

Guy B. Johnson Cylinder Recordings of African-American Music (1920s)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original Guy B. Johnson cylinders

Upon his passing in 1991 at the age of 90, Guy B. Johnson was eulogized by many. Among them, James Peacock, then Chair of Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, who said, “Guy Johnson was a pioneer in carrying out critical Afro-American research in the Southeast, instrumental in combatting racism in the region and a key figure in promoting understanding between the races.”

Guy Benton Johnson was born on a farm on February 28, 1901, in Caddo Mills, Texas, and graduated from that state’s Baylor University in 1921 with a degree in sociology. Later, in 1922, he earned a master’s degree from the University of Chicago and, in 1927, he earned his doctorate from the University of North Carolina. He did some additional post-doctoral work at Yale University. In 1927, he became a faculty member at UNC in Chapel Hill.

It would be at the University of North Carolina that Johnson would spend most of his career—as a professor of sociology and anthropology--and in nearby South Carolina that he would concentrate most of his academic research.

St. Helena Island, South Carolina, is a sea island; the island is approximately 63 square miles. It is connected to South Carolina’s mainland by US Highway 21, which connects to the SC city of Beaufort. Saint Helena was first “discovered” by the Spaniards in 1520. Later, it would be colonized by the French and then recolonized by Spain before falling into the English hands.

The climate and soil of the island and the region is good for the growing of rice, indigo, cotton and spices. Due to its fertile nature, over the years, many plantations owners commandeered the acreage, sending their slave labor and indentured servants to cultivate it. Due to the area’s relative isolation, the region of Saint Helena and its surrounding area, with time, became its own subculture as its residents--mostly African in heritage—developed not only their own customs but, indeed, their own language, a unique, original blend of various other languages, English, various African and English-based Creole, among them.

This language and group became known as the “Gullah,” a term that is believed to have derived from the word “Angola.”

The Gullah, its language especially, was a subject that was long in need of scholarship. In his 1919 work, “The American Language,” M.L. Mencken wrote, “In all its history, the United

States has produced but one dialect that stumps a visitor from any other part of the country and that is the Gullah speech...”

It was that etymology—as well as the general way of life--that greatly intrigued Johnson. Beginning in the 1920s, Johnson began to travel to the island and record—both in his own notebooks and on wax cylinders—various facets of the Gullah life and, specifically, their spoken language and music. In regard to their musics, Johnson fashioned particularly technical and detailed analysis of the island’s most common spirituals.

Later, Johnson would expand his area of study and begin to research (and document) not only the practices and folklore of the Gullah but of the entire “Lowcountry” region of the US as well as the black culture of Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee.

Supported by his research, Johnson eventually made a startling claim about the Gullah language and their music: that, contrary to many assumptions, the spoken and sung communications of the Gullah did not have its primary basis in African languages but in (or on) the dialects of lower-class whites with whom the Lowcountry residents regularly interacted.

At the time that Johnson proposed his thesis, he found his statement contested on several fronts. Many racist whites did not like the idea that white and black cultures could actually blend into something new and meaningful, and many anthropologists didn’t like that their earlier assessments of Gullah ancestry was being called into question. Finally, many blacks did not like the suggestion that Gullah was not an original invention with 100% African origins.

Johnson’s first book on this topic, “The Negro and His Songs,” written with colleague Howard Odum, was published in 1925. This was followed by his books “Negro Workaday Songs” (also with Odum) which appeared in 1926; “John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend” in 1929, and “The Folk Culture of St. Helena Island, South Carolina” in 1930. Subsequent to the publication of his many books, Johnson would often travel the country and give lectures on their subject matter. (Johnson was not the only academic or author in the family. His wife, Guion Griffis Johnson, also published works at this time examining the lives of African Americans.) From 1939 to 1940, Guy B. and Guion G. Johnson assisted with the Myrdal study, a project administered by Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal on the lives of African Americans in the US.

Guy B. Johnson’s long dedication to the study and documentation of the African-American experience gave him not only a great understanding and perspective but also a passion for greater social justice. From 1944 to 1947, Johnson was the director of the interracial organization the Southern Regional Council. Later, in the 1950s, he directed studies in what was then called “Negro” education for the Fund for the Advancement of Education. For over 35 years, Johnson was also a trustee of Howard University.

Throughout his publishing and in his speaking engagements, Johnson advocated for integration and equity for America’s black population. In 1953, he said, “Anyone who thinks that the transition from segregation to racial co-education can be made without problems, tensions and even personal tragedies is a fool.... The operation may be serious but the patient will recover. And when he recovers and looks back over his experience, he may say, ‘Well, it wasn’t half as bad as I thought it would be.’”

To be so outspoken about equality and desegregation at that time, especially in the areas of the US South where Johnson lived and traveled, was a dangerous undertaking, and the scholar was frequently harassed and even occasionally received death threats.

Johnson’s work and the time during which he undertook it was prescient. By the 1920s, the Gullah language, if not its larger culture, was rapidly disappearing and little was in place to

forestall its swift decline. In 1965, when Johnson himself returned to the Sea Islands, he declared, "I returned to St. Helena Island for the first time in thirty-five years...and did not hear a single phrase of old-time Gullah." The Gullah language became even more rare after 1976, when new a government program, under the auspices of the US Department of Labor, brought expanded English language training to the area.

Though some of Johnson's original cylinders, due to their fragile nature, have not survived to the present day, thankfully, a significant number have and have been digitized for ease of use. Johnson, who, as mentioned, passed away in Chapel Hill in 1991 at age 90, donated his life's work to the University of North Carolina archives. His collection there takes up 61 linear feet of library shelf space and numbers in excess of 20,000 items.

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