The World's First "Kumbaya" Moment: New Evidence about an Old Song

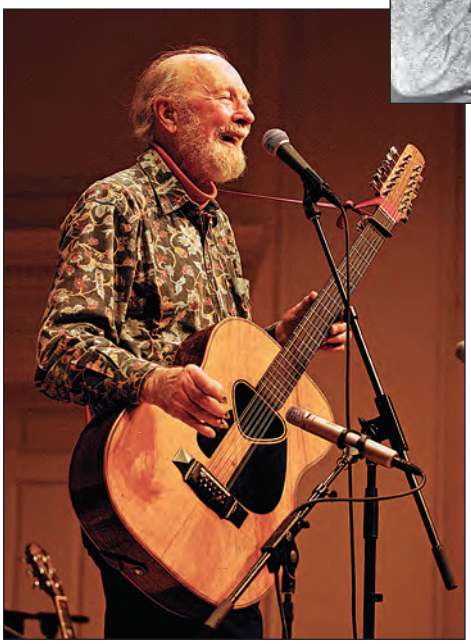
By Stephen Winick

"Kumbaya," once one of the most popular songs in the folk revival, has more recently fallen on hard times. In its heyday, from the 1950s through the 1990s, the song was recorded by dozens of artists, including Joan Baez, the Weavers, Odetta, Pete Seeger, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Nanci Griffith, and Raffi in the United States; Joan Orleans in Germany; Manda Djinn in France; the Seekers in Australia; and many others around the world. However, overlapping with that heyday, from the 1980s through the 2000s, the song experienced a backlash. Musically, it came to be thought of as a children's campfire song, too simple or too silly for adults to bother with. Politically, it became shorthand for weak consensus-seeking that fails to accomplish crucial goals. Socially, it came to stand for the touchy-feely, the wishy-washy, the nerdy, and the meek. These recent attitudes toward the song are unfortunate, since the original is a beautiful example of traditional music, dialect, and creativity. However, the song's recent fall from grace has at least added some colorful metaphors to American political discourse, such phrases as "to join hands and sing 'Kumbaya,'" which means to ignore our differences and get along (albeit superficially), and "Kumbaya moment," an event at which such naïve bonding occurs [1].

Regardless of the song's fluctuating connotations, one question has long fascinated scholars: what was the first "Kumbaya moment?" In other words, where and when did the song originate? To answer this question, there's no better resource than the American Folklife Center Archive at the Library of Congress. The song's early history is very well documented in the Archive, which includes the first known sound recordings of the song, and probably the earliest manuscript copy as well. In addition, the Archive's subject file on the song (which gives it the title "Kum Ba Yah") contains rare documents pertaining to the song's history. Several researchers, most notably and recently Chee Hoo Lum, have used the Archive's resources to tell the story of the song [2]. However, the recent rediscovery of two versions at AFC—a manuscript taken down in 1926 and a cylinder recording made in the same year—makes a more complete account possible, and helps dispel some common fallacies about the song.

The Seekers, of Melbourne, Australia, was one of the groups that first popularized "Kumbaya" outside the United States. Their version first appeared on their 1963 debut album, then on various compilations including this one from 1967.

The Weavers (l-r: Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, Fred Hellerman, Ronnie Gilbert) rehearse for a concert in Philadelphia, 1951. LC P & P Division: reproduction number LC-USZ62-



Credit: Robert Corwin/AFC Robert Corwin Collection.

Pete Seeger on March 16, 2007, in the Library's Coolidge Auditorium.

One of these common misconceptions was espoused and spread by the song's first appearances in the folk revival. The first revival recording of the song, which called it "Kum Ba Yah," was released in 1958 by Ohio-based group the Folksmiths. In the liner notes, they claimed that the song came from Africa, and presented as evidence a previous claim that the song had been collected from missionaries in Angola. On the other hand, some scholars have located the origin of "Kumbaya" in the work of an Anglo-American composer and evangelist named Marvin Frey. In 1939, Frey

Credit: Courtesy Mr. and Mrs. Bert Nye

Robert Winslow Gordon in a portrait taken in 1928, when he joined the staff of the Library of Congress as the first Head of the Archive of American Folk Song.

published and copyrighted sheet music for one version of the song, which he called "Come by Here." Once "Kumbaya" was established as a standard of the folk revival, he pointed to his 1939 publication and claimed to have written the song; many commentators—including such publications as the New York Times—have chosen to believe his claim [3]. This means that during the early years of the folk revival, there were two widely believed theories of the song's origin (one ascribing it to black Africans and the other to a white American), and that both of these theories have persisted among some commentators to this day. As we shall see, in light of AFC's two early documents, neither of these theories is likely.

The most common claim made today about the origins of "Kumbaya" is that it is from the Gullah-Geechee people of coastal Georgia and South Carolina. (The more outlandish versions of this theory, such as the one espoused on Wikipedia on April 2, 2010, claim that "Yah" is a remnant of Aramaic, and refers to God, despite the fact that "yah" means "here" in Gullah.) While a Gullah origin is certainly closer to the truth than either of the previous theories, AFC's archival versions also call the Gullah claim into question.

The Boyd Manuscript

The earliest record of "Kumbaya" in the AFC archive (which may be the earliest anywhere) is in a manuscript sent to Robert Winslow Gordon, the Archive's founder, in 1927. The collector was Julian Parks Boyd, at that time a high school principal in Alliance, North Carolina. This version, which Boyd collected from his student Minnie Lee in 1926, was given the title "Oh, Lord, Won't You Come By Here," which is also the song's refrain. Each verse is one line repeated three times, followed by this refrain. The repeated lines are: "Somebody's sick, Lord, come by here," "Somebody's dying, Lord, come by here," and "Somebody's in trouble, Lord, come by here." Although Boyd collected only the words, this structure is enough to mark Lee's performance as an early version of the well-known "Kumbaya."

Lee's version of "Kumbaya" leads us to one of the many interesting stories hidden in the AFC archive: that of folklore collector Julian Parks Boyd. Boyd, who earned a master's degree from Duke University in 1926, spent only one school year (1926-1927) at his job as a schoolteacher in Alliance. During that time, he showed a remarkable interest in folksong. From letters he sent to Gordon (now also in the AFC archive), we know that Boyd used a time-honored method among academic folklorists: he had his students collect traditional songs from their friends and families in the rural community around the school. Although he was apparently quite selective, keeping only those songs he deemed true folksongs and discarding the rest, he amassed a collection of over a hundred songs, from which he created a typed manuscript. Boyd knew of Gordon through his columns in *Adventure* Magazine, and sent the manuscript to him for his advice and comments in February, 1927.

Credit: Courtesy Barre Toelken.

Robert W. Gordon during an archaeological expedition in Marin County, California, ca. 1923.

By March, Boyd's program of collecting folksongs had encountered a serious obstacle, and that, among other things, convinced him to leave Alliance for graduate school. "The school board and the community in general seem to think that [collecting folksongs] is an obnoxious practice, for some uncertain reason. The seniors were righteously indignant—it was the one thing that had thoroughly aroused their interest," he wrote to Gordon on March 30. "This particular [school board] fits Woodrow Wilson's definition of a board: 'long, wooden, and narrow,'" he continued. "And that explains why I am going to pursue my doctorate at Pennsylvania next year."

Boyd's departure for the University of Pennsylvania probably marked the end of his work as a folksong collector, but it was the beginning of a distinguished career as a historian and librarian. He eventually served as Head Librarian and Professor of History at Princeton University, as the founding treasurer of the Society

of American Archivists, and as president of the American Historical Association (1964) and the American Philosophical Society (1973-1976). As an historian, he is best known as the editor of a definitive edition of the papers of Thomas Jefferson.

Before he left to take up the mantle of history, however, Boyd spent one more, brief period as a folklorist. In his March 30 letter to Gordon, Boyd alludes to plans for a summer field trip to collect folksongs in the Outer Banks. The trip was sponsored by Professor Frank C. Brown of Duke University, then president of the North Carolina Folklore Society. Although the correspondence from Boyd to Gordon terminates before the trip was to have started, we have no reason to think the trip was cancelled. Furthermore, the Society's collection, later published as the seven-volume *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore,* contains many items collected by Boyd, including the same version of "Kumbaya" that Boyd sent to Gordon. It has been overlooked by previous scholars of the history of the song, undoubtedly because its title, "Oh, Lord, Won't You Come By Here," bears little resemblance to the more familiar title, "Kumbaya."

Boyd sent his manuscript collection to Gordon in Georgia, before Gordon moved to Washington, D.C. and founded the Archive of American Folk-Song. Gordon brought the manuscript with him to Washington, where it was among the original materials deposited in the Archive in 1928. Thus, from the very inception of the Archive, it contained at least one version of this classic song.

Cylinder Recordings and Other Evidence

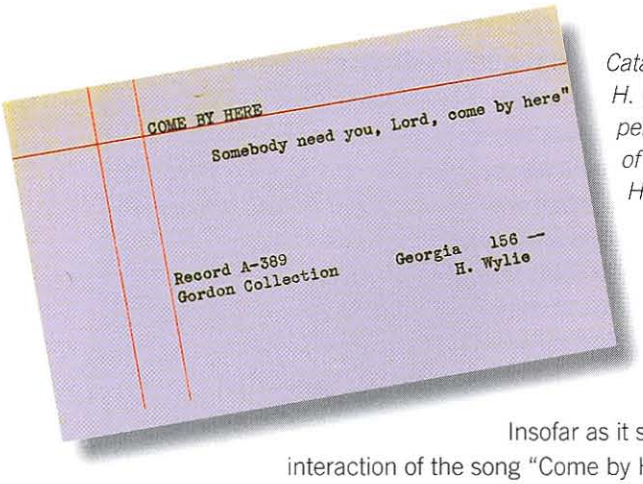
The Boyd papers make it clear that "Kumbaya" was represented in the Archive's very first collections. More surprisingly, a sound recording of the song was also among the archive's initial holdings, a fact that until now has been difficult to establish with certainty. Among the original materials in the AFC Archive were four cylinder recordings of spirituals with the refrain "come by here" or "come by yuh," collected by Gordon himself during his trips to Georgia from 1926 to 1928. Gordon was convinced all four songs were related, and cross-referenced them when he made a card catalog for his manuscripts and cylinders. Subsequently, one of the four cylinders was broken, and one was lost, so two remain in the Archive. However, without hearing the cylinders it would be impossible to state with certainty whether either were a version of "Kumbaya."

One of these cylinders, which clearly is not a version of "Kumbaya," was transcribed by AFC staff member Todd Harvey and published in Chee Hoo Lum's 2007 article. Entitled "Daniel in the Lion's Den," the song has six verses, each of which is just one line repeated six times:

(1) Daniel in the lion's den
(2) Daniel [went to?] God in prayer
(3) The Angel locked the lion's jaw
(4) Daniel [took a deep night's rest?]
(5) Lord, I am worthy now
(6) Lordy won't you come by here

Credit: AFC Robert W. Gordon Collection

Robert W. Gordon in the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song (now the AFC Archive), ca. 1930.



Catalog Card for H. Wylie's 1926 performance of "Come by Here."

Insofar as it suggests the interaction of the song "Come by Here" or "Kumbaya" with a narrative spiritual based on the biblical story of Daniel, this song is interesting to researchers of "Kumbaya." However, because it would not itself be considered a version of "Kumbaya" by most folklorists or musicologists, it cannot establish a definitive date in the history of "Kumbaya."

Lum included "Daniel in the Lion's Den" in his article because it was the earliest surviving recording that Gordon had cross-referenced with the phrase "Come by Here." Strangely, however, Lum did not analyze or publish the second surviving cylinder, instead including a transcription of the version recorded by John Lomax in 1936. This is a pity, for although a section in the middle of Gordon's second cylinder is inaudible, several verses at the beginning and the end are audible and are enough to identify it conclusively as "Kumbaya." As far as we know, it is the earliest sound recording of the song, and it is therefore among the most significant evidence on the song's early history.

As with many of Gordon's cylinders, there is not much contextual information accompanying the recording. The song is identified as "Come By Here." The singer is identified only as H. Wylie. The place is not identified at all, but during this period Gordon was living in Darien, Georgia, and rarely collected more than a few hours' drive from there. The cylinder is numbered A389. It is undated, but all the dated items in Gordon's numbering system from A290 to A434 are from April, 1926; the last precisely dated cylinder before "Come By Here" is dated April 15, and the first after it is dated May 3, so it is likely that the song was recorded within that two-week period. Sadly, it has remained unpublished until now.

The lyrics and music are as follows; the transcription of the words is mine, and represents my best attempt to understand what Wylie is singing. The music was transcribed by Jennifer Cutting, and similarly represents her best effort to accurately represent Wylie's tune:

...need you Lord, come by here,
Somebody need you, Lord, come by here,
Somebody need you, Lord, come by here,
Oh, Lord, come by here.

Now I need you, Lord, come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

Come by here, Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

In the morning see Lord, come by here
In the morning do Lord, come by here
In the morning see Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

[inaudible section]

Oh, Lord, come by here.

I'm gon' need you, Lord, come by here
I'm gon' need you, Lord, come by here
I'm gon' need you, Lord, come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

Oh, sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Sinners need you, Lord, come by here
Oh, my Lord, won't you come by here

In the mornin' mornin', won't you come by here
Mornin' mornin', won't you come by here
In the mornin' mornin', won't you come by here
Oh, Lord, come by here.

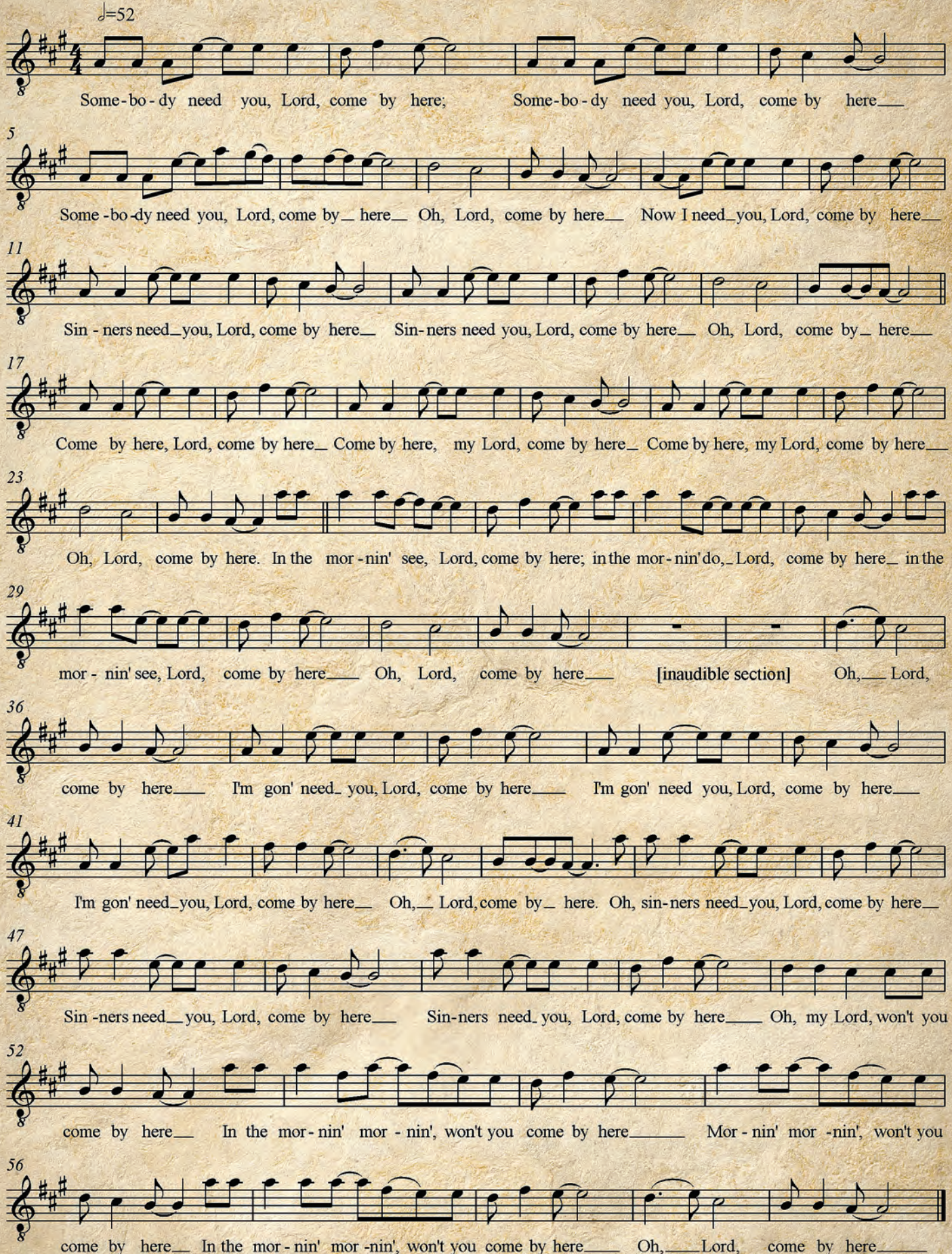
Various publications from the same era suggest the song's range and its influence. In 1926, for example, a song entitled "Oh, Lordy Won't You Come By Here" was published by the songwriter Madelyn Sheppard, who was later half of a songwriting duo with Annelu Burns. (Sheppard and Burns were notable for being two white women from Selma, Alabama who composed blues songs and spirituals in African American dialect and sold them to African American publishers, including W.C. Handy.) Sheppard's song is not the same song as "Kumbaya," but its publication in the era during which the earliest versions of "Kumbaya" were emerging suggests that she was familiar with the traditional song.

In 1931, the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals published a song that they called "Come by Yuh," in a book entitled *The Carolina Low Country*. The exact date of the song's collection is not mentioned in the book, but all of the book's songs were collected between 1922 and 1931. (As a consequence, it

AFC 1928/002
Cylinder A389, Georgia 156

Come By Here

Transcribed by Jennifer Cutting
From the Singing of H. Wylie, 1926



is impossible to know whether this version predates any or all of Gordon's materials, and it therefore may be impossible to identify with certainty the first verifiable reference to the song.) This song has the refrain "Come By Yuh, Lord, come by yuh," and a repeated verse "somebody need you lord, come by yuh." Gordon called one of his now-unplayable cylinders "Come by here, Lord, come by here," and the other "Somebody need you Lord, come by here," suggesting that these were the same song. It is also very similar to the song we know as "Kumbaya." By 1931, then, the song had likely been recorded or transcribed from at least five singers, and other songs bearing the stamp of its influence had been recorded and published as well.

In 1936, John Lomax, Gordon's successor as head of the Archive, recorded another version of "Come by Here" for the archive. The singer was Ethel Best of Raiford, Florida. Each verse was a single line repeated 3 times, followed by "oh, Lord, come by here."

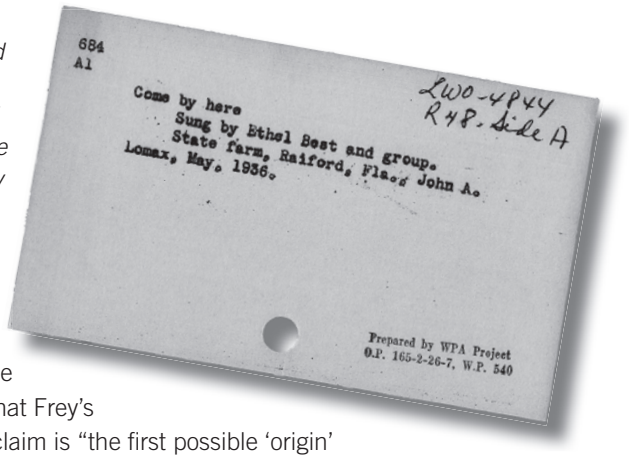
(1) Come by here, my lord, come by here
(2) Well we [down in?] trouble, Lord, come by here
(3) Well, it's somebody needs you lord, come by here
(4) Come by here, my lord, come by here
(5) Well it's somebody sick Lord come by here
(6) Well, we need you Jesus Lord to come by here
(7) Come by here, my lord, come by here
(8) Somebody moanin', Lord, come by here

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the archive recorded the song several more times in Mississippi, Alabama, and Texas.

How the New Evidence Affects Theories of the Song's Origin

Clearly, by the advent of the 1940s, "Come by Here" was a widely known spiritual among African Americans in the South. Yet, as noted above, the song has often been identified as a 1936 composition of New York City songwriter and evangelist Marvin V. Frey (1918-1992). As we have seen, this confusion stems from claims made by Frey himself; in 1939, Frey published a version entitled "Come By Here," on which he claimed copyright. Frey claimed to have written the words in 1936, based on a prayer he had heard from an evangelist in Oregon. Frey might have been basing his story on the truth; the evangelist he mentions could have been adapting the song, which, as we have seen, was already widely known by then. To what extent, then, was his "Come By Here" an original composition?

Chee-Hoo Lum attempted to answer this question in his article. Unfortunately, by skipping over the 1926 Georgia performance by H. Wylie (recorded by Gordon) to present the 1936 Florida performance by Ethel Best (recorded by Lomax), Lum missed the opportunity to compare Frey's song with Wylie's, or with popular versions of "Kumbaya." He seems to find the 1931 publication in *The Carolina Low Country* to be insufficiently close to Frey's later version to constitute clear evidence that Frey's composition was based on the traditional song.


684
A1
Come by here
Sung by Ethel Best and group.
State farm, Raiford, Fla. John A. Lomax, May. 1936.
LWO-4944
R48, Side A
Prepared by WPA Project
O.P. 165-2-26-7, W.P. 540

Catalog card for Ethel Best's 1936 performance of "Come by Here."

Therefore, he concludes that Frey's authorship claim is "the first possible 'origin' theory" for the song. Wylie's version, however, preserved by AFC on a cylinder recording, is closer to Frey's, in both lyrics and music, and predates it by almost ten years. Given the existence of Wylie's version, then, Frey's claim to have composed the song based on a spoken prayer, rather than a song, becomes very unlikely.

Moreover, the plausibility of Frey's claim to have written the song also depended on another factor: Frey was obligated to explain how a song written by a white man and called "Come By Here," had become "Kum Ba Yah" or "Kumbaya" in the oral tradition. After all, a song written in Standard English, and originally disseminated in print as "Come By Here," would be more likely to enter oral tradition in Standard English, and to be collected with a pronunciation closer to that dialect. One of Frey's stories about the song had the effect of explaining this anomaly; he told it to Peter Blood-Patterson, who sent it the AFC archive in 1993. It is filed in the "Kum Ba Yah" subject file:

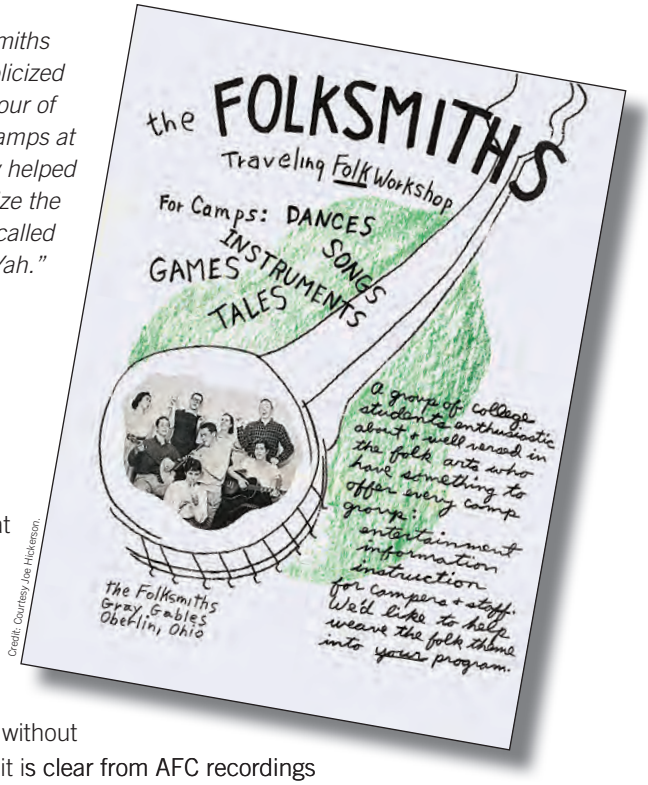
> While [I was] leading children's meetings at a camp meeting in Centralia, Washington, a young boy named Robert Cunningham was converted. He sang this song at the top of his high, boyish voice all over the camp ground, for he was happy and irrepressible. His family were preparing to go as missionaries to the Belgian Congo (Zaire). Their particular burden was for Angola (to the south and west), which at the time was closed to Protestant missionaries.
>
> Ten years later, while in Detroit, Michigan (1948)…the [Cunningham] family sang "Come by Here" with my second tune, the one I had taught in Centralia (1938), and thereafter the theme of my revival crusades. The song by now had become a standard in Pentecostal, Holiness, Evangelical, and Independent churches and Sunday schools. They first sang the song in English, then in an African dialect, with the words, KUM BA YAH, with some African drums and bongos, a slow beat—a very effective presentation.
>
> Later I found out that the language was Luvale, which pervades throughout northeast Angola and southeast Zaire.

According to Frey, then, the pronunciation "Kum Ba Yah" originated when Luvale-speaking people in Angola and Zaire translated "Come by Here" into their language. That strains

credibility on several levels, primarily that "Come by Here" translated into Luvale would not be "Kum Ba Yah"; indeed, for "Come by Here" to translate to "Kum Ba Yah," the target language would have to be a creole with English as one of its main components, and no such language was common in Angola (then still a Portuguese colony) or Zaire (a French-speaking country formerly colonized by Belgium) in the 1930s. Moreover, the AFC's cylinder recording of H. Wylie shows that we have no need of such a story. In Wylie's dialect, which is most likely a form of Gullah, the word "here" is pronounced as "yah," rendering the song's most repeated line "come by yah," a phrase that can be phonetically rendered as either "Kum Ba Yah" or "Kumbaya."

If Frey's claim to have composed the song becomes more farfetched in light of this cylinder recording, so does the notion that the song originated in Africa. The idea of an African origin was based on the understanding of Lynn and Katherine Rohrbough, who published song books through the Cooperative Recreation Service of Delaware, Ohio. As the Folksmiths' liner notes explain, the Rohrboughs heard the song from an Ohio professor, who claimed to have heard it from a missionary in Africa. No account that I have seen establishes a date for this occurrence, so the idea that the song was African in origin (rather than an American song that had traveled to Africa) seems to have been based on the fact that the words "Kum Ba Yah" sounded vaguely African, and the fact that the Rohrboughs were unaware of American versions that predated their own publications of the song. Indeed, according to Frey's interview with Blood-Patterson, once the Rohrboughs learned of Frey's previous claim, they conceded that the song was Frey's, so they seem to have had little confidence in their own claim of an African origin for the song. Thus, AFC's cylinder, with a pronunciation very close to "Kum Ba Yah," would seem to eliminate the last piece of circumstantial evidence for an African origin.

Finally, the third theory about the song (that it originated in Gullah) is weakened by the Boyd manuscript. Even without that version, it is clear from AFC recordings that "Come by Here" was known fairly early throughout the American south, including Texas, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi. Before the rediscovery of the Boyd manuscript, however, the first known versions were Gordon's cylinders, which were from Georgia, and the transcription published in *The Carolina Low Country*, which was from South Carolina. These are all most likely Gullah versions. Their appearance so early in the song's history suggested to most scholars that the song originated in the Gullah region and spread from there. The Boyd manuscript, however, is from Alliance, North Carolina, significantly north of Gullah territory. Therefore, from the time of the song's earliest record, it seems to have been shared among both Gullah speakers and speakers of other



Credit: Courtesy Joe Hickerson

This Folksmiths poster publicized the 1957 tour of summer camps at which they helped to popularize the song they called "Kum Ba Yah."


Credit: Courtesy Joe Hickerson.

This photo was taken during the 1957 Folksmiths tour of summer camps. (L-r): David Sweet, Joe Hickerson, Chuck Crawford, Ruth Weiss, Sarah Newcomb.

Pete Seeger, arriving at Federal Court with his guitar over his shoulder, on April Fool's Day, 1961, three years after he helped popularize "Kumbaya." Seeger was facing a conviction for contempt of Congress based on his refusal to testify concerning the alleged communism of various fellow folksingers. The conviction was overturned on appeal. LC P & P Division: reproduction number LC-USZ62-130860.

African-American dialects. Given this, although a Gullah origin is certainly still possible, it would be dangerous to assume that the song originated in Gullah, rather than in African American English more generally.

In summary, then, the evidence from the American Folklife Center Archive does not fully support any of the common claims about the origin of "Kumbaya." Instead, it suggests that "Kumbaya" is an African American spiritual which originated somewhere in the American south, and then traveled all over the world: to Africa, where missionaries sang it for new converts; to the northwestern United States, where Marvin Frey heard it and adapted it as "Come By Here"; to coastal Georgia and South Carolina, where it was adapted into the Gullah dialect; to the Northeastern United States, where it entered the repertoires of such singers as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez; and eventually to Europe, South America, Australia, and other parts of the world, where revival recordings of the song abound. Although it is truly a global folksong, its earliest versions are preserved in only one place: the AFC Archive.

The back cover of Joan Baez's 1962 album featuring "Kumbaya."

Coda: "Kumbaya," the Archive, and the Revival

The adoption of the song "Kumbaya" into the folk revival also has connections with the American Folklife Center Archive. As we have already seen, the song became popular after it was published by Lynn and Katherine Rohrbough. In 1957, folksinger Tony Saletan learned the song from the Rohrboughs. He taught it to a group from Oberlin College known as The Folksmiths. The Folksmiths toured summer camps in the summer of 1957, and they taught "Kumbaya" (or, as they called it, "Kum Ba Yah") to thousands of American campers, helping to cement the song's association with both children and campfires. The Folksmiths also recorded the song in August, 1957, on an album called *We've Got Some Singing to Do,* which was released on the Folkways label in early 1958. This was the first published recording of the song. Later that same year, Folkways released a version by Pete Seeger, with the title "Kum Ba Ya." In 1959, Seeger's group The Weavers recorded the song, this time as "Kumbaya." The transformation of the song's title from "Come by Here/Come by Yah" to "Kumbaya" was complete.

Most later folk-revival versions of the song undoubtedly derive from these three influential recordings, all of which have connections to AFC's Archive. Seeger was an intern at the Archive in the 1930s, and has revisited AFC many times since then, most recently in 2007. In several recent interviews, he has made it clear that he once heard the extant Gordon cylinder recording of "Come by Here" at the Archive, although he is not sure when this visit to the Archive occurred. As for Hickerson, after his one year with the Folksmiths, he trained as a folklorist and archivist, and got a job at the AFC Archive; he eventually rose to be Head of the Archive, a position from which he retired in 1998. The moral of the story seems to be: while you can take "Kumbaya" out of the AFC Archive, you can't take the Archive out of "Kumbaya." ❍

[1] Several articles have been published about the song's fall from grace, most notably Jeffrey Weiss's article "How did 'Kumbaya' Become a Mocking Metaphor?" Dallas Morning News, *November 12, 2006: http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/religion/stories/DN-kumbaya_11rel.ART0.State.Edition1.3e6da2d.html*

[2] Lum, Chee Hoo. 2007. "A Tale of 'Kum Ba Yah.'" Kodaly Envoy, *33(3): pp5-11*

[3] See the New York Times *obituary for Marvin Frey, published in December 1992: http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/02/obituaries/rev-marvin-frey-74-writer-of-faith-songs.html*