

RECORDING REVIEWS

There Breathes a Hope: The Legacy of John Work II and His Fisk Jubilee Quartet, 1909–1916. Archeophone ARCH 5020, 2010.

There Breathes a Hope compiles the earliest spirituals and poetry ever recorded by jubilee singers from Fisk University, Nashville. Accompanying the two CDs (running time: 131 min.) is a handsome, sepia-toned hardback booklet (108 pp.), the highlights of which are an introductory essay by Archeophone's production team; an extensive historical essay on John Wesley Work II (1873–1925) by Doug Seroff; a detailed description of the recording sessions by Tim Brooks; a discography; and numerous high-quality archival photographs.

Although the celebrated original Fisk Jubilee Singers disbanded in 1878, about a decade before the era of commercial sound recording, their aural legacy was revived at Fisk in the 1890s when original troupe member Ella Sheppard Moore returned to coach a new generation of jubilee vocalists. Among them was John Work II who, in 1899, answered the call of university president E. M. Cravath to organize a mixed company of jubilee singers that would travel on behalf of the university. This large troupe eventually became too expensive to support, so Work's male quartet assumed touring duties, to widespread acclaim. Work's quartets made a series of best-selling recordings for Victor in December 1909 and February 1911, and subsequently for Edison (Dec. 1911), Columbia (Oct. 1915 and Feb. 1916), and Starr (early 1916).

Archeophone is not the first record label to issue Work's quartet recordings commercially: Document Records (Vienna, Austria) published a three-volume series titled *Fisk Jubilee Singers: In Chronological Order* in 1997, the first two volumes of which contain many of the same recordings as *There Breathes a Hope*. As indebted as we are to Document for issuing these early Fisk recordings commercially, the Archeophone CDs far surpass the Document CDs in scope (with many previously unissued recordings), sound quality, and scholarly apparatus.

For example, Archeophone's restorations have resulted in impressively clean recordings that reveal nuances impossible to hear through the hisses and crackles of the Document tracks. A case in point is the last chorus of "In Bright Mansions Above" (CD 1/13): clearly audible are the Fisk singers' trademark *piano*, gradual crescendo, and closing ritard that showcases the beauty and blending of the voices. The spirituals range in mood from the humorous "Peter on the Sea/The Old Ark" (CD 2/5), to the fervent "Great Campmeeting" (CD 1/10), to the haunting "Po' Mo'ner Got Home at Last" (CD 1/12), a moaning spiritual that comes closest to folk practice, with its solo call and unison response, overlapping layers, and spine-tingling falsetto humming. These listener-friendly recordings are a boon for researchers and also facilitate the teaching of this repertory in the classroom.

Prime among the previously unissued recordings are nine songs featuring a young Roland Hayes, who entered Fisk's sixth grade in 1906 and studied there until 1910, when he was dismissed for paying more attention to his glee club and jubilee pursuits than to his classically oriented music studies. At Work's insistence, Hayes traveled with the quartet in 1911; his rich, expressive voice is most prominently

heard as the lead on the December 1911 Edison recording of “My Soul Is a Witness” (CD 2/1). It is instructive to compare this recording with a Victor recording of the same song from February of that year, on which Work sang lead (CD 1/14). Both tenors sing the song in the same key, but the version with Hayes is a minute longer. Not only does Hayes take a more leisurely pace, swinging the rhythm in contrast to Work’s more metronomic rendering, but he also more cogently dramatizes the words, slowing the pace to a virtual standstill when he sings, “The Lord sent an angel, the Lion for to keep, and Daniel laid down and went to sleep.” The contrast between these two recordings is partially attributable to the medium. As Tim Brooks points out in his liner notes (condensed from his excellent chapter on the Fisk recordings in *Lost Sounds*),¹ Edison’s Amberol cylinders allowed up to four minutes of recording time as opposed to the three-minute capacity of Victor’s 10-inch discs (76).

Although spirituals predominate, several tracks feature the spoken word. The Reverend James Andrew Myers performs four dialect poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar, three of which are of musicological interest for their descriptions of rural music and music making: “When Malindy Sings,” “A Banjo Song,” and “The Ol’ Tunes” (a first-person rumination on modern anthems, arias, and choir singing whose narrator casts a vigorous vote for “old-fashioned” folk performance of spiritual tunes over the organ’s “twiddle-twaddle” and the soloist’s “screechin”). In addition, each group of spirituals (which are ordered chronologically by recording session on the CDs) is prefaced by an excerpt from a 1983 audio interview that Doug Seroff conducted with the Reverend Jerome I. Wright, who sang in Work’s last student quartet. Although too brief to reveal much of scholarly interest, these anecdotal testimonies nicely complement the image of Work conveyed through Seroff’s biography, the photographs, and the songs.

Audio technician Doug Benson’s contributions deserve mention. His biggest challenge was ascertaining the correct recording speed, which had not yet been standardized at the time of the original recordings. Reference instruments can serve as an aid in this regard, but Work’s arrangements were all a cappella. Despite Benson’s painstaking research, in the end recording speeds were the result of educated guesses, informed by his and the Archeophone producers’ collective technical knowledge, musicality, and clues within the songs and poems. The results, to my ears, are completely convincing.²

Of course, the star of the recordings is John Work, who collected spirituals in the field, arranged them, started his own company to publish them, led daily chapel singing at Fisk, recruited and directed the quartet singers (as well as Fisk’s Glee Club and Mozart Society), endured lengthy concert tours, and soared as lead tenor of his quartets—while serving for much of that time as head of the History and Latin Department. Doug Seroff’s invaluable essay, “The Fisk University Jubilee Quartet with John Work II—‘Singing of the Old Tunes, in the Old Fashioned Way,’” reveals

¹ Tim Brooks, “The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Popularization of Negro Spirituals,” in *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890–1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 192–214.

² My thanks to Richard Martin of Archeophone for sharing with me the research process into recording speeds, the details of which are beyond the scope of this review.

the toll exacted by Work's service to Fisk University and to African American folk music generally. For most of his career he was enmeshed in an ideological battle between a university administration that advocated a premier Western music curriculum with no place for jubilee singing, and a wider community that cherished the jubilee tradition. Gradually stripped of his university duties and isolated from his Fisk colleagues, Work resigned from the university in August 1923, and died two years later at age 52.

Seroff's essay on this underreported era of jubilee singing at Fisk deserves a wide audience. He not only details the increasingly polarized racial climate at Fisk in the early part of the twentieth century, but he also situates Work's musical style within the emerging community quartet tradition, known for its close harmony and barbershop chords.

It is unfortunate that the introductory essay in the CD booklet, Brooks's Prologue on the original Fisk Jubilee Singers (excerpted from his book *Lost Sounds*), was not updated to correct factual errors and misleading statements.³ The original and significant contributions of the CDs and booklet, however, overshadow this one weakness. Anyone interested in the history of American folk and sacred music, quartet and barbershop singing, or the fraught transition from nineteenth-century to modern musical genres and performance practice will find *There Breathes a Hope* inspiring and elucidating. There is plenty for musicologists, performers, and record collectors to ponder, and the general public will find it attractive and accessible. Archeophone is to be commended for investing so much care in this neglected repertory, and for illuminating its context through high-quality scholarship and production values.

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Journal of the Society for American Music (2012) Volume 6, Number 2, pp. 255–258.
© The Society for American Music 2012 doi:10.1017/S1752196312000119

You're A Grand Old Rag: The Music of George M. Cohan. The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, Rick Benjamin, director. New World Records 80685–2, 2008.

If you consider George M. Cohan (1878–1942) a one-trick pony, *You're A Grand Old Rag*—a wonderful recording by Rick Benjamin and the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra—might well change your mind. The famous songwriter, singer, dancer, producer, and playwright's best-known songs, including "Give My Regards to Broadway," "You're a Grand Old Flag," "Over There," and "Mary's A Grand Old

³ For example, Brooks perpetuates the notion that in early student entertainments from 1867 the students sang "art" repertoire, whereas they actually sang popular songs. White's initial touring group comprised ten students (six women, four men), not nine (although one woman left the troupe after two months). Brooks describes the spirituals as "semi-religious" and uses W.E.B. Du Bois's term "sorrow songs" to refer to them; these terms detract from the rich complexity of this body of song.