

Folksongs of Alabama
Field Recordings by Byron Arnold, 1947

by
John Bealle

This essay was written for a booklet accompanying "Cornbread Crumbled in Gravy," a cassette of songs from the Byron Arnold collection, produced in 1992 by Joy Baklanoff for the Alabama Folklife Association. Minor changes have been made in this on-line version.

Again may I mention a certain urgency in continuing this project now. For example, one lady from whose sister I had gotten seven songs wrote to me last October, offering twelve more songs for the collection. I replied that it would be at least Thanksgiving vacation before I could come to see her. I hear from her sister the middle of November that she had died of heart failure. The ballad singer of Bayou La Batre who is reputed to have known over a hundred cajun songs died in 1943. I have not found anyone of the present generation who is keeping alive these old ballads by singing them.

Byron Arnold
Research Project 139 Report
University of Alabama
April 1, 1946

In 1938, a decade before he would author *Folksongs of Alabama*, Byron Arnold came from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., to the University of Alabama to teach in the Department of Music. With no prior intention to devote himself to the study of Alabama folksong, Arnold was moved by several encounters with traditional singing soon after his arrival. By his own account, just two weeks into his stay in Alabama, he was taken to a foot-washing service in Northport. Less common today, foot-washing is taken from Jesus's command during the feast of the passover that his disciples wash one another's feet (John 13:5-20). In southern tradition, the service integrates music and ritual (see Baklanoff 1987) in such a way that might easily have captivated Arnold's attention and ignited his interest in Alabama folk culture.



Fig. 1: Byron Arnold. *From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries*

Yet Arnold's immediate interest in such an experience was rooted in a more general enthusiasm at the time for folk tradition within American culture. In the grip of the Great Depression, Americans had become fascinated with the commonplace. State and regional folklore collectors answered the call, and folklore societies such as the Southern Folklore Society (1934) were founded to focus this enthusiasm. New Deal arts agencies celebrated working Americans and the rhythm of everyday life. Among them, the Work Projects Administration produced a series of "State Guides" that established a widespread notion of the geopolitical U.S. state as an entity that might have a distinct native culture.

In Alabama, Carl Carmer's *Star's Fell on Alabama* had achieved best-seller status in 1934. Carmer's work described a foot-washing service in such a way that would have easily led Arnold to view it as something exotic. The South was being increasingly recognized as a rich repository of rural culture, a notion the South's own agrarian writers were all too happy to affirm. Most importantly, collections of folksongs from neighboring states, some by musicologists like Arnold, were achieving notoriety for their authors.

Such was the cultural lens through which Arnold observed with fascination what lay before him. Like others of his time who observed folk culture firsthand, Arnold was a romantic, deeply stirred by mysterious transcendent qualities of a music whose cultural circumstances were not his own. Yet these were changing conditions, and Arnold would fix his gaze on the glorious traditions of yesteryear, noting with despair their ceaseless passing. His interest grew, and in 1945 he began what he considered to be the first systematic effort to collect folksongs representative of Alabama.

Types of Folksong

Arnold aptly located such performances within the broad spectrum of musical categories that was called folksong. The vibrant music he observed clearly existed in a world in which memory and oral transmission—and not recordings or written scores—were the primary means of performance. Versions of songs by different singers and sometimes even different performances of songs by one singer exhibited considerable variation and reflected the settlement patterns and broader experiences of the people among whom these songs circulated.

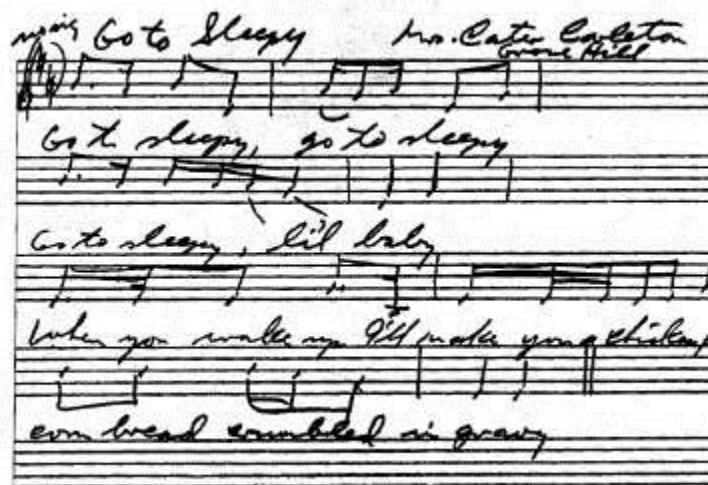


Fig. 2: Transcription of "Go to Sleepy," sung by Mrs. Laurie Cater Carleton, Grove Hill.. From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries

Although less rigid than others of his time, Arnold viewed folksong as falling into discrete categories. Highly prized were English and Scottish ballads that were most common in northern areas of the state. The celebrated discovery of the widespread presence of these stories-in-song in the U.S. had been established by the 1919 publication of Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles's collections, which would appear later as *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1932). For example, Sharp and Karpeles published eleven versions of "Frog Went a-Courtin'," which Arnold recorded from Florence singer Emma Craig. As reviews of his work indicate, Arnold correctly judged that the presence of old-world ballads would serve as a preeminent measure of the overall value of his collection.

Yet Arnold's reach was much wider. He collected play-party songs (such as "Marching 'Round the Levee")—singing games in which children provided vocal accompaniment for skipping, marching, dancing, and other dramatic movement. He collected cumulative songs ("Valley-O"), also associated with childhood and adolescence, which taxed a singer's memory; courtship songs ("Paper of Pins"), which mimicked the dialogue and drama of courtship and marriage; and lullabies ("Go To Sleepy"), which were sung by adults to young children, presumably to induce sleep.

Arnold also collected religious folksongs such as spirituals ("In That Land" and "I Got Shoes") and the more ecstatic gospel songs ("Got On My Traveling Shoes" and "I Want My Crown"), and ring shouts ("Tall Angel at the Bar"). He recorded work songs such as those which accompanied railroad work ("Tampin' Ties"). Perhaps most broad-minded in his quest was the inclusion of certain nineteenth century popular songs that, although originally written compositions, seemed to have entered into a tradition that focused

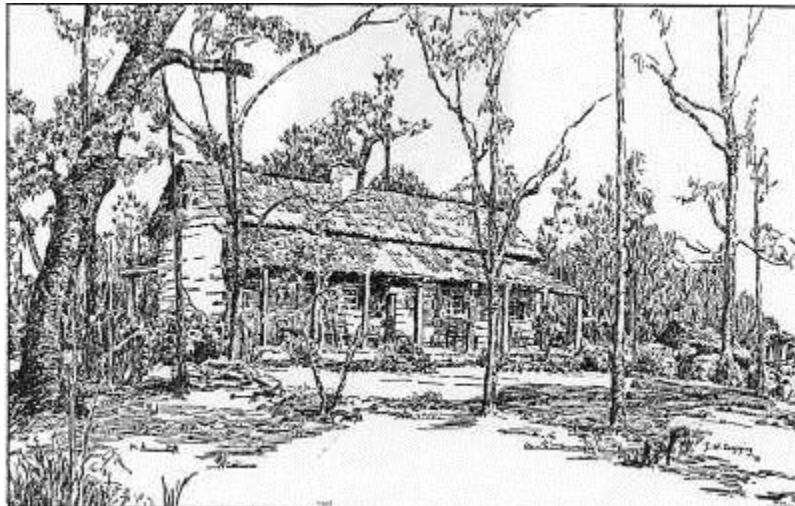


Fig. 3: Sketch of Hurricane House. Originally built in 1846, Arnold had the house moved to the banks of Hurricane Creek and reconstructed in its original plan. The sketch was by Tuscaloosa artist J. W. Cumming. *From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries*

exclusively on oral performance ("My Southern Home").

The scope of Arnold's collecting comes even more sharply into focus in observing what he planned to do. At the time *Folksongs of Alabama* was being prepared, Arnold described an entire series of publications, the titles of which give a good picture of the categories he perceived. At one point the list included "Folk Songs of English Origin," "Negro Spirituals and Work Songs," "Old Fiddlers' Tunes," and a book of play-party songs designed for use in the schools. At another point, his collection of 150 additional ballads was to be complemented by "Negro Spirituals in Alabama," "Early English and Scottish Folk Songs in Alabama," "Ballads of the Civil War and the Gay Nineties," and the play-party book. There is

some evidence that the manuscript for the play-party book reached near-completion after Arnold left Alabama, but was never published.

Nonetheless, Arnold's work suggests a degree of comprehensiveness that was not achieved. He neglected Alabama's Anglo-American instrumental traditions, which should have been abundant in the presence of hillbilly bands and solo fiddlers. He was also curiously quiet on the subject of white spirituals, even though he knew and spoke well of George Pullen Jackson's published accounts. Nor does he address the subject of blues, which Harold Courlander and Frederic Ramsey would discover only several years later. Nowhere does he acknowledge Native American traditions—but it is unlikely that, given his background and the time of his work, he would have been exposed to this in Alabama. Most obviously, his geographical span, although reaching from extreme north to south, was systematic in only three discrete areas.



Fig. 4: Radio Program. Arnold developed a series of radio programs to present folk music to the public. With vocalists Arline Hanke and Bill Steven, he is shown here broadcasting for the radio station of the University of Alabama. *From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries*

Yet, in the end, Arnold was an empiricist, driven to set down in writing or to record everything that lay before him. With each song he heard, his obligation to folksong seemed to increase, limited only by the extraordinary time and expense that collecting involved. Singers appealed to him to come and record their songs, and Arnold came to be drawn irreversibly into a role as a vital link to their destiny. When urged by Portia Washington Pittman to do at last what she and her father, Booker T. Washington, had sought to undertake years before, Arnold wrote, "I, frankly, can see no end to it myself, but I am anxious to continue the project to the best of my ability and fullest use of my time."

Arnold's Life and Work

Byron Arnold was born in Vancouver, Washington, in August of 1901. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, in 1924, and then, in 1937, a Master of Arts from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. Among Arnold's pre-Alabama works was the 1936 publication of two "Negro Spirituals for Solo Voices," one of which was "There's a Man Goin' 'Round." Possibly he was inspired by composers such as George Gershwin or Aaron Copland, both of whom had successfully drawn upon folk materials for orchestral compositions, to delve into written collections of folk music for resource material. One can only imagine the excitement he must have felt upon hearing firsthand the music he earlier had used for arrangements! There is no other evidence of prior interest in folksong, although his Eastman thesis, "Personality Traits of Music Students," might have kindled the particular interest in individual singers that so pervaded his Alabama work.

In 1938, Arnold accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. For some time, he worked as organist and choir director for Christ Episcopal Church, Tuscaloosa, and director of the University Women's and Men's Glee Club. At the outset, his work at the University was absorbed with a heavy teaching load and occasional recitals. It was in his elementary music education class where he encountered a student whose grandmother knew a version of the much-acclaimed ballad, "Barbara Allen."

In 1940, he purchased the remnants of a log house constructed in 1846 with square hand hewn pine logs and had it restored and moved to the banks of Little Hurricane Creek east of Tuscaloosa. The logs were numbered, torn down, and then replaced in their original state at the new location. Apparently this afforded Arnold a bohemian lifestyle a distance from the campus and from densely settled areas of Tuscaloosa—somewhat uncommon for academic professionals of this era. He enjoyed entertaining there, and would host festive dinners, with much singing, for friends and colleagues. The home still stands today as part of a WMCA camp.

MUSIC OF THE AMERICAS

BLANCA RENARD, pianist
EMMETT LEWIS, pianist

BYRON ARNOLD, folk-lorist
ARLINE HANKE, soprano

Sunday, 4:30 PM
19 January 1947

Morgan Hall
Auditorium

I

SOUTH AMERICAN MUSIC

It is generally true that South American music is typified by a variety of rhythms, colorful dynamics and folk-like melodies. There are, however, many European-trained composers whose works are influenced by the music of the countries in which they received their training.

Andante Appassionato.....Soro

Enrique Soro, former director of the National Conservatory at Santiago de Chile, is a prolific composer and popular teacher. His romantic style of composition, clearly an Italian influence, is delightfully presented in the Andante Appassionato.

Two Brazilian Forest Memories.....Villa-Lobos

Polichinelle.....Villa-Lobos

Folk songs of his native Brazil have formed the basis of the compositions of Heitor Villa-Lobos since 1914 when he returned from a two-year scientific expedition and study of Brazilian native customs and music. He went to Paris in 1922 for several years study, but his style of composing remained his own. He is imbued with a primitive creative force that manifests itself in indigenous forms of striking originality.

Senora Renard

II

NORTH AMERICAN MUSIC

Published within the last five years and composed in a style not yet familiar to most concert-goers, this group presents new music by four distinguished teachers of composition. They have been highly successful in having their orchestral works performed under the batons of such conductors as Toscanini, Koussevitsky, Mitropoulos, and Hanson. They have been further honored by many national and international awards, fellowships, and commissions.

Passacaglia.....Piston

Walter Piston, who teaches at Harvard University, has an affinity for contrapuntal style which is comparable to the great J. S. Bach. This Passacaglia, a slow dance built on a repeated bass theme, is a fine example of his technical skill as well as his feeling for the dramatic.

Sonatina.....Phillips

Into even so classic a form as the sonatina, Burrill Phillips injects an element suggestive of the "blues." Mr. Phillips is a member of the faculty of Eastman School of Music.

Three Fantasies.....Bergsma

An "atomic age Mozart"—so William Bergsma, the twenty-six year old composer and teacher at Juillard School of Music, has been designated. Highly individual in style, Bergsma handles every musical situation with assurance. His music, sometimes lyrical and again percussive, is always in excellent taste and shows fine workmanship.

Two Preludes.....Kennan

The music of Kent Kennan, winner of the coveted Prix de Rome in 1938, and now on the faculty of the University of Texas, shows strongly the influence of impressionism. Yet, his vitality of rhythm is not often found in impressionistic compositions.

Miss Lewis

III

ALABAMA FOLK SONGS

These Alabama folk songs were collected and arranged by Byron Arnold under Research Grant 39 from the University of Alabama Research Committee. Mr. Arnold will speak informally during this part of the program.

OLD ENGLISH BALLADS

Last Night I Dreamed of My True Love.....from Lena Hill,
Lexington

The Three Babes.....from Lena Hill

The Old Man in the West.....from Corrie Lambert, Toulminville

Winter's Night.....from Callie Craven, Gadsden

AMERICAN FOLK SONGS AND BALLADS

Springfield Mountain.....from Isabel Tipton, Birmingham

Going to the West.....from Janey Barnard Couch, Guntersville

Fig. 5: Music of the Americas. Billing himself as a "folk-lorist," Arnold organized a concert of North and South American folk music which had several venues in 1946-47. In the Alabama segment, songs he had collected were featured, always with the original singer and singer's residence noted in the program. *From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries*

In his preface to *Folksongs of Alabama*, Arnold describes several experiences early in his stay in Alabama that alerted his attention to the uniqueness of folksong—including the trip to the Northport foot-washing. Arnold was a guest in the Guntersville home of his associate, Dr. E. H. Couch. While preparing dinner, Mrs. Couch ("Valley-O") began humming songs she had learned from her mother. It was these such events, juxtaposed against prevailing notions of folksong, that drew Arnold to the task that would be his.

By 1945, Arnold had applied for and was awarded funding from the University of Alabama Research Grants Committee to collect folksongs throughout Alabama. During that summer and the next two, he followed initial contacts to three regions of the state—(1) the hill country in the Appalachian north, (2) the Black Belt, and (3) the south, including Grove Hill, Atmore, and several communities in Mobile and Baldwin counties. "Project 139," as it was officially designated, became for three years the systematic effort that led to *Folksongs of Alabama* and to the recordings included here. Arnold submitted the manuscript of *Folksongs of Alabama* to the University of Alabama Press early in 1946, intending subsequent fieldwork to be presented in future volumes.

As the project evolved, Arnold developed a series of public lectures, radio programs, and concert performances to present Alabama folk music to the public. For concerts, he customarily engaged a female soloist, most often Arline Hanke, whom he accompanied on the piano. Invariably, the name and location of the source of the original singer of each song were given in the program notes. The lecture series, he would recall, "materially aided" him in making contacts and collecting songs. [\[View the 1946 lecture tour itinerary here\]](#)

At a concert in Mobile, reported the *Mobile Register* (August 22, 1946), Mrs. Pansy Richardson ("Marching 'Round the Levee") participated in the performance of one of her songs:

The audience sang one of the play party songs, "Among the Little White Daisies," which was collected in this area. Mrs. Pansy Richardson, who had given the song to the collection, was present. Her name was used to start the singing game, which calls for the first and the second names of every twenty-fourth person in the group. [\[Read the Mobile Register article here\]](#)

In 1948, recently married to prominent Tuscaloosan Joan Warner, Arnold resigned his position, released unspent project funds, moved with his wife to Los Angeles, and began a Ph.D. degree in musicology at the University of Southern California. During the years the Arnold family spent in Los Angeles, he worked as organist and choir director for St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Monrovia, California. For some time he also emceed folksong broadcasts for KUSC, including interviews with foreign students about customs of their countries. A daughter, Mildred Margaret, was born to the Arnolds in 1949. On September 25, 1950, *Folksongs of Alabama* appeared as a publication of the University of Alabama Press. Arnold's Ph.D. dissertation, completed in 1956 and unrelated to folksong, addressed "The Life and Works of Johann Caspar Bachofen." He had written the research council in 1953: "...as soon as the Ph.D. is finished I will get after another book of folk songs." Arnold died on Christmas day, 1971, at an Air Force hospital in Oscoda, Michigan, never having completed that book.

After Arnold's death, the staff of the University of California, Los Angeles, discovered in a storage room a portion of the papers, records, index cards, and recorded tapes that had been produced under the auspices of the project. According to the terms of the research agreement, the materials were returned to the University of Alabama. The collection, which does not include all of Arnold's work, is housed in the W.S. Hoole Special Collections section of the Gorgas Library in Tuscaloosa; several helpful indexes and guides have been produced.

Project 139

It was the summer of 1945 when Arnold began collecting systematically. His most basic statement of the purpose of the project he began that summer was to "preserve for posterity unpublished and rapidly disappearing songs of Alabama, many known only to the very old, of whom several have died even since this work was begun." The war was not yet over, necessitating the use of public transportation and thus limiting access to remote areas. In fact, he reported that the facility of a private car came after V-J day, August 15, and "changed in a measure the type of songs found."

At the outset, Arnold had selected the three representative areas of the state where prior contacts had already been made. No recording equipment was available at the time, so Arnold worked with musical dictation tablets, accumulating over a thousand pages of melodies, lyrics, notes, and contacts' names and addresses. Apparently he carried a camera and took the photographs of singers that appeared in *Folksongs of Alabama*.

At some point before or during the expedition, the taxonomy of folksong that would guide his work began to emerge. Arnold sought (1) songs of English origin, some with "great antiquity," (2) songs of American and Alabama origin, (3) Negro spirituals and work songs, and (4) play-party songs. Reviewing his work at the end of the summer, Arnold would optimistically view this as more comprehensive than restrictive: "As the project was a six weeks' survey, it seemed best to record all types of songs found rather than limit the study to any one of the above types."

Certainly, Arnold inherited this orientation from the prevailing folksong scholarship of his time. From Francis James Child (*English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1882-1898) and Cecil Sharp (*English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, 1932) he derived his interest in the antiquity of English balladry. Benjamin Botkin (*The American Play-Party Song*, 1937) was influential on the subject of play parties. Collections from neighboring states were taken as precedents for his geographic scope, particularly Arthur Palmer Hudson's *Folk Songs of Mississippi* (1936) and Alton C. Morris's work, which would be published later as *Folksongs of Florida* (1950).

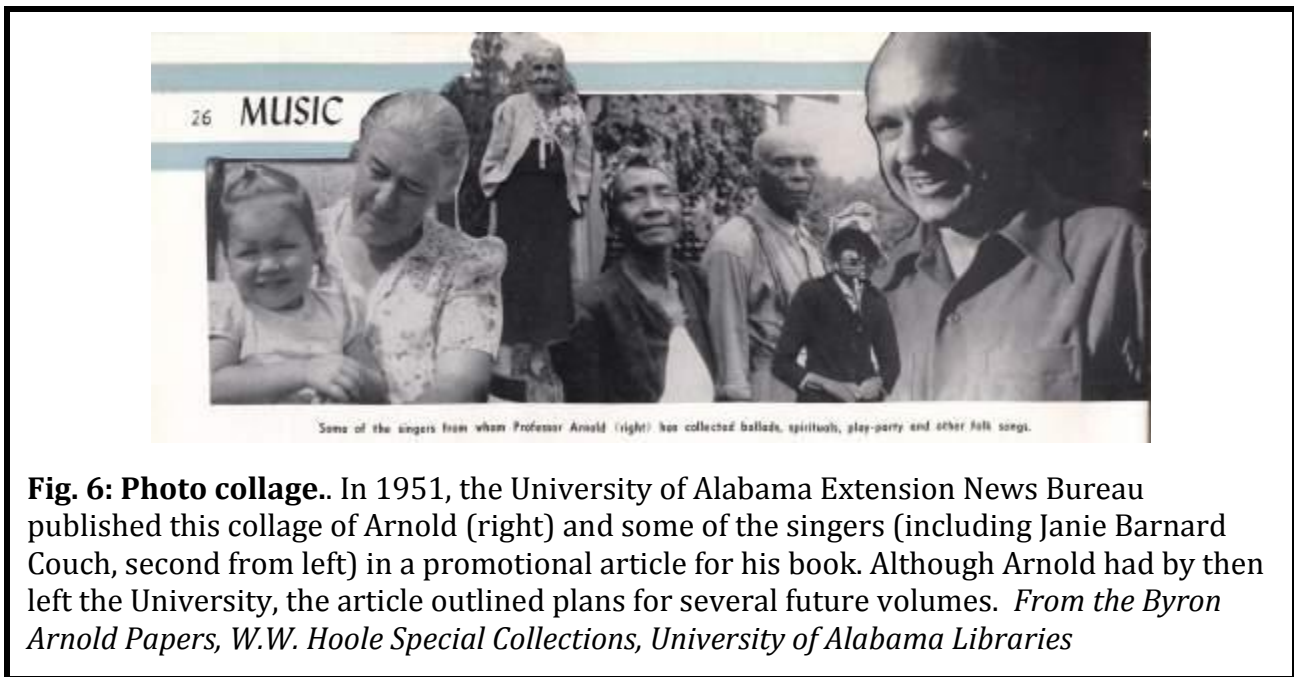


Fig. 6: Photo collage. In 1951, the University of Alabama Extension News Bureau published this collage of Arnold (right) and some of the singers (including Janie Barnard Couch, second from left) in a promotional article for his book. Although Arnold had by then left the University, the article outlined plans for several future volumes. *From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries*

Those unfamiliar with the work of folklore fieldwork may take an interest in the unusually vivid statistical records Arnold left behind. Perhaps because he had to justify his relatively uncommon work to the research committee, or perhaps because prevailing notions of fieldwork valued the discovery of song texts, Arnold measured his work in numbers. His report of the 1945 trip records that in six weeks he collected 258 songs. Furthermore,

The largest number of songs that were collected in any one day was twenty-three. There were two days that we were unable to find any at all, the biggest disappointment being in the Bayou country. In Huntsville we contacted nineteen people and got only one song.

Arnold also reported that from the beginning of the project on July 22 to April 1 of the next year, he had traveled 2,427 miles in the state.

The next summer, his efficiency was enhanced by having made prior contact, so that he could write ahead and tell singers exactly when he was coming. Using previously-visited singers as references, Arnold could easily acquaint new singers by advance letter with the

purpose of the visit. Even this had its drawbacks, however, for, he wrote, "in having to follow a schedule I frequently had to leave a person or a community before collecting all the songs that I knew were to be found."

Reading *Folksongs of Alabama*, it is difficult to imagine that Arnold might have spent no more than several hours with a singer—yet, for some, this is probably the case. Nonetheless, Arnold was able to establish an extraordinary level of rapport with singers. He seemed uncommonly able to convey a sense of historical importance regarding his work and also, undoubtedly, a sense of his personal investment in the singers as a part of it. Arnold described singers as "not only willing, but anxious to have their songs written down." Perhaps most memorable was a session with Mrs. Julia Marechal of Mobile, who at age ninety recorded her repertoire of thirty-three songs in only three hours! Arnold wrote that when she finished the last recording, she sighed, "This has been so thrilling; I wish I

The collection of folksongs that I made in the state of Alabama numbers over a thousand items plus eleven reels of tape recordings that have not yet been transcribed. This collection was accomplished through three grants-in-aid, each for a period of five weeks, from the University of Alabama Research Committee to enable me to tour the state. Only five counties were omitted in these collecting trips. It has a wide and varied scope from the well-known English ballad survivals such as Cecil Sharp and Miss Maude Karpeles found north of Alabama in the Appalachians, to Negro spirituals and work songs. There are recordings of Negro religious services, from remote communities singing not only spirituals but also the florid chant-like music of the so-called "foot washing" sect of the Baptist faith. It includes a good many songs sung around camp fires by southern soldiers beside the known bad man ballads of the United States, and folksongs of local historical interest.

—Byron Arnold
"Historical Alabama Folksongs"
address to the International Folk Music Council

Fig. 7: Address to Folk Music Council. After *Folksongs of Alabama* was published, Arnold spoke to the International Folk Music Council in England about his work. His address included this summary of his work in Alabama.

knew more songs to record."

Several structural factors may have contributed to this apparent ease of relations. As a non-native new to Alabama, Arnold's own cultural origins were outside the culture and social structure he recorded. Otherwise it may never have occurred to him to conduct the work. Yet, unlike collectors whose expeditions began from outside the region, Arnold lived in the place of his work—not all that far, as Tuscaloosa is, from its geographic center. This was vastly important because he was viewed by singers as accessible—as someone who might

return to visit them again or who might be counted upon to see that eventually all of their songs would be set down for posterity. Indeed, this was the burden he had begun to report by the time he left in 1948.

Consider, for example, what Arnold would probably have thought a good day. On June 10, 1947, with recording equipment and an automobile, he visited Tuscumbia where he recorded three songs from Mary Wallace Kirk and four from Isaiah Holmes, her gardener. His next stop was nearby Sheffield where he collected two songs from Joe M. Jacks and two from his wife. In Sheffield, he also visited Mrs. C. N. Crick and recorded one song, and Martha Nathan for nine songs. Then he was off to Lexington, near the Tennessee border, where Mrs. Lena Hill sang four songs for him. Next he proceeded to Huntsville where he recorded two from Zimmer Holding. This undoubtedly satisfying day produced twenty-seven songs in four communities!

Rapport with singers was aided also by the diligent correspondence he carried on during periods when he could not visit. In April of 1946, he reported to the Research Committee 268 letters to and from singers he had visited the previous summer. The texts of some 100 ballads, in addition to those he had collected, had been mailed to him from singers. For some time, he used project funds to assign full-time a secretary, Alice Duggan, to manage correspondence. He made some attempt to secure remuneration for singers who made recordings, but bewildered committee officials could not find provisions for such funds as proper expenses of a research budget.

Arnold anticipated making far more recordings than actually were produced. As a result of the successes of the first summer, he ordered recording equipment in October of 1945. In spite of correspondence expressing increasing exasperation, the equipment did not arrive even in time for the trip planned for the next summer. With his usual sense of urgency, Arnold reported to the committee the series of misfortunes that plagued even his own resourcefulness:

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| Saturday, June 7 Florence | Thursday, June 26 Birmingham | Thursday, July 10 Atmore |
| Sunday, June 8 Florence | Saturday, July 5 Grove Hill | Prison |
| Monday, June 9 Florence | Saturday, July 5 Mobile | Friday, July 11 Atmore |
| Tuesday, June 10 Huntsville | Sunday, July 6 Mobile | Thursday, July 17 Birmingham |
| Lexington | Monday, July 7 | Saturday, July 19 Carlowville |
| Sheffield | | Saturday, |

| | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Tuscumbia | Mobile | July 19 |
| Thursday, | Point Clear | Selma |
| June 12 | Tuesday, | (Perrin's |
| Ft. Payne | July 8 | Restaurant) |
| Section | Mobile | Sunday, July |
| Friday, June | Dog River, | 20 |
| 13 | Mobile | Montgomery |
| Ft Payne | Wednesday, | Monday, July |
| Gadsden | July 9 | 21 |
| Guntersville | Mobile | Tuskegee |
| Mon-Tue, | Thursday, | Monday, July |
| June 16-17 | July 10 | 21 |
| Livingston | Daphne | Union |
| Wednesday, | Thursday, | Springs |
| June 25 | July 10 | Tuesday, |
| Birmingham | Pensacola, | July 22 |
| | Fla. | Troy |
| | | Wednesday, |
| | | July 23 |
| | | Elba |

Fig. 8. 1947 Trip. With recording equipment borrowed from the Speech Department, Arnold made his only recording expedition in the summer of 1947. *Table compiled by the author, from materials in the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries* [[View the full itinerary here](#)]

When I left on these last trips [1946] I got authorization to take the singers to local radio stations to make recordings of their songs. Unfortunately this plan did not work, as Callie Craven of Gadsden, from whom I got twenty-two songs in 1945, died two weeks before I arrived there. Lena Hill of Lexington flatly refused to go to a radio station, saying, "I'm not goin' up thar to have them laugh at my songs." In Mobile, Corie Lambert's son had suddenly died of a heart attack and I could not ask her to sing. These ladies were the three richest sources of folk songs last year."

As prerequisite to the loan, the Speech Department requested that the equipment be operated by an electronics technician, whose salary—with overtime—Arnold had to pay with project funds. In Florence on June 11, only the fifth day of the trip and one day after the busy day described above, Arnold wrote committee secretary Mrs. W. K. E. James of problems with a hum in the recording equipment. He continued: "It has required a great deal of patience, frequently, to persuade some of them to sing and we are still behind the original schedule...am having no time to make new contacts." By the

end of the trip he would report more favorable conditions. At some later date, Arnold secured use of a tape recorder, and even as late as 1951 returned to Alabama for a recording trip.

At the time, Arnold would have found preposterous the thought that none of the recordings would be released to the public until 1992. In Los Angeles, he had made some inquiries with record companies with the hope of selling the recordings, but never saw this through to the end. He was also in contact with the Southern Educational Film Production Service regarding a film of the folk song project. Apparently films were made, but were lost during developing. In Los Angeles, freed from the burdens of proximity, Arnold's involvement with Alabama folksong quickly declined. He carried on some correspondence with singers and for some time considered writing a dissertation based on his fieldwork. He also made certain that all singers received copies of the recordings, although much of the direct

correspondence was handled by Mrs. James. Arnold continued to write with plans for future volumes in the series of books, but none emerged.

In 1960, Mrs. James wrote Arnold acknowledging the formal closure of Project 139 "without full publication of data." The project had been granted the not-extravagant sum of \$5894, of which \$2039.37 had been returned when Arnold resigned. *Folksongs of Alabama* had sold reasonably well, but profits were absorbed by expensive corrections that had to be made in the original printing. Arnold's work lay dormant until the mid-1970s when a University of Alabama music professor, the late Robert Nicolosi, took a rather extraordinary interest in the collection. This recording is indebted in many ways to the work and enthusiasm Dr. Nicolosi generated.

Folksongs of Alabama

Although Arnold is hardly credited with revolutionizing the study of folksong, few scholars who read his book have failed to note its uncommon organization. At the time the book appeared, serious studies of folksong were organized chronologically, in the manner established by Francis James Child (1882-1898), with the oldest and thus most valuable songs at the beginning. Alternatively, John Lomax and his son Alan had secured the widespread popularity of topical arrangements, for example, sections of work songs, play parties, spirituals, etc. Yet another popular arrangement, responsive to the growing interest in regional culture, was by region. All of these were motivated by the widespread belief among scholars that folksong was preeminently a communal, not an individual, expression—representing the homogeneous cultural totality of which the singer was a component.

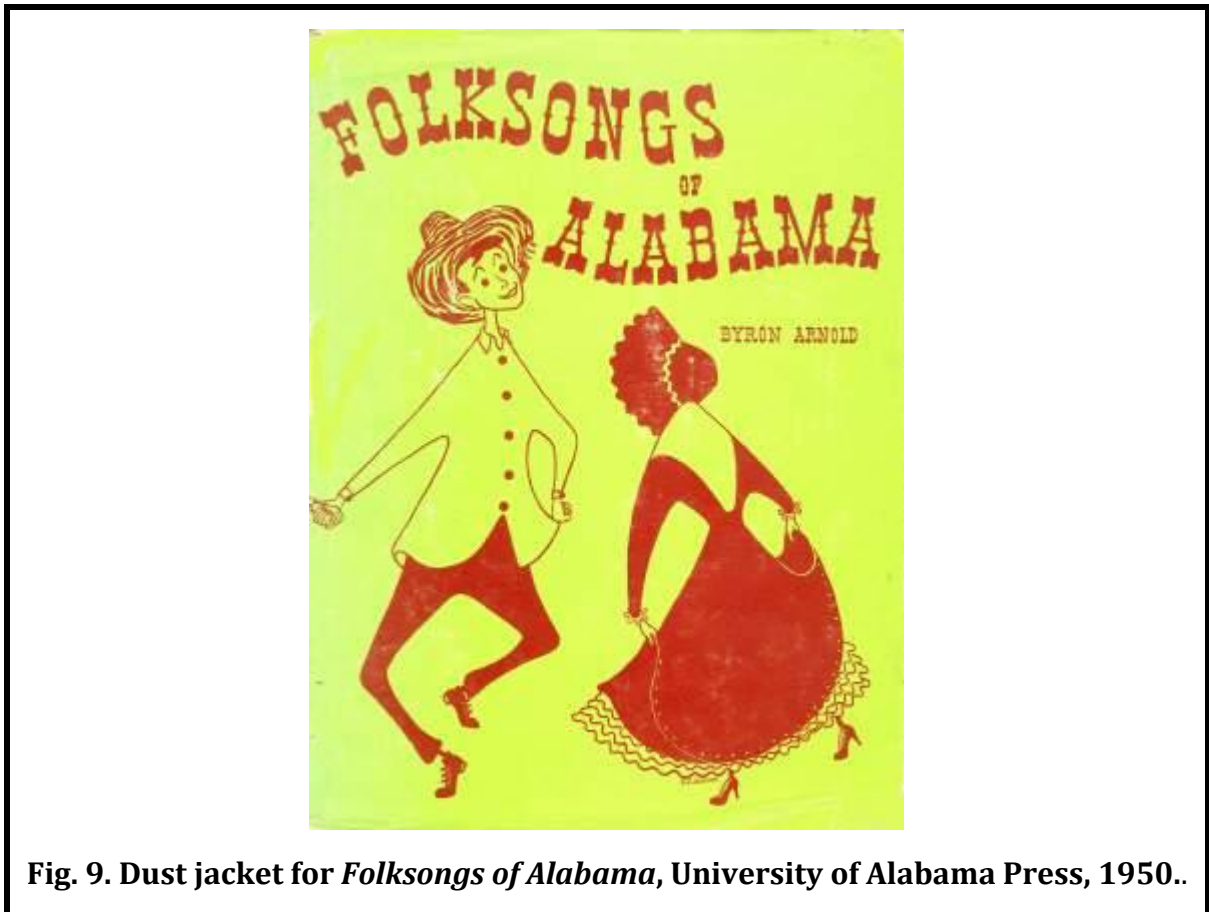


Fig. 9. Dust jacket for *Folksongs of Alabama*, University of Alabama Press, 1950..

Arnold gives two accounts of his decision to arrange the book biographically. In one, the first singer he visited, Callie Craven of Gadsden, asked that, if her songs were published, they be kept in a group and called, "Callie's Songs" (see *Folksongs of Alabama*, p. 3). When Arnold returned the next summer, he was told that she had passed away. Callie Craven's songs indeed appear first in the book, suggesting that those which followed similarly took her arrangement as a model.

Yet Arnold described a more deliberate interest "in the singers themselves as personalities and in the wide range of material in their singing" (p. vii). He included, where available, biographies of singers written in their own words—sent to him at his request in letters and edited only by shortening some of them. Arnold believed this arrangement measurably superior to others because readers could determine more easily which songs belonged with particular singers.

Arnold would not have known how extensively the field of folksong study and folklore study in general would shift in this direction over the years following publication of his book. Studies have proliferated that focus on biography, specific performances, singers' repertoires, and the social dynamics of the relations of collectors and singers. Entire books on individual singers and their song repertoires are now common. Collectors' accounts of the fieldwork process, once kept in separate journals, are now given specific attention.

Most recently, the popularity in folklore scholarship of the literary theories of Russian critic M. M. Bakhtin have drawn upon his view of the novel—and thus, by extension, the ethnographic text or collection of songs—as an assembly of diverse and unmolested voices.

Sandburg praises book by local man

The most recent book off the University Press is receiving favorable reports from the critics.

The volume, Byron Arnold's "Folksongs of Alabama," is a collection of folk music from all over the state.

Noted poet Carl Sandburg says in reference:

"..The photographs of singers, their remarks about their songs, much more, represent excellent field work by Byron Arnold. Going through the book in a leisurely way is like taking a trip to forgotten corners of Alabama."

Hudson Strode says:

"Byron Arnold's labor of love turns out to be an important work that will surely have permanent value.."

Arnold is a former member of the faculty of the university music department, now taking his doctorate at the University of Southern California.

Fig. 10: "Sandburg praises." *Folksongs of Alabama* was an immediate success, earning praise from many folksong authorities. Author of the popular collection *The American Songbag* (1927), Carl Sandburg had visited the University of Alabama under an arrangement made by Carl Carmer while Carmer was teaching in the English Department. *From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries*

This aspect of *Folksongs of Alabama* attracted the immediate attention of folksong scholars. *Folksongs of Mississippi* author Arthur Palmer Hudson liked the idea "of making the individual singer and his or her personality and life story the principle of organization." "This gives intimacy and reality," he continued, "to the songs as parts of the singer's individuality and experience." Renowned folktale scholar Stith Thompson commented that the biographical arrangement "gives a feeling of reality to the collection that is missing in so many others." Bibliographer and folklorist Charles Haywood, however, objected, saying that the biographical emphasis was of only "secondary importance to a systematic arrangement of the songs according to the various categories recognized by most scholars" (1951:175).

Biographical arrangement also had local impact. By focusing on individuals, Arnold provided a means by which the communities he visited could more easily claim the attention given their native singers. For Arnold, local communities were important. Addressing the International Folk Music Council several years later, he summarized his plan for *Folksongs of Alabama*:

The resulting book was not academic in intent, but its avowed purpose was to present to the people of the state a usable text with

music of the rich heritage of the material found. At the opening session of this Council last year, the president, Dr. Ralph Vaughn Williams, expressed such a purpose when he said, "The people whom it is our Mission to make acquainted with our folk music are not experts. They have, and quite rightly, no interest in variants and parallels and folklore."

Thus when the book appeared, Arnold must have been pleased that the same *Tuscaloosa News* article that cited folklorists Arthur Palmer Hudson and Stith Thompson could proclaim in its headline, "Six Tuscaloosans Have Songs in Collection."

Sales of the book were strong. Mrs. James wrote Arnold in California in 1950 that the book was creating such an immediate sensation that the student newspaper had reported that "some Northerner was offering a rather substantial monetary reward to any student who would send him Alabama folklore or songs." In 1962, a report listed the book second in sales among eighteen books funded by the University Research Council. After the early 1960s, the book enjoyed a resurgence when the folksong revival aroused widespread attention to the subject at large. Scholarly reviews were generally congenial, but took issue with particular methodological problems. In the *Journal of American Folklore* (1951), folksong scholar Tristram Coffin acknowledged that the book partly satisfied a "long-standing need in regional studies," and urged the publication of the remainder of Arnold's collection in order to provide other versions of the songs printed in the book. In *Western Folklore* (1951), Bertrand Bronson, taking aim at the corrupting influences of professionalism and audience appeal, lauded Arnold's empathy for the emotional impulses of the genuine folk singer. In the *Music Library Association Notes* (1951), Charles Seeger challenged the general use of the names of states to indicate collections, made by individuals, that ultimately did not cover the entire state.

Seeger was also quick to point out that Arnold—or someone—dutifully segregated black and white singers in the layout of *Folksongs of Alabama*, all too conspicuously placing black singers in the back. There is some irony in this pronouncement since it was fairly common at the time to treat separately the folksongs of groups of people who had some degree of established cultural homogeneity. Perhaps Arnold's ironic mistake was in focusing on individual singers largely to the exclusion of these cultural factors, and then choosing a system of arrangement that undermined that orientation.

Yet Seeger's point should be well taken that Arnold's collecting was conducted well within the prevailing social structure of its time. Arnold, in fact, seemed to have an uncommon knack for quickly and effectively identifying those situations where his own presence was immediately seen as positive. Missing were the more provocative, the more inhibited, or the more reluctant singers whose contributions might require more sensitivity, diligence, or empathy.

On the other hand, Arnold and Project 139 left behind evidence of their designs, and nowhere is there any suggestion of prejudice personally borne. His compassion for the

singers and their songs was by all accounts evenly distributed. If anything, Arnold is to be faulted with a lack of theoretical drive. He was a collector, and his eventual withdrawal from the folksong field suggests that he was drawn to the task more by circumstance than prejudice.

In fact, it was somewhat in defiance of folksong scholarship that he included as bona fide sources singers who were trained musicians. One *Folksongs of Alabama* "informant" was Alton O'Steen, his friend and colleague on the music faculty. Arnold's apparent understanding was that those who most loved music would seek it indiscriminately,

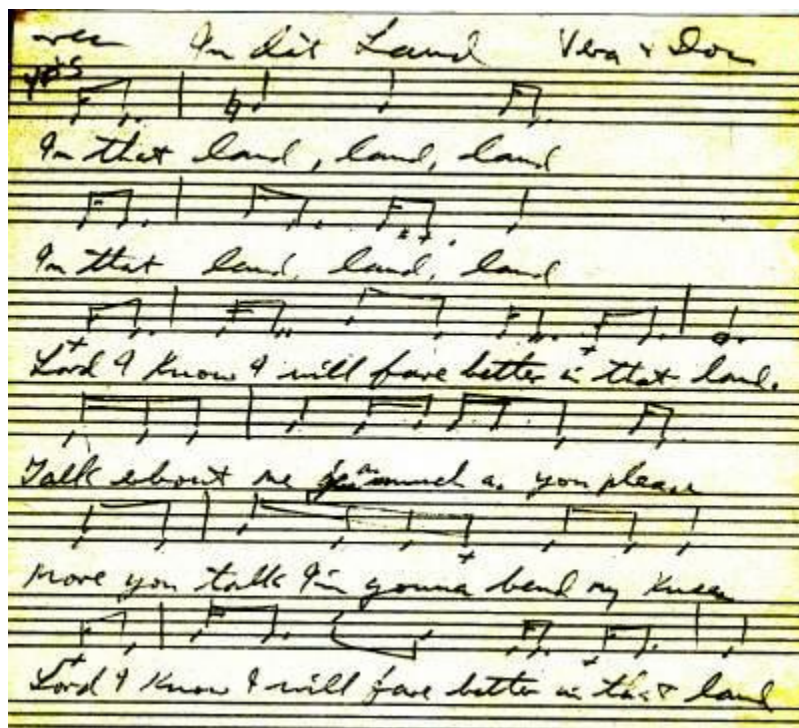


Fig. 11. Transcription of "In That Land," sung by Vera Hall and Dock Reed, Livingston. From the Byron Arnold Papers, W.W. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama Libraries.

regardless of their background or training.

On several accounts, reviewers were skeptical or critical of Arnold's transcriptions, some, such as Seeger, wishing "that there were a recording to which to resort for checking." Indeed, these recordings give us a rare glimpse of fieldwork at a juncture of technological advance—Arnold first collected songs using field transcriptions and then, in some cases, returned to make recordings of the same songs! The transcription of "Tall Angel At the Bar," printed in *Folksongs of Alabama* and of "Go To Sleepy," may be compared to the melody of the recorded performance. Readers should note, of course, that the time lapse between the two performances is two years.

At the time, however, many folksong collections were published without music at all, often because their authors were insufficiently trained. Arnold's relentless attention to musical detail is thus not to be overlooked. Apparently, Arnold was somewhat of a champion for the musical cause, for he jotted "no music" on those bibliographic entries in his notes which had no transcriptions. Correspondence indicates also that a collaborator for the book was recommended, one who was not interested in the music. Thankfully, Arnold disregarded this.

In transcribing lyrics, Arnold rendered what he called "dialect words" in spelling which approximated sound "as closely as possible" (p. vii)— e.g., "Lawd" for "Lord," "Jurdan" for "Jordan." Such practices had been methodically spelled out in nineteenth century collections of African-American spirituals. Arnold was less systematic, intending only to use orthographic distortions to convey a quaint dialect not his own. Perhaps his most egregious abuse of dialect was the transcription of the affected black speech by the University of Alabama Men's Glee Club of "Dese Bones Gwine Rise Ag'in" included in *Folksongs of Alabama* (p. 148). Here we find not accurate representation of dialect, but diligent complicity in racial caricature.

In 1959, when D. K. Wilgus's comprehensive history, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, was published, Arnold's work was not mentioned. Both of the Florida and Mississippi books upon which Arnold modeled *Folksongs of Alabama* were included. This was an ironic oversight, for Wilgus gave considerable attention to the rigors of publishing musical transcriptions, even including a table (p. 199) listing for each collection the percent of song texts which gave accompanying tunes. *Folksongs of Alabama*, at 100%, would have appeared at the head of the list.

In part, this omission must have been due to Arnold's position far on the periphery of folksong scholarship. He was not involved in the heated debates over folksong origin and authenticity. In his collection, he provided little commentary and scant annotation for the songs he presented. Perhaps most important, he abruptly exited the field of folksong scholarship just as his book rolled off the presses.

Furthermore, contemporary folksong scholarship has veered in other directions. In his survey, Arnold skimmed the surface of a variety of complex musical and cultural traditions. Since the time of his work, these traditions have been given considerable in-depth attention. For many scholars, it would be unconscionable today to treat complex traditions as superficially as Arnold did.

Nonetheless, a contemporary assessment should locate *Folksongs of Alabama* within a scholarly method that at the time had not fully emerged. Certainly biographical and repertoire studies were unheard of. Wilgus notes that John and Alan Lomax' *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936) was "the first book length report of a folksinger's repertoire." Now far more common, it is in this tradition that *Folksongs of Alabama* will likely find its place.

John Bealle
Cincinnati, Ohio
March, 1992
Revised March, 2006

Acknowledgements

These notes are indebted to the generous assistance of several individuals who should not go unrecognized. Mrs. Joyce Lamont and the Special Collections staff at the Gorgas Library, University of Alabama, were of invaluable assistance during several lengthy visits; Mrs. Gunetta Rich was particularly helpful in securing reprints of material from the collection. Mrs. Joan Van Zele and Mrs. William Steven recalled for me Arnold's days at the University of Alabama. The Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University, assisted in the work on Will S. Hays. Prof. Alan Brown, Livingston University, provided the photographs of Vera Hall and Dock Reed, and Jo Tartt and Harold Courlander permission to use them. Mr. Doug Seroff and Mr. John Alexander both provided invaluable advice on commercially recorded gospel songs. The University of Alabama Press gave permission to use photos from *Folksongs of Alabama*.

References

Arnold, Byron

1956 "The Life and Works of Johann Caspar Bachofen." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California.

1950 *Folksongs of Alabama*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

1937 "Personality Traits of Music Students." M.A. thesis, Eastman School of Music.

1936 "Negro Spirituals for Solo Voices," N.Y.: N.Y. Blueprint Co.

Baklanoff, Joy Driskell

1987 "The Celebration of a Feast: Music, Dance, and Possession Trance in the Black Primitive Baptist Footwashing Ritual." *Ethnomusicology* 31:381-94.

Bronson, Bertrand H.

1951 Review of Byron Arnold, *Folksongs of Alabama*. *Western Folklore* 10:338-39.

Child, Francis James

1882-1898 *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. 5 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company.

Coffin, Tristram P.

1951 Review of Byron Arnold, *Folksongs of Alabama*. *Journal of American Folklore* 64:240-41.

Courlander, Harold

1963 *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press.

1960 *Negro Songs from Alabama*. N.Y.: Oak Publications.

1951 *Negro Folk Music of Alabama*. Volume II: Religious Music. N.Y.: Ethnic Folkways P-418.

Haywood, Charles

1951 Review of *Folksongs of Alabama*. *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 15:173-76.

Hudson, Arthur Palmer

1936 *Folk Songs of Mississippi*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

- Jackson, George Pullen
1965[1933] *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*. N.Y.: Dover. Orig. Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 1933.
- Lomax, John and Alan
1936 *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*. N.Y.: Macmillan.
- Morris, Alton C.
1950 *Folksongs of Florida*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Ramsey, Frederic, Jr.
1960 *Been Here and Gone*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Seeger, Charles
1951 Review of Byron Arnold, *Folksongs of Alabama*. Music Library Association Notes.
8:523-25.
- Sharp, Cecil J. and Maud Karpeles
1932 *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. London: Oxford University
Press.
- Wilgus, D. K.
1982[1959] *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*. Westport, Connecticut:
Greenwood Press.