Introduction

At the time of his death in 1966, Willis Laurence James had lived to see a gradual turning of the tide in the direction of appreciation for the folk traditions that evolved in America during the era of African enslavement. Born at the turn of the century, when many of the oldest black traditions were still transmitted orally in rural areas throughout the South, James began to collect in his youthful memory songs that he later raised to the level of choral artistry. He was among that early group of well-educated and highly talented black musicians who undertook the study and preservation of a music widely considered the only indigenous American folk song next to that of the Native Americans.

There was hardly a time in his life when James was not drawn to the culture from which black folk song evolved. As a result of his work as a folklorist, folk song arranger, and original composer, his reputation as an authority on black folk life spread from the local and regional levels to the national arena during the 1950s, at which time he began receiving invitations to lecture throughout the country and abroad. In 1951 he was one of twenty-five musicians and music educators invited to a conference at the Library of Congress to consider the future of music in America. He also became a regular lecturer and panelist at the annual Newport Jazz Festival from its beginning in 1954, and at the Newport Folk Music Festival beginning in 1957. In 1961 he lectured at the opening of the Center for Negro Arts in Lagos, Nigeria. He also received prestigious honors for his work, such as the Honorary Superior Degree for Service in Music, which he was awarded in 1953 by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Two years later, in 1955, he was awarded an honorary doctor of music degree from Wilberforce University in recogni-

tion of his efforts to preserve black folk song through collection, composition, and performance.

Willis Laurence James was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on September 18, 1900. As a child he was taken to Florida by his mother, Minnie James. They moved first to Pensacola and then to Jacksonville, where they settled down and attended the Bethel Institutional Baptist Church. For many years Bethel served as the setting in which the young James not only absorbed the tenets of his Baptist faith but also heard black concert artists and was exposed to the rich song tradition of the black spirituals.

James attended the Florida Baptist Academy (founded by Bethel Church), where he came under the tutelage of the individual who nurtured and encouraged his appreciation for the artistry of black folk song—the academy's music teacher, concert tenor Sidney Woodward.[1] James sang in the choral groups and male quartets trained at the academy by Woodward. Recognizing his young student's musical talent and particularly his potential as a violinist, Woodward took James to Atlanta in the summer of 1916 to play for concert violinist and Morehouse College professor Kemper Harreld.[2] The following fall James entered the tenth grade at Morehouse Academy and became Harreld's protégé. As his student there and subsequently at Morehouse College, James became an outstanding violinist and one of the leading tenor soloists in the Morehouse Glee Club and Quartet. He also became a member of the Morehouse Orchestra and later,

1. Maud Cuney Hare, "Musical Pioneers," *International Library of Negro Life and History* (1969). Born on a Georgia plantation, Woodward (1860–1924) was orphaned at an early age but overcame many hardships to obtain an education. Aided by a benefactor, he studied voice in Boston, concertized in the United States, and later toured many of the major capitals of Europe as a celebrated artist. Upon his return to the United States, he taught at the Florida Baptist Academy, Clark University in Nashville, and the Music School Settlement in New York.

2. Kemper Harreld (1885–1971) played a prominent role in the development of music at Morehouse College and in the Atlanta area. Trained at major American conservatories and in Europe, he performed widely throughout Europe and the United States and joined the music faculty of Morehouse College in 1911. He also became associated with Spelman College when the music departments of the two institutions merged in 1927.

during his college years, concertmaster and assistant conductor. During these latter years he began to demonstrate a talent for composing and arranging, often performing his own vocal compositions. His folk song arrangements were performed frequently by the Morehouse Glee Club and Quartet.

Following his studies at Morehouse College, James began his teaching career in 1923 at Leland College in Baker, Louisiana, where he remained until 1928. It was at Leland that he began his collection of black folk song, using the area surrounding the college (a former sugar plantation along the Mississippi River known as the Louisiana Sugar Bottoms) and the southeastern section of the state as the locales for his research. This period marks the beginning of James's fascination with the songs, cries, and hollers sung by the longshoremen, dockworkers, and laborers who work along the levees and in the fields. Several of the songs he collected during this period of fieldwork were arranged for the choral groups he directed at Leland. Four of them were recorded by the Paramount Record Company of Chicago in 1927; two were later published and are still performed.[3]

In 1928 James joined the faculty of Alabama State Normal College, in Montgomery, the city of his birth. He had recently married Theodora Joanna Fisher, a graduate of Spelman College, whom he had met during her year of teaching at Leland, 1926–27. James, a more mature teacher and seasoned musician as a result of his teaching experiences at Leland and his advanced training at the Chicago Conservatory of Music during the summers, began to make a positive impression during his first year as director of the choir and the small orchestra he started, and as instructor of a beginning class in violin.[4] During his second year at Alabama, James became director of the marching band and began working with jazz ensembles, a relatively new development at black colleges. James's interest in folk music now also embraced the tradition of quartet singing associated with the mining camps near Birmingham.

3. James himself wrote the music for these songs. The two later published were "Captain, Look-a Yonder" and "Cabin Boy Call."

4. *State Normal Journal* 2, no.1 (March 1929): 52–53.

In 1933, after five years at Alabama State Normal College, James joined the faculty of Spelman College in Atlanta, where he remained until his death in 1966. In the combined music department of Spelman and Morehouse he directed the Morehouse College Marching Band, taught a wide range of music courses, and occasionally, with Kemper Harreld, conducted the Morehouse-Spelman Orchestra and taught violin. One of James's principal duties was directing the Spelman College Glee Club, whose highly touted performances often included arrangements of James's collected black folk songs as well as standard classical works. While none of James's numerous arrangements of spirituals for the women's voices of the Spelman College Glee Club were ever published, some preserved in manuscript remain part of its repertoire, as do several of James's original compositions that are not based on folk sources. James also wrote arrangements and compositions for the male voices of the Morehouse Glee Club and Quartet; two of his songs remain popular in that ensemble's repertoire.[5] Beginning in 1935, the performance of James's arrangements and compositions based on his collected Christmas spirituals became a tradition at the annual Morehouse-Spelman Christmas carol concerts, initiated by Harreld in 1927.

Two events early in James's tenure at Spelman College were important to his career as a folklorist. First, in 1939 he received a General Education Board grant that enabled him to do extended fieldwork—the research for this book—during a period when folk traditions were still strong in many areas of the Deep South. Second, in 1941 he became involved with the Fort Valley State College Folk Music Festival, which for almost fifteen years gave him the opportunity to act on his belief that the folklorist should not only collect folk songs but encourage folk musicians to perform them.

From the start James intended this book to be a valuable contribution to the documentation of black folklore, which by now he was

5. The texts of these two songs, "Captain, Look-a Yonder" and "Roberta Lee," were published, along with two of James's collected work songs, in *Negro Caravan*, ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York: Dryden Press, 1941). An arrangement of "Roberta Lee" by the late Wendell P. Whalum, a former student of James, was published by Lawson-Gould in 1972 and attributed to James.

well equipped to undertake. "It is not enough merely to collect these songs," he wrote in his proposal to the General Education Board. "It is necessary to possess a first-hand knowledge of Negro customs, modes of expression, intimate domestic life and attitudes. . . . Great patience and understanding are required to win their [Negroes'] confidence and to have them sing with the naturalness and abandon with which they sing among themselves. . . . I believe that I am qualified to undertake the work because I am a Negro, a singer, and a composer."[6] James felt strongly that there needed to be made "a clear and authoritative statement" by a black scholar on the musical gifts evolving out of black folk life, since earlier works on black music by black scholars had concentrated on black contributions to the Western musical tradition.[7]

In September 1939 James began four months of fieldwork in the South Carolina Sea Islands (St. Helena, Port Royal, and James), the coal-mining regions of Alabama, the southern region of Georgia, and the coastal regions of Florida. He spent much of the remaining three months of his leave organizing his findings. He began to write this book in the early 1940s and completed it in 1945. In correspondence with publishers James described it as "a study of Negro folk music based upon first-hand observation, in the field and classroom, and covering a period of twenty years . . . arranged according to the unfolding of Negro music in America . . . to provide a source wherein one may acquire insight and comprehension regarding the true nature and meaning of all classes and types of Negro music." Whatever prevented James from finding a publisher for his manuscript, it was unquestionably an invaluable document of black folklore, as invaluable as the works of other pioneer black folklorists, such as Zora Neale Hurston. That it appears now, exactly fifty years after James completed it, makes it all the more important as a source of

6. Willis Laurence James, grant proposal submitted to the General Education Board, January 24, 1939. James had already done fieldwork on a Carnegie grant in the summer of 1935.

7. See, for example, James Monroe Trotter's *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1878), Maud Cuney Hare's *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (1936), and Alain Locke's *The Negro and His Music* (1936).

insight into a folk culture of the Deep South that no longer exists as James knew it.

The publication of *Stars in de Elements* not only brings resolution to the extraordinary life of Willis Laurence James but also serves as a tribute to his mother, Minnie James Washington, who inspired and encouraged his early interest in his folk heritage, and to his widow, Theodora Fisher James (1905–94), who sought vigorously to find a publisher after his death. Although Mrs. James did not live to see the book in print, she did consent to have it edited and published with my introduction. From the outset of my work on James fifteen years ago, she was a staunch ally, supporter, and friend. Her generous assistance and cooperation in my use and organization of her husband's papers in the Spelman College archives figure largely in whatever success I have had in illuminating his place in American history. I gratefully dedicate this momentous fulfillment of our efforts to her memory.

Finally, this publication is a credit to Jon Michael Spencer, who was too young to know James while he lived but who recognized the importance of making this work available in published form. He has edited it carefully and thoughtfully, enhancing its clarity while preserving the integrity of James's thoughts and language. For his work and dedication I am profoundly grateful.

Rebecca T. Cureau