

Read 'Em, John, arr. Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory: Notes

Read 'Em, John is from a body of historic repertoire known as *ring shouts*, which was in use on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia during the time of slavery. Traditionally, the form was characterized by call-and-response singing, polyrhythmic percussion (canes striking wooden floors and hand clapping), and a prescribed shuffling movement which was specifically NOT considered dancing. A lead singer generally begins the ring shout in a slow and somber style, accompanied by a single cane or broomstick. The ensemble responds by singing and setting up counter-rhythms which are clapped and stomped. As intensity builds and the tempo accelerates, a group of "shouters" begins to move in a counterclockwise circle. Widely practiced on the southern coast through the Civil War, the shout now exists only through the efforts of small groups of dedicated preservationists.

The ring shout was seasonal fare, reserved for use around Christmas and the New Year. Not generally practiced in the context of worship services, the shout happened most often *after* church as a type of extended social and praising event. Without doubt, the most significant shouting took place each year on New Year's Eve. After a Watch Night service ended at midnight, the community would either move the benches out of the way or retire to another space where they would shout until dawn. Note that "shout until dawn" does not refer to *spontaneous* religious ecstasy. Rather, it means that they would sing specific songs from the ring shout repertoire, accompanied by traditional rhythms, and move in the specified shout formation. Yes, fervent ecstasy would ensue, but this was not an unstructured, frenetic form.

Read 'Em, John has its own interesting textual history. For years, the assumption was that "John" referred to the biblical figure John, author of the book of Revelation. Recently, another theory has surfaced. "John" represents a select group of slaves who had somehow learned to read. The "letter" which "John" places on the table is actually the Emancipation Proclamation. The community commands John to "read 'em" simply because he is the one who can. The ability to read therefore becomes a vehicle for the delivery of freedom.

This arrangement was commissioned to honor Betty Bruce of Oklahoma City, the founder and driving force behind a literacy and enrichment program called S.P.A.R.K. (Support Program of Art and Reading for Kids). S.P.A.R.K. and Betty's work have supported the development and strengthening of reading skills for hundreds of children, as well as improvement in their capacity to learn in other areas of education. *Read 'Em, John* seemed the perfect way to recognize someone who has spent a lifetime teaching children to read, giving them the freedom to be all that they can be.

The piece was commissioned by Betty's husband, James W. Bruce, Jr., (President of Canterbury Choral Society) as a birthday gift. It was created for a May 2007 premiere by the Canterbury Academy of the Vocal Arts Chorale, conducted by its Artistic Director, Judith Willoughby.

A traditional performance of *Read 'Em, John* (by John Davis and group) can be found on Alan Lomax's *Southern Journey* series, vol. 13: *Earliest Times, Georgia Sea Islands Songs for Everyday Living*. The disc is available on the Rounder label.