

## TRACK LIST

- 1) *"This World Is Not My Home (I'm Just Passing Thru)"* Written by Albert Brumley © Arr. Copyright 1936. Renewed 1964 by Albert E. Brumley & Sons/SESAC (admin. By ICG). All rights reserved. Used by permission. Sung by the Thomas Sisters, recorded by Steve Grauberger at Chapel United Methodist Church, Eclectic, AL, 1-28-2001. 1:18
- 2) *"Getting Ready to Leave this World,"* by Luther Presley ©1937 Stamps-Baxter (BMI) (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All Rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at St. Joseph Baptist Church, Prichard AL, 10-14-1995, Led by West Alabama Union Choir. 3:48
- 3) *"Heaven's Jubilee,"* by G T Speer ©1939. Ben Speer Music/SESAC (admin). All rights reserved. Used by permission. By ICG Recorded by Steve Grauberger 1-28-2001 at Chapel United Methodist Church, Eclectic, AL. Central Union Convention. 4:05
- 4) *"Just a Little Talk With Jesus,"* by Cleavant Derricks © 1937 Stamps-Baxter Music (BMI) (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger 10-17-1998 Sweetwater Baptist Church, Santuck AL. Central Union Singing Convention. 5:05
- 5) *"Jesus is the Only One,"* by James Noble © 1964 Convention Music Company. Used by permission. Recorded by Joe Dan Boyd, at WOZK radio station in Ozark, AL, 4-20-1969. Wiregrass Singers radio broadcast. Led by Dewey P. Williams. 2:07
- 6) *"Welcome,"* by Denise Thompson. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Chapel United Methodist Church, Eclectic AL, 1-23-2000. 0:53
- 7) *"I Am Leaving Here,"* by Phillip D. Garrison, Preston Hood © 1978 James D Vaughn. (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All Rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger on 1-23-2000 Chapel United Methodist, Eclectic AL. Central Union Convention. 3:31

- 8) *"A Brief History of the Central Union Singing Convention,"* by Denise Thompson. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Chapel United Methodist Church, Eclectic AL, 1-23-2000. Central Union Convention. 3:28
- 9) *"Each Moment of Time,"* by J. R. Baxter, Jr. © 1960 Stamps-Baxter (BMI) (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc. All Rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Chapel United Methodist, Eclectic AL, 1-23-2000. Central Union. 6:32
- 10) *"Victory in Jesus,"* by E. M Bartlett. ©1939, renewed 1967 by Mrs. E.M. Bartlett. Assigned to Albert E. Brumley & Sons/SESAC (admin. By ICG). All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Pleasant Valley Missionary Baptist Church, Coffee Springs, AL, 10-13-2001. Alabama Seven Shape State Convention. 3:27
- 11) *"Lord, Give Me Just a Little More Time,"* by Albert Brumley © 1958 Stamps-Baxter Music (BMI) (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Doris Dyen 1972, Rutledge Alabama. 3:26
- 12) *"Somebody Loves Me,"* by W. F. and Majorie Crumley owned by Crumley and Menson © 1940. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at the South Alabama Singing Convention Hall, Greenville, Butler County, Alabama 9-29-2001. South Alabama Singing Convention. 3:51
- 13) *"Camping in Canaan's Land,"* by Mrs. E.M. Bartlett. Assigned to Albert E. Brumley & Sons/SESAC (admin. By ICG). All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Bethel Baptist Church Tuscaloosa, AL, 3-31-2002. Alabama-Mississippi Singing Convention 4:57
- 14) *"Where the Soul of Man Never Dies,"* by William M. Golden, © 1992. Welcome Home Press/BMI (admin. By ICG). All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Mt. Sinai Baptist Church in Newville, AL, 12-9-1995. Alabama Seven Shape State Convention 3:10
- 15) *" Better Get Ready,"* by Clyde W White © 1978 Stamps-Baxter Music (BMI) (administered

*by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Mt. Sinai Baptist Church in Newville, AL, 12-9-1995. Alabama Seven Shape State Convention. 3:18*

*16) "I Never Shall Forget the Day," by G. T. Speer ©1937. Renewed 1965 Ben Speer Music/SESAC (admin. By ICG). All rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at St. Joseph Baptist Church, Prichard, AL, 10-14-1995. West Alabama Union Choir. 5:28*

*17) Bernice Harvey speech advocating for continuance. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Pleasant Valley Missionary Baptist Church, Coffee Springs, AL, 10-13-2001. 0:53*

*18) "Farther Along," by W. B. Stevens and J.R. Baxter, Jr. ©1937 Stamps-Baxter (BMI) (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All Rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at Pleasant Valley Missionary Baptist Church, Coffee Springs, AL, 10-13-2001. Alabama Seven Shape State Convention. 5:32*

*19) "Shouting On The Hill," by Leroy Carver © 1982 J. D. Vaughan. (administered by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.) All Rights reserved. Used by permission. Recorded by Steve Grauberger at St. Joseph Baptist Church, Prichard, AL, 10-14-1995. South Wayne County Mississippi and Alabama Vocal Choir. 6:01*

Elston Driver Leads a Group of West Alabama Singers at the All State Convention, Prichard, AL 1995



photo by steve grauberger

“Shapenote methodology began in America with 1801 publication of William Little and William Smith’s *Easy Instructor*”

The tradition of African American “shapenote” singing in Alabama is ostensibly rooted in early British singing school practices that were transferred to New England colonies in the 1700s during the era of England’s Great Awakening which first embraced congregational hymn singing in church services. Singing schools and singing societies became an important element of America’s burgeoning musical education. In a singing school students are taught to read and sing music from the printed page. They are also taught to sing each particular sound in a musical scale using syllables, called solfege, solfeggio, or solmization. Early English practice adopted the syllables *fa sol la fa sol la mi fa* to sing a complete octave of a major scale. Note that only four syllables are used. Later, the more recognizable *do re mi fa sol la ti do* solmization became the norm.

Shapenote methodology began in America with the 1801 publication of William Little and William Smith’s *Easy Instructor*, using the four syllable system that was standard for the time. Four geometrically shaped note heads were developed to symbolize each of the four syllables used; a triangle for *fa*, a circle for *sol*, a rectangle for *la* and a diamond for *mi*. These new shaped notes were used on the same five lined staff in conjunction with other notation elements, such as clefs, measures, time and key signatures. This shaped note-head method made it much easier for a student to quickly learn to read and understand simple music theory.

Coinciding with the Second Great Awakening, beginning around 1800, singing schools using shapenote methodology had, by 1813, spread to three areas: Virginia; Cincinnati to St. Louis; and further south to South Carolina and Georgia. The primary transmitters of the music were itinerant singing-school masters who taught the four shapenote system. Singing-school masters came into a community for a week, or even months, to teach a school and sell tune books to their students for additional remuneration. Ideally, at the end of the singing school there would be an all day singing in the community. This type of dissemination allowed for expansion of the musical art, by embedding a system of grass roots singing conventions into the fabric of southern culture. In rural agricultural areas, schools and





conventions often occurred at the end of summer or in the fall after the crops were harvested, when there was time to relax.

In the North, devotees of the “better school” movement supplanted the four syllable *fa sol la* system with *do re mi* solmization and roundhead music notation, basically ending shapenote practice, a form considered crude by those in the movement.

Although abandoned in the North, there were still many staunch supporters of shapenote singing in the South. Because of its popularity and the importance of shapenotes as a learning tool, a conversion to seven shape notation gained momentum, promoted by progressive music educators and certain book compilers and publishers. Thus, more note-head shapes were needed to attach to three additional syllables. At least seven different types of shape-head alternatives competed. The first seven-syllable shapenote book published was the *Christian Minstrel* by Jesse Aiken in 1846. His “patent” seven note-head system won the standard but did not gain popularity until the later part of the nineteenth century.

William Walker’s *Christian Harmony*, using Aiken’s seven-shape system, published in 1866, was also a popular tunebook. A revision of this book, printed in Alabama, and still in use today, is an important part of the state’s musical heritage.

Added popularization of the seven shape system occurred when the Reubusch-Kieffer Company in Dayton, Virginia began printing, in 1874, newly composed books of music based on the Aiken system. According to music scholar Charles Wolfe,

**“The newer songbooks were designed not so much for formal church service, but for special singings and for ‘singing conventions’ in which many of the singers in a county-wide area might gather to try their hand at sight reading the songs in the new books. In some areas, competitions were held to see who could sight sing or direct songs they had never seen before.”**

**In addition to learning the skills of sight singing, devotees of this music have been, since the beginning, the primary authors of most songs written for these publications. This is the type of music featured on this CD, defined here as a genre of Southern Gospel music.**

**Originally associated with the Reubusch-Kieffer Company, Anthony Johnson Showalter, publisher and composer of “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” founded a gospel music publishing house that by 1904 had exceeded in the sales of two million gospel songs and hymn collections. He established the Southern Normal Conservatory in 1885 to “educate more teachers and composers of gospel songs than all other southern schools of this nature combined.” (New Groves Dictionary of Music)**

**Seven shapenote singing most likely came into the African American communities about the same time as it did in the white communities due to popularization of the genre by A. J. Showalter, James Vaughan, V. O. Stamps and J. R. Baxter. In 1883, James D. Vaughan was a student at the Ruebush Kieffer Normal School where he learned to sing seven shapenote music. He eventually moved to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, and opened the James D. Vaughan Publishing Company in 1902. Vaughan established a traveling quartet to demonstrate and promote his annual convention songbooks. In 1910 his all-male Southern Gospel Quartet helped to double sales of his songbooks to 60,000. By 1912, 85,000 books were sold. Books could be ordered directly by mail from the publisher. Charles Wolfe writes,**

**“The first gospel quartets were hired not as an end in themselves, but to popularize new songs from new songbooks, and to sell these songbooks to rural singers and churches throughout the South.... The center for performance remained the local church or county singing convention, not the urban media center; the gospel songwriters often remained in their own small communities and mailed in to the publishing company their compositions for editing and eventual publication. Thus the music remained largely decentralized with much closer ties to the community and local culture. And while some of the publishing giants like Stamps-Baxter, themselves eventually located in Dallas, many smaller publishing companies remained in relatively small towns like Lawrenceburg, Tennessee (Vaughan), Hartford, Arkansas (Hartford), Hudson, North Carolina (Teachers), and Dayton, Tennessee (R.E. Winsett).”**

The basic makeup of a “new book” is 75% new music and 25% songs from older repertoires, such as “Amazing Grace” and other well-known favorites. In addition, Ruebush-Kieffer, Showalter, Vaughan and other publishers, in their continued efforts to educate new singers, issued additional “little book” publications, usually called “Rudiments of Music.” The Vaughan School of Music, formed in 1911, taught people to sing and to write their own music, as did



Ruebush-Kieffer and Showalter before. Vaughan founded WOAN, the first radio station in Tennessee that broadcast southern gospel music, starting in 1922. One might contrast this era of Southern Gospel music to the “modern” youthful and upbeat lure of today’s contemporary gospel.

Seven-shape singing conventions, regularly called “classes” as they were in singing schools, utilize a ritualized, democratic procedure, employing a form of Robert’s Rules, developed from older four shape organizations, like that of Sacred Harp. Conventions rely upon a strong democratic base where all that sing, or feel in some way connected, vote on every aspect of the *class’* business.

“In African American conventions, for instance, there might be Missionary and Primitive Baptists, AMEs, CMEs, as well as Holiness and other Pentecostal denominations.”

Social integration of various Christian denominations is part of the multifaceted social structure of the shapenote “class” tradition in Alabama (and in general). One important aspect of this popular form of folk hymnody is that singing members may come from any Christian denomination. In African American conventions, for instance, there might be Missionary and Primitive Baptists, AMEs, CMEs, as well as Holiness and other Pentecostal denominations.

While most of the singing events held in churches are considered secular, the singing of joyful religious praise is a primary function. Originally, singing classes were often allowed the use of a church on “off days.” Off days consist of Sundays where the preacher or elder does not give a service. Rural preachers used to maintain a circuit of churches. A second or third Sunday might be unscheduled but consistently, the 5th Sunday of a month, happening four to five times during a calendar year, was usually clear for use. Shapenote singings also could be held after a church service or Sunday school. Principal annual conventions, representing adjoining classes in a surrounding region, typically lasted two or three days. People, in the past, arrived by foot or on horse and wagon. Members of the host church, many times, put up songsters overnight and supplied food to them and their animals.



“Early in the twentieth century, individual church choirs, large singing families and community singing groups became adept at singing seven shape music.”

The Alabama seven shapenote selections presented on this CD represent most African American singing groups in Alabama that keep this particular style of southern gospel music alive. Included in this recording are songs and verbal excerpts from five separate regional conventions: the Central Union Singing Convention (1911), the Southeast Alabama Seven Shape State Singing Convention in the Wiregrass area (1935); the South Alabama Singing Convention (1919) in (mainly) Crenshaw and Butler Counties (south central); three conventions located in west Alabama, the Alabama-Mississippi Singing Convention (1887), the Davis Creek-New Grove-Cannan East Union (1923), and the West Alabama Union Singing Convention (1917); and furthest south, the South Wayne County Mississippi and Alabama Vocal Singing Convention (1921) in the Mobile area. The West Alabama and Mobile area conventions are affiliated in a larger alliance organization called the All State Singing Convention (1967). During the annual meeting in 1995 it included classes from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan and Ohio.

There are undoubtedly other organizations interspersed throughout Alabama where African American populations continue to sing seven shape gospel in limited numbers; but they are not documented in this release. Known conventions are: the East Alabama District Union Singing Convention in the Chambers and Lee Counties near Roanoke Alabama; the Vocal Choir Convention in Choctaw and Washington Counties; and the Florida-Alabama Progressive Seven Shapenote Singing Convention, documented on the 1980 LP release “Drop Down in Florida” from Crestview, Florida. The majority of research done on the Wiregrass and Central Union conventions outweighs that of the other conventions; consequently, there are more musical examples from those conventions.

There is a much larger organization of historically white seven shapenote singers represented through the Alabama State Gospel Music Convention. A subsequent CD in this series will document this tradition. Although there is a history of racial separation between the white and black conventions, both conventions now warmly welcome the other. In an eventful meeting in

2001, at the annual Alabama State Gospel Music Convention in Hamilton, AL, a group of black singers from west Alabama visited this convention for the first time. As a group, they led “Heaven’s Jubilee” and “Lord, Give Me Just a Little More Time” to a receptive crowd.

“Early in the 20th century, individual church choirs, large singing families and community singing groups became adept at singing seven shape music.”

According to the individual documentation of various conventions, the earliest seven shapenote singing among African Americans was the Alabama-Mississippi Singing Convention (Lowndes County in MS, Pickens and Tuscaloosa Counties in AL) Its date of inception is 1887. There is a possibility that this began as a seven shape *Christian Harmony* convention and has come to be believed that it always was of the seven shape genre. Not documented specifically on this CD is the East Alabama Union Singing

Convention from Chambers and Lee Counties in Alabama and adjoining Georgia counties, Troup and Heard. (Some of their members sing with the Central Union convention on this recording.) At Abbottsford, Georgia, in 1979, the East Alabama Union had its 89th anniversary. Members interviewed remember it as always being a

photo by steve grauberger



All State Singing Convention Prichard AL 1995

seven shape convention, from its creation in 1890. This district convention originally had fourteen classes in the organization, but now has only five.

Near the same period of origin as the Alabama-Mississippi and the East Alabama Union conventions, the Calvary Sacred Harp Singing Convention (Tallapoosa, Chambers, and Lee Counties), in east central Alabama, organized in 1891. The Calvary convention sings from the *Sacred Harp*, Denson Edition. The best-documented group of African American four shape songsters is from the Wiregrass area of Southeastern Alabama and sing from the *Sacred Harp*, Cooper Edition. The earliest known Wiregrass shapenote organization began in Henry County in 1880, and in Dale County in 1890. The Alabama-Florida Union Sacred Harp Singing Convention was founded in 1922. It is in this Wiregrass area where many African Americans read both four and seven shape notation, although some read just one or the other. There also exists the Black Sacred Harp State Convention in Mississippi, established in 1934. In this annual event, seven shape “year-books” are used on Saturday night and the *Sacred Harp*, Denson Revision on Sunday. Apparently the Mississippi Black Sacred Harp convention never had any past association with Calvary or the Alabama-Florida Union conventions. Likewise, there was no historic connection between the latter two.

In recent years, the Central Union seven shape convention (1911) welcomed the Calvary Sacred Harp singers at its annual convention. During this event the Calvary group sings from the *Sacred Harp*. This is reciprocated when members of Central Union attend Calvary events and sing from their seven shape repertory. The Black Sacred Harp State Singing Convention in Mississippi appears to have been originally a Sacred Harp singing. Now, as mentioned above, it has both seven shape and Sacred Harp components.

There is also an interesting manifestation concerning the use of seven note solmization by Alabama-Mississippi songsters. When singers in the Black Sacred Harp State Singing Convention sing out of their four shape book they use the *do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti* solfege instead of the customary *fa-sol-la-mi*. Further, Joe Dan Boyd documented this same manner of treatment in a historically white Sacred Harp convention, in August 1970, at Stewart’s Chapel in Houston, Mississippi. Black shapenote scholar Chiquita Willis-Walls writes:

“The Black Sacred Harp State Singing Convention uses the do re mi fa sol la ti scale, whereas in other states, the fa sol la fa sol la mi scale is used. The fact that the black

photo courtesy of H. J. Jackson



Early Seven Shapenote Singing  
Class in the Wiregrass Area

**Sacred Harp singers of Mississippi transpose the four note scale to seven notes as they sing is a result of their decision to use B.F. White's four note Sacred Harp songbook published in 1844 with the rudiments outlined in William Walker's seven note Christian Harmony songbook published in 1866. The consequences of this adapted singing style has made the Black Sacred Harp State Singing Convention one of the most outstanding and exceptional within the shapenote genre. "**

**While there is an inherent link between four shape and the seven shape conventions discussed here, precise history linking a transition is unclear. The "new book" conventions heard on this CD came into being between the years 1887 to 1935. This period corresponds closely to the years of increas-**



ing convention book sales by Showalter, and later, by James D. Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter publishing companies, that promoted convention books with popular touring quartets and radio broadcasts by Vaughan.

Early in the twentieth century, individual church choirs, large singing families and community singing groups became adept at singing seven shape music. Many probably learned to read music using “Rudiments of Music” ordered by mail from “new book” publishers like Showalter and Vaughan. These small community and family groups joined together to make up an expanding web of singers and homegrown singing-school teachers. Local groups banded together, often in choirs or classes based in individual churches. Thirty or more separate classes (or choirs) might be associated in a regional or county convention. The larger regional convention, made up of the multiple local organizations, often set up a system of certification to license teachers to teach community singing schools. A board of knowledgeable elders would test the licensee for competence in the rudiments of music. This, again, mirrors a similar custom from four shape convention practice.

Regional conventions presented here are the sum and substance of those historic affiliations that developed from 1887 to 1935. There are various reasons the separate regional organizations did not themselves combine; but, above all, geographical distance and the lack of available transportation was a determining factor. Communication between these larger groups did not exist until recently in some cases. While there are efforts to bring disparate organizations together, distance and transportation are still issues, this combined with the advanced ages of the singers.

The All State Convention, founded in 1967, featured on tracks 2, 16 and 19 of this CD, attempted to bring all regional African American conventions together, but was not wholly able to accomplish the task. As mentioned previously, the Alabama-Mississippi and the Mobile area conventions belong to the All State. The only recorded performance representing the Mobile area convention was captured during the 28<sup>th</sup> annual All State Convention in 1995.

It was common, circa, 1920-50s, for African American church choirs in the note-singing areas of Alabama to sing hymns from seven shape songbooks in regular choir practices and in church services. One can imagine the large number of singers attending regional conventions who were skilled at sight reading music during this flourishing era of “southern gospel.”

photo by steve grauberger



L. E. Burnette, H. J. Jackson and Barney Roberson

At shapenote singings during this heyday period, churches were filled to overflowing with singers and listeners. At larger conventions, entrepreneurs, set up outside the church, offering Coca-Cola, ice cream, and candy for sale. Singing conventions created rare occasions for rural youth to socialize outside their local communities; thus events dispersed throughout the year became greatly anticipated treats for singers and non-singers alike. It also created opportunities for some to partake in socially unacceptable behavior. Thus the old saying, quoted in *Stars Fell on Alabama*: “Sacred Harp singing; Dinner on the grounds; The whisky is in the woods; And the Devil’s all around,” might also have applied to certain seven shape singings. Convention officials never allowed men to lead a song with whisky on their breath if they could help it; although, there are stories that have certain “spirited”

leaders achieving their best song leading fueled by more than just religion.

One mainstay of older Sacred Harp conventions carried into the seven shape tradition is, as mentioned above, “dinner on the grounds.” Next to singing and socializing, “dinner on the grounds” is an important aspect of the occasion. Women prove their culinary skills with special dishes spread out on long tables or set over blankets on the ground prepared for the mutual enjoyment of singers and non-singers alike. H. J. Jackson of Ozark remembers his mother filling a steamer trunk full of food for these events.

“Ideally, *yearbook* convention leaders ordered new books each year to replace the previous ones.”

The use of seven shape notation in Christian hymn and tune books in Alabama was at one time widespread. One could find shapenote hymnals in Church of Christ, Methodist, Baptist and other Christian denominations. Some individual churches still use shapenote hymnals. As mentioned before, “new book” publications were primarily for singing conventions and all competing book companies published a book at least once a year, sometimes twice a year. Ideally, *yearbook* convention leaders ordered new books each year to replace the previous ones. The volume of books bought still brings discount pricing from the publishers. This tradition is carried on in the historically white conventions. Typically, a class is supplied books by sponsors or from class revenues. In black conventions, a person delegated to buy for the greater group distributes convention books each year to individuals at cost. For the organizations documented on this recording, the book replacement process changed somewhat as conventions began losing membership through attrition and elderly songsters’ loss of visual acuity limited their sight-reading skills. However, when the tradition of yearly acquisition was in full bloom in black communities, a new book, when at first secured, was quickly perused cover to cover to recognize the best songs.

In an interview with Bernice Harvey of Ozark, daughter of National Heritage Fellowship winner Dewey Williams, she describes a story similar to that heard in the history given by Denise Thompson of the Central Union (heard on track 8) and that of Chiquita Willis-Walls’ description below. Once a “new book” arrived, Mr. Williams would immediately visit other songsters in his community to try it out, singing each song to find the best ones to lead. He would always

take Bernice along to sing her alto part. Dewey Williams is heard leading one of his all time favorites, "Lord, Give Me Just a Little More Time" on track 11.

It is not known exactly which publishers' books were first used in each class covered here. However, it appears that both Vaughan and Stamps-Baxter books were principal favorites. Individual conventions could choose whichever they wished but would often conform to the books picked by the larger conventions. Each separate regional convention has its own specific collection of songbooks. Given the early date of 1890 for the East Alabama Union, books would have possibly been either Reubusch-Kieffer or Showalter publications. In addition to the favored Stamps-Baxter and Vaughan books, Wiregrass area singers also bought books published in 1963 through 1969, from the short-lived Convention Music Company of Montgomery. The late James Noble of Troy was an avid songwriter who published four songs for Stamps Baxter and two songs for the Convention Music Company. One from the latter is "Jesus is the One," heard on track 5.

Once the conventions began losing singers through death and were unable to pick up new initiates, the retention of older books began to surpass the acquisition of new books. The addition of new publications has virtually ceased, mainly due to the age and poor vision of the members. In the past seven years three new books were added to the collection of the Wiregrass area convention. A similar situation occurs in the other organizations featured here.

In the past, the majority of songs sung were newly composed. Barney Roberson and others in the Pike County class attempt to have practice sessions once a week. The Central Union officials attempt to mandate class practice at least once a month. It is at practice sessions where new songs are tried out. In west Alabama there is also an effort to keep up-to-date by learning new songs whenever possible. However, there are physical limits as described before.

Once the tradition of obtaining new books each year decreased and more and more of the older books remained in the singings, there developed a problem of having too many books. At some events one may view songsters hauling one or even two suitcases full of songbooks. Extra chairs are set in front of singers to prop up the suitcases for easy access. Sometimes, older songs are photocopied just in case people do not bring the correct book.

Officials in regional conventions have attempted to limit the number of books used, especially during the main two or three day annual events. At the All State



Convention in 1995, eight books were to be the limit. During the event, a lengthy dispute ensued when certain singers wanted to sing from an older book that no one else had. In the past, when the memberships were strong, limits and rules were strictly enforced. Now, however, the attitude is not to alienate people because so few singers are left. The Southeast Alabama State convention tried to limit the number of books up to 1998, but this was never strictly enforced.

All conventions documented on this CD use song anthologies that contain many favorite songs found in the older books. The west Alabama conventions use *Mull's Singing Convention* No. 5 book edited by J. Bazzel Mull, P.O. Box 36, Knoxville, TN 37901. The Wiregrass area classes use Stamps-Baxter publications *Heavenly Highways Hymns* and the, out of print, *Convention Classics*. The Central Union uses the *Church Hymnal* and *Heavenly Highways Hymns*. Many songs are led from these anthologies, which makes for a smoother transition between leaders.

Most songs sung during events are tried-and-true favorites, as this CD production illustrates. Due to their delimiting repertory, leaders often choose songs with lyrics that contain particular meaning for themselves in their lives. Songs requested by listeners are chosen because it is their own or a loved one's favorite. Meaningful song lyrics combined with familiar melodies spark deeply felt emotional responses for singers and listeners alike, sometimes to a point where some act upon these feelings by shouting, screaming or wailing. This type of turbulent response does not happen often but when it does it shows the intensity that some experience through of the music. In the song "Better Get Ready," heard on track 15, Gertie Brown clearly has a special feeling and connection to the lyrics. Her distinctive voice carries above the others'.

“On a printed page of seven shapenote music there are two connected staves for each line of music. This is known as the *grand staff*.”

On a printed page of seven shapenote music there are two connected staves for each line of music. This is known as the *grand staff*. The soprano (melody) and alto lines are placed on the top staff with the treble or G clef. The tenor and bass lines are on the lower staff with the bass or F clef. The music is arranged in this common (SATB) format and looks similar to a piano arrangement. In four-shapenote *Sacred Harp* notation the physical arrangement of the printed music is a little different, showing four separate staves, one for each vocal part in the order of, treble, alto, tenor (melody), bass. The physical arrangement of the clefs for each staff may vary depending upon the song.

In seven shapenote singing, both men and women sing the soprano part. This vocal part usually features a greater number of singers. Bass singers are virtually always men and altos are always women. The tenor part may be sung by both men and women and is usually the least populated vocal section.

Practically all songs in the repertory have a homophonic texture, meaning a single melodic line of the soprano part is accompanied by supporting chordal harmonies of the other voice parts. Most music is in a major mode or key using fairly basic harmonic structure of I-IV-V7 chords, i.e. C-F-G7. This is not exclusive to all the repertory as more complex musical elements do exist in certain songs. For instance, relative minor chords are used in some songs and other musical elements, like modulation (key change), and time signature changes, exist as well. Minor mode song composition is rare. Song form is normally a verse/chorus or verse/refrain configuration. Many songs use a coda or D.S. al Fine to end the refrain or chorus. Second endings are not too common. Music of the chorus is often different than that of the verse, although melodic phrases from the verse may be repeated in the chorus. The common use of the coda and D.S. al Fine corroborates this. The majority of the repertory is in 4/4 time, although 3/4 and

complex triple meters also exist. Use of modulation is rare. There is quite a bit of secondary dominance (i.e. C-F-G7-D7) namely, raised 4ths in a melody with a cadence on the II7. Rhythmic syncopation is very common and is enhanced by the use of imitation and antiphony; in other words, varied call and response patterns between the vocal parts are intertwined in the music. Imitation is a contrapuntal practice in which a musical phrase is repeated by different voices one after the other. Rhythmic motives or short repeating rhythmic elements are common using various combinations of sixteenth, eighth, quarter, or half notes. Tied and dotted note patterns help develop syncopation in the music. Whole notes and tied half-notes occur for sustained harmony between measures for an enhanced choral effect. On the whole, there is little distinction in the dynamics, or the loudness and softness of the music as it is performed. Sometimes there is an effort to sing a whole verse softly as a contrast. Nearly all songs are sung at full volume; although most songs tend to have a natural dynamic climax toward the end of a song when the spirit of a song reaches its emotional peak. The music typically moves quickly, as most songs are traditionally “upbeat” and lively. However, African American seven shape singers tend to slow the tempo down quite a bit at times, sometimes to the point that an eighth note gets the apportionment of a quarter note as a separate beat.

“Traditionally, singers sit in a hollow square patterned on the older Sacred Harp tradition.”

Traditionally, singers sit in a *hollow square* patterned on the older Sacred Harp tradition. Not all black seven shape conventions still do this. Only the Central Union and Alabama State (Wiregrass) still follow the hollow square seating arrangement. While officers of the other conventions sometimes try to persuade the singers to sit in the hollow square configuration, their requests usually go unheeded. This is similar to white seven shape conventions in Alabama that typically do not use the hollow square format.

For the two regional conventions that do use the hollow square there is a difference in the configuration of the parts around the square. The Central Union Convention sits (clockwise) soprano (melody), bass, tenor, and alto, thus, soprano faces tenor and alto faces the bass. The Southeast Alabama State Convention sits soprano, bass, alto, tenor; accordingly, the soprano faces the alto and tenor faces the bass. The latter shows basically the same configuration as the Sacred Harp hollow square configuration with tenors (melody), facing the altos and treble (upper harmony part) facing the bass.

“While much of seven shape repertory is typically syncopated, black seven shape singers spontaneously add counter beats, hand claps and slaps, foot stomps and vocal shouts to accentuate the rhythm to raise the spirit of the music.”

An interesting feature distinguishing African American singing, in this and other musical genres, is vocal style and presentation. The emotion and expressiveness of the melodic line and individual singer's stylized vocal renderings make for a more heterogeneous sound. In other words, idiosyncrasies heard in an individual's voice allow one to easily recognize that singer within the group. Thus every particular class is easily distinguishable by the vocal characteristics of individuals in it. While much of seven shape repertory is typically syncopated, black seven shape singers spontaneously add counter beats, hand claps and slaps, foot stomps and vocal shouts to accentuate the rhythm to raise the spirit of the music. The beat is often accentuated with the foot tapping and vocal punctuation. Each beat in a measure is often a strong one because of the slower tempos used. When hand clapping does occur it is often accentuated on beats 2 and 4 in common 4/4 time, similar to black gospel singing in general.

In certain songs, usually depending upon the intimation of the leader, the vocal presentation becomes more punctuated and staccato, with a strong attack and lesser-sustained decay after each strong beat creating a clear articulation of the rhythm. This style is colloquially referred to as *stoptime*.



In general, phrase endings and cadences are often drawn out in a melismatic flourish. Some singers have the ability to improvise added harmonies and melodic ornaments to enhance the overall feeling of the music. Since many songs tend to be sung slowly this allows for extended melodic embellishment. Even with the slower rhythms one is still struck by the overall vitality and pulse of the music. Added to the mix at times are singers, not wholly adept at sight-reading, who combine harmonies and embellishments not in the written music.

**“Skillful leaders have the ability to increase the spirit and emotional fervor of the class.”**

There was a time in the past when singers patiently waited hours for their turn to lead a song. The effect of being inside the hollow square surrounded by hundreds of voices made the wait worthwhile for the songster. When a person had just one chance during the day to do this it was important to get it right. Skillful leaders have the ability to increase the spirit and emotional fervor of the class. This was true in the past and is in the present, even though the crowds are not as large.

When leading, one is required to sing the soprano or melody line (top line of the staff) even if he/she normally sings another part. The leader in a hollow square configuration faces those who sing the soprano part. Hand actions used by the song leaders are based upon a style common to modern music conducting. In 4/4 time, the hand-arm motion



photo by steve graubergier

Charlie Brown Leading A Song

drops down on beat 1 (down beat), then side to side on beats 2 and 3 and up on the 4<sup>th</sup>. In 3/4 time the hand drops down, then across once, then up. This differs from traditional Sacred Harp conducting where the hand moves up and down only, not side to side.

*“Walking the Floor* is a tradition found in African American shapenote singings.”

Leading a song is in itself a traditional art. Good leaders develop a reputation for their style and ability to raise the spirit of the singers during a song. An interesting behavior related to a distinctive leading style is *walking time* or *walking the floor* during a song. *Walking the floor* is a tradition found in African American shapenote singings. It is an “antique” practice known to black and white *Sacred Harp* songsters alike. Walking the floor is an important identifying element of an adroit leader. By walking the floor and demonstrating awareness of a song’s musical subtleties and meaningful lyrics, a skillful leader points or cues each specific vocal part around the square to bring out the salient parts. A talented leader always brings applause and emotional response from singers and listeners who are deeply moved by the experience.

“Singing the *notes* or *just the words* depends upon the preference of each individual leader.”

Seven shape traditionalists in black conventions always lead with the do-re-mi solfege sung before the words unless there are time limitations. Singing the *notes* or *just the words* depends upon the preference of each individual leader. On track 14, “Where the Soul of Man Never Dies,” you can hear Steve Eiland ask convention president Barney Roberson if he should lead the notes and is told to do as he chooses. After announcing the book and page number, all songs start with the sound of the *keyer* giving an initial pitch. The person that *keys* the song is given the responsibility to approxi-

mate the range of the music so as not to make it too high for the tenors and sopranos or too low for the altos and basses. Pitching the music is an important function of the music. When someone does not do this correctly, it makes for a difficult start. Once given the pitch the singers intone the first note of their particular vocal part in the song. In the west Alabama conventions it is common for the pitch to be sung once for the first note of the song and then again for the singers to recognize the second note in the song's sequence.

No one keying songs in any of these conventions used a pitch pipe or tuning fork during this study. The only departure from this practice is when a piano player accompanies the songsters. Examples of this, heard on track 15, occurred during the Southeast Alabama State conventions, and on track 5 "Jesus is the Only One," the historical recording of a radio broadcast by Joe Dan Boyd in 1969. Unlike historically white events where piano is always used, piano is not a requirement in African American conventions, and, for many, detracts from the singing experience. However, there is a long tradition of piano accompaniment in the Southeast Alabama Seven Shape State annual convention.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEPARATE CONVENTIONS

### CENTRAL UNION SINGING CONVENTION (1911)

The Central Union Convention dates itself, in printed programs, to 1911. At least 21 classes belonged to this convention at one time. Its annual singing is the 3rd Sunday and Saturday before in October. The annual was originally a three-day event; now it is just two with an evening session on Saturday that lasts until 9 PM. In addition to the annual two-day event there are the "annual days" that each class in the overarching Central Union is obligated to hold. Annual day classes are held after the host church's regular service or Sunday school. Although singing usually starts around noon, dinner is served between two song sessions. Originally each of the classes had an annual singing day; however, some classes are either too small or there are no members left to have a singing.

On track 8 of the recording, one can hear Denise Thomson give a heartfelt description of how an original group of singers gathered at different houses in “fireside singings and prayer meetings” prior to forming the Central Union Convention at the old log church called Chapel. She mentions the Thomases, the Browns and the Thompsons as some of those families important in the founding of Central Union. The Thomas Sisters, heard on track 1, have a close relationship to the organization. Their father and uncle were important in the organization’s creation. Charlie Brown, the president, is also a tradition bearer who learned this music through his family.

Officials presiding over this convention are Charlie Brown, President; Eddie Brown, Vice-President; Hubert Buckhannon, Superintendent; Lodella Roberts, Secretary. The Chaplain is Mrs Price. The Superintendent’s responsibility not found in other regional groups, is to preside over the “annual days” of individual classes that make up the Central Union.

#### CONVENTIONS IN WEST ALABAMA

Represented on this CD are three separate but reciprocally connected west Alabama conventions: the Alabama-Mississippi Singing Convention (circa 1887); the Davis Creek-New Grove-Canaan East Union Singing Convention (circa 1923) of Fayette, Marion, Tuscaloosa, and Walker Counties; and the West Alabama Union Singing Convention (circa 1917) of Fayette, Lamar and Marion Counties. Another west Alabama convention, the Northwest Alabama Singing Convention (circa 1932) of Marion County, mentioned by Chiquita Willis-Walls in her “Songs of Faith” CD project, is no longer active.

In recent years a few younger members, from related Mississippi groups and from west Alabama, have journeyed to southeast Alabama, to attend the annual convention in the Wiregrass area as a gesture of friendship. Included in this group was Ms. Willis-Walls, her husband Benny and Steve Eiland.

The West Alabama conventions have a slightly different arrangement of officials and procedure in song presentation. Willis-Walls writes:

“In the traditional convention setting the general manager, music director, or president calls each song leader to the front of the sanctuary to lead the congregation in song.



The singer gives the book and page before calling for a pitch. Sometimes the general manager/music director may help lead the song.... The general manager/music director's job is to keep the music flowing smoothly, as well as to make sure all singers have an opportunity to lead a song. In the choir setting, whole choirs ranging from four to fifty members stand in front of the congregation and perform one or two selections."

The music director is often the person who pitches the song. Reference to the term choir can be interchanged with "class", as it means the same thing.

More information on choirs associated with the Alabama-Mississippi conventions is available in work done by Willis-Walls in *The African American Shape Note & Vocal Music Convention Directory*; in *The West Harmony singing Convention 1993* tape recordings; and in *Songs of Faith: African American Shape Note singing from the Deep South*, volume 1, 1995 CD release and companion notes.

The annual singing date for the Alabama-Mississippi Singing Convention is the fourth weekend in September, Friday through Sunday. West Alabama Union Singing Convention's annual is the first weekend in September, Friday through Sunday. The Davis Creek-New Grove-Canaan East Union annual is the first weekend in October, Friday night through Sunday. Each, in addition, has annual days for each participation choir or class.

Shapenote practice similar to the Central Union community gatherings is mentioned in *Songs of Faith*:

"Singers didn't just learn shape note singing at church and in the institutes. Family and extended family social bonds were continually being reinforced when families would practice at home and with neighbors. It became customary to "sing from house to house" in the evenings and at night. Many singers recall getting new books and going over all the songs page by page "in just a few nights" or on rainy days when outside work wasn't possible. The students learned musical theory along with self-confidence, discipline, responsibility, and leadership skills. The

shape note tradition provided educational, social, and political training for its participants while reinforcing the spirit of community.”

Lizzie Pullom is the current president of the Alabama-Mississippi convention. E. B. Rice is Vice President, Exie McReynolds is General Manager, Robert Cork is Assistant General Manager, Edna Cork is Secretary, Linda Rice is Assistant Secretary, Atlanta Latham is Chaplain, Lovie Richardson is the Treasurer. Brother Noland is President of the Davis Creek Convention, Elston Driver is President of the West Alabama Union.

#### SOUTH ALABAMA SINGING CONVENTION

The South Alabama Singing Convention near Greenville in Butler County started in 1919. It is the only organization where an independent singing hall is used for scheduled singing events. In 1982, the Bedgood family gave two acres of land for the singing hall building to be erected. This large metal building is located about eight miles north of Greenville on Highway 10. At this time Deacon M. L. Lowery was President, Deacon Esau Bedgood Vice-President, and Gertrude Fails was the appointed Secretary of the Building Fund Committee. After completion of the building, there was an open house held March 24, 1985. Later a lunchroom was added to the building. The South Alabama Singing Convention recently lost its president L. E. Burnette, who was esteemed both as a singer and teacher. He was also an avid Sacred Harp singer and a valued member of the Southeast Alabama Seven-Shape State Singing Convention.

Regularly scheduled singings for the South Alabama group are every fifth Sunday. The last fifth Sunday, and the Saturday before, of each year is the annual session. After the death of L. E. Burnette, Fred Chambers of Greenville became the President. Verbie Holston is Secretary.

#### ALABAMA SEVEN-SHAPE STATE SINGING CONVENTION

Although this convention officially started in 1935, seven-shape singing classes connected to it began years before. A brief history produced by the convention shows that officials of the Dale County Convention, Friendship Union Convention (Coffee County), and the Shady Grove Convention (Coffee

County) met together in 1933 to start a regional State convention. Nearly every surrounding county in this Wiregrass area had singing organizations by that time. Henry, Dale, Pike, Coffee, and Houston counties all eventually combined into the Alabama Seven Shape State Convention. It has two main events, the annual, on the Saturday before the second Sunday in October, and the semi-annual that usually takes place before the second fifth Sunday in the calendar year. Barney Roberson is President, Brother Brooks is Vice-President, Bernice Harvey is Secretary and J. L. Williams is Treasurer. In Pike County, two organizations, the Southwestern Alabama Convention and the Pike convention merged to become the Pike County Singing Convention in 1920.

#### **SOUTH WAYNE COUNTY MISSISSIPPI AND ALABAMA VOCAL SINGING CONVENTION**

The South Wayne County, Mississippi and Alabama Vocal Singing Convention was established on February 25, 1921. The convention held its first anniversary at the Philadelphia Baptist Church, Buckatunna, MS. This church is known as the mother church. There were originally 31 choirs in the Convention; but now only five remain—St. Joseph Vocal Choir, St. James Vocal Choir, and Mt. Olive Number Two, all in Mobile, Alabama, and Mount Miriah Vocal Choir and Mount Olive Vocal Choir of State Line, both in Mississippi. The convention holds singings every fifth Sunday with the annual two day convention on the first fifth Sunday of each year.

Down through the years there have been eight presidents. The current President is Deacon Oliver L. Walley. Vice-President is Annie Mae Smith. The Recording Secretary is Ann Moore. Sister T. A. Hill was elected Financial Secretary in October 1944, and is still serving at the age of 94. Rosette Kirksey is Corresponding Secretary. The Treasurer is Deacon George Miller. Field Agent and Musical Director is Cleo D. Murphy.

“Unlike the remaining singers that carried on shapenote singing from their ‘fore-parents’, they themselves could not demand compliance of their children, as did their parents.”

Every singing group documented here has the same problem of discontinuance due to the lack of new members and the passing of elders. Today there are virtually no new singers to replace the old. H. J. Jackson thinks that conventions started to decline after WWII, even though there were still many strong singers into the 1960s. The existing generation of singers is from 70 to over 90 years old with few exceptions. Unfortunately the tradition was not passed to the following generation. Unlike the remaining singers that carried on shapenote singing from their “fore-parents,” they themselves could not demand compliance of their children, as did their parents. Children of the tradition bearers had more opportunity to stray and were less restricted due in part to a slow but steady upward economic mobility that made available added diversions to fill their time and attention. While current songsters realize the necessity of bringing in new and younger members for continuance, it is an enduring source of frustration for them. On track 17, Bernice Harvey makes a plea to the membership to bring in more members. She is, of course, preaching to the choir. Unfortunately, similar pleas are heard at almost every seven shape singing convention the author has attended, by singers and non-singers alike, who love the tradition and wish for its perpetuity.

There was a hope that several students taking part in singing schools in the 70’s would carry on the tradition in the Wiregrass area. This, unfortunately, did not happen.

In conclusion, one finds in this music a vibrant, expressive form that provides great meaning and enjoyment for the participants and is an important aspect of Alabama’s traditional soundscape