attend to broader conceptions of space, investigating the wide range of characterizations of the southeastern US that inform southern imaginaries, and how these imaginaries structure participants’ experience of Sacred Harp. Going beyond the simplistic North/South binary that most scholars have relied on, I explore how singers from both inside and outside of the Southeast imagine a multiplicity of “Souths” that reinforce their individual perspectives, asserting the authenticity of what constitutes “tradition” in a panoply of often contradictory ways. After interrogating several overarching themes, including narratives of ruralness, isolation, and “hauntedness,” I conclude by attending to the Souths that are erased in these imaginaries. As I demonstrate, Sacred Harp has been “whitewashed” through southern

imaginaries that ignore the contested histories of race in the Southeast and fail to address how histories of white supremacy are still manifest in the music culture of Sacred Harp.

In chapter 4, I apply this analytical framework to a case study of one specific Sacred Harp community—members of the Lee family and affiliated singers in Hoboken, Georgia. The Hoboken community was largely independent from the broader world of Sacred Harp singing through the twentieth century until they began participating in singings outside their area in the mid-1990s. Many outside singers saw this as a “discovery” of an allegedly long-lost, isolated group—and many interpreted their distinct practices as the most authentic form of Sacred Harp, allegedly preserved in isolation for a century or more. I unpack how the Hoboken singers have been interpreted through the lens of the southern imaginary, showing how romanticized, primitivizing characterizations of the Okefenokee region have helped mediate the meaning of Hoboken Sacred Harp within the broader community. In addition, I offer an alternate reading, exploring the unique character and of Hoboken singing through an ethnographic study that relies on the Lees’ own understanding of the history and meaning of their practices, while respecting them as active participants in the modern world.

Chapter 5 expands to a transnational focus, investigating the new presence of Sacred Harp on a global stage, while exploring a pervasive element of southern imaginaries—the presumption that Sacred Harp is intimately, even genetically linked to the music of the Celtic world. I focus specifically on the burgeoning singing community in Cork, Ireland. The “Celtic imaginary” helps elucidate the multiple reasons that singers travel in large numbers to experience Sacred Harp in Ireland—and how they interpret the music as relevant both to a Celtic country as well as a symbol of perceived Celtic heritage. Questioning why singers frequently accept without interrogation the idea that Sacred Harp is somehow “natural” for Ireland, I untangle the

conceptions of place, space, the imaginary, histories, music, and performance that all converge—like an incredibly complex Celtic knot—around the cultural meaning of Sacred Harp in Ireland. My study addresses the early twentieth-century discourse of Sacred Harp as “Anglo-Celtic” music, traces its legacy up to the present, and considers how contemporary Irish singers understand their own practice from a much more nuanced position of transatlantic cultural interflow.

The final chapter moves into uncharted territory within the Sacred Harp community by bringing the perspective of queer theory to the exploration of place and space in shape-note singing. Traditionally, Sacred Harp singing communities, especially in the US Southeast, have also been religious communities. While singings are not regular worship services always held at churches, the music is still overtly religious and, as Miller and others have documented, many singers identify as religious and specifically respect the markers of Christianity present in *The Sacred Harp* and its attendant practices, whether or not they subscribe to the theology of the song texts. However, singings are also understood to be “democratic”—that is, everyone is encouraged to be a participant with (theoretically) equal opportunity for participation, regardless of their personal background, identity, and affiliations. I investigate how individuals with a variety of diverse identities have interpreted Sacred Harp from queered perspectives and fashioned their own safe spaces within the music culture, focusing on a special “Queer Shapenote Gathering” that LGBTQ+ singers and allies held in New Orleans in 2020. Following Sarah Ahmed and others, I look at the way these spaces are “queered” or reoriented—sometimes in respect to sexuality and gender—but more broadly in respect to openness, acceptance, and belonging.

I conclude by considering how virtual spaces have played a role in this reorientation, as Sacred Harp singers have begun expanding their social practices into digital platforms including social media. This process was dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 that necessitated the widespread cancellation of in-person Sacred Harp singings. I explore this contested virtual terrain, a space that participants have queered from multiple perspectives, whether in magnifying underrepresented voices, empowering singers to address the ways in which their community has failed to reach the level of equity to which it aspires, or in building new forms of social interaction around Sacred Harp singing that navigate the meaning of “tradition” in virtual space.

CHAPTER 2: PERFORMING “TRADITIONAL”—STAGING SACRED HARP

As Charles Faulkner Bryan wrote in “Concertized Folk Music,” c. 1940, “We should diligently work to find and record all folk music about us, but when we find that material, there should be eagerly waiting, intelligent, devoted musicians who are ready to preserve that music for all times by elevating it to concert form, keeping the true spirit of the material as found but enhancing it with interesting sympathetic harmonies” (C. Bryan, n.d.). I begin by focusing on representations of Sacred Harp Singing rather than practices of Sacred Harp singers because these representations were influential in forging many of the imaginaries through which Sacred Harp singing has been constructed and practiced. Many artists and scholars followed the path Bryan described in attempting to capture and preserve the “true spirit” of Sacred Harp, while filtering it through their own musical idioms. As I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, written and recorded representations of Sacred Harp have had an enormous impact, both on outside observers and singers themselves. I go beyond simply cataloging the various attributes of how these documents represent Sacred Harp as “authentic” or “traditional,” and explore how these conceptions have been reproduced within the practices of Sacred Harp itself. As I show, much of the contemporary discourse of Sacred Harp can be traced to the work of early and mid-twentieth century musicologists, music educators, composers, and arrangers.

Arrangements of shape-note tunes, both instrumental and choral, as well as the staging of Sacred Harp singing by choirs, often engender a particular image of the music and of the place of the music in the imaginations of listeners. Drawing from Arjun Appadurai (and discussed in detail in chapter 1), musical imaginaries are part of a network of images which are reciprocated and reified between performers and listeners. Listeners hear particular musical characteristics,

often a particular trope that an arranger has used or a performance style instructed by the conductor, and it reaffirms an idea or image they may already possess of the music or place where the music originates. The use of a southern accent (which itself is not monolithic) and rhythmic foot stomping in the singing of shape-note tunes by choral groups or harmonic constructions of open intervals or pentatonicism can create or reaffirm ideas of the South (either past or present) in the mind of the listener. The common stereotype of rural southerners being uneducated and having a particular way of speaking (which can be endearing) as well as rustic living and cultural practices (music and religion) in the southern backcountry is magnified by particular choral techniques and orchestrations. This is similar to Thomas Gruning's argument that contemporary blues musicians may "perform authenticity through the audience's imaginary reconstructions of early twentieth-century black American experience" and that these resonate through "shared authenticities of experience" (Gruning c2006., 39). In some instances, Sacred Harp singers themselves have argued that even if stereotypes are being perpetuated, these performances give exposure to an otherwise unknown genre of music and music-culture. The problems of appropriation notwithstanding, staged representations of shape-note singing often play upon these tropes, sometimes to an alarming level. But how were these stereotypes put into place, especially musically, and why are they still commonplace? In this chapter I discuss numerous instrumental and choral works from opposite ends of the twentieth century (and the beginning of the twenty first) which have been important in the dissemination of Sacred Harp and early American hymnody to a general public.

Representations, and—frequently misrepresentations—of Sacred Harp and early American hymnody interests me more the longer I participate in singings. The use of shape-note tunes in art music composition predate some of the earliest staged performances, like the highly

influential Word of Mouth Chorus, by at least 40 years, both in instrumental and choral renditions. In this time frame, the general public would otherwise have no awareness of Sacred Harp or what shape-notes were, unless they happened to have a background in this style of singing, yet composers were bringing the music to large audiences, often in the guise of something distinctly American or southern, but not in such a way that they would understand contemporary practices (both musical and social) of shape-note singing.

This chapter surveys a representative sample of these works to help contextualize Sacred Harp's presence within art music and public performances. Such performances (and recordings) have had a large impact on the way many people think about Sacred Harp singing and even vocal styles of many Sacred Harp singers. So much of the back-and-forth nature of the traditional to the staged stems from early folk music collectors in the United States, culminating in the monumental work of George Pullen Jackson, but beginning with a number of similarly-minded composers and folklorists. I argue that social movements of the first half of the twentieth century generated an interest in American folk music and in general and through art and popular music created a pathway for Sacred Harp into a broader American consciousness. Composers like Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland are the pioneers of styles which would become associated with musical Americanism and I discuss their shape-note related works in this context. I then turn to Charles F. Bryan, a relatively unknown composer, whose work with George Pullen Jackson and Donald Davidson helped to usher in acceptance of this music in education and the popular imagination. I then turn to later choral works that further complicate notions of "authenticity" and appropriation.

2.1 Early Use of Folk Music in Art Music Composition

Folk music is understood by many performers and listeners as possessing an “emotional power”—a trait that stems from its perceived authentic histories, made for the common person by common people, preserved through oral transmission, and transcending class and racial boundaries (Gruning c2006). The use of so-called “folk” music within art music composition was not unique to the United States; however, in 1890 Antonin Dvořák proposed that indigenous music (African-American and Native American) should influence American composers in creating an American style (Crawford 1993, 604). While some composers drew on indigenous influences (often problematically, such as “Indianist” works), using these musics as source material was a contested topic for some (Levy 2012, 3).

By the 1920s, however, American composers began to shift their opinions as music on popular subjects gained momentum. Charles Ives agreed that Black Spirituals or Native American melodies would be useful for a composer and “reject[ed] the idea of using such melodies simply to provide an exotic sound or to achieve a distinctive American identity” (Burkholder 2004, 422). Ives frequently included pre-existing melodies he knew (often from his youth) into his compositions, which “brought into the classical tradition the vitality of American vernacular music, with all of the emotions and associations it carried” (Burkholder 2004, 425).

Numerous American composers followed similar styles, incorporating elements they deemed “American” in some way in order to create an “American” sound—what Barbara Zuck calls “musical Americanism.” Beginning in the 1920s composers “sought to make their music meaningful, and in some cases serviceable to the general public” which led the way for these so-called musical Americanisms (Zuck c1980., 10–11). Aaron Copland, probably the best recognized of such composers, commented that many of his own works were affected by Virgil

Thomson; pieces such as Thomson's *The River* convinced Copland that simplicity "could directly impact and reflect cultural values and life in mainstream America" (Tommasini 1998, 290). Although he was not the sole creator of such styles or this general movement, Aaron Copland became synonymous with an American sound, particularly through his film and stage music.

In the early 1930s, Aaron Copland became more attracted to simplicity, popular accessibility, and American identity in art music (Oja and Tick 2005, 115). This was a turn that he called "imposed simplicity" (Levin 2000, 74). Intertwined with his own political affiliations, Copland increasingly drew from folk music, from Mexican and Jewish themes to cowboy songs and American hymns. Alex Ross states that the opening section of Copland's ballet *Billy the Kid*, "The Open Prairie" (Ex. 2.1), is ubiquitous with this American (or populist in Copland's case) style—"woodwind figures in rough-hewn parallel fifths cut across an emptied-out musical space, conjuring the picture of a wagon train moving across some long, dusty valley of the West" (Ross 2007, 300–301). Such devices are common in Copland's work, like his ballet *Appalachian Spring*, where open sonorities, usually at the fifth or fourth (though quartal harmonies are also employed), conjure open landscapes and idyllic scenes. Ross further notes that "indeed, there is nothing intrinsically American about such sounds; they could just as well be used to suggest the English countryside or the Russian steppes. Still, they do create the illusion of a wide expanse, American or otherwise" (Ross 2007, 276). This style became so well known that numerous films, TV shows, commercials, ad campaigns, etc. used Copland or Copland-esque music to convey the western landscape, simpler times, rugged yet open landscapes, and "the innate goodness of small-town life" (Ross 2007, 277).

Opening scene from *Billy the Kid*

Lento maestoso

(Clarinet 1,2)

(Oboe)

(Bassoon)

Ex. 2.1: Opening section from *Billy the Kid* by Aaron Copland.

2.2 Early Influences: Folk Collectors, Anti-Urbanism, the Garden, and the WPA

Not only composers, but folk music collectors were important early promoters of finding an “authentically” American sound. Francis Child’s collections of English and Scottish ballads from the late nineteenth century and Cecil Sharp’s English and American collections in the early twentieth century were landmarks for the preservation and dispersion of traditional ballads. The work of Child heavily influenced later collectors. This era saw the formation of the American Folklore Society (1888) and subsequent state agencies, which up to the 1950s produced many collections of secular ballads, children’s songs, hymns, and any number of tunes that existed in oral traditions (Crawford c2001., 604). Richard Crawford states that “ballad collecting now moved beyond library research and theoretical speculation into fieldwork” and is reflected in the work and collections of George Pullen Jackson and John and Alan Lomax (Crawford 2001, 598). John Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs* (1910) received widespread attention when Theodore Roosevelt endorsed it, saying “you have done a work emphatically worth doing and one which should

appeal to the people of all our country.” He also commented on the song’s “ancient quality” from medieval English, which is part of the popular sentiment of placing folk songs in the past (K. H. Miller 2010, 85). Later work completed by others such as John Powell, John Jacob Niles, Annabel Morris Buchanan, and George Pullen Jackson and Charles Bryan, was also part of this movement, all publishing collections of shape-note music (among others).³ Each of these works promotes the value of American hymnody while asserting that it was largely overlooked. Their prefatory remarks assure the reader they carefully preserved the original character of the tunes while making them singable by and understandable to modern musicians and audiences. Much of this work, stemming from Child, helped promote conceptions of isolationism that was partially circulated by early folklore studies. As I explore in detail in chapter 3, such conceptions developed distinct cultural practices through self-isolation. As folklore entered a stage of professionalization in the late nineteenth century, scholars used it as a way to uncover the foundations of human society, which included evolution, art, and race. This type of work led scholars to understand rural Americans as having a type of cultural authenticity. Karl Hagstrom Miller states that Cowboy song illustrated a type of ancient [European] preservation in rural American spaces: “their physical and social isolation had enabled them to create music that spoke to a deep, fundamental “human rhythm” and truth” (K. H. Miller 2010, 86).

Among all these figures, George Pullen Jackson was the most important in the history of shape-note singing, both as a historian and collector of tunes. The growing interest in Anglo-

³ See John Powell, *Twelve Folk Hymns*, J. Fischer & Bro., 1934; Annabel Morris Buchanan, *Folk Hymns of America*, J. Fischer & Bro., 1938; Jackson and Bryan, *American Folk Music for High School and other Choral Groups*, C.C. Birchard and Company, 1947; John Jacob Niles, *The Shape Note Study Book: Selected from the Sacred Harp (1844) and the Southern Harmony (1835)*, Schirmer, 1950. For a later, similar edition see Hawley Ades, *From the Land of the Sacred Harp*, Harold Flammer, Inc., 1976.

American folk tunes from the late nineteenth century was influential in American art music composers' search for musical topics in Americana. Collections by Jackson, such as *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933) and *Down East Spirituals* (1939), were primary resources for composers like Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, and Henry Cowell, directly feeding their search for some sort of original and "authentic" American sound. Even by 1900, many such hymns were regarded as old-fashioned, originating in an early segment of American history (Jackson 1933). Yet "[these] hymns, praised as authentic American music by scholars, when referenced by numerous composers become lenses into the shifting web of American musical and national identity during the twentieth century, spilling into the opening of the following century" (Smolko 2009, 1).

Barbara Zuck also argues that the interest in American and English folk music during this time closely paralleled socialist movements and "was part of an ongoing idealization of the common man that had accompanied the leftward swing in the early 1930s... This idealization became connected more specifically with America's 'unspoiled' countryside. [There was] a fascination [of] being untainted and ruggedly 'American' (Zuck c1980., 140–41). Charles Seeger was directly involved with these ideas, particularly through his interest in folk music and work with Roosevelt's Federal Resettlement Administration and the Federal Music Project. Collecting songs on aluminum discs, his work would eventually form the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress (Mclucas 2014). Seeger encouraged composers to "discover America," stating in 1934 "If... a composer is going to sing the American people anything new... he music first get upon a common ground with them, learn their musical lingo, work with it, and show he can do for them something they want to have done and cannot do for themselves" (Levy 2012, 269).

Even more significant for shape-note singing, Seeger was closely tied with both Henry and Sidney Cowell and in 1939 gave a paper at the Southeast Folklore Society discussing contrapuntal style in these hymns and foreshadowing some of Cowell's comments about his *18 Hymn and Fuguing Tunes*. Seeger found the contrapuntal style of shape-note hymns interesting because of their development by composers in America. Using the compositional techniques as described by John G. McCurry in his *Social Harp* (1855) in Georgia, Seeger states that these were serious composers in their own right and that contemporary composers of art music would do well to learn from their American predecessors. Seeger also echoed the same ideas of cultural purity which would extend to the present day, saying "there is a rigorous, spare, disciplined beauty in the choral writing that is all the more to be prized for having been conceived in the 'backwoods' for which many professional musicians have such scorn" (Seeger 1940, 488).

Folk music collectors also paralleled changes in what it meant to be American that were tied up in national anxieties through the Great Depression. In her work on music and the creation of the American West, Beth Levy states that "the intertwining of industry and Anglo-Saxon pioneering, the religious connotations of the pastoral, and a significant confusion about the extent to which this particular "pioneer" experience could represent a broader 'American' experience" is what led composers to attempt to represent a pastoral American landscape (Levy 2012, 156). She relates many of these influences, especially the pastoral and idyllic, to the work of Leo Marx in *Machine in the Garden* (1964) and T.J. Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace* (1981). The pastoral in music (and art in general) existed well before the turn of the nineteenth century, yet composers drew from preexisting tropes of a broader American consciousness. Analyzing literary works, Marx finds repeating motifs of nature and industry and their conflicts. It is a paradigm in which progress is inevitable and needed, though machinery and industry

(which is progress) invades and displaces the natural world (read as unspoiled America).

Stemming from the time of Thomas Jefferson, Marx states that the “cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size.

Although it probably shows a farmhouse or a neat white village, the scene is usually dominated by natural objects; in the foreground a pasture, a twisting brook with cattle grazing nearby, then a clump of elms on a rise in the middle distance and beyond that, way off on the western horizon, a line of dark hills. This is the countryside of the old Republic, a chaste, uncomplicated land of rural virtue” (Marx 1964, 141).

Linking a nostalgia based on a lost landscape and a “tendency to idealize rural ways,” Marx points toward ideas rooted in early America which still persist in contemporary society (Marx 1964, 6–7). Levy states this in her work on music and the American West where progress and expansion toward the west was inevitable, needed, and ultimately nostalgia seeks to reclaim what was lost (Levy 2012, 157–59). Composers such as Copland incorporated such ideas into their works when evoking American topics, particularly landscapes; linking anti-urbanism and the pastoral, Ross states these works “evoke America in a prelapsarian state, before the loss of innocence under capitalism... Yet this prairie Eden is threatened by the westward movement of city building settlers” (Ross 2007, 276). Similarly, Lears’ *No Place of Grace* traces the anxiety over a quickly developing industrial capitalist society from 1880–1920 in which many individuals, particularly the intellectual elite of America, were “preoccupied with authentic experience as a means of revitalizing a fragmented personal identity” (Lears 1981, xvii). Such ideas persisted through the Depression era, reflected in musical works which yearn for unspoiled landscapes of the American West and “simpler times” of the South. Even many contemporary

Sacred Harp singers who live in urban spaces echo Marx with a “longing for a more natural environment” (Marx 1964, 5).

The Great Depression also had a profound effect on composers and artists alike, particularly because of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Music Project (FMP). These projects funded by the federal government were to give support to artists, musicians, composers, and writers by creating new jobs, such as orchestras and new music. Many composers, such as Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland, drew on American topics which could help in the creation of national unity. As Richard Crawford states, “the idea that folk music carried its own kind of honesty and truth...gained currency in these years. Concert-hall composers who borrowed it were interested not only in broadening the appeal of their works but in grounding them in the basic stuff of human existence” (Crawford 2001, 610). Many of these composers also aimed at writing accessible music, both for the performing musician and listening audience member, which is evident both in the musical technicality of the pieces and the spare use of dissonance (Crawford 2001, 594). As I will discuss below, however, composers had their own personal interests in creating an American style with local topics, such as Thomson’s childhood church experiences and Copland’s populist ideals and political leanings.

The earliest known use of shape-note tunes in art music is in Douglas Moore’s *Pageant of P.T. Barnum* (1924) (Zuck 1980, 148). Two movements of this five-movement suite quote a small portion of HAPPY LAND,⁴ a tune shared between shape-note and standard hymnals alike (McBride 2011, 12) (Ex. 2.2). The first movement, “I. Boyhood at Bethel,” includes a clear but partial statement of the melody but this is preceded by a rhythmic motif which echoes throughout

⁴ Tune names hereon in small caps are tune names from hymnals such as the *Southern Harmony* and *Sacred Harp*.

the movement in a sort of fanfare (Ex. 2.3). Another partial statement of the melody is heard again in the final movement, “V. Circus Parade,” and again the fanfare motif is passed around the orchestra throughout the movement. It is unclear if HAPPY LAND was familiar to Barnum, though possible as he describes growing up in church in Bethel, Connecticut. Initially stated in “Boyhood at Bethel,” the hymn returns again in “Circus Parade” possibly commenting on Barnum’s contentious work as a newspaper editor in which he often lambasted local clergy (Barnum 1855).

HAPPY LAND. 6, 4, 7, 4. *Leonard P. Breedlove.*

1. There is a happy land, Far, far a - way, } Oh how they sweetly sing, Worthy is our Saviour king, Loud let his praises ring, Praise, praise for aye,
Where saints in glory stand, Bright, bright as day, }

2. Come to the happy land, Come, come a - way, } Oh we shall happy be, When from sin and sorrow free, Lord, we shall live with thee, Blest, blest for aye.
Why will you doubting stand, Why yet de-lay, }

3. Bright in that happy land, Beams every eye, } Then shall his kingdom come, Saints shall share a glorious home, And bright above the sun, We reign for aye.
Kept by a father's hand, Love cannot die, }

Ex. 2.2: HAPPY LAND. In the *Sacred Harp*, 1860 (public domain).

Pageant of P.T. Barnum
No 1. Boyhood at Bethel

(Flutes)

(Clarinets I, II)

(Horn I, II)

Ex. 2.3: Statement of Happy Land in Douglas Moore’s *Pageant of P.T. Barnum*, “I. Boyhood at Bethel” (public domain).

Though Moore's composition is significant as the first instance of shape-note and related hymnody in American art music, larger complete works soon followed. In 1927 Charles Faulkner Bryan sketched his *Symphony I* which later became the *White Spiritual Symphony* (1940) and included several of the so-called "white spirituals" as designated by George Pullen Jackson (Charles T. Priest 2013). Bryan's work, as I will discuss later, never became part of the American art music canon, but his work in music education and folklore with Jackson had a major impact in the revival of these hymn tunes in the broader American consciousness. The best-known of the early works that gained more attention, however, is by far Virgil Thomson's *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* (1928) which moved toward newer styles of musical Americanism (Zuck 1980, 148). Many works quoting or imagining early sacred Americana by other composers followed,⁵ but I will begin with Thomson, whose work contributed to popularizing this music for mass audiences and, along with Charles F. Bryan, introduced it into music education curricula.

2.3 Virgil Thomson

Virgil Thomson's (1896-1989) output was stylistically diverse and often drew from hymnbooks and popular song reflecting his upbringing in a Baptist church in Missouri where his father was a deacon (Tommasini 1998, 29). Being raised in the church, popular Sunday School tunes such as "Jesus Love Me" were an easy source for Thomson's composition, yet the older style shape-note tunes of *The Southern Harmony* were found by a different course. Shape-note music was not pervasive in Thomson's oeuvre, yet his *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* and music for the film *The River* (which uses some material from the former) speak to an interest in church

⁵ A small and incomplete list includes: William Schuman; Ernst Bacon; Samuel Barber; William Duckworth.

hymns, particularly those which Joanna Smolko says are from his “deep-rooted nostalgia for an imagined Antebellum South” (Smolko 2009, 16). Thomson’s romanticization of the South was evident in his own words:

My mother’s sister Aunt Lillie Post could play, with all their pearly runs intact, variations on “Old Black Joe” and “Listen to the Mocking Bird.”... She evoked a nostalgia that I could know to have some connection with the prewar South. ...These souvenirs of an earlier Kentucky...had over me a power so intense that...I could almost not bear for it either to go on or to stop (Thomson 1966, 13–14).

Naturally, in a place as Yankee-versus-Rebel conscious as Kansas City, I kept mostly to myself what nostalgia I may have felt for a way of life I had not known anyway and which certainly had never existed in quite the way that anybody still remembered it (Thomson 1966, 20).

Thomson also stated that “when you reach down into your subconscious, you get certain things...When I reach down I get Southern hymns” (Rockwell 1977, 423). Hymns were a powerful signifier for Thomson which recalled his past, perhaps reconciling his contentious relationship with the church, as well as creating the imagined South which he had not been a part of.

Written from 1926–1928 but not premiering until 1945, *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* set a precedent for hymn tunes entering the realm of art music composition. (Tommasini 1998, 154). Comprised of four movements, the symphony uses “How Firm a Foundation” (the tune BELLEVUE), “Jesus Loves Me,” and bits of another folk tune, though not a hymn, “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” as thematic material (Tommasini 1998, 29). Like “Amazing Grace (NEW BRITAIN),” “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” (CORONATION), and “What Wondrous Love is This” (WONDROUS LOVE), “How Firm a Foundation” is one of the most ubiquitous of the early American tunes; its melody is comprised of a gapped scale harkening to the earlier sound of pre-gospel music in the mid nineteenth century. Thomson interweaves the tune with JESUS LOVES ME

in various ways, but his references to early American hymnody, particularly four-part harmony and the use of parallel fifths, clearly illustrate the earlier sound that the piece is imagining. Gapped scales, parallel fifths, harmonization at the fifth rather than the third, melodic (rather than completely functional) harmony across voice parts are hallmarks of the earlier American style, elements that George Pullen Jackson eventually would equate with European church music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Incorporating these elements into his compositions, Thomson precedes some of Aaron Copland's sound, which would be used to represent unscathed landscapes of the West. Writing in 1929, Paul Rosenfeld concluded that the Symphony and Thomson's variations for organ based on hymn tunes "have a primitive naivete...the symphony attains the quaintness of a Currier and Ives print. The style is angular and archaic with a distinct quality, a mixture of the severe, homely and delicate. Indeed, the symphony is pervaded by a mysterious feel of the American soil and past" (Rosenfeld 1929, 99).

The opening segments of *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* echo styles that are more often associated with Copland and anticipate his populist style—sparse orchestrations that reveal "open space" and wide expanses (Ross 2007, 283). Two horns plaintively introduce the work with open fifths, are broken by brooding octaves in the lower strings, and two flutes echo the fifths before harmonizing at the sixth before diverging. From there, various groups of instruments break further into pairs (such as bassoons, oboes, etc.) as motives of the main theme of "How Firm a Foundation" are presented. The strings present the first half of the hymn in a four-part harmonization, but the winds break this in a bitonal shift, giving a sense of tension which pervades other parts of the symphony. The symphony then moves in so many directions that many scholars puzzle over its collage-like nature, thinking of it as pastiche influenced by Satie and Stravinsky (Gann 2019). Still, musical Americanisms which eventually would become

synonymous with composers such as Copland and Ives, like open harmonies to represent space, the sound of military or fife bands, and the “hollow” sound of many early American hymn tunes for their plaintive nature, are found throughout Thomson’s symphony. Whether he created these tropes is unclear, but his particular sound reflects the growing interest in American topics and an American sound, whatever that would come to be.

While *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* did not receive a fully orchestrated premiere until much later, Thomson’s music for the WPA film *The River* (1938) incorporated some of the same material from the symphony. This time, however, shape-note tunes and a few popular tunes were at the forefront to illustrate the journey of the Mississippi river, both naturally and historically, through human intervention over several hundred years. After writing music for the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration program film *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Thomson wrote *The River*, both directed by Pare Lorentz. *The River*, later adapted as an orchestral suite, concentrated on the Mississippi River: “the devastation brought by unchecked cotton cultivation, reckless timber cutting, the abuse of land, the building of cities on river banks...depict[s] the misery of sharecroppers, the wreckage of punishing floods...[and] shows what the Roosevelt administration was doing about it” (Tommasini 1998, 284). Initially planning to resign from the Resettlement Administration, Lorentz saw the opportunity for the film as “terrific propaganda for New Deal programs that required constant promotion to a recalcitrant Congress” (Tommasini 1998, 284). It was fitting that Thomson used shape-note hymns in his score because they give a religious underpinning to a government project of alleviating poverty; a practice once fulfilled through missionary work by religious communities (Smolko 2009, 7).

For Thomson, *The River* needed to evoke natural settings—“Its landscape of streams and forest was pastoral, static. Its historical narrative covered a century, its geographic perspective

half the continent” (Tommasini 1998, 285). Certainly his compositional style was well-suited here, as Tomassini notes that Thomson’s “music aims to achieve a radical simplicity...sound[ing] both simple...direct and clear” (“Thomson, Virgil | Grove Music” n.d.). Thomson even stated himself that “my music offered one approach to simplification; and my employment of folk-style tunes was, as Copland was to write me later about *The River*, a lesson in how to treat Americana” (Crawford 2001, 583). An earlier encounter with Jackson’s 1933 *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* led him to seek out a copy of the *Southern Harmony* (1835) by William Walker of Spartanburg, South Carolina. Thomson wrote to Jackson for resources and eventually the two met in New York, with Jackson playing “authentic” recordings of shape-note singing for him. Thomson asked his partner Maurice Grosser, who was in Tennessee painting, to look for shape-note books and he “found a plowing clergyman willing to lend, since it was ‘for educational purposes,’ his precious copy of the century-old *Southern Harmony*.” Maurice was put on the federal payroll to transcribe all tunes and words that Thomson did not already have in his copy of *The Sacred Harp* (Thomson 2016, 148–49). Smolko even notes that the “authenticity [of the hymns] lent legitimacy to his musical exploration of the south” and that Grosser’s ways of “obtaining an ancient, tattered hymnal from a man plowing his fields out back in the hills of Tennessee adds to the aura of authenticity surrounding the hymnal (Smolko 2009, 18).

Thomson used many tunes he heard as a child in *The River*:

- *How Firm a Foundation, or Convention* (BELLEVUE)
- *My Shepherd Will Supply My Need* (RESIGNATION)
- *Rose of Alabama, or Carry me Back to Old Virginny*
- *What Solemn Sound the Ear Invades, or Death of Washington* (MOUNT VERNON)
- *Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*

- *The Eagles They Fly High in Mobile, or Captain Kyd* (CAPTAIN KIDD)
- *When Gabriel's Awful Trump Shall Sound* (MISSISSIPPI)
- *Go Tell Aunt Rhody* (SWEET AFFLICTION)
- *Yes, Jesus Loves Me*
- *There's Not a Friend Like Lowly Jesus* (Smolko 2009, 24).

The tune which opens and closes *The River*, acting as a pillar, is interestingly the main theme of *Symphony on a Hymn Tune*, “How Firm a Foundation.” The opening measures of *The River* use the exact same material which introduces the third movement of the symphony, with only timbral and dynamic changes. In this first movement of the orchestral suite, subtitled “The Old South,” multiple tunes are interwoven but the two major pentatonic tunes BELLEVUE and RESIGNATION, are heard first. They present the undisturbed simplicity of the land and source of the Mississippi River in the film. Transition material for RESIGNATION moves to the minor mode with a solo for the English horn, echoing in some ways the famous solo from Dvořák’s Symphony No. 9 (“From the New World”). Smolko states that the development of this particular tune is significant, as Thomson seeks to cultivate it to reflect its origin as a “white spiritual” stemming from George Pullen Jackson (Smolko 2009, 31). As I will detail later, Charles Bryan’s treatment of the English horn in his *White Spiritual Symphony* also bears a striking resemblance to the effect cast by Dvořák. From here the film moves to human intersections with the river itself and incorporates more popular tunes, such as “Rose of Alabama,” replete with scoring for a banjo. Less pastiche and much more evocative of the narrative of the film, the tunes used in *The River* illustrate an undisturbed American landscape which has been rerouted and ravaged by industrial progress, as stated by Marx.

As the river flows from its origins, the narration, with its cadenced flow described by Tommasini as having “incantatory poetic power,” follows a route of brilliant and wild landscapes whose slow erosion, caused by human intervention and deforestation, has led to catastrophic disasters (Tommasini 1998, 247). A brief period of separated snare drum rolls and bugle-like trumpet fanfares with text visuals of Robert E. Lee’s *General Order No. 9* from 1865 is accompanied by a plaintive setting of MOUNT VERNON, one of the few tunes of the shape-note repository with a patriotic subject. This brief section illustrates not only the impending natural destruction (if the viewer wasn’t already aware, especially from advertising posters of the film), but also the history of human conflict which interacts with the Mississippi. The tune is presented nearly as it is found in *The Southern Harmony*, stated simply with woodwinds and strings, and solo oboe, English horn, and bassoon concluding its fuguing section, as the narrator states “we fought a war and kept the West bank of the river free of slavery forever. But we left the old South impoverished and stricken. Doubly stricken, because, beside the tragedy of war, already the frenzied cotton cultivation of a quarter of a century had taken toll of the land. We minded the soil for cotton until it would yield no more, and then moved west. We fought a war, but there was a double tragedy—the tragedy of land twice impoverished” (Lorentz 1938).

As scenes progress and destruction is more and more evident, the natural setting is once again represented by a hymn tune, but this time as destruction and erosion are most evident. In section three, subtitled “Soil Erosion and Floods,” images of clearcut forests in dense fog are slowly sprinkled with rain, which eventually leads to mudslides and heavy flooding. Accompanying the scene is an initial eight pulses of the timpani on F-sharp before the English horn presents the first half of the tune MISSISSIPPI from the *Southern Harmony*. The oboe enters, continuing the melody with a very brief harmonization with the English horn until both are

playing a perfect fifth apart. Next, a bassoon enters an octave below the English horn and continues the parallel texture, all while the timpani gives its steady beat. Eventually the strings and other instruments enter as Thomson disturbs the harmony of the original shape-note tune with dissonance and canon effects. Whether Thomson chose this tune ironically is not clear; however, the hymn text (though not apparent in the orchestral music) seems fitting:

*When Gabriel's awful trump shall sound,
And rend the rocks, convulse the ground,
And give to time her utmost bound,
Ye dead, arise to judgment;
See lightnings flash and thunders roll,
See earth wrapped up like parchment scroll;
Comets blaze,
Sinners raise,
Dread amaze,
Horrors seize
The guilty sons of Adam's race,
Unsaved from sin by Jesus.⁶*

Another important point about this particular junction of music and image comes from Indianist tropes. Native Americans are not explicitly named or discussed in *The River*, but the pulse of the timpani and use of parallel fifths is easily understood as representing Indian-ness. Like many composers before him, Thomson could have easily drawn upon these tropes, which could help solidify the image of the pure landscape being ravaged by war and disaster. Linking natural purity to a cultural authenticity, the landscape has been broken and decimated in the film, suggesting the destruction of the “authentic” cultures that it housed.

The film progresses through optimism, however, as new ways of farming and land management (technology) are used to reshape the landscape and return nature to a state of

⁶ Text from Ely's *Baltimore Collection*, 1792 and music by Bradshaw, 1820.

balance and order. As the film closes with an optimism for American progress through the TVA, “How Firm a Foundation” again returns, representing a restoration, of sorts, of nature. The initial bitonal dissonance heard in this setting, however, falls directly when large dams of the WPA are shown, which seems to reflect ideas of technology and change; both the plaintive nature of the original hymn tune and the bitonal dissonance relate an intertwining of tradition and progress, nature and culture.

2.4 Henry Cowell

Thomson consciously and intentionally included shape-note music in recognizable forms in his music both to evoke Americana and to capture the nostalgia of his childhood. Composers such as Henry Cowell, however, worked in a different vein to create a newer sound (although simplicity was still at the forefront) based on the genre of fuguing tunes. Before the 1930s, Cowell “explored approaches to composition that owed little either to the cosmopolitan idea of stylistic evolution or the trend toward populist outreach,” but during his time of incarceration (1936–40) and after his marriage to Sidney Robertston in 1941, he increasingly drew upon Irish and American folk music as models (Crawford 2001, 594–95). Cowell wrote numerous “Hymn and Fuguing Tunes” pieces between 1944–1964 that were eventually numbered in a set of 18, although some were never finished (“Cowell, Henry | Grove Music” n.d.). Each work in the set of 18 is for a diverse set of instruments, from solo organ, strings, trombone and piano, or saxophone duet, to name a few, and traces of this style are also found in his other larger works (Shirley 2013, 107). Cowell did not use pre-existing tunes like Thomson and others; instead he

drew upon the styles of early American hymns (hymns and fuguing tunes) to create an updated genre. As he put it:

(This work) is written in a manner which is frankly influenced by the early American style of Billings and Walker. However, the early style is not exactly imitated, nor are any of the tunes and melodies taken from these early masters. Rather, I asked myself the question, What would have happened in America if this fine, serious early style had developed? [This work] which uses old modes [and] open chords...is a modern version of this old style (Shirley 2013, 96).

Developing the genre of the fuguing tune was Cowell's goal with these pieces, though he took many elements from the existing body of early American hymnody, particularly the modes (mainly Dorian) as well as a direct sense of rhythm, using basic meters, homophonic texture, and harmonies based on triads, open fifths, and avoiding harmonizing effects of ninth- and seventh-chords (Shirley 2013, 100). While Cowell did not directly quote any tunes, fleeting glimpses seem to come through, particularly Billing's "When Jesus Wept" (No. 14 for organ) and WONDROUS LOVE (No. 16) from *The Southern Harmony*.

Cowell was initially introduced to the corpus of early American hymnody in *The Southern Harmony* by his wife Sidney in 1941, in which the music recalled impressions of hearing hymn singing from his childhood in Oklahoma (Shirley 2013, 97). Sidney Robertson Cowell was herself well-acquainted with shape-note singing—in 1950 she and Sam Eskin, working with Moses Asch with Smithsonian Folkways, recorded a group of Old Harp singers⁷ in east Tennessee. The material was not intended to be released, but at the suggestion of either Asch

⁷ "Old Harp" singing is a tradition related to Sacred Harp singing. Only practiced in areas of east Tennessee, Swan's *New Harp of Columbia* (1867) uses a seven-shape system although the hymnal has many of the same tunes as *The Sacred Harp*, *Southern Harmony*, and *Christian Harmony*. Singers follow many of the same practices as Sacred Harp singers—annual singings, singing the shapes before the words, and have a history of singing schools in the area. There is a considerable overlap between Old Harp singers and the broader shape-note singing community, though most Old Harp singers in east Tennessee tend to only attend their local singings.

or Henry it became the only Folkways recording (or any other for that matter) to include Old Harp singing before the folk revivals of the 1970s (Carlin 2008, 90–91). Sidney’s own impression of the singing expressed a view that many folklorists held (and indeed one that many listeners echo even in contemporary times):

They were wonderful because they sang so wonderfully out of tune. Sally Adams was the lead, the most vociferous of the lot. You know, they sing very loud, with a trotting rhythm, all very intent, and they double up the system [referring to the doubling of voice parts]...They sing so ardently. And Sally would stand in front and yell into the microphone; I had such a time getting her to stand away from the microphone (Carlin 2008, 90).

While Henry Cowell never wrote about an interest in the actual singers of shape-note music, it is clear that his interest in the music largely stems from his wife’s influence. Cowell stated that he was not “consciously concerned with an American flavour” in his music yet his “interests have led...towards having some such flavours in [his] music.” This, of course, referred to his great interest in broader musical influences, namely drawing upon elements of early-American hymnody, European style, and more contemporary compositional styles of the 1940s (Cowell 1955, 7–8).

Cowell’s comments on his *Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 3*, however, clearly place these works in the larger discourse of the growing fascination with shape-note music and the supposed pristine and rural America (and South) that it came to represent:

The fuguing tune that follows...was borrowed from southern revival meetings rather than New England anthems; it adopts the dance rhythms that have been taken over by the big singing gatherings in the south...Syncopated tunes tumble over and through each other in a kind of merry polyphonic scramble; they are pentatonic, like so much of the traditional music of British origin in our southern mountains (Shirley 2013, 104).

Cowell stands out amongst his contemporaries who were using shape-note hymns in their compositions, yet the style of his *Hymn and Fuguing Tunes* is unmistakably American in sound

by following much of the same ideology as his peers. Virgil Thomson stated of *Hymn and Fuguing Tune No. 2* that it is “an extended and songful development in the diatonic modal manner practiced by our American back-country forefathers. It sings; it soars, it leaps with joy” (Shirley 2013, 102).

2.5 Aaron Copland

Thomson and Cowell’s works set a precedent for using shape-note hymns in art music compositions and particularly in drawing out and intertwining musical Americanisms. Many other composers used shape-note hymns arranged in varying styles. From Samuel Barber’s plaintive *Wondrous Love: Variations on a Shape Note Hymn* (1958), which echoes Cowell, to more dissonant works like Ernst Bacon’s “The Sacred Harp,” from the short collection *Maple Sugaring* (1955); William Duckworth’s minimalist choral suit *Southern Harmony* (1980–81); and Alice Parker’s opera *Singers Glen* (1978); composers evoke either the plaintive quality of the tunes or the rural settings where the tunes were understood to live.⁸

The most widely known of these arrangements is Aaron Copland’s *Zion’s Walls*. Copland borrowed the tune from John G. McCurry’s *Social Harp* (1855), though he discovered the melody in George Pullen Jackson’s *Down East Spirituals* (1939) (Copland 1954). Originally part of *Old American Songs (Set Two)* and later reworked in *The Tender Land*, Copland altered the original text, changing “Come join us in singing the praises of Jesus” to “Come join us in singing the praises of Zion,” reflecting his own Jewish identity and political affiliations (Smolko 2009,

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the usage of shape-note hymns by American composers see Joanna Ruth Smolko (2009), *Reshaping American Music: The Quotation of Shape-note Hymns by Twentieth-century Composers*, PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.

52). Like much of Copland's "American"-sounding works, *Zion's Walls* evokes imagery of idyllic country settings by using the original pentatonic melody (juxtaposed with a newly written countermelody) and using a text reflecting both the earlier religious communities that the song stems from and a newly imagined socialist community in which everyone joyously participates:

*Come, fathers and mothers, Come, sisters and brothers,
Come, join us in singing the praises of Zion;
O, fathers don't you feel determined,
To meet within the walls of Zion.
We'll shout and go round, We'll shout and go round,
We'll shout and go round the walls of Zion* (Ex. 2.4)

Zion's Walls

Come fa - thers and mo - thers, Come sis - ters and bro - thers, Come join us in

Come fa - thers and mo - thers come, Sis - ters and bro - thers com, Join us in sing - ing the prai - ses of Zi - on, — that prais - es of Zi - on. —

Ex. 2.4: "Zion's Walls" by Aaron Copland. This excerpt shows the original melody from the *Social Harp* paired with a new countermelody by Copland.

Zion's Walls, in addition to Alice Parker's *Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal*, is by far the most widely-known and performed arrangement of shape-note hymns. It is a choral standard when programming Copland and its popularity has generated many new arrangements that are clearly influenced by his original. The tune's obscurity as a shape-note hymn is often overlooked, however, and is frequently equated with "Simple Gifts" from *Appalachian Spring* and mistaken for a Shaker tune. No written records or oral accounts suggest that Copland ever experienced a Sacred Harp singing in person, and likely only knew the tunes from printed sources. It is unlikely

that Copland heard it in a recording, either, as the tune “Zion’s Walls” was not included in *The Sacred Harp*, but a less prominent tunebook called *The Social Harp*, which had not been actively used in singings for decades.

The arranging of shape-note hymns by these composers and others points towards the search for something that was idiomatically American. From Cowell’s extension of early American styles, Thomson’s nostalgic interpretations, or Copland’s reflection of social order, shape-note hymns were imbued with an authenticity and nostalgia that many composers were searching for to represent American landscapes and ideals. As Thomas Gruning explains, “Nostalgia for an imaged past has long held a central role in folk music discourses.” This includes a “sense of longing for the imagined rural homestead, the simplicity of a preindustrial lifestyle, and the freedom to wander the open prairies of America unfettered by the constraints of twentieth-century modernity...” (Gruning c2006., 28). George Pullen Jackson’s colleague, Charles Bryan, would imbue his artistic and educational work with the same sentiments argued by Gruning in order to repatriate shape-notes tunes into the American consciousness.

2.6 Charles F. Bryan and American Folksong

Charles Faulkner Bryan (1911-1955) is a relatively unknown composer, though his work in music education, along with George Pullen Jackson, increased awareness of American folk music. Although Bryan and his music are not recognized as widely as his contemporaries who were working with similar themes, he intersects more closely with the shape-note singing community, largely because of his location and upbringing. I discuss only his larger works which use shape-note tunes—*White Spirituals* (1940) and *Singin’ Billy: A Folk Opera* (1952)—their

significance within the broader context of Americanist compositions, relation to Southern Agrarian thought, imagined place-making in the “old” South, and the connections that he and his colleagues made with Sacred Harp singers that still persist.

Originally from McMinnville, TN, Bryan’s earliest musical influences were mostly church-related, including piano lessons, and continuing with studies at the Nashville Conservatory (1930–34), Peabody College (1939–40), and Yale (1945–46), the latter where he studied briefly with Paul Hindemith (Priest 2008, 19–36). After the conservatory he held teaching positions at the Polytechnic Institute (1935–39) (now Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville), Peabody College (1939–40, 1947–52) (now part of Vanderbilt University in Nashville), and Indian Spring School (1952–55) in Pelham, Alabama (Priest 2008, 28–44). Bryan’s work as an educator and composer reflected his interest in American folk music, particularly that of his home region along the Cumberland plateau. Charles Priest notes that he used regional tunes, often including shape-note hymns, to preserve “a rapidly disappearing cultural repertory through...incorporation into large-scale art forms” and to disseminate the “material to a broader public with the intent of increasing appreciation of [the] indigenous traditions” (Priest 2008, 2–3). His *White Spiritual Symphony* and *Singin’ Billy: A Folk Opera* introduced the so-called “folk hymns” from the research of George Pullen Jackson to a wider audience, which created a space where listeners could experience something “authentic” though they were separated from their original contexts (Priest 2008, 198).

In the early 1940s Bryan became director of the Tennessee Music Project (part of the Works Progress Administration), supervising state auditions and inventories and interviewing musicians for WPA projects that included organizing a training institute for WPA music teachers in Tennessee (Livingston 2003, 46–47). With encouragement from Irving Wolfe at Peabody

College for Teachers and George Pullen Jackson at Vanderbilt, Bryan was no doubt important for the incorporation of folk music, particularly local music, into public school music curricula. Bryan and Jackson alike gave numerous talks and papers aimed at validating American folk tunes for art music composition and public school teaching.

Jackson and Bryan initially met through the Tennessee Folklore Society around 1935. After Bryan moved to Nashville in 1939 they were able to collaborate more frequently (Livingston 2003, 72–73). Letters between the two show their admiration for one another's work—Bryan's corpus of shape-note arrangements owed much to that of Jackson, from the naming of the *White Spiritual Symphony* (a term, though problematic, championed by Jackson), the collaborative project *American Folk Music for High School*, discussions about *Singin' Billy*, and their tireless work as educators who gave papers at conferences and meetings, including those of the Tennessee Folklore Society and Tennessee Music Educators. Their work together was so important to Bryan that he dedicated his last orchestral work to Jackson, *Threnody to George Pullen Jackson*, though it remained unfinished at Bryan's death (Livingston 2003, 156).

Jackson and Bryan collaborated on two collections of American folk music—*Sing, Brothers, Sing* (1945/1951) and *American Folk Music for High School and other Choral Groups* (1947), the latter being successfully published.⁹ Both compilations have piano accompaniments by Bryan and feature secular and sacred (shape-note) tunes. Bryan's work of arranging and collecting toggles between art and scholarship, in ways paralleling Virgil Thomson's works and collections like those of Jackson or Annabel Morris Buchanan. He did not work exclusively with

⁹ Livingston cites *Sing, Brothers, Sing* as 1951 although the University of Tennessee lists it as 1945 <https://digital.lib.utk.edu/collections/islandora/object/volvoices%3A11739>.

composition or with preservation but incorporated traditional music into his compositions and worked to educate the public about this music in hopes that it would survive.

Bryan's earliest influence in using folk music in his artistic endeavors was Lucien L. and Flora Lassiter McDowell's *Songs of the Old Camp Ground: Genuine Religious Folk Songs of the Tennessee Hill Country* (1937). Numerous songs from this volume are noted in the front of Bryan's 1936 copy of the *Original Sacred Harp*, several of which he would later arrange.¹⁰ The tunes from this collection were the initial source material for *White Spirituals Symphony*, although Bryan was certainly already familiar with them previously (Livingston 2003, 102).

In a paper entitled "The White Spiritual Comes to the Concert Hall," Bryan articulated three reasons for using "white spirituals" as thematic material in compositions: a "wide range of emotional expression," "the ease with which...themes can be developed," and the their "innate simplicity and freedom from unessentials," meaning "folk hymns offer the composer bed-rock material free from embellishments" (C. F. Bryan n.d.). In the broader sense he wanted to preserve "rapidly disappearing cultural repertory through...incorporation into large-scale art music forms" and to disseminate the "material to a broader public with intent of increasing appreciation of these indigenous traditions" (Priest 2008, 2–3). These ideologies are present in most of his work, whether directly quoting traditional tunes or writing new themes in the so-called folk style. I examine only two works in detail with relation to shape-note music, though the tunes (or original work in the shape-note style) are scattered throughout many of his works.

¹⁰ Bryan writes in his *Sacred Harp*: "Songs of the Old Camp- 10-33-38-54 59-62 65-67-68." All of these numbers correspond to pages of tunes within McDowell's book which are also in the *Sacred Harp* (one difference being page 38 "The Promised Land" which is not in the *Sacred Harp*, but is a tune he arranged).

White Spiritual Symphony (1940) was Bryan's earliest work to incorporate shape-note music. Using the so-called "white spirituals" as designated by George Pullen Jackson,¹¹ the symphonic work was submitted as a master's thesis at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville in 1940 and the second movement was premiered in Knoxville, TN in 1942 by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra (Livingston 2003, 99–101). There is no known performance of the complete work nor a score of the edited second movement, which Bryan edited with suggestions from Eugene Goossens, Cincinnati's conductor (Priest 2008, 96). Bryan only cited five tunes in the work, but six tunes, all from *Songs of the Old Campground*, are part of the symphony (Priest 2008, 86). While Bryan cites the McDowells as his source, it's clear that the work of Jackson is also present, as the term "white spiritual" was coined by Jackson (they also first met in 1935). Each tune can also be found in Jackson's published collections.¹²

- "Going Over Jordan" (POOR WAYFARING STRANGER)
- "Amazing Grace" (NEW BRITAIN)
- "I Have a Mother in the Promised Land"
- "I Will Arise and Go to Jesus" (RESTORATION)
- "I Believe in Being Ready"
- "I Belong to that Band" (JESTER)

The symphony follows the standard three-movement fast-slow-fast layout, although individual movements vary the traditional sonata-allegro form and bipartite structures. Bryan stated that "the form of the composition is free, and the harmonic structure modal" because "the

¹¹ Jackson's racialized language reflects his view of "Anglo-Celtic" music predating African American spirituals. I discuss this in detail in chapter 3.

¹² With the exception of "I have a mother in the Promised Land" and "I believe in being ready," these tunes are in the *Sacred Harp* songbook and are well-known to Sacred Harp singers.

nature of the themes requires this treatment” (Priest 2008, 86). He treats harmonizations similar to those of Virgil Thomson (*The River*) and Aaron Copland (*Appalachian Spring* and *Buckaroo Holiday*), employing fourths, fifths, sixths, and ninths. He also departs from his contemporaries composing in the same idiom by employing passages of minor pentatonicism (Ex. 2.5), dissonance (Ex. 2.6, 2.7), and surprising whole-tone passages (Ex. 2.8). A small portion of melodic material from sketches of his unfinished *Symphony No. 1* (1927) become countermelodic material in the first movement.

White Spiritual Symphony

Movement 1 (p. 1)

(Fl., Cl., Vln. 1)

(Trpt., Vla.)

(Hns., Vln. 2)

(Cel.)

(Trmbn.)

(Bass)

Ex. 2.5: Opening measures of Charles Bryan’s *White Spiritual Symphony* illustrating pentatonicism.

White Spiritual Symphony

Movement 1 (pp. 32-33)

Excerpt from Movement 1 (pp. 32-33) of Charles Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony*. The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves: (Trumpet), (Horns), (Harp), and (Basses). The music is characterized by dissonance and a whole-ton passage.

Ex. 2.6: Excerpt from Charles Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony* (first movement) illustrating dissonance. Also note the whole-ton passage.

White Spiritual Symphony

Movement 2 (pp. 1-5)

Excerpt from Movement 2 (pp. 1-5) of Charles Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony*. The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves: (Horn), (Strings), (Harp), and (Strings). The music is characterized by dissonance and a whole-ton passage. The English horn melody in the second line presents the tune WAYFARING STRANGER.

Ex. 2.7: Excerpt from Charles Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony* (second movement) illustrating dissonance. The English horn melody in the second line presents the tune WAYFARING STRANGER.

White Spiritual Symphony

Movement 1 (pp. 25-28)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for Movement 1 of Charles Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony*. The first system features a treble clef staff for Flutes and Clarinets, and a bass clef staff for Horns, both in 3/4 time. The second system shows a treble clef staff for Oboe and a bass clef staff for Clarinets, with a key signature change to one flat and a time signature change to 4/4. The third system consists of a single treble clef staff for Strings, returning to 3/4 time. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings, illustrating the piece's style.

Ex. 2.8: Excerpts from Charles Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony* (first movement) illustrating extending whole-tone passages which are partial motives from hymn tunes.

Charles Priest notes that two folk music styles are found in *White Spiritual Symphony*, both relating to Bryan's interest in preserving authentic performance practices in his arranging. The second movement uses the familiar "Amazing Grace" tune played by the first violins and sparsely accompanied by basses and the harp. The melody is decorated with portamentos, passing tones and neighboring tones, with eighth and quarter rests breaking the flow. Priest claims that Bryan "effectively writes into the score an imitation of rural southern singing style in which similar ornaments are improvised," a way of singing that Charles Wolfe calls "snaking"

(Priest 2008, 99). Priest also cites from Wolfe that a “sudden melodic stop, often on an upward melodic interval,” common in ballad-style singing and frequently called “feathering,” is present here (Charles Thomas Priest 2008, 107–8), (Ex. 2.9).

White Spiritual Symphony



Ex. 2.9: “Amazing Grace” melody from Charles Bryan’s *White Spiritual Symphony*. Excerpt features written stops which Charles Priests describes as an effect similar to “feathering.”

In the third movement Bryan uses “I belong to that band,” commonly known as JESTER by Sacred Harp singers. It begins with the bassoon accompanied by droning strings before higher voices enter (flute, horns, strings), which Priest believes reflects the performance practice of lined hymns that McDowell heard and documented in his *Songs of the Old Campground* (Priest 2013, 18). However, this does not necessarily indicate that Bryan was trying to imitate lining out, a type of heterophonic call and response singing. Bryan’s orchestration looks more imitative than heterophonic. A handwritten note above the bassoon entrance at the presto marking in Bryan’s score indicates “this is an old shouting song” and “should be played with both reverence and humor which this register of bassoon has.” With a tempo of half-note=126 and the articulation

markings in the “humorous” bassoon part, the long drawn out strains of lined hymns do not seem congruous with his arrangement. Rather, the bounce of JESTER paired with “I believe in being ready” is reminiscent of the more ecstatic portions of the camp meeting.

Priest feels that these stylistic additions to Bryan’s composition reflect place, particularly the Upper Cumberland Plateau, as they are styles which would have been heard in the rural singing of the area (Priest 2008, 110). This certainly is reflective of singing styles across the region, not necessarily relegated to the Upper Cumberland area, just as the tunes he chose were widely known and published (from songbooks from the upper Shenandoah to Alabama). But what was happening here in the broader context? If Bryan was trying to preserve tunes, create new art from them, and educate the public about this music, why would he choose “white spirituals” over fiddle tunes or ballads? What are other contexts for using the “folk” material in academic or scholarly ways and how would the general public engage with it? An illuminating counterpart to Jackson’s scholarship and collection and Bryan’s compositions and teaching was Donald Davidson’s work with the Southern Agrarians.

2.7 “Singin’ Billy”

The most important and influential work concerning the broader shape-note singing community by Bryan is *Singin’ Billy*, which premiered at Vanderbilt University in 1952. This “folk” opera is a fictional account of William “Singing Billy” Walker of Spartanburg, South Carolina, who compiled *The Southern Harmony* shape-note songbook in 1835. The *Southern Harmony* was probably the most influential shape-note singing school book of the Southeast before the *Sacred Harp* in 1844 (Jackson 1933). Comprised of music from its forebears, the

Kentucky Harmony (1816) and the *Missouri Harmony* (1820), Walker's book included newly composed and arranged tunes by regional authors, including his brother-in-law, B.F. White, author of *The Sacred Harp*. Although the staged work about Walker is fictional, it includes several tunes from the *Southern Harmony* (most of which are also found in the *Sacred Harp*) and references actual places in South Carolina. This work was a collaboration between Charles Bryan and the writer Donald Davidson; their partnership reflects the larger southern imaginary framework.

Donald Davidson (1893–1968) was professor of English at Vanderbilt University, although he was better known as one of the “Fugitives” writing group and later part of the Agrarian movement (Livingston 2003, 158–59). His involvement with the Southern Agrarians—a group of writers concerned with a decay of the rural South because of industrialization—is central to his interest in a project about southern folk music. The Southern Agrarians were essentially antimodernists, though they had no central ideology that permeated all of their work (Murphy 1995, 83). Davidson was invested in preserving a southern past and southern ways—a white tradition of social memory that highlighted regionalism and assumed that rural life, which was largely homogenous, supported a cultural cohesiveness with genuine values (I discuss the racial perspectives of Davidson and his associates in detail in chapter 3). Industrialism, therefore, was a direct threat to these ways, especially its artistic life (Meacham 2003, 17–18). Matthew Meacham states that “*Singin’ Billy* reflects the aesthetics of Southern Agrarianism, especially as set for in Davidson’s own critical essays” and that “the opera might be considered illustrative of the challenges involved in reconciling certain tenets of Agrarian aesthetic thought in actual practice” (Meacham 2003, ii). Therefore, Davidson was preoccupied with “destructive efforts of

acquisitive materialism upon [southern] traditional culture” and *Singin’ Billy* was a project in which he could make people aware of this particular facet of the South (Young 1985, x).

In 1934 Davidson published an article detailing his visit to a Sacred Harp singing in Middle Georgia. “The Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden” not only describes the singing in detail, but clearly correlates with the ideology of the Southern Agrarians and those discussed by Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). Davidson’s reference to “Eden” is a clear connection to the “garden”; a place of natural and cultural riches that exist alongside (and in opposition to) the surrounding industrialized society. As he wrote, “Whatever one may argue about the phantasmic impositions of automobile and radio upon appearances, here there is little change in the essence of things as they were in other days...the land of Eden as kept alive, almost unwittingly, the all-day singings which have been a feature of life in the South since eighteenth-century times” (Davidson 1934, 203). He creates an image for the reader of a “land before time” as they drive down paved highways that turn to sand roads, past deserted “Negro cabins,” cotton fields, and peach orchards. This is where white southerners are “keeping alive a *native* American music which had made itself felt in unacknowledged ways...that reflect an indigenous American experience” (DAVIDSON 1934, 215–16). Davidson mixes visions of antimodernism with essentialism that creates this “land of Eden,” where white southerners maintain a cultural purity that is lost in urban centers like Atlanta and Nashville and where even radio performances of operatic and orchestral music cannot create a “sterile musical culture” (Davidson 1934, 216). Although each brought different levels of commitment to Southern Agrarian thought, the confluence of Bryan, Davidson, and Jackson all working together in Tennessee perpetuates the ideals, particularly those of undisturbed rural culture which, at the time, was seen to have unbroken connections to the nineteenth century, early American colonies, and Anglo-Celtic

cultural practices. There is no doubt, however, that practices in folklore studies since 1900 influenced much of Bryan and Davidson's thinking.

In 1950 while at Peabody College, Bryan received a grant from the Carnegie Foundation Research Fund for "research in American folklore to prepare an American folk opera for college use" (Meacham 2003, 2). Later in the same year, Davidson consulted Bryan (who was an expert on the Appalachian dulcimer) to help with the repair of an instrument he had acquired.¹³ After meeting, Bryan told Davidson of his plans for a folk opera and in reply Davidson noted that he was considering writing a biography of William Walker.¹⁴ Working together, Davidson provided the libretto and story and Bryan wrote the music. The opera was initially successful—two performances were held in 1952 at Peabody with praise from the local population and reviews in *The Nashville Tennessean*,¹⁵ but later performances were few (Fig. 2.1).¹⁶ In 1954 there was even a possibility of a television version of *Singin' Billy* with NBC, but this never came to fruition, as Bryan died on July 7 of the same year (Livingston 2003, 168).¹⁷ My research with archivists at Tennessee Technological University in 2018 lead me to believe that a forthcoming

¹³ There are numerous photographs of Bryan holding or playing an Appalachian dulcimer. Bryan also gave many recitals of folk music with his dulcimer—recital programs from the TTU archives reveal he often included shape-note tunes (usually "Wondrous Love" and "Wayfaring Stranger") in his performances.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that there currently is no biography of William Walker other than a few scant stories that were related to George Pullen Jackson which he published in *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* in 1933. Had Davidson dedicated a project for a biography he most certainly could have spoken with Walker's children and other relatives and uncovered a wealth of knowledge about the famous singing school teacher and book compiler.

¹⁵ Louis Nicholas reviewed: "Vanderbilt University Theater was filled last night with an audience which responded which chuckles, laughter, enthusiastic applause and sympathetic concern as "Singin' Billy" had its world premiere—a memorable performance in Nashville musical and theatrical history...The finale of the first act was the musical triumph of the entire work, for here the composer has very skillfully used the academic device of augmentation to portray the dramatic situation in a really exciting way" (Nicholas 1952).

¹⁶ The only known performances are: Peabody College (Nashville, TN), April 1952; Middlebury College (Vermont), 1952; July-August 1955; Pauline High School (Spartanburg Co., SC), February 1953; Florida State College Summer Music Camp chorus (with accompanist only), July 1954; West Texas State College (A&M), May 1954; East Central Junior College (Decatur, MS), April 1957, Matinee Music Club in Paducah, Kentucky (1961).

¹⁷ See Livingston 2003, pp. 167-169 for a complete summary of reviews and NBC.

performance at Middle Tennessee State University was planned, but as of 2020 no announcements had been made. Before discussing connections with Southern Agrarianism and broader implications of interest in traditional music, I will briefly examine the score of *Singin' Billy*.



Fig. 2.1: Original audition poster for Bryan and Davidson's opera *Singin' Billy* (courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Tennessee Technical University).

The folk opera is a fictional story based on the life of singing school teacher and tunebook compiler, William Walker. Walker (1809–1875) was born in Union County South Carolina and later moved with his family to nearby Spartanburg. He was well-known as a singing school teacher, compiler of the very popular *Southern Harmony* (1835) songbook, and

ran a bookshop in Spartanburg (Jackson 1933, 58). Walker was extremely influential for later songbooks, such as the *Sacred Harp*, and many of his arrangements of hymns (or those that he claimed authorship) were reprinted in numerous books.¹⁸ The opera is set in the imagined “Oconee Town” in actual Pickens County, South Carolina near the Appalachian foothills. Walker comes to town at the bequest of the town matriarch Callie to teach a singing school, where he is met with equal parts suspicion and admiration (classic tropes of Appalachian communities as isolated people intrigued by outsiders). The town ruffian Kinch challenges Walker’s identity and authenticity as a singing school teacher (instead accusing him of being an abolitionist in disguise!) and the ingenue Margaret finds herself romantically interested in Walker. Amy Golightly, Walker’s actual wife, is also mentioned, which offsets Margaret’s budding feelings. The story’s narrative focuses on an upcoming wedding in town and the drama unfolds between characters of the wedding party, Walker’s singing school, and Kinch’s opposition. As Carolyn Livingston observes, “*Singin’ Billy* contains dramatized and generalized elements of rural mountain life during the nineteenth century before the Civil War,” including “alcoholic boisterousness, religious fanaticism, superstition, political controversy, and provincialism” (Livingston 2003, 161). The opera culminates in “dramatic tension and symbolic representation” through Kinch, who “represents human corruption,” and Walker, “who stands for virtue and adherence to the will of God” through a “sing-off” by the characters in the “Wondrous Love fugato” (Livingston 2003, 160). The storyline itself is overly dramatically weak—indeed one of its biggest critiques was that Davidson was “not very effective in creating dramatic

¹⁸ For an in-depth discussion of Walker’s life and work see Jackson (1933), 55-69, and *Singing Baptists* (Eskew 1994).

situations that called for dramatic resolution” (Livingston 2003, 167). His use of words between songs was a hindrance and reviewers suggested the text be shortened for future performances.

Many aspects of Appalachian and rural imagery permeate the opera, though often they are stereotypes. These include suspicion of outsiders (conflated with abolitionists), illiteracy, an outdoor wedding, a barn dance, fiddle playing, Native American love charms, and quasi-religious prophesying by the Tyger river telling Walker of his destiny. Even the singing school itself was understood as part of the rural landscape. The original music by Bryan also contributes to the ideas of rurality and Appalachia, with ballad-like melodies including “The Low Country,” “The Hawthorn Tree,” and “The Rising of the Moon,” and fiddle tunes and barn dancing in “Sandy Land” and “John Barleycorn.” Narratives in “The Low Country” imagine the distant city of Charleston as a metropolis of high culture and European ideals, which is in stark contrast to the ruralness of Pickens County in the mountains. Recordings of the original production, located in the Tennessee Technological University archives, provide some context for performance, particularly those that reinforce stereotyped ideas of the South. All characters except Walker speak with an affected “southern” accent—highlighting certain words or vowels associated with rural communities. Walker’s voice is refined and eloquent, which stands out from the rest of the cast, who perform with theatrically affected “country” accents. None of these differences are present in the singing quality, however, as all of the singers employ a *bel canto* style. Interestingly, neither Davidson nor Bryan chose to have the singing school tunes imitate actual shape-note singers; instead, they sound more refined, like a college choir with clean diction and vibrato.¹⁹

¹⁹ Only one thing sticks out: in “Jerusalem” the original text of “so fare you well I am going home” is changed to “so fare y’well I’m a goin’ home” reflecting the authors’ conception of rural speech.

The opera is comprised of two acts with original music by Bryan and includes six arranged tunes from the *Southern Harmony*. These shape-note tunes are used as teaching material in the singing school and sung by the cast as a “class;” other tunes are used purely to propel the storyline. Without musically analyzing the entire opera, I will only discuss elements which relate to Davidson's Agrarian ideology and intersections with southern imaginaries.

Several shape-note tunes are included in the overture, with the most prominent being WONDROUS LOVE (Ex. 2.10). This tune recurs throughout the opera, acting as a narrative connector as well as pillars at the beginning and end. It is the main signifier of the sacred, especially when it is pitted against itself in a secular version. The first shape-note tune appearing outside of the overture is FRENCH BROAD, which wasn't included in the *Southern Harmony* until 1847, with a note at the bottom of the page stating that Walker wrote the tune while traveling over the mountains on the French Broad River between NC and TN in 1831. Essentially the same melody as KEDRON,²⁰ Bryan places this tune in the narrative as Walker enters Oconee Town from the mountains.

WONDROUS LOVE. 12, 9, 6, 6, 12, 9. 159



What wondrous love is this! oh! my soul! oh! my soul! What wondrous love is this oh! my soul! What wondrous love is this! That

caused the Lord of bliss To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, 'To bear the dread-ful curse for my soul.

Ex. 2.10: Wondrous Love. From the *Sacred Harp*, 1860 (public domain).

²⁰ This tune originally appeared in Amos Pilsbury's *United States Sacred Harmony* (1799) and is attributed to Elkanah Kelsay Dare.

Before WONDROUS LOVE is heard at the end of Act I, the main protagonist Kinch Hardy sings “John Barleycorn,” which is a secular version of the same tune. Kinch accuses Walker of coming to town to ruin their way of life, saying they’ll “be a-learnin’ pious songs...you’ll be a-sayin’ it’s wrong to dance, and the fiddle is the devil’s instrument. There’ll be no more courtin’ and kissin’ in the good old way, and us men will have to go around all dressed up...You’ll take away our whiskey” (Bryan and Davidson 1985, 45). Kinch sings “John Barleycorn” to Walker in a style which he says is “what we like, here in Pickens County,” which is Wondrous Love in double time accompanied by a fiddle ostinato. This fiddle part is reminiscent of other musicals of the time that represent rural spaces and the west (*Oklahoma*, 1943 & *Annie Get Your Gun*, 1946, among many) and puts Walker’s more refined and dignified style of the melody to a show down of sorts, between good and evil. There are many instances of Davidson’s conceptions of Agrarianism in *Singin’ Billy*, but the juxtaposition of “John Barleycorn” with its country ways and a perceived encroaching of industrialized culture as represented by Walker and his “Wondrous Love” (although he is ultimately victorious) is a major conflict in the opera. Completing the first act, “Wondrous Love” begins similarly to “French Broad,” with Walker singing the melody with sparse harmonization, mostly in fourths and fifths, evoking much of tune’s original texture. Other main characters join Walker, though strangely they sing incorrectly placed shape-note syllables, which seems to have no bearing on the narrative.

Three other tunes are included in Act II, JERUSALEM, PROMISED LAND, and EVENING SHADE, although they are only part of scenes of Walker’s singing school. Another tune, SAMANTHRA, is included with the original manuscripts and found in the 1985 publication of the

libretto, but is not found in the reproduced score.²¹ The drama of the opera culminates in a “sing off” between Walker and Hardy in which “Wondrous Love” and “John Barleycorn” feud in a “fugato”—the double time secular version placed over the slower moving sacred original. Walker is victorious in the singing battle, showing the town that his intentions have been genuine all along. Kinch’s anxiety of modernization is eventually overturned, as the noble Walker represents a more refined agrarianism—a specific New South sought after by the Agrarians.

Bryan utilized shape-note tunes as an important means of marking the alleged authenticity of his project, but they also reinforce his Southern Agrarian perspective by sonically conveying his conceptions of Appalachia and ruralness. Numerous tunes use open string motives for the violins, like “The Life and Death of John Barleycorn,” to imitate fiddling styles, as well as pizzicato in lower strings to imitate the banjo (Ex. 2.11). “The Rising of the Moon” (Ex. 2.12) and “The Low Country”²² (Ex. 2.13) are both minor modal like many shape-note tunes, their natural sevenths²³ give a plaintive and somber character to the romantic developments in the drama. “One More Hunt” is a clear example of a cowboy-style song text and melody with its flat seventh (mixolydian) within F Major (Ex. 2.14).²⁴ Finally, Bryan’s Celtic musical imagery is validated in a letter from Davidson:

²¹ Davidson asks Bryan in a letter what to do with this tune, but there is no other correspondence in later writings (Letter from Donald Davidson to Charles Bryan, July 7, 1952, Charles Faulkner Bryan Collections, Angelo and Jeannette Volpe Library and Media Center, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville).

²² This tune uses an open drone on G for the first thirteen bars. The modal character in the accompaniment and main melody only use pitch 1-5 and 7, and this, over the pulsating of the drone is reminiscent of American Indianism, though a concrete connection between this example and any Indianist tropes are not present.

²³ I use natural seventh here to indicate there is now lowering of the seventh by accidental.

²⁴ The melody is written in the key of B-flat while the tonic clearly rests of F. The mixolydian nature of such tunes is often understood to be of “Celtic” origin.

I think you are here at the top of musical art—right at perfection; be careful not to spoil it! ...Charles, the harpers and bagpipers of your Gaelic-Celtic forbears stood by you when you composed this music!²⁵

The Life and Death of John Barleycorn

Charles F. Bryan

Lively Kinch:

John Bar-ley-corn is dead, some folks say, some folks say, John Bar-ley-corn is

(Fiddles)

8 dead, somefolks say. _____ John Bar-ley-corn is dead for they laid him on _ his bed, and they've kivered up his

16 head, old and gray, old and gray, and the wind it blows so cold all the day. _____

Ex. 2.11: “The Life and Death of John Barleycorn” from Bryan’s *Singin’ Billy*.

²⁵ Letter from Donald Davidson to C.F. Bryan, August 13 1952. Charles Faulkner Bryan Collections, Angelo and Jeannette Volpe Library and Media Center, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville

The Rising of the Moon

Gussie:

One time as I was walk-ing a - long I thought the world had done me wrong till I came to the ris - ing

7

Freely

of ____ the moon and the fid - dle played the tune - o, tune - o tune - o ____ and the fid - dle played the tune-o-__

Ex. 2.12: Melody from “The Rising of the Moon” in Bryan’s *Singin’ Billy*.

The Low Country

'Twas all for Bri-tain's cru-el King and for their Lib-cr - ty Our fath-ers left old

Eng-land's isle and sailed to the Low Coun - try, my dear, and sailed to the Low Coun - try it's

"fare - you-well" they told their Loves, I'm bound a-cross the sea, and if we e - ver

meet a - gain', twill be in the Low Coun - try my Love 'twill be in the Low Coun - try.

Ex. 2.13: Opening solo from "The Low Country" in Bryan's *Singin' Billy*.

One More Hunt

Kinch:

1. Oth - er days, I hunt - ed free Car - o - li - na and Ten - nes - see;
2. Old Tom Big - by's gone out West, He al - ways knows where the hunt - in's best:

Dog at heel and gun in hand; Pine - y woods and san - dy land.
Old Tom wrote me the best he could: "Come on, fool! The hunt - in's good.

Ex. 2.14: Opening melody from “One More Hunt” in Bryan’s *Singin’ Billy*.

Davidson is referring to “Quilt Song,” a ballad-style tune which textually “sews together” images of an old country and the new land. Connections between kings and heroes, Culloden and Sedgemoor, and Washington and liberty clearly track histories of the British Isles (Celtic legacies) to American soil and independence, which are all sewn into a figurative quilt that the people of the mountains are stitched in. However, there is nothing that appears “Gaelic-Celtic”²⁶ in the tune itself—it is minor in tonality but uses more chromaticism than many other tunes in the opera.

*2. What the sword said in the battle,
What the axe said to the tree,
All our travels, all our wanderings—
Sewed to keep in memory.*

*3. While the candle gutted slowly,
I remembered times of men.
I remembered kings and heroes,
Deathless deeds of now and then.*

*4. Red Culloden, grief of Sedgemoor
Washington and liberty,*

²⁶ For an extensive explanation of the Celtic Imaginary, see chapter 5.

*Mountain riders, mountain rifles,
Sewed to keep in memory.*

Although the story of *Singin' Billy* is fictitious (but described as “entirely possible”), it presented Walker as an important and noble figure in the history of the South (Bryan and Davidson 1985, ii). Bryan clearly wanted to educate audiences about the shape-note hymnody that he was so interested in with hopes that Americans would readopt it into their musical identity. Herschel Gower, student of Davidson, best expressed the legacy of *Singin' Billy* in a short memoir which highlights Jackson's influence, Bryan's methods, and ideas about past musical forms which persist to the present day:

“Singin' Billy” at the Vanderbilt Theatre was undoubtedly, first, an introduction to an ancient polyphonic way of singing; second, it was a validation of Dr. Jackson's scholarly appreciate of that tradition; third, it was Mr. Davidson's poetic and lyric voice combined finally with music, and Charlie Bryan's reworking of the traditional ballad and the lyric heritage of England and Scotland. It was clearly a rare opportunity to experience both a tradition and individual talents extending it to instruct and delight (Bryan and Davidson 1985, v).

Bryan had a particular skill of absorbing perceived folk styles, which he credited to his upbringing and experience playing the dulcimer. Indeed, several of the melodies used in *Singin' Billy* would appear to traditional ballads at first glance, especially “The Hawthorn Tree” and “The Low Country” with their shifting time signatures and modal characteristics (Livingston 2003, 121). A review from the first performance in Nashville in 1952 opined that

...Bryan has maintained the feeling for the folk, locale and period with exceptional success. “The Hawthorn Tree,” “The Quilt Song,” and “The Low Country” were tunes of great beauty and winsomeness, which matched in the chasteness and warmth of their settings [and/ loveliness of Davidson's poetry (Nicholas 1952).

Yet the rural-urban and sacred-secular metaphors that Davidson and Bryan include in the opera are still present, especially in contemporary narratives of Sacred Harp singing, which I

discuss in chapter 3. His connection and familiarity with Sacred Harp was clear from singers' signatures and addresses in his copy of the 1936 *Original Sacred Harp*, including Paine Denson, Lonnie Odom, and Lee Wells, and his address in the *Directory of Sacred Harp Singers; and of their Annual Singing Conventions* for 1945/46.²⁷ He was also recorded as attending local singings with his students in 1950–52 in the annual *Minutes of Sacred Harp Singings* directory.²⁸

Bryan's enormous artistic output drew mostly from American traditional music sources. His secular cantata *The Bell Witch* (1946) tells the story of the infamous Bell witch of Tennessee and circles around southern gothic themes. This is the only instance of Bryan composing a new shape-note-style tune. "O Canaan" is written in four parts for unaccompanied choir and even states that the "lead" (melody) is in the tenor line "as in the traditional Sacred Harp" (Bryan 1947, 52). Though there is more harmonic motion than most shape-note singers are accustomed to, this newly composed tune sonically imitates Sacred Harp singing and metaphorically represents a musical antidote to the demon possession by the Bell witch herself. Shape-note singing and musical styles became an integral part that permeated most of Bryan's works.

Bryan, Jackson, Davidson, and others also had a hand in the establishment of Sacred Harp singing in Tennessee.²⁹ Several singings were initiated (or possibly revived) in areas south

²⁷ Items in the Charles Faulkner Bryan Collections, Angelo and Jeannette Volpe Library and Media Center, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville

²⁸ The minutes from 1950-53 show a number of interesting connections: Bryan did not attend with his students in 1952, however a representative accompanied the class for him; Margaret Wright was recorded in attendance at the Odem's Chapel singing in Tennessee for several years and brought her Middle Tennessee State College Sacred Harp singers in 1953; Dr. Wolf (presumably Irving Wolfe who was chair of music at Peabody) was in attendance at the Tennessee River Convention in 1953. Wolfe was a colleague of both Bryan and George Pullen Jackson. Virginia Wolfe, a student of Bryan who played the cello in the Peabody production of *Singing Billy* and was a singer in the Peabody Madrigalians, was also present in 1951 at the Odem's Chapel singing in St. Joseph, TN. These connections between Bryan, Wolfe, Jackson, and Wright furthers my argument that these educators were all influenced by and connected with Sacred Harp singers.

²⁹ Jackson was an organizer of the Tennessee Sacred Harp Singing Association in 1939 ("Our Debt to George Pullen Jackson" 2014).

of Nashville by singers with family connections to Alabama and north Alabama singings, such as the Odem's Chapel singing, which had its own specially built chapel solely for Sacred Harp singings. Singings in Nashville have generally waned in recent years, but it's important to note that these are some of the earliest newly-established singings—prior to the folk revival influence on Sacred Harp—that were formed with influence from non-regular Sacred Harp singers. Although no artistic performances of Bryan's work are reproduced by Sacred Harps in general, those singers in Nashville can trace their community lineage to the seeds planted by Jackson, Bryan, and singers in southern Tennessee.

Instrumental works by Bryan, Thomson, Cowell, and many others are not often widely performed. Bryan's *White Spiritual Symphony* was never published or typeset and only his master's thesis edition is known to exist. However, many students with wind band experience (myself included) have encountered Donald Grantham's *Southern Harmony* (1998) and *Kentucky Harmony* (2000). While I do not give a full survey of these or similar works here, it's worth mentioning the importance of these two works in the broader community of music education, particularly in the treatment of musical imaginaries not unlike those of Thomson and Bryan. Both of Grantham's works use arrangements of tunes from their respective tunebooks (*Kentucky Harmony*, 1816 and *Southern Harmony*, 1835). His arrangements make use of a recognizable musical rhetoric, not unlike Copland's Americanisms, drawing largely on the narratives first instituted by George Pullen Jackson. This includes highlighting stark open intervals, Copland-esque fanfares, a humorous treatment of the tune EXHILARATION, not unlike Bryan's rendition of JESTER, which includes clapping and pentatonic passages. Merlin Patterson reviews a recording of *Southern Harmony* as “bold, exotic harmonies, innovative melodic and rhythmic treatments, [and] novel instrumental effects.... If this does not give you goose-bumps, nothing will”

(Patterson n.d.). Tunes like these still exist in numerous school music texts in the US because of Bryan's influence (Livingston, 2003).

Choral works have remained the most common medium for the dissemination of shape-note music. Hundreds, if not thousands, of choral arrangements of shape-note tunes have been published since the 1950s, for use in educational settings but also for church choirs and community music groups. The popularity of these arrangements seems to parallel other events in the United States: interest in folk music after the 1970s folk revivals, interest in American topics during the Bicentennial, and a later revival of old-time and mountain music spurred by the film *Cold Mountain* in the early 2000s. I will discuss several popular arrangements, particularly those published in recent years, which continue threads of musical imaginaries.

2.8 Reproducing Imaginaries in Choral Interpretations of Sacred Harp Singing

Arrangements of Sacred Harp are most often encountered in choral settings. These tunes, or early American hymnody in general, are often programmed because they represent a particular American sound, often one of *difference* from standard choral repertoire. Indeed, much of the appeal of Sacred Harp for choirs and music groups is the perception of “authentic” historical American music that it carries—perceptions built on the early to mid-twentieth century frameworks I explore above, and perpetuated, mostly uncritically into contemporary settings. These arrangements play an important and mostly invisible role in reifying the imaginaries of Sacred Harp to the public in the present.

Many arrangements have been published since at least the 1960s, often incorporating the melody into a new harmonization with accompaniment. Yet in the contemporary choral world,

educators and their students look for new ways to perform these pieces, often with elements that are understood to be “authentic.” Many choral directors are aware of the problems of appropriation, and at some level it is unavoidable when performing musics from their original contexts. This section discusses choral arrangements in more recent years, their rise in popularity, and elements of performance. I argue that these performances may educate students and listeners about Sacred Harp singing, but may also generate and reify narratives of southerners which circulate in the popular imagination.

Many choral arrangements of shape-note tunes have been published since the early books of John Powell, Annabel Morris Buchanan, John Jacob Niles, and Bryan and Jackson. New arrangements are constantly released, as evidenced on websites for purchasing choral music. Niles states in the introduction to his 1950 compilation that he has changed the music and added “a more up-to-date form of harmony...in the piano settings,” and that “All this has been done to widen the interest in, and the use of, this very important segment of our national musical culture.” Ironically, the molding of these tunes to a digestible format is the opposite of what later arrangers would do, instead often homing in on the particular aspects of *difference*.

Awareness of shape-note music has risen since the 1960s, particularly among church musicians and college choral groups. Articles on early American hymnody or shape-note music have been published in numerous hymn, choral, organ, church music, and music educator journals and newsletters, often paralleling important events like the American Bicentennial or trends in choral music publishing.³⁰ Publications like *The New Liberty Bell* (1976), which included early American music from Billings and his contemporaries, the so-called “white

³⁰ Various trends exist in choral music, though the use of folk tunes began to rise in general in church music after Vatican II and folk festivals in the 1970s (Wilson-Dickson 2003).

spirituals,” and composers from George Root to Charles Ives, aimed to celebrate distinctly American choral repertoires.³¹ In 1978, Southern Illinois University choral director Leonard Van Camp published several articles in choral journals which drew up Sacred Harp singing styles as a model for performance practice in the music of William Billings. Van Camp corresponded with Hugh McGraw, general secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company; he learned about contemporary singing practices from McGraw and even arranged to attend a singing with him.³² Rather than a regularly scheduled singing, however, Van Camp attended the recording session in Birmingham, Alabama for the Sacred Harp Publishing Company’s 1976 album *Sacred Harp—A Bicentennial Celebration*, their own acknowledgement of the importance of Sacred Harp music in American history. The same year, Augsburg Publishers, what became the main publishing house of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), published a reprint of the *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), as this was the first southeastern tune book printed in shape-note notation.³³ The *Kentucky Harmony* had not been used in regular singings since the nineteenth century, but a church music publisher saw fit to reintroduce this book as popularity in American folk traditions was growing within churches, inspired in part by the Bicentennial.

Many later editions leveraged the success of the movies *O Brother, Where art Thou* (2000) and *Cold Mountain* (2003), which spurred numerous concerts, CD compilations, documentaries, and performances of old-time mountain music, roots of bluegrass, and shape-note singing. These movies and their influence within the popular imagination also increased

³¹ This collection and doubtless others make no mention of African American compositions or spirituals in the history of America. “Native American” is also a common term in books of the first half of the 20th century that was applied to the artistic output not of indigenous peoples but of native-born composers (who were white).

³² Letter filed under “Van Camp,” Sacred Harp Publishing Company Museum.

³³ Augsburg became Augsburg Fortress and is now called 1517 Media.

exposure to and attendance at Sacred Harp singings.³⁴ Immediately following the release of *Cold Mountain*, church music publishers wasted no time in compiling and arranging music from the film for church choirs. Tom Fettke's *Spiritual Songs from "Cold Mountain"* includes three tunes, the last being the most-recognizable of the shape-note tunes in the film: I'M GOING HOME. Fettke's arrangement adheres almost exactly to the original in *The Sacred Harp*, but the performance suggestions include a common rhetoric about Sacred Harp or rural musics in the popular imagination. These directions are meant to help singers achieve "authenticity" in their performances, though they rarely state it explicitly: "Feel free...to perform the piece as it would have sounded 150 years ago—a cappella, energetic, mixed with the drum-like slapping of thighs and hearty tapping (or stomping) of feet" (Fettke and Curry 2003, 27). Of course it is difficult to say what Sacred Harp would have sounded like in the nineteenth century, although many argue that recordings from the 1920s give an idea, as I will discuss in chapters 3 and 4. Sacred Harp singing is still a cappella and energetic in contemporary contexts, but aggressive foot stomping is looked down upon in many communities. The "slapping of thighs" appears to be an archetype of traditional music in general, promulgated by stereotype and reinforced by notions of perceived authenticity. Still, many arrangements include subtle notations with marked sonic effects such as slides, rests to clip notes, aspirations, and grace note anticipations, all present in Pepper Choplin's arrangement of the same tune. A description in the choral octavo expresses a common sentiment, which equates spiritual wholesomeness and purity with rural American religious practices: "Simple, but not simplistic, it is a homespun, honest selection from America's spiritual heritage" ("I'm Going Home (SATB) by Pepper Choplin| J.W. Pepper Sheet Music," n.d.).

³⁴ Statistics from the Sacred Harp Minutes books (available online) corroborate this data and are presented in the Sacred Harp Newsletter at <http://originalsacredharp.com/2013/12/31/the-cold-mountain-bump/>

Brad Holmes, Director of Choir Programs at Millikin University in Decatur, IL, has published several arrangements of shape-note tunes and frequently incorporates them, as well as early American hymnody, in concerts. Holmes's initial interest in the repertoire stemmed from Richard Bjella's arrangement of the tune IDUMEA, when the Millikin choir sang it before publication in 2010. He stated that "his piece is an arrangement, but really seems to hang on to the raw character. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* brought some of that sound out" (p.c., Brad Holmes, September 2019).

Introductory comments include more information than most other published arrangements, citing the song's appearance in the *Kentucky Harmony* and biblical accounts its lyrics. There are only a few brief performance suggestions, with Bjella stating: "I would suggest listening to the original version before making it too refined in its approach. I would suggest little to no vibrato for the singers or the instrumentalists. A rugged and rough vocal timbre and diction must be central to the performance" (Bjella 2010). No special notations or markings are included in the score, which is for unaccompanied choir and two violins, but his opening remarks give choral directors much to work with.³⁵

Leanne Conley-Holcom cites Bjella's arrangement in her dissertation "Come, All My Dear Brethren and Help Me to Sing: Dialogue and Participation as Foundations for the Choral Performance of Sacred Harp Music," explaining that the introductory remarks give little context for the contemporary practice of shape-note singing, creating a disconnect between choral performances and Sacred Harp singing communities. Conley-Holcom's work aims to discuss the possibility of cultural understanding of a more informed approach to singing shape-note music,

³⁵ Several other arrangements are available, including alternate voicings and instrumentation.

citing similar (and extremely popular) works like Alice Parker's "Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal."³⁶ While interpretation of *Idumea* is fairly open to choral directors, Bjella's indications tend to produce similar results. Many recordings of this are found on YouTube and publisher websites, nearly all using a more forward tone or varying qualities of southern or "country" accents. Some of these affected accents are quite humorous and problematic, especially to southerners, but the overall effect is the same as the examples described earlier.

In his own interpretation of tunes and Bjella's arrangement, Holmes works to convey a certain spirit of the tunes and wants to be conscious of the problems of appropriation. "The choral world is in a place where cultural appropriation is very dangerous right now," he explains. "We're getting into a troublesome spot. I have to think twice if I'm going to program a spiritual. There are challenges that go along with it. I feel some of the same way with some of the early American music. I really work for...the dignity of the culture. Singers [choir] often think it's fun so therefore it shouldn't be serious. We don't want to steal the dignity out of the culture...It's the spirit of the music that captures people. People somehow identify with a folk root. It's like an honest expression of a culture." Holmes is genuinely concerned with issues of representation and tries to teach his students as much about the contexts of Sacred Harp singing as possible. He wants students to understand the particular joy and level of energy that Sacred Harp singers usually encounter at all-day singings. Conley-Holcom suggests methods of inclusion in her work, which brings in Sacred Harp singers to participate with choirs and vice versa.

³⁶ Parker's arrangement is arguably the most well-known arrangement of a shape-note tune for contemporary choirs. It takes its tune from *The Southern Harmony* (INVITATION NEW) and adapts it using thick textures. Still, the nature of the tune, its mostly gapped scale and Scotch snaps, is preserved and would resonate with most audiences as a "folk tune."

Holmes' own arrangements, including the tunes HALLELUJAH (*Halleluia*), AFRICA (*Now Shall My Inward Joys Arise*), WEeping MARY, WINDHAM and STAR IN THE EAST make use of special choral effects, mainly timbre (which is affected by pronunciation), anticipation, and body percussion.³⁷ With an interest in early American hymnody as well as traditional vocal styles from other areas of the globe, Holmes incorporates many of these into choral concerts. "I've had lots of all-state choirs sing this music, often doing three hymns—early American, contrast it with Rachmaninoff *Liturgy*, then a South African contemporary piece called *Hymn* which is very tribal. All-state choirs really like the variety and possibility of sounds" (p.c., Brad Holmes, September 2019). While Holmes does explain contemporary cultural context about the music to students (who often state they enjoy singing in a non-art music style), audiences may be transported to another place or another time, further reinforcing the unmodernized and rural imaginary. He explained that several Millikin choral students became interested in Sacred Harp once he introduced it, often writing senior projects on singing and a few attending conventions.

³⁷ HALLELUJAH, AFRICA, and WINDHAM are found in numerous books, but in this instance come from the *Sacred Harp*. WEeping MARY is from the *Social Harp* (1855) and STAR IN THE EAST taken from *The Southern Harmony or Christian Harmony*.

Halleluia

The musical score for 'Halleluia' is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It consists of four staves. The first staff is a vocal line with lyrics: 'And let this fee - ble bo - dy fail And let it fait or die. My'. The second staff is another vocal line with lyrics: 'soul shall quit this mourn - ful vale and soar to world on high. And'. The third and fourth staves are instrumental accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and rests, as well as a glissando marking '(Gliss.)' at the end of the second vocal line.

Ex. 2.15: Opening of Holmes' arrangement *Halleluia* illustrating notated "Scotch-snaps."

In regards to performance, Holmes would like students and listeners to essentially understand the spirit of the tunes and the context in which they are traditionally sung. By adding elements such as body percussion, anticipations, Scotch snaps, and slides, he feels the tunes are much more vibrant and hearty.

I talk about singing out of a square vowel rather than round. A very teeth-approaching to singing, forward in nasality. I work with a more reedy sound. The tenors sing in a higher range so a bit more reedy like in the alto range. I often get tenors to sing alto in Renaissance music to get a more edgy cathedral sound. I'm very interested in tone...How can we get to a very spirited sound but not a classically trained sound? We push the rules of classical singing. When I listen to shape-note singers sing they aren't spending all their time on vowels! But we don't want them to sound like Disney pirates! We want to bring dignity to the culture. You can get a lot of ideas about the sound from shape-note conventions. Sometimes I think, why would you buy the arrangement? Just go by the tunebook! (p.c., Brad Holmes, September 2019).

These arrangements differ from Bjella's because they follow the originals in the hymnals more closely, though with stylistic notations adhering to something a little closer to what an all-day singing would sound like. This is clear from recordings of each of his arrangements. Rhythmic changes in the score of *Halleluia* alter a number of quarter notes to sixteenth and dotted quarters, illustrating an added Scotch snap (compare Ex. 2.15 and Ex. 2.16). The performance notes state "this so called "Scottish Snap" is a performance feature carried forward to the present day among some 'shaped-note' singing societies. The vibrancy and fervor of this music may be enhanced with a bright, forward tone and a biting articulation" (Holmes 2002). While older recordings do often possess this trait to an extent, this is not typical of contemporary Sacred Harp practice.³⁸ The compound meter of the tune is complemented with stomping throughout the piece, again frowned upon when too energetic at singings, and seems to relate to ideas that I discuss in chapter 5, that of the Celtic imaginary. Holmes stated that he hears an underlying "Celtic" rhythm in much of this music and chooses to include stomps and other effects to enhance its rhythmic vitality (p.c., Brad Holmes, September 2019). I discuss these relations and "Celtic" musical traits fully in chapter 5.

³⁸ See Lomax's commercially available recordings in the *Southern Journey* series of the 1959 United Sacred Harp Convention, or visit the [Association for Cultural Equity](#) to find two recordings of HALLELUJAH from the same singing. The version by the Tudor Choir on *The Shapenote Album* is also sung this way, but with much more "snap."

And let this fee-ble bo-dy fail, And let it faint and die;
My soul shall quit this mournful vale, And soar to worlds on high. } And I'll sing hal-le-lu-jah, And

you'll sing hal-le-lu-jah, And we'll all sing hal-le-lu-jah, When we ar-rive at home.

Ex. 2.16: HALLELUJAH, from the *Sacred Harp*, 1860 (public domain).

Millikin and Holmes are well known in the choral community because of their strong sense of musical ensemble and their particular style, which often includes shape-note music, South African choral styles, and others labeled as world music genres. Holmes's arranging and stylistic choices have become further reaching as many students from Millikin's program, now in the professional choral world, especially around Chicago, recast shape-note music with the same mold. Former Millikin students in the Cantus Vocal Ensemble in Minneapolis introduced shape-note music to the group and several tunes appear on their albums. On their album *That Eternal Day*, *Hallelujah* is Holmes' arrangement, although it is not attributed. Cantus, an all-male choir,

uses a forward straight tone in the style of Holmes for most of their shape-note renditions.³⁹

Their recording of JEWETT on the album *That Eternal Day* clips consonants to highlight the rhythmic nature of the text-music interplay and occasionally elongates vowels. A later recording, posted in 2020, is essentially the same but pronunciation is less noticeable. Arranger Aaron Humble wrote, “When Cantus started singing this repertoire, we cultivated a bright, buzzy, and vibrant tone that accentuated the open harmony but never fell victim to becoming parody” (cantussings 2020). Choral groups using a perceived southern or country accent often navigate towards parody in choosing certain speech elements to alter while retaining other aspects of choral singing. Flattening an “ī” sound as in “die” or “fly” into something more like “ä” as in “dah” or “flah” rather than the standard pronunciation with a slight diphthong, is common, yet crisp final consonants like *t* adhere to standard choral practice. With regards to Sacred Harp singers with choral backgrounds, they know the differences, and may laugh slightly and state, “well, they aren’t *real* singers, are they?” (meaning Sacred Harp singers) (p.c., Karen Ivey, 2017). Those singers who also work in the professional music field, like Stuart Ivey from Alabama, recognize this disconnect and work to educate their music students as to the reality of Sacred Harp and that it need not be sung in a parodic fashion.

2.9 Perpetuating Imaginaries in Performing Sacred Harp

Just as early and mid-twentieth-century imaginaries are reproduced through arrangements of Sacred Harp tunes, they are also perpetuated in staged performances of Sacred Harp by

³⁹ “Paradise” (NORTHPORT) from *That Eternal Day*, interestingly, uses a much more subdued style and standard choral pronunciation. This quiet and reflective rendition is in the vein of the Word of Mouth Chorus performance (*Rivers of Delight*, 1979).

professional ensembles and recording groups. These performances have had a particularly important impact on the practices of Sacred Harp singers because many contemporary singers first encounter Sacred Harp not through singing conventions, but through these performances. Many singers tell similar stories of their “discovery” of shape-note music, sometimes at folk festivals, serendipitous attendance of a workshop, or taking a college course. One of the most common means of exposure is through hearing recordings made by performance groups outside Sacred Harp’s music culture. Likely the most widely influential recording of Sacred Harp singing is the Word of Mouth Chorus’s *Rivers of Delight* from 1979. Released on LP by Nonesuch Records, this album was readily available through music stores and catalogs, giving Sacred Harp singing a place in the wider market. Just a few years earlier, Larry Gordon, director of the Chorus, traveled to the Georgia State Convention in Atlanta with the group. This was a major turning point for Sacred Harp Singing—earlier groups, such as George Pullen Jackson’s Old Harp Singers (Fig. 2.2),⁴⁰ the Sacred Harp Singers at Middle Tennessee State, and Neely Bruce’s American Music Group at the University of Illinois (Fig. 2.3), had all recorded albums and made trips to attend all-day singings or conventions, and in some sense connect with established Sacred Harp communities, yet the effects did not help new singing communities grow with the same fervor.

⁴⁰ This group went through changing memberships and was also known as the Original Sacred Harp Choir.



Fig. 2.2: Original Sacred Harp Choir 78, 1922 (image courtesy of Jeff Crompton).

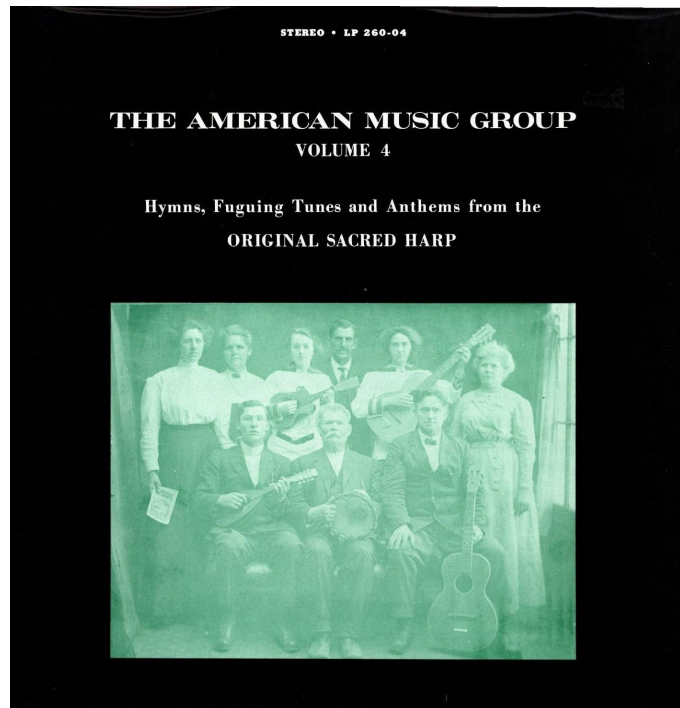


Fig. 2.3: LP album of Sacred Harp tunes recorded by The American Music, University of Illinois (collection of the author).

Rivers of Delight combines energy, professionalism (in performance and recording technology), novelty, and an air of tradition that frames their recording as authentic. Within the liner notes, Gordon tells the story of taking the Chorus to Georgia and learning from “traditional” singers, but this does not immediately strike a new listener as being inauthentic. In a way, their authenticity lies in the performance practices learned from traditional southern singers and their newfound friendships with them. In addition, they have appropriated elements of Sacred Harp performance practice in *Rivers of Delight* that give the record a dramatically different vocal character than other works in their corpus. In many respects, the ensemble maintains their typical standard choral practices—closing phrases with crisp consonants, homogenous breathing, and acknowledging printed accidentals (which are often ignored by Sacred Harp singers). But in other respects, they draw elements from Sacred Harp’s sonic character to signal their engagement with the music community and its practices. For example, by singing with their head voices, they produce bright, rigid vocal timbres; they incorporate forward vowel sounds; in at least one song, a solo singer utilizes vocal feathering.⁴¹ They also sing the shapes prior to the words on multiple songs.

One last example demonstrates the influence that this performance of “tradition” has on singers both inside and outside Sacred Harp communities. On the song WONDROUS LOVE, the tenors anticipate the downbeat of the beginning of the second phrase. The effect is a rhythmically consistent syncopation that repeats in an identical fashion throughout the recording. Although this is a departure from the music as printed in *The Sacred Harp*, it is based on the choir’s perception of Sacred Harp “tradition,” as heard in a specific field recording: Alan Lomax’s 1942

⁴¹ This is heard in the song “Weeping Mary” on the words “away” and “never” in the first verse.

recording of the Alabama State Musical Association in Birmingham. On this recording, which circulated widely as a Library of Congress release, an individual singer can clearly be heard anticipating notes in the same fashion in WONDROUS LOVE. Unlike the Word of Mouth Chorus, however, his anticipation is not a consistent intervention in the rhythm, but a slight anticipation that some Sacred Harp singers have utilized to help maintain the class's momentum—an irregular irruption rather than a calculated affectation. Nonetheless, some singers who were introduced to Sacred Harp through this recording, or those who were otherwise inspired by it, emulated the Word of Mouth Chorus's rhythmically consistent version of the anticipation with the understanding that it was "traditional" to Sacred Harp. The practice spread from there to those who might never have even encountered the recording—a singer I spoke to in California explained that the anticipation was "how traditional singers" render the song.

The complex relationship of staged performance of various types, and Sacred Harp singings is replayed over and over again. Performances and arrangements usually point out, whether in program notes, stylistic characteristics, or other sonic performative elements, the "essential" nature of shape-note tunes and Sacred Harp singing as something old, southern, American, and rural. These superficial descriptions do not reflect the lived experiences of most contemporary singers. It seems ironic that in the early twentieth century, Sacred Harp was often decried as outdated and unworthy of the urban cultural spaces of the Southeast. Now, the elements which expressed those sentiments, though largely manufactured by many performers, are taken by audiences searching for an audible past as the *real* Sacred Harp. Sacred Harp singers themselves often come to the singing community because of these same imagined spaces and many, as I will show in the next chapter, construct their relationship to the music community through imagined conceptions of "the South." This interconnected, complicated web is a major

factor in the various imaginaries that I describe in this study—singers and performers, with different but overlapping ideas about what singing is and what it means, create networks which construct, promote, and reiterate imaginaries that define Sacred Harp to observers and participants alike. Understanding what Sacred Harp means to the singers who practice it in the contemporary world requires unpacking representations of Sacred Harp developed in the early twentieth century and maintained up to the present through musicological and historical accounts, music compositions and arrangements, and performances (including recordings).

CHAPTER 3: IMAGINING THE SOUTH

In 2005, I attended my first Annual Meeting for the Society for Ethnomusicology, held that year in Atlanta. Friday evening, I drove about an hour west of the city to Holly Springs Primitive Baptist church in Bremen for a short informal Sacred Harp singing—I had never been to the church before, but I already knew it as an iconic Sacred Harp site (Fig. 3.1). In addition to hosting a historic, well-attended singing, it has been featured on record album covers and in a documentary film by Alan Lomax (Fig. 3.2).⁴² The building sits only a few hundred feet from I-20, but the route to access the church, about a half mile past a gas station and through a wooded area, made it seem somehow much more remote. Entering the property, passing an old spring house sitting quietly in the woods under a recently constructed cover, a clearing in the woods opened to view, revealing the church. The space is secluded, but the roar of the interstate thrusts through thick underbrush and large oaks (Fig. 3.3).



Fig. 3.1: Holly Springs Primitive Baptist Church, Bremen, Georgia (photo by the author).

⁴² See LP information, Alan Lomax Archive <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3mb3Ya9OUc>

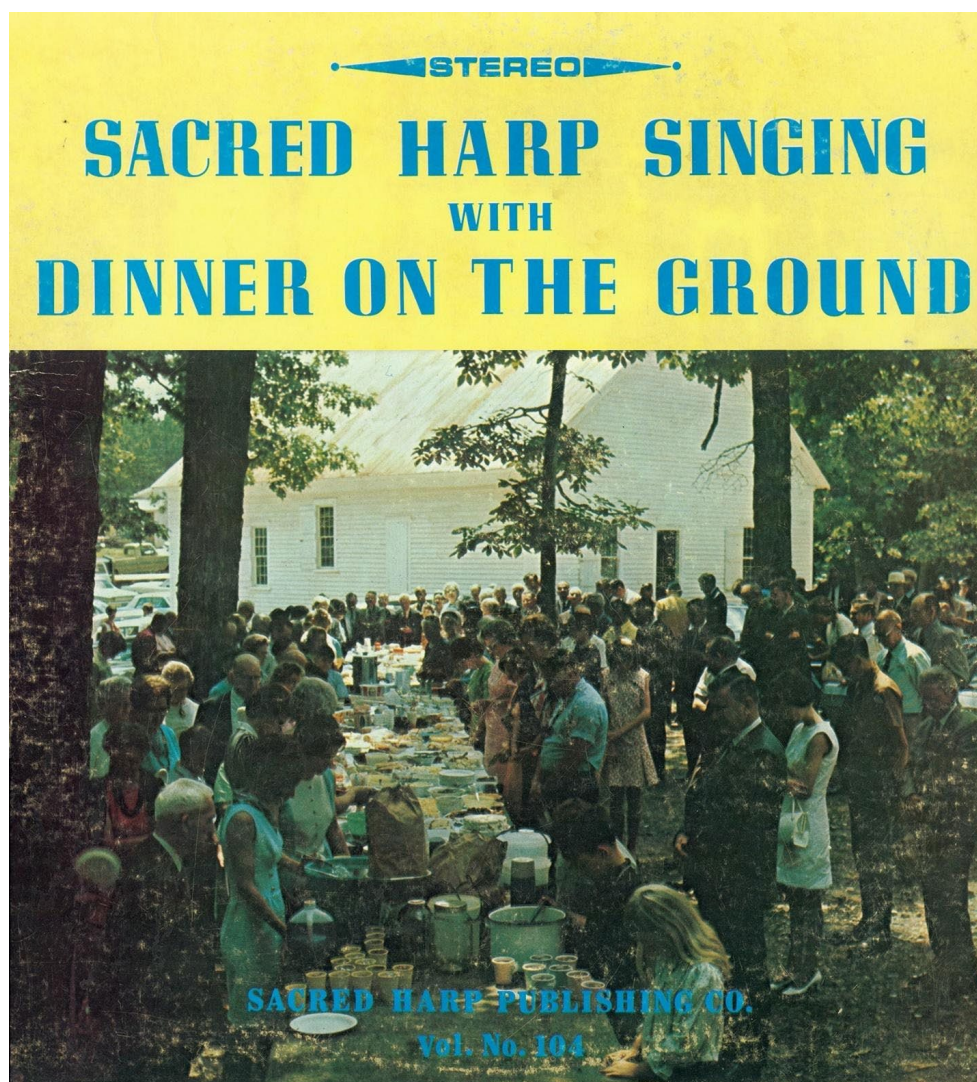


Fig. 3.2: LP album cover from the Sacred Harp Publishing Company featuring Holly Springs on the cover. The audio of this album was not recorded at Holly Springs, but at a local recording studio with selected singers (image courtesy of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company Museum).



Fig. 3.3: Aerial view of Holly Springs situated between interstate-20 and GA highway 27 (photo by the author).

Driving in the dark on my first trip to Holly Springs, I let my imagination wander; the lights of Atlanta disappeared and the darkness around the church, with few street lights, left me uncertain what I was walking into. I pulled up to the church late and the singing was already in progress. This was a “night” or “practice” singing—an informal regular gathering that takes place in the evening to give local singers an opportunity to get together in between the bigger all-day singings and conventions. I parked and saw my first dim glimpse of the church, a building famed for its connection to Sacred Harp and one of the superb acoustic spaces for this style of singing. I had already heard singers refer to it as a “holy grail” or “Carnegie Hall” of Sacred Harp spaces. It is an unassuming structure—built around the turn of the century in an American vernacular style, the whitewashed box of a building is typical of many Primitive Baptist churches with no steeple, symmetrical design, wooden interior, and pulpit centered on the long side of the building (Fig. 3.4). While many Primitive Baptist churches have been updated or newly built

using updated layouts, this structure reflects the older style of early American meeting houses.⁴³ Primitive Baptist theology does not support evangelism, paid ministers, or musical instruments, so the building lacks any extra rooms for Sunday school or offices, nor does it include a choir loft or piano.



Fig. 3.4: Interior view of Holly Springs (photo by the author)

Many Sacred Harp singers prefer buildings of this style because they readily accommodate the singing square—the pews are already arranged in three inward-facing sections, and moving a few pews makes an alto section in front of the pulpit. Equally important, the all-

⁴³ See Fasola Discussions on Google Groups, “The endless search for the Holy Grail of the Perfect Sacred Harp Singing Room,” https://groups.google.com/g/fasola-discussions/c/Kpk4fqG-W5g/m/lp2Gjo_aCn8J

wooden interior with low ceilings helps direct the sound inwards. Like musical instruments with resonator boxes (violin, guitar, piano, etc.), the resonant interior of the church has as much to do with the sound of Sacred Harp as the singers themselves. Buildings like this also speak to the imagined connections to the past for singers—as Sacred Harp singing is so often characterized as *old*, this clearly old space seems an ideal match for the sound itself. Primitive Baptist churches have often been the sites of Sacred Harp singings in the Southeast, not just because of their architecture, but also the historical associations between Primitive Baptist worship music (usually unaccompanied heterophony or simple harmony), which draw deeply from a mostly oral repertoire which was frozen as notated music in the *Sacred Harp* and similar hymnals (Cobb 1978). Sacred Harp singing was never a common worship music for regular Primitive Baptist Sunday services, but many Primitive Baptist churches held Sacred Harp singings in place of formalized worship services on a regular basis.

Spaces like Holly Springs are also significant for singers who imagine a *simpler* past of a bygone era. Narratives of rural quietude in a variety of spaces—associated with everything from agricultural landscapes to mountains—referenced through signifiers ranging from Spanish moss, oppressive summer heat, fire ants, and outhouses, all resound with many singers who imagine an idealized rural past and long to experience it. Even singers who endured the heat of pre-air-conditioned buildings and only had the option of aging outhouses will relay their stories as a point of pride in their rural heritage (though they certainly don't miss them!). All of these ideas and aesthetics draw Sacred Harp singers who are seeking a connection to this experience. Rough-hewn, rural, and historic spaces like Holly Springs amplify these expectations so that for many singers, the experience of being there feels like a rite of passage—a completed pilgrimage.

As I entered the church from the darkness, I was immediately struck by the brilliance of the wooden interior, which was illuminated by aesthetically intrusive fluorescent light fixtures. I was nervous because I had only attended one singing in Georgia, and even though I would know several singers in attendance, my own southern imaginaries had turned this excursion into a southern Gothic fantasy. I immediately saw Hugh McGraw, the most well-known and respected promotor of Sacred Harp in the second half of the twentieth century; Charlene Wallace whom I recognized from online photographs; and a very tall and broad man with a goatee, a less-than-complete set of front teeth, and a small ponytail. Once again, I began to think “where am I?”, framing my expectations about the folks I encountered based on common southern stereotypes. First, Hugh McGraw welcomed me, as he knew I was “that boy from South Carolina.” At a glance, Charlene Wallace seemed dour and sinister—I imagined that she must live in a cabin in the woods. But what generated the most discomfort in this unfamiliar situation was the man with the ponytail—surely this man was the epitome of stereotype. Should I stay at the singing? Was I safe?

Although in hindsight these thoughts seem absurd, at the time they were very real. I stress them in order to point out my own exoticization and preconceived stereotyping of rural southern people. Being raised in a rural southeastern setting myself, I understood these *as* stereotypes, and recognized that they are usually false. Still, my own imagination, fed by narratives of rural southern depravation à la *Deliverance*, had placed this space and singing, which is barely out of the Atlanta metropolitan area, in an earlier time where old ways still existed in secluded segments of rural America. Over many years of singing with these people, I would learn how elegant, humorous, and thoughtful Charlene Wallace was and that the man with the ponytail, Stanley Edwards, was a complicated but accepting person who grew organic vegetables and

eventually moved to Oregon to become a marijuana farmer. Clearly, Sacred Harp at Holly Springs wasn't the rural southern experience that I had been primed to expect.

In this chapter I explore the sources and impacts of these expectations from the perspective of the imaginary. For more than a century, popular accounts of Sacred Harp have embraced two overlapping but sometimes competing tropes. One trope frames Sacred Harp as a relic of the past, focusing on antiquity, ruralness, and the strangeness of the sound in a modern context. The second trope describes Sacred Harp as welcoming and open—often using the term “democratic.” Most articles, even those with eye-catching titles like “Weird Airs Handed Down,” and “Timeless Song Style” tend to recycle the same rhetoric which has swirled around Sacred Harp even before the “old days” were old at all.⁴⁴ More recently, a flood of online articles, podcasts, radio segments, TV shorts and YouTube videos have reinforced these conceptions for contemporary audiences. They frequently follow a similar formula, beginning with a description of the singing itself, noting “primitive” and “raw” sonic qualities, followed by the history of Sacred Harp singing, its place in rural southern settings, and usually conclude by offering tips on how to find a singing and participate. These narratives, told time and again in popular media, reinforce the tropes of Sacred Harp as ancient (often described as “medieval”), roughly performed (“unschooled” and “raw”), and existing in the most rural of backwoods *deep* South locations—while simultaneously being open for access to anyone who wants to seek it out.

While these descriptions are not completely inaccurate, their prominence within discourses highlights only some aspects of the larger context of Sacred Harp singing while sensationalizing its practice. Such imaginings draw in participants from backgrounds who would likely would never encounter the singing otherwise. This is true of singers who identify as

⁴⁴ See Bealle 1997, Chapter 2.

southern as well as those who do not. Despite the frequent attempt to make a facile distinction between “southern” and “northern” singers in numerous accounts of Sacred Harp, I recognize the power of imaginaries about space and place—focused on conceptions of the South—on singers from with and without the region. These intersections—disparate people encountering Sacred Harp singing imagined through various social spaces, including discourses of belief, aesthetics, belonging, etc.—is my predominant focus in this chapter. I draw attention to the terms “rural” and “ruralness” or “rurality” because they not only denote a physical landscape, they also create a cultural landscape. As Christopher Stapel explains, “rural” constitutes “material places” and “ruralities” are the “subjective meanings [that] actors attach to a given...space” (Stapel 2013, 60).

I begin the chapter by investigating the meaning of singing spaces in Sacred Harp, starting with the physical structures where singings are held. I explore not only how singing spaces sound—but how they signify through historical and geographical imaginaries. I continue by addressing the South as an imagined concept, beginning with imaginaries of a romanticized, pre-modern South advocated beginning in the early twentieth century, and continuing to inform Sacred Harp singing into the present. Then, I turn to focus on less positive imaginaries—including tropes of isolation, the “southern Gothic,” and the “haunted South”—but I demonstrate how these superficially negative perceptions are embraced by participants and observers to exoticize Sacred Harp or to reinforce their sense of its “timelessness.” I conclude by considering what aspects of the South Sacred Harp singers prefer *not* to imagine, exploring how representations of Sacred Harp singing have been whitewashed to eliminate the music’s imbrication in the region’s troubled histories of slavery, segregation, and racism. Through each of these perspectives, I demonstrate that the South is much more than a geographical region in

the discourses surrounding Sacred Harp singing, but a potent imaginary that singers employ to understand the meaning and significance of their participation.

3.1 Singing Spaces (Churches)

Singing spaces matter immensely to Sacred Harp singers. Regardless of where they live or what community they belong to, nearly every singer will have strong ideas about their preferred singing spaces. When deciding on a new singing venue, a community must always consider cost, distance, accessibility, food preparation and serving facilities, and scheduling, but the first concern is usually how the space sounds or “sings.” Finding a space with all of these qualities can be very difficult—but when a community identifies an ideal singing space, local singers make it a point of pride to promote their singings to other communities. Even when not looking for a singing venue, I have heard numerous singers say “I bet that church sings good” or ask “I wonder what that place sounds like?” Facilities and acoustics are important, but they are not the only aspect of a space that matters. The most cherished singing spaces are not always those that “sing” the best or are the most convenient to host singings. Instead, a complicated mixture of acoustic, aesthetic, and social qualities impacts how singers understand Sacred Harp spaces. How are such spaces imagined and recreated in other contexts?

Understanding the importance of southern imaginaries in Sacred Harp singing requires engaging with the most important physical spaces in southern singing. A building’s history plays a significant role in its value as a singing space. Many of these churches have histories of singing, with annual conventions being held in them for many years, making Sacred Harp seem integral to the building itself. Some churches have active congregations which hold regular or semi-regular services and accommodate annual singings once or twice a year. Others, like Holly

Springs, are recently disbanded and now only hold singings rather than worship services. Families associated with particular church structures imbue importance to the place because of historical ties. These include family histories of attendance at the church, at annual singings, and genealogical ties apparent in cemeteries (K. Miller 2008). Families like the Iveys at Liberty Baptist in Henegar, Alabama, and the Rogers, at Hopewell Primitive Baptist in Roopville Georgia, feel special affiliation to place and church structures through years of attendance at singings, family reunions, or church services, even if they no longer live in the region (Figs. 3.5, 3.6). All these factors taken together help create the meaning of Sacred Harp singing spaces.



Fig. 3.5: Interior of Hopewell Primitive Baptist church at Roopville, Georgia. This photograph shows a large crowd of singers present for the 150th session of this singing in 2017 (photo by the author).



Fig. 3.6: Cars line the road for the 150th session of the singing at Hopwell Primitive Baptist church, Roopville, GA in 2017 (photo by the author).

Many singing locations in the Southeast are current or former Primitive Baptist churches. Sacred Harp and Primitive Baptist music practices are historically intertwined. Most Primitive Baptist congregations still sing a higher proportion of American hymns than other Christian denominations (often called “folk hymns” or what Jackson referred to as “white spirituals”). Not all early Sacred Harp composers and leading figures were Primitive Baptists, but the predominance of these tunes shows a shared heritage of rural music making. Primitive Baptists as a whole did not adopt *The Sacred Harp* or similar books as their standard hymnal—most nineteenth-century churches did not use hymnals at all but practiced lining-out (the “old way of singing”) (Temperley 1981) or used words-only books including Benjamin Lloyd’s *Primitive*

Hymns or Jesse Mercer's *Cluster of Spiritual Songs* (Crowley 1998). However, many singers associate Sacred Harp and Primitive Baptists as synonymous. There are still a sizeable number of singers in the Southeast, especially Georgia, Alabama, and Texas, who grew up in or still attend Primitive Baptist churches. *The Sacred Harp*'s hymn texts do not consistently conform to Primitive Baptist doctrines or even a single theology, for that matter (B. E. Cobb 1978), but the overlap in practices and participants has meant that numerous Sacred Harp singings in the Southeast are held in Primitive Baptist churches.

Although Primitive Baptist churches do not all conform to a homogeneous design, many of the existing structures from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries where singings are held have similar architectural features. In general, most Primitive Baptist churches, or meeting houses, are modest in size, simple in design, and lack artistic features including stained glass and paintings. They also do not have pianos or organs.⁴⁵ The Primitive Baptist denomination does not have Sunday School programs (an activity historically tied to the Missionary movement, and therefore contrary to the denomination's rigorously predestinarian theology), so their churches do not have separate classrooms and other structures designed for "missionary" work (Peacock 1989). Churches are generally of a simplified American vernacular design, rarely including decorative architectural features like columned facades or steeples (Fig. 3.7). Though fairly small structures, the plain interiors of these churches imitate other early American churches such as those of dissenting congregations in New England and along the east coast. Some buildings have a central pulpit while others have a decentralized design with the pulpit located on the longer wall of the sanctuary, which reflects the design of many dissenting churches (Rath 2004) (Fig. 3.8). The inward-facing pews to the right, left, and facing the pulpit, also accommodate the

⁴⁵ The Progressive Primitive Baptist church, a separate denomination, is an exception to this as instrumental accompaniment is part of regular worship services.

square formations of Sacred Harp singings (a few benches replace the communion table directly in front of the pulpit for the altos). For the casual or new singer, it appears that such a church, like Holly Springs in Bremen, Georgia, was made for the sole purpose of housing singings.



Fig 3.7: Exterior of Emmaus Primitive Baptist church, Carrollton, Georgia (photo by the author).



Fig. 3.8: Interior of Emmaus Primitive Baptist Church, Carrollton, Georgia (photo by the author).

These structures were designed with acoustics in mind, as they were built to accommodate speaking and preaching, which, along with praying, are the three central worship practices of Primitive Baptists⁴⁶ (Peacock 1989). Box-like wooden interiors keep sound enclosed, which makes speaking legible and amplifies singing, fully enveloping congregants in their singing even without instrumental accompaniment. I have heard several singers compare these “sound box” churches to the interior of a guitar, an ideal space to experience the music.

⁴⁶ Footwashing is often included in this list, though it is not a weekly ritual and is more closely related to communion (sacraments).

These churches tend to have an intimacy that is lacking in large, cavernous buildings and most singers prefer the acoustics of closer environments. Despite the expectation that large, reverberant spaces are ideal for choral music, for Sacred Harp singers, small settings with tight acoustics are ideal instead.

Furthermore, smaller, box-like structures accommodate the hollow square formation which is essential for Sacred Harp singing, and allow singers to better hear and see one another, facilitating a strong sense of pitch and helping to synchronizing tempo. At a particularly strong singing, singers will comment afterward how “everything seemed to lock in” or that the pulse of the music was very strong. In large spaces these effects may be lost because singers are unable to hear one another clearly. In 2011, the United Sacred Harp Musical Association’s convention was held in a huge conference room at Trevecca University in Nashville. The sound dampening ceiling and plush carpet absorbed sound instantly and the walls were much too far from the square of singers to reflect even the loudest voices. By the third row of the tenor section, just about ten feet from the center of the square, the sound had little power and most singers had difficulty keeping together or hearing the other parts.

The acoustic nature of Sacred Harp singing and the songs themselves centers around sonic feedback from other parts—singers orient themselves in relation to other sections not only by placement in the room, but by the sounds which emanate from different sides of the square. Smaller spaces, especially those where the four parts back themselves against the walls, allow each of the sections to be heard throughout the space, immersing singers completely in the sound no matter where they are sitting within the church. Benjamin Copenhaver, Scott Schoen Jr., and Michael Haberman at the University of Texas measured fourteen acoustic spaces in their study investigating what factors influence singer’s ratings of spaces (with a goal to aid singing

communities when searching for spaces for singings). While their study was quite small in relation to the number of singing spaces worldwide that Sacred Harp communities regularly use, their physical data and conclusions correlate closely with my observation of singer's acoustic preferences. They found that singers prefer older wooden rooms lacking sound-reducing materials on the ceiling, floor, or walls.

In introducing Sacred Harp in their paper they explain that churches with rural, southern origins “have come to form the acoustical ideal for singing spaces” (Copenhaver and Schoen, Jr. 2013). Aesthetics are not a major portion of their research, yet it is clear from space rankings made by singers in their study that participants' sense of a building's sound is not entirely captured by its acoustics. A contemporary urban building with ideal acoustic qualities still seems likely to rank behind sites like Holly Springs in singers' estimation. What, beyond the sound, draws singers to rural southeastern churches?

3.2 Romanticizing Southern Ruralness

For Sacred Harp singers, the rural South is much more than simply a geographical designation. The music's longtime association with an overlapping set of southern imaginaries is an essential element of its character. Descriptions of Sacred Harp singing inevitably emphasize its history in the South. Likewise, singers' own discussions of their practice will usually point to the South for authenticity, “the way it's supposed to be done,” advancing origin stories set in rural southern spaces in the era prior to the Civil War. As an American music practice, this rhetoric surrounding Sacred Harp seems to hold particular potency, but it is not unique—other music forms are also popularly situated within southern imaginaries, including bluegrass and old-time music. While Cobb (1978), Miller (2008), Clawson (2011), and others have discussed

the history of singing in the Southeast and fascinations with the South by non-southern singers, I explore this ongoing discourse as it circulates in the singing community, largely through social imaginaries.

Drawing from Miller and numerous southern studies and history scholars, I will discuss several overlapping imaginaries which support and reify many singers' interest in the South. For some, this interest is based largely on romanticized archetypes which are created through literature, actual and mythic events, and political and socio-cultural discourses.⁴⁷ While it is not possible to engage with or represent all Sacred Harp experiences, I find that many singers (both frequent, occasional, and enthusiast) share many of the same ideas about the South and about southern Sacred Harp traditions, frequently employed as markers of authenticity. Certainly, all singers do not share these ideas, in fact, some even push against them, preferring to think of Sacred Harp singing as a musical practice which has southern roots but can exist without interjection or support from southern singers. Still others would argue that acknowledging southern practices and traditions are essential to any non-southern singing group and that, in any event, they'll never *be the real thing* anyway. Whether interpreting southern singing as an arbiter of authenticity, an unattainable ideal, or a set of practices to reject, all of these viewpoints assume the existence of "southern Sacred Harp" as a real entity rather than an imaginary. What singers imagine about the South matters immensely in their experience of Sacred Harp.

The South has been the subject of a monumental amount of critiquing, philosophizing, history (re)writing, and vehement arguing about its true nature, cultural practices, or even cultural purity—all in the shadow of the Civil War. The field of southern studies has begun moving away from its roots in regional boosterism toward a broader and more critical

⁴⁷ See Watson, Griffin, and Eveleigh 2008.

understanding of what “the South” means. As early as the 1970s, some southern studies scholars called for new ways for the field to progress, mainly in regard to southern exceptionalism and the persistent consciousness of the Civil War.⁴⁸ Despite the work of these scholars—or the continuing work of academic journals like *Southern Cultures* (published by the University of North Carolina) in replacing romanticized southern mythologizing with critical accounts of the region’s diverse populations and constantly changing demographics, a cursory glance at contemporary popular culture reveals that outdated tropes of southern essentialism are still very influential in the twenty-first century United States.

Scholarly investigations of the myths of popular conceptions of “southern-ness,” however, demonstrate that like other imaginaries, the imagined South is a not just a misguided narrative, but a concept with significant social utility. Garvin Davenport’s pioneering work questioned established narratives about the South, asserting that the myth of southern-ness was extremely important in creating ideologies about place and essentialized views of southern peoples and their cultural practices. He challenged the firmly established binarism of the South as “supposedly agrarian, aristocratic, patriarchal, fixed, closed” and the North as “industrial, democratic, egalitarian, mobile, open” (Davenport Jr. 1970, 3). Indeed, these ideas still resound today, though perhaps not as explicitly. Ideas of ruralness, isolation, and backwardness still swirl in literature, film, and the popular imagination. Metaphors of “progress” and “loss” in urban settings of the North (or really urban spaces anywhere) are offered as the antithesis of the “pure” and “preserved”—if antiquated—South.

Davenport’s take on reframing the South in history and place reveals the power of myth and mythmaking in the broader consciousness. Quoting Henry Nash Smith, Davenport frames

⁴⁸ See Gerster and Cords 1974, and Davenport Jr. 1970

myth as “an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image” and that “while [they] do not always reflect empirical fact, they sometimes exert a decided influence on practical affairs, and on ways of thinking about one’s self and about others.” Myths in this instance are “not synonymous with *fiction*...they simply denote one particular kind of perception” (Davenport Jr. 1970, 5). He emphasized that “history is not so much what happened as what people believe happened,” which helps elucidate often romanticized ideas or rememberings, such as Davidson’s account in *Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden* (Davenport Jr. 1970, viii). Similarly, George Tindall wrote that “reality involves not only that which is demonstrably true but also that which one believes to be true...the idea of the South—or more appropriately, the ideas of the South—belong in large part to the order of social myth...but to place the ideas of the South in the context of mythology, of course, is not necessarily to pass judgement upon them as illusions” (Tindall 1974, 1–2). Other scholars addressed a range of specific southern myths, from the “plantation myth” to the myth of the South as nostalgic realm situated further back in time than the rest of the nation.⁴⁹

Although many scholars have addressed such problematic imaginings of the South, stereotype and clichés persist. These myths are appealing in part because they seem to offer a positive reappraisal of people and practices that have been negatively characterized in past stereotypes. Few accounts of Sacred Harp steer clear of these more positive stereotypes. Miller has documented how singers embrace narratives of southern Sacred Harp as offering access to an idyllic era of the past; Sacred Harp’s allegedly primitive, rough, but ancient sound attracts numerous newcomers (Miller 2008, 139–171).

⁴⁹ See Gerster and Cords 1974.

This conception has a much deeper history, though, dating back at least to the first half of the twentieth century, especially through the work of Donald Davidson. A member of both the Southern Agrarians and the Fugitives literary movements, Davidson promoted the South as preserving the last remnants of agrarian culture in the United States. His concept of the South was a “traditional society...that is stable, religious, more rural than urban, and politically conservative in which human needs were supplied by family, bloodkinship, clanship, folkways, custom, and community.” Tindell argues that these ideas of “traditional virtues” in the agrarian South are part of the myth-making process which pits urban cities (North) against pastoral scenes (South) where “human being existed serenely and harmoniously” (Tindall 1974, 8–9). My analysis of Davidson and Bryan’s *Singin’ Billy* folk opera in chapter 2 exemplifies these characteristics: an outsider (William Walker) from the city comes to a remote rural town, bringing education (in the form of systematic music education through shape-notes).

Davidson had already developed these themes in the article “The Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden” of 1934, one of the earliest detailed accounts of Sacred Harp singing. As Miller described, he “reproduces a classic fieldwork story” in which the observer departs from their modern home and travels back in time to a rural place where folkways are kept unchanged and separate from contemporary society (K. Miller 2008, 101). As Davidson claimed, “In the plantation country of Middle Georgia is a land which ought to be, but is not, called Eden.” His description of the singing and its spatial setting create a compelling narrative of Sacred Harp as offering a glimpse of a pre-industrial American “Eden.” As he wrote, “Whatever one may argue about the phantasmic impositions of automobile and radio upon appearances, here there is little change in the essence of things as they were in other days.” Davidson asserted Sacred Harp’s ostensibly rural character was what made it pristine:

To rediscover this tradition, one must forsake the neo-Gothic churches of the town, which reflect the fleeting prosperity of the New South and the taste of the Gilded Age, and seek out the plain rectangular ‘church houses’ that stand beside lonely graveyards, in groves of pine or oak, in the midst of old plantation lands now sometimes tilled by tenants from North Georgia or Alabama.

In Davidson’s telling, Sacred Harp was distinct even within the South, a glimpse of an earlier era that had to be experienced outside of cities and towns, where commercial success had allowed “culture” to intrude in the form of architectural pretension. For Davidson, only churches like the Primitive Baptist buildings described above seemed the proper setting for a tradition as ancient and authentic as Sacred Harp.

From the perspective of Sacred Harp singers, however, Davidson’s piece seems lacking. Details about the musical practice and the identity of the singers are almost entirely absent—“Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden” does not note what songs were sung, provide any specifics on how they were sung, or reveal anything about who was there. While the piece does not give much insight into musical practices in the 1930s, it does reveal that Davidson and his contemporaries’ main concern was documenting a supposedly disappearing way of life harbored in the southern backwoods—a way of life that offered an antidote to the vapid, disenchanted world of modernity. As Davidson concluded, perhaps, in their conservatism, the folk of Eden have been armored in nothing more formidable than innocence; but their innocence is now beginning to look like wisdom, or at the very least like a rare fidelity to which time may give some reward.”

Davidson’s article also misrepresents the character of Sacred Harp singing. Even in the early twentieth century, Sacred Harp was not an exclusively rural phenomenon. Many singings took place in courthouses in town centers across Alabama and Georgia (B. E. Cobb 1978). While the majority of singers were likely employed in agriculture, a number of prominent early twentieth-century Sacred Harp singers were urban professionals, like Birmingham lawyer Paine

Denson, or Atlanta lawyer Ted Knight (B. Cobb 2013). Some of the largest singings were held in the Southeast's biggest metropolis—Atlanta. The year following Davidson's account of "Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden," the United Sacred Harp Musical Association met in the Atlanta Auditorium Armory, where hundreds of singers came by train or streetcar and ate meals catered by an urban restaurant (Rees 2017). Although it is difficult to know the proportion of rural to urban singers and singings, Sacred Harp was clearly never an exclusively rural phenomenon.

Nearly a century later, observers are still describing Sacred Harp singing using similar conventions. Even a progressive online magazine, *The Bitter Southerner*, which aims to "uncover the American South in all its truth and complexity...to break stereotypes about the region and its people by pushing out important, difficult, uncomfortable, irreverent, witty, addictive, and always enjoyable stories that turn myths about the South inside out," still portrayed Sacred Harp singing using the rhetoric of roughhewn, forgotten, timeless culturescapes ("The Bitter Southerner, 'About'" n.d.). The article "Let Everybody Sing," which attracted considerable attention among Sacred Harp singers because of its striking photographs by singer Johnathon Kelso, describes Sacred Harp in romanticized language that emphasizes its connections to the past. Although the article notes the shifting social dynamics of contemporary singings, essentializing descriptions abound, such as the music feeling "harmonious, but in a much more primitive way," or that Sacred Harp descends "deep in the antebellum bowels of southern history" and that every southerner will unconsciously recognize it as part of their "deepest past" (Reece 2016). The manner in which the editors employed Kelso's photography reinforces this conception by illustrating southern Sacred Harp singings with imagery that conforms to this perspective—country dirt roads, vintage pickup trucks, singers wearing jeans, boots, and overalls—all fitting tropes so commonly associated with the imagined "old-timey"

South. Though not stated explicitly, the illustrations convey a sentiments similar to Davidson's argument that "one must forsake the neo-Gothic churches of the town" in order to experience authentic Sacred Harp.

Contemporary representations of Sacred Harp singing have also been influenced by a body of literature called "Grit Lit," which plays up the "rough South" aesthetic while reinforcing tropes already present in the work of the Southern Agrarians. Indeed, this genre has become popular with highly successful books like *Hillbilly Elegy*, which offer compelling imagery feeding on this imaginary, but often reinforcing stereotypes and exaggerated socio-political drama.⁵⁰ Zackary Vernon describes Grit Lit as a genre obsessed with conceptions of authenticity:

The burgeoning success of Grit Lit is a direct result of a regional and national obsession with authenticity. In the midst of global homogenization, readers are increasingly drawn to narratives about enclaves that have or appear to have retained certain hallmarks of cultural distinctiveness. In the South, one such enclave—be it a physical, social, or class-based space—is the "Rough South," and fictional narratives purportedly reflecting its authenticity appear tantalizing to audiences comprised predominantly of educated and middle-class consumers... While [the] working-class narratives expand the literary canon, they also seem to codify a particular working-class identity in the name of southern authenticity (Vernon 2016, p.78).

Likewise, many descriptions of Sacred Harp singing reflect a fascination with and need for southern authenticity. The many descriptions of singings by George Pullen Jackson and Donald Davidson from the 1930s to recent magazine articles all highlight the sheer division between the Sacred Harp "folk," the rural South, and urban settings which many travel from to sing.⁵¹ For many, the experience of traveling to singings in rural (southern) spaces, both in music/sound and place, are like going back in time. As Miller describes, singers "drive down twisting country roads that become narrower and turn to gravel to reach one-room churches. The park near rows

⁵⁰ See *Appalachian Reckoning*, eds. Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll, 2019.

⁵¹ I've described the writings by Jackson and Davidson throughout this dissertation.

of nineteenth-century gravestones, some decorated with Confederate flags, and emerge into moist summer heart that pulses with the swell of unaccompanied voices” (K. Miller 2008, 139). Such journeys “back in time” from urban to rural settings relate to Raymond Williams’ understanding of the country representing ways of the past, which are “old,” “natural,” and “human,” and the city as the future or ways of “progress, modernism, and development.” Williams describes that “in what is then a tension, a present experienced as tension, we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses...” (Williams 1975, 297). Likewise, Jackson Lears’ thesis of an “antimodern quest for authenticity” contributes to an understanding of why so many observers and participants of Sacred Harp focus on rural spaces, “simpler times,” or any number of related tropes of authenticity.⁵²

As Miller notes, “searches for the ancient, exotic, primitive, and out-of-the-way are still very much alive and meaningful for some Sacred Harp singers” (K. Miller 2008, 143). While many singers have made personal connections with those in other locations (such as Minnesota to Georgia), the journey from densely populated urban areas to sparse, rural spaces has become a rite of passage or a point of pride for many singers. As he was about to leave New York City, singer Jim Pfau of Minneapolis posted online that “we are starting today in a city of over 8 million people. Our destination is Hoboken, Georgia, a town of 463, although we’ll spend the night in nearby Waycross, a veritable metropolis of over 14,000 (Towns with populations of 463 rarely have hotels).”⁵³ Moving between urban and rural spaces shows how singers are able to shift between seemingly different social situations and that they are welcome and *able* to do this demonstrates their acceptance as an authentic Sacred Harp singer. Yet for many singers, access

⁵² See Lears 1981, pp xv-xx.

⁵³ Facebook post, Jim Pfau, October 19, 2012.

Pfau, Jim. 2012. “We are starting today in a city with over 8 million people.” Facebook, October 19, 2012. <https://www.facebook.com/jim.pfau/posts/10100332469500275>.

to these spaces is not just a way to “cross the cultural divide” between city and country, but a way to reconcile modern/post-modern anxieties of the perceived dangers of (southern) rural or “natural” spaces and those of safe and “progressive” spaces.

3.3 Isolation and the Southern Gothic

Ruralness can also have a dark side in the popular imagination. Although the Southern Agrarians’ romanticized vision of ruralness was associated with positive values, another southern imaginary reframes “rural” as “isolated,” and reinterprets historicizing views of a golden “bygone era” by inferring that the rural South might harbor backward social views or even terrors of an earlier age. Frequently in the context of Sacred Harp singing, however, these conceptions are not imagined as negative qualities in need of reform, but as exciting qualities that exoticize the experience of singing in the South and add a sense of compelling intrigue to the understanding of Sacred Harp as a window back in time.

Of course, Sacred Harp singers have never been isolated in the ways the popular imagination frames them. Both Campbell (1997) and Karlsberg (2015) argue that while groups may have lived and sung in rural spaces, they were in clearly in contact with contemporary surroundings and society. For example, the *Musical Million*, an extremely popular magazine of all things music and literature in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, congratulated a very large turnout of singers at the Yalabusha Mississippi Singing Convention and were surprised they still used the *Sacred Harp* songbook (as opposed to new convention books) (G. J. Campbell 1997, 74). I engage with these stories of rural spaces, many which engender anxieties of ruralness, because they echo larger, general narratives about the South and ruralness; narratives that also support ideas about cultural purity and authenticity. Discussions of the “rural

South” inevitably still bring up images of poverty, conservatism, backwardness, isolation, and therefore danger in the popular imagination. While many singers from outside the Southeast are not fearful of traveling there to sing, images and stories of rural places frequently circulate, from comical gas station encounters to getting lost in the woods on the way to a singing.

Rather than making Sacred Harp seem off-putting or unsafe, however, imaginaries of rural southern isolation situate the music practice in an appealingly exotic space. Tales of strange encounters, perilous journeys, and remote locations reinforce the conception of Sacred Harp singing as a glimpse of an earlier age, and amplify various other southern imaginaries associated with the tradition. Indeed, the more isolated and inaccessible a singing is, the more it seems to encapsulate the vision of this imagined South.

The Labor Day Singing at Shoal Creek Church (Fig. 3.9) in the Talladega National Forest in eastern Alabama (Fig. 3.10) is an iconic example of a remote singing, “miles removed from civilization” (Camper 2014). The history of the building itself, a log structure with no electricity or plumbing, includes few surviving written records and exists as part of a settlement which, in the sensationalist language of local historian Joseph M. Jones, “did not last long as a map destination...[because] it was just too hard to make a living in the hills and hollows of the mountainous country, which became best known for its whiskey” (Jones 2009, 5). The opening of the documentary *Awake My Soul: The Story of the Sacred Harp* (2006) transports the viewer back in time as the camera moves down the red dirt road through the forest and arrives at the old church. The singing is hardly typical—singers are inconvenienced by the lack of artificial light, air conditioning, and modern bathrooms—but the church’s isolation makes singing there seem, as *Awake My Soul* suggests, like an eminently authentic experience of Sacred Harp.



Fig. 3.9: Shoal Creek Church in the Talladega National Forest, Alabama (photo by the author).



Fig 3.10: Shoal Creek church tucked into the pine woods of the Talladega National Forest, Alabama (photo by the author).

One of the archetypal narratives that singers tell in framing a singing as “authentic” is the story of getting lost on a way because the location was so remote. Before smartphones became ubiquitous, many singers discussed the necessity of a “sings map” or a sort of online repository of longitude/latitude coordinates for the now mostly defunct standalone GPS units. Even as late as 2017, discussions on the Fasola⁵⁴ listserv called for some sort of sings map because so many places, especially in the rural Southeast, were still impossible to find: “your GPS won’t find the church” is a common statement that I hear at many out-of-the-way places in Alabama and Georgia. As a *Paste* magazine article on Sacred Harp in Alabama put it, “Folks drive for hours to all-day sings...at rustic gravel-road churches...If you’re searching for one, Google Maps will only get you so far” (Kiefer 2008, 45). For many years, singers included hand-drawn maps on flyers for annual conventions and all-day sings, adding to the off-the-grid sense of singing locations. Indeed, some locations were difficult to locate, though as southern sings began to accommodate the broader community, local convention officers would create road signs to direct vehicles down some of the more confusing byways. One of the best examples of this is the well-known handmade sign for the Lookout Mountain Convention at Pine Grove near Collinsville, Alabama—the sign itself signals a bygone era for many visitors (Fig. 3.11). In an article in *Southern Cultures* journal, David Carlton notes his first trip to Pine Grove was in “deep woods” and he “began to wonder if [was] in the right place at the right time,” and “why would anyone come up here?” (Carlton 2003, 50).

⁵⁴ Fasola refers to the shapes used in Sacred Harp notation—Sacred Harp is sometimes called “fasola” singing.



Fig. 3.11: “Sing” sign on the way to Pine Grove church near Collinsville, Alabama (photo courtesy of Darrell Swarens).

Another location, Wilson’s Chapel outside Carrollton, Georgia, always seemed a difficult singing to find, even with a GPS. Only a few miles outside Carrollton, a medium-sized town in west Georgia with a population of about 27,000, just an hour from Atlanta, Wilson’s Chapel is the home to Chattahoochee Convention, the oldest extant Sacred Harp convention (Fig. 3.12). My earliest visits there always seemed dizzying with curvy roads and the final dirt road which dead ends at a large reservoir. While I always felt lost when going to the Chattahoochee, this was all part of my imagining of a rural place; I didn’t really know where it was, I could not easily locate it on the GPS (before smartphones), and I had heard many times how far in the woods the church was. In recent years I realized that the church was not far from the town itself and now,

though the chapel's only function is to house this convention, it is clearly a designated place location in Google Maps. In fact, despite the “deep in the woods” setting the church occupies, Google Maps indicates that there are two Starbucks' locations within a fifteen-minute drive.



Fig. 3.12: Exterior of Wilson's Chapel, outside Carrollton, Georgia (photo by the author).

Yet Wilson's Chapel and other churches still impress visitors as being far off the beaten path. Regardless of how isolated they truly are, sites like Wilson's Chapel are *imagined* as being far from urban spaces—and, concomitantly, far from the *modern* world. Wilson's Chapel still has outhouses (although portable toilets are brought in for the singing) and a rather untidy dwelling across the dirt road from the church further conveys the sense of a “hillbilly” landscape (Fig. 3.13). Similarly, a stop sign along the road to Holly Springs (which I mentioned in the

opening sketch) had been vandalized with a Confederate flag sticker which greeted (or frightened) visitors for several years. Though the sticker had no apparent connection with the church, visitors could draw their own conclusions about the locals they were about to sing with.



Fig. 3.13: Outhouse at Wilson's Chapel outside Carrollton, Georgia (photo by the author).

This imagery contributes to what Bernice Murphy calls the “rural gothic in American popular culture” that draws from literary genres, playing on the sense of difference and fear evoked by rural settings, usually by the urban elite (B. M. Murphy 2013). Ultimately, it stems from early and pioneer American anxieties of “wilderness,” which are constructions that delineate “civilization” and “savagery,” paralleling colonial conquests of Indigenous North America (Nash 2001). Murphy analyzes many popular films, such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) to *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), showing how rural spaces are represented as dangerous and mysterious sites whose inhabitants maintain backward ways of living that threaten educated, urban, “modern” subjects.

Drawing from literary scholars, Murphy asserts that the rural gothic in American popular culture, particular in stories of the South, becomes a metaphor for the roughest and the truest form of American culture. In addition, the idea of the “roughneck” or “white trash” protagonist in these films, who stems from Scots-Irish settlers (a stand-in for whiteness that I will address in more detail in chapter five), is imagined as dangerous, aggressive, and hostile to outsiders. These people become the “‘Other’ to the urban, industrialized, and ‘civilized’ North” (B. M. Murphy 2013, 138). As Richard Gray describes, “formulation has much in common with the relationship between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’... South and North end up functioning rather like a photograph and its negative, in a mutually determining, reciprocally defining relationship: the South is, in these circumstances, whatever the North is not, and vice versa” (Gray 2004, 4).

While I never encountered singings that resembled *Deliverance* (1972) or *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964), such “rural gothic” narratives influence descriptions of Sacred Harp. Many discursive accounts highlight “backwoods” ideologies, from “weird” singing with unintelligible gibberish (shape-notes) to hidden churches down long dirt roads (Fig. 3.14). The 2008 article on

Sacred Harp in *Paste* magazine, “Shout and Sing the Good Old Way,” which attended the release of the documentary *Awake My Soul*, its subsequent indie CD of the same name, and the rising popularity among urban hipsters, clearly situates Liberty Baptist Church in Henagar, Alabama in this same framework. The people and musical practices of the area are overshadowed by the foregrounding of “Sand Mountain [as] a haunted house of a place,” highlighting snake handling from the well-known 1995 book by Dennis Covington (*Salvation on Sand Mountain*) and concluding with “the area is nicknamed ‘Meth Mountain’ for obvious (and frightening) reasons” (Kiefer 2008, 47).



Fig. 3.14: Sardis Primitive Baptist church seen by car headlights. Folkston, Georgia (photo by the author).

Such narratives create and perpetuate social imaginaries that can inspire genuine unease or even fear in outsiders. The anecdote about my discomfort with imagined rural spaces at the beginning of this chapter is hardly unique. Several singers have shared their sense of concern,

before traveling to a southern singing, that the journey could be dangerous. Although these sorts of stories are usually shared as humorous recollections among singers whose subsequent experience revealed that the perceived dangers were imaginary, the initial fear could still seem very real. After attending Camp Fasola for the first time in 2007, I learned that another young participant from Boston was anxious prior to his first trip to sing Sacred Harp in the Southeast. His travel companions told me that he was concerned that as a young liberal Jewish man from the North, he might be harassed by local country boys, so much so that he secretly packed a pocketknife for added security. Although the dangers did not materialize—he enjoyed the trip and would later spend numerous summers singing Sacred Harp in Alabama and Georgia—his initial fear was very real even if unwarranted.

3.4 Haunted South

Paste magazine's description of Sand Mountain as a "haunted house of a place" also references another overlapping set of southern imaginaries that situate Sacred Harp in an appealingly exoticized past—through the language of haunting and horror. This vision of the rural gothic is also mediated through representations in literature and film. In particular, Sacred Harp singing seems to resonate with the aesthetic conventions of the folk horror film genre. The most well-known of these is *The Wicker Man* (1973), a British film about the ritual sacrifice of a Christian policeman by modern pagans living on an isolated Scottish island. As a genre, folk horror emerged in British film, but it has grown to encompass southern, rural gothic horror. Adam Scovell defines folk horror as having four main elements: rural locations, isolated groups, skewed morals or beliefs, and violent supernatural happenings (Scovell 2017). These characteristics clearly do not describe the practice of Sacred Harp singing, but elements of them

inform the broader contexts of participant's understanding of Sacred Harp within the context of the rural South, including in the ways in which contemporary singers understand the music's historical origins.

Clare Button discusses this in the context of place in British traditional songs that stem from the second folk revival and evoke “a nostalgic ‘new Albion’ haunted by the weird and primal” (Button 2018, 260). Primarily discussing the great wave of folk music collecting in England in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries and the interest in ballad singing in the folk revival, Button states that English song was full of place-making, haunted by the “growing industrial landscape,” “destruction of the rural,” and “questions about interpretations of natural and supernatural phenomena” (Button 2018, 262). In addition, she draws from the idea of “hauntology,” a term originally coined by Derrida,⁵⁵ in which “traditional song can be used both to haunt and to comment on haunting; to evoke a place, but also to discuss a place” (Button 2018, 267). Mark Fisher theorizes hauntology in music as “the staining of particular places with time—albeit a time that is out of joint” (thehauntologicalsociety n.d.).⁵⁶ Literary discussions of place are important in this example because of the relationships between growing conceptions of the Industrial Revolution as *losing* place (a diminishing countryside) and Victorian sentiments of the natural world. Many hymn texts that specify “rural imagery [and] highlight larger cultural responses to industrialization” relate to this discourse (Gomulkiewicz 2015).

Mirroring Donald Davidson's “Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden,” [English] “folk songs were frequently painted as gallant ‘survivors’ from an idyllic golden age, with the ‘haunted place’ a symbol both of lost innocence and a spur to try to reclaim it” (Button 2018, 262–63).

⁵⁵ See (Derrida 1994).

⁵⁶ Mark Fisher's talk was part of the Colloquium for Unpopular Culture & NYU's Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program event: “There Are Non-Times As Well As Non-Places: Reflections On Hauntology, a talk by Mark Fisher.” Wednesday 4th of May 2011, 6:30pm, Room 471, 20 Cooper Square, New York, NY and is available on [SoundCloud](#).

Paralleling the sentiments of George Pullen Jackson, English folk song collector Cecil Sharp found that this music had “historical and archaeological value” (Sharp 1907, 140) while being kept “in the heathen kingdoms and the wilder parts” (Sharp and Marson 1904, xi).

Sacred Harp, folk horror, and the rural gothic all intersect in surprising ways, but not at the outset for most American singers. Chris Brown and Judy Whiting from West Yorkshire, as well as other English singers, have described their initial interest in Sacred Harp as coming not through American folk music recordings but by those of the Watsons and similar groups. The Watsons, a vocal quartet from Yorkshire, are ubiquitous in the English folk revival and still stand as one of the most important folk music groups. Their album *Sound, Sound Your Instruments of Joy* (1977) was an essential connector for a number of the English singers. Whether they heard this album first or connected the Sacred Harp style with a folk music they were familiar with, the Watsons became a common point of discussion between American and British Sacred Harp singers. In fact, the 1977 album included several tunes from the *Sacred Harp* which the Watsons were introduced to by Buell Cobb from Alabama while attending the 1976 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C. (B. E. Cobb 2014, 60–62).

The songs from this album, along with similar groups such as Swan’s Way, shared a number of Sacred Harp tunes and similar musical styles effectively inserting Sacred Harp, unbeknownst to the general listening public, into the broader British folk revival. At the same time, English folk song and the folk horror genres paralleled one another, becoming intertwined in themes of isolation, ruralness, ancient ritual and the occult. As Button describes, Sharp’s descriptions “became the shadowy counterpart to the ‘new Albion’ of the second revival...the sleeve notes to The Watsons’ 1965 album of calendar custom songs, *Frost and Fire*, skillfully conjure images of our ancestors dressing in green leave or animal skins to perform their magic”

(Button 2018, 264). The album also includes a version of “John Barleycorn,” a ballad text associated with pagan ritual, and in the case of the Watsons, closely follows the tune PILGRIM in the *Sacred Harp* (Winkler 1990, 74). “John Barleycorn” also appears with the tune wondrous love in Davidson and Bryan’s *Singin’ Billy* folk opera, clearly asserting the relationship between ancient practices of the supposed “old country” and its preservation in the rural South.⁵⁷ The Watsons were not only influential on British singers. In an interesting double trans-Atlantic voyage, the Watsons found *Sacred Harp*—and then thirty-five years later, a shape-note book published in the United States, the *Shenandoah Harmony* (2013), included an arrangement of “The Good Old Way” from their 1977 album.

The Watsons and other British folk performers’ use of *Sacred Harp* situates it within the broader discursive field of pre-modern Euro-American culture that the folk horror genre draws from. Other aspects of *Sacred Harp* singing, including the music’s aesthetic quality and the subjects of its hymn texts, seem to reinforce this connection. Unlike most contemporary Christian hymnals, the *Sacred Harp* includes many minor tunes. As minor music has become more associated with sadness, fear, and mourning, minor tunes in the *Sacred Harp* strike listeners in ways that their original composers may not have intended. Davidson described this dichotomy in his “*Sacred Harp in the Land of Eden*.” “The next song was in a minor key—a solemn and plaintive echo, with as much strength as mournfulness in it, of times when the songs of the faith had not brightened up into the persevering optimism of the exclusively major modes” (Davidson 1934, 211).

This sense of austerity is also reinforced in the texts of many of the hymns. Many singers take it as a point of pride that the texts in *The Sacred Harp* contrast with those in most

⁵⁷ The connections between shape-note tunes, ballads, and other melodies from the British Isles is extremely common in *Sacred Harp* discourse. I discuss this in relation to the broader “Celtic imaginary” in chapter five.

contemporary hymnals. Texts in these books tend to be taken from earlier sources which predate sweeter-sounding gospel music and concentrate on poetic sentiments in existence before the Second Great Awakening (Bruce Jr. 1981). Songs including DISTRESS and MELANCHOLY DAY, among many others, include textual passages that many describe as “dark,” “doleful,” “haunting, ancient” (K. Miller 2008). Such somber texts are at odds with the more optimistic tenor of hymns favored by many contemporary Christian denominations; many new singers find these texts unsettling, while experienced singers may smile as they blissfully sing songs about death.⁵⁸

DISTRESS

*So fades the lovely blooming flow’r,
Frail, smiling solace of an hour;
So soon our transient comforts fly,
And pleasure only blooms to die.*
- words by Anne Steele, 1760

MELANCHOLY DAY

*Death, ‘tis a melancholy day,
To those who have no God,
When the poor soul is forced away,
To seek her last abode.
In vain to heav’n she lifts her eyes,
For guilt, a heavy chain,
Still drags her downward from the skies,
To darkness, fire and pain.*
- words by Isaac Watts, 1709

I have heard some singers describe these songs as “scary” or “spooky,” although these are generally considered positive qualities. Reed Schilbach from Washington explained to me that she loves “spooky songs,” both in text and tune. Her favorite text is from “The Lone

⁵⁸ One paper, “Death in Sacred Harp,” analyzed the “death lyrics” of the *Sacred Harp* as a sort of evangelical tool which singers use to “convert” newcomers to “their religion.” See Tilley 2007.

Pilgrim” (“and in a low whisper I heard something say”), which she finds compellingly eerie (p.c. February 2022). In a video presentation, she added, “there’s a physiological response to those spooky songs that’s part of the pleasure of singing this music...there is a lot of spiritual food in that music” (Northwest Folklife 2011, 0:52). Clarissa Fetrow posted online that they and a small group venture out into the rain around Halloween to sing “creepy-sounding songs for about an hour,” an activity that they considered worth the price of a new songbook since theirs was ruined by the weather.⁵⁹ Mike McGonigal of *Wondering Sound* expressed that he was “positively transported” by “melodies that are subtle, dirge-y, counterpoint-heavy,” harmonies that are “supernatural, booming, sepulchral...that [are] otherworldly, wholly strange, alien-sounding, and delightful” (McGonigal 2005).

Some singers take special delight in celebrating the “haunted” character of the *The Sacred Harp*. Many singers gather on or around Halloween to sing the “spooky shapenote songs,” often accompanied by dressing up in costumes that reference a song lyric or title. This has become a favorite activity of singers in several communities, with prominent gatherings occurring in Atlanta, New York City, and Berlin. In this instance, the song lyrics to PLENARY, “harp from the tombs the doleful sound,” and many others, serve as the nexus of a gothic aesthetic and broader Christian worldviews. The Berlin Sacred Harp singers’ Instagram account also posted an image from a late Medieval painting, which, taken out of its original context, looks uncannily like a group of skeletons at a Sacred Harp singing (Fig. 3.15). This repurposed artwork pulls together the images of the “creepy songs” and McGonigal’s intentional references to the Medieval (Gothic) era.

⁵⁹ Facebook post, Sacred Harp Friends group, Clarissa Fetrow, November 1, 20201.

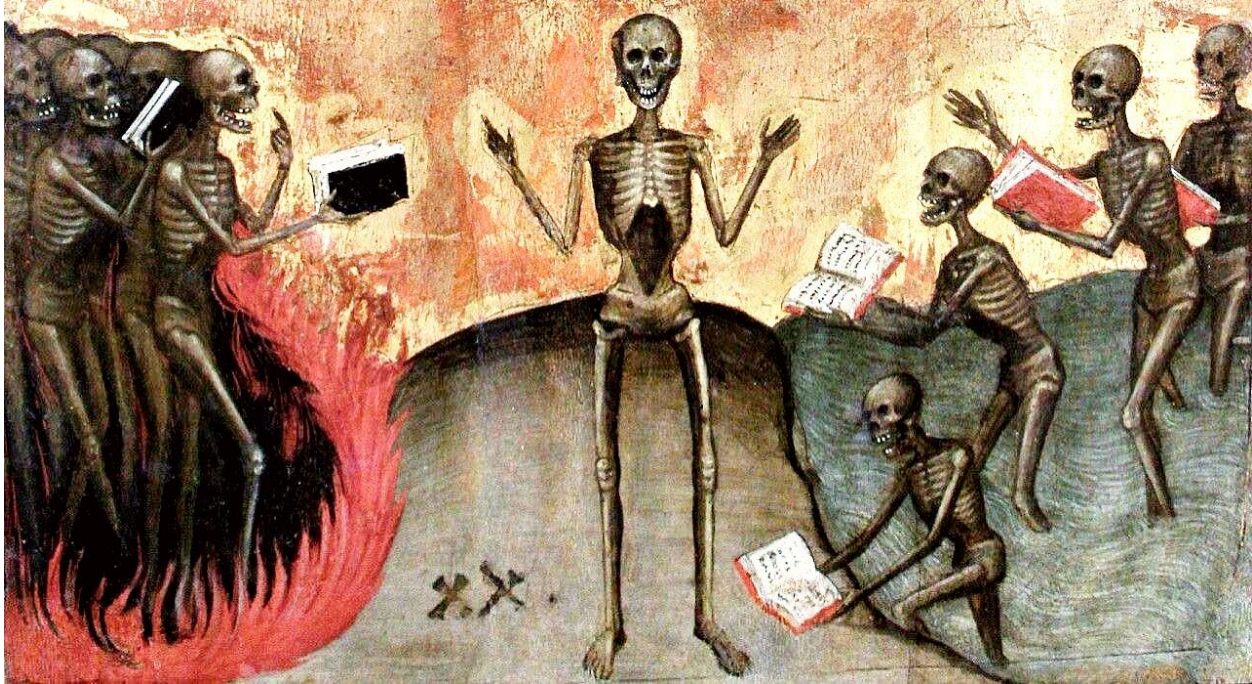


Fig. 3.15: *Polyptych of the Apocalypse*, Jacobello Albergino, ca. 1360 (public domain).

Death is a frequent topic of the hymns in *The Sacred Harp* and of discussion at Sacred Harp singings. At most singings, the topic is treated reverentially, as in the memorial lesson, a pause during the day of singing in which appointed speakers are invited to give a few comments in memory of the deceased of the past year and those who are unable to attend. In memorializing, death becomes real and present, which differs from most regular church services where emphasis is placed on contemplation or grace. Miller discusses memorial lessons as “public performances of grief.” She adds that as newcomers witness them they “may inspire empathy even in those who don’t know any of the names on the memorial lists...Speakers invite the class to prepare themselves for the day when their own loved ones are missing from the square, they encourage *preemptive* nostalgia as a prelude to grief. To earn the right to this nostalgia, newcomers must invest themselves in the task of perpetuating the singing tradition” (K. Miller 2008, 63). Such empathy arises between singers of disparate backgrounds at the point where religious dogma and spiritual freedom meet on common ground; the totalizing human experiences of death and loss.

Many Sacred Harp singers see this frank approach to mortality as a healthy alternative to the hushed avoidance of the topic in most contemporary discourse. And many singers see *The Sacred Harp*'s direct, unflinching treatment of death as a liberating experience. This sense of confronting death with a positive perspective is especially pronounced in hymns that combine upbeat, even playful melodies with doleful, death-centered texts. The gospel-tinged MORNING SUN, for example, strikes many new singers as a jarringly discordant combination of a bouncy, cheerful tune, and a solemn, even morbid text. Mike McGonigal described it as strangely "cheery and Munchkin-happy," considering its subject (McGonigal 2005).

Perhaps the best example of this is a c. 1960 recording by Whit Denson, whose father, S.M. Denson, composed the song. The "one-voice quartet of Whit Denson," who recorded himself singing all four parts and playing the piano in his rendition of "New Morning Sun,"⁶⁰ is often cited by Sacred Harp singers as the brightest, cheeriest singing about death.

MORNING SUN

*Youth, like the spring, will soon be gone,
By fleeting time or conqu'ring death
Your morning sun may set at noon,
And leave you ever in the dark⁶¹
Your sparkling eyes and blooming cheeks
Must wither like the blasted rose;
The coffin, earth, and winding sheet
Will soon your active limbs enclose.*
- words from *The New England Sunday School Hymn Book*, 1830

A similarly upbeat recording of a solemn text, WEeping MARY, was featured in the remake of the southern gothic film *The Ladykillers* (2004). It accompanies the accidental death

⁶⁰ Recording available on *I Belong to This Band: Eighty-Five Years of Sacred Harp Recordings* 2006 and [S. Whit Denson – A One-Voice Quartet – New Morning Sun \(Audio Archive\)](#)

⁶¹ The text is slightly altered in Denson's recording

of one of the homicidal criminals in the story. On his way to murder the sleeping Marva Munson, “the General” is frightened by a cuckoo clock with a spring-loaded Jesus figure—through several comical interruptions, he falls down the stairs to his death all while “Weeping Mary” plays on an unseen phonograph. This recording, performed by the Roswell (Atlanta) Sacred Harp Quartet in 1940, along with “New Morning Sun,” sonically points to contemporary fascinations with the disembodied voices of singers past: the scratchy sounds of shellac discs, singing styles from a previous era, and the pairing of somber texts and melodies with ragtime appeal engender images of a bygone era so often associated with the romanticized rural South.⁶² As Bouvéron describes while developing a sense of southern gothic music from southern gothic literature, “The description of a mysterious and eerie atmosphere often evoked a supernatural presence. The frontiers between past and present, dream and reality, sanity and madness, are blurry” (Bouvéron 2017, 10). Similarly, Gordon Campbell states that these older recordings, including Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), demonstrate the “old, weird America” and “came from a more spacious time in America’s cultural history when music making...hinted at a world that was vast and mysterious” (Campbell 2021). Greil Marcus’s “old, weird America” explains that the recordings in Smith’s anthology, including Sacred Harp singers from Alabama, created “the bizarre [and] made the familiar strange, the never known into the forgotten, and the forgotten into a collective memory that teased [at the] listener’s conscious mind” (Marcus 1997, 95).

In at least one instance, shape-note singing has been employed directly within the folk horror genre, in the 2014 American Cartoon Network animated series *Over the Garden Wall*. The story centers around two characters, Wirt and Gregory, who are lost in the woods. Ten

⁶² See the *I Belong to This Band: Eighty-Five Years of Sacred Harp Recordings* for recordings of both songs, also available at [Dust-to-Digital’s Bandcamp site](#).

episodes detail the journey of the characters, borrowing from folktales, myths, and “old wives’ tales that have been passed down throughout the years” (“Over the Garden Wall” n.d.). In addition, the nostalgia-driven animation style hearkens back to cartoons from the 1920s–50s (Ramsey 2016). The series’ themes and imagery are firmly within the folk horror genre, with a distinctly New England perspective. In fact, numerous scholars writing in *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* (2018), together with Bernice Murphy in *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*, cite the fiction of Shirley Jackson (*The Witchcraft of Salem Village*, 1956) in the U.S. along with works by H.P. Lovecraft and M.R. James as important threads in the rural gothic/folk horror thread. *Over the Garden Wall* seems a blending of the two, with references to English folk traditions (maypoles), early American imagery (skulls from eighteenth-century headstones), and the imagined nostalgia of autumn in an early New England village. In a strangely empty town, Wirt and Gregory stumble across a harvest festival happening in a barn—drawn by lively music, a shape-note tune accompanying figures wearing pumpkins over their heads, dancing around a large pumpkin-topped maypole.

The song, titled “Pottsville,” describes ritual and play in Pottsville town in self-consciously antiquated language. More than just incidental music, the song, composed by Brandon Armstrong, Joshua Kaufman, and Justin Rubenstein was also made available in sheet music online. While not written by recognized shape-note composers, the song employs all the hallmarks of a traditional shape-note composition; it is arranged in four lines using the four-shape system, with relatively independent melodic contours in each of the four parts. In addition, it conforms to the eighteenth–nineteenth-century New England convention of naming tunes after cities, and includes the metrical designation in the title line (“C.M.” for common meter), also a nod to shape-note books of the era. The song leverages the well-known association of historical

rural New England and shape-note singing, promoted by groups like Vermont's Village Harmony, to evoke an imagined early New England through the nostalgic production of place. The Vermont-based folk group Cricket Blue and friends released a cover of the song and stated that the song and show "resonate with...that autumnal New England folktale witchy aesthetic" (p.c., Taylor Smith, March 2022).⁶³ In this case, shape-note singing speaks through the same narratives of imagined ruralness and isolation, but from the perspective of New England rather than southern singers. In *Over the Garden Wall*, shape-note singing does not merely signal ruralness and timelessness, but employs them to reinforce its chilling folk horror plot: the dancing pumpkins are eventually revealed to contain not living humans, but skeletons.

Sacred Harp singing as practiced within the established context of singing conventions is not framed as "haunted" or "gothic"—even singers who find the discordance between cheerful tunes and somber texts amusing respect the religious origins of the hymns, and discussions of creepy lyrics or haunted places generally happen outside of singings themselves. Yet in the broader discourse surrounding Sacred Harp, these discussions still have an important influence on how singers understand the social and physical spaces their music occupies, and making shape-note music a popular signifier of a gothic or haunted past. In each of the respects I have discussed thus far, Sacred Harp's association with grief, melancholy, and troubled histories have mostly positive connotations, adding a compelling sense of an exotic, intriguing past to the music's meaning. In other respects, however, singers and observers are quick to distance their musical practice from histories of pain—especially its historical place within the context of race and history in the Southeast.

⁶³ See Cricket Blue's cover of "Pottsville" at <https://youtu.be/s54joYaUDGw>.

3.5 Whitewashing Imaginaries

One of the challenges of situating Sacred Harp within a southern imaginary is addressing a contested topic that is pervasive throughout histories, representations, and conceptions of the South: race. Since the early twentieth century, accounts of Sacred Harp singing have either side-stepped or downplayed the issue, creating an imagined space of racial harmony for Sacred Harp to inhabit, ignoring the complicated ways in which race has been central to the experience of Sacred Harp since its origins—frequently in expressions that supported racist ideologies and social practices. Much of Sacred Harp’s southern imaginary has been whitewashed.

Southern myth-making in the context of the rural frequently imagines white spaces. From older scholarship on southern regionalism to recent popular pieces on southern culture, many narratives frame the rural as the domain of Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Celtic, Scots-Irish, etc., erasing the experiences of people of color across the Southeast. While much contemporary literature about non-white communities across the Southeast exists, the framing of rural spaces still exists largely in the domain of whiteness. Many singers and observers of Sacred Harp have framed the music as the cultural property of Scots-Irish settlers and their descendants in the so-called “upland South,” a term which George Pullen Jackson used to frame a particular area with a racial and cultural heritage preserved by isolation. As Karlsberg notes, Jackson’s findings are “not a natural reflection of [his] focus on white Sacred Harp singers, but a consequence of the limited geographical reach of his fieldwork, which centered on overwhelmingly white areas, and the irrelevance of black singers to his commitment to representing Sacred Harp singing as a white potential wellspring of a new American culture as an alternative to and precursor of black spirituals” (J. P. Karlsberg 2015, 155).

Jackson situates Sacred Harp singing as a white rural practice, descending from European idioms, and only briefly attends to African American Sacred Harp communities, describing them as simply an adaptation of an originally white musical form. Later scholars, including Grady McWhiney (who I discuss in chapter five), borrowed this narrative and pushed it further to assert the socio-cultural history of an essentialized “upland southern white” identity in explaining the origin of the Civil War and the current character of political discourses in the region. In both Jackson’s romanticized agrarianism and McWhiney’s militant vision of Anglo-Celtic heritage, Sacred Harp is characterized as a white practice—any hint of racial complexity and its attendant histories of oppression and violence are simply made irrelevant. This perspective prevailed during the early expansion of Sacred Harp singing outside of the Southeast, when non-Southern audiences were highly attuned to the racial dynamics of the South during the latter part of the Civil Rights movement. When Leonard Spencer, a singer from Massachusetts, attended the Georgia State Sacred Harp Convention in 1966, his hosts (all of whom were white) told him that there were “practically no” African Americans living in the areas he visited—despite the fact that the singing was held just south of Carrollton, Georgia, a city with a sizeable Black community. His observation that white Sacred Harp singers demonstrated “the usual deep-set, automatic and unselfconscious prejudice” against African Americans is a rare recognition among singers of the era that Sacred Harp existed in a world of racial conflict (Spencer, 1966, 47). His hosts’ assertion that there were no African Americans living in the area seems like an attempt to whitewash the fact that Black singers simply would not have been welcome at their singings.

There were, of course, also African American Sacred Harp singers in multiple communities in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas; however, they were nearly unknown to most white singers of the era. The most prominent African-American community of singers

lived in the Wiregrass region of south Alabama, around the towns of Ozark and Dothan.⁶⁴ This community uses the Cooper revision of the *Sacred Harp* and the small songbook, *The Colored Sacred Harp*, produced by local singer Judge Jackson in 1934. Black and white singers in Alabama and Georgia were certainly aware of one another through the twentieth century, but their singings were effectively segregated: prominent white leaders might visit Black singings, but mostly unspoken social codes meant that Black singers generally did not lead songs at white singings. Furthermore, the publication of *The Colored Sacred Harp* was spurred by the white editors' insistence that the revision of the *Sacred Harp* used in the region remain segregated—Judge Jackson and his community were barred from publishing their music in the book because of their race (Boyd 2002).

This history of enforced and tacit segregation is hardly surprising in the mid-twentieth-century Southeast, yet *Sacred Harp* singers since the 1970s have preferred to imagine singings as integrated spaces. The coming together of white and black *Sacred Harp* communities in the ensuing decades is an often-cited anecdote of “integration” and unity in the broader singing community. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, African American *Sacred Harp* singings gained increasing recognition, challenging the view of Jackson's era that singing was a white cultural practice. A new kind of interaction began around 1970 when white and Black singers shared the stage at Smithsonian Festivals of American Folklife. Through “shifting...with contemporaneous political transformations,” scholars of black music were able to draw more attention to the broader community of shape-note singers, highlighting singers from the Wiregrass region who were previously overlooked (J. P. Karlsberg 2015, 205). The creation of

⁶⁴ Other communities have been documented in Texas and Mississippi, but the “Wiregrass *Sacred Harp* Singers” rose to prominence through local radio, their close affiliation with local white *Sacred Harp* singers, and the Smithsonian Folk Festivals.

the National Sacred Harp Convention in 1980 was the next step in the narrative of a racially unified singing community. Hugh McGraw, the main organizer of the Convention, had previously worked with the Wiregrass singers on the stages of the folk festivals and invited Dewey Williams and Japeth Jackson to lead twenty-minute lessons, an honor given to only a select number of widely-recognized community leaders.⁶⁵

For the next decade or so, Williams, Jackson, and members of their family and community attended the annual National Convention as a main point of contact with the larger Sacred Harp community. Indeed, numerous white singers in south Alabama frequently attended Wiregrass singer's events, but the broader community only experienced this type of integration through the National Convention and folklife events. A number of white singers also began travelling to sing with Williams and members of the Jackson family at historically Black Sacred Harp singings, frequently describing their visits as exemplifying the uncomplicated racial harmony they understood Sacred Harp to represent. From the 1980s, singers and observers could cite the apparent goodwill between Black and white participants as evidence that spaces of Sacred Harp had risen above the Southeast's histories of racism and white supremacy, overlooking the ways in which white Sacred Harp communities and institutions marginalized Black participants.

In the past several years, some singers have begun challenging this whitewashed imaginary. I return to this theme in a detailed discussion in chapter six, where I explore how singers have begun directly confronting the legacies of racism and white supremacy within the singing community, although much work remains to be accomplished in this regard. As a basis for undertaking this work, however, it is essential to understand the ways in which Sacred Harp

⁶⁵ While everyone is allowed to lead at contemporary singings and conventions, earlier rules of decorum allowed only selected individuals the opportunity to lead, usually for an extended period of time.

has been interpreted, represented, and constructed through imaginaries. Claims surrounding “authenticity” and “tradition” in Sacred Harp’s history and practice have too frequently been reduced to simplified, romanticized, and exoticizing narratives of Southernness. Sacred Harp’s geographical and cultural relationship to the South is much more complicated—and much more subject to the diverse experiences of individual singers and constituent communities—than such essentializing narratives allow.

CHAPTER 4: EMPLOYING SOUTHERN IMAGINARIES— IMAGINING HOBOKEN SACRED HARP

As I discussed in the previous chapter, southern imaginaries have informed the practice and representation of Sacred Harp from a wide variety of perspectives. In this chapter, I explore one specific example to better understand the origin, expression, and impact of these imaginaries. My case study focuses on a specific community of white Sacred Harp singers in southeast Georgia centered around the small city of Hoboken in Brantley County. In many ways, this community's Sacred Harp singing practice is typical: they hold local evening singings as well as annual all-day singings organized very much like those in the broader world of Sacred Harp. They sing from the current printing of *The B.F. White Sacred Harp* (the “Cooper” book), the second most commonly used revision (and the book in widespread use among the nearest Sacred Harp communities in south Alabama and Florida). Additionally, they have long family and regional ties to the music dating back to the nineteenth century. And, like many Sacred Harp communities in the Southeast, theirs was centered around a prominent singing family—the Lees. Indeed, Sacred Harp in Hoboken is so dominated by the Lees' extended family that “Hoboken” and “the Lees' singing” are virtually interchangeable in Sacred Harp parlance.

In one important respect, however, Hoboken stands out. During the twentieth century, singers there gradually associated less and less with other Sacred Harp communities, and they had very little contact with the wider world of Sacred Harp while the music form was attracting attention nationally and new groups were emerging in the 1970s through the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, they were “discovered” by the broader Sacred Harp community, a moment that struck many singers as a sensational revelation: an apparently isolated, untouched expression of Sacred Harp was still being practiced in a remote corner of the Deep South near the

Okefenokee Swamp. Echoing the language of George Pullen Jackson from a half century earlier, Buell Cobb referred to the Hoboken Sacred Harp singers as a “lost tonal tribe” (B. E. Cobb 2014).

The “discovery” of the Lees prompted an outpouring of discourse on southern imaginaries related to Sacred Harp, in the written and spoken accounts of singers, in the networks of reciprocal travel that developed, and in the impact that the Lees’ performance practices had on singers in other communities. Few events in the recent history of Sacred Harp singing have had such a dramatic impact on the way that singers think about, perform, and represent their music culture.⁶⁶ Although this “discovery” did, in fact, bring numerous singers together for the first time, the process of interpreting and incorporating the Lees into the broader world of Sacred Harp was heavily mediated through imaginaries. Under scrutiny, many of the assumptions about the Lees’ history and practice of singing are based more on romanticized imaginings of the South than on demonstrable facts.

I begin by exploring how Sacred Harp singers imagined the Hoboken singing community in the context of the Okefenokee region, employing a longstanding narrative of physical and cultural isolation that helped frame local practices as “timeless” and therefore authentic. I continue by detailing the practices and perspectives of Hoboken singers based on my ethnographic research with community members. I consider how Sacred Harp in Hoboken is distinct from but also related to other Sacred Harp communities, and trace the relationship of the Lees’ singing practices to historical singing school pedagogy and to Primitive Baptist worship music. The chapter concludes by investigating the ways in which interrelations among singers inside and outside the Hoboken community have shaped representations, interpretations, and

⁶⁶ For detailed descriptions the Lee family’s entry into the broader Sacred Harp community in the 1990s, see Bealle 1997, Miller 2008, and Sommers 2010.

appropriations of Hoboken Sacred Harp. Through this extended case study, I show how imaginaries of place discussed in the previous chapter help Sacred Harp participants understand the significance of their participation in the music culture and find meaning in their interactions with other singers from very different communities. By attending to the shifting and complicated ways in which observers frame their perspectives through imaginaries, participants and observers can avoid reproducing the problematic narratives of authenticity preserved in isolated southern rurality and the attendant racially and culturally myopic mythology of the “white spiritual.”

4.1 Deep in the Okefenokee

The Lees and their extended families live in the southeastern corner of Georgia, in and near the towns Hoboken, Waycross, and into the northern tip of Florida at Hilliard. This area is just north and east of the Okefenokee Swamp—a massive National Wildlife Refuge which straddles the Georgia and Florida border (Fig. 4.1). The region where the Lees live has had an enormous impact on how their music practices have been interpreted and incorporated into Sacred Harp singing. Much more than a simple geographical site, the Okefenokee’s cultural associations, developed over the course of the twentieth century, have given observers a framework for understanding their music. The very specific imaginaries of place evoked by the Okefenokee play an important role in narratives of Hoboken Sacred Harp.



Fig. 4.1: Looking toward the interior wilderness area of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from the boardwalk at the Folkston entrance (photo by the author).

The Okefenokee is centered in southeast Georgia (Ware, Charlton, and Clinch Counties), with its southernmost portion in north Florida (Baker County). The swamp is largely a National Wildlife Refuge (the largest in the eastern U.S.) and state and local parks are also within its borders (including Okefenokee Swamp Park and Stephen C. Foster State Park) (Fig. 4.2). Around 700 square miles, the swamp is just over half the size of Rhode Island (“Okefenokee at a Glance” 2021). The earliest recorded expeditions in the region were completed by William Bartram, who published his *Travels* in 1791, naturalist surveys that also included descriptions of indigenous groups. His writing set the tone for later descriptions of the swamp: he emphasized its vastness and related tales of hunters who disappeared without a trace. He claimed that the swamp became a refuge for a Native population who lived in hiding in the swamp after an ancient

conflict with another tribe. Bartram details stories told to him by Creek (Muscogee) people that (white) hunters became lost in the swamp and were helped by a “peculiar race of Indians.” They caught sight of firm ground, but “in their endeavours to approach it, they were involved in perpetual labyrinths, and, like enchanted [sic] land, still as they imagined they had just gained it, it seemed to fly before them, alternately appearing and disappearing” (Bartram 1791). The name “Okefenokee” itself is taken from the Mikasuki language and means “land of trembling earth,” a moniker which colonists used in myth-making.⁶⁷ Through the twentieth century, numerous written publications, films, and folklore reiterated these narratives of isolation, including romanticized retellings of Native American lore, and stories of runaway enslaved peoples, Confederate deserters, and convicts⁶⁸ (Thompson 1915).



Fig. 4.2: View of wetlands in Stephen C. Foster State Park near Fargo, Georgia (photo by the author).

⁶⁷ “Land of trembling earth” refers to deposits of peat in the swamp floor which bubble or move when stepped on.

⁶⁸ Many stories, like Bartram’s tales of the “immortal race of Indians,” are completely fabricated or misunderstood. Little evidence supports many stories of the sanctuary nature of the swamp.

The first important cultural studies of the region were conducted by Francis Harper, who began documenting cultural practices of the area's inhabitants. Harper's work largely paralleled that of contemporary folklorists including Francis Child, Cecil Sharp, Annabelle Morris Buchanan, and, most notably for Sacred Harp, George Pullen Jackson. Harper and his family eventually formed close friendships with his research subjects, connections which he maintained throughout his life. Following earlier writers, he tended to frame the land as a mysterious place full of exotic natural beauty and danger lurking in the dark waters. He also drew connections, like other folklorists, to the cultural practices of the British Isles. His numerous trips to the swamp resulted in written and film documentation, much of which centered on ways of life of a bygone era.

He asserted connections between Appalachian practices, including music and speech, which he saw, like Jackson, as sites of cultural preservation where populations maintained practices that came directly from England and Scotland. "The Hillbillies and Tar Heels of the Appalachians," he claimed, "shared the Okefinokee Crackers' ancestry, speech, folklore, and social ways. Both the mountain and the swamp people lived in isolation from mainstream America, and they were able to preserve in part the cultural heritage of Britain...the Okefinokee folk lived more carefree, comfortable lives than the mountaineers, and they were slower to adopt the so-called advantages of modern civilization" (Harper 1981, 24). Although Harper and Jackson do not seem to have been in contact about Sacred Harp singing in south Georgia, they both heard "Elizabethan" qualities in speech patterns and music in their respective areas of collecting⁶⁹ (Harper 1981, 3). While little of Harper's collecting focused on Sacred Harp singing,

⁶⁹ Jackson was working in what he called the "upland" South, though *White Spirituals* covers Texas through the Appalachians to the Carolinas and Shenandoah Valley. See chapter 5 for a detailed exploration of the alleged connections between the South and the Anglo-Celtic world.

his writing gave a glimpse of the local way of singing, the songbooks used, and the importance of the Primitive Baptist Church.

Francis Harper's "discovery" of the swamp and its peoples helped bring awareness to the conservation of the region and Okefenokee ways of life. He found surprising connections in music, food, and social cohesion which he understood to be essentially English and Scottish—cultural practices which were shared among isolated groups in the Appalachians. Harper drew connections between ancestry and preservation of cultural practices from the British Isles and held that the poor white communities of the Okefenokee (and more broadly as "cracker" culture) shared a common heritage with factions of the English-Scottish heritage living in the Appalachian and Piedmont regions in the upland South. Harper, like many of his folklorist contemporaries, was searching for remnants of old-world cultures in the isolated areas of the Southeast. It is fitting, then, that about sixty years later, the Lees would be "discovered" like their Appalachian cousins in the early twentieth century and become, for many Sacred Harp singers, the ultimate representation of "authentic" Sacred Harp.

4.2 Fashioning a Legend of Authenticity

The Lee family first began connecting with the wider Sacred Harp singing community because of a legendary cassette tape. The tape supposedly made its way from a member of the Lee family attending the University of Georgia at Athens in the 1990s to a professor of Chemistry, John Garst, when he learned that Garst was also a Sacred Harp singer. From there, the tape was given by the family member to another singer in west Georgia. The cassette was a recording of a singing at a Lee family wedding anniversary. Once singers outside Hoboken heard it, they were immediately confounded by the revelation that an isolated group was maintaining

its own Sacred Harp practice—and that their practice had a unique way of singing which many presumed was an audible translation of a preserved remnant of a much earlier era.

Further legends accrued around the Lees by virtue of their alleged isolation. As Miller describes, “The Lees’ apparent isolation has become the measure of their authenticity, and their commodification has served an essential role in producing that authenticity” (K. Miller 2008, 102–3). As one visitor remarked on his first visit, “Hoboken Sacred Harp is about as authentic as it gets. It seems to have been protected through the isolation of the village and the ties these families have maintained to it through a couple of centuries” (Ted Eldridge, email message to Fasola listserv, October 9, 2006). This sense of preservation through isolation “evokes ideas of organic purity and natural musicianship” (K. Miller 2008, 105). As I will discuss, through these lenses, Hoboken became the authentic of the authentic to many Sacred Harp singers—the deepest South, the oldest singing, the most religious.

The Lees’ isolation was not simply expressed as separation from other Sacred Harp singers, but as an actual geographical isolation from the modern world, relying on many of the tropes popularized by Francis Harper to characterize the inhabitants of the Okefenokee region. Echoes from Harper and others of the “swamp wilderness” trope resound in these narratives. That the singers around Hoboken have historical ties to the swamp region and its earlier settlers is certainly true, yet the myth of isolation is greatly exaggerated. This narrative is further promoted in general tourism of the Okefenokee—though advertisements and travel literature appeal to outdoor enthusiasts with promises of birding, canoeing, and alligator siting, they also implement tropes of isolation and mystery in “the Land of the Trembling Earth” (Nelson 2009). For David Lee, in fact, the swamp was nothing like the exotic land of mystery of this mythical perspective—instead, as he told me, he just thought of it as the place where they went to fish and

hunt until the government took over the land (p.c. March, 2022). In the context of Sacred Harp singing as already framed within tropes of southern ruralness discussed in chapter three, the sense of the Lees' rural isolation in the swamps of the Deep South seemed especially compelling.

News articles and media publications also frequently highlight the perceived rurality of the Hoboken singers, not just in descriptions of the swamp, but in the alleged "simpleness" of the people. A video produced by Will Payne for WaterTower Films that relates the story of Sacred Harp and Hoboken, for example, introduces David Lee as "a farmer...[who] has worked the fields of Hoboken for decades" (Payne 2016). The video shows Lee feeding cattle while driving a John Deere tractor. The reality is a bit more nuanced, however. He does own cattle, but David describes his own career quite differently. As he told Kiri Miller: "I own a wholesale commercial lawn equipment distributorship for the southeast U.S. and a local retail lawn equipment dealership" (K. Miller 2008, 155). The reality of Lee's interstate commercial operation—integrated in the complex modern world of global commerce—would have been far less evocative in furthering the narrative of Hoboken singing existing in the imagined isolated, antiquated rural South that the video's producers sought to portray.

Following another of the key themes I have identified earlier as contributing to southern imaginaries, the Lees' religion also added to the sense that they had emerged from a distant past. The Lee family and their relatives attend several Primitive Baptist churches in and around Hoboken. As I discuss in chapter three, Sacred Harp singers, especially those from outside the Southeast, have interpreted Primitive Baptist practices and worship spaces as artifacts of the distant past. Following Primitive Baptist practice, the Lees worship in plain buildings without representational artworks or musical instruments, and they sing unaccompanied from Benjamin Lloyd's *Primitive Hymns*, which they call the "hymnbook" (Fig. 4.3). Furthermore, several of the

most prominent Sacred Harp leaders in the family, including Johnny Lee (who died in 2016) and Clarke Lee are also pastors in the Primitive Baptist Church. All these associations reinforce the perception that the family has maintained ancient religious practices—many observers have erroneously assumed that “primitive” in their denomination’s name refers not to their emulation of the church of the New Testament era, but to the “early American” era popularly associated with their worship practices.

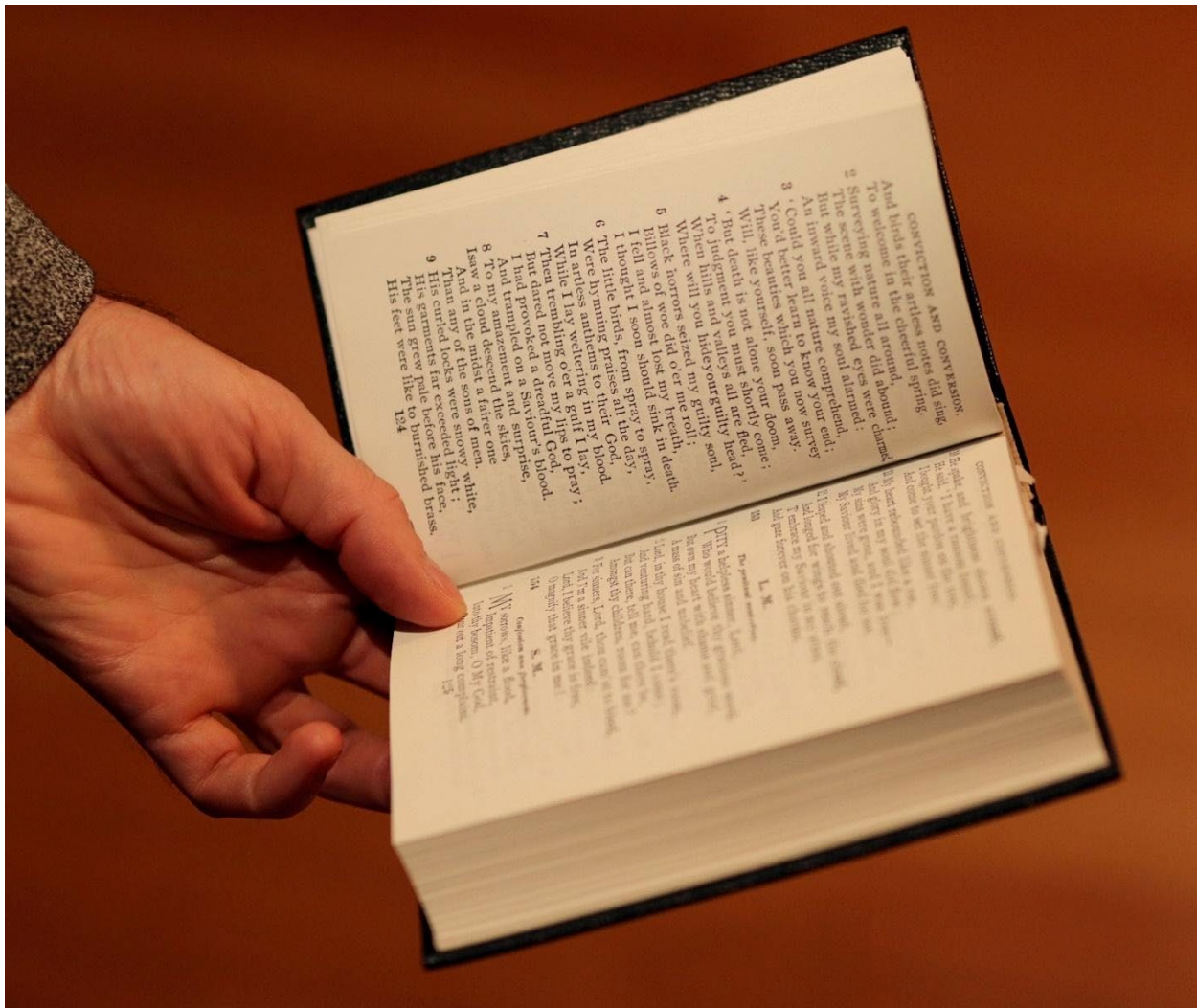


Fig. 4.3: Benjamin Lloyd’s *Primitive Hymns* (photo by the author).

Complexities in the Lees’ relationship to their denomination have further added to the conception of their “ancient/authentic” religious practice. Primitive Baptist churches in the

region fall into several separate associations—organizations on a level just below denominations that link congregations with similar perspectives. As Sommers has detailed, the Lees were directly affected by a split in the Alabama River Primitive Baptist Association (Sommers 2010). Several churches that favored what they described as an “old” style of worship divided from the “new” churches. Although the details of religious practice are not visible to outsiders, differences in their church buildings are immediately evident. The old churches, including High Bluff, Sardis, and Oak Grove do not have electricity or indoor plumbing (Fig. 4.4). After many of the Lees left these churches, they began attending other Primitive Baptist congregations such as Big Creek and Mars Hill—basic but modern buildings that do have electricity, central heat and air, and indoor plumbing. The Hoboken annual singings that attract large numbers of visitors occur at Mars Hill (Fig. 4.5, 4.6) and the Hoboken Elementary School auditorium (Fig. 4.7), an even more modern space.



Fig. 4.4: Sardis Primitive Baptist church near Folkston, Georgia (photo by the author).



Fig. 4.5: Mars Hill Primitive Baptist church near Hoboken, Georgia (photo by Robert Chambliss, courtesy of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company Museum).

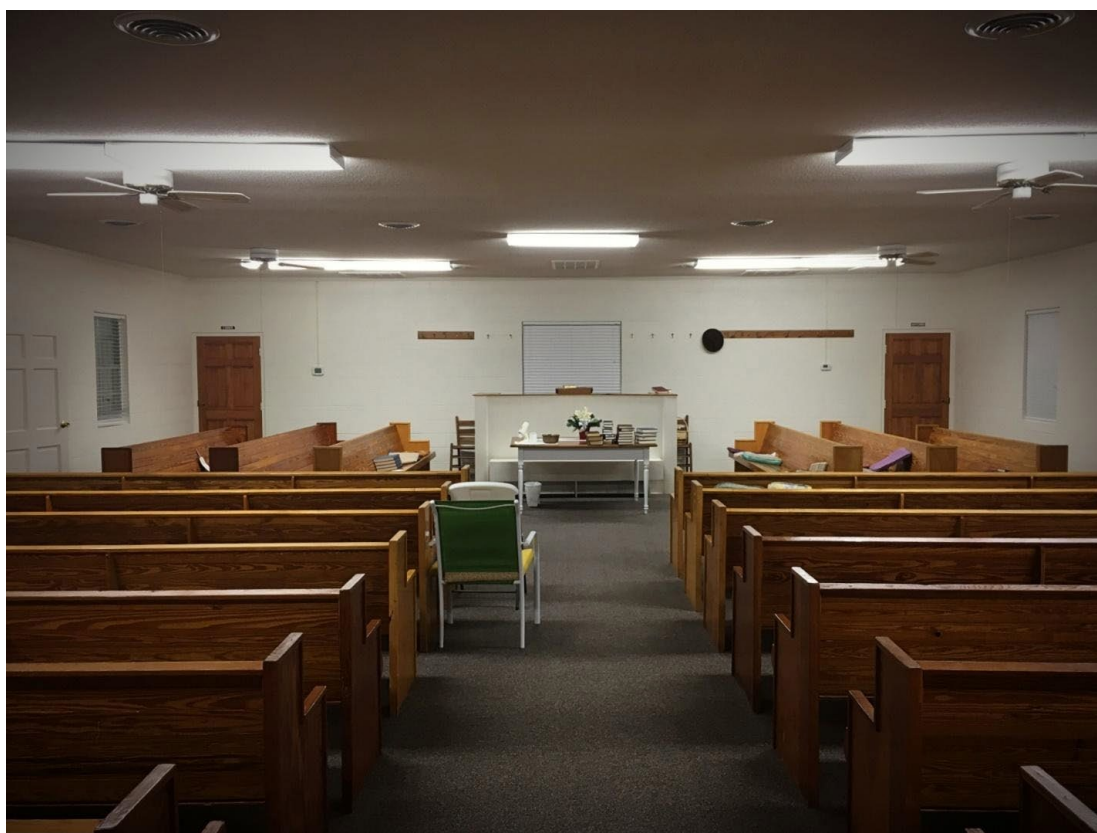


Fig. 4.6: Interior of Mars Hill Primitive Baptist church, Hoboken, Georgia (photo by the author).



Fig. 4.7: David Lee leading at the annual March All-Day singing, Hoboken Elementary School, Hoboken, Georgia (photo by Robert Chambless, courtesy of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company Museum).

Rather than seeing this development as a concession to modernity, outside Sacred Harp singers have instead interpreted it as *reinforcing* the conception of Hoboken's isolation: by this logic, the singers there are only one step removed from radically antiquated cultural practices, and only because of their recent willingness to open to the outside world are visitors able to access their pristine musical practices. This viewpoint is not concerned with the actual complicated argument among Primitive Baptists of the region about the suitability of various building styles, and assumes that the older churches represent closed-mindedness, rusticity, and backward social practices of what some call the "hardshell" Baptists. Not fully reflective of the complete histories of these congregations or their individual congregants, these rural imaginaries primitivize these churches and the Lee family at the same time, assuming that they have only

emerged from antiquated conditions since the 1990s. In fact, worshippers at the various churches have a range of social perspectives, many members of the Lee family are still in close relations with their relatives and friends who attend churches in both associations, and the reality of lived religious experience does not reflect the stuck-in-the-past perspective that many outside observers bring.

Other aspects of the Lees' actual lived experience further undercut these narratives. While Brantley County is a rural area with a significant agricultural presence, it is hardly isolated—just over an hour away is Jacksonville, Florida's most populous city and one of the largest economic centers of the Southeast. Likewise, the legend of the Lees' "discovery" overstates the family's isolation from other Sacred Harp singers. Instead of the cassette tape legend, David Lee describes a very different process of meeting other singers—on his own volition, he made contact with singers in Tallahassee and attended a singing in 1994 as his initial emergence into "the outside world" (K. Miller 2008, 153).

Nor had their singing community been completely isolated in the past. In 1958, Silas Lee took a group of singers for a demonstration at the Florida Folk Festival in White Springs, about 100 miles south of Hoboken. This did not attract national interest in Hoboken Sacred Harp—this was before the later folk festivals that directly impacted the resurgence of singing in the Southeast and around the US—but it demonstrates the recognition that Sacred Harp singers in southeast Georgia had within their own region. Additionally, in the 1960s, Wilson Wainwright and Thomas Lee visited a singing in Alabama and made recordings on a reel-to-reel recorder to take home and play for their families. They noted the singing was very different than their own (they sang slower than the Alabama singers), and even though they invited the Alabama singers to come to Hoboken they never received a visitor. They themselves did not return to the singing

in Alabama, but they were certainly aware of other Sacred Harp singing communities (Lee n.d.). Lastly, the Lees were in regular contact with the Sacred Harp Book Company, the organization that publishes the Cooper edition of the *Sacred Harp*, as they purchased new copies of the latest revisions of the tunebook. Although characterized as a “Lost Tonal Tribe,” they were singing from the most up-to-date version of the Cooper book when they were “discovered.” However their individual views may interpret the need to stay distinct from negative aspects they see in the modern world or to maintain longstanding religious traditions, the Hoboken singers live in the contemporary world, not in the past.

4.3 Musical Practices of the Lees

Perhaps the reason that these primitivizing perspectives carry such weight despite their problematic assumptions is that they explain, for many observers, the unique singing style that the Lees and other Hoboken singers maintain. Many Sacred Harp singers interpreted their alleged isolation to mean that the Lees’ musical practices had remained unchanged for generations. Some singers even speculated that the Lees preserved the most authentic expression of Sacred Harp as measured by its proximity to the performance practices of nineteenth-century singers. As one singer from northeast Alabama hypothesized to me, if one wanted to hear what Sacred Harp would have sounded like when B. F. White was alive, their singing would be as close as anyone could get (Henry Johnson, p.c., June 2018). In addition to overemphasizing the Lees’ isolation, this viewpoint does not account for the change and development over multiple generations that can occur among isolated populations, yet it expresses a widely shared belief among Sacred Harp singers that the Lees’ practices are not just authentic, but the *most* authentic expression of Sacred Harp at present.

In many respects, Sacred Harp in Hoboken is similar to Sacred Harp elsewhere in the Southeast. This owes in part to the similar use of singing schools taught from the *Sacred Harp*'s rudiments section as a method of instructing young singers. Early singing schools in southeast Georgia are not well documented, but several accounts by older singers place them as far back as the nineteenth century. Lazarus Dowling (1829–1919) is the earliest known singing school teacher and leader of songs in local churches, and his son Martin and brother-in-law William Guy also taught singing schools (Sommers 2010). Following the basic instructions common across rudiments in historical and contemporary editions of the *Sacred Harp*, Hoboken singers sit in a hollow square, sing the solfege prior to singing the words on each tune, key songs according to relative rather than standard pitch, among a host of other fundamental practices observed by nearly every Sacred Harp community.

The Lees are also connected by the hymnal they use and by the format of their singings. Singers in southeast Georgia use recent editions of the *B.F. White Sacred Harp* (also known as the “Cooper Book” or “Blue Book”) for their regular singing events, the same book in widespread use in south Alabama and Florida (Fig. 4.8). Their singings and conventions are conducted much like those in other areas, with leaders being called to come to the center of the square to lead one or more tunes of their choice; prior to the 1990s, only a handful of prominent singers would lead all the selections. In the Hoboken area specifically, such events are called “sings” and occur monthly for a few hours on scheduled evenings. Annual “all-day” sings began in the late 1990s, which have constantly drawn large crowds to Hoboken every March. The ease with which the Hoboken singers were able to integrate outside singers into their sings demonstrates the high degree of commonality that they share with other Sacred Harp communities.

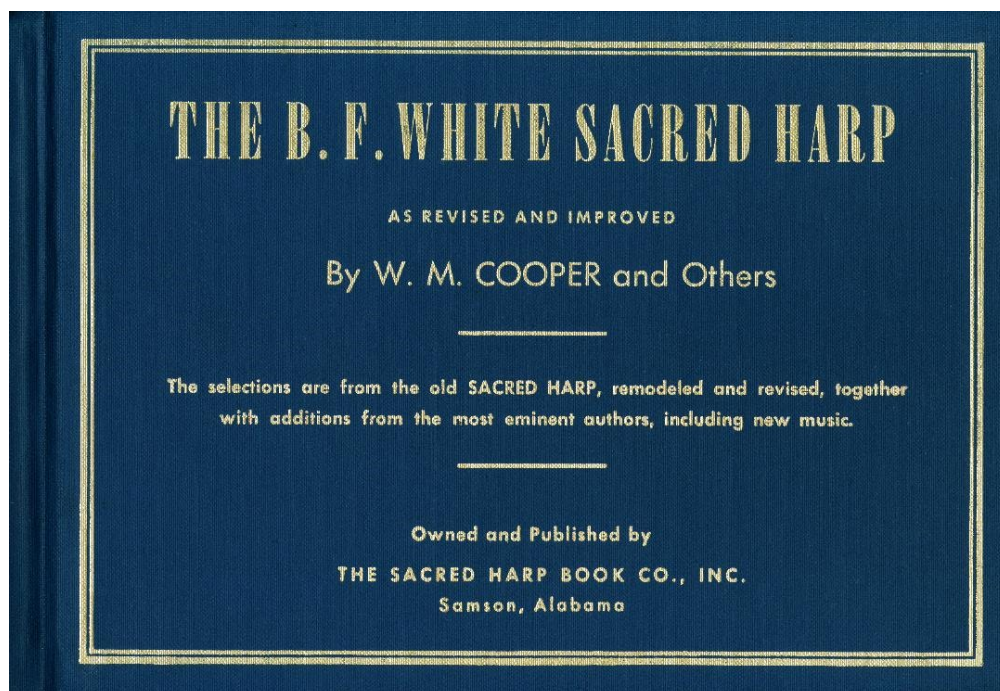


Fig. 4.8: Cover of the *B.F. White Sacred Harp* (1960), “Cooper” edition (collection of the author).

Still, there is no question that Sacred Harp in Hoboken sounds different from other Sacred Harp communities, even in the Southeast. Experienced Sacred Harp singers will immediately recognize sonic differences in singing around Hoboken. Directly related to local Primitive Baptist singing practices, Sacred Harp tends to be slower and more ornamented in this area than other multi-generational areas of singing in the Southeast. Harper’s *Okefinokee Album* and 1944 recordings document that these practices have a long history in the region: the subdued tempos and liberal embellishment of the melody in the recordings are both characteristic of Sacred Harp in Hoboken at present.

In general, Sacred Harp is sung more slowly in Hoboken than in other historical singing communities. The rudiments at the beginning of most oblong shape-note songbooks have historically stated appropriate tempos by meter (2, 3, 4, 6), but most communities do not consistently employ the recommended tempos, and local practices determine speed. Singers often debate appropriate tempos for each mode of time and even for individual songs, but

ultimately local influence and personal preference are acknowledged as “correct” (Kelley 2017). Although individual singers vary in their leading practice, singers in Hoboken tend to sing at a tempo that seems stately, even languid compared with other Sacred Harp communities, which is most likely related to very slow hymn singing in local Primitive Baptist churches.

Hoboken singers are also distinct in their leading practice. Unlike most singing communities, who use the Denson edition of the Sacred Harp, many songs in 4/4 time are led in a 4-beat pattern. Most “Denson Book” singers beat 4/4 time in a down and up pattern with two beats up, two beats down. Hoboken singers indicate each beat with an individual hand motion, moving in a down-left-right-up pattern.⁷⁰ Although uncommon in the broader Sacred Harp world, many other communities who sing from the “Cooper Book” share this practice for 4/4 time, but Hoboken singers are unique in beating out each beat of music written in compound time. While all other Sacred Harp communities beat compound time with a down and up pattern emphasizing the first and third beats, singers in Hoboken lead in two groups of three, emphasizing each of the six beats in a repeated triangle pattern. Singers I spoke with were unsure of the origin of this practice but felt that it better accommodated their slower pace of singing.

Another practice unique to Hoboken is called “walking time.” Accounts of Martin Dowling’s early twentieth-century singing schools by Tollie Lee and Lottie Lee Carter suggest that this practice emerged from a singing-school exercise. As they describe, a leader “walks time” by moving around the hollow square while stepping in time to the pace of the singing. Singers from Hoboken would learn to walk time in singing schools as the prominent method for embodying tempo, an act that Clarke Lee said “makes you feel the music with your body” (p.c., January 2018). This practice today is only occasionally utilized, usually by David or Clarke Lee

⁷⁰ This pattern is similar to basic choral conducting, though it is performed in a more angular fashion with beats one and three stopping in the same area. This creates a right angle similar to a backwards L (for right-handed leaders).

or some of their children at the all-day singing at Hoboken in March. Yet another distinctive practice, which the Hoboken singers employ only occasionally, was also developed as a singing school exercise. Usually only in a singing school or after a singing has concluded, the class will sing a “drone,” in which several concentric circles of singers holding tonic, dominant, and octave pitches walk in time while a small group of singers inside the circles sings a song in the *Sacred Harp* (see chapter five for a detailed description of this practice). The inverse of “walking time,” the singers in the center remain stationary while the singers surrounding them move in the concentric circles (Sommers 2010).

In addition to walking time and the performance of a drone, other aspects of Hoboken Sacred Harp appear closely connected with the instructive nature of singing schools. Often, between the announcement of a song page and singing the shapes, David or Clarke Lee will verbally announce the order in which they will give the starting pitches before actually keying a song. For example, at a sing I attended in 2014, when a leader called page 497, THE BITTER CUP, David Lee announced “treble take the first sound, tenor/bass together, and alto below.” This is a formalized explanation of the order of the pitches he is about to give, which correspond to the parts in the printed music. He then sounded the pitches: la (the third) for the trebles, fa (tonic) for the tenor and bass, and sol (fifth) for the altos (Ex. 4.1). Keyers in other singing communities simply sound the pitches and assume that the singers will be able to identify their part’s pitch by identifying the note corresponding to the first note in the printed music—outside of Hoboken, keyers rarely say anything at all when they sound the key.

THE BITTER CUP. C. M.

Fa-ther, remove this bit-ter cup, If such Thy sacred will; If not, con-tent t

Ex. 4.1: Opening measures of THE BITTER CUP, *B.F. White Sacred Harp* (public domain).

Another instructive element likely derived from singing-school practice is often heard when there are rests between the verses of a song. For example, BOUND FOR CANAAN is in quadruple time, begins on a half note, and therefore includes a two-beat rest at the beginning of the song (Ex. 4.2). The Hoboken community often adds a sort of “sing-counting” during the rests as one or more singers count the rests (“one, two”) while holding or changing pitches in time with the music, effectively letting the class of singers know when to begin singing. In BOUND FOR CANAAN, this occurs between each verse, including the initial singing of the shapes. Sing-counting, in this case, is not confined to one pitch, but modally similar to the melody (Ex. 4.3). Other examples include two singers sing-counting held pitches on the first and fifth which creates a stark, though brief, hollow sound between the fully harmonized verses. These instructive passages are brief and often go unnoticed by regular singers, though by frequently employing them, prominent singers are replicating singing school practices that constantly reify a way of learning and ultimately the collective identity of the local community.

BOUND FOR CANAAN.

Mercer's Cluster, p. 356.—E. J. King. Alto, W. M. Cooper.

1. O when shall I see Je-sus, And reign with Him a - bove? And from the flow-ing fount-ain Drink ev - er - last-ing love!

2. When shall I be de-liv-ered From this vain world of sin? And with my bless-ed Je - sus Drink endless pleasures in.

3. But now I am a sol-dier, My Cap-tain's gone be-fore; He's giv-en me my or-ders, And bids me ne'er give o'er.

4. His prom-is-es are faith-ful, A righteous crown He'll give, And all His val-iant sol-diers E - ter - nal-ly shall live.

5. Thro' grace I feel de-termined To conquer, tho' I die; And then a-way to glo-ry, On wings of love I'll fly.

CHORUS.

I'm on my way to Ca-naan, I'm on my way to Ca - naan, I'm on my way to Ca-naan, To the new Je - ru - sa - lem.

Ex. 4.2: BOUND FOR CANAAN, *B.F. White Sacred Harp* (public domain).**Bound for Canaan**

"one, two-" 1.O when shall I see Je - sus, and reign with Him a - bove? And

Ex. 4.3: Example of "sing-counting" on BOUND FOR CANAAN.

One other practice that is unique to Sacred Harp singing in Hoboken has less clear origins. When pronouncing the sound “ē” when it appears as the last syllable in a word (usually when spelled with a “y” as in “holy”) many singers shift the vowel to “ī” as in “eye.” While singers I talked with had no definite sense of why or how this practice originated, it parallels the choir pedagogy in changing vowel sounds that seem unmusical or unpleasant in whatever way with more aesthetically pleasing sounds. I am not aware of any other form of hymnody that employs this particular shift from ē to ī, but suspect it originated through the aesthetic preference of a singing school teacher or prominent leader sometime in the past. Whatever its origins, the practice has become sufficiently ingrained to seem “traditional” to Hoboken singers, making it a distinctive part of their music practice.

Although singing schools have had a significant impact, the greatest influence on the particular singing practices in southeast Georgia stem from local Primitive Baptist worship. Clarke Lee stated that all Primitive churches in this area at one time used Benjamin Lloyd’s *Primitive Hymns*, which is a “words-only” book similar to many earlier American hymn and psalm books. Without printed music notation, anyone singing from these books must know a tune (or tunes) to use for any given hymn. The Lloyd Book itself has around seven hundred hymns, though not all are used. Many tunes used in these churches are drawn from printed sources like the *Sacred Harp*.

Before the Lees began attending singings outside their area, a few of them gathered together the tunes that they understood were not printed in any tunebook (by which they mean shape-note hymnals), which they call “note-books.” David and Clarke Lee eventually found most of the tunes printed in other sources and although they had not seen those sources before, they knew that tunes must have been learned from those books or passed between other communities

in different areas. One hymn, “I Would not Live Alway,” as sung by the Lees and others in their local churches, was learned aurally without any notation (Ex. 4.4). This tune was first printed in M. L. Swan’s *Harp of Columbia* in Knoxville, TN, 1848 as SUMMER. The tune was also included in William Walker’s *Christian Harmony* of 1866 in South Carolina (Ex. 4.5). Therefore, David Lee assumes someone from their community must have encountered one of these books in the past, though it is also possible the tune previously circulated by aural means.

I Would Not Live Alway

(sung a 4th lower)

melody

union in octaves

I.I would not live al-way I ask not to stay Where

bass

storm af-ter storm ri-ses dark o'er the way: The

higher harmony (stems up)

slide

few lu-cid morn-ings that dawn on us here, Are

foll-owed by gloom, or be-cloud-ed with fear.

Ex. 4.4: Transcription of “I would not live always” from the singing of the Lees on the circulating cassette from 1996. Note that the transcription is not exact—the tempo is variable, particularly beats one and two of each measure.

354 **SUMMER. 11s.** SWAN.

1. I would not live al-way: I ask not to stay } The few lu-rid mornings that dawn on us here, Are e-nough for life's woes, full e-nough for its cheer.

2. Where storm after storm ris-es dark o'er the way; } Since I would not live al-way; no-welcome the tomb, } There, sweet be my rest, till He bid me a-rise, To hail Him in tri-umph descend-ing the skies.

3. Who, who would live al-way, a-way from his God, } Where riv-ers of pleasure flow o'er the bright plains, And the noontide of glo-ry e-ter-nal-ly reigns:

4. Where the saints of all a-ges in harmony meet, } Their Saviour and breth-ren transport-ed to greet; } While an-thems of rapture un-ceasingly roll, And the smile of the Lord is the feast of the soul.

Ex. 4.5: Summer in William Walker's *Christian Harmony*, 1866 (public domain).

The practice of using shape-note melodies in Primitive Baptist song services is not uncommon—while repertory varies between congregations and regions, groups which sing from words-only hymns often employ melodies familiar to most Sacred Harp singers (B. B. Patterson 1995). Hymn singing in churches around Hoboken, however, differ from many other churches in that they borrow many of the harmony parts from the *Sacred Harp* for their church singing. Clarke Lee explained that even though the same tunes are used in both contexts, as a general rule, they were taught to sing even slower in church services in reverence to God and to allow time to ponder the text (p.c., January 2018).

At both church services and sings, Hoboken singers employ a distinct form of vocal ornamentation. This style is especially emphasized by men, who often lead singing in church or have organized the regular sings for many years. This style, which is widely discussed and occasionally emulated in the larger Sacred Harp community, is similar to the singing practice of other Primitive Baptists and Old Regular Baptists. Nonetheless, this singing style has not been subject to significant scholarly analysis, so most of the specific vocal features do not have codified terms. Therefore, I explain them using standard music terminology and incorporate transcriptions in notation which these singers would not normally use.

Singing from the *Sacred Harp* or any note-book with printed notation usually creates consistency of performance between each repetition of a given song. Printed music helps (or forces) the singer to sing virtually the same way each time the song is sung. Of course singing from these books is much more flexible than classical choral music, but in general only slight variations occur from performance to performance. Primitive Baptist singing shares some of these aspects, yet the inclusion (or removal) of harmony is flexible as is melodic decoration. I use “decoration” more than “ornamentation” in this instance because it encapsulates an idea of adding extra beauty to the melody. For example, David Lee has used the brief first half of the tune SHOW PITY LORD (also known as CUSSETA) in many singing schools to illustrate the differences between the printed version in the *Sacred Harp* and the way many would sing it in the church meetinghouse (Ex. 4.6).⁷¹ When he demonstrates the church service version it is much slower than what is normally sung at sings, therefore giving much more time to add florid decoration to the melody. A number of neighboring tones, anticipations, mordents, or turns are added to the melody in an improvisatory fashion, giving the Lee’s their distinctive sound (Ex. 4.7). While not all singers sing this way, there is a surprising amount of consistency between those who do, even though each example will be slightly different. Many of these decorations are also incorporated into Sacred Harp singing in this area, although to a lesser extent because songs tend to be faster. Still, the overlap of this ornamented style of singing associated with Primitive Baptists is pronounced enough in Sacred Harp singings in the area that it makes nearly any recording of Hoboken Sacred Harp instantly recognizable.

⁷¹ See to hear this example

https://vimeo.com/130364240?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=36844371

SHOW PITY, LORD. L. M. Jno. Massengale. Alto by W. M. C. 73

Show pity, Lord; O Lord, forgive, Let a repenting rebel live; Are not thy mercies large and free? May not a sinner trust in thee?

Ex 4.6: SHOW PITY LORD (also called CUSETTA), *B.F. White Sacred Harp* (public domain).

Show Pity Lord

(sung in E maj.)

Show pi-ty Lor - d O - Lor-d for - give
Let a re - pen - ting re - bel live.

Ex. 4.7: Transcription of David Lees' singing of "Show Pity Lord."

+ = tempo is variable and "+" marks show approximate downbeats

* = mordent or trill

In addition to the decorative additions to these slower paced songs, I find that much of the ornamentation contributes to an overall act of "leading" even though the leader is not visually directing other singers. Because Primitive Baptist singing does not employ a rotation of leaders like Sacred Harp singings, the voice of an appointed song leader begins all songs and carries the group's tempo. These "leaders" may not even be physically and visually directing the singing as in Sacred Harp singings, but they use their voice as a leading tool. Incorporating various embellishments and ornaments seems to fill the gap between longer-held notes by adding subtle subdivision, therefore giving a sense of movement which propels the song forward. Similar

styles are found in Old Regular Baptist and other Primitive Baptist singing, which is largely heterophonic and incorporates the practice of “lining out” hymn verses. These heterophonic performances are generally very slow and often lack a sense of meter, yet the use of similar ornamentation pushes the song forward.

While singing practices relate to church music in other areas of the country, singing in Hoboken has a particular history which brands it in many ways as a preserver of tradition. Musical practices in this area have changed since the “discovery” of the Lees, but compared to other expressions of Sacred Harp singing, their sound is still very distinct. Rather than describing the Lees’ singing as having been influenced by their church music, however, most observers in the decades since they came to prominence have imagined their musical practice as a product of their isolated condition—an authentically ancient expression of Sacred Harp not subject to outside influences. Even scholarly accounts have focused on the continuation and change of these musical practices in a nostalgic framework expressing the anxiety that cultural practices might be lost to time and modernization.⁷² Whether in order to help preserve these practices or to engage with what they perceive as the most authentic form of Sacred Harp, many singers have gone beyond merely listening to the Lees by attempting to emulate them.

4.4 Learning from Hoboken

Beginning with the “legendary” cassette tape that supposedly introduced the Lees to the broader world of Sacred Harp singing, the majority of singers first encountered the Lees and learned about Hoboken’s unique Sacred Harp practices from recordings. One recording in particular, often confused with the wedding-anniversary singing cassette referenced above, has

⁷² For example, see Sommers 2010.

had an enormous impact. This tape, often simply referred to as “the Lee tape,” circulated widely among Sacred Harp singers beginning later in the 1990s. The recording was made by David Lee, Clarke Lee, and Phillip Reeves (a member of the extended Lee family) in 1996 to document the tunes they sing to hymns from Lloyd’s *Primitive Hymns*. They produced the recording as a means of preserving their family’s singing style and song usage for future generations—a foresight from within their own community to document and remember while knowing “outside” contact would influence their practices.

I first heard a copy of the tape from a singer in west Georgia around 2008, another copy a few years later while visiting a singer in Pennsylvania, and discovered additional copies at the Sacred Harp Museum that had been donated by singers from Ohio and Arkansas. The tape entered the domain of digital music sharing around 2012 and copies of varying quality have crisscrossed the US and Atlantic many times over, constantly rekindling an interest in the Lees and their way of singing (Fig. 4.9).

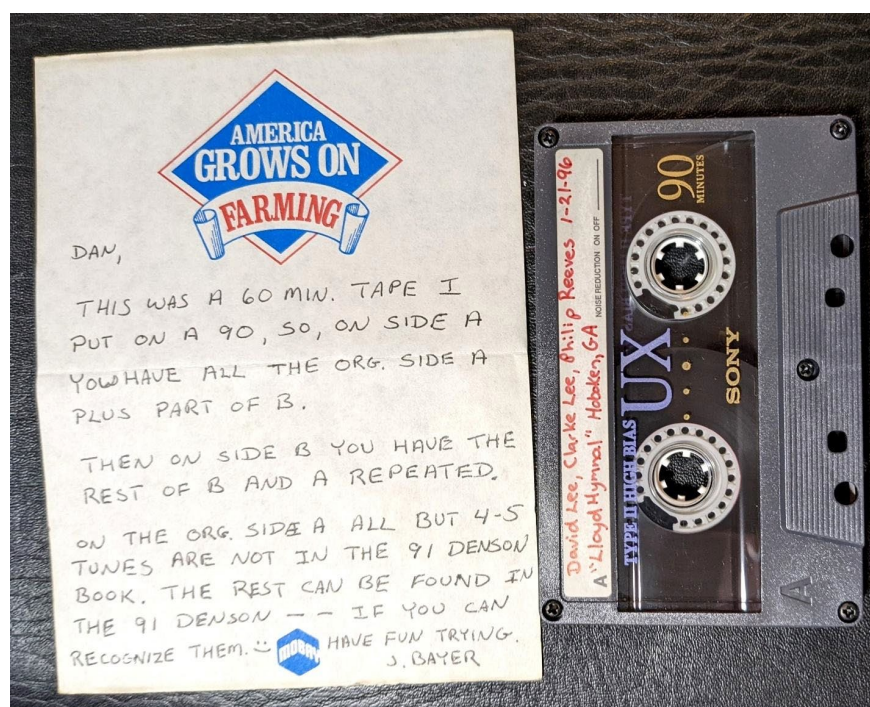


Fig. 4.9: One of the many copies of the 1996 Lee cassettes that circulated (courtesy of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company Museum).

Despite its international impact, the tape was never meant to be circulated. David Lee told me, “that one was never circulated. It was never approved for circulation. A singer wound up with the copy because we were promised it would not circulate” (p.c., January 2018). The recording, however, along with the earlier anniversary recording, held power that invoked the imagery of isolation and “circulated authenticity.” In part because they were not available commercially, the tapes become an especially valuable commodity for singers. They were valued not only for the interest of listening, but as validating singers in reaching a certain type of deep participation in the community. In other words, if you’re a “real” singer with personal connections and commitment in the community, then you may be able to obtain the recordings through others who recognize that commitment. While the tapes were originally meant as a record of local practices, their circulation opened up broader connections between the Lees and singers outside Hoboken (K. Miller 2008, 151). In a broader sense, the tapes helped revive some of the narratives that had been built into the broader community by the “authenticity it ascribed to these singers, imagined as devout believers from an unbroken family line hidden away in a secret pocket of the rural South” (K. Miller 2008, 152).

Beyond merely noting or celebrating these perceived “authentic” practices, many Sacred Harp singers actively emulate them as a way of validating their own practices and participation. Singers who have especially close affiliations with the Lees often borrow their unique performance practices. Kevin Barrans, from Washington, for example, developed his own style of singing that has been highly influenced by Hoboken singers, especially David and Clarke Lee. This style is highly ornamented, especially in slower songs, which is not unrelated to Anglo-American ballad singing and Irish styles (the latter is also important in Kevin’s background through the influence of sean-nós singer Joe Heaney). While Barrans acknowledges that he is

influenced by the Lees' style of singing, he does not feel that he is merely appropriating their practice, but incorporating elements he has learned from it into a style informed by his broad experience singing different types of American and Irish music. Still, he is proud to have learned from the Hoboken sound, and readily expresses his deep respect for his friends in the Hoboken singing community.

Another more visible practice from Hoboken is "walking time." Although this practice is not typically encountered outside Hoboken, its influence has permeated the broader Sacred Harp community, especially after the publication of the *Shenandoah Harmony* (2013) in northern Virginia. Some of the book's committee members formed strong ties to Hoboken, particularly to Tollie Lee, and subsequent collaboration resulted in a few "Hoboken songs" being included in the songbook. These songs include WE'VE NO ABIDING CITY HERE, CONSTRAINED BY LOVE, BESIDE THE GOSPEL POOL, TRANSPORT, and YE OBJECTS OF SENSE, all of which exist in other forms in nineteenth-century shape-note hymnals. The *Shenandoah Harmony* also includes I WALKED ABROAD, a song not found in other sources, which the Lees understand as part of their unique oral tradition. These tunes were transcribed and arranged by Daniel Hunter and Ted Stokes from various recordings of the Lee family's singing.

Tollie visited Pennsylvania often to sing, both from the *Sacred Harp* and *Shenandoah Harmony*—communities which are not separate, but inextricably connected, as the *Shenandoah* was a new compendium of older and recent music compiled by Sacred Harp singers. A charismatic leader, Tollie invited singers in Pennsylvania to participate in walking time, singing drones, and in a variety of Hoboken-style practices at his 2012 singing school. At the Lehigh Valley Singing in 2013, Dan Hunter and Nathan Berry led WALK WITH GOD from the *Shenandoah Harmony* and after singing the shapes they proceeded to walk time on the words.

Though they have not fully adopted the practice in all of their leading, they felt it appropriate to acknowledge Tollie's influence and to validate their own usage of it because of their connections to him and Hoboken.

Singers from elsewhere understand their appropriation as a respectful and positive means of accessing the values they see in Hoboken singing. For the most part, the Lees and other singers in the area make no objection to outside singers emulating their performance practices. David Lee did not express concern about their songs being included in the *Shenandoah Harmony* or other singers emulating them. Instead, he was humbled that other singers would think so much of them to be interested and invested in their particular history of Sacred Harp singing. David only expressed that he didn't want *their* music commercialized. He feels that the real essence of Sacred Harp in Hoboken has to do with belief and "real meaning" of the songs in the *Shenandoah*. He stated that even though "people might have those songs to sing, they don't get the heartfelt meaning of them in the same context as what local folks feel" (pc David Lee Jan 1 2018). Still, David was very happy that others could learn some of their songs, particularly unwritten songs from Lloyd's *Primitive Hymns*. Although David Lee and many of his relatives understand what makes their singing unique among other Sacred Harp, they do not feel they own or pioneered the style. Clark and David Lee both agreed that they are happy that others are interested in their singing style and only hope they associate the sound with the strong personal connections and religious sentiment that they themselves feel for the music (P.C. January 1, 2018).

Indeed, numerous singers have forged lasting relationships, linking the Hoboken singers to other communities. This process has been facilitated by the patterns of reciprocal travel connecting geographically disparate singers and singing communities. Many members of the Lee

family have traveled to singings in other parts of the country. Sometimes, they have been invited by Sacred Harp conventions to teach singing schools. On other occasions, they simply travel to sing for their own enjoyment and to fellowship with other singers. For example, David and Kathy Lee formed close relationships with Terry and Sheila Wootten of Ider, Alabama—although they belong to different religious denominations, they nonetheless share many of the same religious beliefs and perspectives about Sacred Harp singing, and they have bonded over those connections (p.c., January 2018).

While the Lees have traveled to singings across the country, numerous Sacred Harp singers have traveled to Hoboken to sing, especially to the annual sing in March, which has attracted singers from multiple regions of North America as well as Europe. The March sing has become one of the best attended annual singings in the Southeast by visitors who are not from the region and one of the largest singings from the Cooper Book. In fact, it is one of the few Cooper Book singings whose minutes are published in *Minutes and Directory of Sacred Harp Singings*, the international publication that primarily documents Denson Book singings.

Some visitors were directly inspired by hearing recordings, like Nicoletta Rogers of Ontario, Canada, who posted to the Fasola Listserv about her experience traveling to Hoboken for the first time in 2012. She first heard the singing through recordings online. As she described, “I was VERY attracted to the slow steady beat, the deep, resonant sound of the voices, and the obvious and palpable connection between the music and the daily life of these people...” Inspired by hearing their singing from afar, she traveled to the all-day sing in March. She recalled, “I felt seen, understood and welcomed; a sense of coming HOME to where I had not been before, because I had been missing and at the same time longing for something like this all

my life...the measured pace allows the harmonies the time needed for that deep ‘touching’...”
(Rogers 2012).

The Hoboken singers encourage this perspective, working hard to make visitors feel welcome and hoping that they will leave feeling inspired by the music in the same way that they do. As Clarke Lee explained, “many people come to Hoboken because they find something there they can’t find elsewhere.” He feels that “we are always preaching to the world in everything that we do and you never know what you say or do and how it will affect someone.” From a spiritual world view, he hopes that visitors coming to sing will find something to make them “feel it from inside rather than just going through the motions and doing the music” (p.c. 1/1/2018).

4.5 Commodifying Hoboken

For many Sacred Harp singers, Hoboken represents something more than its history, distinct singing practices, and individual participants. As I describe above, the narrative of the Lees’ long isolation and recent discovery frames their practice as the most authentic form of Sacred Harp for numerous singers. This conception has clearly helped boost attendance at Hoboken sings, and many relationships would likely never have been forged had singers not been inspired to visit because of romanticized conceptions of authenticity. Yet as Kiri Miller describes, the effect of this narrative has been to “commodify” the Lee family (K. Miller 2008, 103). While Miller interprets this process of commodification as reducing the Lees to a token of “authenticity,” Sacred Harp singers have used them as a medium for signifying a range of values, using one’s proximity to the people and practices of Hoboken Sacred Harp as cultural currency within their own Sacred Harp communities.

Many of the values the Lees are held to embody are positive and celebratory—but the simplistic and essentializing narratives in such representations can be problematic. Many of them are based on the same long-established tropes that animated the work of Francis Harper and George Pullen Jackson. Imagining the Hoboken singing community as isolated reproduces the discourse of the Okefenokee region as existing in an earlier era. Interpreting the slow pace of Hoboken singing as an antidote to the fast pace of consumer society—as one singer did after visiting—similarly reifies the conception of the rural South as existing outside modernity (Rogers 2012). Describing the 1996 recording by David Lee, Clarke Lee, and Phillip Reeves as “magical,” “transcendent” or “otherworldly,” as various singers have, casts the Lee family as a religiously grounded Other, potentially even an antidote, to a spiritually-vapid modernity. Perhaps most insidiously, this essentializing narrative risks reinforcing George Pullen Jackson’s fantasy of the “white spiritual”—locating authenticity in the practices of an apparent embodied link to a mythically pure past, not in the spectrum of practices maintained across the diverse range of Sacred Harp singers living in the contemporary world.

CHAPTER 5: CELTIC CROSSINGS: THE SACRED HARP, IRELAND, AND THE US SOUTH

On March 12, 2012, the second Ireland Sacred Harp Convention closed in an unusual fashion. Approximately one hundred fifty singers gathered from Ireland, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, and the United States for a two day Sacred Harp convention. The convention adhered to the standard format for Sacred Harp singings all through Saturday and Sunday as singers took turns leading a song of their choice from the center of the hollow square. At the end of the singing on Sunday afternoon, however, the assembly pushed back chairs to clear a much larger space in the center of the room and invited Tollie Lee, originally of Hoboken, Georgia, to lead the group in a “drone.”⁷³

A performance practice unique to Lee’s community in southeast Georgia (discussed in detail in chapter four), the drone positions four singers in the center (one for each vocal part) with the remaining participants gathered around them to form three concentric circles. The singers in the center stand stationary and sing a selection as it is written in the *Sacred Harp*—in this case, THE GOLDEN HARP. Those in the surrounding rings do not sing the hymn, but sound steady pitches and walk in a circle, keeping time with the music. The innermost and outermost circles move clockwise and sing the note “la” in octaves (for minor tunes like THE GOLDEN HARP—they would sing “fa” for major key songs), the first scale degree of the key in which the song is set. The circle in between moves counterclockwise and sings the “la” on the fifth scale degree (“sol” for major songs).⁷⁴ David Lee, also from Hoboken, believes that the drone was

⁷³ A video of the Drone from the Convention is available at <http://vimeo.com/38020872>.

⁷⁴ For an extended description of the “drone” and its significance within the Hoboken singing community, see Laurie Kay Sommers, “Hoboken Style: Meaning and Change in Okefenokee Sacred Harp Singing.” *Southern Spaces*, August 17, 2010, <https://southernspaces.org/2010/hoboken-style-meaning-and-change-okefenokee-sacred-harp-singing/>

likely a singing school exercise—singers in the center are forced to concentrate on their musical parts in relation to the drone pitches, and those on the outside rings must maintain a steady tone (Fig. 5.1).



Fig. 5.1: Image from the performance of a drone after the Ireland Sacred Harp Convention in Cork, 2012 (courtesy of Seamus Hegarty).

While the drone is a departure from the ordinary format of a Sacred Harp convention, for many singers it carries an additional layer of significance. Several observers have interpreted the drone not in the context of nineteenth-century singing school practices, but as evidence of much deeper connections tying shape-note singing in the southern United States to music and cultural practices of the British Isles. Some Sacred Harp singers posit that the drone as practiced in Hoboken originated as a method of orally preserving bagpipe music during the eighteenth

century, when the British Act of Proscription allegedly banned bagpipes as instruments of war. According to this theory, which turned a loose connection of facts into historical myth, the Hoboken singers were unknowingly preserving a relic of Scottish cultural heritage.⁷⁵

Although numerous singers subscribe to it, the bagpipe theory does not hold up to scrutiny. The history of Scottish bagpipes does include aural transmission of melodies, but without a drone and in forms that bear little resemblance to the Hoboken drone. Furthermore, historians debate whether any bagpipes were actually banned by the Act of Proscription, and the instrument in question, the Highland bagpipe, has three drone pipes that each sound the tonic in octaves, with no fifth as in the Hoboken drone.⁷⁶ A more plausible explanation comes from a historical interview and an obscure nineteenth-century songbook. Lottie (Lee) Carter of Hoboken recalled in an oral history interview with Laurie Sommers that Martin Dowling (1870-1937), a local singing school teacher of the early twentieth century, would conclude his instruction by teaching the students to sing a drone as a way of proving their ability to sing on pitch. The class would form several lines that would “march around in a circle...the bass and treble each [on their part]...[he] would give everybody their sound and they held it...[he] would listen and say somebody’s not holding their sound”(Carter 2001). Carter indicated that several songs could be

⁷⁵ This theory first began circulating when David and Clarke Lee and their families lead a Hoboken-style singing school in Chicago in March of 1996. David stated that after leading the class in performing a drone, a participant presented this theory, which has since circulated among singers as the historical genesis of vocal drones (p.c., January 2019). [A video from the 1996 Lee family workshop in Chicago](#) includes a short comment by Chicago singer Al Frank stating the bagpipe origin thesis. From my interviews with singers outside Hoboken, this was the most frequently cited explanation of the origin of the drone, although some singers were openly skeptical of this perception, and others accepted it as a possibility but noted that there was probably no way to establish its veracity.

⁷⁶ The Act of Proscription was enacted in 1746 by the British Parliament with the intent of ending Jacobite resistance to English rule. It is a matter of debate whether this legislation was actually employed to prevent performance on the bagpipe. For an exhaustive study of this see John G. Gibson, *Traditional Gaelic Bagpiping 1745–1945* (Edinburgh: NMS Publishing, 1998). As Gibson describes, the history of Scottish bagpipes does include aural transmission of melodies, but without a drone and in forms that bear little resemblance to the Hoboken drone. Furthermore, the Highland bagpipe, the instrument that was, at least theoretically, banned by the Act of Proscription, has three drone pipes that each sound the tonic in octaves, with no fifth as in the Hoboken drone.

used for a drone, but the one that she remembered was “Ye Children of Jesus.” This tune, titled *TRANSPORT* in nineteenth-century tunebooks, was published in George Hendrickson’s *Union Harmony* (1848), with a notated drone in tonic octaves between the bass and treble parts surrounding the melody in the tenor (Ex. 5.1). Whether through this or an intermediary source, Martin Dowling (or his father Lazarus, the first documented singing school teacher in the region)⁷⁷ likely originated the drone from an American tunebook.

TRANSPORT. 11's & 10's.

TRANSPORT—Continued. 83

2. Why should you go mourning from such a Physician,
Who's able and willing your sickness to cure;
Come to him believing, though bad your condition,
His Father has promis'd your case to ensure;

My soul he hath healed, my heart he rejoices,
He brought me to Zion to hear the glad voices;
I'll serve him, and praise him, and always adore him,
Till we meet in heaven where parting's no more.

Ex. 5.1: Transport in George Hendrickson’s *Union Harmony*, 1848. Note the written drone.

It seems vastly less likely to discover a direct link between eighteenth-century Scottish bagpipers and the contemporary Sacred Harp community in Hoboken, Georgia—yet imagining this link has constituted an important part of the narrative that Sacred Harp singers create to explain the practice. Imagining a Scottish origin for the Hoboken drone reflects a much wider

⁷⁷ See (Sommers 2010)

range of common assertions that place the origin of Sacred Harp singing in an imagined “Celtic” space. Although the *Sacred Harp* is a fairly eclectic book with music from a wide range of sources, popular and even scholarly accounts have focused on Britain and Ireland as the birthplace of the musical form.⁷⁸ As I detail, this trend, which was emergent in early twentieth-century studies of Sacred Harp, has gained prominence as an explanation of the music’s origin. While the bagpipe theory is unlikely, it garners particular meanings for contemporary singers by finding deep connections in a distant, misty, and exotic past.

As interesting as the origins of these and other Sacred Harp practices may be, evaluating the veracity of these allegations about the historical antecedents of Sacred Harp singing is not my primary objective. Instead, I am interested in exploring how conceptions of history, place, and *perceived* authenticity converge and are embodied in a music culture and its performance practices. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the common associations made by singers between Sacred Harp in the US South and a set of ideas about Ireland and Scotland I refer to here as the “Celtic imaginary.” I base this concept on a loosely established sense of Celticness in contemporary American culture that Scott Reiss has called the “Celtic imaginary” (Reiss 2003). Because imaginaries are ideology-driven cultural constructions, Reiss’ conception offers a useful framework for understanding the significance underlying Sacred Harp singers’ frequent assertions of a Celtic origin for their music. Regardless of the actual historical links between Sacred Harp and Celtic cultures, perceived connections play an important role in constructions of authenticity and expressions of identity among Sacred Harp singers. The fact that much of this process operates in realms of the imagination does not diminish its power among groups of singers.

⁷⁸ For example, see the works of George Pullen Jackson.

The emergence of Sacred Harp in Ireland has sparked additional interest in this subject. Singers from the United States and Ireland have begun travelling to each other's singings; this transatlantic interchange has elicited considerable discussion about Celtic identity and Sacred Harp singing. Tracing these conversations illuminates how conceptions of "Celtic" heritage are employed by Sacred Harp singers to assert a variety of meanings and values they feel their musical practice represents. The drone that concluded the second Irish Sacred Harp Convention is an illustration of the interplay of Celtic and southern imaginaries within the musical practice of Sacred Harp, reflecting the mutual adaptability of these concepts to individual singers. Participants interpreted the performance in widely differing ways. Some singers were aware that the drone has been identified as a preservation of centuries-old Celtic music—though not all accepted that hypothesis as conclusive fact (p.c. Dan Hunter, August 2016). Some associated it exclusively with the US South, a "special thing they do where Tollie is from," as one Irish singer described it (p.c., Daire O'Sullivan and Kate Kirwan, July 2017). Likewise, perceived connections between Sacred Harp and Celticness influenced participants' decisions to travel to Ireland to sing, and impacted the experiences that they had while there, in similarly diverse ways.

The Celtic imaginary does not exist on its own in Sacred Harp singing, but, as I explore, is often interwoven with other imaginaries discussed throughout this study, especially southern imaginaries. In exploring the overlapping imaginaries that make up participants' experiences of Sacred Harp, the ideological power of Celticness becomes apparent. More than just providing an origin myth for the music form, it allows singers to articulate their own relationship to that origin, serving as a site of expression for a range of values associated with tradition and authenticity. Singers find deep connections not only through the broader imagined community, but through various imaginaries supported by music and sound through supposed historical

lineages (Anderson 1991).

Asserting connections between Sacred Harp and the Celtic articulates a range of cultural values, from supporting the alleged traditional status of particular practices, to affirming personal or community identity. Far more than an imagined historical connection between music and place, the alleged Celtic origins of Sacred Harp are interwoven with broader Celtic imaginaries, promoting Sacred Harp as an “authentic” tradition. This romanticized view obscures the diversity represented by the *Sacred Harp*’s contributors, while limiting claims to authentic status by potential participants, all while reinforcing an outmoded, whitewashed vision of the US South as having emerged from a “Celtic” worldview. In the U.S., “Celtic” also has a long association with whiteness, which primarily celebrates Irish, Scottish, or Scotch-Irish cultural heritage. Heritage aside, Celtic in this context reflects the complex history of a southern identity of difference based upon whitewashing regional culture to reflect white supremacist views of racial purity. I draw from extensive research in this area to explore how Grady McWhiney’s *Cracker Culture*, the work of George Pullen Jackson, and the Southern Agrarians, among others, frame Sacred Harp within the context of an imagined “Celtic” southern white populace. While this analysis is important from an American perspective in the Celtic imaginary, the reverse from an Irish or European perspective is quite different. Despite its resistance to definition and regardless of its questionable claims, the Celtic imaginary serves as the center for a rich nexus of cultural interchange, engendering ideologies of authenticity and identity and facilitating actual physical interaction among Sacred Harp singers on both sides of the Atlantic.

5.1 Fantasizing the Celtic Imaginary

“Celticness” has never been a straightforward or ideologically neutral concept. “Celtic”

has been plagued by a contentious etymological and political history. Aside from describing several nomadic peoples from late prehistoric to medieval Europe who spoke a related set of languages, the term has been put to an astonishingly wide range of purposes, often to validate national, racial, or cultural boundaries as natural rather than constructed categories.⁷⁹ While little is known of these ancient peoples, “Celtic” has frequently been defined by the cultural practices of their alleged descendants. But because of the heterogeneous range of disparate historical populations and geographies associated with the term “Celtic,” conceptions of which practices are traditional or authentic vary widely. Especially in the United States, there is no consensus on the term’s meaning. In this dizzying realm of competing signs with no single apparent referent, ethnomusicologists Martin Stokes and Philip Bohlman describe “Celtic” as a set of “meanings [that] can thus never be reduced to matters of ethnic property and aboriginal meaning, or to the simple functionalism of domination or subversion, hegemony, or counterhegemony” (Stokes and Bohlman 2003, 2–3).

Despite its semantic slipperiness, interrogating the meanings of Celticness is worthwhile because it represents a range of scattered but interconnected associations in contemporary American vernacular usage. In this arena, “Celtic” usually refers to the perceived “traditional” cultures of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and, less frequently, Brittany and Galicia. Forms of cultural expression, including music, dance, and art, are considered Celtic if they conform to a range of aesthetic models that audiences understand as authentic—including visual modes derived from early Medieval metalwork and illumination styles; symbolic forms drawn from pre-Christian

⁷⁹ For a concise history of the Celts and the usage of the terms “Celt” and “Celtic,” see Barry Cunliffe, *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). James McCarthy and Euan Hague demonstrate the impact of Celtic imaginaries on conceptions of race in the late twentieth-century US in “Race, Nation, and Nature: the Cultural Politics of ‘Celtic’ Identification in the American West,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 2 (2004): 387–408.

northern European mythology; and music based on Irish and Scottish forms that have been asserted as “traditional” as far back as the eighteenth century, with particular emphasis on bagpipes (James 1999, 16–25). While the term “Celtic” is hotly contested, with meanings ranging from the disparate pre-history groups across Europe, aesthetics and art, and cultural continuity, I use the word for its utility to encompass a range of historical understandings and cultural practices which are understood to be relegated to the British Isles, mainly Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. I do not deny the differing yet intertwined histories of people within these places—there are certainly major differences among traditional music practices in these regions, for example—yet the term Celtic, as borrowed from Reiss, encompasses the broadest understanding of peoples and culture from this geographic region.

While these disparate elements fail to cohere as a monolithic definition of “Celtic,” they create an open, fluid conceptual space from which individuals and communities can draw as they identify and perform as Celtic—and these markers are highly effective because they are so readily recognized, given their prevalence in contemporary popular culture. Reiss defines this nexus of unfixed but still potent cultural symbols as the “Celtic imaginary”—a virtual community that “invokes authenticity, heritage, and history, but it is neither derived from musical lineage nor rooted in any specific space.” Citing Arjun Appadurai’s understanding of a “world system of images [that exist in] a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes,” Reiss interprets modern iterations of Celtic music as at once familiar and exotic—the Celtic instruments and languages working to “construct imaginary time: a sense of ancientness or timelessness, from which the traditional tunes emanate” (Reiss 2003, 163).

The Celtic imaginary is not only a mythical understanding of a perceived “ancient” culture and its modern expression—it also represents a broader range of concepts about history,

politics, and cultural geography; the totality of what an individual or group understands “Celtic” to represent. Since they reflect the perceptions of individuals, there are many different Celtic imaginaries, though they tend to have a number of underlying themes. In the United States, Celtic imaginaries are often expressed in representations of Celtic peoples in popular culture—everything from *Riverdance* to *Braveheart* to the décor of Irish-pub-themed restaurants.⁸⁰ A number of specific values are commonly imagined as elements of Celtic identity—these include bravery, honor, stoicism, resistance to oppression, love for freedom, and closeness to nature. As Fiona Stafford argues, these themes trace back at least as far as eighteenth century British literary primitivism, in which the Celtic person was cast as the possessor of natural virtue immune to the oppressive strictures of modern, urban society (Stafford 1996).

5.2 Finding Celtic Origins for the *Sacred Harp*

In many cases the primary work that the Celtic imaginary does is to establish a mythical origin for Sacred Harp singing—to provide a basis for understanding how the music might be “authentic” or “traditional.” Throughout the long history of this discourse, the situation of Sacred Harp relative to Celtic imaginaries has been interwoven with a variety of ideological propositions. Among the early proponents of a link between Sacred Harp and “Celtic” music was George Pullen Jackson—his work is still commonly cited, particularly in authenticating tune origins. Although Jackson’s aims were much broader than establishing Sacred Harp as an essentially Celtic music form, his work provided the basis for more recent singers and observers who connect Sacred Harp and Celtic imaginaries.

Beginning in the 1930s, Jackson described Sacred Harp as a “Celtic melodic idiom,” a

⁸⁰ See (Casey 2002) and (McArthur 1998).

natural cultural expression, in his view, of an area with a high percentage of Scotch-Irish immigrants who had come to the United States as early as 1775, settling primarily in an area stretching from the Deep South to upper Appalachia (Jackson 1933, 158–59). A “Scotch-Irish flavor,” in Jackson’s account, was prevalent in the secular music of immigrants from the British Isles and subsequently found its way into religious folk music. Jackson believed that the large number of modal Sacred Harp tunes, the prevalence of gapped scales, and the high proportion of minor melodies evinced influence or even direct borrowing from Celtic fiddle or bagpipe tunes (Jackson 1933, 160–65).

Another connection to Celtic music Jackson asserted was in the singing style itself. In several observations of Sacred Harp singers singing WONDROUS LOVE, white Primitive Baptists singing the same tune, as well as others, and black congregations singing “surge songs,” he noted a specific type of “flip” at the ends of words or phrases—a physiological “phenomenon” that he could not explain (Jackson 1943, 246–48). Jackson was most likely describing a particular type of voice breaking akin to yodeling styles, what Timothy Wise, as well as many contemporary old-time and country singers, call “feathering” (Wise 2007).⁸¹ Through conversations with Samuel Bayard, Jackson quickly drew conclusions linking this vocal affect with Irish traditional singing as well as bagpipe playing. While feathering, or any other localized term for this “voice-break” as Bart Plantenga calls it, is common in many singing styles worldwide, this embellishment is not part of bagpipe (presumably uilleann pipe) playing (Plantenga 2004). Perhaps Bayard and Jackson’s observations conflated uilleann pipe ornamentation which has a

⁸¹ See Wise 2007 for an audio example as well as “Wayfaring Stranger” on Anonymous 4’s album *Gloryland* (2006). In the second example, the “flip” or “feathering” is audible on the words “poor” and “through” in the first stanza. I discussed this effect with Marsha Genensky of Anonymous 4, though she was not aware of the term “feathering” (p.c. September, 2019). Singer Judy Hauff of Chicago uses this term and I’m indebted to her deep knowledge of singing practices.

very different musical function than vocal feathering. Jackson frequently sought to authenticate every detail, from the printed hymns to singing styles and practices, often making connections between unrelated cultural practices. In seeking these historical origins, his research frequently points to Celtic origins of these tunes and musical practices, further solidifying a white “Celtic” identity for the Americans who practice them.

Jackson located melodic links between American hymn tunes and a number of Scottish and Irish tunes. A few melodies with direct links to Scottish, Irish, or Welsh origins include WELCH,⁸² BONNIE DOON,⁸³ BRUCE’S ADDRESS,⁸⁴ HEBREW CHILDREN,⁸⁵ JERUSALEM,⁸⁶ LAST ROSE OF SUMMER,⁸⁷ LOCHLEVEN,⁸⁸ PLENARY,⁸⁹ SACRED THRONE,⁹⁰ and SINGING SCHOOL.⁹¹ Since Jackson’s time, numerous observers and participants have followed his lead in drawing connections between Sacred Harp tunes and Celtic music. While these tunes often carry a

⁸² Jackson notes a direct hymn arrangement with different words using the Welsh tune “Ar Hyd Y Nos” (“All through the Night”). Printed in numerous books including the *Southern Harmony* (Jackson 1952).

⁸³ The Scottish melody “Ye Banks and Braes of Bonnie Doon,” arrangement in the *Social Harp*.

⁸⁴ Jackson briefly mentions the tune as being printed in *Lyric Gems of Scotland* where it is called “Scots Wha Ha’e Wi’ Wallace Bled” and cited as “Air, “Hey, tuttie, tattie” (Jackson 1953).

⁸⁵ I find that this tune is very similar to the well-known Irish song “Óró, sé do bheatha abhaile” which was published in 1855 in Petrie’s *Ancient Music of Ireland* and further in 1902 in the edited volume *The Complete Collection of Irish Music*. The tune also shares melodic similarities and patterns with the popular sea shanty “The Drunken Sailor.”

⁸⁶ Jackson cites it as coming from “Good Old Way,” a possible British tune, though it’s printed in the *Manx National Songs* (1896). This tune was popularized by The Watsons and arranged following their version by Ted Stokes for the *Shenandoah Harmony* (2013).

⁸⁷ Jackson found an arrangement in the *Revivalist* (1868), though the tune is printed with the Moore text in William Walker’s *Fruits and Flowers* (Jackson 1952). The poetry by Thomas Moore was originally set to the Irish melody “Aisling an Óigfhear” (“The Young Man’s Dream”) which was transcribed by Edward Bunting as performed by Denis Hempson (Donnchadh Ó Hámsaigh) at the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792. It was later printed in *Moore’s Irish Melodies* (arr. Stevenson) in 1813 (McCleave and Caraher 2018).

⁸⁸ Jackson found the tune printed in Amos Hayden’s *Sacred Melodeon* which he says is a close variant of “Highland Boat Songs” found in two nineteenth-century Scottish music collections. This tune was later included in the 2005 edition of *The Missouri Harmony*.

⁸⁹ Found in the *Sacred Harp and Social Harp*, this tune was originally a “Scottish air” and most associated now with “Auld Lang Syne” (Steel and Hulan 2010, 201).

⁹⁰ A Scottish melody arranged by Hugh Wilson around 1800 (Brink and Polman 1998). This melody is fairly common in denominational hymnals and is called MARTYRDOM.

⁹¹ Printed in the *Social Harp*, this arrangement uses the melody of “Blue Bells of Scotland.”

general understanding of “Celticness” to many singers, other songs hold more significant meaning. Irish singers Katie Ahern and Áine Uí Cheallaigh both found particular Irish connections to the tune HELP ME TO SING, which was arranged for the 1859 edition of the *Sacred Harp* (Steel and Hulan 2010), (Ex. 5.2). They both noted that the tune seemed related to a family of tunes, the best-known being “Star of the County Down (p.c. March 2017). Áine expressed that, as a singer of Irish traditional music, she found that a few shape-note tunes had “pauses” in the melody similar to those in Irish songs, specifically between the caoineadh “Liam Uí Raghailigh” and HELP ME TO SING (p.c. March 2017) (Ex. 5.3). There is no doubt a connection between the two songs, as the melodies are remarkably similar in arch and phrasing. Though no sources point to B.F. White’s influences in arranging this song and most Americans do not think of this tune as particularly “Celtic,” it’s important to note that Irish singers find connections between the two music-cultures just as many Americans do.

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HELP ME TO SING. P. M.

B. F. White.

The musical score is for the hymn "HELP ME TO SING" in P. M. mode, arranged by B. F. White. It is written in 6/4 time and consists of two systems of music. Each system includes a vocal melody line and a piano accompaniment consisting of a right-hand treble staff and a left-hand bass staff. The lyrics are: "Ye souls who are bound unto Canaan, Come join in and help me to sing The praises of my lov - ing Je - sus, My prophet, my priest, and my king. His name is most sweetly melodious, 'Twill help you most swiftly to move, While Jesus himself is the leader, We're bound by the cords of his love." The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines, with some notes marked with square shapes, characteristic of shape-note music.

Ex. 5.2: HELP ME TO SING. From the *Sacred Harp*, 1860 (public domain).

Liam O Raghallaigh



Ex. 5.3: The caoineadh “Liam Uí Raghailigh.”

Another example wrapped in deep historical imaginings is BRUCE’S ADDRESS. Removed from later editions of the Denson revision of the *Sacred Harp*, this tune is now only included in the *B.F. White Sacred Harp* (“Cooper” revision), the *Christian Harmony*, and the *New Harp of Columbia*. Jackson briefly mentions that the tune is printed in *Lyric Gems of Scotland* as “Scots Wha Ha’e Wi’ Wallace Bled” to the air, “Hey, tuttie, tattie” (Jackson 1953, 136). Mythologized accounts hold the song was supposedly played by the army of Robert the Bruce before the Battle of Bannockburn in 1344 (Hence “Bruce’s Address”) (Pittock 2006). Whether this is true or not, I have heard singers on numerous occasions (specifically Old Harp singers in east Tennessee) talk about their Scottish heritage in relation to the tune, tying themselves to Robert the Bruce and Scotland through the singing of this song.

These examples demonstrate that there are connections between Celtic music and tunes in American shape-note books. Yet, through the work of Jackson and others, many singers expect to find Celtic connections on nearly every page of the *Sacred Harp* and similar shape-note tunebooks. To mention just one example, PARTING HAND, a tune often used to close all-day singings and conventions, is often cited because of the lilting character of its compound time rhythm. In 2017, a group member shared a recording of “My Christian Friends in Bonds of Love” (the same tune and text as PARTING HAND), to the Sacred Harp Friends Facebook group, noting that it had a “strong Celtic sound.” Recorded in the 1930s, Elder Golden Harris sings the tune and accompanies himself heterophonically with a fiddle (Lornell 1989).⁹² Another person commented on the post, likening it to what Jean Ritchie called “shiver ups and shake downs” and claiming that the Lee family of Hoboken still sing in this manner. Though PARTING HAND is credited to William Walker in the *Southern Harmony* and Jackson found no apparent “Celtic” musical connections, some singers still hear particular musical influences, specifically in ways that support their ideas about origin and authenticity.

It is commonplace for tunes like SAWYER’S EXIT, which is closely related to “Rosin the Beau,” to be called Celtic, Irish, or Scottish because of assumptions that fiddle (and bagpipe) music originates only from the British Isles. However, many tunes also bear striking similarities to English tunes as well as German melodies. In fact, a number of tunes in the *Sacred Harp* are just as closely related to traditional forms from continental Europe as they are to tunes from the so-called Celtic lands. Examples include GREEN FIELDS, a German melody quoted by J.S. Bach in his “Peasant Cantata” as “Es nehme zehntausend Dukaten der Kammerherr alle Tag’ ein” (which subsequently became popular in England), SOFT MUSIC, which is the German melody

⁹² This recording is part of the compilation album *How Can I Keep from Singing: Early American Religious Music and Song*, Vol. 1, Yazoo 2020, 1996 and *Sacred Harp & Shape note Singing*, Jsp Records, 2014.

“Du, du, liegst mir am Herzen,” and JOYFUL, which is based on the English carol “The Seven Joys of Mary.” Indeed, the *Sacred Harp* and similar tunebooks were much more cosmopolitan in their makeup than Jackson and others asserted.

5.3 Celtic Origins and “White Spirituals”

For Jackson, more was at stake than finding the origins of songs in the *Sacred Harp*. His conception of Sacred Harp tunes as “White Spirituals” sought to establish a European-American rather than African-American form as the “original” American music. The ostensibly Celtic origins of Sacred Harp helped bolster his view of a white American national culture; countering contemporaneous scholarship that heralded the “Negro spiritual” as America’s oldest indigenous music, he proposed that African Americans had learned from even earlier white music forms, a body of British folk-tunes in oral circulation that were eventually notated and published in the *Sacred Harp* and other shape-note tunebooks.⁹³

Jackson read the overall character of Sacred Harp singing as a marker of its presumed Celtic origins. He understood the prevalence of compound time, for example, as preserving the “fast fiddle (or bagpipe) note succession[s]” of a British musical heritage (Jackson 1933, 164–65). But Jackson was not particularly concerned about the definition of the term “Celtic”—a vague idea of an ancestral indigenous Anglo-Irish people was sufficient to evoke the sense of earnest white yeomanry that he felt that both Sacred Harp and Celtic music represented. Scotch-Irish immigrants to America had defined their identity primarily in terms of their dissenting Protestantism, not as members of a coherent “Celtic” ethnicity.⁹⁴ This perspective blinded

⁹³ For further discussion on Jackson and “White Spirituals” and race see Tallmadge 1981 and Karlsberg 2015.

⁹⁴ For a range of new perspectives on Scots-Irish immigration to the US, see William P. Kelly and John R. Young, eds., *Ulster and Scotland, 1600-2000: History, Language, and Identity* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).

Jackson to the important contributions of African American musics in the formation of Sacred Harp singing.⁹⁵ For example, Jackson's assertion that the prevalence of pentatonic Sacred Harp melodies reflects a "Celtic idiom" could just as easily be redirected to claim an African American influence.⁹⁶

Perhaps Jackson relied so heavily on his perception of the Celtic and British origins of Sacred Harp because that historical model supported a broader ideological proposition linking rural white southerners to the Celtic world in order to valorize a particular set of allegedly traditional values. Jackson's work promotes an approach that had been developing since the late nineteenth century, celebrating southerners as remnants of a very specific Celtic people: the Scotch-Irish. Beginning with John Hall's *The Mountain Whites of the South* (1893), several writers explained the exceptional nature of the "southern" character as a derivation of Celtic traditions preserved by the descendants of Scots-Irish immigrants.⁹⁷ According to educator and folklorist John C. Campbell, a large fraction of the early settlers of the southern frontier were Scotch-Irish, a people whose ancestors had first left Scotland and northern England to settle in the Ulster region of Ireland, then come in great numbers to the United States in the eighteenth century.⁹⁸ Jackson used Campbell's description of areas with large Scotch-Irish majorities to assert a means by which southern whites, including Sacred Harp singers, could have preserved

⁹⁵ Steel (2010) discusses the possibility of crosscurrents between African American music and white shape-note singing in the Chattahoochee Valley during the period when the Sacred Harp was published (p.13).

⁹⁶ A related assertion circulates in popular accounts of African American music, claiming that the pentatonic melody to "Amazing Grace" (NEW BRITAIN in the Sacred Harp) proves its African origins. See, for example, John Bevere et. al., *Everlasting Hope* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014), 23. Some have noted similarities between the Hoboken drone and the Ring Shout, suggesting a way of interpreting that practice as reflecting an African American influence.

⁹⁷ See John Hall, *The Mountain Whites of the South* (Pittsburgh: J. McMillin, 1893) and also, Henry Jones Ford, *The Scotch-Irish in America* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1966 [1915]).

⁹⁸ See John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation 1921), 5-65, 355-359

the “Celtic melodic idiom.”⁹⁹

Southern and Appalachian imaginaries that took form in the early twentieth century profoundly influenced contemporaneous accounts of rural southern hymnody. Campbell’s assertion of the Scotch-Irish character of Appalachia was, in part, an attempt to rehabilitate the image of the “southern highlanders,” denying that they were a “degenerate and dying stock” (J. C. Campbell 1921, 103). Instead, he believed their allegedly ancient social practices represented an important stage in the development of Protestant American values—although his romanticized, primitivist approach situated their culture in the realm of history rather than the present. Campbell’s contemporary, the English folklorist Cecil Sharp, understood folk music in southern Appalachia as a direct transplant of rural British folksong from an earlier era. This alleged discovery, as Henry D. Shapiro has written, seemed to suggest that people long thought to be on the fringes of American society actually possessed the “essence of American civilization itself” (Shapiro 1986, 256–58).

While Jackson was less concerned than Campbell or Sharp with establishing Appalachians as ethnically Celtic, his sense of the “regular fasola-Americans” whose “dominant tendencies...were largely Scotch-Irish” draws on many of the same tropes (Jackson 1933, 159). Perhaps these earlier accounts of Appalachia as the isolated homeland of the most authentic American music spurred Jackson to treat Sacred Harp singing as a kind of mountain music, a phenomenon of the “Southern Uplands,” despite the fact that, as Warren Steel has documented, the *Sacred Harp* tunebook originated from within the plantation economy of central-west Georgia, and had, by Jackson’s time, a strong following in areas of south Alabama, south

⁹⁹ See Jackson, *White Spirituals*, 159. More recent scholarship has demonstrated the remarkable diversity among Appalachian communities and artforms—see, for example, Fred J. Hay, “Black Musicians in Appalachia: An Introduction to Affrilachian Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 23, (Spring-Autumn, 2003): 1-19.

Georgia, Florida, and Texas, which could never be described as “upland.”¹⁰⁰

Despite subsequent criticism pointing out the sweeping over generalizations and romanticized views of early twentieth-century writers on Appalachia, notions of southern/Celtic connections have continued to impact both scholarly and popular accounts of southern music.¹⁰¹ Among the most influential works on this theme is *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South* (1988), by Grady McWhiney. McWhiney asserts that numerous cultural and historical differences between the North and South owe to the influx of Scots-Irish into the southern United States. McWhiney conflates “Scots-Irish,” “Celtic,” and “Southern,” throughout, arguing that Celtic culture in the South promoted values of honor, bravery, and family loyalty. Much as Jackson had, McWhiney explained the unique character of southern hymnody as a legacy of the intact-preservation of Old World traditions. Furthermore, he asserted that this original Celtic music had been maintained unadulterated, citing the account of a Scottish woman who, after visiting “churches of various denominations in the South...declared that she recognized many of the hymns sung in these churches as those her grandmother, a Highland Scot, used to sing,” presumably referring to the lined-out psalms of the Hebrides (McWhiney 1988, 188). While there are indeed trace elements of Anglo-Irish practice and repertoire in contemporary southern hymnody, McWhiney’s blanket assertion of a directly transplanted tradition ignores the complex admixture of influences in the diverse range of religious music in the southeast United States.¹⁰²

Despite the shortcomings of McWhiney’s account, his work has had a significant

¹⁰⁰ Jackson refers to the “upland South” throughout his work, and his first volume on Sacred Harp singing, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*, even incorporated the term in its title. For the social context surrounding the production of the Sacred Harp in 1844, see Steel and Hulan 2010, 12–15.

¹⁰¹ For criticism of Sharp’s methods and conclusions, see Dave Harker, *Fakesong: the Manufacture of British Folksong 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).

¹⁰² For a critique of McWhiney, see Rodger Cunningham, “Eat Grits and Die: Or, Cracker, Your Breed Ain’t Hermeneutical,” *Appalachian Journal* 17, no. 2 (1990): 176-182.

influence outside of academia by perpetuating early twentieth-century folklorists' belief that "southern culture" equated to Celtic heritage. Books ranging in topic from country music to neo-Confederate apologetic history unquestioningly accept McWhiney's thesis, simultaneously drawing from and fueling Celtic imaginaries.⁴⁰ This argument is particularly troubling in its assertion that a specific subset of white settlers and their descendants represent the authentic version of southern culture. Much like Jackson, McWhiney configures Anglo-European whites as the arbiters of true southern-ness, denigrating by omission the important contributions of the panoply of peoples and cultures within the Southeast. McWhiney's interpretation of lined-out hymnody as a Celtic practice is an apt example—while many different immigrant groups brought this singing style to the eighteenth-century U.S., it actually flourishes among African American congregations up to the present (Dargan 2006).

Despite its questionable historical grounding and implicit racism, this trope has likely maintained its popularity because it provides a useful framework for promoting positive values that counteract long-held negative stereotypes about southerners.¹⁰³ In this respect, the confluence of Celtic and southern or Appalachian imaginaries can help restore the image of an area that has historically been the object of derision; by interpreting assumptions about "southern character" not as deficiencies relative to an imagined "mainstream" American ideal, but as evidence of Celtic heritage, observers can turn negative stereotypes into positive attributes.¹⁰⁴ The conception of the South as "backward," for instance, is reversed in this perspective to read as ancient, authentic, and in touch with the timeless wisdom that the Celtic imaginary can

¹⁰³ For an exploration of a similar kind of self-exoticizing in southern rock, see Jason T. Eastman and Douglas P. Schrock, "Southern Rock Musicians' Construction of White Trash," *Race, Gender & Class* 15, no. 1/2 (2008): 205-219.

¹⁰⁴ On stereotypes of the South, see Carla D. Shirley, "'You might be a redneck if...': Boundary Work among Rural, Southern Whites," *Social Forces* 89, no. 1 (September, 2010): 35-61.

represent. Instead of being uncivilized, southerners are interpreted as living in harmony with nature; rather than being prone to violence, they are understood as maintaining a dogged Celtic sense of honor and determination to fight for their family. This works conceptually in part because the idea of a Celtic heritage has no clear, actual historical antecedent, but is located primarily in the realm of the imaginary. Inasmuch as the Celts are regarded with a romanticized sense of a pure, wholesome, and proud culture, they provide an unimpeachable source of positive values for their alleged descendants in the South.

This trope has been employed not only for southern apologetics, but as a tool to promote white supremacy. In *Strange Kin*, Colin Quinlan discusses the myriad ways that Celtiness, through Irishness, is a stand-in for whiteness, empowering narratives of racial purity through cultural heredity. He states that “...since the last decade of the twentieth century, the rather novel idea of a *Celtic* South has come to receive [a type of] advocacy—and, unfortunately, claims of xenophobic exclusivity—that characterized the champions of Anglo-Saxonism in the 1890s” (Quinlan 2005, 4). As The Southern Poverty Law Center notes, McWhiney used this historical narrative to situate claims of cultural and racial legitimacy and became the “intellectual grandfather of the new-Confederate movement” (“The Ideologues” n.d.).¹⁰⁵

Although McWhiney later distanced himself from explicitly racist organizations, his work from the 1980s remains a bedrock for the continuing rhetoric of “southern Celts.” His text was considered foundational for the creation of the League of the South, a neo-confederate, white supremacist organization. Using *Cracker Culture* as a manifesto, founder Michael Hill claimed that southern people are descended from Anglo-Celtic peoples which justifies their

¹⁰⁵ Many of these founders and leaders were associated with major universities: Grady McWhiney (history, University of Alabama), James Everett Kibler (English, University of Georgia), Donald Livingston (philosophy, Emory University), Charles Hamel (attended the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign).

desire to protect their land, family, religion, and culture (“League of the South” n.d.). Drawing from McWhiney’s research, Hill and others supported essentialized narratives of southern people (that is, white southern people) originating from “martial” heritages, thus supporting their desire for a unified and separate “Dixie” (Hill 2014). The League of the South has advocated for southern secession, and according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, has become an increasingly vocal and visibly racist organization. The League of the South’s website, which firmly asserts southern independence, includes many articles, mostly by Hill, several of which link current American politics to contemporary Irish political organizations (Sinn Féin and the Dáil) and nationalist discourses of white southern and Celtic people.

Many neo-Confederates use music in their arguments to support southern “real” culture of the U.S. (which is Celtic), as opposed to the mainstream, “inauthentic, transient, and mongrelized multiculturalism” of the rest of the country (Hague, Sebesta, and Beirich 2008, 255). The Southern Poverty Law Center lists a number of other scholars and organizations as the “Ideologues” of the neo-confederate movement. James Everett Kibler, also a founding member of The League of the South, works with the Abbeville Institute, a similar organization founded by Donald Livingston which is less militant than the League of the South but also supports problematic narratives of southern exceptionalism. Kibler gave several public talks from 2014–18 about William Walker, compiler of the *Southern Harmony* and *Christian Harmony*, repeating McWhiney and ultimately Jackson’s ideas by asserting the Celtic roots of both the music and Walker himself. Two of Kibler’s talks concentrated on the hymn “Amazing Grace” (NEW BRITAIN in most shape-note songbooks), saying that Walker had a “strong Scotch-Irish background” and that he found it “significant that the Welsh and Irish descended Walker chose that name” (“New Britain”). “Walker understood the Celtic roots of the tune...[it’s in a]

pentatonic scale and that's why pipe bands take to it, so it's likely Scottish...He [Walker] likely heard it in Spartanburg County [South Carolina], full of Scotch-Irish, Irish, and Scots" (Kibler 2018).¹⁰⁶ In a discussion about neglecting shape-note hymnody in earlier musicological texts, Kibler goes on to quote out of context and problematically rephrase Joel Cohen of the Boston Camerata as saying that "Americans have been miseducated to prefer counterfeit culture to the real, *southern* thing," further supporting his own ideas about the southern/Celtic as the root of all American culture (Kibler 2018).

Through the Scotch-Irish Society of the USA, Mike Scoggins has similarly discussed Celtic connections in the shape-note roots of country music. Like the essentialist narratives framed by McWhiney and others, Scoggins claims that shape-note singing thrived in the areas of the South which were largely Scotch-Irish. He found it significant that shape-notes were invented in the late eighteenth century by a Philadelphian with Scottish ancestry and that the best-known of these tunes, "Amazing Grace," is a combination of several "older Scottish or British folk tunes"—an unfounded claim—and that it was arranged in its present form by William Walker, who had Welsh and Scotch-Irish heritage.¹⁰⁷ Further, Scoggins used circular logic to argue for "Amazing Grace's" alleged Celtic origin, claiming that it is "regularly performed on the Scottish bagpipes...and there is certainly little doubt that the tune is ideally suited for this ancient instrument." This further urges readers to accept the southern-Celtic thesis in a full-circle argument of double trans-Atlantic travel (Scoggins 2012, 12).

¹⁰⁶This narrative has a wide presence outside of Kibler's work and is employed with varying levels of awareness of its problematic construction of race. I first encountered it in a very similar lecture given in 2012 by Pat Riddle, Engineering Technology faculty at Pellissippi State Community College where I taught from 2009-12. Riddle's talk drew directly from McWhiney as he outlined his own Scots-Irish heritage in Appalachia, one that explained the tenacity of the fighting "Volunteers" of East Tennessee (Pat Riddle, "Born Fighting," Faculty Lecture Series, Pellissippi State Community College, Knoxville, TN, November 15, 2012).

¹⁰⁷ While Jackson describes Walker as a second-generation Welsh American, nowhere does he discuss a Scotch-Irish heritage.

The trope of Celtic southern music has also been employed in contexts that are less visibly white-supremacist, but still engage problematic conceptions of (white) southern exceptionalism. For example, the Foundation for American Education reprinted the libretto of Davidson and Bryan's *Singin' Billy* folk opera in 1985. The organization, which is now defunct, also published the *Southern Partisan* magazine, a vocal proponent of southern-exceptionalist ideology. Its publisher, Charles Scott Hamel, drew from the twelve southern "Fugitive" writers, which included Donald Davidson. As I discussed in chapter two, Davidson and Bryan's *Singin' Billy* folk opera not only introduced Jackson's "white spirituals" to a broader audience through the palatable form of art music, but it also wove narratives around class, urban and rural spaces, race, and the ethnic origins of its supposed "Celtic" music. In both text and music, the Celt is an ever-present marker of white southern identity in the fictional narrative woven by Davidson.

Subsequent observers that are a step removed from neo-Confederate, white supremacist, or southern-exceptionalist publications who rely on sources like these may be oblivious to the racial implications inherent in their perpetuation of a romanticized Celtic South. Hymnody Scholar Debra Bridges, for example, who claims to uncover the direct British roots of American hymnody, engages the romantic ideals McWhiney and the Ideologues professed: "There is a wandering mysticism in Walker's works that is remarkably reminiscent of ancient Celtic chant, clan music, and Welsh *istydfedd* [sic] singing traditions. Walker appears to have captured a style of music that made a direct and legitimate—almost genetic—connection to ancestry...He was able to refresh the ancestral identities of even the most isolated and remote villages of the Carolina backcountry by emphasizing the Anglo-Celtic traditions of its immigrant forefathers and mothers" (Bridges 1999, 153). Although her work was not intended to reinforce white southern apologetics, Bridges nonetheless reduces the complex interwoven influence of multiple

ethnic and cultural groups on Walker's work to a singular "Anglo-Celtic" voice as an authentic origin of southern American hymnody.

5.4 Southern and Celtic Imaginaries in Sacred Harp

These quasi-mythical accounts connecting southern and Celtic identities influence contemporary Sacred Harp experience. This conception is not just expressed by active participants—especially in the Southeast, Sacred Harp is frequently framed in popular culture as having Celtic origins. For example, one non-singer shared a page from the Sacred Harp Publishing Company on Facebook, adding, "Sacred Harp is Celtic Singing! If you're Southern, Sacred Harp is part of your Celtic-Gaelic heritage."¹⁰⁸ Even though numerous scholars in the intervening years have critiqued the limits of George Pullen Jackson's work, his characterization of Sacred Harp as a "Celtic idiom" has found a renewed salience, particularly among singers themselves. Beginning in the 1970s, newly formed Sacred Harp communities initiated conventions across the United States, introducing the music to diverse audiences far from its original base in the southeast. As I discussed in chapter two, many of these new singers had a background in folk music, a realm heavily influenced by the work of Campbell, Sharp, and others who promoted connections between American folk hymnody and Celtic music.

While this discourse had been introduced into Sacred Harp scholarship in Jackson's work, it initially played a peripheral role, especially in singers' own accounts of their music.¹⁰⁹ For newer singers who brought a folk music perspective, however, Jackson's work, especially as

¹⁰⁸ Facebook post, Rhonda Thacker Barrow, June 30, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ I am indebted to John Bealle for pointing out that the two historical sources printed in the *Sacred Harp* hymnal before 1970 (the historical notes by Joseph Stephen James, and Ruth Denson Edwards' introductory essay summarizing Jackson's *Story of the Sacred Harp*) make no reference to Scots-Irish sources or characterize the music as specifically "Celtic."

articulated by contemporary Sacred Harp leaders, offered a ready framework for interpreting Sacred Harp through the perspective of the Celtic imaginary. For example, Hugh McGraw, longtime executive secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, followed Jackson in declaring that “these tunes came from England, Scotland, and Ireland. These are airs which have been sung for many hundreds of years and now handed down from generation to generation... embedded in the minds of our fathers and mothers before us” (McGraw 1964).¹¹⁰ While McGraw himself had little interest in the musics of the Celtic world, his embrace of the theory of Anglo-Celtic origins was nonetheless influential among singers with broader folk music interests. From the mid-1970s until the 1990s, McGraw traveled to multiple states, helping to set up singing conventions and teaching singing schools (Steel and Hulan 2010). As the best recognized authority on Sacred Harp, his perspective helped further ingrain the perceived connection between Sacred Harp singing and Celtic music.

Another likely factor in the perseverance of this theory is the degree to which it affirms commonplace conceptions about the authenticity of Sacred Harp as a “timeless” tradition. Much of what Jackson, McWhiney, and others have written about the roots of southern music emphasizes the importance of Celtic connections in establishing authenticity. The Celtic South they describe is a space outside of modernity, where people preserve an ancient culture unbounded by the constraints of contemporary urban, mechanized society. As ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller observes, “the continuous transmission of Sacred Harp singing in the South has often been linked to the presumed natural musicality and stubborn backwardness of rural Southerners”(K. Miller 2008, 16) As Erich Nunn describes, this sentiment is “directly related to

¹¹⁰ Selections from this speech were published as “There are More Singings Now than Ever Before,” Sacred Harp Publishing Company Newsletter 2(3), December 31, 2013, accessed August 18, 2014, <http://originalsacredharp.com/2013/12/31/there-are-more-singings-now-than-ever-before-hugh-mcgraw-addresses-the-harpeth-valley-singers>

long-standing notions of ‘Celtic’ peoples as inherently musical”(Nunn 2015, 66). This essentializing gaze was also circulated by important thinkers such as Matthew Arnold. As Richard Fallis notes, Arnold asserted that Celts have “a sense of natural magic and the mystery of life, melancholy titanism coupled with a love for lightness and brightness, generosity, and a continuing rebellion against the despotism of fact” (Fallis 1977, 60). But, as Kiri Miller notes, such primitivizing assumptions carry positive connotations within the music culture of Sacred Harp; Miller documents how southeastern singers sometimes play-up their “southern-ness” using stereotypical southern dialect even in public discourse (K. Miller 2008, 157–60).

Imagined ideas about both southern and Celtic identity feed off each other; in works including Jackson’s and McWhiney’s, adherence to supposed Celtic tradition is seen as a marker of authentic southern identity, while respect for southern tradition is interpreted as a marker of authentic Celtic heritage. While neither proposition has a clear historical basis, they work to support conceptions of Sacred Harp that have proven critical to its widespread contemporary appeal, figuring the music form as survival of something truly ancient—an authentic glimpse of early American culture, or a living remnant of even more ancient Old World cultures. As Laura Clawson notes, Sacred Harp singers are hesitant to claim their music practice as a historical revival, but they are frequently adamant that the music is indeed very old—part of an unbroken chain that they perceive as linking past and present worlds through the music that appeals to many singers’ sense of participating in a “timeless” tradition (Clawson 2011, 157).

In part because it serves such important purposes in helping singers frame their experience and identity, this conflation of Celtic and southern imaginaries finds expression throughout the music culture of Sacred Harp. Occasionally, these ideas are the subject of open discussion, whether in informal conversations about Celtic roots, or in singing schools, where

Scots-Irish and other British ancestors are frequently invoked as the originators of the Sacred Harp tradition.¹¹¹ Social media websites and internet discussion lists have allowed some of these conversations to move into a broader public sphere. For example, in a Facebook conversation that took place in 2011, several Sacred Harp singers from different parts of the Southeast shared an online video of “Scots Presbyterian psalm singing.” They were joined with friends from the overlapping tradition of Christian Harmony singing in noting similarities between the Gaelic psalm singing and their own practices. One video that received a particularly enthusiastic response was of a hymn set to a tune that exists in the *Sacred Harp*, SACRED THRONE.¹¹² Larry Beveridge of North Carolina thought that the musical style “must be just a wee bit genetic,” and recalled that his grandmother “claimed that her grandfather in the early 1900s sang all the time and still did a kind of ‘wailing’ tune,” which he associated with the Psalm singing in the video.¹¹³ Margaret Bradshaw from the UK posted later to the Facebook group in 2016 that Gaelic psalm singing and Sacred Harp both resonated with her, and many of the comments on the post by others assumed there were ties between the musical practices because of sonic parallels.¹¹⁴

While Gaelic psalm singing and Sacred Harp are certainly related by way of music of the British-Atlantic world, there not necessarily direct links between the two. Lined-out hymnody of predominantly Baptist churches of Appalachia and the Southeast do share histories with the heterophonic singing in the Scottish Presbyterian church, and by extension so does shape-note

¹¹¹ This concept was advanced at multiple singing schools I attended in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee from 2006-2017.

¹¹² “Psalm 130 to Martyrdom,” YouTube video, 3:15, posted by “David Murray,” August 30, 2010, <https://youtu.be/IA--DfwfcoM>

¹¹³ Facebook post from Larry Beveridge of Rutherfordton, NC, September 6, 2011. This particular recording follows the older heterophonic style of psalm singing, but in English rather than Scottish Gaelic.

¹¹⁴ Facebook post, Margaret Bradshaw, October 30, 2016.

hymnody, though this is usually of little significance to those that find connections. Instead, emphasis is placed on some direct linkages between cultural practices that are “kept safe” within rural, isolated communities, preserving the ancient music practices of Celtic homelands. Arguing for Celtic connections, Douglas Kelly finds that the Gaelic psalmody resembles “the sounds that come from the drones of bagpipes” and that it “seems to be a combination of ancient Celtic modes of harmonization...possibly influenced...by the Eastern Orthodox church” (Kelly 1998, 41–42). As Terry Miller noted in an article about the imagined connections of Gaelic psalm singing, searching for such roots is often “based on incomplete knowledge, fragmentary evidence, misunderstood terms, confusion between similarity and relationship, and dubious reasoning,” all for the sake of authenticity (T. Miller 2009, 244).

More recently, Fiona Ritchie of *Thistle and Shamrock* on NPR and Scottish accordion player and host Phil Cunningham have released books and television programs about musical voyages from Ulster and Scotland to America. While Ritchie’s written account has more nuance through citations, Cunningham’s BBC program follows a single thread connecting various musics of the British Isles, including psalm singing, bagpipe playing, and ballad singing, through to America with lined-out hymns, Sacred Harp singing, and bluegrass.¹¹⁵ These discourses have also been intertwined with workshops and performances of Sacred Harp at the well-known Celtic Connections festival in Scotland.¹¹⁶ Like Scoggins’s narrative in *The Scotch-Irish Influence in Country Music in the Carolinas* discussed above, such accounts fuel and circulate commonly held associations between the South and the British Isles with little or no room to engage with the complicated discourses of cultural practices, particularly musical ones, instead focusing on

¹¹⁵ See Ritchie and Orr 2014 and McGuire 2017.

¹¹⁶ In 2011, Tim Erikson from Massachusetts led Sacred Harp workshops and performed on stage with a group of experienced singers. Interestingly, the workshop alternated with Scottish smallpipes and bodhran workshops.

simplistic, uncomplicated direct transmissions and essentializing narratives.

Even instances like these that articulate specific historical sources still reflect the significance of a Celtic imaginary: the underlying meaning that singers assert for connections to the traditional music of the British Isles is determined in part by the values popularly associated with Celticness. Singers who identified a Celtic precedent for their musical practice did so as a way of celebrating the historical richness and deep family ties that they value about their shape-note traditions. This message is effective when others recognize “Celtic” as signifying authenticity, tradition, and pride for family and community. This discussion seemed particularly apt at providing a platform for southern singers to frame their relationship to shape-note singing as an integral part of their identity. Tracing their heritage to a Celtic origin emphasized the authenticity of their participation; more, in this case, as an assertion of the depth of their belonging within the tradition than as evidence of the authority of any specific performance practice. Furthermore, claiming Celtic roots allows singers to reframe in positive terms elements of their background or upbringing that might read in other contexts as negative or even shameful.

While singers sometimes directly assert connections to a Celtic heritage, subtler forms of expression also evince the workings of Celtic imaginaries in Sacred Harp. One example is the appropriation of a Celtic visual aesthetic. In the United States and United Kingdom, many singers’ *Sacred Harp* songbooks are decorated with Celtic knot work on the outside edges of the pages. Just as the other markers of Celticness vary in their exact meaning from singer to singer, so do these designs— some choose them because of their love of Celtic music, some because of their understanding of connections between Sacred Harp singing and British music, and some because they simply enjoy the aesthetic and wanted to support the singers who created these

artworks (Fig. 5.2).¹¹⁷ In any case, the fact that Celtic knot work seems a natural and even obvious choice for decorating a late twentieth-century edition of a mid-nineteenth-century American hymnal reflects the usefulness of Celtic imaginaries in signifying the traditional status that singers claim for their music. Consciously or not, appropriating this visual form in their music practice is one way in which singers can communicate a sense of belonging to the tradition in its most authentic, original form, whether felt through family ties to Celtic and/or southern worlds, or through their own choice to so align their identity.

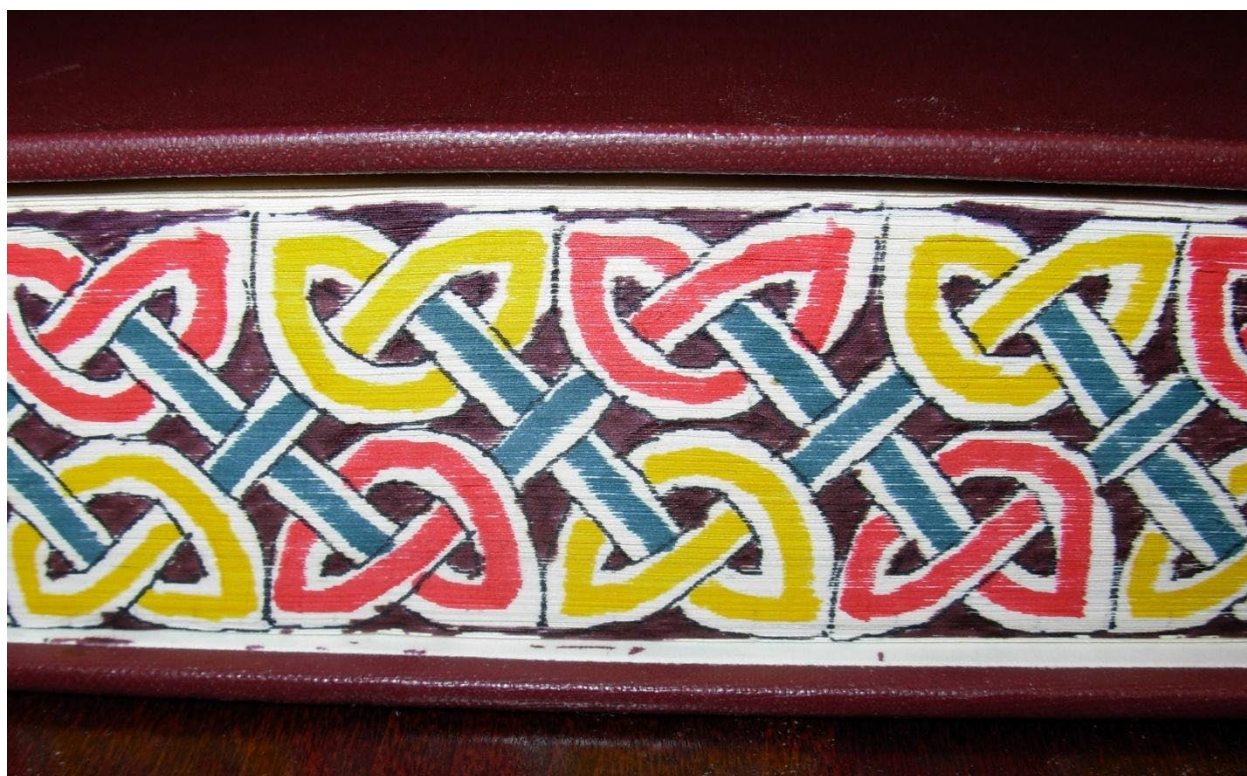


Fig. 5.2: Celtic knotwork draw on the side of a *Sacred Harp* songbook (photo courtesy of John Plunkett).

¹¹⁷ Singers in the United States and United Kingdom stated that English singer Bernard Collard has decorated many songbooks. While Bernard has retired, several other singers have begun experimenting with book decoration using Celtic knots, shape-note designs, and floral patterns.

5.5 Imagining Celtic Influence in Sacred Harp Performance Practice

While Celtic imaginaries help convey meaning through the language and imagery surrounding Sacred Harp, other examples impact the performance of the music itself. The “Scotch snap,” a rhythmic syncopation of a short note on a primary beat and a longer note on an off-beat, is one such alleged marker of Celtic influence on the music of the *Sacred Harp*. While numerous songs include written Scotch-snaps, discussions among singers identify many other examples within the tunebook where “oral tradition” dictates that music notated evenly should be sung with a Scotch snap instead.¹¹⁸ In a number of mid-twentieth-century recordings, singers often perform a Scotch snap even though it is not rhythmically notated in the music—scholars and novices alike have attributed this phenomenon to the Scots-Irish heritage of past generations.¹¹⁹ Although historical recordings demonstrate that this practice waned by the late nineteenth century, some contemporary singers choose to incorporate it, particularly those interested in the performance practice of earlier singing eras. Recordings such as Alan Lomax’s 1959 recording of the United Convention at Fyffe, Alabama, are influential to some singers searching for what they often perceive as “original” or “correct” ways of singing. These singers often assert complex relationships between written sources (the rudiments of the *Sacred Harp*) and oral traditions, the latter being central in the rhetoric of authenticity.¹²⁰ Again, while the actual historical origins of this practice are not entirely clear, and performance practices from a

¹¹⁸ Two examples in the *Sacred Harp* that include written Scotch-snaps are BOWER OF PRAYER and HIGHLANDS OF HEAVEN.

¹¹⁹ For more on the Scotch-snap, See George Pullen Jackson, *Down East Spirituals and Others* (Locust Valley, New York: Augustin, 1939), 112. Erich Nunn traces a theme in early twentieth-century scholarship predating Jackson’s work that argues for the Scotch-snap, among other musical features, as evidence that African American music was ultimately descended from European music. See “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk,” *Criticism* 51, no. 4 (Fall, 2009): 642-643.

¹²⁰ See Thomas Malone, *The Rudiments as “Right Action”: Pedagogy and Praxis in the Traditional Sacred Harp Singing School* (DMA dissertation, Boston University, 2009).

variety of British music styles are plausible sources, the Scotch snap has been interpreted as a marker of authentic adherence to Celtic tradition.¹²¹ A newer singer might consciously decide to incorporate un-notated Scotch snaps, or a longtime singer might determine to continue singing them as a way of celebrating and preserving the Celtic heritage they see as underlying Sacred Harp singing.¹²² Indeed, some singers find great meaning in the presumed Celtic elements of the musical styles themselves, comparing them to a deep seated feeling that seems natural and correct. Reflecting this sentiment, Buell Cobb described his first time encountering Sacred Harp: “Amid marching chords that seemed so *right* and melodies spiraling out with the most appealing Celtic swing, each song, as if intentionally, plucked at strings deep in my being” (B. E. Cobb 2014).

In addition to specific musical forms like the Scotch snap, elements of a more general singing style also connect Sacred Harp with overlapping Celtic and southern imaginaries. In the *Choral Journal*, Sam Hinton describes shape-note singing practices as “the traditional Anglo-Celtic vocal style embodying a “tight voice” placed high in the singer’s range, with much formalized embellishment” (Hinton 1973, 10). Singer Jim Carnes wrote in 1989 that non-singers often comment on the harshness of Sacred Harp singing and frequently compare it to bagpipes “since many of [the] tunes employ a pentatonic, or five-toned scale of ancient Celtic origin” (Carnes 1989). Miller quotes a singer who interpreted the difference in sound between northern and southern singing styles as a result of “the Alabama singers [having] different vocal cords, owing to their Celtic rather than Scandinavian ancestry” (K. Miller 2008, 44).

¹²¹ For example, see the Fasola discussions thread at discussion@fasola.org from January 2-12, 2008 “Scotch-Irish Fiddle Tunes & Sacred Harp,” in which several Sacred Harp singers explored the influence of “Celtic” instrumental music on Sacred Harp singing, citing the “Scots-Snap,” among other practices, as evidence.

¹²² Several long-time singing school teachers actively promote Scotch snaps as a traditional part of Sacred Harp practice. P. Dan Brittain and Warren Steel have addressed this subject in singing schools at Camp Fasola, currently the largest and most influential source of Sacred Harp instruction.

Musicians performing in genres outside of Sacred Harp have helped further entrench these perceived connections by blurring the boundaries between shape-note singing and Celtic music in their work. A variety of performers working in popular, classical, folk, and traditional genres have included “Celtic” renditions of Sacred Harp tunes on albums. The pentatonic melodic lines and lively compound meter tunes found in the *Sacred Harp* lend themselves to such arrangements, and are readily accessible for fiddle, pennywhistle, and mandolin, among other instruments. *Cross Ties Band*, a performing group based in West Georgia, released an album in 2003 titled *Original Sacred Harp*, which features arrangements of tunes from the *Sacred Harp* performed in a recognizably “Celtic” style. The track, “Rocky Road Set,” for example, an arrangement of the Sacred Harp tune ROCKY ROAD references the “set” in Irish session playing and incorporates Irish fiddle and bodhran accompaniment.¹²³ Well-known Irish musicians have also included Sacred Harp songs in their repertoire—Solas, the self-described “quintessential Irish-American band” has performed an arrangement of “Am I Born to Die,” IDUMEA from the *Sacred Harp*, in a clearly “Celtic” style with fiddle and low whistle (Solasmusic 2013).¹²⁴ Additionally, Irish traditional singer Níóirín Ní Riain and her sons Eoin and Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin released a 2008 album, *Celtic Joy*, which opens and closes with two Sacred Harp tunes: “Jesus My All to Heaven Has Gone” (NORTHPORT) and “Farewell My Friends” (PARTING FRIENDS) surrounded by other religious songs mostly in Irish and Latin. Níóirín explained that Sacred Harp resonated with her because the “communal aspect is very powerful as an aspect of sung prayer,” noting its “wild voice timbre” was so different to sean-nós singing (p.c., April 2022). These are just a few examples, as renditions like these are constantly

¹²³See <http://www.crosstiesband.com/discography/original-sacred-harp/>

¹²⁴ Solas’ founding member Seamus Egan’s connection to Moira Smiley, a long-time participant with Larry Gordon’s Village Harmony, is likely the influence for including this tune on their album.

emergent in the music industry, linking supposed Celtic roots with American shape-note hymns as a natural kinship.

Some observers have even postulated a connection between the solfege performed before each Sacred Harp song to Celtic music—guitarist Dan Carollo has argued that the shape-note tune “Wondrous Love” “has a striking similarity to [the] Irish Sean-nós style of singing” (Carollo 2010). Although Carollo’s assertion is not supported by any scholarship linking solfege and sean-nós, this idea has gained traction. Numerous singers have brought this up to me, specifically when talking about the singing style of Primitive Baptists and the Lees of south Georgia. While, on a superficial level, both music forms rely on non-textual vocalizations, their assumed affinity carries more significance as a purported cultural connection than as evidence of any actual historical crosscurrent.

In each of these cases, the groundwork laid by Jackson and other early twentieth-century writers provides a compelling rationale for importing Sacred Harp tunes into a Celtic framework—if, as Jackson argues, many of these songs originated as instrumental folk melodies in Britain, performing them under that rubric would be bringing them full circle, back to their roots. While most of this discourse involving instrumental music has taken place outside of or on the fringes of Sacred Harp’s music culture, several singers have interpreted the emergence of a Sacred Harp singing community in Ireland as evidence that their music is literally returning to its roots.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ One performing group that has merged Sacred Harp and Celtic aesthetics includes active Sacred Harp singers—Barry and Shelley Phillips. See *Wondrous Love* (Gourd Music, 1994), compact disc.

5.6 A (Re)Turn to Ireland

Sacred Harp singing began spreading outside North America as early as the mid-1990s.¹²⁶ The arrival of Sacred Harp in Ireland was much more recent, however. The first Ireland Convention in 2011 was the culmination of a gradual community-building process that began several years earlier at University College, Cork (UCC). In 2009, ethnomusicologist Juniper Hill, originally from California, began teaching a shape-note singing class that was open to university students as well as interested members of the community.¹²⁷ Singing in Cork grew quickly; the first Ireland Convention was exceptionally well attended, and its organizers considered it a remarkable success. By 2017, the added support of singers in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland have made subsequent Ireland Conventions the largest in Europe; 244 singers from seventeen countries registered for the second Ireland Convention in 2012, including twenty American states (“Ireland Convention” 2017), (Fig. 5.3).¹²⁸

¹²⁶ The first UK Sacred Harp Convention met in 1996. For an account of Sacred Harp’s spread in Europe, see Lueck 2014.

¹²⁷ For a brief history of Sacred Harp singing in Ireland see Karslberg 2011.

¹²⁸ Unfortunately, a record snowstorm the following year cancelled most flights and only 77 singers attended.



Fig. 5.3: Photo from the Ireland Sacred Harp Convention at Cork in 2017 (photo by the author).

Cork singer Robert Wedgbury became interested in Sacred Harp while studying at Wesleyan University and at UCC, and helped Hill organize the first Ireland Convention.¹²⁹ Wedgbury researched the history of Sacred Harp, documented its transatlantic journey, and sought to understand the reasons for its appeal in Ireland. He concluded that, for the members of his singing community in Cork, the experiential component of the music was a far more important draw than its historical or cultural background: “for all the gravity attached to the dominant aesthetic and religious side of the music and its transmission, it remains a fun and uplifting style of music to sing, and thus part of the reason why I believe so many people have taken to it so passionately here in Cork” (Wedgbury 2011, 6).¹³⁰

¹²⁹As Jesse P. Karlsberg documents, Hill and Wedgbury are just two links in a longer chain leading up to the establishment of a Sacred Harp convention in Ireland: Hill was a former student of Neely Bruce at Wesleyan University—Bruce co-organized with Hugh McGraw the first Sacred Harp convention outside the Southeast, the 1976 New England Convention, held in Middletown Connecticut.

¹³⁰ Robert’s thesis traces the beginning and continued growth of Sacred Harp in Ireland from ethnomusicological perspectives.

Nonetheless, my conversations with Irish singers suggest that perceptions of Sacred Harp's Irish heritage, more broadly called "Celtic," made the music form a ready fit for Cork. While none of the local singers I interviewed believed that Sacred Harp was fully or inherently Irish, several noted that affinities between shape-note singing and various forms of traditional music familiar in Ireland made Sacred Harp accessible (p.c., Sinéad Hanrahan, Kate Ní Chiardubháin, Daire O'Sullivan, personal communication, July 2017). This reflects a broader trend in European media to describe Sacred Harp as a cousin to Celtic music. In 2012, for example, Welsh singer and television host Cerys Matthews visited a Sacred Harp singing in Alabama to record and interview singers for a radio program on BBC Radio 4. She described the music in terms clearly drawn from George Pullen Jackson's narrative: "Once called 'white spiritual,' this haunting unaccompanied choral tradition survived in the small rural Baptist churches of the American Deep South. Very different to bluegrass and to African American Gospel music, Sacred Harp preserved Anglo-Celtic practices that were subsequently lost in the UK" (Waldman and Matthews 2013).

Although Irish singers were aware of the idea that Sacred Harp was related to Celtic music, this was not the primary appeal for any that I interviewed. For many singers in the United States, however, perceptions of the Celtic heritage of Sacred Harp influenced their decision to travel to Ireland to sing. On one level, this is evident in American singers' dramatically different response to the establishment of the Ireland Convention compared with other international singings. Cork is just one among many European locations that have recently sponsored new Sacred Harp conventions; singings in the United Kingdom have been ongoing since the mid-1990s, and there are approximately twenty different all-day singings and conventions held there on an annual basis. Poland and Germany, too, have held many well-

attended all-day singings and conventions, the former beginning around 2009 in conjunction with the biannual Camp Fasola Europe.¹³¹ But the Ireland Convention was not received by visiting singers as just another event in the orbit of British singing. Instead, as Jesse Karlsberg has described, the Ireland Convention was exceptional in the widespread international support that it drew, seeming “to have catalyzed a new flow of mutual support and reciprocal travel among Sacred Harp singers from across Europe and the United States” (J. Karlsberg 2011).

This exceptional support, as Karlsberg explains, was partly a result of the international connections that had already been established by singers in Cork, as well as the evident exuberance of an enthusiastic, youthful body of singers. But for numerous singers, particularly from the United States, the emergence of Sacred Harp in Ireland seemed not so much a new arrival as a return to the music’s original homeland. In conversations with American singers who have traveled to Ireland to sing Sacred Harp, I have identified two common themes that made Ireland stand out among potential singing destinations: some singers are interested in Ireland from the standpoint of Irish/Celtic music and culture, and others emphasize their sense of personal identity as having Irish or Celtic heritage. As I describe below, most singers seemed to bring a mix of the two in their approach—and both perspectives reflect the importance of the Celtic imaginary as a source of images and associations that help make Ireland and the Celtic world cohere as a social and physical space for Sacred Harp singers.

Among singers who traveled in part because of family heritage, some had very clear connections to Ireland. Pat Callahan, a singer from Massachusetts, was excited to attend the first Ireland Convention because her father’s family came from Cork. She had previously traveled there to visit her cousins and to see her great-grandparents’ graves. The intersection of Sacred

¹³¹ See minutes for “Germany,” “Poland,” and “Camp Fasola Europe” at www.fasola.org.

Harp singing and family history had great personal meaning for Callahan—going to Ireland to sing helped strengthen bonds of friendship and made the experience of Sacred Harp singing even more meaningful through connections to family and place. As she described, she felt a “familial kinship with the place...It was so easy to meet and to talk with everyone from all over the world because everyone had Sacred Harp in common” (p.c., Pat Callahan, July 2016). A key perceived distinction between southern singing communities and others is the assumed lack of multigenerational family participation outside the Southeast (K. Miller 2008, 135–36). For non-southern singers, a connection to Sacred Harp through Irish ancestry can provide a sense of integral family identity tying them to the music culture that they might otherwise lack. Going all the way back to the presumed Celtic origins of shape-note singing dramatically expands the genealogy accessible to Sacred Harp singers who do not have a recent family history of singing, offering an alternate means of identifying as an authentic, integral, and familial part of the music culture.

For southern singers with extensive family connections to the music, asserting connections to the Celtic world can also serve as a way of grounding their identity and emphasizing the depth of the traditions they practice. John McDermott interviewed several southern singers at the Ireland Sacred Harp Convention in 2013 for the *Financial Times*. Tollie Lee, who has extensive family history in Sacred Harp in Georgia and Florida, also identified strongly with the Irish singers—as McDermott wrote, “he believes he is one of them.” Lee had come partly to explore his own family roots and planned on researching his genealogy at the Cork Central Library after the singing (McDermott 2013). David Ivey, from Huntsville, Alabama, is also descended from a very active family of Sacred Harp singers spanning multiple generations. Singing Sacred Harp in Ireland connected him to an even more distant family

history—he described to McDermott an “amorphous sense of Irish identity, unproven but deeply felt.” His family maintains a story that their Irish ancestors lived on a hill. Ivey regards his father’s sense of belonging on Sand Mountain in northeast Alabama as reinforced by this story: “I can’t get him off that mountain,” he said (McDermott 2013). Although his Irish ancestry is less clear than Lee’s, he still feels a sense of Irish heritage, and he describes traveling to Ireland as feeling like “coming home” (McDermott 2013).

Ivey’s conception of Ireland as a homeland bridges the southern and Celtic imaginaries that circulate in popular culture. Just as it had for early twentieth-century observers like Campbell and Sharp, the mountain in his account emblemizes values that appear to link the highlands of the Celtic and southern worlds—isolated, rural, but rugged and immovable, the Scots-Irish and their American descendants allegedly drew their character from the landscapes they inhabited.¹³² For singers like Ivey and Lee who understand their family music traditions as preserving a Celtic heritage, participating in a Sacred Harp singing in Ireland takes on a uniquely meaningful character. It affords the opportunity to encounter the origins of their families and their music practices at the same time, bringing them in close proximity to multiple important aspects of their felt identity as southerners and as Sacred Harp singers.

While conceptions of personal identity and family heritage were important to many singers, others were also drawn by the Ireland Convention’s framing of Sacred Harp in a specifically Celtic musical context. The singing at the convention itself was limited to the *Sacred Harp*, but Tollie Lee’s performance of the drone at the conclusion of the singing marked, for a number of those present, a clear connection between Celtic and shape-note traditions (p.c., Dan

¹³² Campbell, in particular, emphatically constructs “mountain people” as embodiments of the character of the southern Appalachian terrain throughout *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*.

Hunter, August 2016).¹³³ Outside the singing convention, several visiting singers took advantage of the opportunity to experience traditional Irish music in other venues. Blurring the boundaries between musical forms, singers performed Sacred Harp songs in a Cork pub at an informal event arranged by the convention organizers. The selections from the *Sacred Harp* were interspersed among solo performances of sean-nós songs. This reified the conception, shared by American and Irish singers alike, that there are obvious connections between some Sacred Harp tunes and Irish traditional music, or that modal similarities evince a relation between the two music forms. While the singers I spoke with were clear that they considered the two types of music distinct, they nonetheless saw them as having enough overlap to work logically together in the same setting. As Pat Callahan described, “it’s not that Sean-nós sounds like Sacred Harp,” but it still seemed “logical that the Irish folks took to Sacred Harp so quickly because Irish music is so modal, and they must recognize the modal character of the minor Sacred Harp songs right away...” (p.c., July 2016).

These perceived connections between Sacred Harp and “Celtic culture” are, as Ivey describes, more felt than proven, but that does not diminish their social power. Even government institutions have recognized this fact—the Irish Tourist Board has relied on Americans’ associations between Sacred Harp and Celtic culture to promote tourism. In the wake of the global economic downturn after 2008, which hit Ireland especially hard, the Irish government launched “Gathering Ireland” in 2013, “a year-long tourism campaign targeted at the Irish diaspora”(McDermott 2013). This national gathering consisted of a range of events publicized by the Irish Tourist Board, including smaller gatherings organized by individuals and local groups, which were promoted on the “Gathering” website and in local media. Events could be as small as

¹³³ Some of the American singers present were aware of the speculation that the practice was a preservation of centuries-old Celtic music—though not all accepted that hypothesis as conclusive fact.

a family reunion or as large as a festival, and in many cases grants were given to aid in promoting and holding gatherings.

The 2013 Ireland Sacred Harp Convention conveniently coincided with the Gathering; local singers applied for funding and were awarded the maximum grant because they guaranteed a significant attendance by international singers. Cork singer Sinéad Hanrahan noted that the convention “was viewed as one of the most successful events of the Gathering in Cork City” (p.c., August 2017). Not only did the grant from the Irish Tourist Board help the singers produce the convention, but it added the imprimatur of institutional recognition to the understanding that Sacred Harp singing was a natural part of Irish heritage. In fact, the Gathering’s website made overt use of the Celtic imaginary in its romanticized language inviting Americans and other foreigners with Irish heritage to return as a way of bringing the “diaspora” back home. The site claimed, for example, that being Irish is less about nationality than about the “heritage that flows through all our veins from thousands of years of history—remnants of which still exist in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Newgrange and Skellig Michael.”¹³⁴ Playing to a highly mythicized version of the Celtic imaginary, the Irish Tourist Board hoped to attract the widest possible range of visitors. As Diane Negra notes, Irishness is “recruited for global capitalism [and] has become a form of discursive currency, motivating and authenticating a variety of heritage narratives and commercial transactions” (Negra 2006, 1). From this perspective, the Ireland Sacred Harp Convention was a success, bringing participants that saw Ireland as a musical or cultural homeland even if they had no well-established family connection to the

¹³⁴ Newgrange is a Neolithic site in County Meath. Skellig Michael is an abandoned seventh-century monastery on an island off Ireland’s southwest coast.

Accessed, April 15, 2013 (though has been replaced by Discoverireland.ie), <http://www.thegatheringireland.com/About/What-it-means-to-be-Irish.aspx>.

country. Simultaneously, promoting the convention under the auspices of the Gathering further solidified the conception that Sacred Harp was returning to its original home.

For the Cork Sacred Harp community, however, the visiting singers were much more than just cultural tourists. While the tourism generated by the Ireland Convention boosted the Cork economy and helped promote Sacred Harp singing in the area, Hanrahan noted, “I’m not sure that I view singers and other visitors to Ireland in the same way. I view singing visitors to Ireland as just being part of the same community as us, and therefore not tourist” (p.c. August 2017). Irish singers stressed that, whatever their reasons for traveling, visiting American Sacred Harp singers were completely different, in their view, from a stereotypical American sightseer whose exposure to Irish culture is centered on consuming facile stereotypes and patronizing tourist shops (p.c., Daire O’Sullivan, May 2017).

As singers from Ireland encountered singers from elsewhere in Europe and from the United States, the relationships that were forged went on to spark further interchange. Just as singers from the United States have traveled to Ireland, Irish singers have come to the United States to sing—several Irish singers have attended Camp Fasola, the annual singing school staged by the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association in Alabama. A European version of the camp, held in Poland in 2012 and again in 2014, provided an even larger number of Irish singers with the opportunity to learn from experienced singing school teachers from the United States (J. Karlsberg 2013). Ellen Lueck explores the emphasis placed on establishing proper practice in European singing communities—much like their peers in the United States, European singers approach Sacred Harp not just as a body of music literature, but as a music culture with a set of practices that mark the boundaries of what is accepted as traditional. As Lueck notes, singing schools have played an important part in facilitating the “rich, personal understanding of Sacred

Harp singing as a living tradition” for which European singers are striving (Lueck 2014).

While Irish singers were certainly interested in learning more about Sacred Harp practice and tradition, they also recognized the importance of the connections that were established as respected singers from US Sacred Harp communities visited their convention. As transatlantic interchange expanded, Irish singers became more fully integrated into the larger community of Sacred Harp, the globally connected body of singers Lueck describes whose commonality is defined in large measure by networks of reciprocal travel (Lueck 2014). Perhaps the most dramatic symbol of this interchange is the marriage between Melissa Kelley of Minnesota and Eamonn O’Neill of Cork, Ireland, who met through their shared interest in Sacred Harp singing. While theirs is the most obvious, many more relationships have been forged between Irish singers and those from other nations.

In one sense, the power of the Celtic imaginary is manifest in the power that imagined, mythicized, even purely fictional conceptions have in sparking very real interactions between individuals and communities. While other factors are important in forging these bonds, my work demonstrates the significant role that perceptions of Sacred Harp’s Celtic heritage has played in laying the groundwork for these interactions. Perceived personal, familial, or musical connections to Ireland prompted a number of singers to travel there to sing Sacred Harp, initiating the networks of reciprocity that helped integrate geographically disparate communities. Perhaps equally importantly, the Celtic imaginary provides a framework for singers from established Sacred Harp communities in the United States to recognize their counterparts in Ireland as full and legitimate participants in the same music culture.

Rather than being wary of divisions based on cultural differences, many US singers

traveled with the expectation of finding something familiar.¹³⁵ Celtic imaginaries helped set up these cross-cultural encounters in a manner that focused on sameness instead of difference—singers like Ivey, Lee, and Callahan all saw the Irish singers as “family” in some sense before they ever met them. Likewise, many southern singers I spoke with who had travelled to the Ireland Convention noted that singers in both countries were more alike than different. As an Alabama singer explained, “it doesn’t take long to realize that we’re all pretty much alike.”

5.7 Re-imagining and New Imaginaries

The Celtic imaginary is a useful concept for understanding how Sacred Harp singers’ perceptions of history, authenticity, and tradition find physical expression in performances of both music and of identity. Celtic imaginaries are loose networks of conceptions that manifest differently for individual singers, but draw from a wide range of sources, some based in fact and others purely conjectural, to help participants fashion their perceptions about the physical and social spaces of Sacred Harp singing. Part of what makes this imaginary so compelling is its ability to transcend the boundaries between the imagined and the real and to facilitate actual encounters among people and cultures. An overarching theme in all my interviews with singers was that, regardless of their initial motivations, the most important result of their travel to sing in Ireland was the relationships that they forged with singers from other parts of the world. While conceptions about Celtic culture and its connection to Sacred Harp were instrumental in spurring initial visits, the many singers who have made multiple transatlantic singing journeys and

¹³⁵ Both Miller and Clawson address a similar process that unfolded in the United States beginning in the 1970s as Sacred Harp singers from the Southeast traveled to conventions in other parts of the country and came into contact with individuals with markedly different cultural values.

maintained international friendships identify the community that imaginaries helped construct as the most important part of their experience.

While imaginaries play an important role in building transnational communities, they can also have an exclusionary function. Imagined constructs of Sacred Harp singing's heritage risk focusing too much on individual sources, eliding the rich diversity that contributed to the actual origins of the tunebook and its attendant music culture. As Steel's work has shown, the *Sacred Harp* includes composers from many different religious and social backgrounds who lived over a period of several centuries (Steel and Hulan 2010). Contributors include men and women; individuals from various regions of the United States and from several European nations; and composers who worked in "classical" and "folk" idioms, including several who had significant interaction with African American communities. Only white composers are represented in the version of the *Sacred Harp* in widest use (including at the Ireland Sacred Harp Convention), the *Sacred Harp, 1991 Edition*. Other shape-note songbooks include African American and Native American composers.¹³⁶

Just as George Pullen Jackson overlooked potential African American influence in Sacred Harp singing, contemporary observers who focus exclusively on any one imaginary, Celtic or otherwise, will miss the breadth of Sacred Harp's historical spectrum. Although the Celtic narrative is empowering in some respects, its omissions are troubling—contributing authors and communities outside the Celtic purview are left unacknowledged, whitewashing a music culture and a hymnal rather than recognizing the racial, ethnic, religious, and other forms of diversity that have contributed to it both in the past and the present. And, as the work of Grady McWhiney and other southern exceptionalists has demonstrated, the narrative of Sacred Harp's

¹³⁶ See Joe Dan Boyd (2005) and Thomas Commuck, "Thomas Commuck, *Indian Melodies* (1845)," *Writing of Indigenous New England*, accessed December 17, 2014, <https://indnewengland.omeka.net/items/show/96>.

alleged Celtic origins can be co-opted to promote myopic, exclusionary, and even white supremacist agendas. Indeed, imaginaries are always in need of critical attention because, though they may lack factual grounding, they still maintain remarkable social power.

CHAPTER 6: QUEERING SACRED HARP: TRADITIONAL SPACE AS QUEER SPACE

In early January of 2020 I went to Cullman, Alabama to carpool with a singer named Nicholas to a specially arranged singing in New Orleans. A well-known cook in the singing community, Nicholas was scurrying to pack all of his ingredients and cookware for the weekend while we both delighted in watching several episodes of his favorite pastime—*The Golden Girls*. Usually, local singers bring food to singings, but because this singing would be attended predominantly by out-of-town singers, we both felt we needed to contribute to the “dinner on the grounds,” especially since we both would have cooking facilities in our lodgings. He and I both hauled our Instant Pots with us; I took ingredients for collards and lentils and he for peach cobbler. We knew the attendees would be a different demographic from most singings in Alabama and Georgia, so we planned to bring food with less meat—dishes more likely to be encountered at dinners “up North.”

The Queer Shapenote Gathering took place on a busy weekend in New Orleans in 2020, with many tourists in town for the Louisiana State vs. Clemson football game. The city itself was an apt location for such a convening—a place that Peter Marina says “still attracts a flow of modern bohemian transplants, all migrating to the city to become a part of its distinct culture and in search of cultural authenticity, artistic express, self-actualization, identity transformation, and alternative lifestyles” (Marina 2017). This could also describe the variety of singers coming to New Orleans for this Gathering. The singing’s founder, Ateven Snderson, collectively described them in one word where queer and “weird” meet: “queerdos.”

The weather for this mid-January weekend was mostly pleasant, but a few storms cancelled the group graveyard tours that had been arranged for the visiting singers. Many of us in

attendance visited the tourist districts several times, finding our beignets, Café du Monde coffee, king cakes, and drinks at the most flamboyant bars. Musical sounds were surprisingly present everywhere I walked in town, even with the uncertain weather—the sounds of a very young trumpet player across the street sliced through the Sunday singing when the doors of the church were opened. While the singing went largely unnoticed from the street, St. Peter and Paul’s Church (now part of a hotel), one of the singing venues, was situated between the Bywater and Jackson Square, which brought in several tourists wanting to see the marvelous interior of the unrenovated structure (Fig. 6.1, 6.2). Interestingly, the poster on the door which alerted visitors that they were walking into a Sacred Harp singing made no mention at all that this was a queer gathering (Fig. 6.3). Visitors entering the building would most likely not know what they were hearing—the incredible acoustics of the room, though rich and soaring, were at odds with most singer’s sensibilities of small churches rooted in the rural southern imaginary. They wouldn’t notice that some singers would be sitting and singing in vocal sections that didn’t match their perceived gender, or even that many people singing in the space were trans singers. They also wouldn’t notice that the name tags at the welcome desk had space for preferred pronouns (Fig. 6.4)—something which was only recently adopted at singings in the Northeast, Midwest, and Northwest, and that some other singing communities had vocally dismissed. No one unfamiliar with Sacred Harp would know that this was the first event of its kind—“A unique opportunity for LGBTQ+ singers and allies to come together to sing, share and discuss...experiences and hopes for the future” of Sacred Harp singing (Fig. 6.5).¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Quote taken from the fanzine-style “Very Queer Shapenote Gathering” flyer designed by Ateven Snderson and distributed at singings in 2019 and early 2020.



Fig. 6.1: St. Peter and Paul's church (hotel), New Orleans (photo by the author).



Fig. 6.2: Interior of St. Peter and Paul show chairs setup in a square for the singing (photo by the author).



Fig. 6.3: Sign welcoming visitors to the Queer Shapenote Gathering (notice that it only state Sacred Harp), (photo by the author).



Wing Mui ▶ Fasola Q

1 hr · 📎



Soooo unless someone's already doing it, I'm planning on making and bringing pronoun pins to New Orleans in January. What do y'all think about this design? Will probably be printing them on slightly yellowed paper to mimic book. :3



Fig. 6.4: Facebook announcement letting singers know about nametag/pronoun buttons for the Queer Shapenote Gathering in New Orleans.

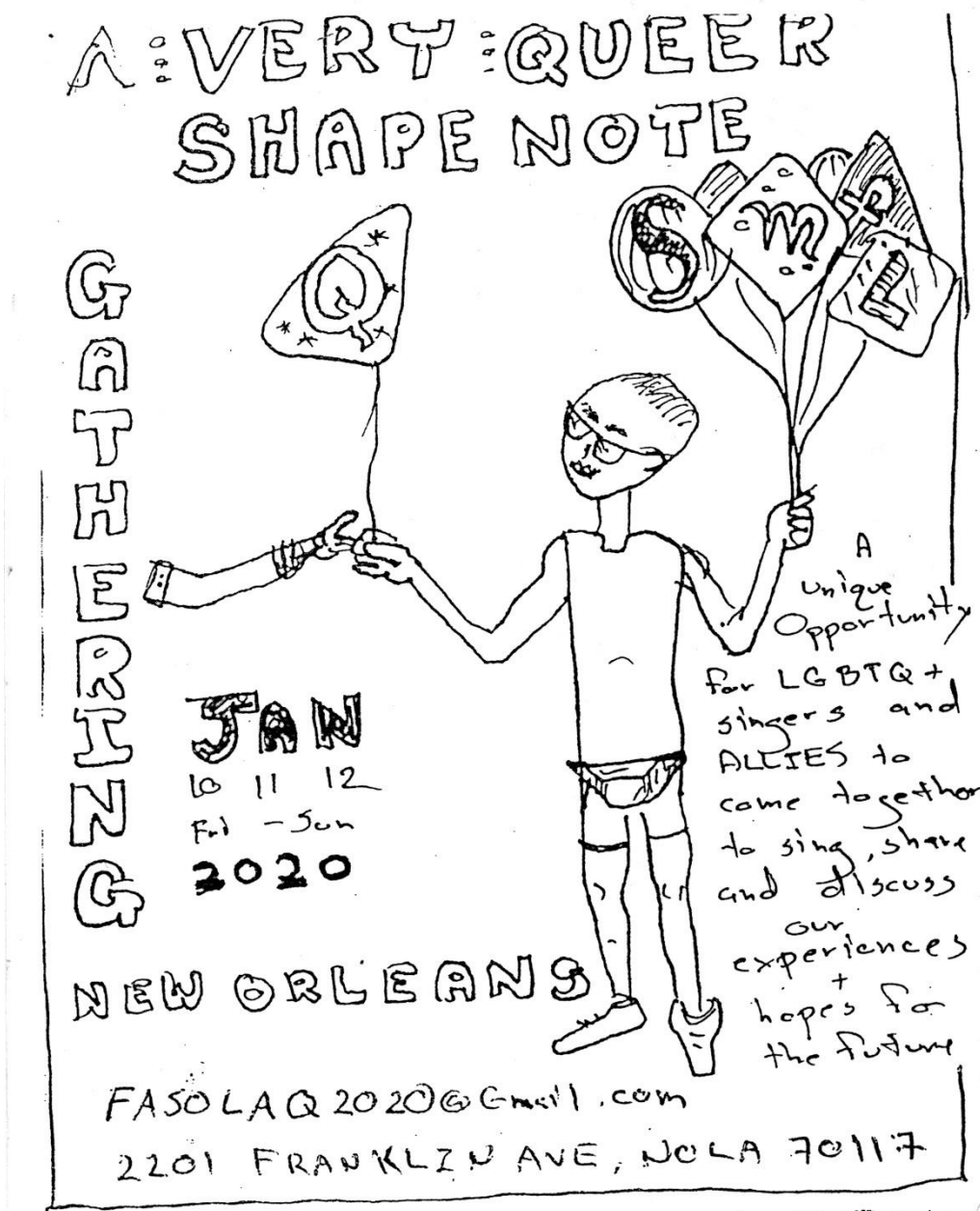


Fig. 6.5: Zine-style flyer passed out at singings announcing the Very Queer Shapenote Gathering in New Orleans.

While there have been many thematic shape-note singings, organized around particular composers or holidays, such as July 4th or William Billings, for example, this was the first, to my knowledge, on a potentially-divisive political topic. The initial idea for the Queer Shapenote Gathering was not to push any agenda, but to provide an opportunity for LGBTQ+ singers to

come together to sing, share experiences, and discuss their concerns related to Sacred Harp singing. Although the singing progressed mostly like any other, with leaders called one at a time to the center of the square to lead the song of their choice, the organizers also included time to open the floor for discussion, an opportunity that many participants took to share deeply personal and private experiences. These discussions had an impact outside the event, as many of the ideas and concerns that were expressed have slowly drifted through the broader Sacred Harp community, calling increasing attention to fundamental issues of equality, opportunity, and equity at singings and within the music culture.

This chapter explores “queering” in the Sacred Harp community, a process that is not limited to the gender and sexuality of Sacred Harp singers. For the majority of my seventeen years of singing, I have been interested in the ways that the Sacred Harp community seems to tacitly welcome singers with diverse identities, specifically those in the LGBTQ+ community, but without always universally acknowledging their presence or fostering equitable accommodation. I am especially interested in the ways in which many of these singers find place within a musical community based predominantly on conservative Christian theology. How can ideas about gender and sexuality be worked out in such spaces and find full expression on the surface of performance without upending longtime social practices of Sacred Harp? Perhaps most importantly, in what ways are these singers welcomed or excluded, and how may the community at large be changing as broader social recognition of diverse identities expands in the United States?

The occurrence of a singing created expressly for queer singers at once signals that the Sacred Harp community is “open” or pluralistic and that it also *needs* to have such an event to address the concerns of this segment of its community. A singer from the state of Washington

told the group that she was glad the Queer Gathering became a reality because she “needed a safe space to discuss ideas” that were important to her, which resonated with many in attendance.¹³⁸ Despite Sacred Harp’s superficially “welcoming” character, the fact that many LGBTQ+ singers have felt discomfort speaks to larger issues in the broader community. Perhaps, as some singers noted at the Queer Gathering, many singing communities have no problem with gay singers who fit a cis-gendered binary because they appear “normal,” whereas singers of other types, specifically trans singers, may not fit these binaries, especially when they appear to break “tradition” by sitting and singing a part that does not match their perceived gender. Still, the desire to foster a pluralistic community and openness to accept a broad range of participants persists, though the explicit nature of “who” might be more or less welcome is never stated.

Many singing communities, like Minneapolis, explicitly work to encourage change around issues of diversity and inclusion. In 2018, the local committee began including a sign about inclusivity as singers were encouraged to include their pronouns on their nametags. Many communities like Minneapolis already maintain unspoken understandings concerned with gender imbalances on front benches and positions of local leadership. These acts, sometimes just small gestures, illustrate the concern for these issues in some communities and their desire for positive change (Fig. 6.6).

¹³⁸ Facebook post, Fasola Q, Wing Mui, May 18, 2019.



In the spirit of inclusivity, we invite you to
include your pronouns on your name tag.



Fig. 6.6: Sign used by Twin Cities Shape-note Singers at singings letting participants know that their usage of pronouns on nametags is welcome (image courtesy of Twin Cities Shape-note Singers).

Following Sara Ahmed's conception of reorientation as a starting point, I trace aspects of Sacred Harp's queer spaces, both by queer bodies and sound and the queering of such spaces. I look at the ways rural and urban spaces impact queerness and the ways that singers' lived experiences complicate simplistic ideas of tradition and progress. I ground my work using the theoretical tools developed Ahmed and other queer theory scholars—and I understand queer theory and the experiences of queer bodies as constantly changing, re-evaluating, and reconceptualizing. This work therefore uses “emergent queer theoretical voices” to both ground my research and attempt to understand a broad range of queer experiences (Barz 2019, 27). Looking at Sacred Harp through a queer lens illuminates the process of “reorientation” within the music culture both in its physical and social spaces. Just as queer studies is often understood as

emergent and malleable, I think of queer experience in Sacred Harp as the same—experiences which do not represent a whole but are important and necessary within Sacred Harp communities.

Queer theory offers a useful framework for understanding the broader community of Sacred Harp singing because the music form has been adopted from its traditional surroundings and then adapted or reoriented to better reflect the diversity of participants in the region. Participants already regard the space as different from the ordinary, so thinking of Sacred Harp as queer space fits well with its practitioners' ideals. While there is a significant representation of gay and lesbian individuals within the Sacred Harp community, interpreting it as queer space also gives an opportunity to understand how members of other minority groups negotiate the spaces of Sacred Harp. In its original context, the music was performed almost exclusively by Christian participants, strongly skewed toward the conservative political ideologies prevalent in the rural Southeast. At contemporary singings, however, singers might be homosexual or heterosexual; Christian, Jewish, "New Age," or atheist; and they include socialists, progressive liberals, and conservatives. All of these different perspectives add to the understanding of Sacred Harp as queer space. Sacred Harp, however, is not simply about the possibility of open interpretation, since it is structured by relatively rigid rules meant to avoid conflict despite the diverse viewpoints of those participating. The result is a curious mix of tradition and innovation, individual expression and group performance. And this space is always defined as much by those who push against its constraints as by those who enforce its boundaries.

6.1 Queering Southern Imaginaries

Particular spaces and temporalities also constitute “tradition” and “traditional” to many singers. As many singers look to the South as the “tradition bearers” or “traditional” practices of Sacred Harp, they tend to emphasize physical place. Not just the South, but the “rural” South is most often identified the point of origin of Sacred Harp singing. As I discussed in chapter 3, constructions of rural-South-as-traditional (or conservative) and urban-North-as-progressive (or liberal) are still quite common and figure prominently in many contemporary narratives about southern culture well beyond Sacred Harp. However, queer imaginings of the South (especially the rural South) as potentially dangerous are part of wider narratives that imagine rural spaces as hostile to queer people. Ruralness implies, for many, a “stubbornly persistent attachment to highly traditional views regarding gender and sexuality and, by extension, an aggressive, sometimes even murderous, antipathy toward gender and sexual difference” (Johnson, Gilley, and Gray 2016, 11). I have heard numerous singers talk about their discomfort with attending singings in rural places, often with fears that circulate through the imaginaries which I outlined in chapter 3. This became more pronounced during Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and presidency as singers began to discuss political issues more openly, mostly through social media, which bled into the general singing community atmosphere. Tensions between singers became higher, especially by 2020, sometimes resulting in singers’ public condemnation of the South on social media platforms. Conceptions of southern ruralness seemed to be revitalized, causing a noticeable rift in the broader Sacred Harp community.

Queer rural space, or “queer rurality,” as I borrow from Stina Soderling, adds another complicating layer to the meanings of ruralness, while illuminating the specific conceptions of rural vs. urban prevalent in Sacred Harp discourse. While a number of singers have expressed

concerns about attending singings in rural places, those who identify as queer often imagine these places as potentially hostile and dangerous. Soderling notes that “popular culture portray[s] the southern and Midwestern countryside as a time of queer death,” places commonly understood as uninhabitable by queer people (Soderling 2016, 343). Though based in the Midwest and Great Plains regions, the murders of Brandon Teena and Mathew Shepard map this danger for queer people onto rural spaces. Soderling explains that although these events occurred in the Midwest, the more important aspect of these sites is their ruralness, and they elicit a sense of danger in any region conceived of as rural, isolated, or socially backward, including the Southeast.

This association of rural spaces with potentially dangerous homophobia is by and large an “urban-centered queer theorization” and is contingent upon the binary of conceptions of the urban and rural (Soderling 2016). This binary is based upon a “tendency to generate imaginary spaces on the two distinct poles of freedom and intolerance,” poles understood to be “between the small town and the urban.” Further, these “co-constructed imaginaries allow each pole of geographically queer distance to ‘otherly’ reify one another” (Johnson, Gilley, and Gray 2016, 12). I see this idea as especially relevant in the broader Sacred Harp community—urban singers, especially those of the LGBTQ+ community, have expressed a hesitancy or discomfort at traveling to southern singings, which mostly take place in rural settings. Their concerns usually stem from the understanding that most southern people are religiously conservative and have a “stubbornly persistent attachment to highly traditional views regarding gender and sexuality...an antipathy toward gender and sexual difference” (Johnson, Gilley, and Gray 2016, 11). In this regard, a gay singer posted to Facebook that he was less excited about attending southern singings after seeing more diversity at northern ones. Likewise, a trans singer commented at the

Queer Shapenote Gathering in New Orleans in 2020, that it was difficult to attend southern singings because he imagined that some people in the room would “wish me dead.”

This concept also impacts Sacred Harp singers who live in rural settings. J. Jack Halberstam has theorized the concept of “metronormativity,” the story of “migration from “country” to “town” [that] is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (Halberstam 2005, 36–37). This process imagines that the metropolis is the safest place for queer people and that the “move” represents the change from oppressed to liberated: in the closet to out and proud. The rural/urban dichotomy exists in a reciprocal relationship in which both rely on one another to imagine and engender ideas, in this instance specific queer spaces—as in Stapel’s idea of “metronormative imaginaries of the rural south” that I engage with in chapter 3 (Stapel 2013, 60). For some queer singers, Sacred Harp offered a route out of small town or rural southern lives, providing the connections that enabled them to move to urban centers or northern cities; one young southern singer recently took exactly this route, building relationships with Sacred Harp singers from a northeastern state and then moving, at their encouragement, to a place where he has begun the process of coming out.

Yet other singers understand this relationship from a reversed perspective. One younger gay singer from Georgia stated that he would never go to northern singings because “he didn’t like Yankees” and eschewed visiting urban areas in general. His position, from a more “ruralnormative” perspective, imagines that cities, not rural areas, are places of danger—a sentiment that I have heard voiced at a few singings in the Southeast, though not always by LGBTQ+ singers. As Colin Johnson notes, the “imaginary of urban gay emancipation and the imaginary of heteropatriarchal rural life construct one another...[and] conflate...everyday life

with the phantasmal [which] produces and imposes particular subjectivities that gloss over individual and collective constructions of queer selfhoods” (Johnson, Gilley, and Gray 2016, 12).

These competing perspectives demonstrate the range of ways in which queer space is constructed in relation to the southern imaginaries that frame Sacred Harp as a southern, rural phenomenon. Narratives that imagine Sacred Harp singing as conduit for queer people to escape lives of perceived persecution in isolated rural spaces are insufficient in describing singers’ queer experiences of Sacred Harp. Yet not all queer Sacred Harp singers feel safe and supported in their rural southeastern communities. Many singers on both sides of this perspective, however, have begun entering new virtual spaces that enable them to transcend the geographical boundaries of their lives, engaging with other Sacred Harp singers in a vast digital landscape. Additionally, singers are queering Sacred Harp in ways that are not exclusively based around the experience of LGBTQ+ singers—queering can involve reorienting Sacred Harp practice from a wide range of perspectives.

6.2 Queer Space – Paradigms

More than just rules of practice and decorum, the structure of Sacred Harp singings creates a space in which individuals are encouraged to express their own personal identities, but inside a structured framework that maintains order and respects longstanding performance practice. Even though both the physical and social spaces of Sacred Harp are modeled on traditional forms, they have been reoriented by contemporary singers to make an open, different space that can be profitably interpreted using the concept of “queer” space. Queer theory, as David Shneer and Caryn Aviv describe, is not simply research about homosexuality, but represents a new perspective on all realms of culture based on an openness to multiple

viewpoints. As they write, “Queer theory encourages people to look at things differently, invites readers to pick up on subtle cues, unpack hidden messages, and make texts more complicated” (Shneer and Aviv 2007, ix). Several scholars have taken this approach to the study of space, including Sarah Ahmed, who uses the term “orientation” in a dual sense, referring both to sexual preference and one’s embodied relationship to their physical surroundings. She explores the constructed conventions of location and space, demonstrating the complex social signification occurring in such seemingly simple terms as inside vs. outside, or near vs. far. As she asserts, “the social dependence upon agreed measures tells us more about the social than it does about space” (Ahmed 2006, 13).

Likewise, queer space is not so much a physical location as a social construction. As Jean-Ulrick Désert suggests, it should be better understood as a “virtual space” that exists only in opposition to another, official or mainstream space (Désert 1997, 18). Queer space happens when people bring different perspectives, whether based on diverse sexual or other identities, and reconfigure, reinterpret, or, to use Ahmed’s term, “reorient” the spaces that they inhabit. As George Chauncey asserts in *Gay New York*, the scholarly project of investigating queer space is not simply an excavation of a hidden gay history—it is essential in understanding broader history, as well, since the “mainstream” only works as a conceptual category when defined against its supposed opposite. As he demonstrates, heterosexual males defended definitions of acceptable behavior in some respects by couching it as the opposite of behaviors considered “queer” (Chauncey 1995, 100). Thus, queer space is not a hidden realm completely separate from other social spaces, but is always already imbricated in all social spaces and depends more on perspective than on geography.

6.3 Traditional Space as Queer Space

Many Sacred Harp singers are proud to note that their tradition originated out of a respect for pluralism—in the preface to the original edition of the hymnal in 1844, B. F. White, the tunebook’s compiler, asserted that the book was “necessarily thrown among churches of various denominations” and avoided any doctrinally exclusionary language: “the *Sacred Harp*,” he wrote, “is designed for all classes who sing, or desire to sing” (Jackson 1968, 3). Because singings were already structured to give equal opportunity to all participants (at least in theory) and to avoid conflict arising in difference, communities that began singing Sacred Harp more recently did not need to refashion the tradition in order to make it work in a contemporary setting. Instead, they were able to appropriate it more or less intact from southern traditional singing communities, giving them a musical form that worked well in a modern multicultural setting but still carries the symbolic weight of tradition.

This emphasis on democracy has been an important draw for participants. Perhaps even more importantly, Sacred Harp has provided an arena for individuals who might not feel comfortable participating in sacred music traditions, or even in music more broadly—a space where they are accorded equal importance, but not expected to conform to any particular model of background or belief. Modern singers represent a diverse range of participants—people from a wide variety of religious backgrounds, political beliefs, and sexualities all belong to Sacred Harp communities. Some of these individuals find Sacred Harp appealing exclusively because they enjoy the music, but many also value the traditional practices and community values that they believe the musical genre represents.

This mix of interests in egalitarian pluralism and traditional culture forms the nexus of Sacred Harp’s queer space, particularly in urban, northern singing communities. For example,

Chicago's Sacred Harp community is the largest in the Midwest, and, reflecting the expansive urban center, appears to be the most diverse in the region. Established in the mid-1980s, Chicago's group has also been extremely influential on other urban Sacred Harp communities, who have interpreted Chicago's balance between tradition and innovation as a success worthy of emulating (Bealle 1997, 200-202). To promote pluralistic acceptance of all participants, Chicago Sacred Harp singers actively present a welcoming attitude with no consideration for individuals' different backgrounds. In the newsletter that they published throughout the 1980s and 90s, and more recently on their website, the Chicago singers emphasize that everyone is welcome; they include personal narratives from people of a variety of religious and political backgrounds, noting that these participants felt "at home" at a Sacred Harp singing despite their apparent difference ("What's It All about?: The Short Version," n.d.). The emphasis in most of these accounts is on religion, potentially the biggest stumbling block to new participants who might be concerned about whether they would be welcome to sing from a Christian hymnal if they were not themselves Christian (K. Miller 2008).

In less public forums, many singers also make an attempt to welcome people who represent other kinds of diversity. While they are less likely to reference sexuality in their publications and web sites, any interaction with their community rapidly evinces that they are tolerant of peoples of all sexualities. In fact, one of the founding members of the Chicago singing group is an openly gay man, and another longstanding and prominent singer is a lesbian woman. Neither feels particularly concerned about that status, and both make a special effort to make LGBTQ+ people feel welcome and included (p.c., Ted Mercer, May 2017). Rather than standing alone in that endeavor, however, they are generally supported by their straight and cis-gender friends and associates within the Sacred Harp community.

This open attitude, along with the inclusion of queer people in prominent positions of leadership, seems to have successfully encouraged individuals with different sexualities to participate; Laura Clawson speculates that up to a third of the male singers in the Chicago area are gay (Clawson 2011, 58). This is a particularly surprising achievement, as Miller notes, given that the texts of the songs are emphatically Christian and can potentially evoke the kind of “guilt-driven, threatening Christianity” that many homosexual participants have rejected (K. Miller 2008, 128). Only by reorienting and queering the spaces of Sacred Harp can such texts be subsumed so successfully within a dynamic of acceptance that their messages lose any threatening overtones.

Counterintuitively, the queer space of Sacred Harp seems to function well partly because of the community’s reliance on the concepts of authenticity and tradition that I mentioned earlier; while singers are emphatic about the inclusive and open nature of participation in their events, they are also very concerned about keeping the format for singing events as close as possible to the longstanding southern singings that they see as their progenitors. Bealle notes that Chicago’s Sacred Harp group has particularly stressed the importance of tradition as a marker of authenticity. Many singers around the country view their influence in Midwestern Sacred Harp as a positive distinction from other Sacred Harp communities, particularly in New England, where the focus on acceptance, accommodation, and diversity was maintained, they assert, by eliminating aspects of traditional practice (Bealle 1997). Sacred Harp in Chicago has been understood by many observers as an ideal combination of both openness and tradition (K. Miller 2008).

In practice, the adherence to tradition has actually had the effect of maintaining rather than constraining the democratic principles that the singers espouse. The egalitarian performance

practices asserted by modern Sacred Harp singers are rooted in the desire of its first promoters to reach the widest possible audience. In order to keep denominational differences from alienating diverse participants, early Sacred Harp singings adopted the convention of limiting potentially divisive activities, including addressing the assembled group with any kind of spoken message.¹³⁹ Instead, individual leaders are expected to simply come to the center of the hollow square, announce their page number, and lead the song. Most singers do not make any comments at all, and those who do are generally only dedicating the song to a singer who was unable to attend or one who had recently died (B. E. Cobb 1978).

These norms are some of the most carefully enforced practices in singing conventions, and those who violate them are subject to reprimand, generally in the form of being “talked to” after the singing. Egregious violations are occasionally dealt with on the spot—at a singing in New York in 2008, a leader began speaking against American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and several prominent singers immediately instructed him to save his remarks for a different occasion and either lead his chosen song or sit down (p.c., Jesse Pearlman Karlsberg 2017). Another similar incident involved a leader who placed anti-war literature on the seats at a convention before the singing began. They were quickly removed by some of the singing’s organizers, despite the fact that they agreed with his stand against the war in Iraq (K. Miller 2008). Even though many in attendance at each event sympathized with the political positions being expressed, most singers realized that his actions were a violation of Sacred Harp tradition that could result in a diminished sense of pluralism. If everyone were allowed to speak on such topics, the resulting sense of alienation that individuals who disagreed might feel would be

¹³⁹ Documentary evidence suggests that this norm was regularly breeched in Sacred Harp singings in the Southeast throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by singers who addressed the class when called to lead. However, modern singing schools promote the ideal of refraining from speaking from the center of the square as an important historical precedent.

enough to undermine the open space of the singing—by conforming to tradition, singers actually reinforce the possibility to make Sacred Harp space a queer space.

Another means by which the broader singing community asserts the traditional nature of their singing is by conspicuously associating with prominent singers from the Southeast who are recognized as authorities about what constitutes “authentic” Sacred Harp practice. Chicago singers were quick to make ties with singers in Georgia and Alabama, and from the beginning, asserted the importance of travelling to the South to see “real” Sacred Harp in practice. In addition, they were successful in getting southern singers to travel to their annual conventions (K. Miller 2008). Furthermore, Chicago area publications emphasized these links by printing numerous images of Midwestern singers and southern singers all standing together, singing in the same spaces, or socializing—they clearly demonstrate the equality between singers of all backgrounds that the Midwestern singers strove to emphasize.

The specific southern singers that the Chicago Sacred Harp community cultivated, however, were not just chosen at random, but included individuals whose ideas about egalitarian openness closely mirrored their own. Perhaps the southern singer most closely associated with Chicago is the former Executive Secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, Richard DeLong, of Whitesburg, Georgia. As an openly gay man, DeLong was a strong proponent of diversity, and actively worked to encourage acceptance of people of all beliefs and sexualities at singings (Miller 2008). By bringing DeLong to conventions in the Midwest and inviting him to teach numerous singing schools in the Chicago area, the local Sacred Harp community emphasized the traditional nature of their practice (as represented by an “authentic” southern singer), while maintaining their open, reoriented, queer space for singing.

Singers in the Midwest strove for balance between the open and welcoming “queer” space of the singing community and the adherence to tradition that provides the necessary framework to keep such a diverse group from avoiding conflict. Although this structure might seem to stifle individual expression, individual singers still find ways to express their own individual identities within the group performance setting. Sacred Harp does not provide an opportunity for articulating ideology in spoken form, but leaders still find ways to convey social meaning through their actions in the hollow square and in the surrounding social spaces. Though the egalitarian nature of Sacred Harp provides equal opportunity for anyone who so desires to lead the group in a song, the specific choices that the leader makes in their song selection and leading style can convey ideological messages. Frequently, these messages are not immediately obvious to new singers, but the longer an individual has been a part of the Sacred Harp community, the more they are likely to recognize the nuanced meanings behind particular aspects of performance practice.

6.4 Queering Sacred Harp Practice

Perhaps the most obvious way in which leaders can articulate ideology or express some aspect of their individual identity arises from their ability to choose any song from the book for the group to sing. Although the texts of the book are mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and focus almost exclusively on religious themes, the breadth of topics in the more than five hundred songs in the book leaves room for singers to select songs whose lyrics convey something very personal (Miller 2008, 126). For people whose religious affiliations or political backgrounds might differ from the conservative Christian viewpoint popularly associated with American hymnody, songs whose texts directly assert the singers’ equal standing are popular

choices. A well-known openly gay singer from Georgia frequently led the song titled “The Enquirer,” whose text, by Isaac Watts, begins by proclaiming, “I’m not ashamed to own my Lord...” (McGraw 1991, 73). A Chicago singer I spoke with found the choice inspirational, and agreed that most of the longtime singers understand the message about equality that he meant to project by leading that particular song (p.c., Ted Mercer, 2016).

A trans singer from Minneapolis found lines in *THE CHURCH’S DESOLATION* that seem described his own feelings of otherness, yet through the music and community of Sacred Harp, he found place:

*Adieu, ye proud, ye gay,
I’ll seek the brokenhearted,
Who weep when they of Zion say,
Her glory is departed.*

Although “ye gay” refers to “lighthearted” in the song, he thinks of this instance (one of two in the *Sacred Harp*) for the term to represent the broader queer singing community. “I’ll seek the brokenhearted” is reoriented to mean the struggles and pain of the community, as well.

A trans singer from Massachusetts explained that the text to *PRIMROSE* helped her understand the idea of transformation—through the text she found ways to transcend the daily struggles of gender and daily life. In her words, the text offered a way to “get out of this shit” (p.c., Leanne Vance, January 2020). The text, like numerous songs in the *Sacred Harp*, speak more to the human condition rather than explicit Christian sentiments found in many late nineteenth-century hymns:

*Salvation, O the joyful sound!
‘Tis pleasure to our ears;
A sov’ reign balm for ev’ry wound,
A cordial for our fears.
Buried in sorrow and in sin,
At hell’s dark door we lay;
But we arise by grace divine*

*To see a heav'nly day.
 Salvation! Let the echo fly
 The spacious earth around;
 While all the armies of the sky
 Conspire to raise the sound.*

The tune itself is one of the well-loved pentatonic melodies which is often called “soaring” because of its prominent open chords and the interplay of high pitches between the tenor and treble parts. The text as well relates to these feelings, much as the singer felt, with its descriptions of sonic qualities (“joyful sound,” “pleasure to our ears,” “let the echo fly,” and “raise the sound”) as well as universal and less Christian-centered sentiments (“balm for every wound,” “cordial for our fears,” “buried in sorrow,” “we arise,” “the spacious earth around”).

Other singers favor songs that are not overtly Christian as a way of expressing their identity, and several Jewish singers lead the song titled “Day of Worship” at Saturday singings as a way of quietly nodding to their own religious backgrounds (p.c., Lauren Bock, 2018). In each of these cases, the singers still adhere to the traditional structure of Sacred Harp singing, and nothing about their choice could be considered an overt threat to the “authentic” nature of the singings in which they participate. Examples such as these are quite common, as singers from many backgrounds can adapt texts to fit a variety of meanings and worldviews. While some many take issue with lyrics such as “you must be a lover of the Lord or you can’t go to heaven when you die,” they may find deep meaning in other songs that describe more universal sentiments of death and release.

As the revision of *The Sacred Harp, 1991 Edition* draws closer, many singers have also called for offensive lyrics to be removed. This has engendered many discussions online about what is and is not offensive, and whether the lyrics are simply historical relics or true religious sentiments. Whatever the new revision may look like, by adapting traditional performance

practice to reflect their own individual ideologies, singers fully exploit the queered space of Sacred Harp to express their own diverse identities. As Miller describes, this panoply of individual interpretations illustrates that “Sacred Harp texts are full of questions, drawing singers into a community of uncertainty rather than placing them at the margins of a community of belief” (K. Miller 2008, 129).

Another way that singers reorient the traditional forms of Sacred Harp performance is reflected in their leading style. While Sacred Harp singers follow a relatively simple manner of beating time with an up and down stroke of the arm, there is still room for considerable variation in the leader’s unique personal style (Cobb 1989). Some singers use broad flourishes and dramatic, intense motions that can convey a range of emotions and serve as a powerful form of personal expression. Others develop ways of leading that they feel highlight the meaning of the song, potentially allowing them to combine leading style and song selection as an even more effective means of expressing their own identity within the group setting.

Many newer singers, in their concerted attempt to keep their performance practices “authentic,” have been particularly careful to avoid classical or “choral” leading styles, which are often read as out of place at singings, and individuals have focused instead on emulating admired southern singers in their manner of directing (Clawson 2011, 72). Skillfully pointing to each part as they enter in a complicated fugue, leading without relying on the book, and being able to set the pitch for one’s own song are all counted as marks of expert leading (Miller 2008, 59-61). Those who have mastered these points of style are considered exceptional leaders—leading a song in a way that emphatically asserts a high degree of competence can serve as a powerful sign of equality. Not only does the leader in question have the right to an equal opportunity in front of

the class, but they also get a chance demonstrate that they are equal in ability to anyone else in the tradition.

Some singers, especially those who are younger and are newly learning Sacred Harp practices, become enamored at the graceful movements of older singers, specifically those regarded as skilled leaders within the community. Buell Cobb discusses the influential leading styles of respected older singers in his memoir *Like Cords Around My Heart*. Cobb himself learned in his youth how to lead by following the gestures of respected leaders. His arm movements are smooth, precise, and contained, resembling older singers, especially those from the West Alabama region where he grew up. These leaders, in turn, learned these movements from their singing school teachers—one could chart a genealogy of leading movements grouping singers with similar motions into categories and tracing influences. Historically, leading styles have also been gendered within Sacred Harp practice. Subtle differences in arm and body motion have been read as more masculine or more feminine, generally following twentieth-century American conceptions of gender dichotomies in comportment, opposing “florid” to “controlled,” “swishy” to “steady,” and the like (Migdalek 2015).

My interviews suggest that singers are increasingly less cognizant of the gendered associations of particular forms of leading motion: however, some singers consciously queer these norms to transgress space and more openly perform themselves. Nicholas, a young singer from Alabama, has chosen to emulate the leading style of Reba Dell Windom, an older singer from Ider, Alabama who is well-known throughout the larger Sacred Harp community as a skilled leader. Nicholas, who initially began singing alto as a teenager and was welcomed by Windom to sit in the alto section, felt very comfortable being given a place which suited his voice. Before coming out as openly gay, Nicholas had few outlets to express himself and Sacred

Harp singing became an integral part of his coming-out process (p.c., November 2019). By emulating a respected and beloved singer, Nicholas adheres to longtime tenets of Sacred Harp leading practice. By emulating a *female* singer without attempting to moderate or “masculinize” her style, Nicholas queers Sacred Harp leading practice to assert his own transgressive gender identity.

Voice parts are also subject to queering in Sacred Harp singing. There are four voice parts: the tenor, which is the melody, sung by low- and high-voiced singers in their respective octaves simultaneously; the treble, a high harmony, also doubled at the octave; and alto and bass parts which are generally not doubled. The conventional description is that women and men both sing tenor and treble, while only women sing alto and only men sing bass. While most singing schools have assumed that women will sing the high octave on the tenor and treble parts, in practice, lower-voiced women occasionally sing in a lower octave. It is rare, however, for men to sing in the upper octave. For many participants, the traditional associations between gender and voice parts seem completely natural. However, some singers find navigating the gender- and voice-norm dichotomy challenging when their identity is not aligned with preconceived roles.

Nicholas, the young singer from north Alabama, is primarily an alto. As a teenager, he sang alto before his voice changed but because he was still viewed as a child in his local community, this was completely acceptable. Nicholas grew up in a small Primitive Baptist church, a denomination known for its conservative ideology, which I discuss at length in chapter 3. He gravitated toward the alto part not because he desired to sing a “women’s part,” but because he was greatly influenced by local alto singers with whom he made close friendships and because he enjoys the sound of the part. He told me that “alto just has something about it that’s beautiful, I just don’t know what it is.” Nicholas always sang alto until his voice changed

enough that a full day of singing would leave him hoarse. He now mostly sings treble and will occasionally sing alto, though he often will sit on the edge of one of these sections and switch back and forth, often through necessity at small singings with low attendance. No one ever told Nicholas *not* to sing alto, other than in warning that it could damage his voice, yet several singers have encouraged him to sing other parts, sometimes with the stated reason that another part (generally the treble) was lacking support, but often with an unspoken implication that within his local Sacred Harp community, the perception is that only women should sing alto.

Historically, men singing alto was not considered transgressive—numerous early recordings feature male altos (a famous example is Whitt Denson singing alto on HALLELUJAH on Alan Lomax’s 1959 recording of the United Sacred Harp Musical Association). Buell Cobb notes that through the middle of the twentieth century there have been several male singers who sang alto “like a woman,” one in particular singing this part all the time (B. E. Cobb 2014, 229). Although this is far less common at present, this precedent allows Nicholas to sing alto within a very conservative Sacred Harp community, giving him “cover” to queer his practice of Sacred Harp.

Another singer, Ann from Rhode Island, navigates her perceived gender roles in a very different way. A trans woman, Ann usually sings bass, as it fits her voice range best. To my knowledge no one in the communities in which she sings has taken issue with this. Occasionally in the Southeast, I’ve seen cis-gendered women do this when it fits their voice range (usually altos, whether an octave higher, or at pitch as written in the lower octave), but they tend to move back to alto during the day. Within the Southeast, the bass part is clearly oriented as “male,” yet Ann has turned to singing alto more recently as she feels *disoriented* in the bass section (Low, 2017). Ann’s less conservative community makes this experience possible—she is able to queer

Sacred Harp practice without repercussions only because the local participants she sings with welcome her bass voice.

Still, another singer from the UK posted on Facebook that they had fun singing bass an octave up in the back row, but they felt they were breaching tradition as the rudiments in *The Sacred Harp* (a section in the front of the songbook which gives directions for singing) dictates which parts men and women should sing based on their voice ranges. This singer stated “I just want to express the sadness of wanting to do something that you’re not really meant to by the intended design, which I feel is related to the queer/trans experience.”¹⁴⁰ Several trans singers whose perceived gender images and voices do not seem to line up with conventional ideologies about gender and singing, have frequently felt this type of discomfort even if they live and sing in ostensibly welcoming communities. Some of these singers restrict their travel, only attending singings which they feel comfortable at. Others rely on the local singing community to help navigate these situations—here, allies are extremely important to these singers as they reassure them they can sing in whatever section most comfortably fits their voices.

A solution for some singers, including Ann and Nicholas, is creating their own queer space by singing in the aisle. For Nicholas, it’s singing in the corner between treble and alto. Both singers occupy sort of marginal space, their voices unsure where they belong because of gender politics and personal identities. They sit near the edge of a section and swap back and forth between parts, giving them a feeling of half acceptance in both spaces while not being completely at home in one or the other. These experiences are similar to what Sara Ahmed calls the “disorientation of the sense of home...the out of place or out of line effect; the lived

¹⁴⁰ Facebook post, Fasola Q group, September 19, 2019.

experience of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home” (Ahmed 2006, 10).

Some trans singers deal with vocal dysphoria, another level of discomfort in navigating conceptions of gender, self, and belonging. At the Queer Shapenote Gathering in New Orleans, several singers described their experience navigating this condition. They explained that vocal dysphoria for trans singers often involves difficulty adjusting to a new vocal range while undergoing gender-confirming therapy. The group of singers also explained it can refer to the disjuncture between the way that an individual hears their own voice and understands their newly confirmed gender identity. One singer from California described the emotional and physical pain of learning to sing with a new voice while remembering earlier embodied notions of their voice and gender. This singer became quite emotional describing their experience and at that point was in the process of “retraining” their voice for music because their new range was very small. Another singer attending from Massachusetts said they had a difficult time finding which part suited their range best and enjoyed trying different parts at an all-day singing. They added that doing this was exhausting and adopted what they described as a “fuck it” attitude because Sacred Harp is not meant to be about performance in the first place. They also noted that every trans person’s experience is different, especially in regard to the voice, and although well-meaning, many of their singing friends in Massachusetts try to “work out their ideas about trans singers” through them, putting them in the impossible position of representing all trans people (p.c., Carter Dunbar, January 2020).

Other means of personal expression within the queer space of Sacred Harp include more overt markers of identity, such as clothing or accessories that send a clear message about identity. While some aspects of performance practice are carefully circumscribed by an

understanding of “tradition,” others are less clearly bounded. There is no dress code for Sacred Harp singing—while many singers tend to dress relatively formally, singers bring a wide range of stylistic tastes and levels of formality at any large singing. Clothing readily serves as a vehicle for the expression of identity although specific contexts are important in interpreting those identities (Aspers and Godart 2013). Those who are more politically conservative are likely to dress formally to emphasize the religious aspect of the music and to align themselves with similarly-minded singers in the Southeast. I have often seen older male singers in the Southeast ask younger men to remove their hats inside, for example. Others dress much more casually, implicitly distancing themselves from those views. Singers occasionally wear symbolic clothing that actively asserts their identity; examples I have seen range from rainbow themed pins supporting sexual equality to a type of hat meant as a symbol of the wearer’s Buddhist affiliation, to yellow ribbons worn in support of troops in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Only on rare occasions do singers attempt to police standards of dress—T-shirts with potentially offensive logos have sparked some discussion, but even the large majority of southern singers are happy to welcome those from the other regions or anyone with unusual attire, tattoos, or piercings (Clawson 2011, 126–128).

Just because Sacred Harp performance practice is carefully delineated by conceptions of tradition, participants are not rendered mute. By their song selections, leading styles, and manner of dress, singers can use the allegedly neutral space of the hollow square to articulate ideological messages that they would not be encouraged to voice out loud. All of these means help define Sacred Harp space as queer space, but there are other opportunities for singers to be even more vocal in their personal expression in realms that are not technically part of Sacred Harp singing conventions, but are still within the wider social space of Sacred Harp.

6.5 Queering Sacred Harp Community

Although the gendering of voice parts and their navigation by queer singers is a more visible part of these queer spaces, re/orienting oneself within the social spaces of the singing community is the most common way Sacred Harp is queered. Sacred Harp exists within a history of evangelical Christianity, yet, as described above, it was designed even in the nineteenth century to be open to participants from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds. This religious but non-denominational character has generated an open space for belief—an opportunity for religious participation with the degree or type of religiosity determined by every individual participant, what John Bealle describes as simultaneous “public worship” and “private faith” (Bealle 1997). All-day singings and conventions have never been fully associated with church services or particular denominations, though they often occur in churches. No central governing body dictates who can sing or what singers should believe, so anyone is welcome to participate regardless of their religious background, ostensibly, as long as their faith (or lack thereof) is kept private. As Kiri Miller notes, “singers evince tolerance through building personal relationships that transgress their usual norms...they might condemn or mourn homosexuality as a sin in private conversation but show tremendous love and support for the gay singers they know personally (73-4).”

Through these tenets, a space is opened to allow singers to experience spirituality through music—however they define it—because the music itself is not confined to any singular religious expression. Sacred Harp is not the only musical form in which participants find ways to reorient themselves in relation to the religious character of the music. As Douglas Harrison has written about queering southern gospel,

...the queer turn to religious music manifests little concern that experience aligns with the literal meaning of the doctrine as expressed in lyrics. Instead, the focus is on the feeling of salvation (which is to say, unconditional acceptance and belonging) that emerges in...close harmony. To join a community of singers is ipso facto to partake—palpably, viscerally through the voice’s uplifted song—in a musical version of what scripture refers to as the eternal promise...independent of orthodox doctrine’s attempt to regulate this experience (Harrison 2012, 156–57).

Albeit with a different set of hymns and texts, the process is very much the same in Sacred Harp singing. Singers may re-orient the texts to align them with some aspect of their own experience or belief. Often, they reinterpret texts to help them re-orient themselves into a religious community having left another.

Brian, a singer who recently moved to the west coast, described growing up in a very conservative household and eventually leaving his church because he was gay. Finding Sacred Harp fulfilled the longing for community that he experienced after leaving the church, and although he said he does not necessarily seek God in Sacred Harp, the sense of fellowship he feels in the singing community has become his most meaningful social experience. Brian’s position was that Sacred Harp had been the community which he had sought all along but failed to find in the church. For him, Sacred Harp was already oriented in a way that facilitated his queered religious experience. While he found the Queer Shapenote Gathering in New Orleans was generally a positive experience, he did not see it as a necessary intervention: “I value the intentional safe space and inclusion that I’ve experienced with Sacred Harp, but [I] don’t personally need a ‘queer space’ like New Orleans to be fulfilled with Sacred Harp” (p.c., Bryan Patterson, November 2019). A reorientation like Brian’s seems, in a way, part of a process of the singing community queering itself: bodies that are “out of place” “become vertical,” to use Ahmed’s phrasing—back in a state of alignment.

Indeed, many singers who feel they do not fit in in other communities have found a place in Sacred Harp. Many identify with hymn lyrics not through an acceptance of a particular theology, but because of their experiences of “exclusion, repression, or emotional trauma” (K. Miller 2008, 128). There are singers in every community who have felt marginalized in some way before coming to Sacred Harp and miraculously find place within a wide array of people and perspectives who “form bonds based on their shared rejection by or rejection of the ‘mainstream’”(K. Miller 2008, 170). At the Queer Shapenote Gathering, a few singers noted that Sacred Harp had worked positively within their own religious experiences: a singer from North Carolina explained that the singing community allowed her to “re-root” her spiritual life (p.c. Kori Sinclair, January 2020) and another from Florida stated that the music culture has “all of the good things about the religion and other stuff, too” that he grew up with (p.c., Bryan Thomas, January 2020). Queer Sacred Harp spaces frequently center around a diffuse sense of spirituality rather than explicit Christian sentiments. Indeed, many LGBTQ+ singers are Christians, but many have described that their participation in religious activities required some special navigation in the past. Spaces that allow for queer understandings of spirituality are constantly questioning, emerging, shifting, and being remade. Kath Browne notes that queer “spirituality...is seen as dynamic and interactive, often perceived as an ultimate entity venerated by a ‘seeker,’ [and] also as organic, as a substance that one can grow” (Browne, Munt, and Yip 2016).

Sacred Harp singers also find ways to queer the spaces of the music culture outside of singings. On weekends when singings take place, many singers participate in official or unofficial “socials,” where they gather to try out new songs, eat and drink, and socialize in ways that are not as easy within the structured time of the conventions themselves. These may be

formal events to which all singers are invited, or they may constitute smaller, invitation-only gatherings at a host singer's residence (Clawson 2011, 96). Since the proscription against speaking about ideology is only valid during the singing itself, singers take the opportunity at socials to discuss subjects that would be considered inappropriate within the confines of the hollow square. Not surprisingly, singers with similar sexualities, religious beliefs, or politics tend to seek each other out for social interaction, but as long as a gathering is publicly announced, the same democratic openness to any participant is expected at a social as at a convention. In open discussion, singers have the opportunity to openly voice the subjects that they could only refer to tacitly in the singing itself. Often, the topic of conversation turns to the day's singing, and I have heard multiple singers explain how they intended their choice of song or manner of leading as an ideological statement or expression of their personal identity. One singer even explained to me that they look forward to after-singing gatherings for the opportunity to review what different singers led and to speculate what, if any, message they were trying to convey (p.c, Justin Squizzero, 2019). Socials and other informal non-singing spaces of Sacred Harp offer abundant opportunities for sharing queered perspectives and formulating queer expressions that would not be possible at singings themselves. Recently, however, Sacred Harp participants have actively sought out new spaces—both physical and virtual—that challenge longstanding assumptions about who can speak and what ideas can be voiced in Sacred Harp.

6.6 Queer Singing Out of the Closet

In 2015 a number of queer singers formed a Facebook group called Fasola Q to discuss queer Sacred Harp topics more openly than possible in the context of singing conventions. The group seemed slow to grow as some singers were afraid to join because they feared it could lead

others to make assumptions about their sexuality or gender, potentially outing them to the broader Sacred Harp community (or even to their friends and family outside of Sacred Harp). The administrators eventually decided to close the group so that only members could view posts, which led to much more activity, as many singers were hesitant to openly express queer identities in a public forum. The group is still active, and participants discuss a wide range of topics. Many issues have raised considerable, sometimes anxious discussion as singers voice grievances, share ways in which they have been subject to discrimination, or address systemic problems in the broader singing community.

To give queer singers an opportunity to discuss these concerns in person and to help singers forge physical connections, group founder Ateven Snderson organized the first “Queer Shapenote Gathering” in January 2020 in New Orleans. He stated that the Sacred Harp “tradition amaze[d] him because it allows queerdos from all over the world to experience the community and practice music without being religious.” As a queer singer, he had concerns about attending “traditional” singings in the South and respecting conservative singers while also expressing his authentic self. At the same time, he acknowledged that his rights should be respected regardless of who might take offense (p.c., Ateven Snderson, January 2020). The Queer Shapenote Gathering was an opportunity to create a singing built on the premise that singers could express their identities fully in a totally safe space.

The three-day Queer Shapenote Gathering was primarily aimed toward LGBTQ+ singers and allies, although anyone was allowed to attend. The event did elicit some controversy. One of most frequently stated objections, voiced by both straight and LGBTQ+ singers, was that there is no precedent for Sacred Harp singings organized around specific identity groups, and that this

sense of exclusivity might “make some people feel unwelcome.”¹⁴¹ There were several gay singers from the Southeast who I thought would attend the singing but chose not to because they disagreed with what they saw as an exclusionary premise of the singing. Others expressed concern that “gay bashing” singers could show up and cause disruption, or that other singers might retaliate against those who attended the event. The singing itself caused no apparent rifts in the community; no one came to heckle the queer singers, and I am unaware of any incidents of retaliation that have occurred subsequently.

The only significant pushback from the broader Sacred Harp community was that editors of *Minutes and Directory of Sacred Harp Singings*, the annual that publishes the list of songs led at each singing, would not title the singing as “A Very Queer Shapenote Gathering” in the publication. The editors argued that the title was “political,” and could not be included in the printed minutes. After learning of this decision—and in deference to the concerns of a number of attendees who preferred that others not learn of their participation—the singing’s organizers declined to publish the minutes in the printed volume.¹⁴² The minutes were released, however, in the online-only version of the annual publication as “The New Orleans Gathering of Lgbtq Singers.” The organizers felt safer publishing the minutes digitally, as they assumed that the most conservative—and often elderly—singers would be unlikely to refer to the digital publication. I heard no objections from members of Fasola Q to the compromise title, which suggested that the minutes book’s editors objected to the term “queer” more than to the premise of the singing.

¹⁴¹ Facebook post, Fasola Q group, reply to Ateven P Snderson’s post, May 18, 2019.

¹⁴² On the overlapping but separate spaces that the printed and digital minutes occupy within Sacred Harp singing, see Nathan Rees, “The Sacred Harp ‘Minutes Book’: Centering Tradition for an Expanding Community in the Digital Age,” *American Periodicals* 30, 1 (2020): 60-80, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/751778>.

While the Queer Shapenote Gathering was held as two consecutive all-day singings, it also included a few hours of open dialogue to discuss pertinent issues in the community, a significant departure from the structure of most Sacred Harp singings. The entire event was a queering of traditional Sacred Harp in a sense: Ateven told the group that he wanted to change numerous aspects of singings that he objected to, including the starting and ending times and the overall organization. He opened the discussion to a radical reorienting of Sacred Harp, not just a limited discussion of how to better support queer participants.

The Saturday and Sunday singing sessions followed usual singing decorum—opening remarks were given, keyers were chosen, leaders were called, prayers were offered, and a business session took place. Unlike most singings, however, everyone was invited to share thoughts or anecdotes when they were called to lead. Most singers took the opportunity, and many were clearly grateful for the opportunity to voice what they were constrained to keep silent in regular Sacred Harp singings, giving very emotional remarks. Singers expressed various hardships they faced at singings in their home communities, personal struggles with vocal dysphoria, thoughts about religion and spirituality, and expressions of gratitude for the event itself. A singer from New York commented to me after the singing that bringing up issues of any sort in the hollow square inevitably brings up politics, even though we generally think of this as taboo and consider the singing space to be apolitical. This session, which included the most heart felt and difficult discussions of the weekend, was the centerpiece in queering Sacred Harp “tradition;” it set aside a time to discuss politics, religion, difference, negative experiences and how the queer community can enact change in the broader world of Sacred Harp. As one singer described, “Sacred Harp doesn’t have the structures like [the] church does, so having queer

people staying in the community forces it to change over time” (p.c., Kori Sinclair, January 2020).

As a queer singer, the Queer Shapenote Gathering was to me, personally, and to the broader community, a pivotal event. Many things about this singing seemed simultaneously so right and so wrong that I could hardly describe the event in hindsight. Ideas came together in one place and also diverged, clearly illustrating many queer theorists’ assertion that “queer” and “queer theory” are impossible to pin down or firmly theorize. While an event like a summer Pride celebration would seem, on the surface, to have a central goal or theme (of coming together, unity, etc.), individuals and their ideas of unity and difference are never homogenous. Indeed, the Queer Shapenote Gathering was a singing that aimed to bring a set of like-minded people together, but it was clear at the offset that *queer* shape-note singing had many meanings.

The Queer Shapenote Gathering also demonstrated that there are limits to the ways in which singers can queer the spaces of Sacred Harp without facing pushback from other participants—limits that are defined differently based on the specific character of any individual Sacred Harp singing or community. The very fact that a substantial group of Sacred Harp singers saw a need for an event where they could openly voice their perspectives demonstrates the degree to which these concerns have not been addressed within the music culture’s ordinary spaces. The event also revealed the limits of the “public worship/private faith” construct, showing that some private faiths are more welcome than others. While overt references to Christianity are pervasive in the physical and social spaces of Sacred Harp, queer perspectives—including queer religious perspectives—are expected to be kept resolutely private. On Saturday evening at the open discussion session, this issue was broached very directly by a New Orleans singer who asserted that participants should stop claiming that “Sacred Harp isn’t political,”

because every movement and choice at a singing can be read as political (p.c., Jason, November 2020). Not only do queer perspectives offer insight on how the spaces of Sacred Harp could be reoriented—they also help reorient our perspectives on long-unquestioned ideas about how “democratic” Sacred Harp’s practices truly are.

6.7 Queering “Traditional” Space and the Politics of Belonging

While the Queer Shapenote Gathering was a singular opportunity to reorient perspectives on Sacred Harp, singers have long been leveraging new virtual spaces to queer the music culture. Since about 2012, I have witnessed an increasing number of social media posts and heard more conversations about gender, sexuality, and diversity at Sacred Harp singings. Most of these call for greater awareness and seek to counter the imbalances and discrimination seen in society at large. While all of these issues do not deal directly with LGBTQ+ singers, I tend to think of them as a whole because they revolve in the same basic arena—an arena that in fact queers the perceived traditional spaces of Sacred Harp. Many frank conversations about gender, sexuality, and race have caused turmoil in the broader community, especially through social media, which in itself pierces the “democratic” nature of singings, is a fundamental tenet to most singers. Though these conversations have been uncomfortable, and at times accusatory and vitriolic (especially on social media), they have helped enact social change at singings, reorienting “traditional” space to be more inclusive and welcoming. The idea of disorientation as a sense of being “out of place” is experienced by many queer singers at singings, yet these difficult conversations act as a way to “reorientate” the spaces, which “involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently” (Ahmed 2006, 20) and then “becoming vertical,” in which “objects in the world no longer appear as if they are off center” (Ahmed 2006, 65). I discuss and

illustrate the ways that singers both experience “disorientation” at singings and seek to “reorient” themselves in those spaces as well as help those spaces “become vertical.”

Being disoriented and finding orientation through re-orientation is something that happens frequently at Sacred Harp singings, especially for queer participants. As I discuss in detail in chapters 1 through 3, Sacred Harp is a musical practice and community where ideas of “the tradition” and what is “traditional” are constantly in play. For most singers, “tradition” lies within the practices of the southern “homeland” of Sacred Harp and notions of authenticity follow closely behind. Regardless of the many problems of understanding tradition in this sense, most singers would agree that Sacred Harp has particular traditions which are essential for its continued practice and meaning. The most obvious of these include sitting in a square with a rotation of leaders, the continued use of shape-notes, singing the shapes before the words, organizing all-day singings and conventions following the longstanding format, and, even in predominantly non-religious communities, offering prayers and memorial lessons to remember the ill and deceased. I revisit the idea of tradition because of the queer lens—in order for a reorientation to occur, particularly in a queer sense, the gaze must focus on things that are “out of line” within the “traditional” structure of things that are “in line” (Ahmed 2006). I see queering Sacred Harp singing as a reorientation of traditions, by anyone and for any number of reasons, although most notably by queer singers. Such queering helps open and positively change the singing space and create more welcoming communities. Although I primarily trace the experiences of queer singers in the Sacred Harp community, I also bring in other examples of queering space by non-LGBTQ+ singers.

One of the most important aspects defining “traditional” performance to Sacred Harp singers is the arrangement of the space in which they sing. While Sacred Harp happens in many

different physical spaces, it brings its own portable geography that keeps it sited wherever it travels. Singers are remarkably flexible about the locations at which they will hold a singing, but they expect a particular arrangement within the singing space in order to accept the space as valid. The setup focuses on the “hollow square,” a formation of chairs or benches arranged around an empty central space, with all four sides facing inward. The arrangement is functional, since it gives a space for each of the four voice parts of the music, while leaving an open area in the middle for an individual to lead the song.

Beyond the practical advantages of this layout, however, the hollow square is regarded as a potent signifier of the values that Sacred Harp is meant to represent. Indeed, one of the most compelling reasons why newer singing communities adopted Sacred Harp traditional practices wholesale is that it has long been interpreted as an expression of egalitarian ideals valuing individual participation within a wider group activity (Cobb 1989). Singers often refer to their practices as “democratic”: every person who participates has an equal opportunity to come to the center of the hollow square and lead the class in any song from the Sacred Harp hymnal that they may choose. While they are on the floor, the leader, no matter their personal background, is acknowledged as being in complete command of the class—and then after their song is done, they yield to the next leader until every participant has been offered the chance to lead (Cobb 2013). The hollow square is arranged with all four parts equally balanced, and, in theory, there is no privileged space for anyone based on their position or merit. However, the front bench, especially in the tenor, is generally a space for more experienced or strong singers. For the tenor section in particular, the assigned “keyer” sits on the front bench, usually along with leading members of the local singing community. At many singings in the Southeast, these are nearly all

white men, despite the fact that both men and women sing the tenor part in roughly equal numbers.

Recently, however, some singers have posted to social media about various gender imbalances throughout the community, offering perspectives on how to reorient the hollow square and other aspects of singing to allow for more equity. Becky Wright, a singer from Massachusetts, for example, charged everyone in a post on Facebook to seriously think about how they might “do 1 thing differently at the next singing” they attend, such as inviting more women to take your (front bench) seat when you leave or to keep note if women keyers and leaders were “overridden.” Wright called attention to the frequency with which assertive men, whether out of a sense of entitlement, or just oblivious to their own empowerment, ignore the pitches offered by female keyers, or change the tempo or otherwise ignore women’s directives as they lead.

Not only did posts call attention to the gender imbalance in singing practice, but also in the institutional and social structures that support Sacred Harp singing. Men significantly outnumber women in a variety of leadership roles, whether as officers and committee members at singing conventions, as teachers at Camp Fasola, members of the board of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, and members of the committee currently revising *The Sacred Harp, 1991 Edition*. In 2018, Angharad Davis of Connecticut pointed out in a Facebook post that the lineup of teachers at Camp Fasola that year included three times as many men as women. Within the Sacred Harp community, the post went viral. Numerous comments offered opposing perspectives. While some agreed that men clearly “run the show,” others pointed out the gradual gains that women have made in representation and in leadership roles within Sacred Harp. Still

others found the post objectionable, asserting that the author was merely trying inject political views into Sacred Harp, or blowing the issue out of proportion.

The commentary, which raised obvious and important issues also prompted singers to think about the roles of the voice, particularly in regard to pitch level (the usual “men sing an octave lower than women” phrase), and who should sing what voice part. Overall, the post prompted a movement, one that was already in motion but now had renewed awareness, for singers and singing conventions to reassess how women participate at each event. Rachel Wells Hall, of Philadelphia, acknowledged that “traditional” singings run by families, especially in the Southeast, are usually headed by men and that they sit on the front of the tenor section. She stated she would never tell them how to run their own singings, but she felt that singers from other places, such as her own communities in the mid-Atlantic, should not take advantage of that privilege.¹⁴³ Conscious efforts were made at large singings, including the Keystone Convention in 2020, to deliberately ensure that the front always included female singers, to welcome anyone to sing any part without regard to gendered voice conventions, and to nominate gender-balanced committees to run the singing. Such actions were ongoing in many singing communities in the last few decades, especially outside the Southeast, but the attention through social media posts added to their urgency.

In the various social and physical spaces of Sacred Harp, individuals find ways to express their own diverse identities while maintaining the structured format they identify in traditional performance practice. Whether at the Queer Shapenote Gathering or at a regular Sacred Harp singing, participants navigate their group participation and individual identities. Queer theory helps interpret the significance of Sacred Harp singing to its practitioners, revealing how the

¹⁴³ Facebook post, Sacred Harp Friends group, reply to Angharad Davids, July 3, 2019.

reoriented perspectives of participants with disparate identities have queered the spaces of Sacred Harp. As Sacred Harp singers continue to consider how to address the ways in which their communities can better accomplish the “democratic” structure that they envision, queered perspectives will prove critical.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In March, 2020, I attended the Ireland Sacred Harp Convention in Cork. I was visiting the West Coast and Kerry when rumblings on the news began describing a dangerous virus spreading in Italy. Most singers who visited the convention from abroad had already returned home, luckily, as within the week many European borders threatened to close. Just two weeks after my return to the US, the COVID-19 virus became a global pandemic. The dizzying effects of such a swift and unknown disease left singing communities unsure what to do—hold their scheduled singing if no one was sick or cancel out of caution? As the virus’s capacity for airborne transmission became clear, most singings around the world were cancelled. For a period of time in 2020, Sacred Harp hit a complete standstill.

As society at large sought virtual options for communication and commerce, so did Sacred Harp. Since the 1990s, the broader singing community has had a “virtual” presence online, initially through email listservs—email threads used for announcing singings and discussing singing-related topics. As social media became ubiquitous in the 2010s, the community developed a virtual presence on Facebook through small local groups and a large community-wide group titled “Sacred Harp Friends.” This group quickly became the central space for online Sacred Harp activity. Individuals announce upcoming singings, mark special celebrations (like anniversaries or funerals), or post life-updates about singers. They also post questions, observations, and discoveries about Sacred Harp history and practice from an exceptionally wide range of perspectives. In addition to this overarching group, other singers created groups for particular subsets of the community. Some have simple socializing and entertainment aims, including “Music That Sacred Harp Singers Are Into Besides Sacred Harp,” and “Unintentional Sacred Harp.” Other groups, like “Fasola Q,” which I discuss above, are for serious discussion of singers that share identities or social concerns.

These expanded spaces of Sacred Harp opened up virtual arenas that have helped a more disparate range of people to come together around Sacred Harp singing than ever before, while transgressing conceptions of “traditional” space. This openness has had numerous positive effects, building relationships among singers who are separated geographically, and allowing people to learn from others who bring diverse viewpoints to the music culture they have in common. However, whereas most singers acknowledge that participants “check politics at the door” at physical singings (despite the limits of that viewpoint I discuss above), there is neither an expectation nor a way of enforcing this ideal in virtual spaces. While arguments certainly occurred on the earlier Fasola Discussions listservs, they were only read by a relatively small number of singers and listserv arguments seldom boiled over into real-world antagonism. Social media groups, however, offered many group members, sometimes individuals who were not even active Sacred Harp singers, to post and comment with very few restraints.

As social tensions heightened around the 2016 presidential election, so did many of the conversations in “Sacred Harp Friends.” Many singers felt disconnected with other singers when they read their Facebook posts. While many singers claim to “agree to disagree,” or at least not let differing political views discourage amicable exchanges at singings, specific posts about religion, race, and nationalism permeated “Sacred Harp Friends” starting in 2017 and began to impact the general sense of community that so many singers express as essential to the Sacred Harp experience. Some singers no longer wanted to attend singings with certain others as they learned that their political affiliations or ethical principles were not in line with their own—or with those that they viewed as compatible with participation in Sacred Harp singing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, “Sacred Harp Friends” became a virtual battleground. The contention centered around discussions of race, spurred in part by the Black Lives Matter movement

and police-murders of People of Color including Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. The Facebook group erupted in inflammatory comments and accusations, not about the movement or murders themselves, but about perceptions of racism within the Sacred Harp community. There is no denying that Sacred Harp is an overwhelmingly white practice—there are few Persons of Color, in or outside of the Southeast. As Karslberg and others have argued, despite token respect given the Black Sacred Harp tradition in southeast Alabama, Sacred Harp is not diverse (see chapter 3 for a discussion of historically Black Sacred Harp communities). Much of the discussion that ensued on the Sacred Harp Friends page was thoughtful and considered, offering perspectives about why Sacred Harp lacks diversity and how the community could become more welcoming and inclusive. This was the first time that these issues were discussed in such a public platform with input from singers representing numerous singing regions. Some participants found the discussion on Facebook a vital, long-overdue step toward overturning outdated ideas, including the “white spirituals” imaginary discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

Despite the fact that the group is moderated by a handful of singers, posting settings allowed individuals to post publicly without moderation, and offensive or inflammatory content was only removed once moderators saw it—frequently after many other participants had already read and engaged. While most of the posts considered problematic were merely uncivil, a few participants posted offensive material, including at least one instance of racist name calling by a white singer against an Asian-British singer. Other posts egregiously violated the norm of not bringing politics into Sacred Harp on both end of the political spectrum. For example, some posts denounced Christianity as inherently racist, while others characterized anti-racist efforts as an affront to Christianity. With a membership of about 3,400, the group represents a significant chunk of active singers, many of whom know each other fairly well. Difficult discussions and arguments pierced the

traditional space of Sacred Harp, effectively queering the space, causing much turmoil. Some singers left the Facebook group, some vowed to never go to certain singings again (the South was mentioned a few times), and others left the singing community altogether. Some moderators even left the group because of how difficult the discussions became.

Depending on one's point of view, this new virtual space for Sacred Harp had been either an abject failure or a surprising success. For singers who sought a virtual extension of "traditional" Sacred Harp space where norms that apply at singings would structure social experience in familiar ways, the tension on Sacred Harp Friends was a disaster. For other singers, who had been seeking for venues to discuss critical issues without the impediments to open speech that exist at typical singings, the Sacred Harp Friends page provided much-needed opportunity to queer the spaces of Sacred Harp.

As COVID continued to make Sacred Harp singing unsafe, it disoriented and ultimately queered the Sacred Harp community in additional ways. Singers were forced to cancel their singings and seek alternative ways to gather and sing. Prior to this point, a number of singings had been live-streamed so that individuals who were not able to participate in person could still experience the singing virtually in some fashion. Spurred by COVID, many singers soon organized informal gatherings, mainly over the ZOOM platform, to temporarily replace the loss of in-person singing. Most of the early singings included extensive discussion as singers wanted to greet and actively talk with friends in much the same way they were accustomed to do during breaks and socials.

Other singers worked to hold true virtual singings. This proved exceptionally challenging because ZOOM, Skype, GoogleMeet, and similar platforms cannot compensate the varying rates at which data travels through the virtual experience. No matter how good one's internet connection,

small differences in data arrival times mean that participants are not on the exact same timeframe; keeping in tempo is impossible, as singers quickly learned who tried singing together over ZOOM. As an alternative, singers devised events with a number of activities to help replace in-person singings, including discussion time, trivia, singing solo songs, and sharing videos or recordings of singings through screenshare functions. During the first spring of the pandemic, Kentucky singer Timothy Morton used his video production skills to create a video featuring dozens of singers. Each singer recorded themselves at home singing along to a recording, then uploaded their videos to Morton, who stitched them together. “The Quarantine Chorus,” as he called the virtual assembly, released a special 360-degree rendering of the EASTER ANTHEM. In the guise of a virtual Easter egg hunt, viewers can rotate the view to see each section and identify individual singers (Fig. 7.1).¹⁴⁴

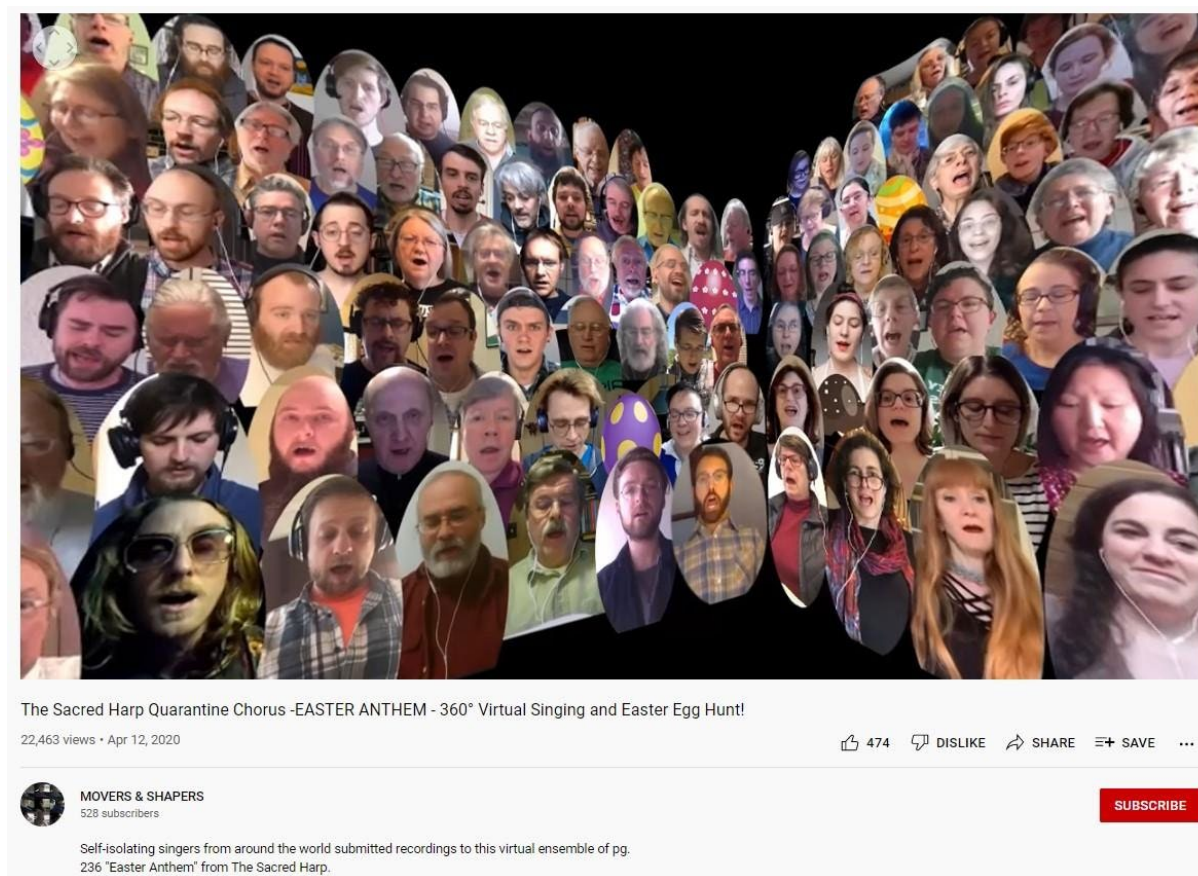


Fig. 7.1: Screenshot of the YouTube “Quarantine Chorus” singing the EASTER ANTHEM.

¹⁴⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDBoD30O20g&t=115s>

As the pandemic progressed, singing communities created more formal structures for ZOOM singings to emulate all-day singings and conventions (Fig. 7.2). Virtual singings elected officers, conducted memorial lessons, took minutes, and set aside time for virtual socials. To work around the problem of singing in time, moderators of the groups devised playlists of the entire *Sacred Harp* and when each leader chose a song, the moderator queued up a recording, screenshared it from their computer to the group, and invited everyone to sing along on their own with their microphones muted. With practice, skilled moderators like Evelyn Lamb in Salt Lake City ran seamless singings which eventually became transnationally attended weekly events. While many annual singings were replaced by virtual ones, local groups, like those in Salt Lake City, were able to open up their small communities to the world, and singers who had never sung together before had an opportunity to meet. Even small singing communities with little outside attendance before the pandemic, like Omaha, Nebraska, suddenly were connected with singers who never considered the possibility of singing “in” Nebraska. New Facebook groups were formed, too, like “Sacred Harp Streaming,” which helped the community navigate the emergent terrain of this virtual singing.

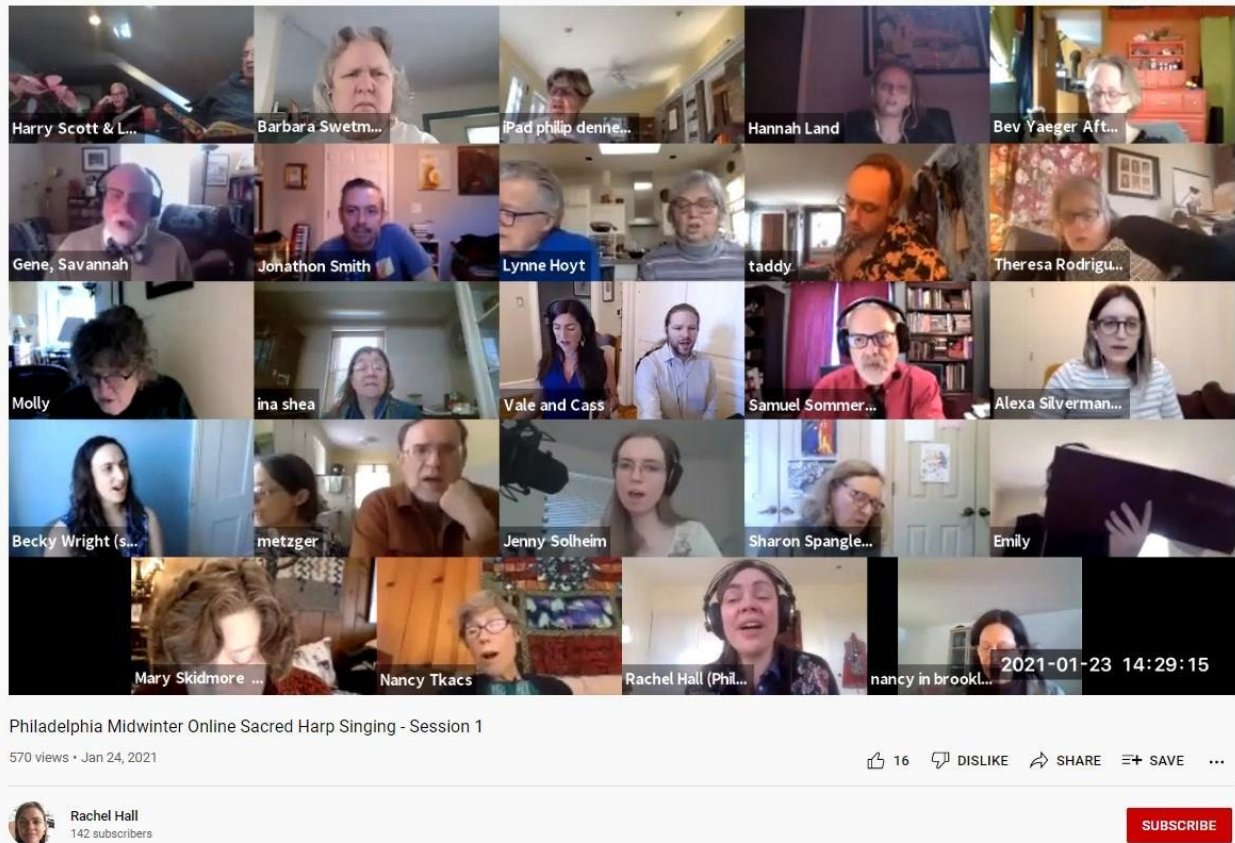


Fig. 7.2: Illustration of Zoom singing or “zinging.”

Some singers experimented with novel ways to navigate the juke box nature of many of the singings. Participants coined the term “zinging” to refer to the initial ZOOM-style of singing described above, while alternate technologies included “jamzinging” through Jamulus, a platform designed to address the problems of synchronization. Singers could also go “stringing” on Facebook Live, wherein one or more singers recorded themselves and invited additional singers to “string” their own recordings along with the original one (Morgan-Ellis 2021, 4–6). Many singers found these options especially appealing, particularly the fact that they could now sing with people they had never met, broadening their own sense of community and enlarging the scope of what Sacred Harp as a practice is capable of. A wide range of singers participated in singings, but as “COVID burnout” and the resumption of more normal activities progressed, attendance gradually diminished.

My own circle of singing friends, including Tennessee singer Barrett Patton, started a Facebook message group and regular ZOOM hangout which he called “Zooming Youth” after BLOOMING YOUTH in the *Sacred Harp*. Our group met regularly for several months but it too diminished and was abandoned through the numbing social effects of the pandemic. However, some singers, as Esther Morgan-Ellis details, thrive and continue to find a deep sense of community specifically through the virtual act of singing (Morgan-Ellis 2021). Virtual singings illustrate the complexity of space in Sacred Harp singing, where a broad range of participants from truly disparate backgrounds can gather even without the need to travel. The Quarantine Chorus video, along with others that were posted to social media from the various streaming Sacred Harp singings illustrate the pluralistic nature of the singing and the larger community’s ability to accommodate new avenues of participation even in exceptional circumstances.

Although vaccinations and the slowing of COVID prompted some singings to resume, mostly initially outdoors, many singings continued to cancel through 2022. Camp Fasola cancelled for three years in a row, although its sponsoring organization, the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, organized a successful “virtual camp” in 2021. As the pandemic lingers and “long COVID” becomes a social condition and not just a viral side effect, it is uncertain how in-person singings will revive and continue relative to their pre-pandemic states. In mid-2022, the future of Sacred Harp space is uncertain, but it seems likely that the music community will continue across new virtual spaces (Fig 7.3).



Fig. 7.3: Screenshot of “Dinner on the Grounds” from the 2021 Virtual Camp Fasola.

As this study has explored, the meaning of these spaces, whether virtual or physical, is always mediated through imaginaries. My critical perspective provides an important vantage point for reconsidering the narratives that have framed the discourse surrounding Sacred Harp since the early twentieth century. Whether considering what makes Sacred Harp “southern” and how that placing plays out in conceptions of “tradition” and “authenticity”—or in interrogating how the southern imaginary has been constructed and reproduced through performances and representations of Sacred Harp—the importance of studying imaginaries is not merely to overturn inaccurate historical narratives, but to understand how these imaginaries have shaped the communities and practices of Sacred Harp singing. Conceptions of tradition and authenticity—encountered through essentializing tropes of southernness and Celticness—not only reduce Sacred Harp singing to a

caricature, but reify exclusivist, chauvinistic, and white supremacist discourses. Escaping the pull of these longstanding tropes requires recognizing and interrogating the imaginaries that animate conceptions of “traditional,” “southern,” and “Anglo-Celtic,” a model that I hope this study will provide.

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