



jake blount

the new faith



Jake Blount: The New Faith

The Psalms of the Sentinel

1. Take Me to the Water / Prayer 3:38
2. The Downward Road 3:36
3. Didn't It Rain 3:05
4. Tangle Eye Blues 3:51

The Psalms of the Gravedigger

5. Parable 2:20
6. Death Have Mercy 2:59
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8. They Are Waiting for Me 4:27

The Psalms of the Teacher

9. Psalms 2:54
10. Just as Well to Get Ready, You Got to Die 3:08
11. Give Up the World 4:09
12. Once There Was No Sun 4:21

Produced by Jake Blount and Brian Slattery

To N. K. Jemisin and Octavia Butler for showing me that our future is worth imagining.

With special thanks to the Gullah Geechee people, whose contributions to the record of early Black folk music are unrivaled. This album could not have been made without your art and labor. I hope that those reading this will join me in making a donation to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. (gullahgeecheecorridor.org)

1. arr. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP | 2. arr. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP – arr. Brian Francis Slattery, ASCAP | 3. arr. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP – arr. Brian Francis Slattery, ASCAP) | 4. Collected by Alan Lomax/TRO-Essex, BMI | 5. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP | 6. arr. Vera Hall/Unichappell Music, Inc., BMI | 7. Charles Albert Tindley – arr. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP | 8. James D. Vaughan – arr. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP | 9. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP | 10. “Just as Well to Get Ready, You Got to Die” arr. Blind Willie McTell/Songs of Peer, Ltd., ASCAP; “Yonder Comes My Mother” arr. Son House/BMG Bumblebee o/b/o Sondick Music, BMI | 11. arr. Jake Meserve Blount/Rusting Earth Music, ASCAP – arr. Brian Francis Slattery, ASCAP | 12. arr. Bessie Jones – collected by Alan Lomax/Ludlow Music Inc., BMI

The New Faith

Jake Blount

I have long felt a powerful draw to the old spirituals passed down in my community. I am an unlikely devotee; I only rarely attended church as a child, declared myself an atheist at the tender age of eight, and developed a strong antipathy toward Christianity when I began to understand my queerness. Nonetheless, spirituals are the songs

I bring to communal singing events. They are the songs I teach. In moments of homesickness, sorrow and fear, they are the songs I turn to for solace. While I have never reconciled fully with Christianity, I have come to appreciate the Black Church and its music for their secular functions. The Church, when called

upon, has functioned as a social venue, a political organization, a school administration, and a mutual aid fund. Despite its flaws, it has borne us safely through the long years of a dark history. The spirituals it has passed down are its chronicle. Our ancestors were not empowered to write down their stories, thoughts, opinions, and

feelings in plain speech. The songs they handed down to us are their first-person accounts, veiled in allegory and symbolism. Black folk music is one of the strongest connections between present-day Black people and our lost ancestors; strong enough, in fact, that studying it broke me of my atheism.

When I play what my grandfather calls “the old songs,” I can feel other hands lifting my arms as I move the bow. I feel my playing shift to accommodate sounds that are not there. I feel an enveloping stillness like the press of cool water on my mind, and I wonder if I am walking some abyssal plain between Amerika and my unknown homeland.

Smithsonian Folkways approached me about making an album in the summer of 2020, in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and just after the unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd. I was isolated from friends and family, and recovering from what I now know was likely a bout of long COVID. I was consumed with fear,

stricken by the sudden concreteness of my own mortality and the collapse of everyday life. I felt barely able to play music, but Folkways' catalog has long been a source of inspiration for me and I wanted to be part of that legacy. I examined my repertoire, considered what I could bring to it in that moment, and ended up asking two

questions: *What will this music sound like when I'm dead? What will this music sound like when everyone is dead?*

And so, *The New Faith* was born. This record envisions Black American religious music in a future devastated by warfare and anthropogenic climate change. The record is based

on field recordings of Black religious services from the early-to-mid 20th century, but it is composed entirely of new arrangements and subtle rewrites of traditional Black folk songs. To make an informed prediction, I referenced a more diverse cross-section of the African Diaspora's music than I ever have before. This album incorporates sounds from

Belize, Georgia, Jamaica, Texas, Mississippi, New York, and beyond. The pieces I drew upon were collected over the course of nearly three-and-a-half centuries in a variety of formats; the earliest piece, transcribed by Hans Sloane from enslaved Africans in Jamaica, dates to 1688.

It is not surprising to me that the most paralyzing time of my life, and the deepest dive into history I've yet taken, have resulted in an Afrofuturist album. I believe our most likely future bears a close resemblance to our past. My vision of civilization's course does not involve glittering ships hurtling through the cosmos; such

idealized depictions of the future, when I come across them, remind me only of humanity's wasted potential. I don't claim to be a prophet, but I do read the news and stay informed on the science. It seems fairly clear to me what the next several centuries hold.



“What will this music sound like when I’m dead? What will this music



sound like when everyone is dead?"

I believe that warming, acidification, and overfishing will kill every fish in the ocean. I believe that droughts, floods, and plummeting insect populations will devastate agriculture. I believe that nations will fall to sea level rise and desertification. I believe that these events will precipitate the largest refugee crisis in human

history, in the midst of the most severe resource shortage our species has ever experienced. I believe that the likeliest outcome is thermonuclear war, and the near or complete annihilation of our civilization well before we launch any shining vessels into the interstellar void.

I believe that we have the ability to avert this future. I do not believe that we will make use of it.

The New Faith takes place in the aftermath of these calamities. The worshipers depicted on the recording are descendants of U.S. Black refugees who fled northward in the wake of civilization's collapse,

only to be confined to an island refugee camp off the coast of present-day New England. The dire straits their ancestors endured have reshaped their traditions, including their music. As people of the future, they have heard echoes of everything we've heard, preserved in oral tradition. Their unreliable access to electricity and

limited technology, however, have limited them almost exclusively to acoustic instruments. The lyrics of the songs and the text of the prayers contain echoes of Christian theology, but the religion of these worshipers is different. The trappings of ancestor worship are woven throughout the service, the only named deity is Death, and the new faith's

teachings are as harsh as the world it was born from.

The end result is an album comprised of songs and sounds heard in traditional African and African American ceremony, but updated with modern techniques. Drums, banjos, fiddles and song meet rock and roll, rap, looping, and contemporary arrangements.

Ambient sounds and drone material collected on Cushing's Island, Maine, establish the soundscape. I discerned the sound of the future by listening to the past and present.

The destruction of a way of life entails both loss and growth. The traditional songs I adapted for *The New Faith* originally developed

among a people who had but recently been robbed of home, history, family, culture, and society. The unique history of African American people made our musical tradition an ideal candidate for my ambitious task. *The New Faith* is a statement of reverence for our devastating, yet empowering past; of anticipation and anxiety

toward our uncertain future; and of hope that, come what may, something of us will yet survive.

- * The cover art for this recording depicts a tree that stood on one of the plantations where my forebears were held in bondage. Oral history tells us that one of my ancestors rested in the shade of this tree as he grazed his master's horses. The tree died in my early childhood, but I visited its remains several times as I worked on *The New Faith*. Storm winds or lightning have riven the tree's crown from its trunk, and cast it upon the ground. The wreck of it now decays under cover of grass and vine, gradually disappearing into the standing water that accumulates more deeply in the fields of Smithfield, Virginia, with each passing year.

The Psalms of the Sentinel

1. Take Me to the Water / Prayer

SOURCE: Bessie Jones,
recorded by Alan Lomax
in 1966.

Jake Blount,
prayer text, vocals

Additional material from:
“Blow, Gabriel,” learned from
Bessie Jones, recorded by
Alan Lomax in 1959.

**Jake Blount and
Brian Slattery,**
percussion

Mali Obomsawin,
bass

“Angola,” sung by enslaved
Africans in Jamaica and
collected by Hans Sloane
in 1688.

2. The Downward Road

SOURCE: Jim Williams,
recorded by Alan Lomax
between 1934 and 1939.

Additional material drawn
from “Angola,” sung by
enslaved Africans in Jamaica
and collected by Hans
Sloane in 1688.

Jake Blount,
vocals, fiddle, banjos

Demeanor,
rap

**Jake Blount
and Brian Slattery,**
percussion

3. Didn't It Rain

SOURCE: "Didn't It Rain,"
learned from Sister Rosetta
Tharpe and Mahalia Jackson

**Jake Blount, Kaïa Kater,
Rissi Palmer, and D'orjay**
The Singing Shaman,
vocals

Jake Blount,
guitar, banjo bass

Brian Slattery,
percussion

4. Tangle Eye Blues

SOURCE: Walter “Tangle Eye” Jackson, recorded by Alan Lomax in 1948.

**Jake Blount played
and arranged all parts
of this song.**

A black and white photograph of a forest floor. A path leads through trees and dense foliage. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“I discerned the sound of the future by listening



to the past and present.”

The Psalms of the Gravedigger

5. Parable

Jake Blount,
vocals, fiddles

Brian Slattery,
percussion

6. Death Have Mercy

SOURCE: Vera Hall, recorded
by Alan Lomax in 1959

Jake Blount,
vocals, banjo, strings

**Jake Blount and
Brian Slattery,**
percussion

Mali Obomsawin,
bass

Demeanor,
rap

7. City Called Heaven

source: Fannie Lou Hamer,
recorded in 1963

**Jake Blount played
and arranged all parts
of this song.**

8. They Are Waiting for Me

SOURCE: Skip James

Jake Blount,
vocals

Samuel James,
guitar

The Psalms of the Teacher

9. Psalms

Jake Blount, Kaia Kater,
Lizzie No, Rissi Palmer,
D'orjay The Singing Shaman,
vocals

Brian Slattery,
percussion

10. Just as Well to Get Ready, You Got to Die

SOURCE: Blind Willie McTell

Jake Blount,
vocals, strings, banjos

Additional material drawn from “Yonder Comes My Mother,” sung by Son House; “Angola,” sung by enslaved Africans in Jamaica and collected by Hans Sloane in 1688.

**Jake Blount and
Brian Slattery,**
percussion

Joseph DeJarnette,
bass





**“When I play what my grandfather calls
‘the old songs,’ I can feel other hands
lifting my arms as I move the bow.”**

11. Give Up the World

SOURCE: Unknown singer in the Port Royal Islands, transcribed by Charles Pickard Ware and published in 1867 as part of *Slave Songs of the United States*

Jake Blount,
vocals, banjo

**Jake Blount and
Brian Slattery,**
strings

Brian Slattery,
guitar, percussion

Demeanor,
rap

Mali Obomsawin,
bass

12. Once There Was No Sun

SOURCE: Bessie Jones,
recorded by Alan Lomax
in 1965

Additional material drawn
from “Angola,” sung by
enslaved Africans in Jamaica
and collected by Hans
Sloane in 1688.

**Jake Blount, Kaïa Kater,
Lizzie No, Rissi Palmer,
Brandi Pace, D’orjay
The Singing Shaman,
Lillian Werbin,**
vocals

Jake Blount,
strings

Jake Blount,
banjo

**Jake Blount
and Brian Slattery,**
percussion

Mali Obomsawin,
bass

Credits

PRODUCED BY

Jake Blount and Brian Slattery

FEATURING

Demeanor, D'orjay The Singing Shaman, Samuel James, Kaïa Kater, Lizzie No, Mali Obomsawin, Brandi Pace, Rissi Palmer, and Lillian Werbin.

RECORDED IN:

Firehouse 12, Acadia Recording Co., but mostly Jake's bedroom, Brian's house, and Mali's shed.

MIXED BY

Joseph DeJarnette (Studio 808a)

MASTERED BY

Mike Monseur, Axis Audio, Nashville, TN

ANNOTATED BY Jake Blount

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Daniel E. Sheehy and John Smith

PRODUCTION MANAGER:

Mary Monseur

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT:

Kate Harrington

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE BY

James Deutsch

PHOTOS BY

Tadin Brown

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY

Abbey Pechman

ART DIRECTION, DESIGN, AND LAYOUT BY

Caroline Gut

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This recording is part of the African American Legacy series, co-conceived with and supported by the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. As a series, it is an audio mosaic in the making, comprised of reissues and compilations drawn from the Smithsonian Folkways archival collections and new recordings of living bearers of diverse African American traditions. As new recordings are added to the series, they portray an ever-grander picture-in-sound of this vital vein of American creativity.

SMITHSONIAN FOLKWAYS RECORDINGS is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, the national museum of the United States. Our mission is to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In this way, we continue the legacy of Moses Asch, who founded Folkways Records in 1948. The Smithsonian acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987, and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings has continued the Folkways tradition by supporting the work of traditional artists and expressing a commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding among peoples through the production, documentation, preservation, and dissemination of sound.

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jake blount: the new faith

Produced by Jake Blount
and Brian Slattery

The New Faith tells an Afrofuturist story set in a far-future world devastated by climate change. Jake Blount and his collaborators embody a group of Black climate refugees as they perform a religious service, invoking spirituals that are age-old even now, familiar in their content but extraordinary in their presentation. These songs, which have seen Black Americans through countless struggles, bind this future community together and their shared past; beauty and power held in song through centuries of devastation, heartbreak, and loss.

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