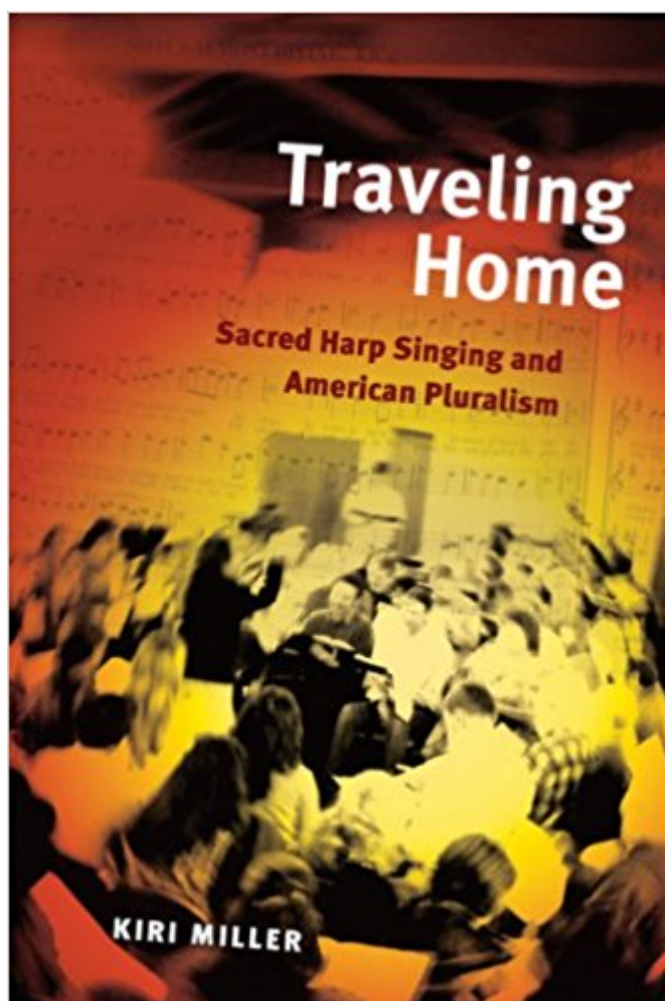


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# Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing And American Pluralism (Music In American Life)



## Synopsis

Ã A compelling account of contemporary Sacred Harp singing, *Traveling Home* describes how this vibrant musical tradition brings together Americans of widely divergent religious and political beliefs. Named after the most popular of the nineteenth-century shape-note tunebooks--which employed an innovative notation system to teach singers to read music--Sacred Harp singing has been part of rural Southern life for more than 150 years.Ã In the wake of the folk revival of the 1950s and '60s, this participatory musical tradition attracted new singers from all over America. All-day "singings" from The Sacred Harp now take place across the country, creating a diverse and far-flung musical community. Meanwhile, the advent of internet discussion boards and increasing circulation of singer-produced recordings have changed the nature of traditional transmission and sharpened debates about Sacred Harp as an "authentic" form of southern musical expression. Blending historical scholarship with wide-ranging fieldwork, Kiri Miller presents an engagingly written study of a musical movement that some have christened "a quintessential expression of American democracy."Ã

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[One of the] most penetrating and subtle ethnographic accounts of Sacred Harp singing. I wholeheartedly recommend the book to all interested in traditional music, issues of tradition and revival, diaspora and nostalgia, and religious life in the United States."--Journal of Folklore

Research "Miller explains every aspect of the musical practice as both an observer and participant. The book is essential reading for anyone who has ever been stirred by singing the shapes."--Sing Out!"Evocative, nuanced, never reductionistic, Miller's explorations of this vibrant tradition of American hymnody merits attention in Sacred Harp circles and beyond."--Christian Century

How the participatory tradition of Sacred Harp singing fosters a diverse musical community --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Surely, some of you remember singing out of those shaped-note hymnals at Church some time ago. I grew up on the shape notes found in the Jimmie Davis hymnal, signing with fire and points, but that was the way we did it. It was a rural church, and indeed, in West Virginia, we had them too. Shape Notes. Told us what to point. What to highlight. How to sing. Sacred Harp singing, however, is more about just an easy way to sing, but involves a rich texturizing of America that is rarely seen, and written about, in such a positive light. It is the story of American culture, rooted in the South and carried forth through a disjointed diaspora of Yankees, agnostics, believers, and those on the political Left and Right. The author sheds new light and brings an appreciation to the Tradition of Sacred Harp singing which only an insider could. Written by Kiri Miller, the Manning Assistant Professor of Music at Brown University, it tells the story of the author's own interaction with the Sacred Harp singing community. You cannot help but note her own inner connection to the community as well as her utmost respect while questioning many of the different aspects of it. She writes, "What are a Southern conservative Christian and a Liberal queer agnostic intellectual doing singing hymns together, one weekend in a university hall in Chicago and the next in a one-room church in rural Alabama?" (38) Previously, she noted her emotional reaction to the songs at one particular convention, although she was 'not a Christian.' (24) She goes on to describe in warm detail some of the diverse communities springing up in this tradition, all the while calling attention to what exactly establishing tradition entails. It is not written from a far off, scholarly, doctoral dissertation view, but one who is every much a part of the community, citing her 'conversion' (my word) when she was in college. She treats Southerners, Christians, and Conservatives with respect, care and precision so as to not inflict a political conversation into the mix, but to note that a history rich with Southern roots, originating with Christian hymns, is not the racial hegemonic one would expect nor bound to political rhetoric to the extent that these things so out shine the glorious light of the singing conventions. She notes fully the stereotypes of the South and shows-up 'Northerners' in their attempt to classify this as anything but a rich tradition nurtured in the South. The South comes

off as a culturally wealthy segment of the country and Miller is not hesitant about showcasing the treasures found there. Her second chapter (the first being an introduction to the tradition and in some ways, to the author), is the author's imagining of a cultural diaspora of Sacred Harp singing, hence the title of the book. She beautifully, and for this 'exiled Southerner', calls to mind the Southern accents, the floorboards of old country church houses, and the family connections exhibited by Southerners. While it may be just my romanticism erupting, Miller's writing is almost lyrical and with some of her points, my mind hearkens back to the South and her deep traditions and rich culture. In the third and fourth chapters she begins to highlight the rich tradition found inside the communities, and in this, we can see the passing along of faith, text, tradition, and styles, mirroring that of other traditions, more especially religion. It would be interesting, in the social sciences, to note with great enthusiasm, how these traditions become so, are defended, revised, and upheld across the diaspora which Miller notes included a stream of new converts who generally refuse to classify themselves as traditional. Following these chapters, the fifth explores the effect that the outside world has had on Sacred Harp singing. She goes on to note that the raw material would have included local culture, which during the turn of the last century, would have included not just music (such as Sacred Harp) but language, customs, and the like which more than not, Northerners used for their own ends while savaging it. Think *Dukes of Hazzard* and other shows set in Appalachia, or shows with characters from Appalachia. It is no doubt that for a period of time, the entire South was treated with a colonizing disdain, but even today, Appalachia still remains a colony, a hallmark of capitalism. It is in the sixth chapter, however, that the community is taken to the human level, in which we see it dealing with political correctness and controversies over particular songs, the influx of new members and new geographically influenced cultures, as well as how to proceed if Sacred Harp loses its Southern roots. Yet, this transience as it is labeled, where in the midst of exile Tradition is preserved over and over again, Sacred Harp singing is taking root across the culture spectrum of America keeping itself embedded in our culture, where I hope it remains for a long time. Reading Miller's book has provided me with a better appreciation for Sacred Harp singing, having come to see it as a living tale of 'Americanness', culture diaspora, and a real overture to the past which we so often reject in our modernity. It tells the story of little stone churches, white picket fences, graveyards in Sacred Harp strongholds, and the power which I know that music has. The music, the lyrics, the words, and the traditions of Sacred Harp, which includes prayers that are even enjoined and said by non-believers softens the heart of the singers and gives them, many of who aren't Christians themselves, a fuller appreciation of the Christian life as sung through the tears of the Sacred Harp. Miller's hollow square provides a panoramic view of Sacred Harp, and one which is

not told by an outsider, but by one who is part of the family. Her experiences in this family gives this book the added weight of grace which is gained by experiencing the deaths memorialized during a lesson, the coaching by traditional singers, and one who politely reminds us that while these ancient pious hymns are sung, they are sung by such a cross-section of Americana (p164), that it would be more harmful than not to simply classify them as anything by Sacred Harp singers.

Excellent resource. Great foot notes and bibliography. I was on a religious blog recently commenting upon traditional vs contemporary worship traditions. A country church in Virginia had dissolved over the music issue and reformed as traditional. I asked the blog owner if the congregation observed the Sacred Harp. The blogger was unfamiliar, did some diligence, and termed it "fascinating!" Subsequent participants also indicated their interest in becoming familiar with the Sacred Harp. In my town I showed a copy of a reproduction of an old Stamps Baxter shape note hymnal. The owner, also a singer, was completely unfamiliar and immediately did a search on available resources. I then opened my copy of Sacred Harp, and she was speechless! It was a "learning" moment.

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