

has been published by Daphne Duval Harrison and others, not nearly enough has been done to reflect the importance of vaudeville in the dissemination of the blues, either in the 1920s or before the recorded age.³

Nobody Knows Where the Blues Comes From provides much needed primary research and has developed methods of analysis that can be usefully applied more broadly in our understanding of the dissemination of the blues. Yet an assumption underpins this book that in many ways contradicts its title. Since “nobody knows where the blues comes from,” it is dangerous to assume that the Delta blues has primacy, or that it should be the paradigm by which other subgenres are assessed. Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow ably argue in *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* that “it is improper to extol Patton as a blues pioneer in any circumstances, for no one knows when blues developed, or where they developed.”⁴ The blues as a musical form appeared almost simultaneously in published rags, in the repertoire of jazz bands, on the vaudeville stage, and also in the Mississippi Delta, and elsewhere in the South in the early years of the twentieth century.

It is clear that the development of the blues is not a simple narrative but rather the product of complex relationships. If this book can also act as the catalyst for debate about the future direction of blues research, and the extent to which the reengagement of the various genres of the blues would prove fruitful, then perhaps we shall be one step closer to finding out where the blues did come from.

Vic Hobson



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Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong. By John Bealle. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997.

Across the mainstream United States, there is a growing awareness of the genre of religious choral song known as “sacred harp” singing, a form not long ago sheltered in backwaters of the rural South. Over the past forty-five years the genre has gained attention and has recently entered the popular media, particularly in Hollywood films such as *Cold Mountain* and *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?* Further evidence of this trend includes the increasing interest in the tradition on college campuses, and there is a growing inclination to recognize its repertory as a subgenre of so-called American roots music. According to John Bealle, the tune book known as *The Sacred Harp*, first published in 1844, has become synonymous with the genre. It has, he writes, become an “over-determined” symbol (5). Of importance to his argument,

³ Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

⁴ Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow, *King of the Delta Blues: The Life and Music of Charlie Patton* (Newton, N.J.: Rock Chapel Press, 1988), 47.

The Sacred Harp and many other similar texts that cropped up in the nineteenth century employed a curious form of notation known as shape notes. According to Bealle, the text has become a US “cultural object” that mediates varying historical periods, folk and popular traditions, and critical and conservative aesthetic stances. The text illuminates sacred and secular ideologies as well and offers a glimpse of the shifting US cultural ethos.

Bealle demonstrates that the study of *The Sacred Harp* as a cultural text reveals much about the formation of the US music culture in general. He examines the text from an interdisciplinary perspective drawing on folklore research, cultural criticism, ethnomusicology, theology, and history; also, he explores the role of “native” religious singing with its attendant practices and publications within the development of American culture from colonial times through modernization and urbanization to the present phase of revival and postmodern reassessment. The locus of much of the history that is embedded in *Sacred Harp* is the rural South, where conservative religious and agrarian values persist. Against this backdrop, Sacred Harp singing has occasionally reemerged as a folk revival spectacle.

This landmark study suggests two central themes. First, the tune-books that served the growing number of colonial-era singing schools skirted many of the issues considered divisive among churches in New England. The singing school became a religious appellation, and given that the church was central to civic life, music instruction extended beyond denominational worship to secular life. During the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth-century, shape-note tune books documented popular music practice and composition, and were essentially multi-denominational, and even nondenominational. Bealle’s second theme, as suggested by his subtitle “Sacred Harp and American Folksong,” points to the adoption of southern Sacred Harp singing style by the folk revival as a folk artifact, despite evidence that locates the practice within the paradigm of a popular form, albeit one driven from the urban community by agents of social reform.

Sacred Harp singing survived into the postmodern era despite an attempt to modernize and popularize congregational singing. The genre captured the interest of the folk revivalists in the mid-twentieth century through documentation by outsider “culture writers” such as George Pullen Jackson. Bealle suggests that concurrent to incipient stages of the folk revival, public institutions presented Sacred Harp performances in a manner that postured such music as folk artifact rather than a viable living and continuing musical tradition. And only in the postmodern period has there been an attempt to blend Sacred Harp as a native tradition with the trend towards revival. Bealle credits this blending to the commitment of southern singers who wish to demonstrate the music’s credibility. And, ultimately, Sacred Harp music is practiced with a degree of spiritual commitment to the extent that its full aesthetic value cannot be re-created fully on the folk concert stage. This, according to Bealle, demonstrates the full measure of its vitality.

Bealle examines four centripetal aspects that illuminate the role that Sacred Harp has played in US cultural history. In four chapters, each handled with exceptional skill, he traverses the topics of “music reform on the urban frontier,” the “*Sacred Harp* as a cultural object,” “writing traditions of the *Sacred Harp*,” and the “*Sacred Harp* revival.”

The initial theme involves the development of the singing school in New England and its tenuous relationship to the various concurrent competing religious movements. Early singing schoolteachers in the United States recognized the system as an improvement over responsorial congregational singing known as “lining out,” which, due to its sluggish Deacon-led pace, had severely diminished the church song repertory. Shape notes became immediately popular, facilitating both singing schools and fresh compositions. Soon, though, singing schools and shape notes became embroiled in a controversy that stemmed from their unabashed vernacular qualities.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the shape note as a pedagogical device fell into disrepute as the ideology of modernization moved westward. Modernism offered a view of music that could be demonstrated to be “scientific.” Bealle argues that the distinction between round and shape notes was implied by educational and moral reform movements grounded in rational theories that were fashionable at the time, and which looked to Europe for authority. Hence, shape notes were driven from their didactic role in the antebellum era to one servicing the social needs of rural communities, and that distinction functioned to portray rural singing as an aesthetic “other” for urban music making.

Next, Bealle separates culture writers from “native writers” and devotes a chapter to various writers’ ideological constructions of Sacred Harp singing as a folk form. For example, Carl Carmer, in his *Stars Fell on Alabama*, and George Pullen Jackson, in his extensive oeuvre, could claim “discovery” of Sacred Harp singing. One of the most insightful points of *Public Worship, Private Faith*, is the notion that the formative aspects of putative folk artifacts within the dimension of modernizing cultures may drive once popular forms in retrograde direction into the aesthetic domain of folk forms.

When folk scholar George Pullen Jackson published his *White Spirituals of the Southern Uplands* in 1933, most Americans had completely forgotten the Sacred Harp signing traditions once familiar to their ancestors.¹ Jackson’s German Romantic education and exposure to its folklore instilled in him a desire to explore the American terrain for native folk traditions, which he claimed to have discovered in Sacred Harp singing; Jackson, so Bealle argues, produced an oeuvre that powerfully influenced the later folk revivals.

Thus the shape-note repertory, which was once a populist form, became, a practice thought to exhibit qualities favored by romantic agrarians. Bealle gives Jackson credit for positioning *The Sacred Harp’s* folk character in the older tradition of “religious dissent,” rather than populist ideologies in fashion in the 1930s. Ironically, the writers who interpreted shape-note singing as folk music created a narrative of Sacred Harp that nourished the later folk revival era nominally supported by an educated elite urban audience and thus maintained a cultural dimension largely disconnected from the very music these writers wished to preserve.

Native writers, on the other hand, created a collection of “insider” texts that served to promote the music and document the tradition. Bealle discusses five

¹ George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands: The Story of the Fasola Folk, Their Songs, Singings, and “Buckwheat Notes”* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

forms of native writing for their utility and ideology; he distinguishes them in form, style, and content from culture writing. Bealle should be credited for a rich collection of primary source material. He surveys *The Organ*, a nineteenth-century newspaper edited and published by B. F. White, the compiler of *The Sacred Harp*. Bealle provides an excellent analysis of the newspaper's function as a primer on the community values of which the singing was one aesthetic part. He also contrasts the writings of J. S. James, an early twentieth-century historian and Sacred Harp editor, with the writings of culture critics. Then Bealle examines insider documentary writings, from the Chattahoochee Musical Convention by Earl Thurman and the essays of Ruth Denson Edwards written in the 1970s to the "minutes" of Sacred Harp singings, which document musical events dating to the nineteenth century.

Finally, Bealle turns to the revival itself. He provides an in-depth history of the Sacred Harp revival, particularly the post-1970 era. He argues that the overriding spirituality of Sacred Harp ultimately severs the tradition from folk ideology and returns it to the native institutions that support the form. Bealle focuses on the interest in *Sacred Harp* singing of folk institutions, particularly in Chicago, on the establishment of "conventions" in New England, and on the Sacred Harp singing groups formed at northern liberal arts colleges. He also studies the enthusiasm of college singers and their interaction with "native" singers of the southern tradition. He is particularly interested in the revival's effect on the core repertory of *The Sacred Harp*, as revealed in a 1992 edition. Moreover, it is significant, he writes, that commercial recordings produced by revival groups helped to broaden the revival. Urban revival singers imposed the aesthetic qualities of pop recordings upon the idiom, in contradistinction to the more mundane acoustics of documentary field recordings, which seemed only to sustain the foreign character of native Sacred Harp singing. Bealle also provides, in twelve appendices, lists of conventions, editors, and songs of the various revisions of *The Sacred Harp*.

Bealle optimistically suggests that the Sacred Harp revival can achieve an authentic unity through the spiritual dimension required by traditional singing practice and performance. The nondenominational and populist qualities of the music and text, combined with a growing spiritual interest in this postmodern era, might serve to promote a healthy cultural unity that evaded the nineteenth century. Here, private faith, albeit a nondenominational one, engenders public worship that merges sacred and secular ideologies.

Peter B. Olson