“Old Regular Baptists: Lined-Out Hymnody from Southeastern Kentucky”--Indian Bottom Association (1997)

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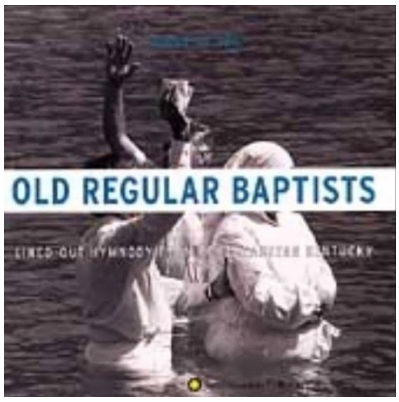
Essay by Scotty Gray (guest post)*



The Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists in Southeastern Kentucky, deep in the coal-mining country of central Appalachia, preserves one of the oldest types of Anglo-American church music--English, Scottish, Irish lined-out hymnody brought to America by the British colonists. This Smithsonian Folkways Recording is of members of the Indian Bottom Association, Old Regular Baptists, at Defeated Creek Church, Linefork, Kentucky on August 20, 1992 and June 10, 1993.

The recording is a historical, cultural, musical treasure of what is now a rare form of early American church music. The 12 hymns on the recording average about 4 to 5 minutes in length and an additional 12-minute-plus track on it is of singers telling what this type of singing means to them. A booklet inside provides “perspectives on the people, their beliefs and practices, their history and theology and their music.” Notes to the recording by Jeff Todd Titon, Professor of Music, Brown University, include, for each song/hymn, the author (if known) and his dates, title, text, page number in one of their books, and hymnic meter, as well as possible sources of the tune, and the name of the song leader.

In his notes to the recording, John Wallhausser, Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Berea College, states that the leaders of “old time” Baptists speak of their roots in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Reformation, in eighteenth-century pietism and revival movements in New England, and in the nineteenth-century theological controversies in New England. The Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists in Kentucky has clearly stated Articles of Faith (a “transformed Calvinist theology”), a Constitution, and Rules of Decorum. They have lay, untrained, unpaid, worker-preachers; reject “autonomous bureaucracies on theological grounds”; and do not have Sunday Schools, seminaries, or mission societies, which they consider transfers the responsibilities of congregations to ad hoc professional agencies.

A typical Sunday morning worship service of Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists might begin at 9:30 in a simple, clean, neat church in an atmosphere of orderliness and freedom

of expression, with hand shaking, and a brother selecting and lining out songs. At about 10:00, a moderator welcomes the congregation, then selects a brother to do a brief "introduction" to the service to set the atmosphere, stimulate thought, and emphasize spirituality. This is followed by more lined-out singing, hand shaking, and "spiritual embracing." The minister then leads in an extemporaneous prayer while some remain seated and others kneel on the floor. Next, three or four brothers deliver, sometimes chant, extemporaneous sermons during which there may be shouting and tears of joy. A few minutes before noon, the minister of the last sermon gives an invitation for membership in the church and the service closes with another lined-out song and a prayer. The membership is diverse in age, education, occupation, and finances, but united in faith, reverence, sincerity, humility, and commitment to family.

The texts reflect the spiritual experience and doctrinal bases of their faith. The oldest texts are from traditional eighteenth-century hymns by familiar English writers, such as (on this recording) Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Samuel Stennett, and William Williams. Some are gospel song texts with a chorus. Two are by the American Baptist preacher John Leland, and one is by the English Baptist minister and hymn-writer, Richard Burnham. The texts are usually in rhymed three or four stanzas (as in this recording) with the same melody for each stanza. The hymnic meters include the standard common, short, and long meters and some mixed meters. Their books contain words but no music and are distributed only to the song leaders. The two favorite collections of texts are "Sweet Songster" and the "Thomas Hymnal."

The tunes are similar to (sometimes prior to) those found in nineteenth-century shape-note hymnals (such William Walker's "Southern Harmony and Musical Companion," "The Sacred Harp," and "The New Harmonia Sacra"); "the early Skene manuscript (ca. 1620?)" from Scotland; Kentucky folk songs"; and gospel songs with a chorus. Some tunes are in a major mode, some in a minor mode, and there is an occasional appearance of the mixolydian mode.

The Old Regular Baptist singing ("the old way") is a vital part of the emotional, spiritual aspects of their worship and is handed down by oral tradition from Anglo-American folk music with strong elements of improvisation. It is acapella and distinctive in being "lined out," i.e., a line sung or chanted by a leader and answered (often before the leader completes the line) line by line by the group of men, women, and children singing relatively slowly and simultaneously more than one version (ornamented, more elaborated than that of the leader) of the same melody. Lining-out has roots in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English parish church.

The slow, improvisatory nature allows the leader, and especially the congregation a degree of personal interpretation of the melody, rhythm, and tempo. The leader's statement is concise and usually more rhythmic, while the congregation is slower and contemplative, lengthening every word, even syllable, and most often having more than one pitch to a syllable. There is no regular beat in the congregational response, and the phrasing is governed by the length of the line and breath; sometimes breathing more than once within one word. The leader may hum to himself the first pitch to be certain that the tune will be in a comfortable range. The congregational response frequently begins with a "gathering [slightly held] tone" for pitch and perhaps to focus thought. Their first sounds are frequently "scooped" up (portamento of an interval of a fourth) to the pitch. The pronunciation, an important part of the singing, is characteristically Appalachian, intensified by the slow singing, and contributes to the distinctive timbre of the music.

What may seem to some as rhythmic, ensemble, and pitch imprecision is a vital, personal spiritual experience expressed in a historic and almost lost form of folk art. This Smithsonian

Folkways Recording preserves a vital part of American history, a relatively isolated national treasurer, and a blend of the deep spirituality with the musical tradition of a rich Appalachian culture.

Scotty Gray devoted 35 years to graduate theological education serving as seminary professor, acting dean of music, vice president for academic affairs, and executive vice president. During his academic career, Gray chaired site visits to universities and seminaries for national and regional accrediting agencies. He and his family have lived in England, Germany, and Switzerland.

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