

Bound To Go Illuminating Legacy Of African American Folk Tradition

Written by Robert ID4418

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Bound To Go is a landmark collection of 35 songs from the African American folk tradition that includes spirituals, shout songs from the Sea Islands, prison ballads and secular songs. Lovingly compiled, created and produced by Andrew Calhoun, a working folk singer, the collection shines new light onto some of the most moving and important songs in the American folk music tradition. The record was released on his own Waterbug Records, an artist collective label he started in 1992. Calhoun's mission with Bound To Go, stunningly realized, is to revive the legacy of the African American folk tradition.

By putting the spotlight on these songs (many of which have never been recorded) and styles, they can no longer be deemphasized by regarding them as simply the root source for more popular and well-known styles such as blues, country or gospel.

As Calhoun himself says so eloquently, "The African American spiritual is its own art form, which remains unsurpassed in its ability to communicate profound truths about existence in quickly apprehended, memorable forms."

These heartfelt, soulful and moving songs would be cause for celebration in and of themselves, but coupled with the incredible packaging Bound To Go is a work of art in its own right. The album cover painting White Scarf is by noted Gullah artist Jonathan Green.

The extensive and informative notes in the accompanying booklet not only give insight into the songs, but also draw the connection between spirituals and indigenous African religions. Calhoun repudiates the notion that spirituals were simply a yearning for the next world because the African's lot in America was one of misery. He argues that these spirituals "express an embracing of the journey to the other world as a form of ancestor connection; that the African continued to practice in America the religious sensibility they had always practiced, applying it to Christianity."

In fact, innovation runs through every facet of Bound To Go including the presentation of the spirituals as call-and-response folk songs rather than art songs sung by one voice. This expression presents these songs in their highest form and purpose—the binding together of community through music.

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The instrumentation itself is unique, featuring trumpet (not a common instrument in folk arrangements), cello, fretless gourd banjo (an instrument slaves would have played), fiddle, hambone and more. As one earlier listener commented, this project has "all the freshness of a field recording, with the polish of a studio production."

It's not often that you get to hear history in the re-making, but Andrew Calhoun has masterfully given new life to often overlooked music from the African American folk tradition. And that is history worth rediscovering.