

JOSEPH SPENCE, Folk Guitar
JOHN ROBERTS and
FREDERICK McQUEEN
Bahaman Ballads and
Rhyming Spirituals

AN INTRODUCTION

Samuel Charters

It has been six years since I was on Andros Island, the largest of the Bahamas group, but I have, still, a very vivid memory of the island and its people. Andros was beautiful in many ways, with its miles of empty sand beaches and the ragged growth of brush and trees that lined the paths that led out of the settlements toward the center of the island, and with its clear blue skies and brilliant sun, but my memories are more of the difficulty of the life and loneliness of the few scattered settlements along the coast, with their handful of stucco buildings and the wooden sloops anchored off shore. There was the poverty, too, of the settlements, the people trying to farm patches of poor soil burned out of the brush that covered the island's crumbling coral. And I remember the sharks in three feet of water so that it was dangerous to use a deserted beach and the insects that filled the board shack that had to do for a house in the Fresh Creek settlement. Before I went to Andros I had tried to learn something about it, but it seemed so desolate and so poverty ridden, even in the scattered settlements where its handfuls of people lived, that there would be little music there. Instead, there was still on Andros one of the richest musical cultures to be found anywhere in the Americas.

Someone coming to Nassau, the largest city of the Bahamas, on New Providence Island, would find it difficult to believe that there could be music on Andros. Nassau is a port city and its music is a hybrid of nearly every kind of music from the West Indian islands to the southwest. Andros, however, because of its isolation, and because of the strength of its Anglican and English Catholic religious background, is very different. The music on the island has come from the same sources as the music of the American South, from the hymns and the dances of early 19th Century England. There have been new importations and changes in the style, but on Andros there was still polyphonic improvisation on hymn tunes that had a clear relationship to the older European fuguing hymns. There were singers who still wrote sustained and emotional ballads, there were guitarists, there were brass bands, there was nearly



Joseph Spence.

every kind of music that must have been part of the American southern background seventy and eighty years ago. Six years later, remembering Andros again, it seems almost impossible that there was so much music. I remember the island's swamp ridden interior, and the herds of goats trying to stretch from their tethers near the houses to nibble at the dry leaves on the spiny bushes, and the men in patched and faded clothes loading the decks of their fishing sloops with empty bottles and coconuts to sell in Nassau. But the music was there, losing some of its impulse and vitality, but still part of the life of Andros, and there were still some of the musicians who were known the length of Andros for the creativity and the excitement of their music. I will forget many things about Andros, but it will be difficult to forget the music of three of the Andros men, the guitarist Joseph Spence, and the two singers John Roberts and Frederick McQueen.

SIDE ONE

JOSEPH SPENCE

Band 1. BIMINI GAL

Band 2. THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Band 3. GLORY GLORY

Joseph Spence, guitar and occasional singing. Recorded at Fresh Creek Settlement, Andros, July 23, 1958.

It is difficult to sum up Spence's playing in a few words. Probably the easiest thing to do is to call him an experience, and that will be as close as anything else will be to describing the exuberance and inventiveness of his guitar style. He is one of the most distinctive guitarists that folk music has ever produced. He begins with a simple Bahaman folk tune like BIMINI GAL or a gospel song like GLORY GLORY and improvises on it until it has

become a dizzying succession of rhythmic variations, melodic inventions, and implied harmonic suspensions, all over a noisy rhythm of notes on the bass strings of the guitar, the tapping of his foot, and a half sung, half growled version of the melody that he mutters between teeth clenched on his pipe. He is from a small settlement called Small Hope, in northern Andros, but he was living in Nassau and working as a stone mason when he recorded, and he was only on Andros for a visit. His musicianship was so complete, that he even performed slower hymns like THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD in an almost classical style, with only the moving rhythm to mark the opening phrases as Spence's. The recording was done under primitive conditions - on the little porch of the house in Fresh Creek - and there was a power failure during his playing of THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, but Spence went on playing without paying any attention to it. The music was so entirely an expression of his large personality that he had little concern for something as momentary as recording.

Spence was the first Andros musician to record, and I kept the tapes with the machine for the rest of the time I spent on the island. Nearly every young man on Andros plays the guitar, and at every settlement a group of them would begin to gather when I set up the machine. Since there were so many that wanted to record I would start off by playing a little of one of Spence's solos. Most of them would listen uncomfortably for a moment; then they would take their guitars and go home. If there was anyone left after the second Spence number I would ask him to play something, feeling that he must be able to play a little or he wouldn't have the courage to stay around.

Although there were a number of good guitarists on Andros none of them played as well as Spence, and there was only one other man that recorded who tried to play in Spence's complex finger picking style. He remembered that a little of the style had been played in a few settlements, but that Spence's playing was so distinctive that everyone had decided that he'd developed it himself. It is true that Spence's playing is so distinctive that no one has yet been able to imitate more than a few bars of one of his solos; although as more and more people become aware of his playing folk guitarists will begin seriously to study the music. If someone were to play one of Spence's solos for him he would probably laugh loudly and ask him where he'd learned it; then he would sit down and do the solo in an entirely different way, growling to himself with pleasure.

(Other selections by Spence can be found on Folkways Record FS 3844, Music of the Bahamas, Volume 1.)



Boat Building, Lisbon Creek.

SIDE TWO

JOHN ROBERTS

Band 1. OUT ON THE ROLLING SEA

Band 2. CECIL GONE IN THE TIME OF STORM

John Roberts, lead voice; H. Brown, bass; Charles Wallace, treble.
Recorded at Fresh Creek Settlement, Andros, August 10, 1958.

FREDERICK McQUEEN

Band 3. HARCOURT GOT DROWNED

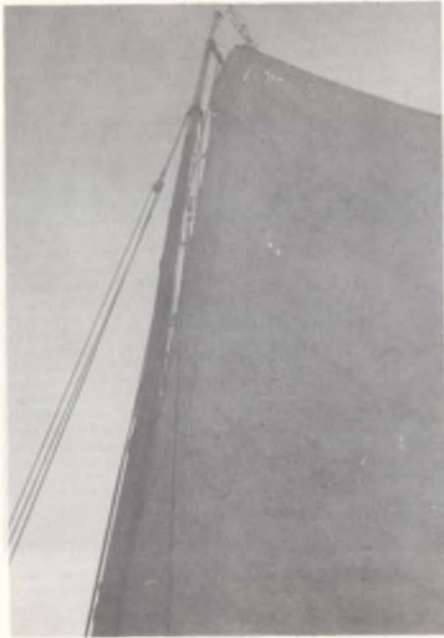
Band 4. DIG MY GRAVE

Band 5. KNEELING DOWN BESIDE THE GATE

Band 6. SHAKE MY HAND

Frederick McQueen, lead voice, Charles Bastian, bass; Norris Rolle, treble. Recorded at Lisbon Creek, Andros, August 19, 1958.

The "rhyming" style of the Andros religious singers is as distinctive as Spence's guitar style, and has many of the same qualities of polyphonic rhythmic development and a strong rhythmic sense. I first saw Roberts at a wake in a small house in the Fresh Creek settlement. It was late at night and the people were singing Anglican hymns, one of the women reading the words from an old hymn book that she held near the kerosene lantern. Someone asked Roberts to sing, and he hesitated; then he sat up, put his hand against his ear and began to sing a slow gospel song. One of the men began singing a bass harmony to his lead; then a third man joined them humming a high treble part. After they had sung two or three verses to get into the harmony and the text Roberts shut his eyes and began to develop a freely rhythmmed variation on the text within the harmonic frame work of the other two voices. Each verse was more complex than the last, and as the excitement rose the other two singers began to vary their part until it became almost a freely voiced polyphony with a fiercely intent rhythmic rush. Finally John reached the end of his variations and without looking at the others returned to the original melody. Their harmonies suddenly returned to the original outline and they finished on a sustained three voiced chord, as though they had done nothing more than sing the hymn in the choir book arrangement. I was standing on the porch outside the house and I listened leaning in the window. It was the first time I had heard Bahaman rhyming, and it was an overwhelming moment.



A Sail at sunset.

In 1958 there were probably no other singers on Andros who could improvise in the rhyming styles like Roberts and a man he had known since he was a boy, Frederick McQueen, who despite his moodiness was a legend to everyone who had heard him sing. McQueen recorded on two separate days at Lisbon Creek, and most of the songs from the first time he sang, late at night with the people in the village around him, were released on the second volume of the Music of the Bahamas set, FS 3845. That night he had sung the great ballad CECIL GONE IN THE TIME OF STORM, but he was the only singer who also knew the ballad HARCOURT GOT DROWNED IN THE LUGGERHEAD HOLE and the recording began in the house of Leroy Bannister, one of the men who worked a small sloop out of Lisbon Creek, with McQueen's HARCOURT. The singing of the night before had been restrained. McQueen was not drinking and his voice had a clear strength and tone. Just as we finished recording HARCOURT it began to rain heavily and the noise of the water on the corrugated iron roof made it impossible to record. There were about twenty of the people of the settlement jammed into the small room, and we waited in the suffocating heat for the rain to stop. When the rain finally blew over McQueen's mood had changed and he began singing with an almost frightening intensity. He began again with the beautiful DIG MY GRAVE, with the captain of the sloop that McQueen sailed on singing the bass. Charles Bastian, his captain, was soon almost as excited as McQueen, and for their KNEELING DOWN BESIDE THE GATE I held the microphone closer to him than to McQueen so that it would be possible to hear the "bassing" style more clearly. It had been difficult to find someone who was willing to sing treble with McQueen; since his own voice was very high and his singing was so powerful that the other men were embarrassed to sing with him, but the sound of the two voices was loud enough to be heard everywhere in the settlement, and within a few moments someone began singing a treble part from outside the window. It was an older man in the settlement, Norris Rolle, who was building a boat on the beach several hundred yards away. He had been unable

to stay away from the singing, and he had put down his tools and come to the house. They ended the afternoon with SHAKE MY HAND, Norris kneeling on the floor since every chair was taken, McQueen half singing, half chanting, his body twisting with the excitement of the music.

It is difficult to follow the words of a rhyming song; since the singers become so involved with their own development that they are often nearly incomprehensible. Roberts tried to transcribe some of the verses he had sung but he couldn't understand what he had said. Because of this there has been no effort made to transcribe the songs. His version of CECIL GONE IN THE TIME OF STORM is clearer and is an interesting variant on the version which McQueen did that is included in Music of The Bahamas Volume 2.

CECIL GONE IN THE TIME OF STORM

I remember the day, I remember right well.

Refrain:

Cecil gone in the time of storm.

We shall hear what Cecil said.

Refrain:

Cecil gone in the time of storm.

I remember the day, I remember right well.

(Refrain)

Evil Cecil, you know me well.

(Refrain)

Now on blessed Sunday, Cecil went away.
Now he going to his mother's house.
Say 'But mama, mama, I want to go to Mastic Point.'

(Refrain)

But Cecil's mama, replied to him,
Say 'But Cecil go to church,'
Say but Cecil say, 'Mama, I'm going to Mastic Point.'

(Refrain)

But Cecil packed up his suitcase in the house
Now start to go on the way.
When he reach on the way to the Point,

(Refrain)

Now he pitched in the boat, then he hoist up
the sail
Start to go to Mastic Point.
Nobody hear about Cecil on that (treating?)

(Refrain)

Now they made right at Cecil, very long time,
There from Blanket Sound Bay.
Now they started to go down to Mastic Point,

(Refrain)

When they get opposite now Julio Channel
They saw that boat turned ill.
Upset the boat, he turned its bottom upward,

(Refrain)

Then they went down yonder to Mastic Point
land,
They asked, see was Cecil reach here?
Then nobody couldn't give account for Cecil
at Mastic Point,

(Refrain)

Then they turned back down, then they come
up Blanket Sound
They landed new to Blanket Sound.
Say but Cecil he reached now to Mastic Point
land,

(Refrain)

Oh God, when the news hit Eudie, Eudie was
his mother,
Eudie was standing to the window.
When the news hit Eudie, now she start to break
the window,

(Refrain)

Oh Lord, now she said to the people, 'Oh my
son,
My son has gone now, we will see him no more.'
Nobody knows what become of Cecil gone,

(Refrain)

But she start to weep, she start to moan
She hurry now to the people now on Blanket
Sound
Oh, what a weepin', oh, what a moanin',

(Refrain)

Ah, but nobody hear and nobody see,
About Cecil gone that day.
Ah but 'Cecil', she weeps, ah but 'Cecil' she
moans,

(Refrain)

The ballad which McQueen sings, HARCOURT GOT
DROWNED seems to be fragmentary and he simply
improvised to fill in the gaps as he sang. Luger-
head is the Bahaman term for sea turtle, and they
are highly prized for their meat and oil.



Fresh Creek, low tide.

HARCOURT GOT DROWNED IN THE LUGGERHEAD HOLE

Harcourt decided, don't you know, to go to the
luggerhead,
Don't you know, the luggerhead hole,
One Saturday morning he did call (over his mama)
What called throughout the day,
Harcourt drowned, don't you know, in the
luggerhead hole.

Etc.

AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the winter of 1963 three Boston folk musicians
asked me to play unreleased material from the
Andros sessions for them. Two of them, Geoff
Muldaur and Fritz Richmond, were interested in
Joseph Spence. The other, Eric Von Schmidt,
was interested in McQueen. I hadn't listened to
any of the material since 1958 and it was hearing
it with them that led to my new interest in some
of the songs I had nearly forgotten and, finally,
to this record.

All recording done on Andros Island, the Bahamas,
by Samuel Charters, with the assistance of A. R.
Danberg.