

## SPIRITUALS TO SWING

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THE Battle of Song that recently took place in Madison Square Garden between the unknown Camp Meeting Choir and the well-known Wings Over Jordan chorus had little of the excitement of a Balinese gamelan competition, but it was a beautiful example of the distance between straight gospel singing and radio artifice.

The Wings Over Jordan people have sung over the air for years and for the armed forces abroad. Their style now is pretentious and false. They sing their saccharine arrangements out of tune, and the antics of their leader must be seen to be believed. The others, from North Carolina, are a young group who began singing together while they worked for Reynolds Tobacco. Today they make their living through engagements. Their tone is brilliant; they sing with ease, and their intonation is perfect. Their eager vitality turns the plainest gospel hymn into a joyful adventure. The simple harmonies of their arrangements have the maximum resonance, and it was interesting to see that while their rhythm was far more exciting than that of the Jordan singers, their leader conducted with small, almost secret gestures. As they sang, there seemed no doubt in the minds of the audience which group was better. Their only flaws in taste lie in some of the quartet work, and in the style of one or two soloists, not uninfluenced by

the insidious microphone. The group has been recording for Diamond, a new firm, and their first album came out in June.

Spirituals are recorded in quantity at present. In the shops north of 110th Street you find the names of Georgia Peach, The Heavenly Gospel Singers, Dixie Humming Birds on unfamiliar labels. Robeson sings for Victor; the Brahms-MacDowell harmonies sound worse than ever after hearing a few of the just-mentioned discs. Of unusual interest, however, is the Disc (formerly Asch) album which includes humble singers from the rural South, and the material has that true folk quality of the albums put out by the Library of Congress.

Disc has also an album of folk ballads — love songs — sung by Richard Dyer-Bennet, whose incredible refinement of diction and tone makes them sound precious and unreal. You may hear plenty of folksongs over WNYC at regular hours each week. Some of the programs are pretty feeble; the mere act of singing folksongs with Josh White or Tug-Boat-Annie intonation does not necessarily make you a folk singer. But both Tom Glazer and Pete Seeger have authority and a ring in their voices. Seeger's guitar is brilliant. Both singers, however, would give more pleasure to my ears if they inclined less to pure Americana. Our native songs are deadly dull both melodically and metrically. I like most of all on these programs

the voice of Brownie McGhee, who has made many race records, and whose blues have real folk quality in them. Sonny Terry's fantastic harmonica weaves around the voice in astonishing tonal relations.

Duke Ellington's son, Mercer, who began composing and arranging for his father's band while still in high school has a new band of his own, but it sounded just like any other at the Apollo Theater. The jazz concerts in the recent Carnegie pops series were uneven. I remember chiefly some beautiful playing by Coleman Hawkins and Buck Clayton in the second. A disappointingly dull performance by the Edmond Hall group in the third, especially the un-inspired set of "improvisations" on Gershwin tunes - *Bess, Man I Love, Summertime, Nothing, Necessarily So* sequence - all of the worst. Café Society has indeed taken it out of a fine musician. The last concert turned hundreds away. An all-star program opened with the frantic trumpet of Dizzie Gillespie and grew more exciting as the program worked down to Lester Young and Buck Clayton. Billie Holiday and Slam Stewart brought the house down, completely.

The new Victor recordings of Bunk Johnson and his band are disappoint-

ing. It was a pleasure to hear these men, above all Bunk's still robust trumpet, in a dancehall last year. Early New Orleans style still sounded exuberant. But in the records the band seems to have lost its vitality and sounds badly out of tune. Far more exciting are the Decca reissues of King Oliver records made in 1926-28. There is wonderful playing here, not only by Oliver, but by Johnny Dodds and Kid Ory, and the recordings hold up very well indeed for the period. To come down to the present. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan take Calypso for a ride in the popular *Stone Cold Dead in the Market*. Ella and Louis Armstrong sing together in *Frim Fram Sauce*, with Louis's trumpet satisfying as ever on the last brief chorus (Decca). Nat Cole does beautiful singing in *Everyone Is Saying Hello Again* - his low, bloom-on-the-grape tones are recorded to perfection (Capitol). Commodore gives us one of those rare records in *Rockin' at Ryan's*, with Hot Lips Page and band. I never seem to get enough of Page's trumpet when he is in the mood, as he is in the final solo on this fine record.

Interesting as a sign of the times, *Down Beat* now lists 197 labels in the recording business.