

“I’ll Fly Away”—The Chuck Wagon Gang (1948)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

Essay by Bill C. Malone (guest post)*



Early label

“I’ll Fly Away” is one of the most performed songs in the world, counting not only the multitude of recordings of it, but also the innumerable public and private performances made in formal concerts and jam sessions. Like “You Are My Sunshine,” it is one of the few songs that everyone seems to know, at least in part.

It was written by one of America’s most respected gospel composers, Albert E. Brumley, whose songs have circulated widely in gospel, country, and bluegrass music. They won their initial popularity during the Great Depression particularly among “plain folk” who sought reassurance of God’s presence, of escape, or of comforting memories of parents and the old home.

Brumley was born into a cotton tenant farm family on October 29, 1905 near Spiro, Oklahoma, when that part of the state was still Indian territory. He learned the shape-note style--a system of notation in which shapes are used to depict the musical scale--under the pioneer gospel composer Eugene M. Bartlett, at the Hartford Musical Institute in Hartford, Arkansas. He later worked for the Hartford Publishing Company as an itinerant singing school teacher and sang bass with one of its touring quartets, whose principal business was to sell their paperback hymnals. In 1927, Hartford published Brumley’s “I Can Hear Them Singing Over There,” the first of approximately 800 compositions written for that company and the Stamps-Baxter concern in Dallas.

“I’ll Fly Away” seems to have been inspired by a singularly unspiritual moment in Brumley’s life. One day, while plowing in his father’s field, the tired and sweaty young man began daydreaming about being somewhere else. He thought of a well-known verse from an earlier country hit, “The Prisoner’s Song,” which declared, “If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly.” What began as a good-natured complaint about work ended as a more spirited and spiritual affirmation.

In both its structure and intent, “I’ll Fly Away” harks back to 19th century camp meeting spirituals. In these large outdoor religious encampments, which were often ecumenically Christian in nature, songs were crafted for mass participation. They usually contained simple melodies, and repeated refrains and a chorus that could be quickly learned and performed, a practice continued by the shape-note singing schools where Brumley learned his trade. Theologically, the song can be described as culturally Christian, and it was performed in Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of Christ, and other evangelical denominations. While God is mentioned only once, and Jesus not at all, Heaven is pictured as a “celestial shore” where believers are promised release from life’s travail.

Brumley began work on the song in 1929 but did not publish it until 1932, when it appeared in a Hartford hymnal, “Wonderful Message.” The Hartford Company was aggressive in its marketing policies, and sent its songbooks to churches and singing conventions all over the South and Midwest. Hartford quartets hawked the songbooks during their frequent concerts, and, after 1936, they and other quartets, such as those employed by Stamps-Baxter in Texas, won wide and loyal audiences through radio broadcasts. Unlike the segregated era in which they were performed, these songs moved across racial lines and could be heard in black and white churches alike. Between 1932 and 1940, therefore, “I’ll Fly Away” had ample opportunity to gain exposure in both communities.

Known for his popular sermons, the Rev. J.M. Gates, a powerful and oft-recorded African American preacher from Atlanta, Georgia, was apparently the first person to record the song in 1940. His version featured accompanying singers employing one verse and repeated choruses to back up his sermon. The following year, another African American act, the Selah Jubilee Singers, recorded the song in an affecting syncopated style, but these were only the first of literally thousands of recordings of “I’ll Fly Away.”

In 1948, the Chuck Wagon Gang--D.P. Carter and his children, Anna, Rose, and Jim--did the most to launch the song into the homes and hearts of Middle Americans. They had been popular radio singers in Texas since 1935, and had won an even larger audience after 1936 when they began a recording career with Columbia that lasted for over 39 years. Performing with the sole accompaniment of a guitar, they became famous and beloved for their four-part harmonies that enhanced the emotional quality of their gospel songs. Their version of “I’ll Fly Away” sold over a million copies, and was only one of several of Brumley’s songs that they recorded during their career.

“I’ll Fly Away,” of course, is now firmly ensconced in the pantheon of America’s greatest and most enduring songs. Recorded by a host of entertainers, as disparate as Aretha Franklin, Kanye West, George Jones, the Kossoy Sisters, Johnny Cash, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, and Carolyn Hester (whose version included the harmonica playing of Bob Dylan in his first recorded performance), it has capably accommodated many styles. In the year 2000 it reached an audience whose magnitude had been undreamed of, appearing in the soundtrack of the movie “O Brother Where Art Thou,” sung by the Kossoy Sisters. Superstars Gillian Welch and Alison Krauss performed it in a subsequent CD collection of the soundtrack, which sold over eight million copies and received a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Folk Album. That “I’ll Fly

Away” had become a school-spirit song at Jacksonville State College in Alabama, performed by their band, the Marching Southerners, after every football game demonstrates both its flexibility and cultural prominence.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.