

THE FISK JUBILEE SINGERS ARE THE ORIGINAL NASHVILLE SOUND.



No, no, no, no!"

DeLise Hall barked at a singer to correct his meticulous schoolboy English. "It is chil'in, not children. It is dere, not there. It is da, not the. Remember, these are black spirituals sung by slaves."

DeLise Hall, singing director of the world-famous Fisk University Jubilee Singers, was asking a group of college students at the Nashville school to go back in time.

"Try again," she said.

And the singers did. Over and over again, into the night, just as they and others before them have done for 120 years.

Raymond Mitchell, singing alto, flubbed the slang a second time. Soprano Leeta Power muddled it, too. Breaking her adorable singing voice, she stopped and said, "Whoops, sorry."

No reason to be sorry. Practice continues to make a perfect Jubilee, an honored Southern tradition that began when a white man, George L. White, formed the troupe in October 1871. Theirs is the original Nashville sound.

Fisk Jubilee Singers traveled across 19th-century America by train and covered wagon, reducing audiences to tears with their simple but powerful songs. In 1872, the Tennessee singers got an electrifying ovation from Bostonians after crooning the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Over a century later, in 1978, they so mesmerized 10-year-old Leeta Power, then a fourth-grader in Little Rock, Ark., that she would stop at nothing to be a Jubilee.

"I was taken because of the harmony," she recalled. "When you're that young, you don't know what the voice can do."

Comparisons with your average corner church choir, rocking and stomping before the Lord, would not do justice to the Jubilees, said Clyde Owen Jackson, director of the Tuskegee University Choir. "They

understand that black folk music is something that can slip away from us. We are losing some good black music; it's disappearing. We are pleased that they do continue to sing and do continue to exist."

The singing is so moving that the young black Jubilees aren't criticized for coming off like slaves. "No one says anything," said Willis Edwards, a sophomore. "They know we're singing Negro spirituals. I would tell them to check up on their history."

Fisk students audition each year for a spot in the 16-member group. Veterans are not assured of their old positions.

"When you get in front of the alumni, you have to uphold that No. 1 impression," Power said. "You have to be top-notch, because the Jubilee Singers introduced spirituals to the world."

That wasn't an easy thing for a group of young black college students to do in the late 19th century. For one thing, traveling was so rugged and time-consuming that singers hardly ever graduated. For another, segregationists denied them hotel rooms, chased them from restaurants and badgered them at train stations.

"How many times we were refused accommodations in hotels, I cannot remember," Mabel Lewis Imes, one of the original Jubilees, wrote long ago. "Once, in Washington, D.C., we had gotten ourselves settled in the hotel and gone to our rooms, when, lo and behold, Mr. White was told that they could not accommodate us under any circumstances, otherwise they would lose their boarders. We packed our belongings and off we went."

But their trips usually ended on a good note. Singing tunes such as "Sheridan's Ride," "Wine Is a Mocker" and "There's Moonlight on the Lake," the Jubilees raised hundreds of thousands of dollars and helped a struggling Fisk stay alive. They built the three-story Jubilee Hall with \$50,000 in 1874.

"The Jubilees stand for performing excellence," said Horace Carney, a former member of the group, now chairman of Alabama A&M's music department.

Being in the group, he said, "was considered one of the highest

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honors in the music department," as opposed to Fisk's two other singing groups, the gospel chorale and university choir. "It had all the prestige. It had all the history."

History being the key word. Back at practice, Hall tapped a single piano key to get fidgeting soprano Nirva Dorsaint in tune.

"OK, I'm ready," Dorsaint said. She reached deep for a breath and stirred a small hurricane. As the wind approached her lips, she tamed it, singing chil'in, da and dere with precision until the words seemed perfect notes of music wafting up to God.

— *Darryl Fears*  
March 29, 1992

FOR THE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN, THE  
HOLIDAY CROWD IS MILES AWAY.

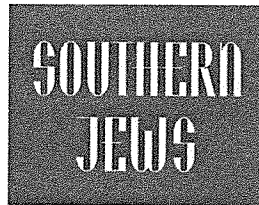
*F*or years, being

Jewish in a small Southern town meant hitting the road for the holidays.

Scattered through small towns in a kind of economic Diaspora, Jews in the South drove to the nearest synagogue for services. (Orthodox Jews made the drive before sundown of the holiday.) In more isolated areas, where there weren't enough Jews to support a synagogue, they would drive to a central point for services held in a makeshift synagogue, perhaps a room above a shoe store or just someone's living room.

These days were special not just because of their religious significance. Jews exist in the American South as a distinct religious and cultural minority, particularly in small towns. For us, like any other minority seeking out and finding its own, there is a feeling of comfort and ease in those few hours in which we exist as a majority.

*I*n my mother's West Texas childhood, holidays were a movable feast



and often meant a drive of 60 to 70 miles. She and her brother and sisters would be loaded into a car and driven to an aunt's or uncle's house. Other relatives — scattered from Del Rio, near the border with Mexico, to Pecos, near the border with New Mexico — would do the same. Holidays rotated from town to town, house to house; "Next year at Uncle Dave's" might be the farewell cry.

Among her favorite childhood memories was the year Passover Seder was held at her house. The service, where Jews give thanks at a ritual feast for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, coincided with the circus being in town. So, of course, Jews traveling with the circus were invited. Among those who came was the fat lady. There was barely enough gefilte fish to go around, my mother remembered.

Last week Jews celebrated Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year; observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, follows soon. But every year fewer of these ceremonies and family get-togethers are taking place in small Southern towns. Elderly Jews have died and the children of Jewish merchants have moved to Atlanta and other cities. In Donaldsonville, La., a former synagogue is now a hardware store. In Eufaula, Ala., a thriving congregation with its own synagogue has dwindled to one elderly woman.

*T*oday most Jews live in cities. So perhaps this generation's childhood memories of high holiday observances will be more similar to mine growing up in the city of Dallas, Texas, than of my mother's in a dusty small town. For me, the memories are not of hitting the road but of

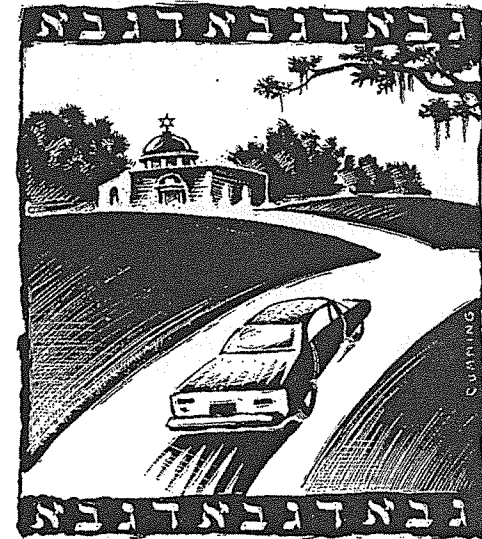


ILLUSTRATION BY WALTER CUMMING

dressing up for services despite sweltering September heat, a feeling of specialness at not being in school on a weekday and not being sick.

Not all the memories are pleasant. Some Jewish children in the South can recall a teacher making an uncomfortable point of their absence. Or being asked to explain to their classmates how they were different. The most I came to hope for from officialdom was to have my Jewishness ignored. That is, until I moved to New York City.

Within weeks of arriving in the city, I was a weary veteran of a game New Yorkers know as “alternate side of the street parking.” This means I got up before dawn and moved the car (which I was desperately trying to sell) to the other side of the street so it wouldn’t be towed when the street cleaners came.

As September rolled around, a colleague hearing me whine about my latest pre-dawn car maneuver told me to cheer up, “The holidays are almost here.”

Huh?

Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana were right around the corner.

So what?

“You don’t have to move the car.” Parking restrictions were suspended for the Jewish high holidays.

I knew then that I was a long way from home.

— *Lea Donosky*

September 15, 1991

PRAISE THE LORD AND KEEP THE RITE;  
WEDNESDAY NIGHT IS CHURCH NIGHT.

*T*

he crisp night air is bone-chillingly cold, but a buzzing heater is only partly responsible for the warmth inside Little Zion Baptist Church in the Atlanta suburb of DeKalb County.



A tiny knot of congregants huddle on two pews and lift their voices in a favorite old hymn, bodies rocking to and fro, tapping the brown wood floor as they fill the empty pews of their white frame church with spirited song: “Lord, you been good to me . . . You sho’ been good to me.”

It’s Wednesday night in the South, and churches — black and white — are all aglow for a Bible Belt tradition: midweek services. The crowds are smaller now, but “church night” carries on, giving worshipers a jolt of Jesus to recharge their spiritual batteries until Sunday.

As car headlights flicker past outside, Deacon Wilmer Harris shakes hands with congregants, then kneels before a chair for the opening prayer. He beseeches the Lord to look in on the sick, the imprisoned, those whose busy schedules kept them away.

“Lord, we want to thank you that when we rose this morning, we had eyes to see and ears to hear.”

“Yes, Lord!” agrees a sister from the second row. “You been better to us than we’ve been to ourselves.”

*M*idweek services are an adaptation of a 17th-century Puritan gathering called Tuesday lecture. The more informal Wednesday-night prayer meeting was part of the revivalism that spread through America in the 1800s.

The services were very popular by the turn of the century, especially in the South, where churches fulfilled a greater social function. People turned out in droves to pray, sing, testify, hold heated Bible discussions and nod or shout as preachers broke into sermons to fire up their souls until the Sabbath.

“Wednesday was the getting-over-the-hump day, getting yourself regrouped from one Sunday and ready for the next,” explains the Rev. Eddie Walker, pastor of Little Zion. “By midweek, the gas is getting close to ‘E’ and you have to stop to get some more so you can get home.”

In some small towns, Baptists and Methodists wielded such clout that schools and civic groups considered it downright disrespectful to schedule an event that would tempt people to miss Wednesday services.

Interest in midweek worship began to wane significantly in the 1950s. More women started working, people got busier, and TV began competing with the Lord and winning.

“Now people have too many things,” Walker laments.

Things to do? “No, material things. When I was growing up, people didn’t have much but they were more God-fearing.”

But you can’t keep a good church tradition down. To adapt to changing times, many churches have revamped midweek services. In the ’60s, many began holding fellowship dinners and consolidating activities on Wednesday night to accommodate their congregants’ busy schedules.

“In most cases, it draws a good turnout,” says Jack Lowndes, director of church minister relations for the Southern Baptist Convention of Georgia, “but it’s not what it used to be.”

That’s because the turnout now has as much to do with the activities as with prayer. In many large congregations, church night has become a convention of committee meetings and special-interest groups, with prayer and Bible study but two of many items. At Atlanta’s Dunwoody Baptist Church, for instance, choruses rehearse, committees convene, mission groups meet.

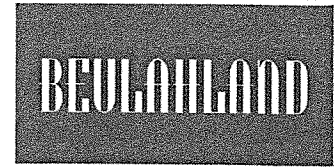
Meanwhile, smaller churches such as Little Zion haven’t let poor attendance quench the Wednesday-night fire for the die-hard few.

Determined to keep the tradition alive, churches still light up like beacons on a lonely highway, ministers pacing the aisles to see how many spent souls will join them. And whether the crowd numbers six or 60, a booming voice still strikes up a hymn, others following. Then they bow heads in prayer and open their Bibles and hearts in search of that old midweek uplift.

“It’s something unique about Wednesday night,” Walker says. “We’ve been down to three and still went on with the service and had a good time.”

— *Connie Green*  
January 26, 1992

FROM ZION, S.C., TO PALESTINE,  
TEX., THE MAP OF THE BIBLE  
BELT IS WELL-VERSED.



Here’s Ararat,

Ala., and Hebron, Ky. Bethany, La., and Shiloh, Tenn. Zion and New Zion, S.C. Zionville and Beulahville, N.C. Mounts Zion, Lebanon, Gilead and Carmel scattered hither and yon. Last and possibly least, in the far southwestern tip of Virginia lies a piece of very late pseudepigrapha: the village of Ben Hur.

In the South, it seems, you’re always on the road to Damascus.

This propensity for biblical names is not strictly a Southern phenomenon, of course. The entire United States has been a Bible Belt at one time or another. Just take note of Salem, Mass.; Bethlehem, Pa.; St. Paul, Minn.; and Our Lady of the Angels, Calif. The U.S. Geological Survey, which keeps a computerized list of two million place names, counts 28 Palestines evenly distributed between the South and Midwest.

But there is a distinctive pattern to religious place names here.

In “Biblical Place Names in the United States,” an article in the March 1979 issue of the journal *Names*, John Leighly, a University of California geography professor, analyzed 61,742 names. He found that although biblical names are not significantly more common in the South, there is a greater variety of them and they are more likely to come from the New Testament. Moreover, the names tend to be associated with Jesus, the Apostle Paul or the churches in Asia Minor to which the Book of Revelation is directed.

What appeal would such names have held for settlers? University of Mississippi historian Charles Reagan Wilson hypothesizes, “There has been a strong religious tradition in the South of restorationism — the belief that you could restore the church the way it was in biblical times.”

The picture is of small evangelical groups settling the Southern hinterland on the model of the isolated, apocalypse-expectant communities of the New Testament.

No wonder the South has two-thirds of the geological survey's 36 Smyrnas, named after a Revelation church. And 10 of the survey's 12 Calvarys.

One of them is a tiny town in southwest Georgia not far from the trinity of Damascus, Bethany and Macedonia. Originally known as the North Carolina Settlement after some migratory Tar Heels who alighted there in 1828, Calvary got its current name 104 years ago from Benjamin Fairbanks, an herb doctor who happened to be the first postmaster of the place.

Exactly why Dr. Fairbanks seized upon Calvary is not revealed in the file folder consulted by current acting Postmaster Carla Nix. But University of Florida religion professor Samuel Hill suggests that the explanation may lie in the theological outlook of Southern evangelicalism.

"Those denominations really think of the biblical sites as points to identify with," Hill says. "In the sacramental churches, you've got the reality there with you — in your hand, in your mouth, on your tongue. In the evangelical churches, it's memory-jogging."

Calvary, Ga., then, is a perpetual reminder of Easter.

Of course, the South is not all evangelical Protestant. In half-Catholic Louisiana, where 11 places are named for saints, you can journey from Paradise to Port Sulphur with stops in Pride, Jigger, Liberty Hill and Eros.

That's a long way from Temperanceville, Va.

— *Mark Silk*  
March 31, 1991