

## RECORD REVIEWS

**Powerhouse for God: Sacred Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church.** Jeff Todd Titon. Edited by Daniel W. Patterson, American Folklore Recording Series. 2 lps, 15 selections, spoken word and vocal, stereo, booklet by Jeff Todd Titon, (pp. 24). University of North Carolina Press, 0-8078-4084-X, P.O. Box 2288, Chapel Hill, NC 27514, 1982.

**Primitive Baptist Hymns of the Blue Ridge.** Brett Sutton and Pete Hartman. Edited by Daniel W. Patterson, American Folklore Recording Series. 12 selections, vocal, stereo, booklet by Brett Sutton, (pp. 27). University of North Carolina Press, 0-8078-4083-1, P.O. Box 2288, Chapel Hill, NC 27514, 1982.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Peterson.

**Powerhouse for God** by Jeff Todd Titon and **Primitive Baptist Hymns of the Blue Ridge** by Brett Sutton and Pete Hartman are the inaugural offerings in a series of American Folklore Recordings edited by Daniel W. Patterson and published by the University of North Carolina Press. The albums comprise an auspicious beginning for the series. The mere fact that the recordings document aspects of religious language and song too often neglected alone make them welcome additions. Fortunately, however, the albums and their accompanying booklets are also uniformly excellent in presentation.

More specifically, Sutton and Hartman's **Primitive Baptist Hymns** documents a sacred singing tradition largely ignored by scholars, and is a welcome antidote to the usual folkloric emphasis upon star performers and groups. Excluding one duet selection, the recording contains examples of Primitive Baptist hymnody performed by seven different white and black congregations located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwestern Virginia. The sound quality is clear throughout. From the unaccompanied

"loosely-blended," and predominantly monophonic singing, one hears hymns, spirituals, and examples of lining out. Several of the selections are also arranged so that stylistic comparisons can easily be made between Anglo and Afro-American versions of the same core tunes. Stylistic comparison is also a central theme of the accompanying booklet by Sutton which contains photographs, text and tune transcriptions and annotations as well as a lengthy discussion of the historical background of the communities, the church and the singing traditions. Sutton is particularly adept at analysing the many influences upon the Primitive Baptist singing tradition, the complex relationships between texts and tunes, and the stylistic differences between Anglo and Afro-American singing traditions. Although the musical analysis section may be difficult for the novice, the booklet is an exemplary piece of scholarship which increases the album's usefulness in any course in folk religion or folk song.

While Sutton and Hartman's efforts are generically organized, Jeff Todd Titon's **Powerhouse for God** is contextual in approach: that is, the first three sides of the album present in general sequential order "the genres of language in religious practice" which one might hear at the Fellowship Independent Baptist Church near Stanley, Virginia every Sunday morning. Thus, the double album contains examples of hymns, prayer, Sunday school teaching, preaching, and testimony. The church's pastor, Rev. John Sherfey, recounts his life story on the concluding side. The accompanying booklet by Titon provides necessary historical information about the community and the church as well as photographs, a verbatim text and music transcriptions. The majority of the booklet, in fact, is devoted to the scrupulous transcriptions and a clear, detailed explanation of the genres, their relationship to one another, and their place in the worship service.

This contextual framework is rarely applied to sound recordings, and some scholars may question its necessity or usefulness. I, on the other hand, question why it has taken so long. Certainly, listening to an album cut of an alter prayer is not everyone's cup of tea, but aesthetic taste is not or should not be the issue here (though the prayer, singing, testimony, and

Sherfey's preaching are undeniably powerful). Rather, the album should be viewed as a natural extension of and a persuasive case for Titon's earlier work in life story, ethnopoeitics, and transcription. Few folklorists, unfortunately, are as concerned with the processes of fieldwork, and the nature of description and transcription (and, hence, epistemology) as Titon, and these concerns are amply demonstrated throughout the album and booklet.

In this light, the brief interpretative comments at the end of the booklet are more frustrating and tantalizing than illuminating. One hopes that the companion book (to be published by University of Texas Press) will answer some of the questions Titon raises in the album. Nonetheless, the record could be used successfully in any classes on folk religion, folk song, narrative, or fieldwork.

Amidst this praise, there is one minor criticism. The choice of paper color for the booklets (a gold brown) is hideous and seriously detracts from the quality of the photographs.

Finally, a whimsical conclusion remains. As we know, folklorists and the publications of folklorists sometimes appear in the strangest places. We've witnessed Roger Welsch and Jim Griffith on Charles Kuralt's *On the Road* and Jan Brunvand on *The David Letterman Show*. We can now add to this curious list the citation of *Powerhouse for God* as one of the five best albums of 1982 by popular music critic Dave Marsh in the March, 1983 issue of *Musician* magazine. I can only speculate about Marsh's rationale, but I certainly concur with his good judgement.