

The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Bound for Canaan". It consists of four staves. The first three staves are in treble clef, and the fourth is in bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics "I'm on my way to Ca - naan, I'm on my way to Ca - naan," are written below each staff. The melody is simple and repetitive, with a focus on the lyrics.

BOUND FOR CANAAN

Sacred Harp Singing

from Sand Mountain, Alabama

Special thanks
to the Wootten family
and the Antioch Baptist Church.

Thanks also to Ted Johnson for use of an alternate master recording.

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Spring Sunday morning, a red-brick country church. The gathering crowd brings an air of expectancy. A hush surrounds the preliminaries of greeting and prayer. Then, headlong, full-blown, the sound comes hurling—swarm-like from the midst of things. It is a sound at once earthly and ethereal, ancient and new-born. Wilderness music to stir the modern soul.

Folk traditions of a *cappella* choral music, exploiting the warmth and power of unaccompanied vocal harmony, thrive in many corners of the world. Recent recordings and concert tours have demonstrated the cross-cultural appeal of South African township choirs, Soviet Georgian choruses, and Balkan women's ensembles. A less widely known but equally vigorous counterpart to these examples is the Sacred Harp singing still heard in the rural Deep South a century and a half after its introduction.

The Original Sacred Harp hymnal, published continuously since 1844, has proved the hardest specimen of a genre that proliferated in early-19th-century America—the shape-note tunebook. Combining the medieval practice of solmization, or syllable-singing, with a notation system of four shapes (▼ called *fa*; ● *sol*; ■ *la*; and ◆ *mi*) to represent the octave (*fa-sol-la-fa-sol-la-mi-fa*), itinerant singing-masters of New England and later the Midwest and South taught the rudiments of sight-reading to a populace largely unschooled in “academic” music.

Homegrown composers filled volume after volume with part-songs, many of them familiar folk melodies freshly harmonized and girded with edifying verse. This burgeoning repertory, including many so-called fusing tunes featuring successive entrances for the parts in their choruses or “fuges,” enabled urban singing societies and frontier flocks alike to make lively and well-balanced music without the aid of instruments. In the composition style known as dispersed harmony, all four traditional voices—treble (soprano), alto, tenor (melody), and bass—follow tuneful lines that cross each other freely, unbound by the hierarchy of chord structure that the organ and piano elsewhere impose. The space required to display such notation, each part on a separate staff, gives the books their characteristic oblong format.

As settlers pressed south and west over the Appalachians, a new current of European influence reached New England's shores. Along with the piano came a taste for “refined” music, corsetted and prim. Increasing sweetness in hymnal poetry, too, reflected the changing values of a more prosperous society. The fervent hosannas and stark laments of shape-note hymns, however, with their open harmonies and frequent use of the minor and other plaintive modes, continued to suit the pioneer spirit that persisted deeper in the territory. West Georgia was the humble birthplace of *The Sacred Harp*. Spreading across Alabama and into Mississippi and Tennessee, the music found a lasting stronghold. In large measure it was the Primitive and

independent Baptists, predisposed against “modern” modes of worship, who preserved the singing-school practices and set in motion the cycle of annual conventions that the tradition still follows.

The typical Saturday or Sunday singing begins around 9:30 A.M. and lasts until 2:30, with a bountiful noontime dinner-on-the-ground. As in the old days, participants sit according to vocal part—mixed voices on tenor and treble, women on alto, men on bass—around the “hollow square.” Everyone present is encouraged to lead, from the square, a “lesson” of one or two songs. The front-row pitch-setter, unfettered by pipe or keyboard, skillfully accommodates the group's vocal range. On each selection, the “class” first “sings the notes,” naming the *fasola* syllables that serve not merely as a time-honored learning device but as a mark of these singers' identity.

One of the areas where *fasola* singing remains strongest today is Sand Mountain, Alabama. This Appalachian plateau, roughly ten miles wide and extending some eighty miles from the northeast corner of the state southwest toward Birmingham, is an isolated upland within a region that has itself until recently resisted cultural change. Over generations, Sacred Harp in this section has acquired certain distinctive attributes, as exhibited by the remarkable Wootten family of singers. For example, the local practice of “beating four beats” on 4/4 tunes (*e.g.*, *Detroit*, *Raymond*, and *Fillmore* on this recording), rather than the more widespread marking of two beats per measure, emphasizes the sturdy rhythmic framework of these songs over their fluid qualities. In the Henagar and Ider area, the Woottens, whose ancestors brought the *Sacred Harp* from Georgia shortly after the Civil War, continue to use the songbook in their church meetings and family gatherings, in addition to annual all-day song services.

This recording was made at Antioch Baptist Church, near Ider, Alabama, on the second Sunday in April, 1990. As has increasingly been the case in recent years, the Woottens were joined on this occasion by singing friends from near and far. Every effort has been made to retain the flavor of an all-day singing, with its rigorous sequence of songs, intermittent remarks, and communal spirit. It is hoped that the extraneous mutter, cough, or infant's cry will not intrude upon but rather enrich the listening experience. On the subject of “environmental” sounds, two phenomena merit further comment. The impulsive rhythm of this music by nature sets toes (and heels) to tapping. At times, this percussion builds to a sort of bass-drum cadence. The last song on the recording, which was also the closing song for the day, followed a spontaneous and emotional “testimony” by an elderly woman of the community. Although her words have been omitted here, their zeal resounds in the shouts that rise above the singing.

Jim Carnes, August 1990