



Winter 2010

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Recommended Citation

Clifford, Jack (2010) "Songs of Hope," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*:
Vol. 19 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol19/iss4/10>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Songs of Hope

A book by Jerrilyn McGregory '71 shines new light on the spiritual life of a little-known region.

In her new book, *Downhome Gospel: African American Spiritual Activism in Wiregrass Country* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), Jerrilyn McGregory '71 returns to a Southern region and a Southern culture that she explored in her first book, *Wiregrass Country* (1997).



In her new book, McGregory studies gospel's influence on social awareness in the Wiregrass Country of Georgia, Alabama and north Florida.

Wiregrass country — which encompasses parts of southern Georgia, southeastern Alabama and the Florida Panhandle — is a little-known region, with a history that “challenges longstanding assumptions about African-American life, history, and culture,” McGregory writes in the introduction to her new book. “Its inhabitants owe much of their love of sacred music to a dynamic historical past.”

McGregory, an English major at Illinois Wesleyan, received her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. She is now an associate professor of English at Florida State University and a specialist in African-American folklore and folklife. Her first experiences with Wiregrass Country took place about 15 years ago. She writes in *Downhome Gospel* that she entered the area “*tabula rasa* ... I was a neophyte in the South, a neophyte in Wiregrass Country, and a neophyte studying rural culture.”

McGregory made site visits and had chance meetings with the people of these often-overlooked communities.

Wiregrass Country was the commencement of a spiritual journey for her, she writes, appreciating that the area’s

“folklife endures, and African Americans there expend much

time, energy, and economic resources singing sacred music for the benefit of all who hearken to hear their sound.” Because many of these traditions still go unnoticed and unappreciated, however, McGregory intends with *Downhome Gospel* to “close the gap by shining a spotlight on the downhome gospel in Wiregrass Country.”

“Sacred music plays a magnanimous, stimulating, and scintillating role within people’s everyday lives,” writes McGregory. “In Wiregrass Country, the people often say, ‘You don’t have to sing like an angel.’ For them, praising the glory of God in song does not require trained voices, but only the desire to display one’s God-given talent, without reproach. African-American Wiregrass sacred performance communities speak in song not just to God but to one another.”

Despite a self-proclaimed unawareness of the region when she first began to visit the communities and started to connect with the residents, Gregory has received strong praise for the research she has done and the stories she shares in *Downhome Gospel*.

“McGregory ... escorts her readers through their roads, homes, churches, and burial grounds, introducing us to the distinctive expressive culture that can be found throughout this region,” writes Patricia A. Turner, author of *Crafted Lives: Stories and Studies of African American Quilters*. “*Downhome Gospel* is one of the richest and most significant ethnographic studies of an African-American community published in recent years.”

In addition to cultural observations, Gregory writes about environmental setbacks that the area has suffered. Once rich in biodiversity, the area “stood for multiculturalism,” Gregory writes. There are estimates that of an original 93 million acres of wiregrass, only 1 million acres remain. “Most people who live in the region have never seen it grow. Wiregrass is practically extinct along with certain species of wildlife, which could not survive within the monoculture deforestation produced.

“Yet, many of the region’s human social rituals remain vibrant.”

In addition to addressing that aspect of loss, Gregory writes in her epilogue that because of the length of time she devoted to her research, some of the people she interviewed passed away before *Downhome Gospel* was published. During this time, she writes, “my own son, Bill, succumbed. I could not have withstood his passing without years of tutelage by these spiritual activists.

“Over the years, I had not realized how much I had internalized their lyrics and absorbed their prayers.”

Gregory’s current research engages Boxing Day in the African diaspora. Globally celebrated on Dec. 26, it is a longstanding bank holiday for members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. “Arguably, Boxing Day is one of the world’s most celebrated yet under-valored transnational holidays,” Gregory says.

For the project, she has conducted fieldwork on Boxing Day in Jamaica, Bermuda, St. Croix, St. Kitts and the Bahamas.

This story is adapted from one written by Jack Clifford that originally appeared on the Florida State University English Department website and was used by permission.



Above are the famed Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers of Ozark, Ala. Says Gregory, “These African Americans are the last to sing according to the shape of four notes and Sacred Harp is one of the oldest forms of sacred music, dating back to the Shakespearean period.”