

Old Regular Baptists of Southeastern Kentucky: A Community of Sacred Song

Jeff Todd Titon

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THE COMMUNITY

The singing of the Old Regular Baptists from the Kentucky coal-mining country in the heart of the southern Appalachian Mountains is one of the oldest and deepest veins of the English/Scots/Irish-based American melodic traditions. This hymnody, with its elaborate, lined-out, unaccompanied singing, is not well known outside its region, cannot be heard on television or radio, and little of it has been available on recordings. Yet it is a regional and national treasure that deserves to be encouraged within its community and made available to the world outside. Elwood Cornett, Moderator (elected leader) of the Indian Bottom Association of Old Regular Baptists, wrote: "We Old Regular Baptists are a peculiar people. We sing differently. Some say our worship has a sad and mournful sound. But I've never heard a more beautiful melody, and the sound of the worship causes my heart to feel complete."

Old Regular Baptists form a close-knit community. They are concentrated within their central Appalachian region in the upper South, and in certain Kentucky counties — Letcher, Knott, Perry — there are more Old Regular Baptists than members of any other Protestant denomination. In addition to a geographical community, they also form a moral community of shared beliefs. Elwood Cornett describes his people:

The Old Regular Baptist members come from many walks of life. Some are highly educated — some are not. Some are well off financially — some are not. Some are old — some are young. We come together as equal children of God. We do not say we are better than someone else. We are totally unconcerned about the opinions of modern theologians. Each person has an individual relationship with God, and that spiritual relationship overshadows everything else.

We hold family and place in high regard. Children are taught by the light of the life of Christians much more than either written or oral words. Sincerity and humbleness and reverence are marks of God's people. The Old Regular Baptists may travel far and wide, but they are anxious to return to the place where they grew up. They want to hear those special sounds and see familiar scenes. Those that move away return

Sacred Sounds



Members of an Old Regular Baptist church from the Kentucky coal-mining country in the heart of the southern Appalachian Mountains look on as a "true believer" is baptized. Old Regular Baptists carry on a tradition of singing that dates from the 16th century.

Photo courtesy Elwood Cornett

often and are likely to return for retirement. It is my desire to not sound self-righteous, but I humbly proclaim that I have found home. It has been decades since I searched for a people to fellowship with. I have found just what I was looking for. These are my people. This is my home!

According to John Wallhauser, a professor of religion at Berea College, Kentucky, the beliefs and traditions of the older Baptist denominations in the southern Appalachian Mountains are found in layers, like seams of coal. The earliest layers are composed of 16th- and early 17th-century Reformation beliefs and creeds — particularly, for English Baptists who followed the theology of John Calvin, the First (1644) and Second (1689) London Confessions. The next layer consists of 18th-century pietism and the revival movements in New

England and the American frontier. Finally, one finds the theological controversies of the 19th century which led Old Regular Baptist churches to consolidate and preserve their traditions, their "old-fashioned way." Twentieth-century efforts by Appalachian churches to hold on to their past have kept much of that past intact. Consequently, we can still discern today the remarkable heritage of the mountains: their distinctive way of being "in the world but not of the world."

THE SINGING

All music embodies ideas — social, aesthetic, stylistic — and sacred music is a particularly powerful system of sound and belief. Old Regular Baptists think of their music chiefly in terms of worship. When sung in the Spirit of God, these songs bring people closer to God and to each other. This experience is most truly felt by a Christian saved by grace, and yet many speak of how the sound of the singing drew them powerfully even when they were

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children and did not understand its full meaning. Worship, not history or the way the songs are put together, is the most important aspect of the music.

Old Regular Baptist singing has a lot in common with other Protestant hymnody. The whole congregation is invited to sing. Their aim is to praise the Lord. The songs are sung in church, at memorial meetings, baptisms, and in homes. They are sung by men, women, and children alike. But Old Regular Baptist singing also has its own particulars. The singing is very slow. It gets along without a regular beat; you can't tap your foot to it. The melodies are very elaborate, and they come from the old Anglo-American folk music tune stock, not from classical music or from popular songs written to make money. The group sings in unison, not in parts (harmony), but each singer is free to "curve" the tune a little differently, and those who are able to make it more elaborate are admired. People unfamiliar with this way of singing are mistaken if they think the singers intend unified precision but fall short; on the contrary, the singing is in step and deliberately just a bit out of phase — and this is one of its most powerful musical aspects.

Like almost all Christian hymns, Old Regular Baptist congregational songs consist of rhymed, metrical verse in a series of stanzas to which a repeating tune is set. Song books are kept at the pulpit and passed around to the song leaders. These books have words but no musical notation. The oldest lyrics are the 18th-century hymns, written chiefly by familiar English or American devotional poets and hymn writers such as Isaac Watts. These fill their two favorite song books, the collections *Sweet Songster* and the *Thomas Hymnal*. The leader sings the very first line, and the congregation joins in when they recognize the song. After that, the song proceeds line by line: the leader briefly chants a line alone, and then the group repeats the words but to a tune that is much longer and more elaborate than the leader's chant or lining tune. Music historians call this procedure lining out.

Tunes are passed along from one singer, one generation to the next among the members of these close families and church communities. Singers learn by following and imitating others, not by reading notes. Some of their melodies, such as the one used for both "Guide me o thou great Jehovah" and "Every moment brings me nearer," are quite old, while others are more recent compositions in the same folksong style. Other tunes, such as those for "Salvation is the name I love" and "The day is past and gone,"

are clearly related to tunes that were printed in 19th-century hymnals. Old Regular Baptist song rhythm is governed, not by metronome time, but by breath time. "We believe in being tuned up with the grace of God and His Holy Spirit; and when that begins, it makes a melody, makes a joyful noise," Elder I. D. Back said.

The Old Regular Baptist way of singing derives from the music of the 16th-century English parish church. In 1644 the Westminster Assembly of Divines, a group appointed by the English Parliament, recommended the practice of lining out, and it was adopted in Massachusetts a few years later. By the end of the 17th century it had become "the common way of singing" among Anglicans and other Protestant denominations (Lutherans excepted) throughout Britain and her colonies. African Americans learned it and carry a parallel tradition today, particularly Baptists in the rural South.

As settlers moved during the 18th and early 19th centuries into the frontier South, to the Shenandoah Valley and later across the Cumberland Gap, they carried "the common way" (now called "the old way") of singing with them. Most Appalachian settlers from the English/Scottish borderlands were familiar with this music, for it had lingered there well into the 18th century even after it had declined in southern England and the urban parts of the American colonies. The Old Baptists used well-known secular tunes and composed other, similar-sounding tunes to carry the sacred texts. Nineteenth-century camp meetings gave rise to spiritual songs — usually easily sung, rapid choruses with refrains; but the more conservative Old Baptist ancestors of the Old Regulars resisted the new gospel music. They also resisted musical notation in shaped notes, a reform designed to drive out "the old way of singing." Shaped notes (diamonds, triangles, squares,

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and circles that aided in learning to sing by sight) spread via singing schools from New England to Appalachia and the South in the 19th century and were featured in such prominent Southern hymn collections as the *Southern Harmony* and the *Sacred Harp* and in various gospel hymn collections from the late 19th century onwards. The greatest challenge to “the old way of singing” today comes

from the gospel songs on radio and recordings. Some Old Regular Baptist churches have succumbed to part-singing, and many include a far higher percentage of gospel hymnody, but in the Indian Bottom Association most remain steadfast in keeping the older, lined-out hymnody.

The melodic elaborations

of “the old way” predominate in the styles of several contemporary country and bluegrass singers — George Jones, Ralph Stanley, Merle Haggard, Randy Travis, Garth Brooks, Emmylou Harris, and Dolly Parton, to name some of the more prominent — whose melodic turns and graces link country music with its cultural past and make it attractive to knowing listeners. Old Regular Baptist music is what it is today because the people continue to believe strongly “In the Good, Old-Fashioned Way,” as the title of one of their songs has it. They have been able to preserve the old singing to a remarkable degree. This powerfully affecting, richly complex singing and the people who have kept it deserve to be honored and celebrated.

Jeff Todd Titon directs the doctoral program in music at Brown University. A folklorist and an ethnomusicologist, he has collaborated with Old Regular Baptists to co-produce an album of their music that is available on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Suggested Listening & Viewing

Songs of the Old Regular Baptists: Lined-out Hymnody from Southeastern Kentucky. Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40106. CD and cassette format. Co-produced by Elwood Cornett, John Wallhausser, and Jeff Todd Titon. Sung by members of the Indian Bottom Association, Old Regular Baptists. Recorded 1992 and 1993.

While the Ages Roll On. VHS, color, 1-hour documentary about an Old Regular Baptist family and their annual memorial service. Directed by Kevin Balling. Filmed in 1989 in Pike Co., KY. Available from the Appalachian Center, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.

Suggested Reading

Dorgan, Howard. 1989. *The Old Regular Baptists of Central Appalachia.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Melton, J. Gordon. 1978. The Baptist Family. In *The Encyclopedia Of American Religions.* Wilmington, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Company.