

# SHAKER MUSIC & DANCE



SHAKER VILLAGE  
OF PLEASANT HILL

Music was of the utmost importance to a group that believed in dancing in worship. As more than 20,000 songs were written by a large cross-section of the Shakers, much can be learned about the Shakers from the tunes and lyrics. Music was one of few means of artistic expression, and many of the Shaker songs are achingly beautiful. Many have a haunting, almost otherworldly quality to them.

Shaker music was always performed *a cappella* (without instruments) from the early beginnings until the latter 1800s, because the Shakers thought one could not improve upon the most perfect instrument, God's instrument - the voice - with anything man-made.

Singing meetings were held usually on weekdays but also sometimes on Sunday mornings before the Sabbath service to perfect the singing of the anthem designated for the later service held in the village meeting house. The first Shaker songs were wordless tunes which were hummed, usually as accompaniment to the early dances. Shaker songs remained wordless until the field of religious music as a whole was influenced by "The Great Awakening" in New England and by the Great or Kentucky Revival in the west.

A western Shaker, Richard McNemar, formerly a Presbyterian preacher who had been a leader of the Kentucky revival and is called the "Father of Shaker Music," composed more hymns, anthems, and exercise songs than any other Shaker of his day. Shaker music was unconventional by the world's standards, and theoreticians formulated what they hoped would be a less confusing and more fitting system of musical notation in the 1840s. In his new Shaker musical notation, letters were used in place of round notes, and a greater degree of rhythmic freedom expressive of spiritual spontaneity was permitted.

From the incipiency of the Shaker movement, dancing, or "laboring" under operations of the spirit was an essential element of Shaker worship. The Shakers found several reasons to add dance to their worship. They found 19 scripture passages that said they should dance for the Lord and also reasoned that God created the whole body, not just the mouth and hands and therefore they should praise the Lord with their whole bodies. The communal family often gathered in its family meeting room to worship during the weekday evenings, at first in spontaneous, individual dancing, and later to practice intricate dance steps.

Shaker Sabbath worship was unique, and yet in the early days followed the form dictated by spiritual influence on each individual and was therefore purely natural.

Shakers shared their devotional feelings in worship as they shared every other aspect of their communal lives. Full participation in worship meant worshipping with one's whole body and soul, expressed through dancing, singing, and other exercises, rather than merely repeating time-worn phrases.