

RECORDING REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS D'ENREGISTREMENTS

Sankofa Songs, a Legacy of Roots and Rhythm: African Nova Scotian Songs from the Collection of Dr. Helen Creighton. 2019. Liner notes by Clary Croft and Henry Bishop. Dartmouth, NS: Helen Creighton Folklore Society. Compact disc and digital download.

CHRIS GREENCORN
University of Toronto

Helen Creighton's (1899-1989) impact on the study of folk music in Canada's Maritime Provinces has been immense. A recent Federal Heritage Designation plaque on the property of her family home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, describes her as a "pioneering folklorist" who "amassed one of Canada's largest collections of songs, tales, customs, and material culture between 1928 and 1975." Accordingly, Creighton's legacy has drawn plenty of scholarly attention. Beginning with Ian McKay's work in the early 1990s, cultural historians, folklorists, and music scholars have grappled with the lasting impacts of Creighton's foundational work, as well as her ideological motivations.

Outside of the academy, a number of public-facing projects have addressed this inheritance as well. *Sankofa Songs, a Legacy of Roots and Rhythm: African Nova Scotian Songs from the Dr. Helen Creighton Collection* is one such project. Released in April 2019 by the Helen Creighton Folklore Society (HCFS), *Sankofa Songs* was produced by musician and folklorist Clary Croft — a protégé of Creighton's, as well as her archivist and

biographer — with contributions from Henry Bishop, a visual artist, community historian, and former Curator of the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia. The album is available as a compact disc from the HCFS, as well as in CD-quality digital audio with a PDF version of the 12-page liner booklet through the online music vendor Bandcamp.

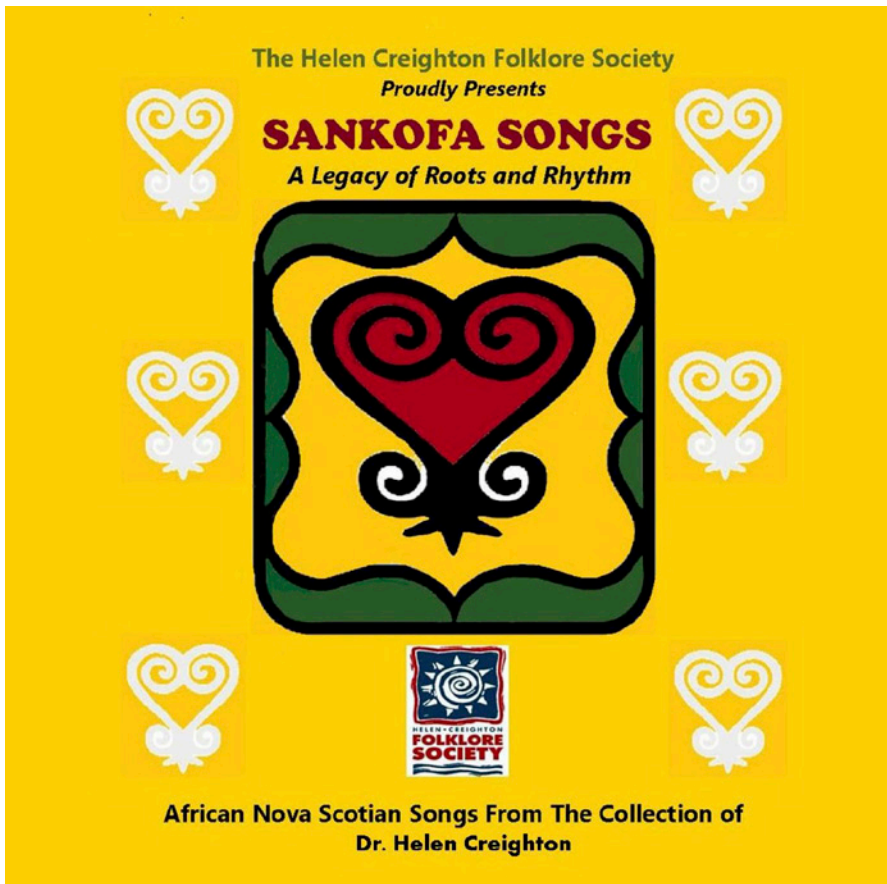
The title and artwork employ an Akan philosophical concept and accompanying Adinkra graphic motif, *sankofa*, which is variously translated as "go back and fetch it" or "return to your past." As a symbol and methodology, *sankofa* is widely used in African diasporic cultural heritage initiatives: for example, Harry Belafonte's social justice organization, Sankofa.org, or in the theme of Canada's Black History Month 2020, "Canadians of African Descent: Going Forward, Guided by the Past." In the local context, *sankofa* has also been a guiding principle throughout the recent Restorative Inquiry on the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children, a site where Creighton collected songs, several of which are included in the *Sankofa Songs* album. For an archival project like *Sankofa Songs*, the concept is especially evocative.

The album's 24 tracks span nearly a quarter of the 20th century: the earliest was recorded by Creighton in August 1943 and the latest in September 1967 by Marvin Burke, a social worker and folk musician working under Creighton's tutelage. Geographically, the recordings are concentrated in greater Halifax — primarily in the historic African Nova Scotian communities of North Preston,

Cherry Brook, and Africville — except those from the Owens family of Inglewood, in the Annapolis Valley. Multiple genres are represented on the album: spirituals like “No More Auction Block for Me” and “Do Lord, Oh Do Lord” sit alongside counting and game songs like “What Band that Sunday Morning” and “Bluebird, Bluebird,” hymns like “I’ll Be with You” and “I Need No Mansions Here Below,” and the lullaby “Come Go to Bed.” Recording quality varies significantly from track to track — even tracks from the same sessions — but unfortunately the liner notes do not pro-

vide details on the original media or the remastering process.

Sankofa Songs is substantially similar to the second of a two-disc album coproduced by the HCFS and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1997-98, entitled *Lord You Brought Me A Mighty Long Way: An African Nova Scotian Musical Journey*. In fact, with the exception of a few songs included on the earlier album that were not recorded by Creighton, the track listing and much of the liner notes are identical. Unlike *Lord You Brought Me A Mighty Long Way*, however, *Sankofa Songs* does not feature any



contemporary musical interpretations of the material in the Creighton collection.

Drawing solely on Creighton's collection is not the only shift in approach, though. An unattributed section at the beginning of the liner notes, which recapitulates *Sankofa Songs'* relation to *Lord You Brought Me A Mighty Long Way* and echoes the opening lines of Croft's notes to the earlier project, inserts the following, new disclaimer:

While it must be acknowledged that Helen Creighton was rather uncomfortable collecting in Black communities and brought some of her personal biases common to people of her generation to the work she did, nevertheless, it is important to reflect upon and celebrate the work she did do. Once recorded, these precious voices are with us forever. That, in itself, is a remarkable legacy for Dr. Creighton but, equally important, for the tradition bearers who left their voices for generations to come. ("Project Summary")

This statement prompts many more questions than the one it seems to address. Uncomfortable about what? How did this discomfort shape her work? Do these "personal biases common to people of her generation" persist in her collection? What is an appropriate balance of reflection and celebration? The album does not offer additional, explicit clarification on these matters.

Undeniably, we would be much the poorer had these recordings not been made. There is also a very real benefit to increased access to these recordings, particularly for the communities from

which they were extracted. In spite of this, by failing to adequately critique Creighton's work, *Sankofa Songs* arguably perpetuates some of her biases.

In contrast to Child ballads, or even local songs from nearby white communities, Creighton rarely discussed the provenance of songs she collected in African Nova Scotian communities, nor is there much indication in her abundant personal papers at Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management that she was particularly committed to seeking out this information. In her publications, all but one of the songs she collected from African Nova Scotian singers are devoid of the scholarly citations found in her notes to the Child ballads and local songs: the exception is "Cherry Tree Carol," collected from William Riley in Cherry Brook, which is a Child ballad. Songs from African Nova Scotians evidently had a place in Creighton's Nova Scotian folk canon, but one with little context.

Sankofa Songs suffers from a similar unevenness. While the liner notes do situate the songs in an overview of African Nova Scotian history, descriptions of the album's musical content abound in the ahistorical "Africanisms" or "African retentions" paradigmatic for much of the last century — which are foreshadowed in the album title, *A Legacy of Roots and Rhythm*. Moreover, while the performers are noted for each track, none of the songs are attributed despite readily identifiable origins in many cases. "No More Auction Block for Me" is a variant of "Many Thousand Go," first published in Allen, Ware, and Garrison's *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867: 48), a fact that Neil V. Rosenberg brought to light

in 1988 (144). Other tracks are arrangements of evangelical hymns or more contemporary popular songs, like "Jesus Remember[ed] Me," written by Hank Williams and released in 1950 (as "Hank & Audrey").

Disappointingly, *Sankofa Songs* does not offer any new information on these connections. Tracing the complex and densely mediated historical processes through which these songs ended up in the repertoire of African Nova Scotian singers, and subsequently on Creighton's recordings, would not diminish the importance of the *Sankofa Songs* or their singers. Rather, doing so stands to enrich our understanding of the material considerably.

Many will enjoy the album for its musical content, as I have, and the HCFS is to be commended for making these recordings available again after long being out of print and difficult to access. At the same time, I found the HCFS's pat acknowledgement of — and immediate pivot away from — the significance of race in Creighton's collecting disconcerting, and the continued disparity of attribution disappointing, especially given the prominence of the

sankofa motif in this iteration. Scholars and general listeners alike would benefit from a more critical assessment of the role that race played in Creighton's work, and I wish that there were more of that here. Nonetheless, *Sankofa Songs* will be a valuable addition to personal and institutional collections and perhaps a starting point for these conversations in the future. ❁

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