

# TAKING FLIGHT IN SONG

Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away.  
To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.



Dr. Joseph Pratt

When I was young, my mom took our family to gospel music “singings.” We would drive up dirt roads back into the piney woods of Sabine County in East Texas, out where the snakes and the red bugs and ticks held sway. There we met other good country folks at old Baptist churches. Our spirits were high. We were not gathering for a Sunday sermon to

hear how we were going to burn in hell; we were not attending a week-long revival meeting where we listened for hours to sermons and then sang verse after verse of “Just As I Am” while the evangelist exhorted us to come forward and be saved. No, we were coming together to make a joyful noise using the best part of the Baptist religion—its hymnal.

Hour after hour, we sang gospel music that was both inspired and inspiring. As in every church I have ever visited, one woman's voice always seemed to stand out, ringing loudly and clearly above the rest, taking the songs on up toward heaven. At times, a different sort of distinctively gospel voice dominated, as touring gospel quartets entertained us with rousing harmonies built around bass voices that rattled the walls. During one singing, a gospel quartet rocked the old church with a rousing song that must have been named “Sing, Brother, Sing.” I say “must have been” because I have never been able to find any mention that such a song has ever existed. I liked the great old favorites such as “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Softly and Tenderly.” I loved “Amazing Grace,” which remains, for me, one of the best songs ever written. But best of all was the hard-driving, rock-and-roll gospel music that filled the church with spirit.

One great attraction of the singings was lunch, with row after row of home cooking laid out on old wooden tables in front of the church. This was what Whole Foods today might call “free range” food—meat from hogs, cows, and chickens that had been raised, slaughtered, and smoked on the farm. Grandmaw Pratt always named her chickens, and she asked the grandkids to pick one out when we first arrived for a visit. She would then call to “Sally,” for instance, walk over and pick her up, and wring her neck in front of us. The next morning, our breakfast would feature chicken-fried Sally. For a decade or so, I refused to eat any and all chickens, even those to whom I had not been formally introduced. Ham from hogs that I had helped “slop” down by the pond worked fine as a substitute until I watched my dad and the other “men folk” slaughter one of them. I did not go hungry at the singings, however, since beside plates of meat were bowls of corn right off the cob and beans and melons picked fresh from gardens. My favorite foods, of course, were the desserts prepared by country women whose singing voices perhaps

did not stand out, but whose special recipes for pecan pie or chocolate cake surely did.

At times, the singings would have a sort of children's hour, with kids called up from the pews to lead songs. Once at about ten years of age, I found myself up front with my big sister, Carolyn, leading “I'll Fly Away.” She was two years older, with some degree of self-confidence; in addition, she could actually sing. I was still a shy boy whose confidence had been shaped by my kinfolks. An aunt, for example, once noted at a family reunion: “I'll swanee, Joe, if you grow any taller, you're gonna fork”; my grandmaw told anyone who would listen that I “looked like a hoot owl.” Unfortunately, my voice was more like that of a screech owl, so I let Carolyn do most of the serious singing while I frantically pumped my arm to mark time to “I'll fly away, Oh Glory; I'll fly away (in the morning). When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.” When the ordeal was over, I realized that I had actually enjoyed it and had not seriously embarrassed myself.

These singings, some fifty years ago, remain the closest I have yet come to feeling at ease with organized religion. The songs moved me. I felt the power of the religious inspiration embodied in the lyrics of such hymns as “Amazing Grace,” which I learned later had been written in the 1770s by the Englishman John Newton, a captain of a slave ship who experienced a “great deliverance” during a horrible storm at sea and changed his ways after surviving the storm. “I'll Fly Away” was written in the 1930s by the Oklahoma-born song-writer Albert E. Brumley, who later admitted that his inspiration came one day while working in the cotton field and imagining flying away from the endless rows of cotton.

The communal act of singing felt right, as did the “good Christian fellowship” and the home cooking spread out on tables for all to enjoy. I realize now that part of what I felt was a deep kinship with these sturdy, hard-working farmers and our common ancestors back through time. Harboring no illusions that life was easy, they needed to believe that rewards for a hard life well lived would come in the after-life: “Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away. To a land where joys will never end, I'll fly away.” Joys will never end? There must be gospel music singings “on God's celestial shore.”



The editorial staff of *Houston History* would like to thank Barbara Eaves for her tireless devotion to the magazine. Barbara not only gathers and writes the news on a regular basis, she acts as our marketer, photographer, bookstore liaison, and all-around good will ambassador. Barbara, we appreciate all of your help!