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Awake, My Soul: The Story of the Sacred Harp (review)

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MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

Awake, My Soul: The Story of the Sacred Harp. Matt and Erica Hinton, directors. 2007. Awake Productions / Digital Maps Two-Disc Special Edition DVD (75 minutes, plus bonus features; NTSC all regions).

Its subtitle would seem to claim that *Awake, My Soul* is primarily about a tunebook; but *The Sacred Harp* is much more than a book, and its story requires a balancing act on the part of any storyteller. Some may emphasize a musical style, focusing on Sacred Harp music's capacity as a written tradition. Others conceive of Sacred Harp as a musical culture, well into its second century and geographically concentrated in the American South; here the emphasis on oral tradition would speak to a style of singing more than a style of composition. And then there is the tunebook itself—a canon enveloping a lengthy publication history beginning with four successively larger editions by B. F. White between 1844 and 1869, proceeding to the 1911 James revision, and continuing on as the “Denson Book” following Paine Denson’s 1936 revision. In the 1991 Denson revision, used today and in this film, 179 of 560 songs were included the 1844 *Sacred Harp*. It is really that original book that constitutes the *Sacred Harp* of *Awake, My Soul*—a tunebook that preserved a singing tradition, a compositional style, and also a religious practice. Matt and Erica Hinton’s film documents a contemporary musical practice against a historical backdrop: it describes the prehistory of the original tunebook and the contemporary culture of Sacred Harp singing in Georgia and Alabama. The film yields mixed results as a history, but as a documentary about singers and singings—especially in its two-disc special edition—it sets a high standard.

Awake, My Soul was a labor of love: the Hintons spent almost a decade expanding a ten-minute student film into an ambitious documentary. They and cowriter John Plunkett interviewed eighteen singers, most from Georgia and Alabama and all but one from the South; I note with appreciation that they included nearly everyone from the Music Committee of the 1991 revision. Interview segments are combined with footage from eight Sacred Harp singings between 1998 and 2005, and the editing, by Matt Hinton and Jennifer Brooks, is usually excellent.

The story is also told through photographs and other archival materials, some collected from singers and some from the George Pullen Jackson archive. Visual and audio reproduction in the film are of a consistently high quality. The narration, read by honey-voiced country-and-western singer Jim Lauderdale, provides background information and helps bring the various media together into a coherent story. Those hoping for uninterrupted songs will welcome the bonus footage available in the special edition—including over two hours of Sacred Harp tunes, sung at conventions by top-rate singers. Here and in the film proper the Hintons have chosen a nicely diverse group of hymns—though one might have asked for an anthem or two—and they made the right choice also in including footage of a closing prayer to bring the singing to an end. *Awake, My Soul* appropriately devotes time to important parts of an all-day singing such as dinner-on-the-grounds and the memorial lesson, and interviewees discuss courtship and travel alongside more directly musical topics. The Hintons have produced a lively and entertaining record of Sacred Harp as a musical and cultural practice in the contemporary South.

Educators will enjoy using *Awake, My Soul* for these reasons, but its use in the classroom should be supplemented with a historical corrective. (Candidates would include John Bealle's *Public Worship, Private Faith: Sacred Harp and American Folksong* [1997] and Kiri Miller's *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism* [2008].) As good as it is as a musical documentary, the film ultimately disappoints in its capacity as a history. The problem is not particular to this film but instead reflects a common misconception within the reception and historiography of Sacred Harp music. This misconception has two parts: first, that Sacred Harp music constitutes a monolithic style that originated with William Billings but somehow also ultimately relates to music in medieval Europe; second, that insofar as this style was commemorated with the publication of *The Sacred Harp* in 1844, its associated performance practice was flash-frozen in the rural South and not "rediscovered" until the 1920s. This film, in other words, regards Sacred Harp as a culture of conservation, not of change: it describes a single musical style, chased from colonial New England by "better music boys" and from the postbellum city by gospel (the soundtrack of "a modern, forward-thinking South"). It was left to George Pullen Jackson to discover his "lost tonal tribe" still singing "the nation's oldest music," and to later folk revivalists to transmit that music to the West and North. "It once was lost, but now it's found," the narrator of *Awake, My Soul* tells us, and what is "found" is a musical canon whose "open chords and parallel fifths" still represent "the American landscape." It was a "wild, untamed music" that came to the South, one that had "simply moved to the next frontier . . . into untamed and uncharted territory."

This conception of Sacred Harp history is appropriate in the context of a documentary insofar as it does represent an oral history. But the viewer should stay aware of its relationship to the choices made by the filmmakers: to focus on older rather than younger singers; to neglect the modern flourishing of Sacred Harp singing in areas outside of the South; and to dwell on William Billings at the expense of the many nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers of Sacred Harp hymns. Indeed, *Awake, My Soul* depicts recent composition of Sacred Harp music as self-consciously "old fashioned" and therefore primarily written in conformance to a historical style. We learn that several of the interviewees

have tunes in the 1991 revision—Raymond Hamrick and Hugh McGraw even discuss their compositional processes—but their hymns are described as being “in the style of William Billings and B. F. White.” Even if modern Sacred Harp composers may consider that to be their particular musical heritage, they also know hundreds of tunes added in later editions, many of them newly composed by then-current editors and singers. Consider, for example, that this “story of *The Sacred Harp*” contains no mention of the Denson family responsible for the 1936 revision and about fifty total hymns in the contemporary edition. The film does not acknowledge Paine Denson or Ruth Denson Edwards; the former is shown in photograph but, as with most photographs shown in the film, the identification is saved for the optional voiceover commentary. Not mentioned anywhere is so important an innovation as the addition of alto parts starting with the James book of 1911 (and borrowed from the separate Cooper revision of 1902). These gaps are not damning points against *Awake, My Soul*, but they are notable indications that the filmmakers see Sacred Harp as a preservative first and foremost.

Awake, My Soul preserves something, too, and therein lies its real beauty. We are fortunate to have photographs and phonographs from early in the twentieth century, but we don’t have multimedia footage. Here in one package, though, we and future generations have clips from eight great singings around the turn of the century, accompanying a documentary about the singers and their own musical histories. (The film also has a soundtrack and a useful webpage.) This is not only a matter of preservation but of transmission: this documentary will bring Sacred Harp singing to new people, and vice versa. The footage of singing is as good as I’ve seen, and the sound is fantastic; I do wish identification of each leader had been included. The technical quality and mise-en-scène of these recordings change from convention to convention, but that variety actually helps suggest the eclectic aspect of an all-day singing: most of the time you’re sitting in one place, but every once in a while you sneak off for a cough drop and stand behind the tenors, say. And the choice of tunes here is excellent, typically avoiding chestnuts in favor of whatever tunes the class sang best that day. The Hintons, after all, are well aware of the importance of recordings: several singers in the film recall hearing Sacred Harp on phonograph records as children, and one recalls years spent faithfully tape-recording every singing he could. It is a reminder that innovation and tradition are two sides of the same coin; *The Sacred Harp*, the singing convention, and shape-note notation itself were innovations that preserved a body of music while facilitating its expansion. *Awake, My Soul* is composed in this spirit, and it is a welcome addition to the canon of Sacred Harp transmission.

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