

University of Mississippi

American Music Archive

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Elapsed Time: One and one-half hours

Melanie and I were a little ahead of schedule We planned to leave Oxford at 1:00 in order to begin our talk with Mr. McGuire at 2:00. I told Mr. McGuire we would call him when we were leaving Oxford and he didn't seem to mind that we might show up a bit early. He said, "Just come on I'll be ready for you." I think he was more eager to talk today than when I first approached him about having this interview on Sunday afternoon just before the Sacred Harp singing at Concord Baptist Church on May 17. On that Sunday afternoon I had a hard time focusing on talking about our upcoming interview because he was focused solely on having a singing. Today, he met us out in the yard as we drove up. There was his car with the license plate reading, "DoRaMi," and then I noticed his pickup truck had a plate reading, "DoMiSo," also. He was dressed in a pair of overalls that looked nearly brand-new. Just as soon as we got out of the car he walked up and in no time pointed out the loose mudflap on my left front tire that had been damaged. Momentarily, he told us to come on inside the house and motioned for us to lead the way. In the short amount of time that we had already been there I couldn't help but notice the similarity between the McGuire's house and the house that I remember my grand parents living in during my childhood - the appearance of the yard with blooming amaryllis and crinum lilies, the wooden swings on either side of the front porch, and especially the front door.

Right before we walked in the front door Mr. McGuire told us that Mrs. McGuire was taking a nap and then we voiced our concern about disturbing her rest and he told us, "Oh don't worry, she can always get another one." The house itself is small in size and upon entering the front door I noticed a bedroom to the left and then to the right is situated the living room. If you were to walk through the living room you would already be in the kitchen which is in the rear of the house. So, we situated ourselves in the living room Mr. McGuire allows us to make ourselves comfortable as he tells us he is going to have a seat in his favorite

chair. The living room is a sparsely decorated space with three whiteish vinyl-upholstered chairs, a television on a table, and a bookcase. On the wall are two pictures to the right side of the television on the wall that faces the front yard and also on the same wall near the front door is a picture frame encasing a lace-embroidery that reads, "McGuire." Also, on the wall that the television is next to hangs a wall clock that ticks steadily. Just at the time that we started our interview here the clock sounded at 2:00 and was reminiscent of a Chinese gong.

In our initial conversation, Mr. McGuire told me that his date of birth was June 20, 1930. Therefore, he is 79 years old at the time of this interview. Although his mailing address is Water Valley, his home is in Banner, Mississippi. He told me he was born just up the road a short distance on Hwy. 9 W. in Banner and he has spent to duration of his life here. Mr. McGuire stated, "There's no other place like Calhoun County." He said that the old home place on Hwy. 9 W. was torn down. And he mentioned that his father lived until just a few years ago when he died at the age of 97. Mr. McGuire is the oldest of three children. He had one brother, who is now deceased who lived in Merkle, Texas, and also has one sister who resides in Oxford, Mississippi. His parents made their living as farmers raising cotton, corn, and cattle among other things. He said that he made is living farming, also, although the home farm place is no longer a working farm. He also worked in Bruce, Mississippi at Williams Slacks, a garment manufacturing company, and at Brookwood Furniture Company.

I say to Mr. McGuire that it is well-known that he is a long-time Sacred Harp singer and he responds by agreeing with me and saying, "yes, for over sixty years." He relates that even before that he became acquainted with this musical tradition around the age of five or six because there were two or three all-day singings that occurred in his area that members of his family attended. Back then, he says, everybody went to these singings. He particularly remembers those on his mother's side of the family who sang especially her mother's grandfather who was known as one of the main singers. Mr. McGuire tells that he was about the age of fifteen when he actually started singing Sacred Harp music himself. He acknowledged that there was an aspect of informal teaching and learning this kind way of singing when a man from Banner loaned him a Sacred Harp book and taught him "how the notes ran."

Speaking of the difference in the quality of singing now as compared to years ago, Mr. McGuire says that there are fewer people who sing this music than there were before, but the people who sing nowadays are better singers – that is, they are better-trained and more knowledgeable in matters of music and he says this is certainly an asset. At this point he makes note of such people as Dr. Warren Steel and Mark Davis who are highly-trained musicians in their own right who regularly contribute to keeping the Sacred Harp tradition alive and on-going in the north Mississippi area. (Here he makes reference to Mark Davis' mother who is in one of the two pictures on the wall to the right of the television. In this picture he tells that Mark's mother is in this picture with him as one of the 1947 senior class of Bruce High School. This right away affirms that Mark himself, whom I see regularly at Sacred Harp singings in the area, grew up into this rich tradition right here in Calhoun County.) He says that people back in the day people would throw up their hands and back off in frustration at some of the songs that are sung today.

In response to being asked about where all he went to singings when he was coming up, Mr. McGuire responded by naming a few places Concord Baptist (where I had visited twice, now), the Spring Creek Church which was burned by an arsonist, the Mount Moriah Church which no longer exists because the membership has died off. These churches, he told me, have or once had regular all-day singings. He said that back then there were more places to attend singings because there were more people living who supported these singings. All of these churches were close by in the area and for this reason alone people went It was just the thing to do at the time. These singings were important also as social institutions. Mr. McGuire told me, "If you didn't like the singing, you could still stay out and socialize and eat dinner." I mentioned that I noticed that a number of people who went to the lunch at Concord didn't go to or participate in the singing that afternoon. Mr. McGuire responded to that by saying, "About the only person at Concord who gets involved with the singing there is Debbie Dunn." He said, "People there don't care about it any more or they didn't study it enough to be able to read it or it could be from just laziness." Another reason that he attributes to Sacred Harp's decline in the area is that cars and other transportation make it possible to go other places and Sacred Harp, in a way, competes with other activities. He says, "The social part is just a thing of the past." Although he agrees that courtship was a common occurrence at singings, he did not meet his wife at one rather he met Mrs. McGuire in Memphis because they both worked there at one time. He says she became a singer after they married although she was somewhat of a singer, she learned the ways of the Sacred Harp singers and has been active with her husband in singing for the nearly 52 that they have been married.

I was curious at one point to know the difference between the Primitive Baptists and the Missionary Baptists, not realizing it was a sensitive subject and Mr. McGuire said to me, "well, you don't want to get me started." He told me that in the early 1800s the Missionary Baptists split off from the Baptist church and distinguished themselves from the others with the mission work that they felt they were called to do, though Mr. McGuire points out that the Bible says nothing of the requirement for Christians to be obligated to do such.

One of the more memorable past experiences that Mr. McGuire talks about (although at first, he says they are all memorable) are the singing conventions that occurred in his area of the state in Calhoun, Webster, and Chickasaw Counties. The affairs used to last for three days and people would travel considerable distances to attend. Another notable singing convention was the Mississippi State Convention. In their prime these conventions would last for three days, but now because most of the people are now deceased they have been cut back to one or two days. In the case of the convention in Webster County, it completely ceased to exist for the very reason of lost supporters – because these people aren't around anymore.

I made the comment to Mr. McGuire that I noticed singing from another book at some of the singings I've attended and I asked whether it mattered or not from which book is sung and he responded by saying, "Well, it matters." The other book that I had noticed at previous singings was identified by Mr. McGuire as the Christian Harmony. Most of the songs, he agreed, were of a different nature than those of the Sacred Harp, namely gospel. Mr. McGuire

commented that these songs of the Christian Harmony had “strayed away from the old paths” and could not hold a candle to those songs contained in the Sacred Harp book.

Mr. McGuire told me that sings are to be distinguished from singing schools because the rudiments, or rules of music, are taught at the singing schools and singings would occur at these schools in order to showcase the learning outcomes of these endeavors. He told me that formerly these schools would last two, perhaps three weeks “ever how long you could stand it.” He relates that for two or three weeks in the late summer after you had laid by the crops and you had a little time between then and the time that school started in the fall a singing school would occur. He told me that the basis of what they teach students in these singing schools is how to read the shapes (shaped-notes). He said, “Time (rhythm), tune (melodic content and contour) , and accent (metrical pattern) are the three main parts of what is taught. Mr. McGuire told me one of the main differences in a singing school that might have occurred in the past and a modern day singing school is that one in the past would happen during daylight hours and in to the night, but singing schools of today are usually held during the evening hours and are shorter in duration (because people today don’t have the time like they had in the past). He claims the modern day singing schools are an entirely different set-up than in the past.

Mr. McGuire chuckles when I make a distinction in the way that solfège syllables are intoned prior to singing a song in Georgia or Alabama and the way that they are intoned in Mississippi. He told me that Mississippi was settled by people who were moving west from South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama and at this time they were using several tunebooks which incorporated seven shapes instead of four. These seven shapes were accompanied by seven different solfège syllables rather than the older system of using just the four syllables. He said his great grandfather was born in 1862 and used the seven syllables to intone songs and as far as he knows this practice was done even before this. Mr. McGuire disagrees with me when I tell him I think this is confusing that some singers choose to sing four syllables to four shapes and some singers (those in northern Mississippi) choose to use seven syllables to four shapes. At this point Mrs. McGuire has awakened from her nap and has joined us in the living room. She acknowledges that people come over to sing in Mississippi from Alabama and other parts east and sing four syllables (fa,so,la, mi) four shapes which is in conflict with the way the Mississippi singers sing. Mrs. McGuire says one reason her husband can read so well is that his grandfather used to sing around him from the time he was a baby, so they both acknowledge that he’s had plenty of practice. Given a song with which he is unfamiliar, he believes he could read it just as well as he reads a familiar song (if he can see it he claims to have bad eyesight), because he’s trained to sing the correct sounds to their corresponding shape. He chuckles when I make the comment that he’s a walking music-maker. Here he told me about a man and his wife from either Washington state or Oregon who know of his son who resides in San Francisco. This couple knew their son and his ability to sing and lead at Sacred Harps singings without even looking at his book their son is so fluent with the music that these people are amazed that he can do what he does without the use of his book. Mr. McGuire laughs and agrees with me when I say, “He has it in his blood.”

When asked about ornamentation, Mr. McGuire told me that they used to try to teach certain aspects of performance practice that are not ordinarily notated in the book. One of these instances of ornamentation he identified as the trill, though he said that it was not always successful or it did not achieve the expected result. Also, in use were slides or slurs. Another example that he knows of where things that are unwritten occur in general performance practice is the use of the raised sixth scale degree in a song in a minor key. This usually always occurs. He thinks this is almost a universal practice – of raising the sixth scale degree. Another comment that is made is about tempo Mr. McGuire says that the Mississippi singers tend to sing a bit faster than they have in years past And then Mrs. McGuire tells me that the Alabama singers, who are generally known for singing at faster tempos, don't tend to sing as fast as they have previously.

Mr. McGuire thinks it's funny when I ask him what it is that he's thinking about when he's singing, then his wife says assuredly that he's thinking about worship. He says the song texts and worship are the basis of the whole thing – “if it weren't for that, well you might as well be singing Yankee Doodle.” He agrees with me with I make the comment that the texts to these songs are powerful he calls it, “pretty stout stuff.” He's pretty hard-pressed when I ask him to name a few of his favorite songs. He speaks of a lady over at Enod (church?) that asked him, “Why don't you sing some songs that aren't so sad?” Here he makes the comment that many of these songs mention the subject of death and they certainly can be construed to be sad, but death is without a doubt part of the cycle of life and he heartily agrees with me when I make mention that these songs also show that death is nothing to be feared. There is no doubt with Mr. McGuire that the texts of these songs are the main drawing point in his worship experience. “You study the music to sing the words perfectly, or more perfectly,” he says. This, he says is an expression that the old-time teachers used. “And of course we sing the sounds before we sing the words for this reason This is something that has fallen by the wayside with other songbooks.

At about the time that the wall clock chimed the three o'clock hour, Mrs. McGuire asked us what was become of the recorded interview we were making with them. We responded by telling her that this interview was to be part of the American Music Archive at the J.D. Williams Library on the Ole Miss campus and she proceeded to tell us about a person who came to gather information that was construed in a way that was offensive to her. A film that was made, she claims, was manipulated in a way that included things that should not have been shown, such as when the speed of the film was increased when it showed her son eating that they both thought was inappropriate. She said, “It didn't thrill my son that they showed him eating like a pig.” This example, they both thought had nothing to do with Sacred Harp singing and so she was naturally curious about our intentions.

From here on the conversation went back and forth from the subject of Sacred Harp singing to general memories of family and community. Our time with the McGuires lasted considerably longer after the ape recording was shut off. I made a comment about how pretty I thought the yard was and particularly noted the crinum lilies. Mrs. McGuire told me she called those “milk and wine” lilies due to their coloration of white with burgundy/pink

markings. She generously offered to let me dig some up, but I declined. I think I'll take her up on her offer to dig up a few bulbs in the fall of the year when the weather cools down and the lilies aren't blooming and in the height of their beauty.