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“WE’LL ALL SHOUT TOGETHER IN THAT MORNING”:
ICONICITY AND SACRED HARP SINGING ON
SAND MOUNTAIN, ALABAMA

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Jonathon Murray Smith
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the cultural context of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain, Alabama. Using Stephen Feld's concept of "iconicity of style," I demonstrate that Sacred Harp singing is more than just a form of music, but an overarching aesthetic that ties together multiple forms of cultural expression and social interaction. Sacred Harp singing occurs in many different contexts on Sand Mountain, ranging from church services, to organized singings, to impromptu social events. Its presence in all these realms connects the sacred and the secular, bridging diverse aspects of Sand Mountain culture.

As I investigate the place of Sacred Harp within this geographically and demographically distinct region of Alabama, I show how it forms the basis for the construction of complex individual and group identities. Notions of "tradition" are especially important to Sand Mountain singers, who attempt to preserve singing practices and stylistic elements from earlier generations. Sacred Harp singing not only ties together disparate social realms; participants believe that it connects families and communities across time and space, linking present and past generations. In my analysis of the social context of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain, I convey a much more detailed understanding of the iconic nature of the musical form than exists in previous scholarship, greatly adding to scholarly understanding of the cultural context of this musical form.

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CHAPTER I GOIN' SANGIN'

Ask almost any real country person of matures years... if he knows anything about fasola singers, and he will very likely be able to direct you to one of them, or perhaps to a group in a "singin'" (Jackson, 1965, p. 3).

Into the Field

Nearly every summer weekend in 2008, I drove a hundred miles or more from Tennessee to parts of Alabama and Georgia. I made my way to country churches, civic buildings, and metropolitan church social halls to engage in a musical phenomenon that is vibrant in the lives of its participants. Singers from many areas of the country regularly come together for two-day conventions of singing from the *Sacred Harp*, a shaped-note hymnal in continual use since 1844. On a particular weekend in early July at Liberty Baptist Church in Henagar, Alabama, so many singers had gathered that latecomers who couldn't find seats had to stand at the back of the church, in the lobby, and even outside on the front porch. They far outnumbered the church's average Sunday attendance of around fifty.

The summer air was humid and thick and even though the church has air conditioners, singers found themselves overwhelmed by the late summer heat, so they eventually opened the doors and windows to allow a breeze to flow. Energy from the singers' voices filled the church with sound as well as heat, and the breeze was quite a relief to me, dressed in my tight-necked shirt and tie.

Even though I was wearing Sunday clothes, I was not exactly in church. Music and fellowship are the central theme of the day and no sermon is preached. The music itself is a message to each individual who participates; the words are inherently religious in nature and most singers accord them near biblical status. Indeed, an oft repeated aphorism holds that every

Southern family used to have at least two books: the Bible, and the *Sacred Harp* (Miller, 2008, p. 98).

The songs I heard that day, all from various editions of the *Sacred Harp*, differ from standard church hymns in their text, form, and musical style; they are entirely *a cappella* and use a system of shaped note-heads to help singers read music, much like the solfege familiar to music students, but in four syllables and shapes instead of seven (three of them are repeated in the scale), and with a moveable tonic. Fa is printed as a triangle, sol is a circle, la is a rectangle, and mi is a diamond. Though nearly anyone in the room would be able to sing their part of the hymns at sight, the Sacred Harp singers always “sing the shapes” before moving on to the words, sounding out the solfege to all the parts simultaneously.

At Liberty Baptist that day, the energy rose to an almost palpable level as one of the song leaders finished singing the shapes, and then exclaimed, “Now listen!” It was a solemn moment for him personally because the text of the song reminded him of generations of his family who have now passed away. The song, “We’ll Soon be There” (Denson, 1991, p. 97),¹ asks, “who will come and go with me... I’m bound fair Canaan’s land to see, we’ll shout and sing, Hosanna.” The leader wanted to emphasize that the singing that day at Liberty mirrored the singing that he anticipated when he would reunite with deceased members of his family in a world to come.

The class sang with great emotion, and at full voice. Men and women sat in a square surrounding the song leader, and sang together in four vocal parts, with octaves doubled on the melody and treble parts, resulting in six-part harmony (see Figure 1.4). Placed prominently at

¹ For clarity, I refer to songs by tune name, noting the book edition, year, and page number. I discuss the editions of the *Sacred Harp* in Chapter 4 (see Table 1). Tune names come from a variety of sources—some are drawn from the lyrics of the song, others are place names, and still others are named after composers and prominent singers.

the ends of phrases in this song are open chords, consisting of the first and fifth scale degrees without the third. The combined effect of the powerful volume, rich vocal texture, and open chords was a sound so strident that I could feel my copy of the *Sacred Harp* vibrating in my hands.

But there are many ways in which we can “now listen.” If you stop singing and listen intently to what is happening at the very moment of singing, you will realize that there are multiple, complex events occurring simultaneously. Sacred Harp singing is more than just a form of music; it is a multifaceted expression of cultural values around which singers construct identities as members of a distinct social group. For Sacred Harp singers, the performance of the music, along with the institutions that surround and support it, serves as the nexus of a number of disparate aspects of local culture. “Sacred Harp” has become an iconic aesthetic that shapes numerous facets of cultural expression, and forms the basis for the construction of complex individual and group identities.

Throughout the South, stylistic and cultural variations demarcate different regions of Sacred Harp singing. Each of these regions has a long history, with a unique interpretation and understanding of Sacred Harp music, and singers are very conscious of differences among the singing practices of various areas. My work focuses on the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing in one of the most clearly defined singing regions – the Sand Mountain area of northeast Alabama. I chose to study singing on Sand Mountain because area singers form one of the most coherent singing cultures in the South; strong ties between families and among church members connect singers outside of their participation in Sacred Harp singings. In addition, Sand Mountain is home to a large number of active singers, who espouse a range of interpretations of Sacred Harp music, drawing from several different editions of the hymnal. Furthermore, singing in the area

came into the national spotlight with the release of the film, *Cold Mountain*, in 2003 (Minghella, 2003). Accounts in the media constructed Sand Mountain singing as the most authentic, iconic form of Sacred Harp.

By investigating the interconnections between music and culture that form the basis for singers' constructions of identity, I provide a rich account of the cultural context and significance of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain. This type of music allows participants to voice their identity as members of a group with diverse, but connected notions of history, spirituality, and cultural affiliation. Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain is an iconic musical form, tying together multiple aspects of local culture with an emphasis on tradition, forging ties between families and communities of present and past generations.

Iconicity of Style

In order to understand the manner in which singers form identities and distinct regional cultures of Sacred Harp singing, it is essential to investigate the connections between the performance of this music and diverse aspects of culture. Ethnomusicologists have proposed various theories to explain the relationship of music to other cultural activities, arguing for the importance of understanding the role of music in a social context. Beginning with Alan Lomax, scholars have sought to connect specific aspects of musical styles with different cultural characteristics, mapping out intercultural similarities around the world.

Alan Lomax's *Cantometrics* (1976) is among the first research that aimed to establish relationships between music and social structures, although his work has been heavily criticized by subsequent scholars (see, for example, Henry, 1976). Finding it impossible to establish direct connections among specific melodies used around the world—melodies that had been subject to limitless possible variations—Lomax searched for ties between more general song styles of

different cultures. He developed the cantometric system, which uses a rating scale of 37 different factors grouped into seven main properties to correlate singing styles with cultural characteristics. The system examines various properties of a culture's song style and argues for a direct relation to the culture's social organization. By specifying a series of particular elements of singing style, including vibrato, melodic range, and melismas, Lomax's comparative method ties musical characteristics to social patterns, such as group organization, levels of consciousness, and orchestral and choral organization.

Lomax (1976) marked out geographical areas with similar singing styles throughout the world using a song region map. This visual diagram shows ten different regions where diverse cultures maintain similar singing styles and social organization. For example, the map shows similarities in singing style and social properties throughout much of Western Europe and the United States. Similarly, areas of South America and native North America exhibit commonality. Lomax also discusses the "evolution of style traditions" (p. 16). Using the same diagram of the ten world regions, he argues for strong and weak links among various societies, as well as "differentiation factors" between cultures. The differentiation factor scale places cultures on a lateral line and creates a rough timeline for their development in relation to each other. Cultures with low levels of economic productivity fall low on the differentiation scale and are thus indicative of early cultures. Those cultures higher on the scale show higher levels of productivity. Taken together, Lomax argues, these factors illuminate the complexities of the relationships between music and culture. However, Lomax subscribed to a cultural-evolutionary model that presupposes a correlation between cultural "advancement" and industrial capability.

This standpoint has been criticized by proponents of cultural relativism, who argue that historical events, not evolutionary forces, shape cultures, and that the achievements of peoples

from around the world cannot be measured by Western standards (Kuper, 2005). Many scholars have debated Lomax and his comparative system of song style and social structure, yet Steven Feld (1984) recognized the work, while problematic, as a substantial turning point for ethnomusicological scholarship, crucial in that it “suggested that songs identify, represent, or otherwise reinforce the core structures of society” (p. 385). Feld asserted this principle as a key axiom of ethnomusicology and applied this method of analysis to his own study of the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea.

Steven Feld’s (1984) scholarship draws upon the ideas of Lomax, examining the close relationships between music, or sound making, and the social lives of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea. Unlike Lomax, however, Feld attempts to understand these concepts from the perspective of the Kaluli themselves, rather than codifying Kaluli music using western terms. Feld (1984) devised a series of questions in six social domains that were intended to approach “integrating the microscopic, ethnographically detailed analyses of musical lives, with an area of comparable, general, relevant issues that will help us compare sociomusical realities and practices” (p. 388). He criticized Lomax’s *Cantometrics* for a lack of in-depth analysis and limited use of ethnographic methods.

The Kaluli conceive of music in a very different sense than Lomax and other western scholars had previously allowed. Rather, they use what Feld describes as an arrangement of natural sounds, which are closely connected to the surrounding rainforest, not limited to human vocal or instrumental production. Similarly, many other aspects of Kaluli life, including metaphor and myth, also have direct connections to the rainforest (Feld, 1990). Songs often imitate birds, which are central characters in these myths and metaphors, and the dense organization of group singing reflects the perpetual sounds of the forest. By concentrating on one

individual culture, Feld argues convincingly about the relationship between their music and society. His limited application of Lomax's theory avoids many of the pitfalls inherent in Lomax's cross-cultural comparisons.

As Feld's scholarship developed, he argued for a more comprehensive linkage between music and society through his conception of "iconicity of style." Feld (1988) stated:

this sonic model, manifest most directly for Kaluli song form and process, also reverberates and echoes through other Kaluli expressive and interactional modes. The same trope that animates musical "lift-up-over sounding" is patterned in artistic verbal, visual, and choreographic expression, as well as in patterns of everyday conversation and social interaction (p. 76).

Feld's research points to links between social situations and musical forms. He asserted (1988) that Kaluli body decoration and movement in dance, for example, both relate to the cultural icon of *dulugu ganalan*—"lift-up-over sounding." Thus, Feld (1988) argues, the musical style is part of an overall aesthetic that seems "naturally real, obvious, complete, and thorough" to the members of Kaluli culture (p. 93).

Although scholarship that extends Feld's concept of "iconicity of style" has tended to focus on cultures outside of the west, Travis Jackson (2000) related Feld's work to blues and jazz cultures in the United States. He identified a set of qualities associated with blues music that he called a "blues aesthetic," aspects that are expressed not only in music, but in visual and written arts, and other cultural activities. To participating musicians, "blues" is a "feeling... that must guide the use of other resources," not merely a musical style. As Jackson (2000) writes, blues "takes on a force that makes it seemingly part of everything in the world" (p. 51). Jackson investigates the confluence of "blues" tropes in various forms of cultural expression, demonstrating that Feld's work fruitfully informs the study of music of the United States.

I assert that Feld and Jackson's scholarship provides a model for understanding the relationships between the music of Sacred Harp and other aspects of culture on Sand Mountain. Early scholarship on Sacred Harp singing sought to equate stylistic characteristics of this form of music with other aspects of the singers' culture. These observations were roughly equivalent to Feld's concept of an aesthetic that becomes an iconic style throughout multiple levels of social actions; however, these writings drew primarily from superficial observations and stereotypes about rural southerners, rather than an in-depth ethnographic examination of their cultural practices. George Pullen Jackson (1965), for example, argued that the character of the "plain folk" who sang from the *Sacred Harp* was reflected in their "plain" unaccompanied music (p. 4). Even though, during his lifetime, the largest singings were held in urban centers of the South, and new songs were being added to the latest editions of the hymnal (Cobb, 1978), Jackson associated Sacred Harp singing exclusively with rural, un-modernized people:

The realization of the existence of this little "survival in culture" is not startling. Such cultural "antiques" have come to be expected in the rural Southeast... this now antiquated solmization was and is associated, precisely as the country singers assert, with a likewise surviving primitive vocal musical theory and practice (p. 5).

Alan Lomax (1961) explained the harmonic character of Sacred Harp music in a similar fashion, suggesting that the unique style was not based on conscious musical decisions by the songwriters, but due instead to their unfamiliarity with standard hymnody:

That the harmonies are unconventional at times is due to ... the blessed ignorance of some of the early composers who had more feeling for folk music than knowledge of the "rules of harmony" (p. 1).

I argue that a more appropriate method of investigating the "iconicity" of Sacred Harp style in Sand Mountain culture is to identify the aspects of singing that participants themselves emphasize as most important, and to search for similar themes in other cultural activities. These

are not limited to stylistic characteristics of singing, but include various aspects of the culture surrounding Sacred Harp. As Jackson (2000) points out in his discussion of blues, the overall “aesthetic” surrounding a particular kind of music is related to many facets of culture beyond musical sound. In documenting the social significance of Sacred Harp singing in Sand Mountain communities, I explore the ways in which Sacred Harp style has become iconic, a broad aesthetic that references multiple forms of cultural expression. I discuss the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing, focusing on the singers understanding of “tradition,” how it shapes their culture, and how it relates to their sense of identity.

Concepts of Identity

The iconic status of Sacred Harp singing in Sand Mountain is so powerful that singers shape their own identities around the aesthetic associated with this music. For numerous participants, singing this music is much more than a hobby; they unhesitatingly devote their time and resources to attending and promoting singings, often spending the bulk of their free time and extra income in order to do so. In the process, they become heavily invested in the culture surrounding the singing, and begin to form strong identities as Sacred Harp singers. Their association with other singers who share similar practices in a specific region also leads to the creation of broader notions of social belonging, in which singers recognize themselves as members of a unique regional singing culture.

Theories of identity illuminate Sacred Harp singing practices and create a framework for recognizing the deeper levels of meaning that are expressed at singings. I organize my observations around theoretical models provided by a range of ethnomusicologists, sociologists, and others, and consider the potential applications of various concepts of identity in developing a better understanding of regional identification in Sacred Harp singing. As Philip Bohlman

(1988) notes, “the identity that shapes groups and generates folklore may be both shared and differential, that is, derived from both core and boundary, similarities and differences” (p. 58). While all singers share a sense of belonging to the wider community of Sacred Harp singing, many of the factors that shape actual practice vary by locality. Singers form their identity both in the similarities they recognize amongst themselves and the differences they assert between themselves and singers from other communities. As I discuss in Chapter Five, this view can result in competing interpretations of the iconic nature of Sacred Harp singing. Understanding the aspects that singers on Sand Mountain recognize as making them unique helps clarify their conception of the iconicity of Sacred Harp music.

Regional identity is not always clearly defined for Sacred Harp singers, as they form connections with multiple interrelated communities. Bruno Nettl (2005) provides a model for understanding how musical events express identities at many levels simultaneously. He asserts, “The idea that one makes or listens to music to show who one is, in national, ethnic, class, personal contexts, has been around for a long time, but identity hasn’t been recognized until the last two decades as a major function of music” (p. 257). Nettl’s work describes the multiple levels of identity, such as ethnicity, nationality, tribal affiliation, religion, age, and personal identities, all of which are expressed by Native Americans at powwows. Each participant might form his or her identity by drawing from several or all these categories. Similar to Nettl’s example, Sacred Harp singers also find their identity at multiple levels, which are reinforced through shared culture, family history, and religious convictions.

These levels of identity are expressed in the particular editions of the songbook that the singers use, regional singing styles, family affiliations, and concepts of the significance of space—many singers with specific family practices try to carry on their ancestors’ legacy of

singing by actively participating within their home singing communities. And, most singers have a shared awareness of and interest in Sacred Harp history even if they were not born into a singing family. Singers express these concepts verbally only rarely by dedicating a song to a particular person, or briefly relating a family story before they begin their song. More often, singers express their cultural heritage through the music, by leading the song the way “their people” always led it. Occasionally, a singer will make this explicit by asking the group to sing a song the way a particular person or community sings it.

Concepts of place and space are another important basis for framing theories of identity. Sheila Whiteley (2004) states that “Music ... plays a significant part in the way that individuals author space, musical texts being creatively combined with local knowledges and sensibilities in ways that tell particular stories about the local, and impose collectively defined meanings and significance on space” (p. 3). Further, Whiteley asserts that specific “urban and rural spaces...provide the rich experiential settings in which music is consumed” (p. 2). Using Whiteley’s idea of space, I find that singers place meaning not only upon their geographic areas of residence, but also their specific places of singing— their churches and homes. Singers from every region, whether it is a large area or a small community, find significance in specific spaces, usually churches (and occasionally front porches or other similar settings) where singers either grew up or identify as their home singing community (see Figure 1.2). As Cohen asserts, identity is enhanced by the importance of kinships or strong collective memories that are attached to a particular place, such as the church (Cohen, 1997). Music, then, is significant as individuals use it to author space. Musical texts combine with local or regional knowledge and history, together composing meanings that are collectively tied to a space (Whiteley, 2004). I

discuss these concepts of the significance of space as I explore the multiple settings of Sacred Harp singing, both sacred and secular.

Identity in Notes and Books

Various cultural activities form the practice of Sacred Harp singing, but a number of tangible objects and visual symbols serve as points of connection among singers and begin to express the iconic nature of the Sacred Harp aesthetic. The shaped notes themselves serve as markers of identity, as symbols can frame a shared experience and a sense of common identity (Cooke, 2005). As Cooke (2005) explains, symbolic objects and actions help foster a sense of belonging among participants within a given religious tradition. He asserts, “to the insider [symbols] perform a very important function: they celebrate a person’s identity and his or her most important values” (p. 6). The shaped note-heads are a common symbol that singers use to assert their identity, apparently relishing the fact that only those who are initiated into the world of shape-note singing will be able to discern their meaning. People use these shaped notes outside the songbook on t-shirts, bumper stickers, and even coffee mugs. The written names of the shapes (fa, sol, la, and mi) also serve as symbols—I have noted signers’ license plates from at least a half a dozen states that read “FASOLA” (see Figure 1.3). Some use this kind of paraphernalia as a proselytizing tool, hoping to pique others’ interest and ultimately bring in new singers.

One of the most important and tangible symbols of an individual’s identity as a Sacred Harp singer is the *Sacred Harp* songbook itself. As Charles Cohen (2008) writes “print communication can foster a sense of common identity among readers both close to and distant from the actual center of distribution” (p. xiii). One common characteristic among all singers is that they use one of the three currently printed editions of the *Sacred Harp*. The book gives

singers a sense of belonging to the community even if they live far from the South. In addition, the particular edition of the book that a singer uses is a marker of the singing community with which he or she identifies. Not all singers use the same book. A major spur toward diversity in the Sacred Harp singing community was the publication of multiple competing editions of the *Sacred Harp* beginning in the early twentieth century (Cobb, 1978). In Chapter Four, I discuss the use of the J. L. White and Cooper revisions in Sand Mountain, demonstrating the degree to which the use of a different repertoire of songs sets Sand Mountain apart from other singing regions and adds to the uniqueness of the Sacred Harp culture in the area.²

Historical and Cultural Context

The *Sacred Harp* was first published in Hamilton, Georgia, in 1844 by B. F. White and E. J. King.³ Many of the songs that they included were composed in New England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The system of shaped notes used in the *Sacred Harp* and other contemporary hymnals was invented during that period to facilitate sight-reading among the musically illiterate (Cobb, 1978). Early American composers used the English solfege system of four repeated syllables (a one octave scale is fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa), but added shaped note-heads as a practical mnemonic device (Jackson, 1965). Singing school teachers asserted that singers could learn to read music rapidly and effectively by associating the shapes with their respective tones (Lowens, 1964). Itinerant teachers traveled across New

² As I discuss in chapter four, several varying editions of the Sacred Harp were published in the early twentieth century, and remain in print. They are named for their original editors. Although most singings on Sand Mountain use the Denson revision, which is by far the most popular, area singers also use the J. L. White and Cooper editions. See table 1.

³ For more information on the history of the Sacred Harp, see Cobb (1978), Beale (1994), and Miller (2008).

England promoting various hymnals, promising to improve congregational singing (Jackson, 1965).

By the time that the *Sacred Harp* was compiled, this type of notation, along with the style of music that had developed around it, had gone out of fashion in the North. Newer styles of harmony and pedagogy had become popular. According to Cobb (1978):

Advocates of a superior music [Lowell Mason, Thomas Hastings, and others] insisted on imported compositions and improved teaching methods. Organs began to be common in churches, thereby reducing the need for the strong harmony and the dearly bought musical discipline of the folk” (p. 62).

During the early nineteenth century, shape note singing spread to the South and West, and singing masters published new four-shape hymnals in these regions. One of the most popular was the *Sacred Harp*, which has been preserved in the Southeast by singing schools akin to those that used to be held in New England. In addition, the *Sacred Harp* has been revised a number of times, with new songs by contemporary composers added to every edition (Cobb, 1978). After the death of B. F. White in 1879, several different individuals compiled new editions of the *Sacred Harp*, which, to varying degrees, included music in more modern styles. I discuss the competing revisions of the *Sacred Harp* in Chapter Four (see Table 1); the most prevalent edition, the 1991 Denson revision, includes songs written from the early eighteenth century right up to the time of its publication (Beale, 1994).

Although the shaped note-heads were originally intended as an instructional tool, *Sacred Harp* singers nearly always “sing the shapes,” vocalizing the solfege, before singing the words of a song, even on songs that they have sung hundreds of times and know by heart (Cobb, 1978). Singers see the shaped notes as emblematic of their tradition. As I discuss below, the triangular

fa, rectangular la, circular sol, and diamond-shaped mi are iconic symbols that singers use to represent their culture.

During the folk revival of the mid-twentieth century, groups began singing from the *Sacred Harp* throughout the United States in areas where the hymnal had not been historically used. Many of them emulated Southern singers in leading practice and vocal style, began to attend singing conventions in the South, and established their own conventions (Miller, 2008). Ironically, Sacred Harp singing has been transplanted back to the Northeast where many of the songs originated. Singers regularly travel from around the nation to attend singings on Sand Mountain and other areas of the South.

Singers from Sand Mountain recognize that their participation in this musical form is rooted in a tradition that reaches back to the decades before the American Civil War. History is important to singers as a justification for the pride they feel in carrying on an activity that was very meaningful to their forebears. In addition, the long history of singing is an essential element of its iconic status; the fact that families and communities have been participating in and promoting this type of music for generations adds to the present cultural significance of Sacred Harp singing and gives current singers a strong impetus to maintain the tradition.

In the rural areas of Georgia and Alabama, as well as the growing cities of Atlanta and Birmingham, the *Sacred Harp* found a place in many southern homes. It also gave a way for its practitioners to identify as belonging to a unique musical tradition. Throughout the twentieth century, singers have been very aware of the differences separating their music from the more modern styles of music favored by an increasing proportion of the population, including late nineteenth century European hymnody and American gospel music. The open harmonies and complicated fugue forms typical of Sacred Harp music had gone out of style by the early 1900s,

replaced by music that many felt was easier to sing (Cobb, 1978). In addition, as communities increased in size and wealth, congregations purchased pianos or organs, and abandoned the older *a cappella* hymnals. Even while many of the founding members of the first *Sacred Harp* conventions were still alive, urban Southerners and proponents of other musical styles began to characterize shape note singing as antiquated and musically inferior (Cobb, 1978). By 1910, observers were already describing Sacred Harp singers as musical primitives in the backwoods; an article in the *Birmingham News* of that year referred to the singers as a small group who continue to hand down “weird airs” (cited in Bealle, 1997, p. 90).

As John Bealle observed, by 1900, the graphic textual images of Christ dying for sinners that pervade the lyrics of the *Sacred Harp* had become unfashionable, and most mainstream Christian denominations preferred the new gospel tunes that told more gentle stories of Christ and his love (Bealle, 1997). Matt Hinton (2006) describes the difference:

Gospel music, with its sweet strains and often sentimental imagery, like “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “Sweet By and By,” was in stark contrast to both the music and words of the old songs it was rapidly replacing. The old songs of the *Sacred Harp* were fiery, uncompromising, and inelegant.

“New Topia,” for example, typifies the older style of lyrics that are now obsolete in most modern Christian hymnals. Its refrain issues a stern warning:

Remember, you are hast’ning on
To death’s dark, gloomy shade;
Your joys on Earth will soon be gone,
Your flesh in dust be laid (Denson, 1991, p. 215).

As I discuss in Chapter Four, many Sand Mountain singers find the lyrics of equal importance to the music in Sacred Harp singing, proudly noting the marked difference between Sacred Harp texts and those in other hymnals widely used in the region. Many singers feel that the poetry of

the *Sacred Harp*, seemingly unchanged by modern trends in hymnody, adds to its iconic status as a musical form.

Partly as a result of the onslaught from the so-called “better music movement,” Sacred Harp singers fiercely guarded their tradition and maintained exceptionally conservative musical preferences throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bealle, 1997, p. 74). Even today, many singers are proud of the long history of shape note singing, and eagerly promote it as “America’s oldest musical tradition” (Hinton, 2006). Though many singers participate in other kinds of music, they tend to be strident in their support of the *Sacred Harp*; this history of defense against other musical forms has apparently made participants even more solid in their identity as Sacred Harp singers. In arguing for the significance of “tradition” as a trope in Sacred Harp culture, I demonstrate the ways in which the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing relates to historical perceptions, both among communities, and within individual families.

The legacy of the convention system further preserves traditions of Sacred Harp singing. B. F. White, along with other individuals, created annual conventions that meet annually over a period of several days for singing and fellowship. Often momentous community occasions, these conventions are held the same time each year and require significant labor in planning and execution by local singers (Cobb, 1978). The conventions, which began in Georgia and quickly spread through the Southeast, helped entrench Sacred Harp singing throughout the region; contemporary singers are proud that some of their singing conventions were inaugurated a century or more ago.⁴ Much like family reunions or church homecomings, annual conventions

⁴ The oldest, the Chattahoochee Convention, was founded in 1852 and takes place every year the first Sunday in August and the Saturday before at Wilson’s Chapel near Carrollton, Georgia (Miller, 2002). The oldest active convention on Sand Mountain is the Henagar-Union, which met for its 93rd session in July, 2009.

draw numerous participants, many of whom have known each other for years, and attract singers from multiple states.

Modern singings usually occur during weekends; in singing parlance, a singing lasting both Saturday and Sunday is called a “convention,” while an annual singing that meets only on one day is referred to as an “all-day singing.” As I discuss in Chapter Two, most conventions and singings elect officials who govern the order of events. These individuals act as chairs or committees and manage events of the singing such as arranging for the use of a church, calling leaders, giving prayers, and organizing a noon-time meal for all the attendants. Originally, individual singers were elected by their singing communities as delegates to represent each community at the convention. These leaders voted on issues at the convention and led one or more songs, collectively called a “lesson,” for the assembled group of singers, referred to as a “class.” This practice has changed over time, as the number of singers has diminished (Buell Cobb, personal communication, June 20, 2009). Whereas in the past, only a few singers from a particular area would represent their community by serving as delegates and leading at other communities’ conventions, every singer who attends a convention today is given the opportunity to lead.

The earlier manner of organizing conventions was an important factor in promoting distinct identities among different regions and communities. Elected singers from various areas of the South were allowed to stand up in front of the class, speak a few words, and lead the song they felt most appropriate (Cobb, 1978). As they lead, they could convey their own ideas about the way a particular song should be sung, as well as about the significance of Sacred Harp music itself. At present, singers still assert their own, sometimes competing, ideals about the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing as they get up to lead. In Chapter Four, I explain how leading a song in a

particular fashion conveys the leader's affiliation with a particular community or region; similarly, a leader may say a few words or dedicate a song to an individual as a way of conveying his or her interpretation of the music's significance.

Methodology

Previous research on the Sacred Harp includes little on performance techniques and regional styles. Most scholarly works are historical in nature and describe the geographical dispersion of singing through the South in the nineteenth century, the development of the various competing editions of the *Sacred Harp*, and biographical information about those individuals who were essential to the process. Only a small number of ethnographic works on Sacred Harp singing (or shape note singing from other books) have actually been conducted in the field.

"Thick descriptions" drawn from ethnographic study are essential in understanding the iconic nature of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain. Thick descriptions, after Geertz (1973), are accounts that describe not just behaviors, but their contexts within a culture:

To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense—is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of deemotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them (p. 30).

Thick descriptions include details about social context that early ethnographers felt were insignificant (Ibid.). In my study, they are useful not only to explain behaviors of singers, but also to understand the place of these behaviors within the social realms of Sacred Harp singing. Geertz's concept is particularly important in understanding what certain actions—whether performative or discursive—mean to individual singers. My research utilizes observations and extensive interviews in Sand Mountain and surrounding regions in order to generate thick descriptions.

I have obtained much of my information from Sacred Harp singers themselves. A key informant from the Sand Mountain community with whom I have worked closely is David Ivey, a lifelong singer and founder of Camp Fasola, near Anniston, Alabama, which promotes the teaching of Sacred Harp traditions. Joyce Walton, from Pisgah, Alabama, has an excellent repository of tunebooks, photographs, and historical documents, and is also a virtual history book with an exhaustive knowledge of various Sacred Harp traditions. In addition to Ivey and Walton, I have interviewed many singers from Georgia and Alabama who helped make this research meaningful and accurate.

Another important component of my fieldwork is the body of audio and video recordings I produced at area singings. The ability to play back numerous singings allowed for reanalysis of songs and made it possible to closely hear regional singing styles. I recorded singers alone, in small groups with myself, and in the context of larger singings. My video recordings have also proved important in identifying regional styles, including the various physical movements that leaders employ to direct the music. They also reveal the variable attributes of leading styles among different communities.

My position as an active participant in Sand Mountain singings since 2007 was instrumental in developing relationships with informants, allowing me to assess issues from an “insider’s” perspective that few other scholars have shared. I became acquainted with many Sand Mountain singers at conventions in Georgia, where I began singing in 2005. As an insider to the Sacred Harp tradition, constructing a thick description is possible through easy cooperation with singers and their families. I follow Aaron Fox’s (2004) example by interacting with informants on a personal level and becoming intimately familiar with their perspectives and interpretations. I have actively attended the Sand Mountain singings I describe for more than

two years. Many local singers are familiar with me and my work and readily offer me information any time I request it. This position also allows me to enter more private venues such as singers' homes, church services, and even funerals. My own activity as a Sacred Harp singer connects me with multiple individuals in singing communities, which has been essential in gaining access to and understanding important aspects of the Sacred Harp culture and its constituent subcultures.

My status as an active participant has also proven problematic. I am aware that singers whom I respect will be reading my work, and that they will not hesitate to correct me if they disagree with my conclusions. More importantly, I recognize that singers have shared very different opinions about aspects of singing with me, sometimes expressing diametrically opposed viewpoints. I have attempted to outline both sides of these arguments without endorsing any particular view, but I realize that some singers may disagree with my failure to support their perspective. Lastly, singers have shared information with me that they might not have felt comfortable presenting to a less familiar outside researcher. I have sought to be as circumspect as possible in leaving out accounts or details that other singers might find embarrassing.

In searching for deep connections between religion and music, I rely on methods similar to Jeff Titon's in *Powerhouse for God* (1988). Rather than simply expounding on the religious themes of musical texts, he actively sought out the underlying structures of and relationships between forms of music and forms of worship. In addition, he recognized the significance of small subsets of religious groups, including families and communities, within a larger organization. He writes of the community at the Fellowship Independent Baptist Church, in Luray, Virginia, "Family, intimately bound up with home, is the most powerful emotional touchstone in their worship services ... many are related through blood or marriage and have

known each other all their lives” (p. 66). Family ties encourage church members to identify as members of a distinct group. Along similar lines, I distinguish between ideas that are commonly held among Sand Mountain singers and those that reflect the divergent understandings of smaller subsets. In many instances, singing style and practice on Sand Mountain differ substantially among individuals with diverse family and church affiliations.

My investigation of the cultural context of Sacred Harp singing draws on Beverly Patterson’s (1995) method of considering factors beyond musical sound and religion in the study of a *cappella* singing. Patterson’s book, *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches*, identifies several social realms in which Primitive Baptist singing takes place. She traces the religious, social, and aesthetic context of singing, following each strand of inquiry separately, as well as exploring the margins where they overlap. She describes the Primitive Baptists’ music:

It is a tradition that continues to hold worlds of meaning—religious, social, and aesthetic—for the members and friends of Primitive Baptist churches. Field research and documentation suggest that Primitive Baptists actively use not only the words and melodies but even the musical sound and style of their singing to express and construct a complex religious identity (p. 2-3).

Although her scope is limited to Blue Ridge area members of the Primitive Baptist church, Patterson’s incisive exploration of the cultural situation of musical practices served as a model for my investigation of a form of music used both in and outside of church services.

Review of the Literature

Scholarly interest in Sacred Harp singing did not begin until the early twentieth century, when George Pullen Jackson brought the music to widespread public attention outside of the South, in a series of books concerning “white spirituals,” shape note singing, and the *Sacred*

Harp.⁵ Jackson's work, however, is problematic in several respects: some of the information is not accurate or well researched; much of his writing is poorly documented; and few aspects of the culture surrounding contemporary Sacred Harp singing are preserved in his writings. Jackson did, however, compile a large amount of information about shape note tunebooks, the songs that he called "white spirituals," and historic documentation of the *Sacred Harp*'s history. As Miller (2008) discusses, Jackson sought to demonstrate that white southerners had preserved a historic form of music comparable in significance to African American spirituals, which were undergoing a tremendous contemporary revival in popularity. Miller criticizes Jackson's work within the context of twentieth century racial discourse, noting that Jackson ignored the influences of African American music on early *Sacred Harp* composers. Despite their shortcomings, Jackson's books are excellent resources for basic historical and biographical information and useful tools in researching early American singing.

Other books similar to Jackson's, but more topic-specific, began to appear after 1950, concurrently with the beginnings of the American folk revival. Buell Cobb's book, *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and its Music* (1978), remains the definitive account of the history and people connected with Sacred Harp singing. This work gives numerous details surrounding the development of the Sacred Harp songbooks, and explores the origins of contemporary singing practices, intertwining ethnographic sketches throughout the text. Similar to Cobb's book are works by John Bealle (1997), Harry Eskew (1960), and Dorothy Horn (1970) who look at shape note singing in an historical context, but provide little ethnographic detail. These authors do prove useful, however, for their fluent knowledge of other historical aspects of shape note singing, society, and music theory.

⁵ See Jackson, (1943) *White and Negro spirituals*, (1952) *Another sheaf of white spirituals*, (1965) *White spirituals in the southern uplands*, (1975) *Spiritual folk-songs of early America*

Kiri Miller's book, *Traveling Home: American Pluralism in the Sacred Harp* (2008) is arguably the first work to focus on the cultural context of Sacred Harp singing. Miller discusses the Sacred Harp "diaspora," the spread of the tradition from the South throughout the United States. Through ethnographic description, extensive fieldwork, and cultural analysis, Miller examines singing communities that have formed in the late 20th century outside the south and how they find identity in their new traditions. Social issues, such as diversity among singers, are a central concern of her book, which is based on her 2005 dissertation from Harvard University. Her work aims for breadth rather than specificity, however, and numerous details that characterize singings in particular regions of the South are not discussed.

More focused on Sacred Harp singing in the South is Laura Clawson's dissertation, "'I belong to this Band, Hallelujah:' Community, Spirituality, and Tradition among Sacred Harp Singers" (2007). Clawson investigates the social structures that surround Sacred Harp singing, and devotes significant attention to the Sand Mountain region. I am especially indebted to her discussion of the political divide between local and visiting singers, as well as her exposition of the events surrounding singers' participation in the movie, *Cold Mountain* (Minghella, 2004). Although her work is extremely helpful to my own, her emphasis is in the field of sociology, and she spends comparatively little time addressing the musical aspects of the singing itself, and how these structure local singers' perceptions of the iconicity of their music.

Doris Dyen's (1977) dissertation on African-American shape note singing in the Wiregrass region of lower Alabama is the first substantial ethnographic work on a Sacred Harp community. Dyen's field was musicology, and her dissertation does not focus on ethnomusicological theories; nonetheless, it provides an in-depth history of the Wiregrass singers, discussing minute aspects of their singing style. Dyen's work provides a model for

describing shape-note singing practices in great detail; I seek to combine this approach with a careful attention to ethnomusicological theory in order to contextualize and better understand the reasons for specific aspects of singing style.

Only a small number of original documents contain history about the *Sacred Harp* and its compilers. Joe S. James' short volume *A Brief History of the Sacred Harp and its Author* (1904) is the only known publication that details the history of the tunebook and its author, B. F. White, within fifty years of his death. However, the songbooks, including James' revision, provide information about the songs and authors as well as preface material describing the events that led to produce a new edition. In addition, all shape note tunebooks in the singing school tradition that include a rudiments section are important for understanding how the singing practices were historically taught. These include books similar to the *Sacred Harp* that were published in the mid-nineteenth century across the South; two of these, the *Christian Harmony* (1866) and the *New Harp of Columbia* (1867), remain in active use.

My thesis contributes to the body of literature on *Sacred Harp* singing by investigating the cultural significance of the music on Sand Mountain, but also by preserving a wealth of detail about the culture surrounding the musical form in an important singing community. Much of the information that I have gathered from local singers has either escaped the notice of other scholars, or been considered inconsequential because it relates to cultural practices outside of official *Sacred Harp* singings. My work on the iconicity of *Sacred Harp* singing on Sand Mountain contributes to the broader scholarly project of reevaluating forms of traditional music in America, recognizing the importance of cultural context on musical style and performance.

Terminology

Sacred Harp singers use a specialized vocabulary to describe aspects of their practices. Many of these terms are borrowed from the New England singing school tradition; a group of singers is called a “class,” and individuals lead “lessons” of one or more songs (Cobb, 1978).⁶ Singers refer to the space in the center of the singing class where the leader stands as the “hollow square.” An “all day singing” generally lasts from about 9 am to 2 pm, and singings that meet on two or more consecutive days are referred to as “conventions.” All day singings and conventions are held annually on the same weekend each year. Smaller monthly or weekly sessions are often referred to as “practice singings,” and those that meet in the evening are called “night singings” (Ibid.). During most annual singings, a half hour or so is set aside for a “memorial lesson,” when appointed singers read a list of those who have died during the past year, and those who are sick or shut-in, and make brief remarks in their remembrance (Miller, 2008).

Singers identify songs as belonging to several distinct types. “Fuging tunes” begin with a section of homophony where all of the vocal parts sing in rhythmic unison. Midway through, the musical texture shifts to imitative polyphone where one or more parts lead with a new rhythmic/melodic motif, and the other parts join in at separate moments, each mimicking the previous one (Cobb, 1978). As Buell Cobb describes, “fuging tunes compensate for ‘harmonic ineptitude’ with rhythm, colorful style, and interest for each singing part” (Ibid., p. 38). Leaders often turn to each vocal section as their fugue subject enters, called “leading in the parts.” Doing this effectively is a skill that takes considerable time to master. “Anthems” are songs with irregular meters designed to accompany and emphasize specific scriptural texts. They are often very lengthy, with multiple sections and unique use of vocal forces including solos or duets

⁶ For more information on New England singing schools, see Lowens (1964), *Music and Musicians in Early America*.

(Ibid.) The *Sacred Harp* includes many homophonic hymn tunes, but the harmonies are distinct from most modern hymnals because the voice parts frequently cross, and final cadences often omit the third scale degree, especially in the minor mode (Ibid.).

Chapter Outline

I begin Chapter Two by describing the multiple contexts of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain. There, Sacred Harp is more than just one musical choice among many, as local singers frame a number of other cultural activities around singing conventions, and understand Sacred Harp as an iconic form encompassing aspects that range from sacred to secular. Throughout my work, I refer to distinctions between “sacred” and “secular.” While local singers might vary somewhat in their interpretation of these terms, “sacred” generally refers to events, texts, or spaces closely associated with their Christian religious practices. The word “secular” is not necessarily used in a negative sense, but describes anything that has no particular religious association. Most Sand Mountain singers consider the lyrics of the *Sacred Harp*, which are nearly all religious in nature, as sacred; many singers also treat the music as sacred, associating it with the texts and with the church services at which they are used (Shelbie Sheppard, personal communication, July 3, 2008). Thus, Sacred Harp singings at local churches are treated with the respect that Sand Mountain residents accord religious traditions.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, however, Sacred Harp music is sometimes performed in settings that are considered secular, including concerts, social gatherings, and impromptu singings at restaurants or even bars. Lacking any religious associations, standards in dress, language, and behavior at these events are much looser than at regular singings. All-day singings include a mix of religious and secular elements, and act as mediating events, providing a context for sacred as well as secular activities. I detail some of the social activities that

converge around Sacred Harp conventions, investigating singers' differing concepts of the limits of the appropriate use of Sacred Harp music.

In Chapter Three, I explore the concept of "Sand Mountain culture" as it is significant to area singers. Combining local residents' understandings of their uniqueness with demographic statistics, I outline the features that distinguish Sand Mountain from other areas of the South. Sand Mountain is a relatively rural region with a population that is more homogeneous racially, religiously, and politically than surrounding areas of Alabama. I discuss the way in which values derived in part from the practices of Sacred Harp singing have impacted relations between Sand Mountain residents and the numerous visitors that attend singings in the region throughout the year. I build upon my earlier discussion of distinctions between sacred and secular, noting the diversity of ideologies that converge at singings, and explaining the capacity for and limits of tolerance that Sand Mountain singers show toward outsiders.

Chapter Four focuses on the concept of "tradition," one of the most important aspects of singing to local participants. I investigate the meaning they give this term, showing how Sacred Harp singing acts as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting families and communities across generations. Integral in this discussion is an interrogation of the means by which the "tradition" is disseminated among practitioners; a complex admixture of written and oral transmission allows for a variety of interpretations among Sand Mountain residents.

In Chapter Five, I consider the competing conceptions of the iconicity of Sacred Harp music, beginning with early to mid-twentieth century ethnomusicological work that historicized and primitivized Sacred Harp singing. I demonstrate that many of these conceptions are still influential in accounts of Sacred Harp, focusing on descriptions of the musical form written in conjunction with the release of the film *Cold Mountain*, in 2003. The movie also encouraged

reflection among Sacred Harp singers around the nation about the proper settings and meanings of this music. I explore the impact that the movie had on outsiders' conceptions of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain, as well as the discussions among local singers that were sparked by aspects of the film that some considered problematic. In particular, I focus on the promotion of singing at Liberty Church; "Liberty" itself became iconic, representing a particular style, sound, and culture that others interpreted as the most "authentic" form of Sacred Harp.

I begin in Chapter Two by explicating the practices of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain in detail, then move to a discussion of the differences that local singers recognize as existing between themselves and others. I continue in Chapters Three and Four by interrogating the social meanings that Sand Mountain singers associate with their music, and then conclude in Chapter Five with an investigation of the range of different meanings that observers from both on and off the mountain ascribe to Sacred Harp singing. Throughout, however, I focus on the issue of iconicity, addressing the various ways in which Sacred Harp in the region is a multifaceted expression of culture. Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain ties together multiple social realms, forging and strengthening bonds between generations and across time and space.

CHAPTER II NOTES ALMOST DIVINE

*Oh, could I speak the matchless worth,
Oh, could I sound the glories forth,
Which in my Savior Shine, Which in my Savior Shine.
I'd soar and touch the heav'nly strings,
And vie with Gabriel while he sings,
In notes almost divine, In notes almost divine* (Denson, 1991, p. 396).

The Contexts of Sacred Harp Singing on Sand Mountain

Amongst Sand Mountain participants, Sacred Harp singing is more than simply a musical style; it forms a much broader aesthetic around which numerous other cultural activities are organized. Sacred Harp singings connect the secular to the sacred, situated between Sand Mountain singers' religious practices and other realms of cultural expression that are often considered completely separate. This chapter begins with a detailed account of a singing, then discusses the use of Sacred Harp music in area churches. I continue by examining the place of Sacred Harp singing in non-religious settings, and then detail the ways in which singers conceive of their participation as both sacred and secular.

At a Sand Mountain Singing

In March 2008, I attended my first singing on Sand Mountain at Liberty Baptist Church (see Figure 1.1). Liberty hosts three annual singings: the Ivey Memorial, on the first fifth Sunday of the year; Decoration Day, in June; and the Henagar-Union Convention, in July. All singings are well attended, but the Henagar-Union Convention generally attracts a very large crowd of local and visiting singers, often numbering over 200 (see Figure 2.1). However, the first singing I attended at Liberty consisted of a smaller group of mostly local singers. Many of

those in attendance belonged to the extended Ivey family, as the singing is held in memorial of their deceased family members.

When I traveled to the same annual singing a year later, on the fifth Sunday of March, 2009, many people who were unknown or only vaguely familiar to me the first time were now greeting me with hugs and handshakes, having become good friends during the intervening year I spent traveling to Sand Mountain singings. I arrived a little later than I would have liked, as I neglected to account for delays caused by the Knoxville Marathon that morning. Just as I walked in the door, the singing was opening with Shane Wootten, the chairman, leading page 32 on the top, "Corinth" (Denson, 1991, p. 32), as the opening song. All-day singings elect officers, usually singers who live in the community of the host church, to direct the events of the day, including a chairman or chairwoman, vice chair, and secretary. They, in turn, appoint others to help with various responsibilities, including taking up and counting the collection (the financial committee), calling on singers to lead (the arranging committee), and offering prayers (the chaplain). Larger conventions sometimes have more committee assignments to help coordinate the singing and surrounding events.

Shane, who had been elected the previous year as chairman, belongs to both the Ivey and Wootten families, since his father is a Wootten and his mother an Ivey. He is one of the most active singers in the area, especially among his younger generation. The singing began as he walked to the center of an open square surrounded by singers on all sides and called out the page number of his song; as he sounded out the first note for each part to take their key, the class immediately hushed and conversations were cut short as everyone began to sing. Shane led with a simple but effective up and down motion of his hand, and a few singers in the front rows of each part led along in a similar fashion. While this practice was developed to aid everyone in

keeping time, it also gives the singers a way to physically “get into” the song—many will lead with their hand and tap with their feet at the same time (Judy Caudle, personal communication, July 1, 2009). It is very helpful, as well, to have front-row tenors leading along when singers who are less experienced or unable to clearly beat time are called to lead songs.

As Shane and the assembled class began to sing, the church rang with a kind of energy that is difficult to describe to anyone who has not experienced it in person. Unlike other types of sacred music that rely on organ or piano accompaniment for much of their strength, Sacred Harp singing has developed a unique aesthetic that emphasizes the musical possibilities inherent in unaccompanied singing, and thus sounds remarkably different from mainstream hymnody. Perhaps most immediately noticeable, Sacred Harp singers sing at “full voice,” and many longtime singers have developed incredibly “full” voices—even though the singing is unaccompanied, the volume is very loud. Few singers use any vibrato, and the sound is strong and clear. Also, singers perform with “accent,” as they call it, meaning that they heavily emphasize the primary beats of a measure, depending on the time signature. At the same time, they sing each note very individually, letting off slightly between notes, creating a pulsing, rhythmic drive. Inside a church like Liberty, the sound rings off the bare walls and floors, hitting with an almost palpable physical force.

Singers sit in pews arranged in a square with each side seating a particular vocal part (see Figure 1.4). The normal arrangement of pews at Liberty accommodates this seating well: tenor (melody) singers sit in the pews facing the pulpit while bass singers sit to their left in inward-facing pews; treble singers are across the square from the basses and altos sit around the pulpit, facing the tenors. Large singings at Liberty require folding chairs and extra pews placed in front of and on both sides of the pulpit to accommodate the altos. In effect, this seating arrangement,

usually referred to by singers as the “hollow square,” focuses the sound into the open center, the area where leaders stand to direct songs. Here, leaders experience the most intense sound in the building, which they often describe as incredibly powerful in a spiritual, as well as an aural sense (Miller, 2008, p. 75).

As I found a place to sit on the second row, other singers trickled in and eventually the church filled to around two thirds of its capacity—more than enough to make for a very powerful singing. The class stood to pray as the song finished, and then the other officers each led a song before turning the session over to the arranging committee, who called singers one at a time to come to the center and lead a song. Their job as a committee is both to make sure that everyone gets a chance to lead before the day is up, as well as to try to let those who have traveled from far away lead at the best times, after the class has warmed up in the morning, but before the energy starts to lag in the afternoon. In order to give everyone a chance to lead, singers are encouraged not to make lengthy remarks or sing too many verses, and the singing moves quickly from one leader to the next, interspersed with short breaks after each hour or so of singing. Individuals usually lead songs alone, but sometimes friends or family members are called on to lead a song together.

As the leaders step one by one to the center of the square and call out the page numbers of their songs, either they or a member of the class will set the key. Usually, singers rely on one of a few individuals who are especially talented at knowing exactly where to pitch a song so that it will be in a comfortable singing range for all the parts. This skill comes from years of experience and a comprehensive knowledge of the songs in the book, as it is always done by ear, without the aid of a pitch-pipe or tuning fork. On Sand Mountain, the “keyers” are usually male, although some women will occasionally key their own songs. The pitches they sound

correspond to the four-note solfege system used in the *Sacred Harp* – fa, sol, la, fa, sol, la, mi, fa.⁷ After the song is keyed, all singers join in with their starting pitch and sing through the entire song using only the four-note solfege syllables. Often difficult for beginners, experienced Sacred Harp singers sound the syllables with ease and great dexterity. These syllables correspond with shaped noteheads in the printed music and allow singers to read music without learning the standard method of reading lines and spaces.

At noon, the chairman of the singing, Shane Wootten, closed the morning session and asked another local singer, Joel Jenkins, to pray for the dinner-on-the-grounds meal. Most singers quickly made their way to the recently built social hall where two long sets of tables were covered with dishes, mostly fixed at home and brought by the singers to share. I stayed inside the church for several minutes to ask some questions, and when I arrived in the social hall, the food was still plentiful. Everything imaginable filled the tables, from Southern staples including collard greens and deviled eggs, to a less-familiar ramen-noodle and almond salad. I headed back to the line for second helpings and made a third trip for a dessert of banana pudding. The hour of eating and socializing quickly passed, and everyone made their way back into the church to resume singing.

After lunch, the singing often has more gusto and volume than in the morning session, mainly because everyone has had a chance to rest his or her voice and build up energy from the meal. This singing was no exception, and the singing frequently rose to an almost deafening level in the front rows of the church. The volume tended to ascend when a favorite song of the class was called or an energetic leader led a song. Three young women, all in their 20s, led “Will You Meet Me” (Cooper, 2006, p. 559), and the class responded well to the quick tempo of

⁷ See Cobb (1978) for a more thorough discussion of the mechanics of a Sacred Harp singing.

the gospel song. A number of leaders led Cooper book songs that day, even though the singing is listed in the official minutes and directory as a Denson book singing. As I discuss in Chapter Four, Liberty and other churches in the area have long ties to the Cooper book, and some singers prefer the sweeter harmonies in this edition.

The March singing at Liberty is the Ivey Memorial—a singing in memory of the Iveys and their extended family. Conventions often include memorial lessons, moments set aside for a designated individual to speak briefly about the singers who have died in the previous year. The Ivey Memorial, however, followed a slightly different format to honor the family. Shane Wootten briefly presented an old photograph of his great grandfather and grandmother Ivey. After showing the picture, he asked for all of their grandchildren (Shane’s parent’s generation) to come into the square and lead a song in their memory. Hobert, Loyd, and Coy Ivey, Eloise Wootten, and Norma Green led “New Harmony” (Denson, 1991, p. 406), which Eloise suggested because it was “her grandmother’s song,” meaning that it was one she loved and frequently led (Eloise Ivey, personal communication, March 29, 2009). Loyd asked to lead “Not Made with Hands” (Cooper, 2006, p. 571), his grandfather’s favorite song (Loyd Ivey, personal communication, March 29, 2009). Following these leaders, a number of families, including Loyd Ivey’s children and grandchildren, entered the square to lead a song together (see Figure 2.2).

After the arranging committee informed the chairman that everyone who wanted to lead had been given the chance, Shane asked for announcements. Singers responded by giving the dates for upcoming singings in their own communities, sometimes making particular pleas for singings in need of help. Following the announcements, all the officers led “Hallelujah” (Denson, 1991, p. 146), and after the class sang the shapes, they rose to their feet and “took the

parting hand” while they sang the words, walking around and shaking hands in fellowship.

Once the song ended, everyone remained standing, and the chaplain offered the closing prayer. The church took quite a while to empty out, as everyone said their goodbyes and tried to greet anyone they may have missed during the day. The singing ended a little after 2:00 PM, with about seventy-five to a hundred songs led during the nearly four hours of singing.

The Sacred Harp in a Sacred Context

While an all-day singing on Sand Mountain is a religious event in a loosely defined sense, Sacred Harp singings have always been non-denominational gatherings; Buell Cobb describes them as “a curious blend of the sacred and the secular” (Kennedy, 2003, p. E1). Singings are not the only place that this music is performed, however—the *Sacred Harp* also has an important place within the worship services of local churches. The long history of singing from the *Sacred Harp* in several area congregations is an important influence on the way that singing itself is perceived among area participants, lending a sense of sacredness to the hymnal and the songs it contains (Darlene Dalton, personal communication, October 9, 2008). In order to understand the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain it is essential to recognize the importance of the religious contexts in which this music is sung, which parallel the semi-religious singing conventions, as well as other, decidedly secular events that occur in conjunction with the conventions.

There are around a dozen annual conventions and all-day singings in the Sand Mountain region, but the *Sacred Harp* songbook is used nearly every Sunday at one or more of the three local churches that still use the book as their hymnal. Historically, many churches in the area used the book, but one by one, most congregations abandoned the book for more modern hymnals (Shane Wootten, personal communication, April 12, 2009). Some of these churches

that used to sing from the *Sacred Harp* in worship services still host annual singings from the hymnal, and many of their older members remember when the book was much more widely used. Only three churches in the region still sing from the *Sacred Harp* during worship: Liberty, in Henagar; Antioch, in Ider (see Figure 2.3); and Shady Grove, between Section and Dutton (see Figure 2.4).⁸ Of these, Liberty is the best known among Sacred Harp singers nationally, and hosts one of the largest annual singings—the July Henagar Union Convention. Antioch also draws large crowds to its annual singing in April, and Shady Grove is known for its use of other books; they hold a Cooper Book singing every October, and sing from the White, Cooper, and Denson revisions at their Summer session.

Just as the singers travel to each other's churches for singings, the members of each of these three churches often meet together for religious services, alternating meeting locations week by week among the church buildings. The history of these churches is directly related to their use of the Sacred Harp; they originally began as Primitive Baptist churches, which forbid the use of musical instruments inside the chapel, but changing theological positions spurred their conversion to independent Baptists (Tony Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). Liberty, for example, began as a Primitive Baptist congregation belonging to the Wills Creek Primitive Baptist Association, founded in 1836, the same year Dekalb County was incorporated. Its members declared independence in 1914, rejecting the Primitive Baptist doctrine of predestination, election, and a limited atonement. All of these churches now preach salvation

⁸ These three churches once belonged to the Mount Olive Baptist Association, which included a fourth church, Mount Olive Baptist, in Rome, Georgia. A split caused the churches on Sand Mountain to break away in the 1970s. Currently, Liberty and Antioch belong to the Mt. Pleasant Association, and Shady Grove and Mount Olive maintain strong ties. The members of Mount Olive in Rome still sing from the *Sacred Harp* (Tony Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

through free grace in a general atonement, instead (Tony Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

Although the Sand Mountain churches that sing from the *Sacred Harp* during worship differ substantially from the Primitive Baptists on their interpretation of these key doctrines, they still retain many aspects of Primitive Baptist organization and worship style. Like the Primitive Baptists, they rely on elders drawn from their local congregations as leaders, and none of them hold formal Sunday schools or support missionary efforts (Patterson, 1995). In addition, their services are very close to those of the Primitive Baptist churches in the region; long-time singer and Primitive Baptist Elder Ricky Harcrow stated that Liberty Church still keeps its Primitive Baptist service design nearly a century after it split from the Wills Creek Association: “Practically speaking, you wouldn’t know it from a Primitive Baptist service” (personal communication, February 1, 2009). Like the Primitive Baptists, members meet about an hour before the service to sing without any accompaniment. The singing is followed by an extemporaneous sermon, and the meeting is closed with more singing and prayer.

The church buildings themselves reflect their Primitive Baptist heritage. While they are all relatively simple in design, Liberty has been least altered over the years, and best fits the traditional form of a plain, white church with no steeple or stained glass (Ricky Harcrow, personal communication, February 1, 2009). Each of the churches is a spacious, but not overly large sanctuary, with an altar table and pulpit in the front, pews facing inward on the right and left of the pulpit, and the remainder of the space filled with forward-facing pews. Pictorial decoration is not proscribed, as in Primitive Baptist churches (Patterson, 1995), but is still somewhat sparse. Shady Grove, for example, has a single stained-glass window picturing Christ prominently situated on the altar wall, and Liberty displays a painting of Christ praying in

Gethsemane in the same position. As for architectural ornament, the churches are approximately equal in plainness, with off-white interior paint and unobtrusive moldings (see Figure 1.1).

I attended Sunday service at Liberty Baptist in February 2009. Since church only meets there once a month, several congregants from Antioch and Shady Grove were there as well. I arrived a few minutes early and was one of the first in the church—people trickled in as they started the “singing service” shortly after 10 am. One of the local members is chosen each month to lead the singing service, meaning that he leads first and then asks others to get up and lead one by one (Tony Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). Shane Wootten “had the singing” this time, as they called it, and got up to lead the song on the top of page 32, “Corinth” (Denson, 1991) a popular opening song. He led without singing the shapes first, and asked the congregation to stand as they sang, and to remain standing during the prayer, which was offered by the regular preacher at Liberty, Tony Ivey.

In general, the singing followed the standard pattern of any all-day singing in the area. Shane keyed songs by ear just as he would at a singing, and the leaders made only brief remarks before their songs. In other respects, however, the singing was subtly different. Singers chose songs at their own discretion, without any particular theme, but most selected familiar songs that many could sing without looking at the book. Also, most of the leaders elected to omit the shapes, since a number of the congregants do not sing the music outside of worship and are unfamiliar with the shapes, but several asked specifically to sing them before the words. While most songs came from the Denson revision of the *Sacred Harp*, a few leaders chose songs from the Cooper revision. Liberty Baptist has Cooper and Denson books in each of the pews, along with a photocopied booklet of songs from the J. L. White revision, which was not available in

reprint until 2008. Singers often lead songs from each of these books, which, as I discuss in Chapter Four, all have a long history of usage in the region.

Unlike at a regular singing, the singers were only loosely arranged in parts, with mostly basses and trebles sitting on their respective sides, but no altos around the pulpit and altar table. The altos, as well as some trebles and basses, were all intermixed with the tenors in the forward facing pews where the tenors usually sit for a singing. None of the singers seemed to have difficulty following their parts, even though they were not all seated together, perhaps because the selected songs were all very familiar. In some respects, the singing before the church service was actually less formal than an all-day singing; the leaders were not given advanced notice by the person arranging before they got up, and there were no officers or special lessons. The feeling of the service, however, was tempered by a stronger air of reverence than would typically be felt at a regular singing. Though the atmosphere was not tense or restrained, no one joked or laughed.

Shane asked Tony to lead a closing song, and as he did, a few people got up from their seats on the sides with the basses and trebles to take seats in the center. Others took the song as a cue to head to the restrooms before the preaching started. The service follows a particular pattern, but there is no printed program. Tony stood to make a few remarks, and then everyone sang “Happy Birthday” to the members with birthdays during the month. Members also came forward to lay their offerings on a bench in the front of the altar table, and those with birthdays were encouraged to make a special donation to the care of the church building. The birthday offerings are which placed in a tiny bank in the shape of a white church (Tony Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). On this particular Sunday, a young man from Middle Tennessee was invited as a guest preacher. His lively sermon lasted about half an hour,

uninterrupted, and was followed by an altar call, in which he asked for anyone to come forward and have him pray with them or for them, or express their conviction of grace. While he encouraged anyone to come up, the congregation sang the words of “Amazing Grace” (Denson, 1991, p. 45) to the tune of “Brown” (Cooper, 2006, p. 511) (see Audio Recording 1.1). When they reached the chorus, they sang the words from “Brown,” “I want to go, I want to go, I want to go there too...” The service closed with one more song, followed by a prayer, and then everyone adjourned to the social hall to share a potluck lunch, much like the dinner-on-the-grounds served at singings. During the service, which lasted from approximately ten in the morning until noon, the congregation spent more time singing from the *Sacred Harp* than in any other activity.

The continuous usage of the *Sacred Harp* in church services outside of regular annual singings is a testament to the importance of the music in the religious life of Sand Mountain singers. Songs, whether sung during church or at a regular singing, are as sacred as scripture verses and a reverent attitude is expected while singing. While the annual singings are not church services per se, they are clearly religious events on Sand Mountain. In many ways, however, Sacred Harp singing mediates between sacred and secular realms, tying together disparate aspects of local culture. An all-day singing is a mix of the religious and the secular, focusing attention on the sacred aspects of local musical customs, while simultaneously bringing an intensified aesthetic awareness and sense of performance into the church.

While singing is religious, it is not a church service in the usual sense (Tony Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). Singings are generally held in churches on Sand Mountain, but this is not a rule; occasionally other spaces, such as community centers, are used, when a church is unavailable or the attendance is expected to exceed a church’s capacity.

Participants are expected to dress neatly and not in casual attire, and most come on Sunday dressed as they would for church, with women in skirts and dresses and men in shirts and ties. The atmosphere in a singing is not quite as reverent as at the Sunday worship services, but is still very respectful. Still, an amusing remark is not considered out of place, and singers will laugh at each other's accidental missteps, memory lapses, and the like. Making light of the words of a song, however, or criticizing anyone else's belief or lifestyle would be considered completely out of place and never be tolerated. There is no preaching, but a few singers may give some remarks about the religious importance of the words of the song they are about to lead. These tend, however, to be generalized reflections on the goodness of God, the importance of family and community, and the significance of Christian devotion, rather than elaborations of specific denominational positions or doctrinal points that might be divisive.

Many singers consider the strength of the Spirit at a singing a more important indicator of its success than any aspect of the music. Darlene Dalton, originally from Ider, grew up singing and going to church between Shady Grove at Dutton, Alabama and Mount Olive in Rome, Georgia. She described a particularly good singing:

Tears just flowing. Now, see, that's when it's good. That's just like after church on Sunday. We were talking about one particular singing and I said you know, you see how it was this morning in the service? When the spirit was in the music? The emotion was in it. I said I don't find that at that place and it's hard for some of us to know better. To know what it's really like and how it's really supposed to be—that it really is a gospel music and it really is worship (personal communication, October 9, 2008)

Those who have traveled to singings in other areas of the country sometimes emphasize the comparative importance of the religious significance of Sacred Harp on Sand Mountain, distancing themselves from the perceived attitudes of other groups who perform the music outside of any religious context. As Darlene continued,

It's hard for us to go to places where they treat it like an ethnic or folk music and we don't sing certain songs where it might offend somebody. Well, sorry. Not meant to offend but if he told us to get stompin' or get right with Jesus, let's have a little talk with Jesus! (personal communication, October 9, 2008).

Part of the sense of identity shared amongst Sand Mountain singers is an understanding that Sacred Harp singing is a religious observance with deeply sacred meaning, whether in the context of a church service, an all-day singing, or another event.

The Sacred Harp in a Secular Context

The religious significance of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain is by no means limited to explicitly religious events, like church services, or semi-religious events, like annual singings. Singers also conceive of the music as an important part of their local cultural heritage, and most do not hesitate to bring other forms of cultural expression into the social field of Sacred Harp singing, or, conversely, to take Sacred Harp singing into other cultural arenas (Dennis George, personal communication, March 29, 2009). Though the sense of sacredness that most singers associate with the music and its lyrics does not necessarily fade in other contexts, there, singers often engage in behaviors and activities that would not be sanctioned at church meetings or official singings. The applicability of Sacred Harp across a wide cultural spectrum on Sand Mountain testifies to its iconic status; more than just a form of music, it finds expression in multiple realms, forming an overarching aesthetic that extends well beyond the singings themselves.

Shortly after the Henagar Union Convention each July, singers gather at the home of Coy and Marie Ivey, just a few minutes from Liberty Baptist Church, to make music of a sort that would never be tolerated inside the church itself. Within the past decade Coy decided to start inviting over a few friends after the singing to get together for a “pickin’” (Dennis George,

personal communication, March 29, 2009). Singers bring over instruments and put together an informal string-band to play old time music by ear (see Figure 2.5). Loyd Ivey (who also plays the harmonica with the string-band) and his daughters often join the music by flatfooting, also called “buckdancing,” which is an old-fashioned dance style somewhat similar to clogging (see Figure 2.6) (Susan Harcrow, personal communication, July 11, 2009). More recently, word got out about the pickin’ and a sizeable percentage of the singing class at Liberty, plus a number of others who come just to play or listen, now head over to the Iveys’ after the singing. Anyone is welcome to join in, and a number of singers from across the country bring their instruments along so they can participate. Most just come for more socializing, as well as the supper of hamburgers and hot-dogs provided by the Iveys (Dennis George, personal communication, March 29, 2009).

The pickin’ is deemed appropriate in the context of Sacred Harp singing because it is another expression of local culture with deep historical roots. In some respects, the association with the singing lends status to the informal musical event, even though the two forms of music at first seem largely unrelated. Many of the instrumentalists there, however, still remain under the influence of the Sacred Harp aesthetic when they perform, even though the *Sacred Harp* book itself was written expressly for congregations that would never make use of instrumental accompaniment. This sense of a larger, encompassing aesthetic connecting the musical genres is expressed by many singers who also play instruments. Many assert that various songs in the *Sacred Harp* were originally “fiddle tunes.” They also suggest that part of the reason so many Sacred Harp composers used pentatonic scales was because of their familiarity with banjo music (Tom Malone, personal communication, January 10, 2009).

Other singers actually combine the two forms, and play instrumental arrangements of tunes in the Sacred Harp. Perhaps best known for this is Sand Mountain singer Dennis George, who released a compact disc in 2002 called *There is a Happy Land*, featuring himself playing the guitar, mandolin, banjo and other instruments, all overdubbed together. He and two young female singers from Alabama—Cassie Franklin Allen and Emily Creel—toured the United Kingdom playing these and other old-time songs, and sang from the Sacred Harp, as well. Dennis noted that many generations on Sand Mountain have played this type of music as well as sung from the Sacred Harp, and feels that the combination of the two forms is therefore fitting (Dennis George, personal communication, March 29, 2009). He and other singers include other forms of local music under the broader rubric of “Sacred Harp,” demonstrating the degree to which the musical form has been accorded iconic status on Sand Mountain.

Because of the popularity of Sacred Harp singing in the region, it has found a place outside of its usual context in church services and all-day singings, as singers from Sand Mountain and other regions travel to music festivals, concerts, and other events to showcase their music (Cobb, 1978). Since their first invitation to participate in the Newport Folk Festival in 1964, singers have performed at events as large as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and as small as demonstration singings at a local library (Elene Stovall, personal communication, September 20, 2008). After the 2007 National Convention in Birmingham, Alabama, a singing that lasts three days, I went with singers to the City Stages Program. Sacred Harp singers were asked to participate in an annual musical festival held in downtown Birmingham, spread over several stages. At the appointed time, approximately 50 singers assembled on the steps to the chancel in front of the pulpit at the Episcopal Cathedral, following a small instrumental folk music ensemble. We sang about ten songs, under the direction of Mark Davis, chairman of the

National Convention that year, to a fairly full church; the audience numbered roughly two to three hundred people.

This singing did not reflect the standard sound or arrangement of Sacred Harp singing. More like a concert, one leader led all the songs, the parts were divided in lateral sections, rather than a four-sided square, and it was difficult to keep together given the echoing sound in the large hall. Everyone I spoke with emphasized the same two points: first, that singing as a performance was not a real expression of what Sacred Harp entailed; second, that demonstrating the music to others was acceptable nonetheless as it served to promote the music and, possibly, to attract new singers. Even though singers felt the music was out of place in this setting, it was not because of the secular nature of the event, but because the songs could not be sung as usual.

The *Sacred Harp* began as a collection of music for religious worship and has never lost its sacred associations, especially on Sand Mountain, where it is still used as the hymnal in several local churches. Sacred Harp music, however, encompasses a much broader aesthetic, finding expression in cultural activities that extend well beyond the bounds of the churches. Sacred Harp singings mediate between sacred and secular culture on Sand Mountain, providing an opportunity for religious expression as well as serving as the connecting locus for a range of non-religious events. While the ties between local religion and singing are a strong influence on the identity of local singers, the iconic nature of Sacred Harp singing finds expression throughout all levels of culture on Sand Mountain.

CHAPTER III UP ON THE MOUNTAIN

We're going to the singing tomorrow up on the mountain
(Reba Dell Windom, personal communication, May 31, 2008).

Cultural Identity on Sand Mountain

People on Sand Mountain are demographically and culturally distinct from the rest of Alabama's populations. They take pride in their local culture and recognize the characteristics that make them unique. Prominent among these is a respect for "tradition." Many area residents consider their culture a survival of a way of life that was once common in the South but has subsequently disappeared. These factors contribute to the importance of Sacred Harp singing in the region; local singers consider this form of music a crucial element of Sand Mountain culture. In order to explain the iconicity of Sacred Harp music on Sand Mountain, it is essential to understand the local sense of a strong regional identity.

Although Sand Mountain singers adamantly emphasize the importance of maintaining what they consider to be traditional ways of singing and interpreting the songs in the *Sacred Harp*, this sentiment is tempered by another set of values that is prominently expressed in the performance of their music: acceptance and tolerance. Local singers recognize the disparity between their own political and ethical values and those of many of the people who come to visit and sing with them, but they consciously respect the diverse backgrounds and ideologies of their guests. Indeed, this is one of the most significant ways in which the values expressed in the iconic musical form translate over into actions outside the realm of singing. I begin with an in-depth examination of what local singers consider "authentic" Sand Mountain culture, focusing on characteristics of the region that distinguish it from other areas of the South. Then, I consider the ways in which the practices of Sacred Harp singing are shaped by local demographics, and

also serve to structure the encounters between locals and visitors, muting some of the more strident expressions of Sand Mountain's conservative values.

Sand Mountain

As a geographical feature, Sand Mountain extends from the northeast corner of Alabama into mid-southern Tennessee. Part of the Cumberland Plateau, the mountain forms the southwestern tip of the Appalachians ("Cumberland Plateau," 2009). Sand Mountain is actually more of a broad plateau than a mountain—roads that go west from Interstate 59 are steep and winding, but once on top, the terrain levels out (see Figure 3.1). Sand Mountain includes most of three Alabama counties: DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall; and the northern parts of two others: Blount and Etowah. Driving through southern Sand Mountain, one would never guess that the suburbs of Birmingham were just over an hour away. There are no urban areas in the region. Albertville, at the Southern extent of Sand Mountain, has the greatest population, with approximately 18,200 residents (US Census Bureau Online Factfinder, 2009). The largest city in the vicinity where Sacred Harp singing remains popular, Scottsboro, has around fifteen thousand residents (US Census Bureau Online Factfinder, 2000). The area is very rural—the closest interstate highway runs the length of the valley below to the East, but Sand Mountain is crisscrossed by five main state highways. They roll over a few sparsely wooded hills and around large tracts of farmland between the towns, where they straighten out in short stretches to become the local main streets, marked by a handful of businesses and restaurants. Small local establishments outnumber national chains in many Sand Mountain communities.

Despite changes that arrived with development in the region after World War II, Sand Mountain has maintained itself as a demographically distinct region of Alabama. Racially, the area is predominantly white, especially compared with the rest of the state; the three main Sand

Mountain Counties range from 1.6 to 2.3 percent African American, compared with 26.3 percent in the state of Alabama as a whole (US Census Bureau Online Factfinder, 2009). This owes in part to the scarcity of slave agriculture in the area in the nineteenth century; subsequently, the lack of a sizeable black population has discouraged others from moving there (US Census Bureau Factfinder, 2009). Correspondingly, though there are a number of African American Sacred Harp singers in the South, there are none who live in the Sand Mountain region.

A high percentage of Sand Mountain residents have long lineages in the area, and identify themselves as having American, English, or Irish ancestry (US Census Bureau Factfinder, 2009). This holds true for local Sacred Harp singers; nearly all who live in the area were born and raised there. The only exceptions of which I became aware were those who moved to the region after marrying local singers. Many Sand Mountain singers can trace their family's presence in the region back multiple generations, often to an "original" immigrant who moved there in search of land in the first half of the nineteenth century soon after the area was opened to settlement (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

People on Sand Mountain tend to have long family histories there, often operating family farms (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). In addition, the statistics show a significant degree of similarity in race, ancestral origin, and vocation. These factors help explain why Sand Mountain residents identify as members of a distinct group, separate from the rest of the state of Alabama. This sense of identity is readily evident driving through the region. One notes, for example, the number of shops, markets, and other businesses with the word "Sand Mountain" in their name, ranging from "Sand Mountain Septic," in Horton, to "Sand Mountain Psychiatry," in Albertville. I have also observed that locals frequently identify themselves to

outsiders as coming from Sand Mountain, rather than identifying the county, city, or community in which they reside, or using a more geographically descriptive term, like northeast Alabama.

As recently as fifty years ago, farming was the most important economic activity in the area. Although agriculture still plays an important role in the local economy, factories that opened in DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall counties have made industry the largest single source of employment in the region (US Census Bureau Online Factfinder, 2009). These factors contribute to the area's relatively low family household income, which, at \$42,646, is nearly 30% below the national average, and 15% below the average for the state of Alabama.⁹ In addition, despite the presence of Northeast Alabama Community College in Rainsville, only 12.2% of the population of the three main Sand Mountain Counties have bachelor's degrees or higher, less than half the national average of 27%, and well below the state average of 21.1% (US Census Bureau Online Factfinder, 2009). One should not take these statistics, however, to imply that education is not valued in the region; many of those who do attain college degrees leave Sand Mountain to find work in metropolitan areas such as Chattanooga or Birmingham (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

Politically, Sand Mountain residents tend to be relatively conservative, reflecting the views typical of largely white regions in the South. In the most recent presidential election (2008), the *New York Times* online election results reveal that between 68 and 78 percent of the voters in the Sand Mountain counties voted for the Republican candidate (*Alabama*, 2008). From my observations, these statistics give a fairly accurate picture of the political ideology prevalent among local singers. Several Sand Mountain singers are very engaged politically;

⁹ As defined by DeKalb, Jackson, and Marshall Counties (US Census Bureau Online Factfinder, 2009).

Ricky Harcrow is a County Commissioner for DeKalb County, and Terry Wootten is a member of the DeKalb County School Board (Ricky Harcrow, personal communication, July 11, 2009).

The idea of “tradition” is extremely important in the realm of Sacred Harp singing, as I discuss in Chapter Four, but it is also a key theme in locals’ explanations of what makes their area unique. In the estimation of many residents, Sand Mountain exists in a space that is little marked by the influence of modernity (see Figure 3.2). As Sid Holcomb, president of the DeKalb County Commission, writes on the organization’s web site, “From the quiet country atmosphere to the buzz of small city life, you can experience what real living is all about. Slow, easy life on the beautiful mountains will take you back in time” (Holcomb, 2008).

Despite the fact that urbanization has not encroached on the region as much as in the areas surrounding Chattanooga and Birmingham, Sand Mountain residents still engage with outside culture and fully participate in the “modern” world. Whether the connection to more mainstream American culture comes through the televisions and radios, or in political engagement, locals are by no means cut off from the rest of the country. Nonetheless, the trope of an older, better way of life resonates among Sand Mountain residents because it expresses what they cherish most about their culture, including the depth of family and community ties, the maintenance of rural surroundings, and the preservation of historical forms of cultural expression.

Perceptions of Sand Mountain

Sand Mountain’s reputation outside the region tends to be colorful, though not uniformly positive. The city of Scottsboro is infamous for the 1931 legal case surrounding the “Scottsboro Boys,” in which nine young African American men accused of raping two white women were

sentenced to death without convincing evidence or adequate legal representation (Maher, 1997, p.103). Though all were eventually pardoned, the case helped create a lasting association between Sand Mountain's largely white culture and segregation-era racism. One elderly woman who used to sell women's clothing quickly learned not to tell her black clients that she was from Scottsboro, after finding that any association with the city incited concerns of racial prejudice (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2008).

A number of written accounts of regional culture have encouraged exoticized views of the region. Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995), an American Book Award winner and National Book Award finalist, attracted significant national attention. As a reporter from the *New York Times*, Covington visited Scottsboro to cover the trial of Glenn Summerford, a snake-handling preacher who allegedly attempted to murder his wife by allowing snakes to bite her. Intrigued by serpent handling, Covington bonded with numerous members of Summerford's church, the Church of Jesus with Signs Following, and eventually testified, sang, prayed, preached, and handled snakes himself. Despite his attempts to understand the faith and practices of the congregation, Covington eventually severed his connections to the church because of arguments over women's rights (Covington, 1995).

In his accounts of snake handling, poison drinking, and faith healing, Covington sensationalizes religious practices that are, in fact, uncommon among most Sand Mountain residents. Some singers in the area actually seem proud of the quirky, primitive cast that Covington gives the region, and boast of knowing people who keep rattlesnakes and copperheads for use in a few Churches of God. Others, however, insist that these practices are on the fringes of Sand Mountain culture, and argue that Covington unfairly characterizes the residents of the

area. Rodney Ivey of Henagar commented that he would never read *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, as “it makes us all look bad” (personal communication, February 8, 2009).

The Values of Sacred Harp Singing

Works including Covington’s and incidents like the one surrounding the “Scottsboro Boys,” despite the limited number of people involved in either case, have had a strong influence on the perception of Sand Mountain culture among people from other regions. Visiting singers often expect the area and its residents to be considerably more exotic than they actually find them upon arrival, and some continue to be suspicious of “what goes on down there” when outsiders are not present. I have heard individuals from the Northeast speculate about who might belong to the Ku Klux Klan, for example. Miller (2008) describes the ambivalent perspective from which outsiders often view Sand Mountain singers:

The difference between Northern and Southern singers is often treated like an ethnic distinction ... and perhaps the most powerful legacy of the ethnicization of traditional singers is the double bind in which they may find themselves now, when their rural Southern background can stigmatize them as uneducated, backward, or racist “white trash” while also serving as a mark of their musical authenticity (p. 13).

I agree with Miller’s assertion that accusations of racism are generally based on stereotypes of Southern culture. If any Sand Mountain singers do hold racist beliefs, they refrain from manifesting them at singings. In truth, although the singers in the area tend to espouse relatively conservative values, they recognize the importance of keeping Sacred Harp singing open to anyone who wants to participate, and generally keep political and ideological discussions outside of the context of singing (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). Though ideological tensions do exist and occasionally surface in public, a set of largely-unspoken values dictate propriety at singings and provide a neutral realm in which singers of all persuasions can meet amicably.

There is a marked divergence between the political views of most of the local singers and many of those who visit from other states. This is due in part to the difference in overall demographics between regions, as well as to the fact that many singers outside the South were introduced to Sacred Harp singing through folk revival or other traditional music circles, which have historically attracted a liberal base of participants (Miller, 2008). Sacred Harp singing itself, however, provides a very egalitarian structure and promotes a democratic ideal. Fundamental to the operation of an all-day singing is the principle that everyone gets the opportunity to lead, regardless of who they are or where they are from. Gender, race, religious and political affiliation are all overlooked, and every singer is given the right to lead the class in a song of their choice. Indeed, local singers usually show respect for those who have traveled far (and are potentially the furthest removed from Sand Mountain culture) by calling them to lead when the singing is at its best, in the hours immediately preceding and following dinner. The principle of democratic sharing of the center of the square is fundamental to Sacred Harp singing, and is never abrogated, even when people who obviously feel much differently about the music and its religious background travel to Sand Mountain to sing.

In order to maintain civility in this environment, however, singers are expected not to make an issue of any of these potentially divisive factors, and certain areas of discussion are considered taboo at singings. No one would deem it appropriate to discuss politics, sectarian points of religious doctrine, or other issues that are likely to be contentious. The rule of avoiding controversy is largely unspoken, but quickly learned by new singers. As one singer, who wishes to remain anonymous, described it, he knew that he and another singer on Sand Mountain “couldn’t agree on anything if you were to sit us down and make us talk about it, but we get along great because we know there’s a time and a place for everything, and we respect that at

singing” (personal communication, April 4, 2009). They and other area singers recognize that Sacred Harp singing is neither the time nor the place for raising divisive issues, and that maintaining the strength of local singings depends upon overlooking the many differences amongst the area singers and between locals and visitors.

Though this ideal has been instrumental in cultivating relationships between Sand Mountain singers and those from diverse areas of the country, it is not a new development meant to encourage distant visitors. In fact, Sacred Harp singing has always needed to maintain order amidst diversity because the book was written not as a hymnal for a particular denomination, but as a volume for use in worship, singing societies, and conventions, where members of different churches would meet together. B. F. White intended the *Sacred Harp* as an interdenominational hymnal, and avoided including lyrics with obvious sectarian bias. As he wrote in the introduction to the original edition, he found himself “thrown among churches of various denominations,” and therefore designed the book “for all classes who sing, or desire to sing” (Jackson, 1968, p. 3). From the beginning, singers from various backgrounds mixed to sing and had to learn to overcome any prejudice if the singings were to be successful.

The adjective “democratic” is often used by observers to describe Sacred Harp conventions, and it aptly describes the open process in which everyone who attends is offered an opportunity to lead a song (Miller, 2008). The term is especially appropriate, however, as the conventions themselves were actually modeled on nineteenth century political meetings (Buell Cobb, personal communication, June 20, 2009). At major conventions in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, so many singers from different communities attended that only a few could have the opportunity to lead. B. F. White and his associates developed a process similar to the one system used at political conventions whereby individual communities of singers elected

“delegates” to represent them at the convention. Thus, the singings followed a democratic selection of singers even when there were too many individuals to all lead (Cobb, 1978).

A remnant of this system is still important to singings at present: nearly every convention includes a business session during which the class nominates and elects officers for the following year. Singers nearly always know who the leadership will be to begin with, and seldom is more than one individual nominated for a position. Nonetheless, singers still feel strongly about holding elections as a way of maintaining the democratic system. Conventions have changed over time, but singers maintain the basic form and structure of the original because it helps preserve a core set of values that are integral to Sacred Harp singing. This is the basis for the ideals of democratic participation and tolerance that remain a crucial aspect of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain.

Some new visiting singers find that issues they initially found concerning turn out to be insignificant upon their arrival. Amongst these is the question of race. Bridgett Hill, an African American singer from Birmingham, was hesitant to attend her first singing in another part of Alabama with a sparse black population. Her fears were quickly allayed, however, as the singers welcomed her without hesitation. She found a similarly warm reception on Sand Mountain, and frequently travels there to sing. Though she assumes that there are individuals in the area who maintain racist beliefs, she doubts that many of them show up at Sacred Harp singings, as they would be forced to interact with her and a number of other people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds who regularly attend Sand Mountain conventions (Bridgett Hill, personal communication, March 22, 2009).

Other issues are occasionally problematic at singings. While the unspoken rules of decorum that proscribe any divisive political or ideological discussion are seldom breached,

individuals have occasionally made comments that were considered out of line. Laura Clawson (2007) describes a specific event at a Sand Mountain singing when local singers were offended by a preacher's public remarks about outside visitors. On the fifth weekend in July of 2001, a number of singers from western Massachusetts attended the Lacy Memorial Singing at Lacy's Chapel in Henagar. Before traveling south, experienced Massachusetts singers suggested that all female singers wear knee-length skirts and conservative attire. Although most followed the suggestions for apparel, two women wore pants and "butch" clothes to the Sunday singing at Lacy Chapel (Clawson, p. 182). A man from Minnesota also attended the singing and although he dressed in slacks and a tie, his shaven head and earrings struck a chord of dissatisfaction with a local preacher, who was asked to give the closing prayer. As Clawson relates:

The pastor opened with thanks for the good day of singing, but quickly moved on to inveigh against the dress of the two visiting women who wore pants, and the man who wore an earring, saying... "It's time that men and women, if they're going to sing our precious word of God and praises unto you, God they ought to know what they're singing about, and God if they get right, Lord, they'll be dressed right." ... The pastor of Lacy, acknowledging in his prayer itself that people would be angry with him, said "Our Father just shut this mouth" (with the implication being that if God did *not* shut the preacher's mouth, it was a sign of God's approval). In immediate response to this, Betty Lacy Shepherd, daughter of one of the men who had built the original Lacy's Chapel... angrily said "AMEN!" (i.e., calling on God to, in fact, shut the preacher's mouth and end the prayer) and began to make her way out of the church. Rod Ivey, too, simply walked out. These were immediate, individual responses, but a broader response was also made. David and Rod rushed to Liberty and spoke to its pastor, Tony Ivey, who is also their cousin, about what had just been said. Before he offered a blessing for lunch, Tony addressed the gathered singers, eloquently acknowledging that hurtful words had been spoken and saying that it was necessary to remember that people came from different backgrounds and had different styles of dress, but that as singers, they were a family and were all welcome at Liberty (p. 182).

The pastor who gave the objectionable remarks interacted on a daily basis with many of the Sand Mountain singers. Even though locals were raised in the same cultural mentality as the preacher, they felt that his comments were disrespectful of the visiting singers. Whereas the

pastor at Lacy's Chapel belonged to a church community with no permanent ties with the singing community, Tony Ivey, the pastor at Liberty Baptist, is a longtime singer and recognized that the prayer was completely inappropriate in the context of singing. The pastor at Lacy's Chapel was either unfamiliar with the accepted rules of decorum at a Sacred Harp singing, or refused to abide by them. Even though some local singers may have agreed with the preacher's sentiments, and might not have minded hearing a similar message in their church services, they recognized that his words were outside the bounds of acceptable behavior at a singing. This incident represents a moment when the values of Sacred Harp singing and those of a wider Sand Mountain culture came into conflict. This story remains infamous among Sand Mountain singers as well as those in singing communities throughout the country. The following year, Reba Dell (Lacy) Windom moved the singing from her family's chapel to another location where the preacher who had made the controversial remarks would not be present (personal communication, March 22, 2009).

Though tolerance is important to Sacred Harp singers, not all forms of expression are considered acceptable, and members of the community encourage offenders to change their behavior if they wish to continue to participate. Since the issue at Lacy's Chapel, Sand Mountain singers have had to address the issue of acceptable forms of expression at singings with the arrival of a singer from elsewhere in the South who was less circumspect about maintaining the division between singing and politics. This individual moved to the region and began attending singings in late 2008. Perhaps the most significant source of discomfort to other singers was the truck he drove, which was covered in political bumper-stickers, advocating a very conservative position on a range of social issues. These made several of the local singers uncomfortable, who considered them racist and likely to offend many of the diverse singers who

regularly travel to Sand Mountain. Irrespective of whether or not he agreed on any level with the ideology behind the bumper stickers, a prominent singer at Liberty informed the newcomer that he would either have to take the stickers off the truck the next time he drove to the church, or he would cover the vehicle in a tarp when he arrived. Much to the relief of the singers at Liberty, the new singer chose the former option. Singers on Sand Mountain may hold strong political beliefs, but they recognize that Sacred Harp singings are not venues at which these should be expressed (Anonymous, personal communication, July 5, 2009).

At the same time, however, Sand Mountain singers expect their visitors to behave with similar discretion. Singers who travel to the region from other parts of the country understand the acceptable standards of behavior and rarely violate them; visitors almost never bring up controversial issues or make political statements. At singings in other parts of the country, however, leaders will occasionally violate these standards, and more experienced singers find ways to voice their disapproval without openly challenging the offending individual and risking a confrontation. At a singing in Rhode Island in 2006, a leader stepped to the center of the square and asked to lead “Liberty” (Denson, 1991, p. 137); before he began the song, he asserted that it would soon be “meaningless” as the U.S. Senate was about to pass a bill “approving torture.” More than one visitor from Sand Mountain, joined by a number of singers from other areas of the country, quietly closed their books and refused to sing (Nathan Rees, personal communication, April 14, 2008).

Although singers on Sand Mountain tend to reflect the general population of the area in terms of race, political views, and cultural background, they welcome visiting singers without making an issue of the often significant ideological disparities that might divide them. As a performance practice, Sacred Harp music has always been inclusive and democratic. Over the

past hundred and sixty years, singers have learned that these ideals are integral to maintaining strong singings with participants from various regions. These values are an integral facet of the iconic nature of Sacred Harp singing, structuring singing conventions at which everyone is encouraged to participate, and forging connections between singers of all different ages, classes, backgrounds, and ideologies.

CHAPTER IV “DO YOU WANT TO LEAD THAT IN FOUR?”

Do ya’ll want to lead that song in four or two?
(Terry Wootten, Easter Singing, April 12, 2009).

Tradition and Iconicity

One of the most important aspects of Sacred Harp singing to participants on Sand Mountain is their understanding of its “traditional” status. Singers emphasize the fact that their form of music antedates nearly every other in the country, and often assert that the way it is currently sung differs little from the way it would have been performed over a century ago. The documentary film, *Awake My Soul* (2006), produced by Atlanta singer Matt Hinton, for example, describes Sacred Harp singing as “America’s oldest musical tradition.” Although the superlative is clearly unjustifiable, it expresses many singers’ conception of the antiquity of the musical form. As I described in Chapter Three, many Sand Mountain residents associate antiquity with authenticity, and accept the axiom that “older is better.” They consider their way of life relatively unsullied by encroachment from the modern world, and see Sacred Harp singing as an important cultural legacy whose survival in any authentic form depends on their continued adherence to the tradition as they were taught it. Thus, Sand Mountain singers approach Sacred Harp singing with great conservatism, both in the way they conduct all-day singings, and in the style with which they sing. Esteemed singers from earlier generations are still mentioned as ideal examples, and local families’ long histories of singing are accorded great importance.

This notion of “tradition” is one of the most significant aspects that distinguishes Sacred Harp singing as an iconic style on Sand Mountain. A wide range of other cultural activities deemed “traditional” are interrelated around the central theme of Sacred Harp. Congruently, the appropriateness of many practices related to Sacred Harp singing is judged by their status as

traditional. Interpretations of the music that are too far outside of the established bounds of tradition are frowned upon, creating an exceptionally conservative musical style.

In this chapter, I interrogate this notion of “tradition” by exploring the importance of memory, both in individuals and among families and communities. I investigate the methods by which the tradition has been passed down through generations, noting the significance of both oral and written forms of transmission and the interrelation between the two. Finally, I discuss the uniqueness of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain, detailing some of the differences in singing style and practice that distinguish the region from other areas. The adherence to this particular interpretation of Sacred Harp singing forms the physical expression of the “tradition” as local singers understand it.

The Significance of Memory

A recurring theme in discussions of Sacred Harp music is “tradition.” Singers consider their music traditional in the sense that it has great antiquity, but they also use this term to delimit the range of practices that they consider acceptable (Judy Caudle, personal communication, May 2, 2009). A particular aspect of singing is usually only considered to fall within the bounds of the “tradition” if it adheres to long-established practice. Consequently, innovations in Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain tend to take a relatively lengthy path before they gain widespread acceptance. Singers, especially members of older generations, frequently stress the importance of tradition when discussing Sacred Harp singing and history. They feel that keeping the contemporary practices of Sacred Harp close to those of their forebears is essential to maintain the long lineage of singing. The musical characteristics of Sacred Harp singing are closely tied to notions of history and tradition, as singers seldom justify a particular musical practice as being best because it sounds better, but because, as one elderly

woman put it, “that is the way that it has always been sung,” and other interpretations were “just not the way I was taught.” (Joyce Walton, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

In fact, singers often relate two primary reasons for singing: the music itself and the memory of singing. Even new singers who have not yet accumulated such memories soon learn the importance that other singers place on past experiences (Miller, 2008, p. 63). The significance of memory is highly individual for every singer, but it also forms collective meaning for singing families. Families on Sand Mountain, including the Iveys, Woottens, Lacys, and others, develop specific memories tied directly to deceased members of their own family (David Ivey, personal communication, November 23, 2008). Through localized singing practices, individuals recognize and remember deceased family members at every singing, whether at home or abroad. In addition, concepts of tradition, tied to the significance of memory, heavily influence Sand Mountain’s regional style of Sacred Harp singing, as the singers attempt to maintain specific stylistic aspects as a way of remembering or honoring their forbears. Singers have several platforms for vocalizing these concerns and advocating their own notions of what constitutes tradition.

As I discuss later, singing schools present the most direct way of teaching about Sacred Harp tradition and the importance of memory, but singers also have opportunities to do so when they lead songs at singings. Frequently, a singer will dedicate a song to a person who has recently passed away, or even to someone who died years ago. They might choose a song with particular significance to that person; since people tend to lead favorite songs over and over, specific songs become associated with individual singers, and singers will often lead a deceased singer’s favorites in their memory. Often, the association between the singer and the song is so strong that the leader does not need to remind the class of the connection; merely saying that

they will lead for a particular individual and then announcing the number results in a chorus of quiet affirmations and nodding heads as the class recognizes the appropriateness of leading a specific song for a particular person.

This experience of remembrance is often very poignant, especially when the words of a song express sentiments of farewell, the inevitability of death, and the hope for reuniting with friends and family in future life. After the death of Amanda Denson Brady in February 2008, numerous singers led one of her favorite songs in her honor, “The Child of Grace” (Denson, 1991, p. 77). The lyrics read:

Oh, what a blessed hope is ours
While here on earth we stay,
We more than taste the heav’nly pow’rs
And antedate that day.
We feel the resurrection near,
Our life in Christ concealed,
And with His glorious presence here
Our earthen vessels filled.

The message took on particular salience after Amanda’s passing, and singers occasionally became emotional as they remembered her eyes welling with tears as she led the song near the end of her life.

Dedicating a song to a deceased singer is a way of asserting the importance of memory, history, and connections between past and present generations. It can also be a way of maintaining a particular singing practice, or advocating a specific interpretation of Sacred Harp tradition. The weight given to the practices of respected deceased singers is enormous. Merely mentioning that one will “do it the way” that an individual who has died used to do it acts as a justification for that specific interpretation. Singers often relay specific messages before a song noting the way that a deceased singer used to lead to justify that particular interpretation. They

might do so to encourage the class to sing more quickly or more slowly than usual, to ask the class to sing a song in four beats that is usually sung in two, or to enjoin them to sing a song that was not printed in the revision of the Sacred Harp being used at the singing. All of these requests are respected without apparent reservation, perhaps owing to the singers' desire to honor earlier singers, even if their musical practices differ from the norm at a given location.

In some instances, earlier singers' interpretations of a specific song help to strengthen and differentiate regional styles of singing. In the Sand Mountain area, for instance, the song "Sweet Union" (Denson, 1991, p. 424) is often led the way that Loyd Ivey's father, Andrew "Short" Ivey used to lead it. After the shapes, he would lead the first verse followed by the chorus, then speed up noticeably on the repeat of the chorus; he would then continue a third time through the chorus, speeding up once again, approaching upper limit at which the singers could perform the song. This interpretation is recognized outside of the area as the "Sand Mountain" rendition of the song, and numerous singers from other regions have learned to lead "Sweet Union" the way that Short Ivey used to, even if they have no idea who he was or that he originated this particular interpretation.

At the Ivey Memorial at Liberty Baptist in March, 2009, Loyd got up to lead "Sweet Union" (Denson, 1991, p. 424) (see Audio Recording 1.2) and announced that he would do it in memory of his father, since it was a memorial singing. Memorial singings give families the opportunity to gather and remember deceased members, and strengthen their ties through singing. In many instances, memorial singings are held in conjunction with family reunions, and numerous individuals who do not regularly attend singings will come for their family's memorial. The singers who attend memorial singings are encouraged to lead songs in memory of anyone they wish, whether or not they were members of the family sponsoring the memorial.

Whether at memorial singings or other all-day singings, leaders often relate short stories or make remarks concerning past loved ones, usually just before they begin their song. These sentiments are generally brief and occur just before a leader begins his or her song. Sometimes, this might involve an amusing anecdote about the person being remembered, but often, the leader may notify the class that they want to lead the song the way someone else once led it; perhaps slower, faster, or with a sudden tempo change in the middle of the song. When Cassie Allen sang “Morning Sun” (Denson, 1991, p. 436) at the Cleburne County Convention in August, 2007, in memory of LaRue Allen, who had died only a week prior, she asked the class to sing it like LaRue would have, meaning very fast. Leading the song in that particular way became a way of honoring the singer who had passed away.

Most conventions and some all-day singings include a memorial lesson, a half hour or so set aside expressly for remembering singers and their loved ones who have died during the previous year, as well as those who are unable to attend due to illness or other circumstances. The memorial lesson was institutionalized in the early years of Sacred Harp conventions, and has subsequently become a very important part of the singing (Miller, 2008). A memorial lesson is usually divided into two sections, each presented by a different singer. The first leader reads a list of the deceased, then shares some thoughts either about people on the list that they knew, or about the subjects of death and loss in general. Their remarks are followed by a song chosen for the appropriateness of its lyrics, often led without the shapes to emphasize the significance of the words. The next leader follows the same pattern, reading a list of those who are “sick or shut-in,” making appropriate remarks, and then leading a song dedicated to them.

Memorial lessons are among the only times at which participants are expected to make extended remarks during a singing, and it is one of the most meaningful parts of the proceedings

to many singers. Miller describes the memorial lesson as a moment when the interruption of the regular flow of a singing causes individuals to focus even more intently on the message presented by the memorial committee: “The altered sense of time and place that a singing constructs... becomes more concentrated and formalized during the memorial lesson: time set apart stands within time set apart” (Miller, 2008, p. 63). The reading of the list of deceased singers encourages individuals at the singing to pause and reflect on the transience of life, but it also emphasizes the connection that singers feel with other members, even after they have died. Thus, the memorial lesson is often one of the most poignant moments in a singing.

The connections that develop among singers are often so strong that distinctions between who is actually related by blood, and who is just “related by singing,” are often blurred; as Reba Dell Windom put it, “we all start to feel like family pretty quick.” (Reba Dell Windom, personal communication, Sept. 13, 2008). The extended Wootten family of Sand Mountain invites local and visiting singers to the Haynes’ reunion (Terry Wootten’s grandmother was in the Haynes family) each summer at Dutton. Unrelated singers who come and help sing at the reunion are treated more or less like family, and encouraged to participate in an event of a sort that is frequently reserved for relatives.

Individuals lead songs in memory of deceased singers as a way of strengthening ties between multiple generations, thus maintaining a sense of connection to people who have long since departed the singing class. As Miller (2005) writes:

Wherever it is set up, the center of the square is the place closest to past and future generations of singers and the place where they communicate with one another. It relies on inwardly focused voices, eyes, and emotions to create an extroverted sense of place, a larger community crossing temporal, geographic, and mortal boundaries (p. 75).

At many Sand Mountain singings, the dead are still physically proximate, as each of the churches where singings are held has a cemetery in the churchyard. Sometimes leaders who call a song in memory of a past member will note that they are buried “right out back,” and wonder if they might not be listening from another realm. Grave markers of longtime singers frequently denote their love of the music; Karen House, a Massachusetts singer with ties to Liberty Baptist, died unexpectedly in 2000 and was buried at Liberty—her headstone reads, poignantly, “How can I keep from singing?” (see Figure 4.1). Markers for other singers include messages as overt as the assertion on Ruth Denson Edwards’ that she was a “Queen of the Sacred Harp” and as subtle as the four shaped notes on the footstones of Gladys and Buford McGraw’s. These inscriptions serve both as reminders of the importance of singing in the lives of the deceased, as well as symbols of the connections between the living and the dead that Sacred Harp singing is meant to maintain. Respect for previous generations is a powerful force in creating the sense of tradition that Sand Mountain singers feel their form of music represents.

Teaching “Tradition”: Oral and Written Transmission in Sacred Harp Singing

Maintaining aspects of Sacred Harp singing that are considered traditional is extremely important to most Sand Mountain singers. The dissemination of this information, however, occurs on two planes simultaneously. On one level, singers learn by attending singings and singing schools, and through oral instruction by more experienced singers. On another level, the *Sacred Harp* hymnal and its rudiments constitute a written set of rules that govern singing. These two modes interact, and both are subject to interpretation by individual singers and broader communities. On Sand Mountain, Sacred Harp music and its associated traditions of performance are passed on from one generation to the next through a combination of oral and

written transmission, resulting in the unique interpretation of the music that characterizes Sacred Harp singing in the region (see Figure 4.2).

The most common arena for learning about Sacred Harp singing is at the singings themselves. Individuals learn the basics of reading shape notes and practice singing their part correctly by listening to others sitting near (Judy Caudle, personal communication, July 1, 2009). Subtler aspects of the music are also conveyed by experienced singers as they lead; as I have discussed above, singers lead songs in particular ways, or make reference to earlier singers, as a way of justifying their particular interpretation of a song. Over many singings, this process illuminates the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in a given area. An attentive singer can quickly learn the local singing practices by observing how the more experienced members of the class lead particular songs, sing with specific techniques and inflections, and generally behave at singings.

There are other, more formal opportunities to learn Sacred Harp singing, of which one of the most effective has historically been the singing school. While young singers in the 19th and early 20th centuries often attended all-day singing schools that would meet for a week or more at a time (Cobb, 1978), modern singing schools tend to be short sessions held in conjunction with an all day singing. An exception is Camp Fasola, sponsored by the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, and directed by David Ivey of Huntsville, who grew up singing in Henagar. At the annual summer camp, people of all ages spend approximately a week attending classes that cover various aspects of Sacred Harp singing, from setting keys to making lemonade. The camp had become popular enough by summer of 2008 to necessitate splitting into two separate sessions, one mainly for adults, and one for children, teenagers, and young adults. David decided that a camp would be an effective way of helping to encourage younger singers,

while teaching aspects of traditional singing style that were at risk of vanishing along with the older generation (David Ivey, personal communication, March 22, 2009).

Teachers at Camp Fasola include individuals from around the country, but all stress the importance of following their elders and keeping close to the “tradition.” Several of these “elders” actually teach classes, including Jeff and Shelbie Sheppard, from Anniston, Alabama, a retired couple who have sung since their youth and met at a Sacred Harp singing. They firmly stress proper protocol at singings and aim to correct any practices that they define as errors. Young people and adults from across the United States and even the United Kingdom attend Camp Fasola and bring with them their own local practices, many having few ties with singers in the South. While distinctions among localized interpretations are recognized, the Sheppards define singing practices that they learned growing up in east-central Alabama as the norm. In regard to leading a song, Shelbie ardently stresses beating time in a strict two or three beat pattern while maintaining fluid, yet precise movements of the arm. Shelbie particularly opposes quick and uneven arm movements, flicks of the wrists on down and up-beats, and foot stomping while leading a song. The Sheppards always justify their lessons with their notions of “tradition” (Jeff Sheppard, personal communication, July 3, 2009). Other singers respect their knowledge and experience, and readily accept their instruction.

Smaller singing schools are regularly held on Sand Mountain, even though the number of skilled singers almost always outweighs the number of new participants by a wide margin. These singing schools, often conducted before night singings¹⁰ at one of the local churches, have two main purposes: to introduce concepts of proper singing methods according to the local tradition, as well as to reinforce these concepts among those who have already been exposed to

¹⁰ Night singings are short singings that meet in the evening for one to two hours.

them. While inviting the class to a singing school the following month, David Ivey remarked that everyone should attend, since a little extra learning “never hurts” (David Ivey, personal communication, January 4, 2009). The local singing schools held on Sand Mountain recognize singing practices that are specific to the area and that would not be taught in other regional singing schools or at Camp Fasola. The proper method of beating in four (down, across, back, up), for example, might be acceptable as a lesson on Sand Mountain, while it would never be taught by the Sheppards, who learned in their youth to always beat a 4/4 song in two.

While singing school teachers are usually respected authorities on Sacred Harp music, their interpretation of the proper method of singing and leading does not always go uncontested. In order to accommodate a broad range of participants, teachers often overlook matters of regional, community, or family variation that are not considered standard by all singers. For example, one Sand Mountain singer was disappointed that David Ivey allowed young people at his singing school to lead 4/4 songs with four beats to the measure (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2009). Although many people in the area do lead this way, some find it “untraditional,” noting that it is contrary to the rudiments, and associate it with seven-shape gospel singing. Even if David’s personal preference were to sing 4/4 in two beats, he taught both methods out of respect for that part of the community that considers leading in four beats part of their tradition (David Ivey, personal communication, March 22, 2009).

All these forms of oral transmission allow for change over time, as individuals form different interpretations and promote their own ideals as they teach the tradition to others. As scholars of earlier Western music have noted, it is impossible to excavate an “original” form of any particular song, as details about the author’s intent are not available (van der Werf, 1995). In other instances, songs may have entered the written tradition as transcriptions of melodies that

were already part of an oral tradition (Azéma, 2005). This is clearly the case in Sacred Harp music, as B. F. White and other early authors borrowed pre-existing melodies in common circulation at the time (Jackson, 1965). The changes that occur over generations of oral transmission account for many of the regional variations in Sacred Harp singing; individuals with distinct tastes and biases deemed a particular interpretation of the music the “best,” most “authentic,” or “original” way of singing, and spoke with enough authority to gain a following in a particular community. Thus, many groups of singers, each trying to maintain the “tradition,” could arrive at multiple interpretations of what exactly that tradition constituted.

The development of Sacred Harp singing has also been shaped by the presence of a strong written tradition. The *Sacred Harp* songbook not only preserves an “official” version of the music, but includes a section of “rudiments” that details certain aspects of performance practice and give guidelines for conducting singings. Most singers, however, treat the *Sacred Harp* and its rudiments more as a set of guidelines than as hard and fast rules, and one can only understand contemporary singing practice by investigating the interactions between the written instructions in the hymnal and the unique oral traditions of individual regions and communities. Furthermore, since the early twentieth century, singers have had the choice of several editions of the *Sacred Harp*, each vying for authority as being closest to the intent of the “original.”

Singers on Sand Mountain still form allegiances to particular editions of the songbook, favoring certain songs and singing practices over others. Three different versions of the *Sacred Harp* are used on Sand Mountain, and the history surrounding the publication of each of these volumes still impacts singing in the area. The last revision for which B. F. White was responsible was published in 1870. After his death in 1879, books became scarce despite multiple re-printings of the 1870 edition, and it was clear that a new revision was needed.

Several individuals seized on the opportunity to publish versions of the *Sacred Harp* in order to promote their own interests (Cobb, 1978). One faction split off in 1901 when the *Sacred Harp* was revised and reprinted under the authorship of William Cooper. Adding newer gospel style songs, Cooper's *B.F. White Sacred Harp* pushed the acceptance of the music to new communities, many of whom still use current editions of this revision, mostly in South Alabama, South Georgia, Florida, and Texas (Cobb, 1978).

As Simon Gaunt notes, the process of modern editing of troubadour songs creates a “double displacement: first from song to book, then from script to print” (Gaunt, 1999, p. 229). While the editors of the various editions of the *Sacred Harp* were drawing from music that had already been typeset, they still inflected their own biases on their revisions. Many of the alto parts, for example, were added in the twentieth century—a majority of songs composed for the first edition were written in three parts with no alto (Cobb, 1978). They can have a profound impact on the feel of a song. Many of the alto parts written for the J. L. White and William Cooper editions, for example, include more thirds than fifths, closing chords that were previously open fifths and making a “sweeter” sound (Henry Johnson, personal communication, July 2, 2009). Even though they reproduced many of the original melodies and harmony parts exactly from B. F. White's earlier editions, modern revisers still made significant changes to the character of many of the songs in their books.

In 1909, B.F. White's son, J.L. White, published a new revision, which included re-harmonized versions of many of the songs in his father's book. Singers emphatically rejected the book, complaining that the new, “modernized” harmonies were stagnant, simple, and an affront to the music (Cobb, 1978). J. L. White abandoned this first attempt and published another revision in 1911 using the original plates from the 1870 edition for approximately the first half of

the book, and including popular gospel songs, similar to those in the Cooper revision, in the second half (Cobb, 1978). J.L. White's volume, now popularly known as the "White Book," became the revision of choice for several areas, especially in North Georgia and parts of the Atlanta area, but it is no longer extensively used. The White Book was reprinted in 2007, spurring enough interest in the book to lead to the formation of a new White Book singing in Alabama.

The revision adopted by the largest group of singers was published in 1911 by Joe S. James of Atlanta. It bore the most resemblance to the 1870 *Sacred Harp*, and thus won the acceptance of the most musically conservative singers. James' revision went through several editions in the early twentieth century until it was heavily revised again prior to 1935 by T. J. and S. M. Denson, noted singing school teachers and brothers who had worked with James on his publication (Cobb, 1978). Though there were significant changes, the Densons again tried to stay as close as possible to the traditional musical style of the *Sacred Harp*, and their book was a great success. It has subsequently been revised several times, most recently in 1991. The 1991 edition of the "Denson Book," as it is often called, is by far the most popular of the editions now used at Sacred Harp singing conventions.

Most regions of Sacred Harp singing in the South use either the Cooper or Denson revision exclusively, but on Sand Mountain, singers frequently lead songs from both of these editions, as well as from the White Book. All but two singings in the region are designated as using the Denson Book, but singers will frequently ask the class to sing one of a number of songs from the Cooper or White Books, or even songs not found in any of the *Sacred Harp* hymnals. In the early twentieth century, copies of the Sacred Harp were scarce on Sand Mountain, and singers would buy whatever edition of the songbook that they could obtain (David Ivey, personal

communication, November 23, 2008). Over the years, singers adopted songs from multiple editions as favorites, and incorporated them into their core repertory. Eventually, the large majority of singers gravitated to the Denson edition, and all of the annual singings in the area used that book, though familiar songs from other editions have always been sung at area singings as far back as anyone can remember (Loyd Ivey, personal communication, March 29, 2009). In recent years, this has been facilitated by the presence of Cooper Books, along with Denson Books, in the pews at Liberty, Antioch, and Shady Grove churches.

More recently, singings using exclusively another edition have been formed to give singers the opportunity to make more use of these books. In the early 1990s, Syble Adams and other members of Shady Grove Baptist Church established an annual Cooper Book singing, which has attracted not only local singers, but a number of visitors from South Georgia and Alabama, Florida, and Texas, where the Cooper revision is predominant. Following the 2007 reprinting of the White Book, Bud Oliver changed the annual April singing at Pine Grove Church on Lookout Mountain from a Denson Book to a White Book singing. Just across the valley from Sand Mountain, the White Book singing at Pine Grove attracts numerous area singers. This singing, as well as several smaller night singings from the White Book during the fall and winter at Liberty and Antioch Churches, gives area singers the opportunity to sing all their favorites from that edition, as well as to explore less familiar songs (see Figure 4.3). Rodney Ivey remembers his grandparents bringing old copies of the White Book with them to singings on Sand Mountain, but notes that singers never led songs from it that weren't very well known, as there weren't enough books to go around (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). The new availability of books has sparked interest in the sizeable body of songs that area singers had never known before.

Although songs from multiple editions are sung at most area singings, local singers do not all agree on the merits of each of the different editions (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2009). In fact, Sand Mountain singers form affiliations, based loosely around the individual local churches, to one or another edition. While those who sing at Antioch, Chestnut Grove, and Shady Grove are more receptive to singing from the White and Cooper Books, singers at Liberty tend to favor the Denson revision (Darlene Dalton, personal communication, October 9, 2008). Some singers see the inclusion of hymns with more standard harmonies and songs in a gospel style as inappropriate for use at Sacred Harp singings, and prefer the class to sing only songs in the Denson edition. These singers are less likely to attend singings from the White and Cooper Books, or even Denson Book singings at the churches where numerous songs from the other editions are likely to be sung. Although this issue is somewhat divisive, Sand Mountain singers tend to get along quite well and generally overlook their differences in songbook preference. Even if some members of the class may not sing along when a leader calls for a song from another edition, only rarely would a singer vocally object or ask the leader to choose a different song.¹¹ Nonetheless, the various smaller communities of singers within the Sand Mountain region are defined in part by their acceptance of specific editions of the *Sacred Harp*.

At a singing, the printed music in the edition of the *Sacred Harp* being used for a particular song serves as the defacto written rule of how the song is to be performed. In most instances, singing any note other than the one written would be considered a mistake, regardless of how that note sounded; improvisation is almost never encouraged. In certain instances,

¹¹ In areas that sing exclusively from one edition, this is not always the case. I observed a visitor at a singing in West Georgia ask the class if they knew a particular song from the Cooper edition, which elicited a friendly but resounding negative response.

however, divergences between the written and oral traditions result in changes to the music.

This phenomenon is most evident when multiple editions of the same song are combined in a hybrid form. For example, numerous alto singers on Sand Mountain sing their part to the song, “Liberty,” as written in the Cooper edition, even when singing out of the Denson Book (see Figures 4.4A and 4.4B; Audio Recordings 1.3A and 1.3B). “Liberty,” as printed in the 1991 Denson revision, includes a short alto section where the third note of the scale is held along with the basses singing the tonic, creating the basis of a major chord while trebles sing the melody in their upper register. Altos on Sand Mountain, however, often sing the alto arrangement of the song from the Cooper revision of the *Sacred Harp*. Here, instead of holding the third, altos sing the fifth for four beats and then slide down to the third (just as the trebles finish their melody arriving at the tonic), thus forming a tonic chord.

This practice has found its way to many other singing groups around the country, and nearly everyone who sings recognizes this as “the Sand Mountain way” of singing “Liberty.” In regions where the Cooper revision has had relatively little influence, the altos sing their part exactly as written in the Denson version. Some singers from these areas, as well as a number on Sand Mountain who are adamant about performing the song as written in the edition being used, find this practice irksome, but others enjoy the Cooper book part and sing it at full volume. Similarly, past generations of Sand Mountain basses sang parts drawn from other editions, as well; in a recording of the 1968 Lookout Mountain convention, the bass section sings a variant of the song “Ortonville” (“new songs” section, p. 98) from the 1909 “Fifth” J. L. White edition.¹² They sang the fourth scale degree instead of the first, dramatically changing the chord (see Figure 4.5a). Singers with whom I have spoken were unable to tell me how or when they began

¹² See Buell Cobb (1978) for information about the various J.L. White editions.

singing this way, or when they stopped. This practice is especially intriguing as the part written in the 1909 White book was changed back to the original (see Figure 4.5b), as it is found in all current editions of the Sacred Harp, in 1911, over fifty years before the 1968 recording was made. Sand Mountain basses now sing the part exactly as written in the Denson edition, perhaps owing to increased interaction with singers from other areas.

Singers regard the Sacred Harp songbook as more than just a repository of the written tradition. Although it is a physical object, the people who sing from it invest it with deep personal meaning and importance. This is visibly manifest in the ragged books that some long-time singers continue to bring with them to convention after convention. Even though a new book might be more practical to sing from, they become attached to the specific book that they have used for numerous years. Shelbie Sheppard, for example, sings from an extremely battered and worn Denson book that she acquired in 1994, which is held together with tape. She told me that she does have a new one, but, she joked, “it’s took this long to break this one in...” In fact, although the book holds little aesthetic value, she admitted that it was of great sentimental significance to her (Shelbie Sheppard, personal communication, March 29, 2009).

For some singers, the Sacred Harp songbook as an object elicits meanings of significance similar to that of the Bible. In the nineteenth century, memories and emotions tied to family Bibles often augmented or even superseded its religious symbolism (McDannell, 1995). The revered object itself was accorded nearly as much importance as the text that it contained. Religious feelings could be bound up in the book, but more important were associations with kin. This tie between the Bible and individuals is symbolic of unification of family and religion. Family members related specific scriptures to deceased relatives, or the book itself served as a tool for remembering the deceased and documenting important family events (McDannell,

1995). As Collen McDannell (1995) writes, “They touched the pages of the Holy Writ, cried over its injunctions, saw the faces of their mothers in the memories evoked by Scripture reading, and fathers entertained their households with magic, faith, sensation, and emotion through the Bible. The ‘Word’ literally became ‘Flesh’ and ‘dwelled among us’” (p. 68).

Similarly, the *Sacred Harp* songbook serves as a symbol of connection between generations. At the 2007 Alabama State Convention, the children of Harrison and Flarce Creel led “The Old Fashioned Bible” (Denson, 1991, p. 342) in Flarce’s memory; she had led the song the previous year at that singing, in what turned out to be her last lesson, as she died the following month. The song’s lyrics seemed particularly appropriate: “I still view the chairs of my father and mother, their offspring, as seated and ranged on each hand; and the richest of books which excels ev’ry other, the family Bible that lay on the stand!” Cindy Creel Tanner noted that her family was brought together by another book of great importance—the *Sacred Harp* (Cindy Tanner, personal communication, November 25, 2007). Her memories centered on her parent’s devotion to the singing, and how the *Sacred Harp* was a focal point of their family’s faith as she was growing up, as was the Bible in the text of the song she led.

The *Sacred Harp*, like the Bible, is also a symbol of more than just religious faith. Though most singers seek and find spiritual meaning in texts, they also invest significance in the book outside of the song lyrics. Songbooks, even though identical in printing, are as individual as the singers. In looking through many singers’ books, I have found many personal annotations of various sorts. People may keep lists of songs led at singings, of favorite songs, names of individuals they somehow link to a song, signatures of living *Sacred Harp* composers (see Figure 4.6), or simply the signatures of everyone with whom they sing. As time goes on, these can increase in sentimental value; David Ivey’s son, Stuart, for example, is proud to have the

signature of John Hocutt, a singer and composer, on the page of one of his best-known songs.

Following Hocutt's death in 2005, the autograph has become a cherished memento (Stuart Ivey, personal communication, May 26, 2007). Some singers possess older editions of the *Sacred Harp* on which they place substantial value because the books may have belonged to a deceased family member and include personal notes and writings (Miller, 2008). They rarely use old books at singings, however, as they do not include a number of popular songs found in the 1991 edition.

As the object of such important symbolic value, singers accord the *Sacred Harp* songbook tremendous esteem. More than just a repository of songs, it represents the connections between singers across generations, forged around the music that it contains and the singings at which it is used. This explains, in part, singers' general reluctance to change or modify the parts as they are written in the book. As I note above, songs are generally only sung differently when another version of the *Sacred Harp* includes the alternate part. Despite the importance of the hymnal as the codified form of all of the songs, oral transmission is still a significant force. Many aspects of singing are not notated, and the book is silent or vague on a number of questions about how songs should be sung and led. The rudiments of the Denson revision, for example, leaves the issue of proper tempo up to the leader's discretion, suggesting that the tempo "should be appropriate to the music and poetry, and it should be neither so slow as to drag intolerably nor so fast as to give the impression of racing or to inhibit the clear pronunciation of the words" (Garst, 1991, p. 16). The limits of "too fast" and "too slow" are, of course, subjective, and leaders in different communities tend to arrive at very different interpretations of such terms. Thus, although singers respect the authority of the book as the written expression of their tradition, it could never be sufficiently detailed so as to avoid variations in interpretation.

Written transmission of Sacred Harp singing is important, but can never occur without its oral counterpart.

Oral and Written Traditions on Sand Mountain

Other aspects of singing that characterize specific communities on Sand Mountain stem from divergent interpretations of the written tradition, different paths of oral traditions, and the interactions between the two. Although many singers from outside the region think of Sand Mountain singing as one discrete entity, there are numerous distinctions in singing practice that separate out smaller communities, families, and sometimes even individuals. Sacred Harp on Sand Mountain is not monolithic, but a conglomeration of different approaches that all converge harmoniously at an all-day singing.

Given the proximity between singers in the region and the fact that many of their families have intermarried over the past several generations, it is not always possible to say that one family leads a particular way, or that one congregation sings with a certain style. Indeed, the notion of a fixed congregation at a particular church does not apply on a practical level, as the members of each of the area churches where singings are held meet for church at their own buildings only once or twice a month, and often travel to the other churches on alternating Sundays. In some respects, however, singers feel closer ties with a particular church, usually because of family affiliations. Other singers fall in between; Shane Wootten, for instance, feels a strong sense of belonging both to Liberty Baptist Church, where his mother, Eloise Ivey Wootten, grew up attending, and to Antioch Baptist Church, where his father, Marlon Wootten's family has long ties. Shane recognizes the differences between singing practice associated with both churches, and is equally at home in either one (Shane Wootten, personal communication, April 12, 2009).

Many individuals, however, are more closely associated with one particular church, and develop a singing and leading style that reflects the influence of that smaller community. As I have already discussed, one of the most clearly drawn lines distinguishing some singers from others is the use of the Cooper and White editions of the *Sacred Harp*, in addition to the Denson revision. While many of the singers at Liberty occasionally lead songs from these other books, their use at this church is not nearly as widespread as it is at Antioch or Shady Grove. Local singers distinguish in other ways between the “typical” singing styles at Antioch and Liberty. Leaders at Antioch are much more likely than those at Liberty to conduct quadruple meter songs with four beats to a measure rather than two, by conducting down, left, right, up, as opposed to down and up. Partially as a result of this leading style, singing at Antioch follows a somewhat slower tempo. Antioch singers, especially the members of the Wootten family, are also known for their preference of somewhat higher keys than singers at Liberty (Darlene Dalton, personal communication, October 9, 2008).

Some of these practices have relatively clear historical origins, while others are more obscure. The practice of leading in four beats is apparently an influence from New Book singing, where this is the only accepted way of leading a song in quadruple meter.¹³ Several singers in the area also participate in singings from these 7-shape gospel style books, and even more did a generation ago, when area churches were often filled to capacity for New Book singings. While the popularity of New Book singing has waned over the past several decades, many of the older singers in the area use to be active participants, and a few still are (Joyce Walton, personal communication, February 8, 2009). According to Darlene Dalton, Herschel

¹³ The moniker, “New Book,” reflects the importance of *Sacred Harp* singing in the Sand Mountain region; even though many of these books were composed during the first half of the twentieth century, they were deemed new in comparison to the *Sacred Harp*. They are not revisions of the *Sacred Harp*, generally do not include any songs in a *Sacred Harp* style, and relatively few people on Sand Mountain sing both at *Sacred Harp* and New Book singings.

Wootten, who taught singers to lead in four beats beginning in the 1960s, was the most important individual responsible for passing this influence on to Sacred Harp singing (Darlene Dalton, personal communication, October 9, 2008). This practice was taken up by many members of the Wootten family, and is still a distinct feature of singing at Antioch. Although typically fewer leaders employ this style at Liberty, a number of singers there also lead songs in four beats, even if a few of the older area singers regard it as an inappropriate incursion from another musical style on Sacred Harp singing.

The reasons for the slower tempo and higher keys at Antioch are somewhat less clear. Darlene remembers that the older generation of the Wootten family preferred songs lead at slower tempi than at present, and they did not hesitate to slow the class down if they felt a leader was going too fast. She also recollects that the Haynes family, from whom many of the Woottens are descended, enjoyed singing in higher keys (Darlene Dalton, personal communication, October 9, 2008). These preferences have apparently been transmitted by oral means to the present generation of singers at Antioch, influencing their distinct style. Terry Wootten, who is instrumental in the Antioch singing community, often keys songs at a higher pitch because he believes the heightened energy makes the class sound better (Terry Wootten, personal communication, July 4, 2007). The singing class at Antioch also includes a number of very capable trebles who have no difficulty singing in these higher registers. Singers associated with Liberty, on the other hand, tend to key songs slightly lower, more in keeping with the practice of surrounding areas of Alabama and Georgia. Perhaps their preference for lower keys reflects the fact that singers from Liberty have traveled more frequently to singings in other areas, especially in recent history, and more singers from outside Sand Mountain typically attend

singings there than at Antioch. Without any concrete evidence, however, it is impossible to know what keys singers used before the development of audio recording.

Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain has developed over the past century and a half as a complex interaction between oral and written modes of transmission. Even though all singers use the same few editions of the Sacred Harp, they interpret them very differently, passing on particular aspects of style and practice to succeeding generations. Although singers are adamant about the importance of preserving traditional singing, even in a community as small as the Sand Mountain Sacred Harp singers, multiple competing interpretations find expression. Sacred Harp singing is such an iconic form in the region, however, that minor interpretive differences are easily subsumed under one broad and multifaceted tradition. The importance of the concept of “tradition” is more significant than the individual expressions that separate smaller communities, families, and individuals.

CHAPTER V “LIBERTY CHURCH SINGERS”

The producer T Bone Burnett has returned to Appalachian traditions for another soundtrack album that reimagines rural music. For the songs of love and death on “Cold Mountain,” he lined up the White Stripes’ Jack White, with a changed, unmannered voice, and Allison Krauss, who gently backdates new songs from Elvis Costello and Sting. But the revelation is the Sacred Harp Singers from Liberty Church in Henagar, Ala., whose tradition predates the Civil War. Their homespun voices, nearly shouting to the do-re-mi syllables of the scale in rough-hewn harmony, should introduce new listeners to the galvanizing sound of shape-note singing (Pareles, 2003, p. AR37).

Sand Mountain Singing Abroad

In recent decades, singing on Sand Mountain has received a great deal of attention from visitors from other regions in the South and around the country, and Liberty Baptist hosts one of the largest Sacred Harp conventions every July, the Henagar Union Convention. The church was also given widespread attention in 2003 with the release of the movie, *Cold Mountain* (Minghella, 2003). Though the scenes of Sacred Harp singing were filmed in Romania, the overdubbed music was recorded at Liberty. In addition, David and Rodney Ivey, two of the prominent singers at Liberty, organized a group of singers to perform at the Oscar ceremonies on national television. They were billed as the “Liberty Church Sacred Harp Singers,” attracting considerable attention to their locality in the national singing community (Clawson, 2007). Although the Sacred Harp song that they were scheduled to sing was cut at the last moment from the live broadcast, they appeared on stage accompanying Allison Krauss, who performed “Scarlet Tide,” which T. Bone Burnett and Elvis Costello composed for the *Cold Mountain* soundtrack. This national publicity boosted attendance at their annual convention; at the July, 2008 Henagar Union Convention, singers literally filled the church to overflowing, as late arrivers stood in the foyer or listened from outside the windows.

To people from outside the region, singing on Sand Mountain has become iconic in very different ways. For many singers from other parts of the nation, this recent national attention has elevated the region's singing style to the status of one of the most "authentic" expressions of Sacred Harp in the South. To viewers of the movie, Sand Mountain singing and Liberty Baptist Church became icons of the past, powerful signifiers of antebellum Southern culture (see Brown, 2003). Each of these notions, however, reflects a limited understanding of the diversity among disparate regions of singing in the South, and the contemporary nature of singing on Sand Mountain. Despite their historical associations, singings are a powerful cultural force in the area precisely because they are *not* historical reenactments; rather, they are continually developing events in the present. In this chapter, I discuss the relatively recent changes that have impacted singing on Sand Mountain, due in part to the increased interaction among singers from across the South and across the country within the past fifty years. Then, I will investigate meanings that Sand Mountain singing carries for outside observers, both singers and a broader public, focusing on how this meaning was construed by the producers of the film, *Cold Mountain*.

The End of "Isolation"

Sand Mountain is, in many ways, still a relatively insular community. As I discussed in Chapter Three, a high proportion of the region's residents were born there, and relatively few people from other areas find reasons to move to the area. Nonetheless, Sand Mountain is considerably more accessible than it was just a few decades ago. Before the construction of modern highways and the prevalence of motor vehicles, going down from the mountain was a strenuous endeavor, and many people seldom did. However, this did not deter singers from traveling significant distances to attend major conventions (Coy Ivey, personal communication,

March 30, 2008). While some would travel in wagons, others traveled by train; written minutes from singings in the first half of the twentieth century frequently thank local rail lines for sending extra trains or making special stops on singing days (Cobb, 1978). But singers made such trips only as time and money would permit, and generally only traveled to distant singings a few times a year at most.

Coy Ivey remembers the excitement in his youth of going all the way to Atlanta to attend a large convention; his sons now routinely fly across the country and even across the Atlantic to participate in far-away Sacred Harp singings (David Ivey, personal communication, November 23, 2008). Since the 1950s, the relative ease of travel has allowed singers to attend conventions outside Sand Mountain much more frequently, while enabling outside singers to come and participate in local singings, as well. This has been a substantial factor in the survival of Sacred Harp singing to the present, and has dramatically changed the dynamics of many singings. Whereas local people might fill churches past their capacity at a large singing, now there are many singings that could not continue if it were not for visitors—in 2008, there were more all day singings in Cleburne County, Alabama, for example, than there were active singers living in the county (Stanley Edwards, personal communication, August 18, 2007).

Sand Mountain is one of the few remaining areas where there is enough local interest in Sacred Harp singing to sustain these events among the local population; the large majority of attendees at most area singings live on or near the mountain. The diminishing attendance at singings elsewhere, however, has had an impact on Sand Mountain singing, because strong singers from the area are frequently asked to help out at singings in other places. Judy Caudle, for example, noted that her singing at Gum Pond, near Cullman, in May 2009, would not have had enough people to sing without the large number of visitors, many of whom came from Sand

Mountain (Judy Caudle, personal communication, May 24, 2009). This increase in travel to different regions has encouraged Sand Mountain singers' participation in a number of different areas and exposed them to the practices of other regions. Occasionally, singers on Sand Mountain bring in influences from outside singers; many of the songs sung at the Cooper Book singing at Shady Grove, for example, were not originally favorites of the older generation of local singers, but were learned by Sand Mountain singers who attended Cooper Book singings in Florida, southern Alabama, and Georgia (Syble Adams, personal communication, June 25, 2009). Reciprocal visits by singers from other places also encourage the mixing of regional styles that happens at any major singing at present. At the Shady Grove singing in October, 2008, for instance, Syble Adams asked Johnny Lee, from Hoboken, Georgia, to lead the class in a warm-up exercise that singers in South Georgia use before each singing. While this practice is virtually unheard of at singings outside of South Georgia, close personal connections between singers such as Syble and Johnny often result in a recognized borrowed singing practice.

Although many Sacred Harp singers are adamant about maintaining "tradition" and their own regional styles, they are also interested in the ways that other people sing, and find useful aspects of other interpretations of their tradition. Despite its long history and its associations with past generations, Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain is not just a piece of the past that is brought out to view at each all-day singing. It is an ongoing entity that thrives on the energy brought by new singers with their own individual and unique interpretation of the tradition. As Allison Schofield, a singer from Western Massachusetts put it, singers in her area do not travel to the South so they can learn how to "do it right," but so they can see the various ways that longtime singers express the music, and bring back aspects they find particularly compelling (personal communication, April 18, 2009). Similarly, Southern singers at the conventions that

she attends have been inspired by her constant exuberance; the impression that she leaves is lasting, as well (Janice Jackson Johnson, personal communication, April 19, 2009).

Competing Iconicities: From Sand Mountain to Cold Mountain

The contemporary relevance of Sacred Harp is an essential aspect of its significance to participants on Sand Mountain. This form of cultural expression is not important only because of its ties to the past, but also because of its continuing power in the present. To some outside observers, however, the music has become an icon of the past, symbolizing a romanticized and vanished antebellum culture. Much early scholarship on shape note music is based on this supposition. George Pullen Jackson (1965), the most prominent scholar of Sacred Harp in the first half of the twentieth century, referred to the singers as a “lost tonal tribe,” considering them the last bastion of early American hymnody left in the United States (p. 4). As his writing makes clear, he was far more interested in the history of how these singers had preserved songs from Colonial America than in the details of their present performance; his best known book, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*, traces the distribution of early American songs through nineteenth-century hymnals, devoting relatively little attention to describing the singings that he attended throughout the South (Jackson, 1965).

Jackson actually found the Sacred Harp singers’ style problematic and believed that the music could be preserved longer and presented to a wider audience if the singers would learn to sing more like the schooled choral groups popular in Jackson’s day. He assembled a group of singers to perform for recordings using heavy vibrato, marked changes in dynamics, and a much more mainstream vocal style than that of traditional singers (Hinton, 2006). As he told the class assembled for the 100th anniversary of the Chattahoochee convention in 1952:

The world is ... joining with us in changing the harmonic dress of those Sacred Harp songs which were dressed less becomingly. Whether or not we like their harmonic styles—*they* like them, and those newly dressed songs will go places, *are* going places where our Sacred Harp, unchanged, would not be allowed to enter (quoted in Miller, 2002, p. 25).

In Jackson's view, the singing was iconic as a slice of early Americana that had been preserved by untrained Southern singers, but it needed to be brought into the mainstream if it were going to survive into the next century. He cared little for the traditions surrounding the contemporary practice of the music, feeling that the history of the songs themselves was far more significant than the singing style that Sacred Harp singers had developed.

Alan Lomax initially worked with George Pullen Jackson, traveling to the Alabama State Convention in 1942 to make his first field recording of Sacred Harp singing (Wade, 1997). While his approach differed substantially from Jackson's, as he was directly concerned with the stylistic aspects of the music, he nonetheless characterized singers in a manner that bears a strong resemblance to Jackson's writing. Lomax treats Sacred Harp singers as a primitive "other" in respect to what he considered mainstream American culture. He wrote of the "Sacred Harp folk," closely mirroring the term "Fasola folk" that Jackson had coined, and frequently described singers using words like "rural," "country," and "backwoods," without noting the significant percentage of singers that resided in the metropolitan areas of Atlanta and Birmingham. In fact, Rounder Records edited the liner notes to his album, *Harp of a Thousand Strings*, to make them seem less offensive. One line originally read: "When I asked one old gentleman what lay back of his beautiful singing, he slapped his big, country palm down on his book and said, every word in that book is true—true as Gospel" (Lomax, 1961, para. 9). In the revised liner notes to the Southern Journey recording series issued by Rounder Records, the word "country" and the colloquialism parodying Southern speech, "lay back of," were omitted. The newer notes read,

“One old gentleman told me, as he slapped his palm down on his songbook ... ” (Lomax, 1998, vol. 9, p. 3). Lomax’s disjunction from local culture was apparent to several of the singers who were present for his recording in 1959 at Fyffe, Alabama; one, for example, described him as a “very strange man,” but declined to elaborate (Anonymous, personal communication, Oct. 14 2007). While Lomax’s work provided important material for the study of Sacred Harp, his treatment of Sand Mountain culture was inadequate.

More recently, the producers of the movie, *Cold Mountain*, interpreted Sacred Harp singing as a poignant marker of Civil War-era Southern culture. The film introduces singing to the viewers in an early scene in which attacking Union forces are halted by massive earthworks. The opposing soldiers on top begin firing and launching projectiles into the trapped masses below, killing and maiming with horrific efficiency. Rising above the din of the battle, unaccompanied traditional Sacred Harp singers perform the song, “Idumea” (Denson, 1991, p. 47), whose lyrics fittingly ask, “And am I born to die? To lay this body down!” The minor chords, with frequent, strident open fifths, create a chilling effect in conjunction with the images of death. “Idumea” has a particularly intense sound, as the range from the lowest bass note to the highest treble is just under three octaves. The slow, steady rhythm is juxtaposed with the cacophony of the battle; the stately pace and minor mode create a somber, funereal mood.

Viewers are given more context for Sacred Harp singing in a later scene, in which the female protagonist is shown singing in a church; the congregation is arranged in a hollow square, beating time as they perform “I am Going Home” (Denson, 1991, p. 282). The lyrics seem somewhat ironic—as the singers in the church assert, “I’m glad that I am born to die,” they refer most directly to their anticipation of leaving the world for a heavenly state, but the singing is interrupted by a messenger bearing the news of North Carolina’s secession, an event that will

bring death to many in the congregation much sooner than they may have supposed. The jubilant chorus of, “Oh yes, my Lord, for I don’t care to stay here long,” competes with the shouts of excitement from outside the church as advocates of secession celebrate the news. “I’m Going Home” has a much sweeter sounding harmony than many Sacred Harp songs, as it has relatively few open chords. The jilting duple rhythm adds to the jubilant, lighthearted feel of the music. As the congregation leaves the church a few people at a time, the music gradually fades, suggesting the war’s interruption of levity and normal life.

Although it is unlikely that churches in mountains of North Carolina would have sung from the Sacred Harp in the early 1860s, the music seemed appropriate to the producers of the film because they felt that it typified rural Southern culture of the period.¹⁴ Tim Eriksen, a professional musician and Sacred Harp singer who lived in Western Massachusetts at the time, was asked to perform in the film. When he noticed that the screenplay referred to Sacred Harp singing, he suggested to T-Bone Burnette, who produced the soundtrack for *Cold Mountain*, that they include actual performances from traditional singers. When Burnette agreed, Eriksen arranged for a recording session at Liberty Baptist Church, and coordinated with local singers to invite a select group to perform for the movie. The singers were drawn primarily from Sand Mountain and Western Massachusetts, but also included others from surrounding regions in the South (Clawson, 2007). The class recorded about 25 to 30 songs, without knowing which would eventually be selected for the movie (David Ivey, personal communication, March 22, 2009).

Even though the members of the singing class recorded for the film came from around the nation, the fact that the singing was organized and recorded at Liberty Church gave local singers significant notoriety. Adding to the publicity, when the *Cold Mountain* soundtrack was

¹⁴ The Sacred Harp was apparently never in widespread use in the region in which the film is set; a more appropriate choice for historical accuracy might have been William Walker’s *Southern Harmony* (Cobb, 1978).

nominated for three Academy Awards, a group of Sacred Harp singers was invited to perform at the Oscars on national television (Clawson, 2007). For the event, they were billed as the “Liberty Sacred Harp Singers,” further emphasizing the ties to that particular church. A last minute change in the program, however, eliminated their opportunity to sing a song from the Sacred Harp, “Liberty” (Denson, 1991, p. 137), which they had practiced in typical “Sand Mountain” style with the alto part from the Cooper book (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009). Although the singers did appear onstage accompanying Allison Kraus, they sang a quiet backup vocal part in a style that was nothing like the Sacred Harp music they were brought to perform.

In several different respects, the events surrounding the Sacred Harp singing in *Cold Mountain* demonstrate competing interpretations of the iconicity of the musical style. The producers of the film presented Sacred Harp music as a signifier of a vanished, antiquated culture; some singers in other regions understood the music in the film as the most “authentic,” “genuine” form of Sacred Harp; and singers on Sand Mountain disagreed about the appropriateness of Sacred Harp singing in the context of a major motion picture. Each of these groups invested the music with divergent meanings, using their own specific interpretations of its significance to advance very different goals. This case study demonstrates the multi-faceted nature of iconicity; Sacred Harp singing is iconic in multiple ways to multiple communities.

The producers of *Cold Mountain* included Sacred Harp singing because they wanted an “authentic” musical form that was popular in the era. T. Bone Burnette, who produced the soundtrack, sought out a number of traditional musicians from the Appalachian region to participate, along with better-known artists, including Allison Krauss and Jack White (Wright, 2004, p. 2004). Interestingly, the movie historicized the music in a manner that, in any other

context, most contemporary singers would find uncomfortable. Traditional singers are proud of the estimable history of Sacred Harp music, but they prefer to focus on the fact that the cultural form is still an integral part of the lives of numerous individuals and communities, and has never become a stagnant relic for historical investigation. As Aldo Ceresa put it in a singing school he taught, “this is not a historical reenactment. We will never wear costumes. This is a living tradition and there are songs in this book from nearly every decade from the 1700s to the 1990s” (personal communication, January 10, 2009). Although the costumes seem appropriate in the film because of the Civil War setting, they associate the music with the distant past, framing the *Sacred Harp* as part of a bygone era. Tim Eriksen and other singers from Western Massachusetts were disappointed to see that the replica 1859 edition songbooks prepared for the movie were made to look old and faded, even though they would have been quite new at the time (Allison Schofield, personal communication, April 18, 2009). The producers apparently felt that old books, even though they were not historically accurate, seemed more appropriate to convey the antiquity of the music. Eriksen expressed that newer books would have better reflected the fact that Sacred Harp singing has always been a very contemporary phenomenon and not a historical relic (Ibid.).

Many reviews of the movie and soundtrack seemed to reflect the producers’ perspective, discussing Sacred Harp singing not as a thriving form of culture in the modern world, but as a survival from past centuries. Jon Pareles (2003), writing for the *New York Times*, used terms reminiscent of George Pullen Jackson when he described the Sacred Harp singers’ “homespun voices,” part of a tradition that “predates the Civil” War (p. AR 37). Bill Ellis (2004), in *The Commercial Appeal*, encouraged his readers to listen to Sacred Harp music before it vanishes: “Most of all, make way for the otherworldly voices of the Sacred Harp Singers at Liberty Baptist

Church in Alabama, who nearly steal the show with their dying solfeggio art that everyone should hear at least once in their lives” (para. 6).

Fred Brown (2003), on the other hand, wrote in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* that shape note singing is “not only alive, but thriving” (para. 6). He incorrectly asserted the antiquity of the style, however, by noting that it “was ancient when the first Europeans landed on America’s shores” (Ibid.). In a later article, he confused Harp of Columbia music from East Tennessee, commonly called “Old Harp,” with Sacred Harp singing, two very different traditions. He wrote (2005), “Old Harp, Sacred Harp, or simply Harp music is one of the original American forms ... In fact, Old Harp has its own movie, *Cold Mountain*.” (para. 2). *Cold Mountain* interpreted the iconic nature of Sacred Harp singing in a manner very different from that of most Sand Mountain singers. While they invest heavily in the notion that their form of music has an important history, they recognize this history as being important primarily for its impact on the present. Singing creates connections between past and present generations that tie families and communities together; the simple fact that it antedates the Civil War is of comparatively little importance to the singers on Sand Mountain (Rodney Ivey, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

Cold Mountain attracted significant national attention to singing in the Sand Mountain region, among the general public, but especially among Sacred Harp singers in other regions. Not only was the recording for the soundtrack made at Liberty Baptist Church in Henagar, but many of those featured in the performance at the Academy Awards were prominent Sand Mountain singers. Furthermore, despite the fact that the class recorded for the soundtrack included representatives from distant parts of Georgia, Alabama, and even Massachusetts, they were billed on the CD and on promotional materials as the “Sacred Harp Singers of Liberty

Church.” Despite the inaccuracy inherent in the name, most participants felt that it would suffice to eliminate confusion and make the group seem more coherent (Clawson, 2007).

Even further emphasizing the connection to Liberty Church, the singers elected to perform the song “Liberty” (Denson, 1991, p. 137) for the Academy Awards broadcast. Not only did the song’s title seem particularly appropriate given their billing as the Sacred Harp Singers of Liberty Church, but the lyrics, unusual for the *Sacred Harp*, were deemed secular enough to be suitable for performance at the Oscars (Clawson, 2007). “Liberty” is a fugal tune in a major key from the New England singing school period, and is typically sung at a quick tempo—the singers involved felt that it would be an ideal choice to showcase the unique characteristics of Sacred Harp singing (Allison Schofield, personal communication, April 18, 2009). Word about the performance had already spread through the national Sacred Harp community, especially through the “Fasola” internet list serve, and singers around the country watched the broadcast from home (Nathan Rees, personal communication, June 15, 2008). Although the last-minute decision to cut the Sacred Harp song was a disappointment, the announcement of the televised singing had attracted the attention of a large proportion of Sacred Harp singers nationwide.

The fact that the so-called “Liberty Church” singers were chosen for this performance suggested that they were representative of the very best of contemporary Sacred Harp singing. Many singers who had little or no experience traveling to singings in various regions of the South, as well as some who did, understood the singing on the *Cold Mountain* soundtrack to be the epitome of “genuine” Sacred Harp. A number of singers tried to emulate the sound of the recording, and the two songs performed in the film became instant favorites in numerous local singings (Nathan Rees, personal communication, June 15, 2008). *Cold Mountain* sparked an

interest in singing on Sand Mountain among singers from outside the South, boosting attendance at the yearly two-day convention at Liberty to the point that it now stands second only to the National Convention in Birmingham in attendance among southern singings (Sheppard, 2008). Owing in part to the publicity of *Cold Mountain*, singing on Sand Mountain has become iconic as the most “authentic” form of the music to many singers across the country. Sand Mountain’s “Liberty Church,” endorsed by Hollywood, came to represent the pinnacle of Sacred Harp singing, despite the fact that the “Liberty Singers” were representatives of a number of individual communities with different stylistic aspects.

Sand Mountain singers were not unanimous in their endorsement of the decision to include Sacred Harp singing in *Cold Mountain*. Some were concerned about the appropriateness of their form of sacred music in such a secular setting. On one end of the spectrum, some singers felt that the movie would garner national attention that would have a positive effect on Sacred Harp for years to come. The film spurred very few locals to attend singings; as Elene Stovall, of Birmingham, quipped, “you could stand Nicole Kidman or Jude Law up in the middle of the room here and a lot of these people would not know who they were... if they did, they wouldn’t care, anyway” (Kennedy, 2003, p. E1). In other parts of the country, however, numerous individuals sought out local singing groups after first encountering the music in the film. Multiple singers from diverse locales have told me of their introduction to singing through *Cold Mountain*, and others have noted the increased awareness of Sacred Harp among their neighbors and associates owing to the film (Jesse Pearlman Karlsberg, personal communication, July 3, 2007).

Other Sand Mountain singers worried about the context in which the film would cast Sacred Harp singing. Tony Ivey, the preacher at Liberty Baptist, seemed to represent the

majority in his assertion that “if you have an inappropriate scene with this type of music, then it would be offensive,” but otherwise, the use of the music in the film would not be objectionable (Brown, 2003, p. 3). Betty Wright, who regularly attends singings at Liberty and lives nearby, read the book before the movie was released, and was concerned that the movie might show the singing in a bad light. “There are some things that went on... that are ungodly. That would be very inappropriate for our music. I would not want our songs associated with that. That would be out of context” (Brown, 2003, p. 3). Most singers seemed to think that the movie treated the music with respect. No one with whom I spoke felt that the singing was inappropriate as the background to a battle scene, as the profundity of the lyrics to “Idumea” (Denson, 1991, p. 47) made for a powerful commentary on the war itself and the frailty of human life. As for the scene of singing in the church, the only disappointment that I heard local singers voice was that no one had taught Nicole Kidman the difference between smoothly beating time and doing a karate chop.

Some singers, however, were concerned that it would be inappropriate to include Sacred Harp singing in a film that had any objectionable content, even if the singing were kept at a distance from other material. One Sand Mountain singer with whom I spoke regretted that she had participated in the recording after she saw the finished film. She was surprised by the movie’s sexual content, and felt that Sacred Harp singing should not have been put in the same context, even if it did not accompany the objectionable scenes. She disagreed that the presentation of Sacred Harp singing in a commercial film was justified by the interest that it would generate in the music (Anonymous, personal communication, February 12, 2009).

Although singers voiced differences of opinion about the appropriateness of Sacred Harp singing in *Cold Mountain*, the issue never became heated or divisive. It did, however, allow individuals

to express their own understanding of the place of Sacred Harp singing within a wider context, demonstrating the range of views about the iconic status of the singing on Sand Mountain. In particular, it encouraged local singers to consider the religious aspects of their singing, exploring the boundaries between sacred and secular.

Much early scholarship on Sacred Harp singing focused on the extensive historical roots of the musical form. George Pullen Jackson and Alan Lomax brought attention to the singing, but emphasized its antiquity to the point of making it seem completely outside of the modern world. More than a half-century after Lomax's introduction to Sacred Harp singing, the movie *Cold Mountain* perpetuated some of these same stereotypes, casting it as a relic from a bye-gone era. Singers themselves, however, have interpreted the history of their form of music in a number of ways. Sacred Harp singing is iconic in divergent ways to different individuals and communities—it carries a complex set of associations and acts as a signifier of numerous disparate ideas depending on the context. Sand Mountain singers' responses to *Cold Mountain* demonstrated the breadth of interpretations of the music within their region, showing that even among a close community, singers see the music as iconic in a range of different ways.

CHAPTER VI “YOUR COMPANY HAS BEEN MOST SWEET”

*My Christian friends, in bonds of love,
Whose hearts in sweetest union join,
Your friendship's like a drawing band,
Yet we must take the parting hand.
Your comp'ny's sweet, your union dear;
Your words delightful to my ear,
Yet when I see that we must part,
You draw like cords around my heart*
(Denson, 1991, p. 62).

Final Thoughts and Continuing Research

Members of the Sacred Harp community on Sand Mountain use the term “singer” in a way that implies a great deal more than the usual sense of the word. Singers are not just people who happen to enjoy vocal music or attend a few singings; they are dedicated participants who devote considerable time and resources to attend Sacred Harp singings. The term suggests a level of dedication roughly equivalent to being an active member of a church—being a singer is often a crucial element of one’s personal identity. This level of significance is possible because Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain is more than just a type of music; it is an iconic musical form that connects multiple aspects of culture and experience under one overarching aesthetic. Tied up in the musical performance are deeply meaningful elements of religious worship, uniquely evocative symbols of community and family history, and expressions of participants’ core values.

Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain is an integral part of local culture, not just a musical performance. Individuals shape their own identities as members of a community related by their participation in the singing. Much as in Stephen Feld’s description of the cultural role of *dulugu ganalan*, or “lift-up-over sounding” for the Kaluli, Sacred Harp music can also be

understood as “a local gloss for social identity articulated through human sonic essences... [which] reverberates and echoes through other ... expressive and interactional modes” (Feld, 1988, p. 76). Similarly, Sacred Harp singing reflects a range of values, social activities, and cultural ideals that are expressed in the musical form, but also in participants’ daily lives as members of Sand Mountain communities.

While Sacred Harp singing plays an important role in area church services, it also acts as a nexus around which local participants plan many other activities encompassing the entire range between sacred and secular. As I explained in Chapter Two, even though most local singers describe the experience of singing from the *Sacred Harp* as intensely religious, as it is used as the worship hymnody for their church services, they take the music into other contexts, singing for festivals and at social events. All-day singings mediate between sacred and secular realms, giving opportunities to those who are so inclined to emphasize the religious nature of the music and its texts, while allowing people of all denominations and inclinations to participate.

The iconic nature of Sacred Harp singing is evident in the ways that singing practices structure interactions between locals and visitors. Further, values derived from the singing itself are expressed in all of the various contexts in which singing occurs. As I described in Chapter Three, Sand Mountain is a demographically unique area of Alabama, where people tend to be racially, religiously, and ideologically similar; those who travel there to sing from the *Sacred Harp*, however, come from very diverse backgrounds and cover the political and religious spectrum. The democratic nature of the singing convention system allows everyone an equal opportunity to lead a song, and singers are adamant about refraining from sectarian, political, or otherwise divisive discussions during the singing. Participants are tacitly, and only occasionally vocally, asked to leave contentious issues aside.

In Chapter Four, I discussed Sand Mountain singers' sense of "tradition" as it relates to Sacred Harp singing, asserting that many singers justify particular practices by citing them as traditional, attempting to preserve the ways of older, respected members, even those who are deceased. In this manner, certain aspects of singing style are taught through oral means; although the *Sacred Harp* songbook is a crucial reference for singers, the particularities of signing practice on Sand Mountain are influenced by a combination of oral and written forms of transmission. Furthermore, when singers meet to preserve their tradition as they sing, they reaffirm their commitment to many of the core values that they find in the music, lyrics, and practices associated with Sacred Harp singing. For Sand Mountain residents, singing is a way to assert their own interpretations of what matters most in their culture. They see teaching upcoming generations to sing from the *Sacred Harp* as one of the most important ways of maintaining that culture (Joyce Walton, personal communication, February 8, 2009).

The *Sacred Harp* songbook itself and the four shaped notes it features are poignant symbols of individuals' identities as Sacred Harp singers, as they invest these objects and characters with great personal, family, and community meaning. Also in Chapter Four, I demonstrated the significance of memory as singers associate specific places, songs, and books with members of their own families or communities, especially after those members have died. Much of the impetus for maintaining the "traditional" aspects of Sacred Harp practice on Sand Mountain comes from the desire to strengthen connections to other singers, both living and dead, across time and space, by attempting to sing like the older generations who have passed on. By preserving these specific practices, singers feel that they reinforce these family and community bonds.

Observers from both on and off Sand Mountain have interpreted Sacred Harp singing in a number of different ways, writing accounts that are inflected with their own perspectives and agendas. As I discuss in Chapter Five, writers have characterized Sacred Harp singing variously as a relic of early American culture, a tradition unchanged since the Civil War, and as a musical form that has adapted to suit the needs of contemporary society. While all of these descriptions are accurate in at least some elements, none are comprehensive accounts. In fact, singers interpret Sacred Harp music in diverse ways, depending on the context and their individual perspective. There is no monolithic and unimpeachable interpretation of the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing—the musical form is iconic to a range of different people in a variety of ways. It is in the intersection of all these diverse interpretations that singers meet to reify the culture that this music represents.

Documenting Other Regional Singing Styles

While Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain is thriving at present, there are many other singing communities throughout the South from South Georgia to Texas with different, but equally rich interpretations of the musical form, whose prospects for continued survival are less secure.¹⁵ On the Saturday before the first Sunday in August, 2003, as publicity for Sacred Harp singing mounted with the anticipated release of the film *Cold Mountain*, a small class assembled at Hopewell Primitive Baptist Church in Oneonta, Alabama, between Sand Mountain and Birmingham, for the combined Warrior River and Clear Creek Conventions. Both singings, which were meeting for their 129th and 104th annual sessions, respectively, used to be held separately over a full weekend, attracting very large crowds, but a decline in interest in the region precipitated their combination into one small all-day singing. This meeting turned out to

¹⁵ See Figure 1.5 for a map of Sacred Harp singings in Alabama.

be the last of both conventions; as Judy Caudle, speaking for the resolutions committee, noted, “We are very saddened because our forefathers sacrificed everything to maintain a great convention that expressed the love they found in the tradition and sacred songs. But, with the decline in interest and attendance, we felt we had no other choice” (Sheppard, 2003, p. 98). Other singings have suffered the same fate when older members become unable to lead conventions and younger people in the area do not become interested in singing.

Even though Sacred Harp singing remains strong in many areas in the South, including Sand Mountain, some regions have seen a marked decline over the past several decades. Buell Cobb, writing in 1978, was already aware of the attenuation faced by many singings when he compiled a list of all the annual singings held at that time. The list included 283 singings from the Denson revision of the Sacred Harp, of which only a handful were outside of the South (Cobb, 163-175). The official directory of singings for 2009 includes 288 Denson book singings, a slight increase from 1978, but the number of singings in other regions apart from the South has grown to 90 (Sheppard, 2009). While the increased interest in Sacred Harp singing around the country is notable, these statistics show that approximately 80 southern singings have discontinued in the past thirty years. As local singing conventions evaporate, distinctive singing styles, histories, and musical practices risk dying out, as well. I intend to continue researching the iconicity of Sacred Harp singing in other regions beyond Sand Mountain, helping to document practices and ideas that might otherwise be lost. In addition, I hope to use my work to bring attention to the various aspects that distinguish regional singing styles, perhaps spurring increased interest among local singers in recognizing and preserving elements that make their regions unique.

Conclusion

My work contributes to the ongoing project of documenting the historical and cultural context of Sacred Harp singing in Alabama. In addition, I advance scholarly understanding of the subject by drawing from pertinent ethnomusicological theories; as I describe the cultural context of Sacred Harp singing on Sand Mountain and throughout the South, I approach the form as more than just a style of music, but as an iconic aesthetic that bridges multiple forms of cultural expression. Singing ties together communities and families, connects past and present generations, and forms a key part of local conceptions of tradition, culture, and history. I demonstrate that Sacred Harp singing happens within a social realm that both shapes and is shaped by broader social experience on Sand Mountain. As I have shown, it is an iconic form with multiple iterations and interpretations, but a central set of practices and values that assert and reify core aspects of Sand Mountain culture.

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APPENDICES

Table 1**Editions of the *Sacred Harp* historically used on Sand Mountain, Alabama.**

Name of Edition	Place and Date of Publication	Name of Editor	Historical Information
<i>Sacred Harp</i> *	Hamilton, GA (1844). Last edition: 1869.	B. F. White and E. J. King	First edition of the <i>Sacred Harp</i> . Many songs in three parts only.
<i>B. F. White Sacred Harp</i> (Cooper Book/Blue Book)	Samson, AL (1901). Most recent edition: 2006.	Wm. Cooper	First break-away revision, including alto parts for all songs and gospel-style songs. Current editions include new compositions using older gospel styles.
<i>Sacred Harp</i> (White Book)	Atlanta, GA (1909). Most recent edition: 2007.	J. L. White	First major revision within the White family. Includes appendix with many gospel songs. Current editions do not include new compositions.
<i>Original Sacred Harp</i> * (James Book)	Atlanta, GA (1910). Last edition: 1921.	Joe S. James	Revision that maintained B.F. White's original integrity.
<i>Sacred Harp</i> (Denson Book/Red Book)	Bremen, GA (1936). Most recent edition: 1991.	S. M. and T. J. Denson	Descended from the James revision. Includes much of B.F. White's original material and new compositions in the style of 19 th century editions.

*No longer in print



Figure 1.1. Liberty Baptist Church, Henagar, AL.



Figure 1.2. Porch singing in Fyfe, AL.



Figure 1.3. License plates relating to Sacred Harp singing (used by permission).

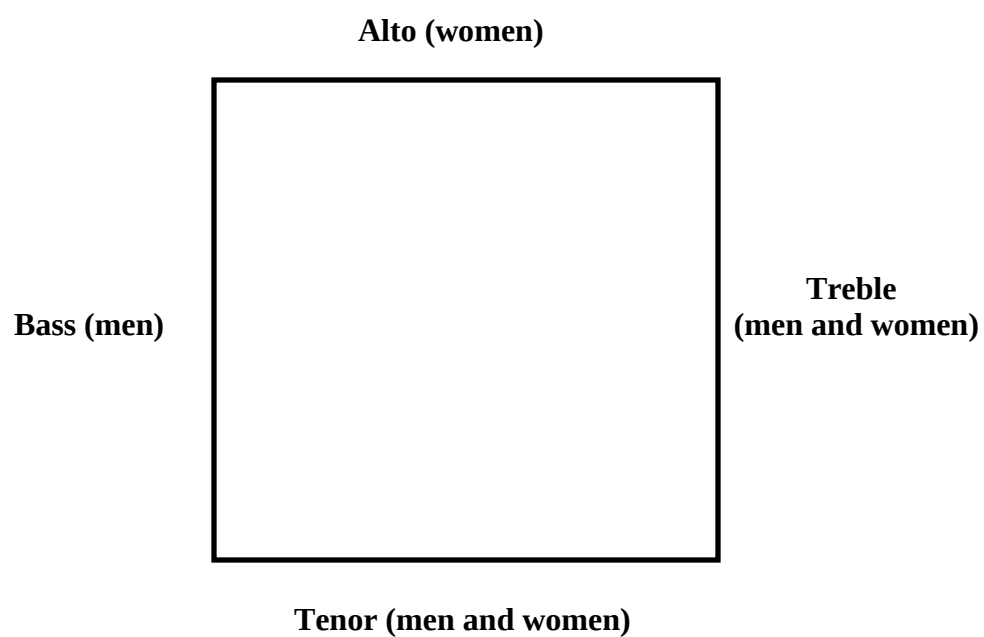


Figure 1.4. The hollow square; showing the seating arrangement of different voice parts. The altos usually sit around or near the pulpit.

Alabama Counties and County Seats

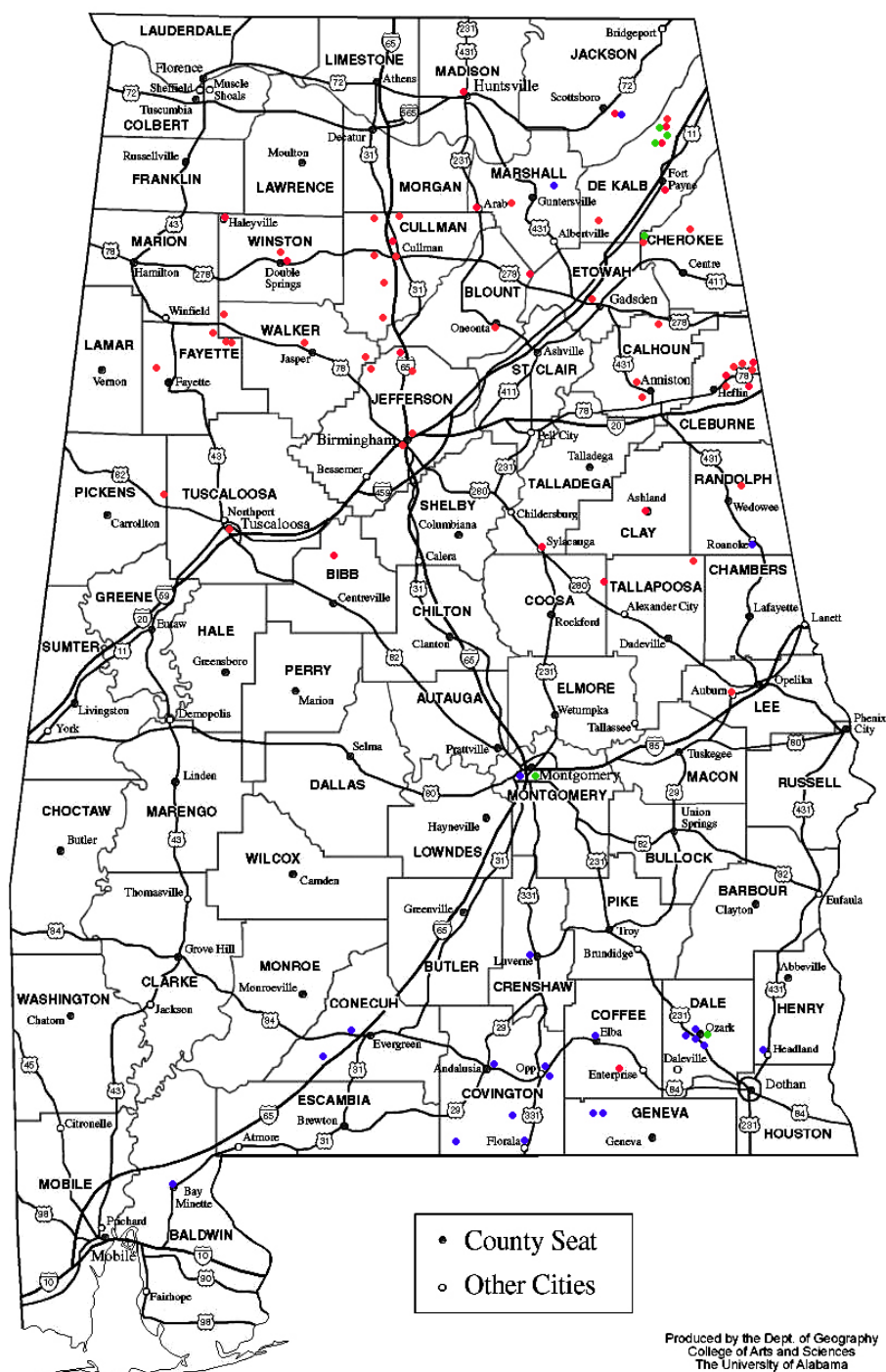


Figure 1.5. Alabama singing map. Showing all-day singings and conventions in Alabama [red=Denson book, blue=Cooper book, green=one or more editions of the *Sacred Harp* used in conjunction with other shape note songbooks] (Sheppard, 2009).



Figure 2.1. Large crowd at the July (2009) Henagar-Union Convention in Henagar, AL.



Figure 2.2. Ivey cousins singing at the Ivey Memorial, Liberty Baptist church, June 2009.



Figure 2.3. Antioch Baptist Church, Ider, Alabama.



Figure 2.4. Shady Grove Baptist Church between Section and Dutton, Alabama.



Figure 2.5. Pickin' at the home of Coy and Marie Ivey, Henagar, AL.



Figure 2.6. "Buck" dancing. Loyd Ivey and his daughters at the home of Coy and Marie Ivey, Henagar, AL.



Figure 3.1. View of Sand Mountain. Interstate 59 at Trenton, Georgia.



Figure 3.2. "Welcome to Henagar" sign.



Figure 4.1. Singing at the grave of Karen House . Liberty Baptist church cemetery, Henagar, Alabama.



Figure 4.2. Reba Dell Windom and her granddaughter. Leading at the Henagar-Union Convention, Liberty Baptist Church, Henagar, Alabama, July 2009.



Figure 4.3. Night Singing. Antioch Baptist Church. Ider, Alabama.

Treble

That free - dom calls her own.

Alto

...own -

Tenor (melody)

Bass

...own -

Figure 4.4A. “Liberty” from the *Sacred Harp*, Cooper revision. (See Audio Recording 1.3A)

Treble

That free - dom calls her own.

Alto

...own -

Tenor (melody)

Bass

...own -

Figure 4.4B. “Liberty” from the *Sacred Harp*, Denson revision. (See Audio Recording 1.3B)

This musical score is for the hymn "Ortonville" from the 1909 5th edition of the *Sacred Harp*. It is written for four voices: Treble, Alto, Tenor (melody), and Bass. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: "And drives a - way his fear,". The Treble part begins with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, Bb4, and C5, ending with a whole note C5. The Alto part begins with a whole note F4, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, and Bb4, ending with a whole note C5. The Tenor (melody) part begins with a whole note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, Bb3, and C4, ending with a whole note C4. The Bass part begins with a whole note F3, followed by quarter notes G3, A3, and Bb3, ending with a whole note C4.

Figure 4.5A. "Ortonville" from the *Sacred Harp*, J.L. White, 1909 5th edition.

This musical score is for the hymn "Ortonville" from the Denson revision of the *Sacred Harp*. It is written for four voices: Treble, Alto, Tenor (melody), and Bass. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: "And drives a - way his fears,". The Treble part begins with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, Bb4, and C5, ending with a whole note C5. The Alto part begins with a whole note F4, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, and Bb4, ending with a whole note C5. The Tenor (melody) part begins with a whole note G3, followed by quarter notes A3, Bb3, and C4, ending with a whole note C4. The Bass part begins with a whole note F3, followed by quarter notes G3, A3, and Bb3, ending with a whole note C4.

Figure 4.5B. "Ortonville" from the *Sacred Harp*, Denson revision.

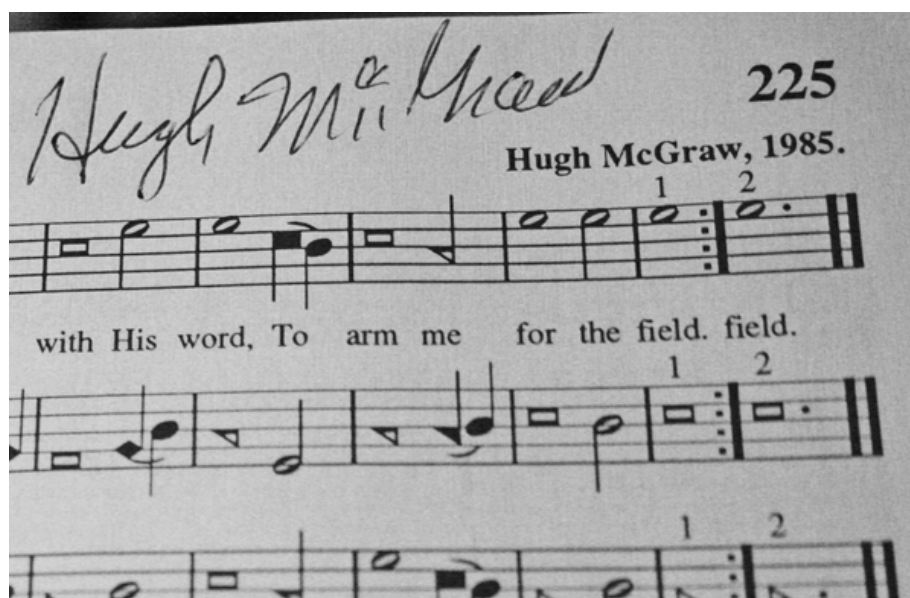


Figure 4.6. Signature of Hugh McGraw.

Audio Recordings

Audio Recording 1.1.

“Brown” and “Amazing Grace”

Recorded at Liberty Baptist Church, Henagar, Alabama, February 8, 2009.

([click here to listen](#))

Audio Recording 1.2.

“Sweet Union” (Denson, 1991, 424)

Recorded at Liberty Baptist Church, Henagar, Alabama, March 27, 2009.

([click here to listen](#))

Audio Recording 1.3A.

“Liberty” (Cooper, 137, 2006)

Recorded at Liberty Baptist Church, Henagar, Alabama, June 7, 2009

([click here to listen](#))

Audio Recording 1.3B.

“Liberty” (Denson, 137, 1991)

Recorded at Holly Springs Primitive Baptist Church, Bremen, GA, June 6, 2009

([click here to listen](#))

All audio recordings used by permission of singers at Liberty Baptist Church, Henagar, Alabama
and Holly Springs Primitive Baptist Church, Bremen, Georgia.

Recordings by Jonathon Smith, 2008-2009

Vita

Jonathon Smith graduated from Lander University, Greenwood, SC, with a BA in Music, emphasis in organ and flute performance, in 2006. He received an MM from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in 2009. Smith served as organist at St. Paul United Methodist Church, Saluda, SC, from 2000-2007. In addition, he is an accomplished composer, with several performed works.

Smith presented on “Sacred Harp Singing: Shape-notes and the American Music Tradition,” at the Multicultural Music Symposium at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in October, 2008. He hopes to pursue further work in ethnomusicology, documenting the unique singing cultures of regional Sacred Harp communities throughout the South. He also plans to research shaped note singing in South Carolina. Smith has written on influences from folk music in the works of Haydn; medieval organ performance practice; oral and written transmission in Old Harp singing in East Tennessee; and theories of double consciousness and the Colored Sacred Harp singers of South Alabama.

Smith’s interest in Sacred Harp singing goes beyond academic study; he is a frequent participant in singings around the South, has taught multiple singing schools, and directed a session about the music of William Walker at the 2009 Camp Fasola in Anniston, Alabama. Smith received a grant from the Alabama Folklife Association to document Camp Fasola. Smith is also a participant in New Harp of Columbia singing in East Tennessee, and taught at the 2009 Camp Doremi in Little Switzerland, North Carolina.