



## John Work's Untitled Manuscript

### EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

The John Work manuscript is the musical heart of the Coahoma project documentation. The transcriptions of these musical selections, while of unquestioned value, are only a portion of the treasure Professor Work has left to us. His manuscript abounds in socio/musical observations and classifications of styles and songs according to the performer's generation, gender, and degree of urbanization. He gives the material resonance beyond the musical notes.

Work's manuscript, like Jones's, offers a more clear-eyed vision of the folklorist's task in documenting the diversity that is the South. Although Work had virtually no authority in selecting who and what to record in Coahoma County, he did have the power to select which informants and subjects to emphasize in his manuscript. Sprinkled throughout the Work text are illustrations of *his* conception of a proper study of folk song. He allows Coahoma natives to articulate their thoughts about their own home in a way accessible to the reader. For example, while Lomax favors the work of the uneducated artist, Work, in addition to writing about Muddy Waters,\* Honeyboy Edwards, and others, makes extensive use of quotes from a literate, articulate Clarksdale Sunday School teacher, especially in the analysis of sin and the blues. Work persists in emphasizing that Delta blacks were a diverse community.

Work's text cites recording opportunities missed, such as city church preachers and gospel soloists. Taken, these opportunities would have provided the survey a more accurate picture of religious life. An analysis of what was missed in the 1941 trip is detailed in the latter two-thirds of Appendix 2, "A Memorandum About the July Trip to Coahoma County—Functional Approach to the Study of Folklore."

Work also includes a transcription of an interview with a gambler. The gambler explicitly states that music was not an integral part of the activity; yet this knowledge doesn't stop

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\*In the recorded interview conducted by John Work in August of 1941, Muddy clearly identifies himself as, "Name McKinley Morganfield, nickname Muddy Water, Stovall's famous guitar picker." The photo of Muddy and Son Sims is labeled in John Work's hand, "Muddy Water." Lomax refers to Morganfield as Muddy Waters (and repeatedly misspells "Sims" as "Simms"). The first published misidentification occurs in Lomax's liner notes that accompany the 1942 Library of Congress album *Afro-American Blues and Game Songs*.

Lomax from persistently asking interview subjects, “What kind of songs do men sing when they gamble?”

Similarly, Lomax went out of his way to collect many spiritual songs. Work recounts the longstanding prevalence of the spiritual style, but notes, “In the Delta church of today, with the exception of the Holiness Church, the spirituals are fast disappearing from the service. In many of the churches they are not sung at all . . . The highly rhythmic character of the [spirituals] has become offensive to [church members]. With the introduction of the piano and the organ into the other churches, the performance of more conventional hymns and gospel-songs became easier.” While noteworthy to present a disappearing culture, that was not the mandate of this study. To ignore the society’s changes and developments is disingenuous; it underscores Lomax’s preference for what he understood as the tradition of the area over a more authentic representation of the community as it was functioning in the early 1940s—the latter being the mandate of the study (“a practical working knowledge of the musical life of people,” to use Lomax’s words). By including the classified index of songs, which reveals the bias towards spirituals over other styles of religious songs, Work may be helping the reader understand that Lomax’s prejudices “cooked the data.”

After reading the correspondence of Alan’s father John Lomax, biographer Nolan Porterfield wrote that, during a 1933 trip in Texas, “[John] Lomax observed that Alan was inclined to romanticize the conditions of the poor and rustic, and thus was disappointed that many of the blacks they had visited owned their farms and were relatively prosperous.”<sup>1</sup>

“The poor and rustic” were the better part of Coahoma County’s population, and between Lomax and Work, there were different ideas about how these people were to be presented. Work’s perspective—as a southerner, as an educated black man—is not necessarily more valid, but it’s a perspective that should certainly be heard. Like a photograph too long in a camera, Work’s manuscript is finally printed. The delay of its publication makes it poignant, but the textured detail of his picture has been fully preserved.



## Untitled Manuscript

by John W. Work III



The utterances of the folk whether speech or song, present problems of considerable difficulty to the transcriber whose aim is accuracy and faithfulness to the materials to which he listens. Yet guided by this principle of accuracy, his transcriptions may be, paradoxically enough, very inaccurate. A skillful and serious transcriber upon listening to a folk singer, may record on paper a version of the song which is accurate to the last note and beat as sung. But this written version, correct as it might be, may be “the way he sang it that time.”

“The way he sang it that time” may be a faulty variant of the real song. The singer’s variations may comprise many errors due to a relative unfamiliarity with the original, to errors in the melody due to confusion arising out of the recording situation, or to melodic errors caused by faulty approximation of tones. The singer too might be lacking in the skills which the style of this song demands. Such a version, therefore, may have sociological value but its worth as folklore is doubtful unless an authentic version of the song is appended.

All Negro folk-singers regard the melody of their song with a free attitude. Tones are freely embellished and changed. Frequently in phrases where the rhythmic pattern is a simple one, and in strong 2/4 time, notes are lengthened, shortened, and omitted. In the course of a song repetitions of the refrain or verses are most always varied.

What then should be transcribed, is the natural question the recorder must ask himself?

The answer is not a simple one. Out of the many embellishments and variations found in the authentic song there still sounds the essential note.\* The transcriber must

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\*The term “essential note” is used here in two different categories. In the first, “essential note” refers to *pitch* only and designates that note in the chromatic scale which the singer most closely approximates, and probably uses in repeated versions of the song. The second use of the term refers to a note as it appears in relation to others to form a part of a melodic pattern.

recognize this tone. Familiarity with the various song idioms helps in this. Frequent listening to the complete version of the song should aid him in noting which tones are the essential ones. The faulty version should be spotted and classified as such immediately. It should be used only as a clue to the authentic song. No attempt is made in these transcriptions to account for the variously named in-between-tones given to tonal vagaries by some folklorists who think they hear Negroes sing notes which are "neither-nor." Folk singers, singing without an instrument, are prone to *over-sing* or *under-sing* a note. But there is serious doubt that the same note is repeatedly *over sung* or *under sung* by them in subsequent renditions of the same song, a condition which must necessarily be observed if serious consideration is to be given to such tones.

In the transcription of the materials in this collection, the guiding principle has been to select that version of the song that seemed made up of the most essential notes. Where there were songs with striking variations more than one version of the particular song has been transcribed. In a few instances the entire song has been recorded. This practice has caused some of the songs to be much longer than are usually transcribed.

"Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," "Were You There," "Free at Last," "Little David Play on Your Harp," and "I Got Shoes," so widely known throughout the South and which appear so generally in other collections, are omitted in this volume. Fragments of songs less than a verse or a refrain, likewise are not included.

For purposes of authenticity, some of the singer's errors were transcribed. In the thirteenth bar of the song "Hallelu" the first leader mistakenly shifted his rhythm which forced the chorus to shift the first syllable of their refrain "Hallelu," from an accented beat to an unaccented one. When an old lady, a more skillful singer, took over the song she sang it unerringly and maintained the proper accents.

Again in the first refrain of "I'm Goin' to Lean on the Lord" the leader repeatedly used C# which was obviously incorrect. Later in the song the essential C $\sharp$  displaced the C#. Both versions were transcribed.

Transcription of the songs by quartets, or those accompanied by guitar, is made of them just as they were performed. In no instance were these arranged by the transcriber. A reliable index of the folk style of performance could only be provided in an original version of the performance with no modification or "correction." The music of the guitar was transcribed on the piano-score instead of the guitar treble clef.

No consistent policy of writing the dialect speech of the Delta Negro Folk was followed, for the simple reason that no consistent speech practice was found among them. Much of the crude dialect of the "Uncle Remus period" was found. On the other hand many of the folk used speech which was quite "correct" and conventional. Conspicuously absent were such words regarded as typical Negro folk speech, "de," "dat," "dis," and "dem." Elisions of final G's and D's, while occurring with frequency, did not occur always. The speed of the song, and its meter, had more to do with such elisions than did any custom.



## CHAPTER I

*The Church*

The inspiration and starting point for the most significant Negro folklore has been the church. The best known of this lore, the spirituals, for seventy years have provided both rich study-material for scholars, and musical exultation for many people far away from the rural churches where they were a part of the worship ritual. Other types of the Negro church folk expressions as well as the secular were little regarded at first as is seen from the almost exclusive treatment of the spiritual in the early treatises and articles on Negro folk song.

Today the prayer and the sermon have both come in for a large share of attention. These are yet in the study area and by their very spontaneous and ephemeral nature cannot provide, as does the spiritual, the enjoyable listening experience to people outside of the place of their creation. Some commercial firms have in the past offered phonograph records of the folk style of sermon. But their necessary brevity and the artificial environment in which they were created made them worthless except as light entertainment.

Most folklore springs from and serves a particular function in group activity. The levee-hollers, shovel-songs, or the songs of the entertaining instrumentalists might be excepted from this principle. The functions of the singing, praying, and preaching in the Negro folk-church service, however, are so definite as to become practically ritualistic. For this reason, it seems demanding that these various types of worship-expressions be studied from the standpoint of their function in the whole service rather than separately as isolated folk phenomena.

The approach to the discussion of the Negro rural church must here be restricted necessarily to its importance as a factor in the stimulation of folklore and its perpetuation. The history of this church, its role in the community, or an evaluation of it must be the task of other studies.

The area of our interest must be defined here, however, in order that a distinction of a sort can be drawn between the folk-church investigated here, and other Negro churches with greater similarity to the standard worship practices.

It is impossible to define the folk-church in any but vague terms because the criteria for determining the folk are so vague and confused. The definitions of the nineteenth century sociologists and anthropologists while applicable to nineteenth century folk are hardly descriptive of the twentieth century folk. Certainly no one would reject the definition of the folk-church as one whose congregation makes no use of the printed word and who creates its own expressions, or uses the creations of other similar congregations. But such a definition would exclude many churches where very interesting folklore is alive. If the location of the folk-church for this definition is restricted to the rural sections, many urban churches rich in distinctive singing, praying, and preaching

must be excluded. The fact that the greatest of the folk-preachers pastor city churches is an indication of the weakness of this restriction. Both that definition and the designated location of the folk-church ignore the present era of gospel song with its many effective soloists, which is developing such overwhelming popularity the country over. Because the plantation church certainly conforms more closely to a workable definition of the folk-church than any other, and because the folk-worship-expression found there must be regarded as typical of those found elsewhere, this study is limited to the expressions in such churches.

Negro churches in the Delta are almost exclusively Missionary Baptist, Primitive (or Old) Baptist, and Methodist. A glimpse at their doctrinal attitudes toward church music provides reasons for the types of songs we find in the various churches.

In addition to its worship-practices of foot-washing, "close" (closed) communion, and its stern oversight of its members' daily life, the Primitive Baptist church is distinguished by its frowning attitude toward the use of instruments and printed music in the service. Its congregational singing consists exclusively of old "long-meter"\* hymns frequently referred to as "Dr. Watts" and a few spirituals. No printed materials are used by the congregation. The membership of its churches is comparatively small though the churches are numerous.

The Missionary Baptists and the Methodists encourage the use of the piano and the organ whenever money can be raised for their purchase and a performer can be found. But both forbid their members performing on other musical instruments even in their homes. These churches favor formal choirs and whenever it is possible they form them. They make extensive use of their denominational hymns and sing spirituals with diminishing frequency. The Methodists only rarely sing the "Dr. Watts." No choirs, however, were found in any of the plantation churches, nor were any expected to be found.

There is an increasing use in these two churches of a new type of rhythmic gospel-song with verse strikingly similar to that of the spiritual, though more frequently varied. The most prominent figure in the composing and promotion of these songs is J. Thomas Dorsey, a Chicago musician. In many places, all songs of this type whether composed by him or not are referred to as "Dorseys." They are spread chiefly by traveling evangelists and professional gospel singers. They are rarely sung in the Old Baptist Church.

In all three churches the service pursues the same order with the exception of a few minor variations. Its program follows generally this order:

1. Song and Prayer Service (all impromptu)
2. Scripture Reading
3. Formal Prayer

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\*This term is a colloquial one adopted by the folk and is not to be confused with the same term used in standard hymnology.

4. Sermon, Evangelistic Plea, and Opening the Doors of the Church for New Members
5. Collection (Offertory)
6. Benediction

There are two important factors which distinguish this service clearly from the service of the other churches. The first of these is the vocal participation by the entire congregation throughout the service. The second is the fact that with a few interruptions, such as the reading of the scripture, the first part of the sermon, and the plea for the collection, the entire service is intoned, forming a sort of religious symphony, or more correctly, a concerto, with voices instead of instruments.



CHAPTER II

*The Music of the Church*

All the interviews with the older church members in the Delta indicate that the spiritual was almost the only music sung in the early period of the church. There were various types of spirituals which were sung for different parts of the service. Crucifixion spirituals were sung during the Sacrament. Songs both of a pleading and a warning nature were sung at revivals with the purpose of enticing, or scaring sinners into the fold. There were several ceremonials, some formal and other miscellaneous practices for which spirituals were sung. Similar though not as permanent as “shouting” was the practice of “rocking” arising out of religious excitement. The songs “Rock Daniel” and “Hallelu” stimulated this strange worship practice. “Form the Line” was sung as a signal for the Hand-of-Fellowship line.

Spirituals of a more general nature were used in the song and prayer service. Preachers often introduced their sermons with an appropriate spiritual to intensify the accord between them and the congregation. Songs with a lively rhythm were used for “taking up the collection” (lifting the offering).

In the Delta church of today, with the exception of the Holiness Church, the spirituals are fast disappearing from the service. In many of the churches they are not sung at all. In others the spirituals are used only during the “collection” and Sacrament, or as evangelistic songs during the annual revival. The Delta people call them by a name not generally used—“Halleys.” The name “spiritual” was unfamiliar to many of them.

For this reason, only a small number of the spirituals which appear in this collection were recorded in the actual church service. Most of those that were recorded in the churches were sung upon the request of the recorders. Many were sung by individuals during interviews. In most of these interviews the singers were elderly persons who sang

songs out of another era. It was interesting to note how many of these singers learned the songs from their mothers and grandmothers.

The fading-out of the spirituals from an active place in the folk-church, deplorable as it might be to the rest of the country, is simply explained. They are being displaced by types of songs which perform their functions more satisfactorily and more easily. The old "long-meter" hymns appeal more to the Primitive Baptists than do the spirituals because the highly rhythmic character of the latter had become offensive to them. With the introduction of the piano and the organ into the other churches, the performance of more conventional hymns and gospel-songs became easier.

The spiritual is not yet gone. Miss Alice C. Reid in her study of the Gee's Bend Community in Alabama<sup>2</sup> reports the spirituals as being important in the church services she attended there. In many churches in every Southern state spirituals old and new are sung with great fervor and volume, rewarding the singers with an incomparable joy.<sup>3</sup>

While the rhythmic character of the spirituals brought about their limited use in the Primitive Baptist Church, it proved most attractive to the Church of God, or the Holiness Church as it is more generally known. The Holiness Church has made the spiritual the core of its song-service. And what a core! It has intensified the rhythm of our dance bands in their most torrid mode. The singers' lusty voices are supplemented by hundreds of hands clapping, stamping of feet, tambourines, guitar, and a style of piano-playing which either imitates "boogie-woogie" at its "hottest"—*or started it*. Many individuals dance during the singing. This is not surprising.

From this description of the Church of God service one might receive the impression of banality and baseness there. Such an impression is not intended. A person witnessing this service becomes convinced of the utter sincerity of the worshippers and of their complete absorption in a religious spirit. Such a style of worship is clearly a revolt against the restraint of the minister-centered service. These communicants refuse to worship by proxy. Their use of present day secular rhythm in their worship while startling is probably no more than a re-echo of Martin Luther incorporating into his service the folk-tunes of his 16th century Germany. The rapid growth of the church invites consideration of its worship-principle.

This church is doing more than preserving the spirituals. It is stimulating their creation. Members are encouraged to compose spirituals. The words of these are published by the denomination in a book and distributed among the various churches. The result has been many new spirituals of unusual interest.

Of much importance to this study was the determination of the number of the spirituals heard here that belonged to this region. Such an estimate could only be an approximate one because of the easy infiltration of music from areas outside of northern Mississippi. This is unquestionably accomplished on a large scale through visiting evangelists and gospel singers, and teachers in the various schools who sang spirituals

learned in the colleges they attended.<sup>4</sup> The easy access to Memphis, where Mississippians can learn new songs is another factor in the spread of music from the outside.

Giving consideration to these factors, two simple procedures were adopted to determine which of the spirituals were created in this section. The first was the more direct—interviews with the singers. From these interviews it can be believed that the [following] songs were created in this section recently:

Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down  
When I've Done the Best I Can I Wants My Crown  
All My Trouble Will Be Over  
I'll Be Waiting Up There  
Get Right Church  
All Power Is in His Hands

Older informants place in Mississippi church services at least a generation ago the following songs:

I Shall Wear the Golden Crown  
Do Remember  
Hold the Wind  
Cryin' Holy Unto the Lord  
With Angels Climbin' the Golden Stairs  
Praise Him  
I'm Running for My Life  
Just Like Heaven to Me  
My Lord's High, High  
Done Taken My Lord Away  
You Got to Stand Your Damnation  
Low Down Your Chariot  
My Soul Is a Witness  
Please Don't Drive Me Away  
O Sister You'll Be Called On  
Chariot Jubilee  
Band of Gideon  
Tell Me How Long Has the Train Been Gone  
Run Right to Him  
There'll Be Preachin' Tonight  
That's What's the Matter with the Church Today  
I Know My Little Soul's Gonna Rise and Fly  
You Don't Believe I'm a Child of God

Don't Grieve After Me  
Sunday Morning Band  
David  
Daniel  
Motherless Children Has a Hard Time  
Rock Daniel  
Sorry, Sorry For to Leave You  
This Here's My Buryin' Ground  
I Got a Hiding Place  
Steal Away to Jesus  
Calvary  
He 'Rose  
No Hiding Place  
I'm Goin' to Lean on the Lord  
I'll Fly Away  
No Condemnation  
I'm a Soldier  
Yeh, Lord  
O Let Me Ride  
Form the Line  
Free at Last  
He Never Said a Mumblin' Word  
I'm Goin' Let It Shine  
Rock-a-My Soul  
Got on My Trav'lin' Shoes  
Glory, Glory  
Glory Hallelujah  
I Done Got Over  
I'm Goin' Stay on the Battlefield  
Lamb of God  
You Got to Reap  
O Lord Will You Come by Here  
Let Your Heart  
Katy, I Got to Go  
Hallelu

as well as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," "Were You There," and "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray."

The second method involved checking the songs found here with the lists appearing in published collections of Negro folksongs.<sup>5</sup> The following songs were not found in any of these collections:

All My Trouble Will Be Over  
All Power is in His Hands  
Daniel  
David  
Done Taken My Lord Away  
Get Right Church  
Hallelu  
I Got a Hiding Place  
I'll Fly Away  
I'm Goin' Let It Shine  
Motherless Children Has a Hard Time  
No Condemnation  
Rock Daniel  
Sorry, Sorry For to Leave You  
Swing Down Chariot  
Low Down the Chariot  
Praise Him  
You Got to Stand Your Damnation  
Please Don't Drive Me Away  
Run Right to Him  
You Don't Believe I'm a Child of God  
I'm Goin' to Lean on the Lord  
Yeh Lord  
Form the Line  
Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down  
When I've Done the Best I Can I Wants My Crown  
Katy, I Got to Go  
I'll Be Waiting up There

Most of these songs are typical. There are several, however, which seem to possess unusual beauty. Anyone listening to "David" must recognize that here is probably the finest example of the Call and Response Chant-Spiritual<sup>6</sup> yet published.

There is found here a type of spiritual which appears to be a new development. This is the solo-spiritual. It undeniably borrows its more sophisticated verse style and its extended musical-phrase structure from the gospel songs, without the easy performance of the latter. The congregation finding these songs too difficult to sing usually surrenders the melody and verse to a leader while it hums—or listens. The songs listed above as created recently in Mississippi are examples of this new type of spiritual. Opportunity has not been provided yet for investigation of other sections of the South to determine whether this style is widespread or merely a north Mississippi phenomenon.

Persons hearing the "long-meter" hymns sung for the first time are strangely per-

plexed by this singing and make varied reactions to it. Miss Reid describing it wrote: "While they were doing this (the deacons preparing the table for the Lord's Supper) the congregation sang a lengthy song which was as much of a continuous wailing and bel-lowing as it was musical."<sup>7</sup> William Alexander Percy in his book *Lanterns on the Levee* relates a meeting in a Delta Negro Church. He describes this singing as follows: "It was a hymn I had never heard, a droning monotonous thing that swelled as they repeated verse after verse, from an almost inaudible mutter to a pounding barbaric chant. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

The words of these songs, old long-forgotten hymn verse generally ascribed to Isaac Watts, are intoned by a leader, traditionally a man, one line at a time. The congregation then begins spinning out an unmeasured melody, totally melismatic, in which each word-syllable receives approximately the equivalent of from four to eight moderate beats, though such beats could only be hypothetical. It would be less difficult to measure Gregorian chant by beats than these long drawn-out "Dr. Watts."

The many elaborate embellishments of which the melody consists are entirely spontaneous and improvised. Each singer improvises his or her own melody in concert with the other members of the congregation who are equally individual. Abbe Niles in his *Introduction to Blues* accounts for this phenomenon as ". . . the impulse of competitive artistic effort—in singing, of the single voice trying to distinguish itself among the rest. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

So varied are the individual melodies that an authentic transcription of "long-meter" singing is impossible. The song represents as many versions as there are singers. The only noticeable uniformity in this singing occurs at the cadences which usually consist of two notes. Here only do the singers agree.

The three versions of the hymn, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say," transcribed here, are possible because numbers two and three are solo versions, and the four women singing number one were clearly dominated by one singer. A solo version of "Dark Was the Night" was also possible to transcribe.

The Negro church undoubtedly inherited this "long-meter" singing from the white church in an era long since past. Today, as far as can be ascertained, "Dr. Watts" are sung exclusively by the Negroes. Not only have the white churches ceased singing them, but they have forgotten that they ever sang them. Interviews with Dr. Charles C. Washburn, Professor of Hymnology at Scarritt College and an authority on American church music, and Dr. George Pullen Jackson, renowned folklorist, give support to this belief.

The Reverend Thomas Walter must have been describing "long-meter" singing in the following complaint against the singing in the New England churches early in the eighteenth century. "The tunes are now miserable tortured and twisted and quavered in our churches into a horrid medley of confused and disorderly voices. Our tunes are left to the mercy of every unskilled throat to chop and alter, to twist and change according to their infinitely diverse and no less odd humors and fancies. I have myself paused twice in one note to take a breath. No two men in the congregation quaver alike or

together. It sounds in the ears of a good judge like five hundred tunes roared out at the same time with perpetual interferences with one another.”<sup>10</sup>



## CHAPTER III

*The Sermon*

Whatever may be said regarding the character or the importance of the various functions of the individual preachers, it can be easily recognized that the folk preacher is a person of rare attainments. He is actor, orator, poet, and mystic. He has the valuable faculty of translating the stories of the Bible and Christian tenets down to the easy understanding of an unreading flock. In the high-pitched emotional excitement of the second phase of his sermon he is transformed into a seer of remarkable accuracy despite his unfailing conviction that every tragedy which befalls nation, city, countryside, or person is a visitation of God's wrath upon the wicked.

The preachers are usually large men with either big voices or mellow ones, though there are famous exceptions to this rule. Most of them are God's Trombones, but some are God's Trumpets. A big resonant voice is one of the preacher's most valuable assets. A loud, high-pitched, frantic "O Lord" at the right time will excite his flock more easily than a good thought. The *right time* is the climax of a narrative sequence which has featured spontaneously rapid acceleration, rise in pitch, and sustained crescendo—all an outgrowth of the preacher's highly emotional state.

The sermon is divided into two parts. The shorter and the first is an application of the preacher's personal philosophy to present-day problems and community situations. Here he is entirely casual, conversational, and intimate. The worldly and the enemies of the church are attacked in this part. The weapon of the preacher here is ridicule, sometimes humorous, at other times caustic and bitter. This part of the sermon, however, serves chiefly as a preamble to the main body of the sermon—a "warming up" period. Frequently the preacher punctuates his remarks with pleas for the flock to bear with him until the spirit arrives or until the Lord tells him to go 'head. A favorite apology for his halting remarks is "I'm just layin' my foundation."

The second part begins when both the preacher and the flock are sufficiently stimulated and emotionally prepared. At this stage the intimate character of the sermon abruptly passes over into the epic. No longer is the preacher dispensing his private and personal advice but is transformed into the messenger of God. God begins to talk. The first part of the sermon was impromptu prose. It now becomes poetry. James Weldon Johnson, in *God's Trombones*, recognized this poetic character as he created his famous sermons. John and Alan Lomax have transcribed a gripping Crucifixion sermon in verse in their book *Our Singing Country*. "A," "an," "And-er," and "a ha," as rhythmic syllables

frequently intersperse the lines to outline them or to supplement those which otherwise would have unsatisfactory meter.

In addition to having meter, the sermon adopts another all-important feature—in-tonation. From the beginning of the second part the preacher introduces a style of delivery which is a mixture of singing and speech, and assumes in places the character of a dramatic recitative. There is a definite key-center, and while the sermon is too rhapsodic to produce sustained melody, the texture consists of successive melodic fragments. They are occasionally punctuated with speech lines. These fragments have all the Negro flavor in them. The ironical fact to be observed about them is that they are exactly like the idiom in many blues, which the church attacks so scornfully. In the sermon transcribed here, the melody accompanying:

Ev'ry brook of water done gone,  
All the grass is parched away!  
Let us divide the lan' between ourselves  
Start at the fork o' the road  
And you go one way and I'll go the other way

is easily recognized as being characteristic of Negro secular music. The melody steadily rises in pitch as the sermon progresses and the spirit becomes more intense.

There are many extravagant gestures used by the preachers. Favorite ones are marching from one end of the platform to the other with a decisive sway at either end; leaping in the air; clapping the hands; covering the ears with the hands when emitting a loud yell; rising slowly on tiptoe and extending the arms directly above the head; and “cracking the whip,” that is, clapping the hands and whirling completely around. Sometimes the preacher may dramatize an incident or a situation.

The appeal of the sermon depends upon the happy combining of its poetry, its rhythm and melody, its dynamics, and the volume, the voice, and the ardor of the preacher. The importance of the actual story is only secondary. The freedom with which the stories are varied from the original without comment or objection from the flock proves this.

This style of sermon is known as the “old-time sermon” or “gravy sermon.” The rural churches generally demand it while only a very few city churches will permit it. It is regrettable that this beautiful religious art form is passing from the worship scene. Even the Delta preachers are aware that the “gravy” is considered by the younger generation as old-fashioned and preached by the ignorant for the ignorant. The following incident is illustrative of this.


A few summers ago John Ross, Alan Lomax, Lewis Jones, and I journeyed deep into the Delta to witness a church service which was to end with baptizing in a river nearby. Several days before, we had secured permission from the pastor of this church to record the service. We arrived at the church before the service and set up the ma-

chines, hoping, as do all folklore collectors, to record something new and beautiful for the outlying world.

The preliminary song service was touchingly devotional and deeply felt by us all. In it were observed several variants of traditional patterns.

Then came the sermon. To our consternation and the amazement of his flock the pastor *read* a sermon on the origin of doctrine, with frequent references to the errors of translation of the original Hebraic and Greek sources. There was no shouting or moaning that afternoon, and the "amens," which were only occasionally given by his loyal but mystified members, seemed terribly strained. That minister was ashamed to let us record his preaching of a "gravy" sermon.

The following sermon, derived from the famous story of Elijah, Ahab, and Baal, found in I Kings, was preached by the Reverend C. H. Savage during a revival at Mt. Ararat church. This church is located on the King and Anderson plantation. The introductory part of the sermon is omitted.

The cadences proved difficult to transcribe accurately because in these the tone not only drops in pitch and intensity but becomes semi-speech. Inasmuch as the cadence is unique, a special symbol  was selected to designate it. In no manner does this represent a slur or glide, as in most instances it is quite direct and crisp.

In the dialect it will be observed that final d's before vowels are sounded while those before consonants are elided.

SERMON

*f*

They for-got our Gawd! They for-got our Gawd! And another King reigned.

And er King A hab - reigned. And Ahab began to teach the people another - Gawd.

There's no need to put Gawd out o' this Chu'ch, and it makes no difflance<sup>2</sup> Cross the Tree of Time.

When you put Gawd out o' yo' re-ligion. Somethin' dreadful goin'<sup>2</sup> to happen to you.

They built another Gawd about which no spoke be - fo'

An they built him - out o' precious stoness, marble an' gol<sup>3</sup>,

an' gave 'im han's and feet and ev - er' body had to Berre that Gawd.

An' that Gawd was a crime to that Servant o' Gawd by the name of E - li - jah.

He walked up one day an' splained<sup>3</sup> it plain to the people that he was dis-pleased at it

An' Gawd heard the folks that were dis - pleased at it.

*ff* "Hear my Gawd I'm gonna lock the do! I'm gonna pray until no rain gonna fall!

*less intense* I'm gonna pray until the grass parch up!"

And E - li - jah seeketh I mean Ahab seeketh the life of E - li - jah.

and he had to flee for his life - a -