

*Come Away to the Skies: A High, Lonesome Mass*  
Wes Ramsay and Tim Sharp

This collection of music is a winsome set of folk-hymn arrangements originating in the mid-nineteenth century collections of the *Sacred Harp* and *Southern Harmony*, and organized around a significant liturgy of the church. The hymnbooks from which this music is found were unique to the southern region of the United States.

The service known as a *High Mass* comes from the ordering of the Christian church liturgy into a standardized theological and dramatic liturgical flow. Many faith communities share this liturgy, in one form or another. Certainly, the Roman Catholic Church is known historically for the service of the mass, but Protestant groups such as Lutherans and Episcopalians also share the service. The adjective “high” before the word “mass” partially indicates a service that is chanted and sung, as differentiated from a service that is mainly spoken. The historic texts, usually known by their Latin name, form the various sections of the traditional mass: Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei.

The working title for this collection plays on the word “High Mass”, by inserting a term unique to the history of the bluegrass musical style, which is the word “lonesome.” This description, coined by Bill Monroe, the so-called “Father of Bluegrass Music”, is the idea of bluegrass music as a “high, lonesome sound.” Monroe is referring to his own vocal quality and range, as well as a modal melodic contour, a quality shared by bluegrass vocalists such as Ralph Stanley, Del McCoury, Ricky Skaggs, and also heard in female musicians such as Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, and Dolly Parton. The subtitle, *A High, Lonesome Mass* plays on this combination of both service and sound.

The folk-hymns used to carry forward the ideas of the individual sections of the mass—“Kyrie”- “Lord, Have Mercy”; “Gloria”- “Glory to God in the Highest”; “Sanctus”-“Holy, Holy, Holy”-“Benedictus”-“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”; “Agnus Dei”-“Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”—possess the same theological themes as these historic sections. These folk-hymns used in this service come primarily from the Scotch-Irish theological and musical traditions, found uniquely in the American South, and published in the hymn collections mentioned above. Such hymn collections flourished throughout the American South in the mid-nineteenth century, and are repositories of some of the greatest hymns of that era.

The ballad and song tradition that migrated with early Irish, Scotch-Irish, Welsh, and English settlers into the southern Appalachian areas of Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee, was as natural as the transposition of their verbal languages and customs. The thousands of songs that flooded into the valleys of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers came from the lips of generations of folk performers of Southern Appalachia, and found their way into the culture and ways of the American South.

At first, cultural isolation kept music contained in the hills or in wilderness settings. But over time, population patterns caused a convergence of the various pods of population and cultures. Religion took a powerful hold on the settlers of these areas and in 1801, great revivals became popular in rural parts of the South. These gatherings resulted in a body of wilderness spirituals and folk hymns such as “Jesus Walked that Lonesome Valley”, “I Found My Lord in the Wilderness”, “Do Lord, Oh Do Remember Me”, “Down to the River to Pray”, and many, many more.

In the mid-nineteenth century, differences found in the American North and South were not limited to politics. There were differences in matters related to music and music instruction, as well. These differences were particularly distinct in matters related to hymn and gospel song publication and practice.

In the North, the European traditional practice of round-note notation prevailed, as well as a hymn tradition based on slow harmonic rhythms, parallel thirds and sixths and the use of common major keys. This tradition, known as the Reformed or Progressive Movement, promoted musical instruction through public schools, choral societies, music normal institutes, and the publication of sacred, educational, and popular music.

The South was more conservative and maintained the folk traditions and customs taught by the old 18<sup>th</sup> century singing schools popular throughout the southern regions. This tradition was characterized by rapid harmonic movement, parallel fourths and fifths, and minor and modal keys. Hymn notation in the South was characterized by the Character Notation Group, or as it is commonly called today, shaped-notes. This method of music education and music reading was based on such pedagogical methods as letter and numerical notation, as well as four and seven shape-note tune books. Nashville, TN, maintained these traditions in both singing schools and hymnal publication. In the North, hymnbook publications were rectangular, but in the South, the distinctive hymn and gospel book publications were oblong in shape, and captured the nickname of “long-boys.”

The first shape-note folk hymn used a four-shape system of notation called “fasola.” This first appeared in *The Kentucky Harmony*, compiled in 1816 by Ananias Davisson. Tennessee was quick to follow Kentucky’s lead with the 1818 publication of Alexander Johnson’s *Johnson’s Tennessee Harmony*. Tennessee compilers published their own books throughout the first half-century, expanding to a system of seven shaped notes, or “doremi” notation, in the 1840s and 1850s.

Shape-note hymn collections published in or near Nashville included William Caldwell’s *Union Harmony* (Nashville, 1829); Allen D. Cardin’s *United States Harmony* (Nashville, 1829); John B. Jackson’s *The Knoxville Harmony* (Madisonville, 1838); *The Western Harmony* (Nashville, 1829); Andrew W. Johnson’s *American Harmony* (Nashville, 1839); *The Eclectic Harmony* (Shelbyville, 1847); and J.D. McCollum and John B. Campbell’s *The Cumberland Harmony* (Nashville, 1834).

Of all the long-boy hymnals published, by far the most enduring and still influential are William Walker's *The Southern Harmony* (New Haven, 1835), and B.F. White and E.J. King's *The Sacred Harp* (Philadelphia, 1844), which are still published today.

One shape-note singer gave the following account of his singing experience using the shape-note hymnals:

The books we used had seven different shapes, for notes, to represent the seven degrees of the scale, and no teacher I ever knew in those days would have recognized his favorite and best known song if he had seen it in 'round notes.' I had been to several singing-schools, and, in fact, had about finished my musical education, before I ever heard of such a thing as 'round notes.' And the question was discussed throughout the country as to whether any man could possibly learn a new piece of music written in 'round notes.'

Early Tennessee preacher F.D. Srygley recalls:

We had no Sunday-schools, but singing-schools flourished in every neighborhood. Ten days was the usual length of such schools, and it was customary to teach them only two days in each week. This stretched a school of ten days over five weeks, which just about covered the time between fodder-pulling and cotton-picking.

Srygley continues by describing a typical singing-school day:

We met at eight o'clock in the morning, brought our dinners with us, and sang till five o'clock in the evening—nine hours a day, hard singing, every day in the week for five weeks on a stretch, right through the hottest part of the summer! That's the way I learned to sing!

Singing-school classes sat on long benches in a hollow square, and the teacher stood in the middle of the square. The leader would move about in this middle area, working his way through the various treble, tenor, counter, and bass sections. The treble corresponded to the modern tenor, the tenor corresponded to the soprano, the counter to the alto, and the bass to the bass. Women sang treble. As the leader beat time vigorously and with long sweeps of the arms and hands, every singer was required to closely imitate his every movement. His chief accomplishment was the ability to sing any part in the music, and whenever bass, tenor, counter, or treble lagged behind or broke down in the performance, the leader would run to the support of the wavering line and bring up the stragglers.

Folk-hymns used for this collection as statements for the traditional mass texts are *Come Away to the Skies* (MIDDLEBURY), *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship* (HOLY MANNA), *Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning* (STAR IN THE EAST), *What Wondrous Love is This* (WONDROUS LOVE), and *Do Lord, Oh Do Remember Me*.

Additional tunes and stylings are inspired by this tradition, and settings are based upon bluegrass stacked harmony, bluegrass rhythms, and other unique stylistic qualities, including “high, lonesome” modal vocals. Instrumentation requires the class bluegrass combination of acoustic guitar, mandolin, fiddle, banjo, and double bass.

Texts and tunes forming the basis of Southern Appalachian folk-hymns and the bluegrass music that came from the Appalachian areas of western Virginia, and eastern and middle Kentucky and Tennessee, share common features. These include the elegant simplicity of the poetry and theology of the hymns; the modal, folk-song quality of the tunes; and even the interval of the rising fourth at the beginning of many of the tunes, theorized to be not so much a compositional idea, but rather, as a “gathering tone” for the group to find their starting pitch. And, there is the underlying theme and tone of hope, and optimism for a better place and a happier day.

*As Come Away to the Skies: A High, Lonesome Mass* invites you into the singing of these timeless hymns, place yourself musically into a time when a singing experience paid little attention to the length of time of a service, but rather, invited you to enjoy community and extended gathering time through the learning of songs in singing schools, through shaped notes, and occasionally through days and even weeks of religious services. There is nothing nostalgic, however, about the poignancy and integrity of text and tune on which this collection is based.