Every year, on the fourth Sunday in May, people gather in the Marshall County courthouse in Benton, Kentucky, to sing hymns from an 1854 tunebook, *The Southern Harmony*. This is a “fasola” or “shape-note’ Singing, extremely popular throughout the South in the nineteenth century, but now preserved only in scattered locations. The gathering, known as Big Singing Day, began in 1884 and is the only remaining Singing using the *Southern Harmony* tunebook. From the beginning, there has been an emphasis on carefully preserving the traditions and style of singing, so that Big Singing Day is conducted now virtually as it was one hundred years ago.

This dissertation provides a history of Big Singing Day and an examination of its role in the Singers’ concept of personal and community identity. In addition, the musical style of *Southern Harmony* singing is examined against the backdrop of the larger tradition of shape-note singing exemplified by *Sacred Harp* singers. An interdisciplinary approach is employed, combining the research techniques of oral history and cultural anthropology with those of musicology.

After the introductory chapter, Chapter II traces the history of Big Singing Day and *Southern Harmony* singing in Benton, Kentucky. Emphasis is placed on reconstructing the event in its early days as an informal county-wide homecoming and examines the ways in which that concept has disappeared. Chapter III defines and analyzes the core repertoire of the singers. Analysis includes the form and source of the texts and the mode, form and harmonization of the melodies.

Chapter IV discusses the performance practices of *Southern Harmony* singing, giving an overview of the instructions in the tunebook, but focusing on actual practice which diverges significantly from the written instructions. The conducting style of leaders, procedures, seating arrangements, singing style and ornamentation are the major topics. Comparisons are made with the practices of *Sacred Harp* singers. Chapter V treats the ethnic identity of the singers focusing on the extra-musical meaning attached to Big Singing Day in its role as a ritual gathering and ethnic boundary. The final chapter offers prospects for the future of Big Singing and outlines areas for further research.