



The Society for the Preservation of Spirituals

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Home	http://www.charlestonmercury.com/articles/2011/08/25/news/doc4e541dc7a9058140373291.txt
94 Gullah Spirituals	<i>Rebawn Again . . . a Gullah Spiritual from the Santee River area</i>
Spiritual Society Beginnings	By Tom Robinson
Testimonial, 1936	. . . <i>Paul en' Silas, dey een duh jail,</i>
Concert Tours & National Broadcast	<i>Eh, gawt 'uh rebawn again,</i>
Chronology	<i>One ob dem watch while de udduh one pray,</i>
Recording Project	<i>Eh, yuh gawt 'uh rebawn again,</i>
CD of Field Recordings	<i>Rebawn sinnuh, gawt 'uh rebawn again . . .</i>
CD of Concert Recordings	
Book with Music & Lyrics	
Books with Lyrics only	
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Testimonial, 1984	When the relentless Atlantic tides tear away the sands of Lowcountry sea islands, an opposing storm soon returns them to reform a beach nearly identical to one that disappeared. The peoples and cultures of those same islands are not always as fortunate.
News	Time. Cultural assimilation. Anglo-tropic laws. Real estate development. Commerce. Taxes. Ignorance and arrogance. These are enemies of the fragile Gullah culture that defines the Lowcountry as much as shrimp and grits and heroes from the Waaar and sleeping porches with haint blue ceilings. Fortunately, there are forces at work that do not forget and will not let go. The Charleston Preservation Society and Historic Charleston Foundation work tirelessly to preserve the architecture, neighborhoods and lifestyle of old Charleston. Similarly, the Rural Mission on Wadmalaw Island and the Penn Center on St. Helena Island work to maintain the culture, language, land ownership and general well-being of the descendants of West African slaves who cling to life on the less developed sea islands.
Contact us	Beginning in 1922, 22 like-minded Charlestonians organized the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals. Involved throughout other elements of the Charleston Renaissance, they began collecting, archiving and recording spirituals: the poetry, music and expressions of faith captured in the Gullah language. The Gullah dialect emanated from the West African slaves who spoke Kiro, and blended with French and English. What some find odd is that a group of white people took it upon themselves to preserve an African culture.
Binyumhs	The early society members, and those who joined since, were not wealthy liberals with a guilty conscience, as some might expect. Those seeking to appreciate the perspective of the society's founders should read The Carolina Low-Country, the book they put together and The MacMillan Company published in 1931. The book describes the cultural background of the Lowcountry and the many influences upon the development of its history but focuses most attention on how the spirituals fit into the traditions that surrounded them.
	They were lovers of the music and the art form of a cappella song, punctuated with foot or hand tapping. "It sounds like Africa ... powerful, dramatic, rhythmic," says Park Dougherty, a third-generation society member. "You don't have to be black to love it." Many whites spoke Gullah as well, including Dougherty's grandfather who worked on road-building crews with African descendants. Gullah was familiar to city kids, too, brought to town from the plantations in the form of nannies' lullabies and street criers. The Gullah and the South Carolina whites also shared a common Christian faith.
	Like other preservationists, SPS members saw the raw, primitive form giving way to more modern jazz and blues forms (and later, urban gospel music). The congregational style of singing was being replaced for music arranged for professional voices. Hymnals were supplanting the more free-form spirituals comprised of indefinite number of verses and illogical sequence. (Congregants typically responded to the opening phrase by a leader, who would often spontaneously change the rhythm by starting the next phrase at different beat intervals or completely extemporize.) The SPS, out of respect for something they knew important, committed itself to preserving a rich oral tradition and a cappella stylings.
	Most fittingly, a cappella means "in the style of the chapel," not just without instrumentation. The early performances and recordings of the spirituals were made in Lowcountry churches — largely modest praise houses — rather than city recording studios.
	The early SPS members introduced Northern and urban audiences to spirituals, performing concerts up and down the coast, even entertaining the likes of Franklin Roosevelt at the White House and performing on NBC radio. Author DuBose Heyward introduced George Gershwin to Gullah music while the composer was adapting Heyward's novel Porgy into the opera Porgy and Bess. Perhaps more importantly, they captured the original music. In 1937 the Spiritual Society bought an "electrical transcription machine" to record on aluminum discs spirituals sung in African-American churches in Charleston and on the surrounding sea islands.
	It was not until the 1980s that those discs resurfaced and the society donated the original aluminum discs to the Library of Congress Folksong Archive. In 2004, a CD including the champion street criers (flower sellers) at the 1936 Azalea Festival, 19 spirituals performed by African-American congregations and six by the founding generation of the Spiritual Society from a 1936 national broadcast was released. Another double CD includes 56 songs by the SPS singers recorded from 1936-1995. In addition a book of lyrics with music to 49 spirituals collected during the 1920s was published. In 2007, a second book was released with the lyrics of 94 spirituals.
	The SPS, like the notes of its music, has seen its ups and downs. The Second World War interrupted pretty much everything, including this work. A second generation revived the society during the 1950s. A third (and some fourth) generation took up the reins and is now leading the modern society. David Smythe is the current president and has a long history with the society. He recalls his father, Henry B. Smythe, longtime SPS president, prodding his wife, Tigger, to calm him and his brothers on long car trips by singing spirituals. He is ready to bring along yet another generation of enthusiasts.
	He and the current society with its 45 members are off to a good start. Just this last June, a writer for the New York Times wrote a story detailing the history of the society. The Post and Courier then noted the story after it appeared in the Times. In July, WKCR-FM in New York featured the music of the society and interviews with Dougherty and Smythe on its Amazing Grace radio program.
	The group stopped giving public concerts about ten years ago, in part because there was no need to perform now that several local African-American groups are holding concerts. The songs were safely in the hands of those to whom they belong, so the society gathers only in private settings to sing now. Last year the society gave a concert at the Footlight Players for the Heyward Foundation for members of the family to honor DuBose Heyward.
	David Smythe acknowledges that, as Gullah has passed from generation to generation, pronunciations may not be as authentic as they once were.
	Smythe is an ardent supporter of authenticity. He welcomes scrutiny that protects the original dialect and music. He is enthusiastic about a coordinated effort by other Gullah advocates and can envision working together more in the future. One of the society's greatest advocates, Alphonso Brown, started the Mt. Zion (AME Church) Spiritual Singers in 1989. They performed at this year's Spoleto Festival. Brown is thankful for the Spiritual Society's efforts to collect and share the music of yesteryear.
	Smythe believes the original mission is being accomplished through the efforts of the society. The music of the sea island culture has been preserved and being shared with the African-American community.
	Publicity about the spirituals as an art form has perhaps never been more widespread than today. Indeed, rather than lower the curtain on an era, the society's president believes the time is ripe once again for creativity in sharing Gullah spirituals. A brand new Web site, www.gullahspirituals.org , just went live. It is a living library, giving a taste of the Lowcountry's music, history and culture. Expect the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals itself to be rebawn again, and again.
	Learn more at the society's Web site http://www.gullahspirituals.org/ . CDs and books are available online and at the Edisto Book Store, http://www.edistobookstore.com/edistoetc.html , (843) 869-1885;
	the Preservation Society of Charleston, http://www.preservationsociety.org/shop_default.asp , (843) 722-4630; Historic Charleston Foundation Book Shop, http://www.historiccharleston.org , (843) 724-8484; and the Saints Alive Book Store, SaintsAlive@StMichaelsChurch.net , (843) 725-5483.