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Lifestyles Editor: Bryan Stevens - bstevens@starbq.com

(423) 542-1545 • www.starbq.com



Singing shapes



Photo by Maria Fredericks
Don Wiley, founder of the Old Field Singers, said that the group gathers monthly at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park, to sing to each other and to God using the shape note singing method.

Don Wiley and the Old Field Singers seek to preserve age-old tradition

BY MARIA FREDERICKS
STAR INTERN

When Don Wiley tells people he enjoys singing the shapes, some of them might give him an excusably puzzled look.

Shape note singing, however, has been around for some time. This form of musical notation, introduced in 1801, became a popular teaching device in American singing schools. Shapes were added to the note heads in written music to help singers find pitches within major and minor scales.

Today, Wiley and his group of fellow musical enthusiasts, are working to preserve the tradition of singing the shapes. Known as the Old Fields Singers, the group meets every third Sunday at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park.

Wiley, a Johnson City resident, explained that, unlike traditional musical notation in which a note is placed on the musical staff to represent the pitch, shape note singing takes a different approach.

Wiley said the shape of the note represents the pitch. For example, in the seven-note system the “do” is represented by a triangle.

The concept behind shape notes is that the parts of a vocal work can be learned more quickly and easily if the music is printed in shapes that match up with the solfège syllables with which the notes of the musical scale are sung. The technique of solfège involves studying small sequences of notes (each note being sung to a particular syllable) and singing the sequences in different keys. The seven syllables commonly used for this practice are: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, and ti/si.

“The key to this form of singing is using one’s sight to recognize sound,” Wiley said.

“This is how we learn to sight read music,” he said. “We are able to use our sense of sight and associate that shape with the correct pitch.”

When the group meets to sing at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park, members arrange their chairs in a square shape. Wiley said doing this helps everyone to hear each other’s part while forming a community of singers.

“Our singing is not for an audience,” Wiley said. “We sing to each other and to God.”

In 2007, Piney Flats resident Mary Grace Walrath started a similar singing group at Rocky Mount Historic Site in Piney Flats. She contemplated moving away from the area, but to keep the group alive, Wiley organized a group that originally met at East Tennessee State University.

Since attendance at ETSU rose to as many as 60 individuals, Wiley moved the group to



Photos by Maria Fredericks
Above: Members of the Old Fields Singers gather on a recent Sunday afternoon for a session of shape note singing. Standing from left are Mary Grace Walrath, Julianne Wiley, Don Wiley, Elanie Cornette and Rhody Jane Meadows. Unicoi County High School student William Simerly is shown kneeling in the front.



Left: Don Wiley leads the Old Fields Singers in a session of shape note singing.

Munsey Church in downtown Johnson City. At the suggestion of one of the singers, he later moved the group to Sycamore Shoals.

“This has been our home ever since,” he said. “We sing the shapes every third Sunday.”

When choosing a name for his group, he was inspired by historic tales about the first settled lands in Carter County. Back in the pioneer days after the Indians had been removed, the settlers noticed how the land was clear, fertile and ready to be farmed. The settlers called the land the “Old Fields.”

Liking the sound of that phrase, Wiley chose the Old Fields Singers as a name for his group.

“I chose this name for its historical significance,” he added.

Shape note singing enjoys a rich history in the Appalachian area.

Wiley, who has been doing shape note singing for more than 20 years now, shared some insight into the history of this unique musical notation system.

Wiley explained that in the early 1800s, singing in churches was not always very harmonious. Most churches used what was called “plain chant,” which lined out the songs. The instructor would sing the first line and then the group would sing it back. These songs were supposed to be standardized tunes; however, over time the songs become more and more individualized. As a result, the original pitch was lost.

To improve upon the teaching methods, while reducing loss of original sound in the church hymns, teachers adopted shape note singing in their schools.

Wiley noted that this became a more sim-

plified method for teaching people to recognize pitch as opposed to the more traditional musical notation. He said the tradition caught on fast and many musicians began compiling and publishing books.

William Walker, a minister, musician and composer, began publishing hymn books. He published a book of songs in 1835 using the shape notes. He called the work “Christian Harmonies.” Wiley and his group use this book today as the basis for their own shape note singing.

Although Wiley was not raised with shape note singing, he had been informed about it as a child growing up. He said he holds a great appreciation for the history and religious significance associated with shape note singing.

“I was raised hearing about it,” he said. “My dad went to the singing schools in the 1930s. He went to a church that didn’t use shape note singing, so it skipped a generation.”

He took a profound interest in the art form around 1989. At the time, there wasn’t any shape note singing in the area, but Wiley and his wife heard about such a singing group in Sevier County and decided to attend. Early on, they also traveled to Knoxville and into North Carolina to sing the shapes.

“I didn’t grow up with it,” he said. “But I have grown into it.”

Many of The Old Field Singers didn’t grow up with a background in shape note singing, but they had heard about it throughout their childhood. Mary Grace Walrath checked out a record from the library on shape note singing. Walrath said her mother heard the songs and told her that she used to sing those

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