Georgia State University
Digital Archive @ GSU

Religious Studies Theses | Department of Religious Studies

8-7-2007

Death in Sacred Harp

Jessica Tilley

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/rs_theses

Recommended Citation
Tilley, Jessica, "Death in Sacred Harp" (2007). *Religious Studies Theses.* Paper 11.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at Digital Archive @ GSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Archive @ GSU. For more information, please contact digitalarchive@gsu.edu.

DEATH IN SACRED HARP

by

JESSICATILLEY

Under the direction of Kathryn McClymond

ABSTRACT

The extraordinary body of Sacred Harp music has been dubbed “the oldest continuously sung American music.” Steven Marini, scholar of sacred arts, proposes that the Sacred Harp community welcomes anyone into their singings, regardless of their religious beliefs. His analysis does not take into account the emphasis placed on conversion to Christianity that is demonstrated by the lyrics and the rituals of the Sacred Harp community, however. Religion is not “a matter of personal faith” to Sacred Harp singers as Marini suggests, but a matter of a very specific set of faith commitments. The implications of these commitments for Sacred Harp singers determine their eternal destiny. An investigation into the lyrics of *The Sacred Harp* hymnal reveals a preoccupation with death, always with intent to point toward the individual “religious” choice of eternal death or eternal life and the desire to share that knowledge with anyone who comes in contact with this remarkable phenomenon.

INDEX WORDS: Sacred Harp, religious studies, Steven Marini, musicology, American history, American religious history, ethnography, Southern American history

DEATH IN SACRED HARP

by

JESSICA TILLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2007

Copyright by

Jessica Tilley

2007

DEATH IN SACRED HARP

by

JESSICA TILLEY

Major Professor: Kathryn McClymond

Committee: Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr.

Christopher White

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction. 1

II. Convention in Henagar, Alabama. 3

III. History of Sacred Harp. 8

IV. Southern Migration. 13

V. "Deeply Spiritual Attitudes:" *Fellowship* Misconstrued. 16

VI. "Content of the Words:" Death in Sacred Harp Lyrics. 17

VII. "Rituals of the Hollow Square:" Memorial Lesson and Leading. 23

VIII. Conclusion. 29

Death in Sacred Harp

Sacred Harp has been lauded as the "oldest continuously sung American music."[1] As it is sung in traditional southern communities, Sacred Harp is as close to the earliest American musical form as one can currently find. George Pullen Jackson calls Sacred Harp music, "an organic body of American folksong." As such, the Sacred Harp community is the subject of inquiry from musicologists, ethnographers, sociologists, historians, and religious studies scholars. Jackson also notes that, as a "folk" movement Sacred Harp has been subject to significant scholarly misrepresentation.[2] It is an element of this misrepresentation I will consider here. In this thesis, I will specifically examine the prevalence of death in Sacred Harp lyrics, ritual, and attitudes of the singers. As I do this, I also will consider the work of one current scholar of sacred arts in America, Stephen Marini.

In the following pages, I will subtly complicate Marini's study by proposing that death-talk to instigate conversion has been and continues to be a crucial focus of the Sacred Harp community. I propose that an analysis of the lyrics, rituals, and attitudes of the singers themselves reveals multiple forms of "death-talk," an angle Marini does not consider thoroughly. I conclude that Marini consequently insufficiently constructs the Sacred Harp community. Though subtle, Marini's misrepresentation has broader implications on studies on Sacred Harp and, more significantly, on the broader academic study of religion.

---

[1] Hinton, Matt, Erica *Awake, My Soul* (Atlanta: Awake Productions, 2006).
[2] Bealle, John *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1997), 111.

The Sacred Harp community is, I will argue, intent on converting non-Christians. From the complex theology from which Sacred Harp derives, the community proposes two fairly straight-forward plans of action: Firstly, one must believe that the death of Jesus Christ was the single act that redeems all of humanity from sin and guarantees an eternity in paradise with God. Secondly, one must proclaim to others, out of concern for their eternal fate, that all who do not accept this will spend eternity in hell. Accompanying the extraordinary music and deeply rooted sense of history, then, is the desire that all who join in the community to sing will then be moved to fellowship—a state that requires conversion to Christianity. Death is significant primarily as a pivot that turns life to heaven or hell, and it holds, because of that instant, eternal significance.

Sacred Harp is, at first encounter, primarily sound. Marini states that Sacred Harp singing is "delivered . . .with extraordinary volume, range, and precision."[3] Sometimes the air is so dense with sound, he says, it is as the singers suggest: "You could cut it with a knife."[4] Marini describes Sacred Harp singing as a "piercing vocal tone without vibrato," with harmonies often sung, "slightly flat or sharp, lending an archaic modal sound to the ensemble."[5] Open-throated singing elevates the volume and the "dispersed harmony" produced creates a "unique synergy" that Marini likens to Whitman's "barbaric yawp of democratic song."[6] This combined with open fifths and three-note chords creates an overall aggressive drive, even on songs set at a slow pace. Marini exclaims, "they deliver all of this with a laser-like chest tone quality that could shatter

---

[3] Marini, Steven, *Sacred Song in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2003), 73.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

glass."[7] Though consideration of the sound produced is vital to any study of Sacred Harp, it is the motivations behind this extraordinary sound I would like to explore in this paper. Chief among these is the assertion that those who die "unsaved" (those who have not converted to Christianity) enter a torturous and eternal death and those who are "saved" enter a blissful and eternal life.

The thesis will 1) offer a description of a current-day Sacred Harp singing, 2) briefly sketch a history of Sacred Harp, 3) consider Stephen Marini's analysis of Sacred Harp, 4) explicate elements of death found in the lyrics of *The Sacred Harp*, and 5) consider elements of death found in rituals of Sacred Harp, especially activities of the Hollow Square which include the Memorial Lesson. Throughout, I will weigh the accounts of current singers along with scholarly analyses, constantly highlighting the conversionary priority of the community.

[*]Convention in Henagar, Alabama

I first attended a Sacred Harp singing on Sunday July 2, 2006. It was an all-day singing, the second day of the annual Henagar-Union Convention, a consistently well-attended Sacred Harp singing. My contact that day was Matt Hinton, a Sacred Harp singer who had completed a documentary on the community that same year.[8] I had heard about Sacred Harp just eight hours before I met Hinton to drive to the singing. Late the night before, I ran into a local music producer at a concert in east Atlanta who described this musical event he had attended earlier that day (he was referencing Sacred Harp but at

---

[7] Ibid.

[*] Asterisks suggest songs from *I Belong to This Band:Eighty-Five Years of Sacred Harp Recordings* (Dust-to-Digital Recording: Atlanta), 2006. Several songs on this recording were recorded at the Henagar-Union Convention July 2006 which I attended. Here, #23 *Ninety-Fifth 36B* is suggested.

[8] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul*.

the time couldn't remember what it was called). He described it as unlike anything he'd ever heard or seen. He described a square toward which everyone present sings. He gesticulated as he described the leader who would stand in that space and lead the rest of the singers by pumping their arm up and down. He finally gave up trying to explain, as if exhausted at the prospect, and said we "had to go" the next day, the second and final day of the convention. When I expressed interest in attending, he gave me Hinton's phone number. Hinton and I planned to meet at 7 the next morning.

On the three and a half hour drove to Henagar, Alabama, I received a colorful history lesson of Sacred Harp from Hinton, as well as a description of what was expected of me at the singing. I remember Hinton stressing above all that I was expected to sing as loudly as I could. He said, "they say, 'if you can hear your neighbor, you're not singing loud enough.'" He then suggested that until I got the hang of it, I sit next to a really loud singer. "Just don't be bashful," he encouraged. We pulled off a rural road up a gravel drive past a grassy lot full of cars, parked ours beside the graveyard, and walked up to the one-room church building about 35 by 60 feet. By 9:40, when we arrived, singing had just begun in the small un-air conditioned space. The sound as we entered was enveloping and, as Hinton had predicted, expressly loud. The one hundred sixty singers gathered in the small space produced a sound that vibrated the room. Singers sat in pews shoulder to shoulder, and some stood. A breeze made its way through open windows and the hand-held paper fans of the singers. The air smelled of sweet perfume, flowers, and warming grass from outside, and even that early in the day, of sweat. Women were dressed in casual dresses and men in pants and dress shirts. Some older women wore stockings and some older men wore ties. Jewelry and make-up were minimal. As the day

wore on, the temperature increased, and the men rolled up their button-up sleeves. Women fanned aggressively. Everyone at this singing was white (though this is not always the case). The singers were predominantly over fifty years old; around twelve singers looked under thirty. There were also four or five young children wandering between pews dressed in smaller versions of the adults' style clothes. The utilitarian cars parked outside in the grass suggested a lower middle class demographic.

The service structure was simple and centered around the signing. Likewise, the arrangement of the room centered around the person who was leading each song. Each singer had the opportunity to lead one song that day. Anyone who wished to lead had submitted his or her name to a designated leader at the beginning of that day's singing. This leader called one name after each song ended; the singer called then walked to the center of the room, to a small empty space about four by four feet called the Hollow Square. All singers sat in a configuration that allowed their voices to target that space in the center of the room. The singer called out the number of the song he or she wished to lead, set the pace by pulsing his or her arm in the air and all singers commenced singing. By the end of the day, most of the people present had led a song. The first time through each song, syllables *fa, sol, la,* or *me* were pronounced instead of the written lyrics. After one time through, the words were sung, and typically, all verses of the song. The leader led a song for three to five minutes. Only this leader had the chance to hear the song with all four to six part harmonies equally represented and meeting in the Hollow Square. The singing continued uninterrupted and grew in volume and intensity until noon when a young leader-for-the-day declared a break for dinner, stressing that everyone was welcome to share in the meal, whether they had brought something to contribute or not.

There was certainly no shortage of food. Long-time Sacred Harp singer Shelbie Sheppard, for instance, claims that she brings between fifteen and twenty dishes to each dinner.[9] Men and women procured dishes from coolers in the backs of vehicles and in less than ten minutes, casseroles, fresh vegetables, meat, and bread were laid out on long permanent concrete tables. One smaller table was filled with sweet tea and desserts. People stood to eat, at high tables, perfect for maneuvering conversations and return visits to the food tables. Conversation was generally jovial. Topics near me revolved around national politics (the elderly man who stood eating beside me had an American flag pin stuck in his ball cap), where I "was from" (the wife of the elderly man proclaimed: "Oh! We've got cousins in Atlanta!") and the food we were eating. Another couple near me discriminatorily nibbled one tomato slice then another slightly lighter-colored slice, conclusively determining thereby which tomato gardener was superior. Most people returned to the table for "seconds" and then for dessert. After an hour of this festive atmosphere, the food was repacked in coolers in the vehicles and singers moved back inside.

Hinton stood behind a small table he had set up under a tall pine tree during the meal, a respectful distance from the dessert table, selling copies of his documentary, "Awake, My Soul" for $20. Singers bought many. Several singers who were at the Henagar singing that day figured in the documentary and most present that day knew someone on it. A few people who had previously viewed it expressed gratitude to Matt for his work. Singing recommenced while we were repacking the discs, a little past 1 p.m.

---

[9] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul.*

After the first songs after dinner, a "Memorial Lesson" was delivered. The same man who declared it was time to break for dinner stood in the Hollow Square at this point and delivered the lesson, which was composed of a few brief comments about "those who have gone before," and an expression of gratitude for their Christian example. There were nods, inarticulate grunts, and *Amens* in affirmation. He then read the names of singers from several states who had passed away in the past year. In the five minutes it took for this Memorial Lesson, the mood of the room changed. Singing began again immediately afterward with songs typically in minor keys. Several who led from the Hollow Square after the Lesson began by dedicating their chosen song to one who had died. Some singers were visibly moved by the Lesson. There was an increase of foot-stomping, knee-slapping, clapping, fist-pumping, and general intensity of the already extraordinary sound. After two more hours of this relentlessly loud singing, an elderly man on the front row prayed a prayer in closing. The small building and tables beside it were cleared out and deserted in half an hour.

When we left, I had a fairly intense head-ache, one I suspected was triggered by my unfamiliarity with such physical exertion in singing and also with the volume produced by it.[10] I was intrigued by the singers' product and passion and decided I wanted to explore this community further. My primary interest, predictably, was in the sound of the music and it was only in conversation with Matt Hinton weeks afterward that I began to realize that the community members did not so predictably consider this their primary purpose in doing what they do. Hinton stated assuredly that there was more that unified this community than a shared history and love of music; there was also a

pervasive awareness of the state of the souls of those present, a celebration for those "saved" and an active concern for those who were not. Hinton expressed that the singers had faith in the experience of a Sacred Harp singing as an instance in which God himself could move a non-Christian to revelation and salvation.[11]

[*]History of Sacred Harp

A sketch of the history of Sacred Harp will help contextualize the community within the history of religion in America. Sacred Harp's early colonial roots are in the tradition of "singing schools," established around 1700 to address what was perceived as a problem with early northern colonial church music. Their Puritan theology called for "plain" musical style. This entailed unadorned, single-lined melody sung without musical accompaniment. Because parishioners were largely musically illiterate, songbooks were not used; rather, songs were taught by repetition. Consequently, the canon of church songs at the time was quite small and the few dozen songs that did exist were sung in one-line melody in dragging tempo.[12] The desire for a more diverse body of religious music motivated some colonial musicians to instigate weekend or week-long "singing schools" to teach parishioners to sing newly composed and often fairly complex religious music. These music teachers were self-motivated and traveled from town to town, advertising that the school was going to be held, and then hosting an apparently effective course in musical sight-reading.[13]

The theology contained in this new body of music can be traced to 17th and 18th century Protestant theologians. The singing schools' instruction so effectively worked its

---

[11] Hinton, Matt. Talk at Georgia State University, 2007.
[*] Hear #10 *Morning 163T*
[12] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul*.
[13] Marini, *Sacred Song in America*, 74.

way into the churches that, as Marini records, by 1770, "churches in America . . . had become seedbeds for a new American synthesis of sacred song." Marini gives credit for that synthesis "almost single-handedly" to Bostonian William Billings (1746-1800). Billings was a "tanner, patriot, moderate Congregationalist, and self-taught singing master and composer." Billings looked to British hymn writers Charles Wesley, John Newton, William Cowper, and most notably Isaac Watts for lyrical inspiration. Watts (1674-1748), minister, theologian, and poet, wrote music as he claimed, to "promote Protestant consensus by focusing on the most essential beliefs of Reformed theology and the promotion of a deeply emotional piety" while, as he put it, "avoid[ing] the more obscure and controverted points of Christianity.'"[14] As a result, Watts adopted an extremely simple style of composition. "The metaphors are generally sunk to the level of vulgar capacities and endeavour'd to make the Sense plain and obvious," he wrote.[15] Watts expressed concern that anyone who encountered the lyrics he wrote would understand them. Sacred Harp lyrics, and the theology they contain, were as important to the singers as was the music that mediated it. Billings and the singing school music composers who followed him, wrote music resonant with Watts' emphasis on what they determined to be "the essential" Christian beliefs. Chief among these essentials was the individual experience of sin and then redemption through the death of Jesus Christ, a theme in the Sacred Harp "canon" that provides the skeleton for all others.

Consonant with this emphasis on simplicity and accessibility in lyrics, Billings' appropriated the "shape-note" system of written notation, a system he suspected could be easily learned. Shape-notes derive from 11th century European syllabic notation, and are

---

[14] Ibid, 74.
[15] Ibid, 76.

reminiscent of the four-note system of the ancient Greeks. Billings adopted the European syllables, returning them to the four-note version. The syllables *fa sol la* and *me* replaced lyrics in this instructional system.[16] Each syllable was represented by a notehead printed in a literal shape placed on a traditional five-line ledger: a triangle, a circle, a rectangle, or a diamond. Each shape, consistently corresponding to one of the four syllables, made sight-reading fairly simple. Once singers learned this 4-note notation they could sing any song written in this simple form. Both the musically trained and musically illiterate in the American colonies adopted this effective form, transforming what had characteristically been the realm of the learned—written musical form—into a form accessible to the populace at large. This democratic thrust hit a chord with the colonists, and the system and singing schools that perpetuated it increased in popularity throughout the 18th century. By 1800, singing schools had reached the height of their popularity. By 1844 with the publication of *The Sacred Harp*, a hymnal cataloguing hundreds of the most popular shape-note songs, the movement also had a name—Sacred Harp.[17] In this name, the significance of the unaccompanied nature of the music was lauded. It was only the human vocal chords that were required to produce this music, a "harp" considered "sacred" by the composers.

Billings, well aware of contemporary European musical forms, intentionally wrote music that was quite different from them. His songs were rambunctious in form, implementing open fifths, two-note chords, and uninhibited static sound, which were all unacceptable in contemporary European music. Shape-note composers were opposed to

---

[16] Cobb, Buell *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989), 59.

the constrictions of trained Europe not so much to support any complicated political philosophy as to express opposition to the constriction that European musical training placed on individual expression and, it was concluded, on individual experience. Lifelong Sacred Harp singer and historian Jim Carnes concluded an analysis of the sometimes "rough around the edges" delivery of the music of Sacred Harp by offering this: "Let's just say that as a musical style, this tradition just has different priorities."[18]

Consider Buell Cobb's *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music* in which he asserts that the tradition from which Sacred Harp derives never aspired to "angels' song."[19] Rather, these early composers and singers speak of the desirability of "earthly tunes." Cobb cites Billings' mandate that in music, "nature is the best dictator" (Cobb 61).[20] Billings expressed a strong conviction: Music should be of a quality consummate with the Creator God to which it was sung. In this it should reflect the "natural" world as God created it (translated by Billings as the sound of the "sacred harp," unencumbered by unnecessary instruction or restraining notation), and that music should be easily accessible to anyone God took the time to create. Billings so adhered to his own mandate that he frequently composed music outdoors so that the sounds of "nature" could mingle with his composition. (He once testified that he paused in an uninspired state for a good length of time until a cow mooed and provided the tone for his next chord.[21]) These "earthy" songs often referenced the substance of earth—wind, water, and blood, for instance—as well as the processes of human existence there earth—birth, decay, and

---

[18] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul*.
[19] Cobb, 2.
[20] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul*..
[21] Ibid.

death, for instance. In this, composers pointed to what they cannot know of God's divine Nature by building on what they do know of God by the created nature around them.

In Sacred Harp lyrics, Puritan preoccupation with death lingers and merges with Watts' philosophy of theological simplification as Billings transposed it. David Watters suggests that the Puritan-origin preoccupation with "end things" was rooted in "an attempt to see creation as God sees it, employing in this life eyes of faith and looking forward to the end of time when all illusions attendant on earthly and sinful existence would finally dissolve."[22] In the sermons, literature, and art of the colonial community, Watters finds hope expressed for an end to earthly difficulty and a belief in eternal reward for faithful Christians. Consider Harvard trained Puritan preacher, Michael Wigglesworth, who warned parishioners of the impending judgment for the unsaved.[23] Wigglesworth's sermon *The Day of Doom* was a poetic prescription for hell familiar to Puritan colonials. The lesson it contained was that if one's soul had not been saved by acceptance of Jesus Christ's death, an eternity of torture was his or her fate. Also, if one was aware that fellow humans were destined for hell, the one saved was required to do all he or she could to bring the unsaved to salvation. Indifference to the fate of others was judged harshly in the end. Sacred Harp does not adhere to the Calvinist-origin, Puritan-adopted doctrine of the elect. Rather, Sacred Harp lyrics reveal a theology of Jesus Christ's death as a democratic act—one in which all may be saved. According to this doctrine of universal salvation, all that was required to save one from hell and usher in

---

[22] Maclear, J.F. "Review of:"*With Bodilie Eyes:" Eschatological Themes in Puritan Literature and Gravestone Art*" in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 40, No. 3 (Williamsburg: Omohundro Institute, 1983), 469.

[23] Long, Thomas L. "Puritan Appropriations of Catholic Discourses in Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom*" (Presentation at the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds (England), July 2000),1, 7.

eternity in heaven was acceptance of Jesus Christ's death for each individual's sins. Nothing more complicated was employed in the theological structure of Sacred Harp. Even the cross-denominational ritual of Eucharist that marks the death of Jesus Christ is not employed in Sacred Harp services. The metaphysical intricacies of the Eucharist are not palatable to the Sacred Harp community. An individual's one-time decision to accept Jesus Christ's death secures an eternity in heaven. This is the theology of Sacred Harp and the primary proclamation of their remarkable sound. The music that mediates this theology lends a powerful mode of proclamation, indeed.

Southern Migration

The apocalyptic lyrics and archaic form of the shape-note tradition instigated a regional migration in the early 19th century as "soft, sweet" gospel music and lyrics were adopted in New England churches. Shape note music, considered "rustic and rural" in contrast, moved southward. By 1840, shape-note singing was situated almost exclusively in rural communities of the south and southwest. Even in the late 19th century, when urban southern churches began adopting gospel music, many rural communities did not. Jim Carnes explains, "shape notes is not a style of music; it's a notation, [and] it came to be associated with acoustic Southern . . . music of preachers and camp meetings." Carnes places the music culturally as well as geographically. He continues: "It didn't seem to fit in with the post Civil War great urban revivals [that] were much more targeted toward the wealthy city dwellers." Rural southerners, then, provided the environment for Sacred Harp music's preservation.

By the early 20th century, academic inquiry into Sacred Harp music was solidly focused on the tradition as a southern "folk" art. Musicologists traveled south to

catalogue what was considered by then a quintessentially southern manifestation. These early investigations frequently caricatured singers as ignorant backwoodsmen and women. In 1928, Karl Carmer published an amateur ethnographic sketch called *The Sacred Harp Singers* which was one of the first pieces to be published on the community. He presented what became a consistent characterization that catapulted them into "folk" significance, specifically in regards to their own ignorance as to the value of the piece of history they had preserved.[24] The account presented stubborn illiterate southerners who sang what Carmer ungraciously called "ludicrous" music. Carmer suggested Sacred Harp music offered a foothold into a raucous southern narrative. Sacred Harp communities' lunches of fried chicken and fresh fruit pies was romanticized to induce Rip-Van-Winkle-like nostalgia. Current scholars Buell Cobb and John Bealle do the same, though in more subtle ways. Cobb comments in regard to the sound in the Hollow Square: "Imperfections are burned away."[25] Bealle quotes a local in lauding Sacred Harp as "an exotic relic of bygone days" and references the "planter gentility" which is alive in Sacred Harp.[26] This caricature of backwards-thinking people in a time warp has proven to be inexhaustibly interesting, but it is one that misconstrues the community. One example of the insufficient construction lies in the unacknowledged elements of death-talk in Sacred Harp as they are used to stimulate conversion-talk. Instead, tales of quaint southern social gatherings prevail.

At least on this one point, I propose that Marini has also misconstrued Sacred Harp. In his descriptions of traditional singings, Marini characterizes traditional Sacred

---

[24] Bealle, 84, 97.
[25] Cobb, 11, 12.
[26] Bealle, 97.

Harp singers' who sing because that is what their relatives and neighbors do as it was what their parents and grandparents' relatives and neighbors did before them. In stereotyping the community this way, he presents them as a relatively theologically passive community. After an investigation into the lyrics, I will propose that they are far from passive, though their approach to conversion is not the evangelical norm.

Among the voices contributing to the body of Sacred Harp scholarship, Steven Marini is at the forefront. In *Sacred Song in America*, Marini offers a thick description, historical overview, and scholarly analysis. He suggests the Sacred Harp community perpetuates a generic spirituality. In his chapter on Sacred Harp, Marini cites the "rituals of the hollow square, the content of the words, and the deeply spiritual attitude of traditional singers" as elements that mark Sacred Harp as a "deeply religious activity." In none of his extensive writing on the community does Marini note the desire to convert others to their community; rather, he depicts a community passively welcoming people of any faith, consequently minimizing one element of this "deeply religious" community that makes it such. His definition of "religion" makes a way for this characterization.

The three elements that Marini highlights that causes him to conclude that this is, in fact, a religious community, are the rituals, the lyrics, and the spiritual attitudes of the singers. These are the three that I will also consider to highlight exactly how this community's focus on death points to their conversionary priorities.

I will begin by considering "the spiritual attitudes of traditional singers" and consider the use of one word that suggests this. "Fellowship," as it appears in Sacred Harp singers' vocabulary, points to a complex community association. To offer an example, I will consider how the word works into the descriptions of Jeff Sheppard, a

respected leader in the Sacred Harp community. Marini interviewed Sheppard in his research and a consideration of what Marini does with this word suggests a subtle but significant misunderstanding of the community.[27]

[*]I. "Deeply Spiritual Attitudes:" *Fellowship* Miscontrued

In interviews for his chapter on Sacred Harp, Marini asked Jeff Sheppard about the relationship of Sacred Harp singings and primary religious institutions. Sheppard responds, "Sacred Harp singing is not . . . church." Sheppard claims that it is, instead, the Sacred Harp singers' "experience of Christianity" that is shared with "people you love." When Marini probes to determine if Sacred Harp might be, then, the religion of traditional singers, Sheppard "unhesitatingly" responds: "It's not their religion. It's their fellowship."[28] Marini narrates immediately after quoting Sheppard, weaving Sheppard's words into his interpretation and offering his own definition of religion: "Religion is a matter of personal faith and denominational identity. Fellowship is a lifetime of relationships with 'people you love' and a shared 'experience of Christianity' that transcends any particular communion."[29] Marini's turn here is toward a generic spirituality, one in which religion is a matter of "personal faith." To these Sacred Harp singers, however, identity with a very particular Christian religious experience is what is required. Sheppard's statement has been broken into ill-fitting parts in Marini's appropriation. Sheppard's "it's not their religion" suggests that the focus not be detracted from a very specific set of Christian beliefs and turned to Sacred Harp. Singing, he proposes, is what these religious people do to proclaim their religion, but it is not their

---

[27] Marini, 87.
[*] Hear #16 *Consecration.*
[28] Marini, 89.

religion. The fact that there is a "they" is less important than what "they" share, namely a theology of salvation situated within a very particular belief in the significance of the deaths of Jesus Christ and of each individual. This common belief is one of the essentials. In the Sacred Harp community, *fellowship* is necessarily commonality.

Fellow- suggests society. Marini is correct about this. The suffix -*ship*, however, necessitates commonality. From the Anglian, -*ship* suggests "state or condition of being," from the Latin, "consort," and from German, "to create, order or appoint." This, I propose is at the heart of the "deeply spiritual attitude" Marini notes, and makes the generic spirituality he suggests implausible. Sacred Harp singers use the word *fellowship* in the fullness of its etymology. In *fellowship*, "society" requires a common lot as implied by "consort." In the singers' use, then, fellowship entails a state or condition of being that is created, ordered, or appointed to share this common lot. The invitation of Sacred Harp singers' fellowship is not as much "all may participate, all may lead, and all may be saved," as it is "all *should* participate, all *should* lead, and all *should* be saved." Only then is fellowship complete.

[*]II. "Contents of the Words:" Death in the Sacred Harp Lyrics

Marini concedes that the response to the question, "What's the most important aspect of the singings?" is deceptively simple. "It's the words," he claims. I will now consider this "most important aspect" at length.[30] I propose that Marini stops short of probing the words' implications. After a consideration of the content of the words, one may conclude that this is a meeting where an encounter with God (an ultimately ineffable concept) is paralleled to death (an ultimately ineffable experience).

---

[*] Hear #6, *Cuba 401*.
[30] Marini, 89.

The lyrics that constitute *The Sacred Harp* hymnal contain multiple themes but chief among them is death. It is significant to note that singers frequently express the belief that their lyrics and tunes were directly inspired by God. While not revered as authoritative as the Bible, *The Sacred Harp* hymnal holds a comparable place. Sacred Harp singer Lonnie Rogers speaks to this while explaining why singers frequently describe "feeling" something when they sing: "We feel like God inspired those people who wrote these songs—that's why we feel something. Man is very little in this world when you get down to what man can do."[31] It is significant to consider the weight singers place on these lyrics and, as Rogers suggests, the words contain God's own inspiration to individuals.

Within this lyrical tradition, there are at least two angles by which death is presented. Here I have termed these two angles "death-in-sin" to demonstrate the statement of original fallen-ness and "death-to-sin" to suggest humanity's choice to change this state by accepting yet another death—the death of Jesus Christ. The Sacred Harp appropriation of this theology suggests that, ultimately, death is nothing to fear because immortality is promised to Christians. The uniqueness of their portrayal of death lies in part in their refusal to soften any element of it. Since conversion is the aim, this determination to speak plainly is understandable.

Death for the unsaved results in separation from God and eternal torture and is rightly to be feared. Death to sin is made possible by Jesus Christ's death and then saves the unsaved. Therefore, death after salvation is not to be feared. Sacred Harp singers then join in the Pauline tradition of taunting: "Death, where is your victory? Death, where is

---

[31] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul*.

your sting?"[32] Death that results in separation from God, the death-in-sin in which all people are born and the fate of non-Christians for eternity, is death's greatest power. Death-to-sin, however, that is made possible by Jesus' death and subsequent redemption of all who believe undermines death's greatest power by casting death as a pivot which turns the saved from earth to eternity with God.

When William Billlings published *The New-England Psalm-Singer* in 1770, he included a hymn by George Whitefield entitled "Ah! Lovely Appearance of Death" at the close of the book, in which the "appearance" of death is welcomed.[33] Death in *The Sacred Harp* does not simply mean the end of a human life, however. The uses of the word are multiple. I will now discuss these two distinct notions of death, death-in-sin and death-to-sin, both of which are tied inextricably to the death of Jesus Christ. Afterward, I will consider two specific instances of the Sacred Harp experience: 1) the Memorial Lesson and 2) leading the singing from the Hollow Square. I will then consider implications of both on the conversionary emphasis of the community.

From the Genesis account of sin and death to Paul's proclamation that "the wages paid by sin is death," an atmosphere of death as payment for sin was established in the Bible and adopted by the evangelical traditions from which Sacred Harp derives.[34] Sacred Harp's "Eureka," presents one common view of the mortal life in *The Sacred Harp*: "Soon will this mortal life be o'er/ this body moulder into dust/ naked my soul will stand before God that's holy, pure and just/ Its standing doom of bliss or woe/ Will from the

---

[32] *The New Jerusalem Bible,* I Corinthians 15:55 (New York: Random House, 2002),
[33] Marini, 78.
[34] *New Jerusalem Bible,* Romans 6:23.

Great I Am receive/ Up to the realms of glory go/ Or in hell's torments ever live."[35] Such elements of sober recitation of the fate of the dead are commonplace in the music of *The Sacred Harp* and mirror an awareness of the nearness of death. In "Sons of Sorrow," Sacred Harp singers relay this belief: "Ye sighing sons of sorrow/ Learn with me your certain doom/ See all nature fading, dying/ Silent all things seem to mourn/ Life from vegetation flying/ Calls to mind the mould'ring urn/ Learn with me your fate tomorrow/ Dead, perhaps laid in the tomb!"[36] Of all the themes Sacred Harp songwriters could have captured they chose again and again to write about death.

The solemnity of the Sacred Harp lyrics should not be interpreted as despair, however. The solemnity is intentional and it is pointed, but it is not despairing. Sacred Harp singers' confrontation with death occurs with a certainty that it is something that has been "overcome" by Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.[37] Death is a barrier to God that Christ has destroyed. Earth's discomforts are assuaged by the promise of eternal bliss. Consider "The Child of Grace," in which the singers declare, "This earth . . . is not my place, I seek my home in heav'n/ A country far from mortal sight/ Yet O, by faith I see/ The land of rest, the saints' delight/ The heav'n prepared for me."[38] When taken as a whole, the lyrics of *The Sacred Harp* deliver a bold affront to death by way of complex and multivalent uses of the word.

Sacred Harp is not novel in its multivalent appropriation of the word "death." Neither is it novel in its emphasis that it is not death itself that limits life, but the fear of

---

[35] Cooper, W.M. *The B.F. White Sacred Harp* (Troy, Alabama: the Sacred Harp Book Company, 1949), 378.
[36] Cooper, 332.
[37] Kerr, Fergus *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*,(Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1997), 124.
[38] Cooper, 77.

death. Paul S. Minear, in *Death Set to Music*, addresses the New Testament's treatment of death: "Only in relatively few instances do the nouns and verbs for dying bear the medical definition as their primary denotation."[39] Instead, Minear insists that writers of the New Testament "perceive that the fear of death is a greater enemy than death itself [and] seeks deliverance from that fear as more desirable than deliverance from death."[40] It is the individual who has the choice of assuaging that fear by considering his or her own fate after death.

It is instructive to note that Sacred Harp lyrics remained largely unchanged from previous centuries. While the majority of American music merged with the importation of "sweeter" 19th century European tunes, Sacred Harp did not. The incessant reference to the details of Jesus Christ's moments of dying, death, and the ensuing death of all who are now alive did not diminish. Many who preferred gospel considered Sacred Harp unnecessarily visceral and morbid. In the middle of evangelical movements to portrayed humanity in more positive lights, this community refused to comply. Death remained at the forefront of their hymnology. Though not unique in its presence, death as it invades the Sacred Harp singings is unique in its persistence. There is in this a constant reminder that the line between life and death is thin and the consequence of un-preparedness for death is eternal.

The most visceral hymns often describe Jesus' death and its implications for the believer. "The Fountain of Life," for instance, describes, "A fountain filled with blood/ Drawn from Immanuel's veins/ And sinners plunge beneath that flood/ Loose all their

---

[39] Minear, Paul, S. *Death Set to Music* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 8.
[40] Ibid.

guilty stains."[41] Lyrics of "The Crucified Savior" declare that Jesus' death was intentional, a result of an active will. There is also an active will in each individual. Consider these lyrics: "On the cruel tree Christ hath died for me/ Sing that Jesus died for me."[42] In the Sacred Harp song, "Calvary," the singers place themselves at the very instant of Jesus' death: "I see One hanging on the tree/ I see One hanging on the tree/ I see One hanging on the tree/ It inspires my heart/ I love to think of Calvary/ It inspires my heart/ By faith I see His bleeding side/ It inspires my heart/ By faith I hear those bitter groans/ It inspires my heart."[43] The individual, then, "present" to Christ's sacrifice, has a choice to accept or reject the sacrifice as redeeming him or her from sin. All who become aware of this theology are "invited to think, not of how Jesus fitted into the conditions of [their] life and time . . . but rather of how [they] are affected by having to share [Christ's] life and time."[44] *The Sacred Harp*'s perception of human's participation in the event of Jesus Christ's death lends a direct control over their eternal fate: God created humans with choice. (They chose to sin and died as a result.) Jesus Christ had a choice. (He chose to die for the redemption of every human.) Consequently, every human has a choice. (The decision to accept Jesus Christ's death "defeats" death. The decision to reject it secures an eternity defeated by it.) Then death, potentially the greatest of human fears, is recast as an opportunity to express the greatest of human decisions and provides a way for the greatest of divine interventions. Nothing less is at stake at each Sacred Harp singing.

---

[41] Ibid., 46.
[42] Ibid., 84.
[43] Ibid., 78.
[44] Kerr, 26.

In *Awake, My Soul*, singer Rodney Ivey speaks of his early childhood familiarity with Sacred Harp and of his adolescent rebellion against it. He describes his rebellion this way in an on-camera interview: "I was wild . . . like some o' these country singers, [with] drinking and women on my mind." Ivey does not go into detail, but summarizes by casting this rebellion as a time in which he was distant from what should have been close. He describes a draw he felt in mid-life to return to Sacred Harp singings and here he speaks of his conversion experience. He describes the process this way: "I got to singin' more 'n' more 'n' more and I finally realized." What, exactly, he "realized" Ivey does not describe. He ends that statement declaratively. His next sentence begins, "I received the Lord in my life and that helped me see the way to go." He affirms that he has been singing consistently since his conversion and offers by way of explanation: "The words just sorta changed me."[45] Ivey is referencing the entire Sacred Harp experience, though, and not simply a reading of the words alone. In words they are certainly death-centered; in their rituals, as well, Sacred Harp singings point to death's pervasive presence and individuals' need to be prepared for it.

[*]III. "Rituals of the Hollow Square:" Memorial Lesson and Leading

The Hollow Square will be considered in light of two rituals: firstly, the Memorial Lesson that is delivered from this space and, secondly, singers' experiences of leading the singing from the square. These rituals point to a trust the singers have that God will be present in the words and rituals of the singing and that the singers will be changed thereby.

---

[45] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul.*
[*] Hear #20 *Farewell Anthem*

Sacred Harp singing is structured in the following sequence: five minutes of opening greeting, hours of singing, a one hour break for dinner, a five to ten minute Memorial Lesson, hours of singing, and a brief prayer in closing. The Memorial Lesson, which falls at the point of the meeting in which a sermon would in a standard Protestant church service, serves some of the same purposes. Both are meant to proclaim and to instruct. Instead of a lengthy prepared sermon, however, the Memorial Lesson is a brief eulogy, followed by a recitation of names of singers who have recently died. Two elements are typically emphasized in this lesson: 1) gratitude to those who have led the way in the Sacred Harp tradition and 2) a reminder that those who are currently alive will soon join them.

Richard DeLong gives the Memorial Lesson at the Henagar-Union singing recorded in *Awake, My Soul*. He matter-of-factly reminds other singers why they have a Memorial Lesson: "This is the time we pause in the singing to remember those who were here a year ago and who are passed on." In this Lesson, DeLong passionately states: "I might not know much but I know one thing—that when this crowd right here gets to heaven and gets with the saints that've gone on before . . . we'll be a singin' there won't be no questions about it." He cries as he speaks. Several singers, as the camera pans to the crowd after the singing recommences, have tear-streaked faces. The Lesson, as DeLong summarizes, honors those lost, expresses grief at the loss, expresses anticipation of one day joining the "saints that've gone on before," and reminds anyone not prepared to do so that they have a decision to make. In the activities of the Hollow Square as in Sacred Harp lyrics, the Sacred Harp fellowship points to death.

In *Awake, My Soul*, Hinton consistently highlights the transference of Sacred Harp heritage from one generation to the next. In the documentary, many of the singers speak of beloved singers who have passed on. Some speak of singing in honor of them or of singing as a way to feel close to them. One singer recalls that her father's dying wish was that she continue singing Sacred Harp music throughout her life. She recalls that near his death he said: "I hadn't ever asked you for anything, but I'm gonna ask you for somethin' now. Don't ever stop singin.'"[46] Some singers interviewed also spoke of their own coming deaths. Raymond Hamrick, one highly respected Sacred Harp singer and composer, spoke of the significance he hoped Sacred Harp singing would play at the time of his death. Hamrick recalls telling his children that there is a particular Sacred Harp song he composed he wanted sung at his funeral. Hamrick relays his belief that at his own funeral, as he put it, "I'll be listenin.'" Because of that fact, he adds that if the singing was "not goin' to be done right—you can forget it."[47] Hamrick specifies that he does not simply want a "handful" of singers at his funeral. At least fifty are required to produce a full sound, i.e., to be "done right." If that is not possible, Hamrick makes allowances for gospel. Hamrick is recalling the familiar belief among Sacred Harp singers of a Christian fellowship that includes not only those on earth, but also those "who have gone before." In Sacred Harp theology, the line between the living and the dead is only thinly imagined.

It is not only the declaration of the theology contained in the lyrics of Sacred Harp that is significant in the Sacred Harp experience. It is also the experience created by the structure and the sound itself that is significant. There is something about the

---

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

combination of elements in a Sacred Harp service to which Hamrick alludes. It is something singers often describe "moves" them and singers typically attribute this to the presence of God. Singers relay that this presence is particularly strong in the Hollow Square. In Hamrick's conception of his own funeral, his body would be in the place of the Hollow Square with all singers singing toward his casket. He, in the presence of God, would "be listenin,'" and the quality of sound was significant as it would be the mediator for the proclamation of the truth in the words and then God's reciprocal communion.

By all accounts, the experience of Sacred Harp singing from within the Hollow Square is one that is difficult to describe. When singers attempt to relay their experiences, they frequently suggest that it cannot be articulated at all; rather, it has to be experienced. When a description is offered, it typically tips into language pointing to the surreal. Richard Ivey speaks of leading from the square: "It's like the ground is shaking under you. I feel that sometimes I'm going to be lifted up by the ground that's shaking under me." Hinton, in *Awake, My Soul* suggests that the Hollow Square serves the role of the biblical Holy of Holies as a space, "where God is especially present."[48] Several singers speak of being fearful at the prospect of leading, insinuating that the fear was not only due to the responsibility of leading others but of an expectation of God in that space. Singers consistently speak with respect at what could transpire there. Joyce Walton recounts: "I led at Muscadine, Alabama, and my knees shook so I could hardly stand up." Richard DeLong suggests that one cannot "hear" Sacred Harp as all, "until you step into that center square and hear those four parts hit you full force because those singers are not singing for a concert or a chorus or to entertain somebody." DeLong asserts that the

[48] Hinton, *Awake, My Soul*.

singers are singing to, and simultaneously being moved by, God. Charlene Wallace speaks of her experiences, also pointing to the ineffability of it: "When you really get involved in it and get where you can direct, when you hear all that sound coming from below you, it's unbelievable." Jim Carnes summarizes the mysterious experience of leading from the Hollow Square: "There's really nothing to compare with it." DeLong speaks of those who would disbelieve the experience. To these people he suggests: "Go experience it and have those goose chills run up and down your neck when it's 'bout ninety-five [degrees] inside and then you'll know what brings these people back."[49] By these accounts, the experience of leading from the Square is one that must be experienced as it cannot be relayed otherwise. With this confidence, Sacred Harp singers allow anyone of any faith to lead the singing, trusting that, once he or she has chosen to step into the Hollow Square, that individual may then be "moved" by God. This reference to moving is, for Christian singers, a move in an experience of a God they have already accepted. For non-Christians, it is a move toward that God they have previously rejected.

Unlike cousin evangelical communities, Sacred Harp singers trust to the mediated experience they create instead of proselytizing directly. When I asked Hinton if anyone is welcome to lead from the Hollow Square, he verified that anyone is invited to lead the singing from this space. Hinton then asserted that singers, if they themselves understood what was at stake, could not be impartial about the presence of non-Christians among them. There is no desire that non-Christians stay away from the Sacred Harp community—on the contrary, Hinton expressed the hope that non-Christians would come and join their fellowship by converting to Christianity and continuing to proclaim its

[49] Ibid.

truths in song.[50] Sacred Harp singers' mode of conversion is not preaching but a trust in the truth revealed in the lyrics and an experience of God mediated by the music. This is especially true when the music is lead from the Hollow Square as the individual has already made a choice to step into this sacred space.

Marini comments on the openness of the Sacred Harp community: "It is telling that song has been the medium through which such disparate partners have found common rituals for their respective styles of appropriating the sacred." He then cites Shelbie Sheppard: "We are sharing our lives and what this music means to [us] when [we] share it with other folks. If we have any mission in life, the scripture says not to hide your talents under a basket." In this sentence, Sheppard links reference to a "mission in life" to "talents" that she is expected to share. She offers no transition between the two, but links her ability to sing as a "talent" that assists her in performing her "mission." Sheppard is keenly aware of her own spiritual context, one that translates these scriptures into a commission to usher others into communion with God. She is, in this sense, a missionary who shares what she has determined to be a great truth by singing about it. It is not about the talents as much as it is about the mission, an emphasis Marini inverts. Marini claims that, "it is telling" that Sacred Harp is the medium by which people with diverse spiritualities "appropriate the sacred." But he does not explore exactly *what* it *tells*. If he did, I suspect the subtle missionary mode of the community would be difficult to miss.[51]

---

[50] Hinton, Talk at Georgia State University, March 2007.
[51] Marini, 97.

Conclusion

Non-Christians are welcome at Sacred Harp singings. That is clear. But they are not simply welcome just as they are. Sacred Harp singers hope that non-Christians will encounter God through the singing and be moved to convert. Conversion in this community is not initiated by fiery sermons, religious publications, or missionary pressure from members. Even the subtler rituals that mark inclusion in most American churches, such as Eucharist and Baptism, are absent. Instead, an environment is created in which music is intended to mediate a revelation of God and subsequent conversion to Christianity. To Sacred Harp singers, then, religion is not simply "a matter of personal faith" as Marini claims. Rather, religion is a very specific set of faith claims and ultimately the means by which individuals prepare themselves for eternity. Those who are Christians have every desire to see those who are not make this all-important conversion from eternal death to eternal life.

Those in the broader academic study of religion may consider Marini to be an example of one who privileges a particular scholarly agenda over the discernment of the agendas of the community studied. If scholars fall into this category, they then run the risk of perverting any claims they make afterward. Particularly in matters involving the definition of religion, the emphases of the community members themselves should be of primary importance. Only after a community's priorities have been ascertained should a scholar proceed with analysis and interpretation. The significance of Marini's subtle scholarly misinterpretation lies in his assumption that the Sacred Harp community views religion as "a matter of personal faith." Consequently, in his analysis thereafter, singers are made to conform to a model of generic spirituality and the community is entirely

colored by this. Marini's assumption is proven inaccurate in light of the community's own definition of religion. Intricacies of historical complexity are lost as the community is set as an example of contemporaneous spirituality. The maverick nature of Sacred Harp is watered down to fit a current scholarly conception of commonality and openness. What is lost is the vitality of a community that has always been a bit anarchic and anachronistic, largely impervious to the acclaim or disdain of onlookers. A careful investigation into Sacred Harp reveals that this community and the scholars who write about it, as Jim Carnes proposes, may simply have different priorities.

Bibliography

Bealle, John. *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong.* Athens, U of Georgia P, 1997.

Bohlman, Philip, ed. *Music in American Religious Experience*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.

Campbell, Gavin James. "Old Can Be Used Instead of New": Shape-Note Singing and the Crisis of Modernity in the New South, 1880-1920. In *Journal of American Folklore.* Vol. 110, No. 436, Spring, 1997, p. 169-188.

Clawson, Laura. "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds: Community and Spirituality Among Sacred harp Singers." *Poetics.*32.3-4 (2004): 311-324.

Cobb, Buell E. *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989.

Cooper, W.M. *The B.F. White Sacred Harp.* Troy, Alabama: Sacred Harp Book Co., Inc., 1949.

Cox, Harvey. "Review: *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture.* U of Illinois P, 2007.

Hinton, Matt and Erica. *Awake, My Soul*. Awake Productions, Atlanta, 2006.

_____. *I Belong to this Band: Recording of Sacred Harp*, Dust to Digital Productions, 2006.

Laderman, Gary. *Rest in Peace: a Culural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America.* New York: Oxford UP, 2003.

_____. *American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.

Marini, Steve. *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture.* Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2003.

Minear, Paul S. *Death Set to Music*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987.

Stowe, David W. *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.

Sullivan, Lawrence E. *Music in the World's Religions*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.

_____. *Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.

Work, John W. “Plantation Meistersinger.” *The Musical Quarterly* 27.1 (1941): 97-106.