

About the Georgia Sea Islands

Some of the strongest retentions of African culture in the United States are found in the communities of the Georgia Sea Islands. These lush former plantation lands dot the coastline of Georgia and the Carolinas, on the eastern seaboard of the United States. They include the low-lying islands known as Johns, James, Wadmalaw, Kiawah, St. Somin's, and others. They were a first stop for many African slave ships making their way to the North American mainland.

Because the Sea Islands' isolation buffered them from urban and white-dominated culture (bridges to the mainland were not constructed until well into the 20th century in some cases), the deepest roots of African-American culture were largely preserved intact. Blacks working the Sea Islands' plantations were under the charge of black overseers for nine months of the year; having no need to camouflage their cultural practices, their unique traditions flourished. The vestiges of African religions blended with Christianity; herbal cures and "charms" were known and practiced by many; songs and dances reflected the structures and nuances of African musical culture at their core. Their diet was similar in many ways to coastal West Africa - even now, fish, oysters, and mussels fill the shallow waters, and the fertile soil and temperate climate produce three crops a year. A regional dialect, Gullah, developed that blended African and English characteristics, and is still spoken today. It is dense with terms that describe the flora and fauna, and is rich with poetic expressions that add color to oral histories.

During the Civil War, the majority of whites fled permanently to the mainland, and the freed blacks formed quiet communities tucked throughout the abandoned plantation lands. However, poverty is still rife in these communities, and the establishment of fancy resorts has raised the value of land and taxes prohibitively for many of the black families who have called the Sea Islands home for generations.

Like African-American music at large, the music of the Sea Islands includes spirituals, blues, call-and-response songs, field hollars, work chants, singing games, and stories. Many children's playground songs found even in northern urban areas actually originated in the Sea Islands. Some of the songs include words, phrases, pronunciation, or sentence structure with links to Gullah.

The Georgia Sea Islands Singers, started in the early 1920s by Linda Parrish, preserved and shared much of the musical heritage of the islands. One of the best known of these singers was Bessie Jones (1902-1984), who spent most of her adult years on St. Simons Island. Her rich voice and total dedication to the continuation of the Sea Islands traditions became known to many as she performed as a soloist with the Sea Islands Singers, led workshops for Kodaly association sessions, and recorded & annotated a large body of songs. Her annotated collection *Step It Down* (Univ. of Georgia Press) is a classic of ring games, play party songs, and children's playground chants. (It should be in the personal library of every music educator!) The name and repertoire of the Sea Islands Singers is now carried on by Frankie and Doug Quimby.

The islands' huge oaks, dressed in shawls of dripping Spanish moss, bear witness to the depth and permanence of the Sea Islands' culture.

[Notes by Judith Cook Tucker, excerpted from *Roots and Branches: A Legacy of Multicultural Music for Children* by Campbell, McCullough-Brabson and Tucker (World Music Press ©1994, used by permission).]

About "Yonder Come Day"

I heard the Sea Island Singers sing the original "Yonder (Yonda') Come Day" in the 1970s at a festival, heard a version of it again as background music in a documentary about the Sea Islands in the early 1980s, and found it on a recording of Bessie Jones and some of the Sea Islands Singers called *So Glad I'm Here* (Rounder) at about the same time. It is an exciting, elusive song with the interweaving of musical phrases and lyrics as the Sea Islanders use overlapping call-and-response, anticipated entrances, improvised phrases, and rhythmic & harmonic embellishments. It stuck with me for years, and I decided to borrow just one musical phrase ("yonder come day") and the inspiration from other melodic fragments and bits of lyrics and meaning to create the foundation for my transformed version. In addition, I had written the rhythmic speech section in the 1960s, and felt that it worked nicely with the main melody and intent of the song.

Performance Suggestions

The gospel choir sway step, with an off-beat clap alternation with a step right and step left, may introduce the song; or you might begin singing and then add the sway part-way through to propel the excitement of the performance.

Some choirs have added an improvised accompaniment on piano or organ, others added tambourine. Encourage the audience to join in, mix older and younger singers in the multi-age gathering or a worship service. Make it your own.