



These thirteen tracks are a snapshot, points along a continuum, plucked out of time and frozen. I had fallen in love with some recordings of a cappella African-American folk singing—to such a degree that I needed to learn them and perform them. I found instruments—fretless and slide guitars—that allowed me to approach the sounds of the voices. As I played these songs, there seemed to be an unfolding, a kind of ongoing revelation of possibilities opening up. I asked Vanessa Morris to sing these songs with my guitars because I thought she could love them too. Fortunately I was right. As I write we have been exploring this repertoire for four years. The process, the unfolding, continues.

These tracks represent our interpretations of and improvisations on vocal performances that were recorded anywhere from half to three-quarters of a century ago. The songs themselves go back much further. I grew up listening to jazz and rock ‘n’ roll. When I

discovered recordings of the earliest African-American folk singing, I heard it echoing throughout the music I already knew. Here was the Root—the ancient, haunting, eerie voices of the Ancestors, the Source for so much of what I had come to know and love, the Rock that laid the foundation.

Eight of these thirteen tracks (2, 3, 6-9, 12, 13) are based on performances of “surge” style **hymn** singing. In 17th century Britain, the practice of “lining out” was devised as a way of dealing with illiterate congregations who couldn’t read the Psalm texts. To facilitate the congregational singing of these texts, one person would chant, or “line out,” a line of the Psalm, after which the congregation would sing the line together. The style of singing was slow, seemingly without a pulse. Each syllable could be stretched out over several notes in a highly ornamented style. And though they were all ostensibly singing the same melody, each congregation member could introduce his or her own variations, the effect created being that of a kind of loose unison, a “wave” of human voices “surging” up through the melody’s arc.

This British practice was introduced to enslaved West Africans in the southern U.S. during the mid-18th century Great Awakening. Missionaries from the newly Protestant sects (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian) used the practice of “lining out” as a means of teaching the slaves the new kind of religious song associated with their evangelical movement, the hymn. As the slaves learned the practice and the music, they transformed it into something distinctively African-American.

The recordings of “surge” style hymns from which Vanessa and I learned were recorded between 1926 and 1954 and so represent a stage in the evolution of this practice far removed from its mid-18th century roots. And, though the practice arose in a congregational setting, the recorded performances we learned from might be called “domestic” adaptations of the congregational practice. They represent what one or two people could do at home singing in this congregational style. All of the performances we learned this style from are field recordings made by Frederic Ramsey in 1954. Three of the tracks (2, 8, 12) were learned from recordings by the vocal duo of John and Lovie Griffins who were recorded singing at home in Perry County, Alabama. Three of the tracks were learned from recordings by one singer alone, singing an a cappella adaptation of this group style: Tracks 3 and 9 (Suddie Griffins) and Track 7 (Mary Price).

The other two hymn performances are based on commercial recordings from the 1920s. As record companies discovered that there was a market in the black community for recordings by black performers, they began to issue such performances in a separate catalog of so-called “race” recordings. Besides the blues singers and gospel quartets, the record companies gradually discovered that black record buyers would buy recorded sermons by black preachers. Oftentimes such preachers would be accompanied in the studio by a handful of congregation members. In such a recording by Rev. J. M. Gates he “lines out” and sings, with a few voices from his congregation, the hymn “**O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?**” Blind Willie Johnson was a street evangelist from

Texas who sang and accompanied himself on slide guitar. His 1927 “**Dark Was the Night**” represents his attempt to imitate the sound of a Baptist congregation singing this hymn in the “moaning” or “surge” style.

In addition to my solo guitar take on Johnson’s performance (Track 13), we include two other performances of “**Dark Was the Night and Cold the Ground**” (Tracks 7 & 8). Each of these three, though based on the same text, use a different melody. This was typical of the hymn tradition. The hymn texts were poems written in a standardized meter. Therefore, any melody that fit that meter could be used with any hymn text. Various 19th century British hymn writers—Dr. Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Horatius Bonar—are responsible for the texts we use here (Tracks 2, 3, 9, 12). We can be much less certain about the origins of these particular melodies which seem to be lost in the mists of time, obscured by the mystery of the oral tradition working over centuries.

Three of the tracks here (1, 4, 11) are African-American **spirituals**. Unlike the hymn, the spiritual was a folk song, born out of the oral tradition, outside of the literate tradition and church practices. The African-American spiritual was the first body of music recognized by the world outside of the southern plantation as distinctively African-American. Short phrases from scripture, images from Bible stories, were worked into the African call-and-response form in mesmerizing repeated cycles.

Track 10, “Wild Ox Moan” is a **holler**. This is a kind of musical call or cry that probably goes back to late 19th century African-American culture. It would be sung by a person working alone, either to call out to another worker some distance away, or sung to one’s self to help pass the time, reflecting on the singer’s current situation. Some scholars have suggested that the holler might be an antecedent of the blues.

We learned these by ear from the recordings, attempting to get as close to the originals as we could. We then let our imaginations take the music where it wanted to go.

--Scott Sandvik
Belmont, Massachusetts, June 2002

I continue to be inspired by the sincerity of the original recordings. Suddie Griffins, John and Lovie Griffins, Vera Hall, Mrs. Sidney Carter et al—these are truly incredible artists. As I work hard to learn the many intricacies and subtleties, I remark on how many of these performers were unaware of their abilities; that these melodies were merely songs they had sung over the years and learned in their youth.

At a time in history where everything imaginable is accessible, somehow I feel centralized by this repertoire. Be it the sense of community the music invokes, that these tunes were passed down an ancestral line, or the reflective quality of many of the performers as they remember, I’m comforted when I listen and when I sing their music.

--Vanessa Morris
Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, August 2002

1. *Lead Me To The Rock*

Mmmm...lead me, my Lord.
I wonder what my mother want to stay here for?
Well this old world ain't no friend to her.

CHORUS:

Well you can dig-uh my grave about ten feet deep
And you can make-uh my grave about four feet wide
And you can bury my body on solid rock
And you can lead
Oh, Lord!
Why don't you lead me to that racial rock, higher and higher?

I wonder what old Satan keeps a-grumblin' about?
Well, he's chained in Hell and he can't come out.

CHORUS

Well, some come cripple and some come lame.
Well, some come limpin' in my Jesus' name.

CHORUS (Improvisation)

From the singing of Wash Dennis and Charlie Sims; State Penitentiary, Parchman, Mississippi, 1936. Recorded by John A. Lomax [Rounder CD 1510 *Afro-American Spirituals, Work Songs, and Ballads*]

According to Alan Lomax, this is a two-part adaptation of a modern arrangement of this spiritual for quartet.

2. *When I Can Read My Title Clear* (Text: Dr. Isaac Watts)

When I can read my title clear to mansions in the skies
I bid farewell to every fear and wipe my weeping eyes

Should earth against my soul engage and the fiery darts be hurled
Then I can smile at Satan's rage and face the frowning world.

From the singing of John and Lovie Griffins; Near Cahaba River, Perry County, Alabama; April 10, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2656 *Music from the South, Vol. 7: Elder Songsters, 2*]

3. *Go Preach My Gospel* (Text: Dr. Isaac Watts)

“Go preach my gospel,” saith the Lord, “bid the whole earth my grace receive.
He shall be saved that trust my word and he condemned who’ll not believe.”

“I’ll make your great commission know, and ye shall prove my gospel true.
By all the works that I have done, by all the wonders ye shall do.”

From the singing of Suddie Griffins. Near Old Oak Grove Baptist Church, Talladega National Forest, Oakmulgee Division, Alabama; April 7, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2655 *Music of the South, Vol. 6: The Elder Songsters I*]

4. *Pharaoh*

Pharaoh, Pharaoh
Pharaoh’s army sure got drowned
Pharaoh

Go down, go down
Go down, Is’up and lead your children
Go down

From the singing of Mrs. Sidney Carter; Senatobia, Mississippi; September, 1959. Recorded by Alan Lomax. [Rounder 1701 *Southern Journey, Vol. 1: Voices from the American South*]

5. *Prayer*

From the singing of Dock Reed and Vera Hall Ward; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; January or February, 1950. Recorded by Harold Courlander. [Folkways 4418 *Negro Folk Music of Alabama, Vol. 2: Religious Music*]

In the original recording, Dock Reed chants a prayer while Vera Hall Ward responds with what Courlander refers to as “moaning”—short phrases sung, sometimes hummed. In our performance Scott’s slide guitar imitates the patterns of Reed’s voice while Vanessa sings Ward’s “moans”.

6. *O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?*

I heard Death's voice.

I heard Jesus say:

“Come unto me and rest
Lay down thy weary one,
Lay down thy head on my breast”

From the singing of Rev. J. M. Gates & congregation; Camden, NJ; September 11, 1926. Original issue Victor 35789 [reissued on Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40090 *Anthology of American Folk Music*]

7. *Dark Was the Night, and Cold the Ground*

Dark was de night and cold the ground
On which the Lord was laid

From the singing of Mary Price. Near Angola, Louisiana, June 22, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2656 *Music from the South, Vol. 7: Elder Songsters, 2*]

Frederic Ramsey, Jr. writes: “ ‘Dark Was the Night’ is sung by many Southern Negroes without recourse to text. It is an outstanding example of a hymn that has been “pulled away” from its point of origin and shaped into a passionate personal expression of suffering and sorrow.” (liner notes to Folkways 2656 *Music from the South, Vol. 7: Elder Songsters, 2*)

8. *Dark Was the Night, and Cold the Ground*

(Dark) was the night and cold the ground on which my Lord was laid
His sweat like drops of blood ran down, in agony he prayed

Father, remove this bitter cup

If search Thy secret will

From the singing of John and Lovie Griffins; Near Cahaba River, Perry County, Alabama; April 10, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2656 *Music from the South, Vol. 7: Elder Songsters, 2*]

9. *I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say* (Text: Horatius Bonar)

I came to Jesus as I was, weary and worn and sad.
I found in him a resting place and he has made me glad.

I heard the voice of Jesus say:

“Behold, I freely give the living water, thirsty one. Stoop down and drink and live.”

From the singing of Suddie Griffins. Near Old Oak Grove Baptist Church, Talladega National Forest, Oakmulgee Division, Alabama; April 7, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2655 *Music of the South, Vol. 6: The Elder Songsters 1*]

Lead Me to the Rock Liner Notes

10. *The Wild Ox Moan*

Oh, run here, black woman,
Ah-hmm, oh, sit on daddy's knee.
Ah-hmm, I got something to tell you, black woman,
Ah-hmm, don't you holler loud.
Ah-hmm, Well, I'm goin' out in Texas, black woman,
Ah-hmm, to hear that wild ox moan.
Ah-hmm, If it don't moan to suit me, black woman,
Ah-hmm, I'm gonna drive my bell cow home.

From the singing of Vera Hall; Livingstone, Alabama; Summer 1959. Recorded by Alan Lomax. [Atlantic 7-82496-2 *Sounds of the South*]

11. *Over in the Glory Land*

Over in the glory land
(I'll) join happy angels' band
Over in the glory land

Just to sing God's praises and his glories here
Over in the glory land
Just ascend to be by my Saviour's side
Over in the glory land

Just over in the glory land
Join, I'll join, the happy angel's band
Just over in the glory land

Just over in the glory land
Join, I'll join the happy angels' band
Though I long to be by my Saviour's side
Just over at the glory land

From the singing of Horace Sprott, Bessie Ford, Nellie Hastings, Annie Sprott; Marion, Alabama; April 21, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2655 *Music from the South, Vol. 6: Elder Songsters, 1*]

12. *A Charge To Keep I Have* (Text: Charles Wesley)

(A charge) to keep I have, a God to glorify
A never-to-dying soul to save and fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill
O may it all my power engage to do my Master's will.

From the singing of John and Lovie Griffins; Near Cahaba River, Perry County, Alabama; April 10, 1954. Recorded by Frederic Ramsey, Jr. [Folkways 2656 *Music from the South, Vol. 7: Elder Songsters, 2*]

13. Dark Was the Night, and Cold the Ground

From the singing and guitaring of Blind Willie Johnson; Dallas, Texas. December 3, 1927. Original issue Columbia 14303-D [reissued on Columbia/Legacy C2K 52835 *The Complete Blind Willie Johnson*]

1. <i>Lead Me To The Rock</i>	[4:19]
2. <i>When I Can Read My Title Clear</i>	[5:19]
3. <i>Go Preach My Gospel</i>	[6:35]
4. <i>Pharaoh</i>	[4:20]
5. <i>Prayer</i>	[2:23]
6. <i>O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?</i>	[6:02]
7. <i>Dark Was the Night, and Cold the Ground</i> (vocal solo)	[0:48]
8. <i>Dark Was the Night, and Cold the Ground</i>	[4:15]
9. <i>I Heard The Voice of Jesus Say</i>	[6:44]
10. <i>The Wild Ox Moan</i> (vocal solo)	[1:17]
11. <i>Over in the Glory Land</i>	[4:08]
12. <i>A Charge To Keep I Have</i>	[6:05]
13. <i>Dark Was the Night, and Cold the Ground</i> (guitar solo)	[5:24]

Total 57:39

Vanessa Morris, vocal

Scott Sandvik, acoustic guitars

Tracks 1-4, 8, 9, 12: 1967 Federico Garcia nylon string acoustic guitar, frets removed

Tracks 5, 6, 11, 13: 1972 Martin D-35 acoustic steel string guitar played lap-style with Stevens bar slide

Recorded June 20, 1999 and May 20, 2000 at PBS Studios, Westwood, Massachusetts

Mixed and Mastered October 15, 2000 by Peter Kontrimas

Recording Engineer: Peter Kontrimas

Produced by Vanessa Morris and Scott Sandvik

Graphic Design & p. 10 photo by Steve Norton/Red Notebook

Type by Zuzanna Licko/Emigre

Morris-Sandvik Photo: Susan Wilson

Copyright 2002 Vanessa Morris and Scott Sandvik

Cover photograph: Vanessa Morris's great-grandparents Mama Annie and Papa Willis Nettles on their front porch in Clinton, Louisiana. (Photographer unknown)