

Cherokee Hymn Singing in Oklahoma

Charlotte Heth

Background

The Christianization of a majority of the members of the Cherokee Nation has spawned hymns and gospel songs — new kinds of Indian music. Cherokees' interaction with Whites and Blacks on the continually moving frontier also brought fiddle and guitar music to them. The older Native religious life, and the ceremonial music and dance associated with it, suffered from the changes in this period and has survived to a greater or lesser extent in rural pockets of Oklahoma and North Carolina.

Today approximately 90% of the Native speakers of the Cherokee language in northeastern Oklahoma are Christian. In Cherokee Christian churches, music plays as important a role as the doctrine preached. While both Cherokees and missionaries adapted some songs directly from Protestant models, others appear unique. All are sung in Cherokee, and the translations often do not match their English counterparts, when such counterparts exist.

Sequoyah, a Cherokee man, invented a syllabary for writing his language that was officially adopted by the Cherokee Nation in 1821. Thereafter, official documents, newspapers, letters, gravestones, magical and medicinal formulas, hymnbooks, Bibles, almanacs, minutes of meetings, and public and private records were kept in Cherokee along with (or frequently without) their English versions. America's first Indian newspaper, the bilingual *Cherokee Phoenix*, appeared February 21, 1828, edited by Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee, who was assisted by Samuel A. Worcester, a missionary. Today the majority of extant materials from the 19th century printed in Cherokee deal with Christian topics.

The first Cherokee hymnbook was printed in 1829 and underwent many subsequent revisions and editions. In all of its editions, the texts are in the Cherokee syllabary without translation into

English, and except for a few temperance songs, musical notation is absent. The tunes themselves have been handed down now for 160 years or more without ever having been written down. In 1846 the *Cherokee Singing Book*, conceived and compiled by Worcester with the help of Lowell Mason, was published in Boston with four-part harmonic settings and Cherokee texts. A close check of these tunes with those used today by the Cherokees in Oklahoma shows no correspondence. Although many of the tunes in the singing book are used by Cherokees (such as "Old Hundred"), the texts associated with them are different from those proposed by Worcester in 1846. There are several Cherokee hymns and gospel songs whose words and music have never appeared in print.

In one of the most recent editions of the *Cherokee Hymn Book* (first published in 1877), there are 132 hymns, 5 doxologies and 3 temperance songs. In addition to the published hymn texts, there are new songs being composed constantly for Cherokee "sings," or assemblies in which *a capella* quartets and choirs, particularly family groups, share their music.

One can find original Cherokee hymnals (from 1829-1962) in the Huntington, Newberry, Gilcrease, University of Tulsa, Northeastern Oklahoma State University, and Oklahoma University Libraries, and the Library of Congress. For the most part, succeeding editions in the 19th century are duplications or expansions of preceding ones. Two 20th-century editions located are printed in typefaces different from that of their predecessors and were never widely

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J.B. Dreadfulwater leads his Cherokee Indian Baptist Choir in a performance of traditional, unaccompanied hymns in the Cherokee language, Hall of Musical Instruments, National Museum of American History, 1988. Photo by Laurie Minor-Penland, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

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HYMN 87. C. M.
Christ's Second Coming.

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ႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠႠ	3 ႠႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠႠ
ႠႠႠႠႠ.	ႠႠႠႠႠ ႠႠႠ;
2 ႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠႠ	ႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠႠ
ႠႠႠႠ ႠႠႠ,	ႠႠ ႠႠႠႠ
	4 ႠႠႠႠႠ ႠႠႠႠ
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Text for the hymn, "Christ's Second Coming," written in the Cherokee syllabary invented by Sequoyah in the early 19th century. The words are sung to the tune of "Amazing Grace" and appeared in the *Cherokee Hymn Book* (1878).

used. A popular version used today is reprinted from the original plates of the 1877 version. The missionary periodicals, *Cherokee Messenger* (1844-1846) and *Cherokee Gospel Tidings* (1898-1901), contain additional hymns.

The Music

The music itself is similar to Christian singing in Protestant churches, but with several important differences. The vocal quality is for the most part nasal and moderately tense, as are the sounds of the Cherokee language. The hymns usually have some breaks (glottal stops) and many sliding attacks and releases, features which also mimic the tonal Cherokee language. Undulating melodies and pentatonic scales are also popular in the hymns, with the slides and glides exaggerated by a slow tempo. The vocal line may be broken up with chorus echoes and responses.

Metric hymns find favor among the Cherokees: many tunes can be used for a single text, and conversely, many texts for a single tune. Much of this unaccompanied singing still has rhythmic vocal surges on accented beats.

Repetition, variation, and improvisation play an important part in each form. The hymns and gospel songs are for the most part strophic, as one might expect, but frequently several different tunes and texts are strung together in a song cycle. Often the singers choose to end with a quick double time section.

Two popular hymns, "One Drop of Blood"

and “Amazing Grace,” were sung on the Trail of Tears, the forced removal in the 1830s of the Cherokees from their eastern homelands to Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. While “Amazing Grace” is familiar to most Christians, “One Drop of Blood” lives primarily in oral tradition. It has been copied and recopied for generations. A translation of the text is:

What can we do, Jesus, our King? He’s
already paid for us.
Our friends, we all must work.
Our King, Your place over which You are
King.
Our King, Your place over which You are
King.

The familiar hymn, “Amazing Grace,” contains words dealing with Christ’s Second Coming.

God’s Son, He paid for us.
Then to heaven He went, after He paid
for us.
But He spoke when He arose.
“I will come again,” He said.

The tradition of Christian hymnody among the Cherokees is among the oldest and best documented examples of change in Indian music brought about by contact with European culture. Other tribes forcibly removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) do have similar traditions — the Creek and Choctaw, for example. But the invention of the Cherokee syllabary in 1821 promoted Cherokee literacy and encouraged the spread of hymn singing among them at a time when their Native religion and culture were still viable. Because the first Cherokee hymnals contained

only texts, it is safe to assume that some melodies were already alive in Cherokee oral tradition before they were brought west in the 1830s. Cherokee hymns today — performed in church, at home and in “sings,” and printed in newsletters with stories about active family gospel quartets and small choirs, such as those directed by J.B. Dreadfulwater — continue to be an active tradition in northeastern Oklahoma.

Further Readings

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- Foreman, Grant. 1938. *Sequoyah*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
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- Walker, Robert Sparks. 1931. *Torchlights to the Cherokees: The Brainerd Mission*. New York: The Macmillan Co.
- Woodward, Grace Steele. 1963. *The Cherokees*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Suggested Listening

- Dreadfulwater, J.B., dir. *Cherokee Indian Choir*. Box 205, Stillwell, Oklahoma 74960.
- Rhodes, Willard, ed. *Indian Songs of Today*. AFS L36.
- Rhodes, Willard, ed. *Delaware, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek*. AFS L37.
- Smyth, Willie, ed. *Songs of Indian Territory: Native American Music Traditions of Oklahoma*. Center of the American Indian, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.