Obery M. Hendricks Jr.*

"I AM THE HOLY DOPE DEALER": THE PROBLEM WITH GOSPEL MUSIC TODAY

> People need to get high off something spiritual, and I'm the holy dope dealer. I got this drug; I got this Jesus rock. And you can have a type of high that you've never experienced.
>
> *Kirk Franklin*[1]

Introduction

Ecstatic, euphoric, celebratory worship has always been an important part of the Black religious experience. It both predates and lives on in the African-American sojourn, as numerous scholars have attested.[2] Those of us that have grown up in the Black Church not only know Jesus for ourselves, as the old saints said that we must, but also know for ourselves the centrality of ecstatic worship. We know for ourselves what it means to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands!" We know for ourselves what it means to lift up holy hands in tearful supplication and joyful thanksgiving. We know for ourselves what it means for arms and legs to be carried away by some other spirit, for old and calloused feet to dance unctioned dances of praise, for fire-kissed tongues to

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[1]Alan Light, "Say Amen, Somebody," *Vibe* 6 (October 1997): 92. Franklin's statement is discussed in the "Conclusion" of this essay, 53-54.

[2]Among these are Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 1978), 56-74; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford: University Press, 1977), 19-29; Wyatt Tee Walker, *Somebody's Calling My Name* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 15-36; and Jon Michael Spencer, "The Rhythms of Black Folks," in *Ain't Gonna Lay My 'Ligion Down*, ed. Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 39-51.

speak languages unknown, yet uplifting. Yes, the euphoric, the celebratory, the praise-filled runs in our people as deeply as marrow. Yet, it has never been the only blood coursing our veins; praise and celebration for deliverance, without a concomitant critique of the events and conditions that our people looked to the Lord from which to deliver us, is never what has characterized the heart of African-American religious expression.

That is, until today. Today we are witnesses to a phenomenon that must turn Nat Turner[3] and Fannie Lou Hamer[4] in their miry graves. Today the prophetic consciousness that, with head and heart, once told Black people to resist the white supremacist oppression that bedeviled their every step, no longer informs the music that once inspired us to action. Although white skin color preference remains the creed of this nation,[5] today the prophet's call to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" is sel-

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[3]It is believed that "Steal Away to Jesus" was among the Spirituals used by Nat Turner to signal his compatriots for battle. See Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 44-45.

[4]Fannie Lou Hamer was known for rousing her compatriots in the Civil Rights Movement with her passionate, spontaneous eruptions into Spiritual song. See Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

[5]Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999), 29, 31, reminds us that America is "a civilization that is shaped by 244 years of chattel slavery, enslavement of African people, and 81 years of Jim Crow....White supremacy cuts through, saturates and permeates every institutional nook and cranny...." Reflective of this reality is the well-orchestrated current offensive by numerous political, legal, social, philanthropic, corporate and religious organizations against affirmative action, and the numerous other current legislative and juridicial attempts to counterbalance systematic de facto white skin color privilege. The de facto system of color privilege that pervades America today is heir to the de jure white supremacy that endured in one form or another from the earliest beginnings of the American republic until the Civil Rights Bill of 1965. For instructive summaries of the scope of this assault see George E. Curry and Trevor W. Coleman, "Hijacking Justice," *Emerge* (October 1999):42-49; and Vern E. Smith, "Showdown in Atlanta," *Emerge* (November 1999):49-56, n.b. 54-55.

dom voiced in Black sacred songs, songs that once moved the "Fightin' 54th of Massachusetts" to brave death for Glory;[6] songs that emboldened Fannie Lou to proclaim to the forces of J. Edgar KKK that she was sick and tired of being sick and tired; songs that helped us to brave Bull Connor's vicious beatings with our eyes stayed on freedom, even as our daughters lie bombed in our churches and our sons lie lynched in our yards.

Black sacred music had this power because it took pains to remind us that "Pharaoh's army got drowned-ed"; to remind us that "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, so why not everyone?"; to remind us that against all odds, Joshua and his poor band of Hebrew outcasts "fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumblin' down." It gave us songs of the comforting Jesus, yes, but also songs of the warrior Jesus; songs that helped us to stand boldly and unbowed before the most efficient engine of oppression and de-humanization ever conceived to declare, "Ride on, King Jesus! No man[7] can-a hinder me!" Songs of hope and love and resistance and change. Songs that reminded us, long before Einstein drew breath, that the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice—on earth, as in heaven.

However, despite the empowering nature of the Black sacred music of the past, in the dominant mode of Black religious music today—contemporary Gospel music—this prophetic

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[6]This is dramatically portrayed in the acclaimed motion picture "Glory."

[7]The language of the Spirituals is patriarchal, as is that of the entire Gospel genre, for that matter. In this sense, both reflect the systematic patriarchy that has always been part of the American social order. Although the writer is a staunch advocate of inclusive language and recognize its necessity in the struggle to dismantle the ravages of patriarchy, in this essay all lyrics are cited using their original wordings for the sake of historical accuracy and authenticity.

voice, this resistance voice, this biblical logic of justice, is all but stilled. Gospel music is heard everywhere today; yet, unlike the Spirituals, it does not press our suit for freedom. It does not call, as the Spirituals, for "Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell ole Pharaoh to let my people go."

Once the Black songs of Zion were heard only in the hush arbors and sequestered hearth-warmed quarters of clandestine slavery times; then in the soft, spare safety of those humming houses of refuge we called "church"; then in the rented halls and auditoriums where the studiedly sweet and mournful voices of church-dressed women and shiny-suited men brought to ultimate rejection the all-American notion that Black folk ain't nobody; then as the fruit of paternalistic bemusement, occasionally emerging in the curiously commercial eye-ball venues of Dinah Shore, Arthur Godfrey, Jack Paar and Ted Mack, where many white folks thought our music enjoyably interesting, but too exotic, too raw, and much too "jungle-fied" for anyone but the downwardly mobile and Aunt Hagar's children to claim as their own.

But the day of limited venues for Black religious music is now past. Today, Gospel music is featured daily by the most popular entertainment media in the land. The market for Gospel in recent years has grown at a seemingly exponential rate. Several Gospel artists are even numbered among the pantheon of international entertainment superstars! Yet, despite the ubiquity of Gospel music today, barely a prophet's voice doth grace the chorus; indeed, the prophet's call for justice is nowhere to be found. Today, Kirk Franklin, arguably the most commercially successful artist in the history of Gospel music, can even utter the probably well-intentioned, yet deeply problematic description of his role as a Gospel artist that is the epigraph of this essay, and cause no uproar or

even audible dissent among his Gospel compatriots. Sadly, in Gospel music today seldom is proclaimed the God of liberation—just the God of escape. Seldom is heralded the God that will deliver the world from evil, just a God who delivers us from reality. Seldom is Moses invoked, or Joshua, or dauntless Hebrew Judges and freedom fighters. And no longer is proclaimed the Exodus, that great event of liberation, that paradigmatic event of our faith, that event which empowered our people through the horrors of slavery and the unrelenting pain of Jim Crow to keep on keeping on, to keep on struggling; that event assured us, by example and analogy, that Pharaoh in the big house is accursed of God and doomed to fail, while we, the tortured heirs of the chosen Hebrew children, are blessed by heaven and bound to be free. Gospel music has gained the world, yet lost the prophetic heart of Black sacred music—the Exodus and its divine mandate of freedom, the same divine imperative of liberation echoed by Jesus as he proclaimed the purpose of his earthly ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free" (Lk. 4:18).

Statement of Thesis and Terms

It is the central thesis of this essay that the social orientation of Gospel music today, at best, is unmindful of and uninvolved with the ongoing freedom struggle of Black people in America; at worst, it unwittingly undermines that struggle. To elucidate this thesis, in this paper the writer examines the reasons for the absence of a liberation imperative in Gospel. The point of debarkation is the radical departure of Gospel music from the socio-political emphases of the Spirituals. The study

of this departure begins through analysis of the shift from the eschatological employment of Old Testament liberation motifs and prophetic sensibilities that permeate the Spirituals, to the celebratory, "otherworldly Jesus"-centered proclamations of Gospel music today that offer virtually no reference to the harsh social realities that bedevil Africans in America. In addition, the factors are examined that underlie the socio-aesthetic shift from the sensibilities of the Spirituals to the origins of Gospel music. In turn, there is a scrutiny of the relationship of this shift in genres to the change in the predominant mode of Black production from rural agrarian to urban industrial, an evolution that was, itself, the result of the great urban migration of African Americans in the early part of this century. Finally, the ways the particular emphases of the contemporary Gospel music scene are too often anathema to the socio-political interests of African Americans are identified. The writer concludes with a proposal to address the aesthetic excesses of Gospel that prevents achieving its potential as a force for holistic Black liberation.

Just a word on terminology. As used here, the term "Spirituals" refers to the body of Black sacred songs that evolved as the collective cultural expression of enslaved and, to a lesser extent, the later experience of Jim "Crow-ed" Africans in America, representing a period spanning from the early seventeenth-century to about the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This is a straightforward, traditional definition of the term. The use of the term "early" or "historic" Gospel is self-evident, referring to the first several decades of that genre, roughly form the 1920s to the 1950s and early 1960s. The use of the term "contemporary Gospel music" is less straightforward, however. The roots of contemporary Gospel can be traced to the pioneering works of Andraé

Crouch and Edwin Hawkins in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The compositions and performances of these Gospel innovators combined pop riffs and Rhythm and Blues instrumentation and production techniques with traditional Gospel music, to create the genre called "contemporary Gospel." Although the use of "contemporary Gospel" includes Crouch and Hawkins in its purview, but because of the cultural currency of the Gospel phenomenon today, here the term is understood as primarily referring to the most contemporary of African-American religious music—to the Gospel music produced in the present decade.

It is clear that the Gospel music scene today is not homogenous. Yet in terms of popular exposure and acceptance, as well as measured by commercial success, it is dominated by those artists, songs, performances, and sensibilities that focus almost exclusively on "praise-singing," that is, on the ecstatic and the celebratory, to the virtual exclusion of the prophetic, thus excluding not only the explicitly socially referential but, for that matter, excluding even the encoded references to social and political conditions that characterized the Spirituals. This sector of the Gospel music scene has become so dominant, in fact, as to virtually define the Gospel genre today. Artists that can be understood as typifying the contemporary Gospel music scene by virtue of their commercial success and wide popular acceptance are located along a broad stylistic continuum. They include Franklin, Richard Smallwood, Fred Hammond, Hezekiah Walker, Take 6, and BeBe and CeCe Winans, among others. It is to this stratum of the Gospel music genre that the use of the term "contemporary Gospel music" in this paper refers.

The writer, in this essay, is a lover of Gospel music with the fondest and earliest memories tied to this genre: my

grandmother, Laura Banks, singing "Precious Lord" (she pronounced it "pry-shush") and "Glory to His Name," back home in Charlotte Court House, Virginia, as she snapped fresh beans for our supper—the extended family, with joyful familial anticipation, following Uncle Leon Banks and his "quartet" as they traveled to myriad tiny venues in rural Virginia to place their musical gifts at the service of the Lord before handfuls of joyous believers—our later home in East Orange, New Jersey, warmed every Sunday morning by Brother Jonathan Joe Crane and his "Gospel Caravan" on WNJR ("1400 on your radio"), with father reading his Bible, contentedly drinking his daily Sanka, and mother readying my sister and me for Sunday School—as a child of six, father and I going to a "Battle of the Quartets," headlined by the "Five Blind Boys," at Newark's Greater Abyssinian Baptist Church. Even today, among the hundreds of recordings in my personal collection, the works of the "Soul Stirrers," Mahalia Jackson, the "Five Blind Boys," Helen Baylor, and Richard Smallwood hold pride of place with Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk, John and Alice Coltrane, Gerri Allen, and Wynton Marsalis.

As much as this writer loves Gospel music, the freedom of African Americans is loved more. African-American children continue to die, on an average, eight-to-ten years younger than their Euro-American counterparts. Black folks suffer disproportionately higher rates of cancer, strokes, heart disease, diabetes, and infant and maternal mortality than the national average, while our access to adequate and timely healthcare is shamefully limited; we receive far less justice from the criminal justice system; we pay significantly higher interest rates for mortgages and auto loans than other groups; and have far less access to higher education and high wage

employment. By every significant measure, the systematic suffering of Black people continues. Yet, as the praise songs of Gospel music thunder across the land, one listens in vain for lyrics of protest or even explicit acknowledgment of our plight. Therefore, because both Gospel music and my people are loved, Gospel is engaged as one would a dear, beloved friend: honestly, candidly, unflinchingly. Thus, this essay offers Gospel music the supreme compliment of being regarded seriously by not submitting it to uncritical hagiography but to the same level of analytical rigor which thoughtful scholars engage all subjects they respect. In so doing, the writer sincerely follows those who have so boldly treaded this ground before, including W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, Amiri Baraka, Wyatt Tee Walker, James H. Cone, Bernice Johnson Reagon and countless others.[8]

The Spirituals: The Prism of the African-American Social Experience

Wyatt Tee Walker has asserted, "The political and social significance of the Spiritual will be obscured if one loses sight of the fact that the Spirituals were born in slavery."[9] The importance of this point cannot be overstated, for it under-

[8]W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990; originally published in 1903), 180-190; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973; originally published as two separate volumes in 1925 and 1926); LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow, 1963); Walker, *Somebody's Calling My Name*; James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Bernice Johnson Reagon, ed., *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992). Also see the important essays in Bernard Katz, ed., *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

[9]Walker, *Somebody's Calling My Name*, 43.

scores the social setting in which the Spirituals were formed, and the social conditions and social relations with which they were invariably in dialogue. The Spirituals' tone of ceaseless hope in the inevitability of deliverance to justice empowered Black people to resist white supremacy's devaluation of our humanity and its definition of our lot as without hope. In this sense, the Spirituals are part of what can be called a discursive formation of resistance. This is a set of rules determined by the collective needs and aspirations of a particular social group; it arises out of the social and political conditions of that group's particular setting in life. It is the discursive formation that determines "what can and must be said" by the members of that group, and what the terms that are used within that discourse ultimately mean, particularly with regard to their socio-political plight.[10]

The discursive formation that gave meaning to the terms and images of the Spirituals was the ongoing African-American discourse of resistance to systematic de jure white supremacy in America. The term "resistance discourse" denotes terms, phrases, figures of speech, concepts, poetry, and songs common to a particular grouping of subjugated persons and widely understood by them as exhortative in nature, calling their hearers to resist in some way the oppression to which they are subjected.[11] The modes that these discursive forms of resistance may take range from the relatively benign, like feigning inability to understand a command or directive, to the outright use of violence.[12]

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[10]See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology* (London: Verso, 1991), 19-196. Also Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 195.

[11]See Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter, *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 85; and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 84.

[12]See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), ix-16.

The great freedom fighter Frederick Douglass contended that the resistance sensibilities of the Spirituals were so pronounced that, "Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains."[13] However, to say that Spirituals fit within the spectrum of African-American resistance discourse is to recognize that while not every individual song of the Spiritual genre explicitly refers to freedom from bondage and the eschatological institution of justice, still all Spirituals do in some way hope, counsel, or proclaim resistance to the negation of our forebears' humanity, the negation of their right to have life and that more abundantly, the negation demanded by the tenets of the system of oppression that weighed upon them. Because of the omnipresence of the oppressive gaze during the period of African-American enslavement, often this resistance was expressed in coded language, what Mikhail Bahktin has called "double-voiced" discourse, in which "the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention."[14] Music scholar Gwendolin Warren observes the double-voiced nature of the Spirituals: "without understanding...double meanings it is impossible to get a complete sense of the significance of the [S]piritual as a way African Americans resisted enslavement."[15]

The "double-voiced" resistance nature of Spirituals took a number of forms. Some songs explicitly bemoaned the slaves' suffering beneath the white supremacist heel without naming

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[13]Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Collier, 1962; originally published in [1885]), 99.

[14]Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 352.

[15]Gwendolin Sims Warren, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 16.

the specifics of their subjugation:

> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> A long, long ways from home.

Some were songs of perseverance in the struggle for personhood and liberation:

> I ain't got weary yet,
> I ain't got weary yet,
> I been in the wilderness a mighty long time,
> And I ain't got weary yet.

Others were outright proclamations of resistance, such as "Marching Up the Heavenly Road," whose lyrics are possessed of such powerful resistance sensibilities that one could well imagine it being sung by Nat Turner's army, or by soldiers in the hundreds of other slave revolts as they marched to battle:

> Marching up the heavenly road,
> I'm bound to fight until I die.
> O fare you well friends, fare you well foes,
> Marching up the heavenly road,
> I leave you all my eyes to close,
> Marching up the heavenly road.

Also consider "Great Day! Great Day!":

> This is the day of jubilee...
> The Lord has set his people free,
> God's going to build up Zion's walls!

We want no cowards in our band,
We call for valiant-hearted men,
God's going to build up Zion's walls!

And, of course:

Oh, freedom!
Oh, freedom!
Oh, freedom over me!
And before I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free!

Spirituals have played a pivotal role in the articulation of African-American resistance discourse in general because their public assertions of personhood, by definition, resist the oppressive definitions and importunities of the white supremacist social order, also because they occur in a collective medium of expression in which all can participate. In fact, the collective, communal nature of the Spiritual genre is important for two primary reasons.

First, the very act of collective song, whether in sequestered sites outside the oppressive gaze, or in postures of unobtrusive, feigned guilelessness squarely in the oppressors' presence, nonetheless helped to develop and to eventually normalize the significance of resistance themes, terms, and figures into a collective cultural product. James C. Scott calls this process "making space for a dissident subculture,"[16] with "dissidence," or rejection of the worldview and definitions promulgated by the dominant class, being the operative word. After the process of cultural dissidence has repeatedly and

[16]Scott, *Domination*, 108-153.

systematically discredited those claims, in order for the process to be meaningful to the oppressed, the claims, notions, and definitions that undergird oppression must be redefined, given constructive new meanings, or replaced by terms, concepts, and figures that serve the liberative interests of the oppressed. What cultural dissidence ultimately seeks is to counter the ideological claims, or "hegemony," of the oppressive power. Hegemony is the process by which the lines between the interests of an oppressed group and those of the class that dominates it become blurred by the systematic obfuscatory efforts of the oppressor, with the result that the oppressed unwittingly come to give assent to social definitions, even social policies, that are anathema to their own interests thus, in effect, becoming complicit in their own oppression.[17] In this sense, the cultural dissidence task of countering the effects of the hegemonic process can be called "counter-hegemony."

Citing the ethnohistorical work of Werner Sollors,[18] Theophus Smith refers to the particular counter-hegemonic process by which the African-American slaves effectively redefined biblical events and characters by the term "typological ethnogenesis." He defines this process as "the formation of peoplehood through the hermeneutic of biblical typology" in which enslaved Afro-America "envisioned and revised its existence in terms of characters and events found in the Exodus story."[19] Albert Raboteau observes:

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[17]See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), 5-23 and Joseph Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 44-45.

[18]Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[19]Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 7.

> Slaves prayed for the future day of deliverance to come, and they kept hope alive by incorporating as part of *their* mythic past the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery....The Christian slaves applied the Exodus story, whose end they knew, to their own experience of slavery, which had not ended....Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves. The sacred history of God's liberation of his people would be or was being repeated in the American South [emphasis by the author].[20]

Because of the affinity the enslaved Africans felt with the enslaved Hebrews, the Old Testament figures of Moses, Joshua, Daniel, and the Pharaoh of Egypt became typologies through which the slaves expressed their hope, their approbation, their derision and, most importantly, their definitions of justice and injustice. What is significant in this process is that the primary biblical figures used typologically in the Spirituals were resistance figures who struggled with and triumphed over worldly oppression. They were not mystical, ethereal, or pacific characters, but freedom fighters, servants of God who expressed their faith by struggling for the liberation of their people. Likewise, the litany of biblical liberation events, particularly those of the Exodus, the vanquishing of the Hebrews' enemies at Jericho, Daniel's deliverance from annihilation at the hands of his oppressors, and the Hebrews' possession of the land beyond the chilly Jordan, together constituted the most significant and widely invoked motifs of the entire Spiritual genre, with the Exodus being the primary subject of typological ethnogenesis among them. In this

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[20]Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 311.

sense, Wendell Whalum's assertion that freedom was the constant theme of the Spirituals is wholly accurate.[21]

Another significance of the Spirituals as collective cultural products is that they reflect the communal, cooperative mode of production in which they were produced, i.e., the agrarian or farming mode of production which, because it was fully dependent upon cooperative labor, extolled the virtue of, accorded normative status to, and eventually sacralized the ethos of cooperative, communal production as part of its underlying moral economy.[22] Because Spirituals are products of this agrarian-based culture of reciprocity and cooperative action, they are not individual efforts; rather, they are collective expressions of the collective ethos, hopes, dreams, fears, aspirations, angst, and anger of the African-American communities that collectively produced them. Nor were Spirituals produced as commodities, that is, for commercial transfer or exchange; they were produced for their producing communities' own collective edification and consumption. Spirituals were not crafted by their producers as personal appeals to the emotions of others but, rather, to express the collective sentiments of the communities that produced them. In other words, in the settings that produced them, the Spirituals were not performance vehicles, but products of collective expression and edification. This is an important difference between Spirituals and Gospel songs, as we shall discuss in greater depth later in this essay.

The agrarian or farming mode of production had a further significance regarding the formation of the Spirituals.

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[21]Wendell Philips Whalum, "Black Hymnody," *Review and Expositor* 70 (1973): 342.

[22]A moral economy is a constellation of ethics and values that guides and drives social relations in a particular social group. See James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

Although the enslaved Africans labored for others under the severest compulsion, still the agrarian nature of most slaves' labor and the setting of that labor in rural expanses conspired to offer them a certain sense of empowerment or, at least, possibility. It is important to note that the slaves' agrarian labor was not fully alienated in the Marxist sense, that is, it was not fully devoid of a sense of the satisfaction of creation or achievement,[23] for often the slaves literally saw the fruit of their labor grow to fruition. They raised crops they themselves planted and nurtured, and sometimes lived off the fruits of their own toil. As a result, despite the compulsory nature of their labor, the slaves could still experience some measure of the fulfillment that came from shepherding the span of cultivation to production, planting to harvest.

Therefore, although their labor was forced and often pain-filled, it was not without meaning. Moreover, the rural expanses of most slaves' settings in life offered the omnipresent hope and possibility of escape to new, more humane surroundings in which they would know a greater measure of justice in their lives. If nothing else, there always loomed for them the Promised Land of the North and its ideal of freedom. And in the immediate post-Emancipation era in which the later Spirituals were produced, agrarian labor would have been of even greater meaning to freedmen and freedwomen who had become smallholders working their own soil. Some sense of the meaning labor gave to the lives of Black agrarian workers, whether enslaved or experiencing the circumscribed "freedom" of sharecropping or rural proletariat "day work," can be culled from the blues singer

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[23]See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988), 69-84. For a succinct treatment, also Tom Bottomore, ed., *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 11-17.

B.B. King's recollection of his own boyhood as an agrarian day worker:

> In the Mississippi Delta of my childhood, cotton was a force of nature....It's how I beat back the wolf. Cotton turned me from a boy to a man, testing my energy and giving me what I needed—a means to survive. But I did more than cope with the crop. I actually loved it. It was beautiful to live through the seasons, to break the ground in the chill of winter, plant the seeds against the winds of spring, and pick the blossoms in the heat of summer.[24]

Although the pain that accompanied these factors must not be underestimated, nonetheless, it must be counted as contributing to the abiding sense of hope in the face of inhumane oppression expressed in the Spirituals. In turn, that hope reflected a sense of relative power on the part of oppressed African Americans, albeit small, that they might in some way effect changes in their worldly circumstances.

This measure of control offered by the agrarian mode of production, as well as the perceived possibility of effecting change in their own circumstances, is reflected in the eschatological nature of the slaves' hope. Eschatology generally refers to one's belief or understanding of how the present world order will end. From a perusal of the Spiritual genre, it is clear that the slaves harbored eschatological hopes for the comfort of heaven, but it is also clear that they expected

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[24]B.B. King, *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King* (New York: Avon, 1996), 57. The extreme importance of agrarian labor to the self-definition of the smallholder is reflected in greater depth in the testimony of the eponymous African-American peasant activist in Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

justice in this world as well or, as W.E.B. DuBois says, they held "a faith in the ultimate justice of things."[25] This eschatological expectation for justice in this world is richly expressed by David Walker's 1829 polemical *Appeal*:

> Remember [white] Americans, that we must and shall be free, and enlightened as you are, will you wait until we shall, under God, obtain our liberty by the crushing arm of power?....We must and shall be free I say, in spite of you. You may do your best to keep us in wretchedness and misery, to enrich you and your children, but God will deliver us from under you.[26]

Walker uses "shall" and "must," terms that brook no uncertainty. The eschatology of justice that he expresses knew neither the day nor the hour, but it held no doubt of the outcome. This is the same eschatological certainty of deliverance that is expressed by the Spiritual when it proclaims:

> "I ain't got long to stay here."

The Normative Elements of Black Sacred Music

The Spirituals grew out of the collective root experience of the exclusion and oppression that has always pervaded African-American reality and, as a genre, was informed by the contours of that experience. Because the awareness and expression of that root reality is an intrinsic constituent of the Spiritual genre and since the Spiritual is the earliest form of African-American music, it is compelling cultural logic that the sensi-

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[25]DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 188.

[26]David Walker, *Appeal in Four Articles* (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1989; originally published in 1829), 80.

bilities of the Spirituals be considered to constitute the normative elements of Black sacred music. These sensibilities include the prophetic functions of naming the oppressive reality and exhorting resistance to it, and the eschatological expectation of justice in this world. Moreover, an important characteristic of Spirituals is that they offer empathy and comfort for suffering even as they counsel resistance, the empathic nature of the genre should be included among the normative elements of Black sacred song.

Because they constitute the well out of which Black sacred music sprang, these normative characteristics must be considered collectively to constitute the primary evaluative criteria by which the cultural relevance of Black sacred music to the ongoing struggle of African Americans for equity and justice may be determined. To summarize, these criteria include: (1) collective acknowledgment of oppression, (2) prophetic critique of the race-based system and sensibilities that produce and perpetuate that oppression, (3) exhortation to resist the importunities of that systematic oppression, (4) while simultaneously offering comfort and empathy in its midst. It is a thesis of this essay that with the exception of its stress on the empathic, contemporary Gospel music fails to fulfill these criteria which, ultimately, are so crucial to the quest of African Americans to have life with the same abundance in American society as citizens of European descent. We will explore this claim.

Gospel Music: Hear No, See No, Speak No (Political) Evil

In many of today's churches, Gospel music has virtually replaced Spirituals, yet Gospel music represents a real shift

in consciousness and worldview from the Spirituals. Despite real differences, however, there are significant points of continuity between the two.

Commonalities with Spirituals: Hope, Immanence, and Deliverance from Burdens

First, both Spirituals and gospel songs are primarily expressions of hope and affirmation. Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1993) who, along with Charles A. Tindley (1851-1933), was a seminal figure in Gospel music, said of his role in the origins of the genre during the Great Depression, "I wrote to give [the people] something to lift them out of that depression."[27] He went on to explain, "We intended [G]ospel to strike a happy medium for the downtrodden. This music lifted people out of the muck and mire of poverty and loneliness, of being broke, and gave them some kind of hope anyway."[28] Gospel great Mahalia Jackson epitomized the overall significance of hope to Gospel music in this way: "[G]ospel songs are songs of hope. When you sing them you are delivered of your burden."[29]

The unrelenting hopefulness of Gospel songs is seen for instance, in "I've Got a Feeling (Everything's Gonna Be Alright)" and Dorsey's "The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow," which reflects the certainty of God's mercy and deliverance from suffering. The Spirituals hold a similar certainty that despite the pain of the present moment, "There is a Balm in Gilead." In addition to the certainty of eventual comfort and rest, the

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[27]Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound*, rev. ed. (New York: Limelight, 1997), 27. This has proven to be an important resource, particularly for the study of the culture of Gospel music.

[28]Ibid., 35.

[29]Mahalia Jackson, *Movin' On Up* (New York: Hawthorne, 1966), 72.

Spirituals also held the eschatological certainty of justice, as seen in "Jacob's Ladder":

> We are climbing Jacob's ladder
> Every round goes higher and higher
> We are climbing higher and higher,
> Soldiers of the cross.

In addition, both Spirituals and Gospel music attest to the immanence and omnipresence of God as central to their proclamations. While the Spiritual testifies, "God Don't Ever Change," "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" and "My God Is So High You Can't Get over Him," Gospel music sings, "He Has Never Left Me Alone," "His Eye Is on the Sparrow and I Know He Watches Me," and "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand."

Moreover, even as Gospel evolved its own distinctive markings, forms and accompanying musical culture, in some quarters the early Gospel music retained from its Spiritual roots something of the character of a collective cultural product, at least in the sense that performance of it was not specialized or individualized. This is attested by no less than Sallie Martin, an important associate of Dorsey and a pioneer of Gospel music in her own right, who recalls of those early years, "We didn't have no soloists. We would all sing together."[30]

Differences: Meek Jesus, Absent Moses, Individuation and the Timetable of Justice

Despite the similarities between the two genres, however, their differences are profound with worldviews that differ

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[30]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 7.

radically. Whereas typologies of Old Testament liberation themes and motifs were central for Spirituals, this is not true with Gospel music. It is not the Hebrew children struggling for freedom that dominate Gospel songs, but Jesus. And not just any Jesus, but specifically the pacific, meek, mild, otherworldly Jesus. As Lawrence Levine observes, the figure of Jesus that predominates the Gospel songs "is not the warrior Jesus of the [S]pirituals but a benevolent spirit who promised His children rest and peace and justice in the hereafter."[31] This is attested today by Gospel titles such as "Christ Is All," "I'd Rather Have Jesus," "Jesus Knows and Will Supply My Every Need," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," and "Jesus Is the Answer to Every Problem," to name just a few.

Moreover, Spirituals generally were the product of anonymous collective authorship and, therefore, did not identify with a particular individual member of the community. Conversely, although the thoughts and emotions expressed in Gospel songs are often universal in scope and emphasis, the songs themselves have, from the beginning, been written, copyrighted and often widely identified with individuals. Thus, unlike the communal nature of Spirituals, Gospel songs are of individual authorship and ownership. One commentator observes, "The creation and development of that African-American art called [G]ospel music and its wide acceptance by 1950 can be attributed to fewer than one dozen composers."[32]

Furthermore, whereas the eschatology of the Spirituals ultimately foresees the establishment of God's justice in this world, the eschatology of Gospel songs is apocalyptic and otherworldly in orientation. Apocalyptic as a worldview

[31]Levine, *Black Culture*, 175.

[32]Horace Clarence Boyer, "Charles Albert Tindley: Progenitor of African American Gospel Music," in *We'll Understand It Better*, 53.

expresses a sense of powerlessness to effect meaningful positive change in an unjust social order, a sense that because the odds against victory and vindication in this world are so overwhelming and so insurmountable that there is nothing one can do but "wait on the Lord" for a new day.[33] Thus, although both genres hold hope in common, the Gospel hope is not for justice in this world, as is the Spiritual, but for deliverance from this world. The locus of the hope of Gospel songs is "over yonder," as seen in "I'll Fly Away":

> Just a few more weary days and then,
> I'll fly away.
> To a land where joys will never end,
> I'll fly away.

Apocalyptic is seen in even bolder relief in the evocation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, one of the foremost examples of New Testament apocalyptic, in "I'll Be Caught Up in the Air to Meet Him":

> I'll be caught up to meet him,
> I'll be caught up to greet him.
> Joy and happiness will be mine...

Also, unlike the Spirituals' general tone of response to and expression of collective, communal woes experienced within the community, Gospel songs generally have a personal, individual tone. Indeed, they are generally written out of specific personal experiences and personal realizations. For instance, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," the world's best-

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[33]See John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

known Gospel song (it has been translated into some fifty languages), was written by Thomas Dorsey after the death of his young wife and unborn child. Similarly, Lucie Campbell wrote "He Understands, He'll Say Well Done" after her fellow congregants rescinded her beloved local church membership after a bitter church controversy.[34]

Another area of difference between the two genres lies in their respective moral foci. The primary moral focus of Spirituals is largely horizontal, i.e., upon group morality, concerned with effecting right relations with humankind; the practical measure of its ethics and morality is how one functions in community. It is important to note that the Spirituals' focus on collective ethics or morality does not imply that the communities that produced them valued personal moral behavior less highly than collective morality. However, because of the baldness of the systematic white supremacy under which they lived, it was crucial to the survival of the subjugated African Americans that they also adjudge moral behavior by one's role in the plight of the Black community, i.e., as either oppressor (this included collaborators such as loyal "house negroes," and Black overseers),[35] or as resistor to oppression, the latter being defined by one's relative contribution to the edification and survival of the Black community.

Instead of the collective morality of the Spirituals, however, the primary moral focus of Gospel music stresses vertical moral behavior, i.e., piety whose main concern is with one's individual relationship to God, with secondary emphasis

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[34]Charles Walker, "Lucie E. Campbell Williams: A Cultural Biography," in *We'll Understand It Better*, 129-130.

[35]This kind of moral judgement is reflected, for instance, in the unyielding refusal of the insurrectionist Denmark Vesey to include "house n[egroes]" among his co-conspirators. See David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 70.

upon actively striving to serve one's neighbor (although the only real evidence of such a relationship with God is right treatment of those God created). This difference in moral focus can be seen by considering Jesus' summation of "the greatest Law" in Mt. 22:37-39. While the Spirituals can be understood to stress the horizontal, communal facet of the pronouncement, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39), Gospel music stresses its vertical, personal aspect, i.e., "Love your Lord your God with all your heart" (Mt. 22:37). Even Gospel songs with seeming resistance sensibilities, such as "I Am on the Battlefield for My Lord," ultimately have reference to struggles with personal morality, rather than to struggles against the oppressive forces of the world. This difference in emphasis is rooted in changes in both the social and material conditions of African Americans, which we shall now explore.

This emphasis on individual morality is an important emphasis of early Gospel music and is reflected in admirable ways in the lives of its early pioneers who, for the most part, were apparently men and women of great conviction and dramatic personal moral rectitude. This moral emphasis is expressed in songs such as Thomas Dorsey's "Live the Song I Sing About" and his "Highway to Heaven":

> It's a highway to heaven
> None can go up there but the pure in heart.

In her inimitable way, Sallie Martin reflects the emphasis on personal morality in the early Gospel culture: "There isn't but one thing that I say will keep us back and that is singing one thing and then doing...different when you get out of your service....If we can't live right, then why did Jesus leave it here with us?"[36]

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[36]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 17.

As the result of this emphasis on individual feelings and experiences and personal morality, at its core Gospel music evolved a deeply empathic tone. The empathy, however, differed from the Spirituals' acknowledgment of common suffering under an oppressive social order. Instead, the empathy of Gospel inhered in its acknowledgment of personal angst and suffering, personal doubt and feelings of unworthiness. Its personal emphathic nature fuels the emotionalism of Gospel music today which, in turn, informs the highly emotion-charged performance-orientation that underpins the genre.

Eschewing Prophetic Critique

Cited above was the explanation by Thomas Dorsey, universally hailed as the father of Gospel music, that hope lay at the heart of Gospel music. Dorsey's concluding comment in that explanation illustrates the difference between the hope of the Spirituals and the hope of Gospel songs: "Make it anything [other] than good news," he says, and "it ceases to be [G]ospel."[37] In addition to highlighting the contrasting emphases on hope in the two genres, Dorsey's remark reveals that in its quest to soothe the suffering of the Black masses, Gospel music consciously eschews both prophetic critique and activist engagement of the social order that underlies much of the suffering it seeks to assuage. It is understandable that Dorsey sought to lighten the load of a people already inundated daily by more bad news at the hands of white supremacy than any people should be asked to endure. Indeed, lightening their load was necessary for African-Americans' pyscho-emotional health. In addition to the great source of comfort Gospel music came to consti-

[37]Ibid., 35.

tute for the beleagured Black community, the general unwillingness, however, of Gospel artists to cite bad news, to critique or even acknowledge the systemic causes of Black folks' pain, resulted in an extremely unfortunate consequence: the tone of Gospel music became studiously and conscientiously non-prophetic.

Prophetic Critique and Painful Memory

Prophetic critique can be defined as principled public criticism of and opposition to systemic injustice, based upon the biblical logic of justice that is reflected, for instance, in Psalm 72:

> Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice....He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressors (Ps. 72:1-2, 4).

Prophetic engagement of social and political issues is grounded in the enduring example of biblical prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, who all spoke "thus saith the Lord" against the oppressors in their own socio-historical settings. In fact, one of the most powerful and memorable phrases of the great freedom fighter, Martin Luther King Jr. is from Amos: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24). Close examination of the Spirituals reveals that many of them embodied the concern for social justice that is the goal of prophetic critique. Examples from the Spirituals include, "You Shall Reap (what you sow)," "You Got a Right (to the tree of life)," and "Some of These Days (I'm gonna tell God how you treat me)."

To be sure, a similar prophetic critique of the foremost institutional evil of the present age, i.e., systematic white skin color privilege in America, is indispensable to the struggle to alleviate the ongoing marginalization and oppression of African Americans. Despite its importance, however, prophetic critique is yet another reminder for the victims of oppression of the omnipresence of their suffering; it simply is not good news in the sense in which Professor Dorsey speaks. It certainly would not have been good news for Dorsey to have reminded his hearers that, for instance, just a few years before he wrote, President Woodrow Wilson had refused to sign an anti-lynching law, or that Wilson had tearfully praised the preposterously racist movie "Birth of a Nation" for its "truth," or that one Black man, woman or child was then being lynched every thirty-six hours. The humanity of people of African descent was so devalued that Africans were exhibited as sub-human curiosities in American zoos little more than a decade before Dorsey began his Gospel career. In one of the most infamous of these instances, in 1906 Ota Benga, a Pygmy from southern Africa, was imprisoned and displayed in a monkey cage at New York City's Bronx Zoo.[38] That Black folks could once again legally be detained as animals could only have heightened their ongoing sense of insecurity living in the overarching context of white supremacy in America; for most, particularly Black children, it must have been traumatic and frightening beyond words.

It is understandable, then, that according to Dorsey's stated logic, discussion of or even allusion to the painful social reality of African Americans would have to be off-limits if Gospel music were to "strike a happy medium for the downtrodden,"[39] as Dorsey stated as his goal. Unfortunately, the sad

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[38]See Phillips Verner Bradford and Harvey Blume, *Ota Benga: The Pygmy in the Zoo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

[39]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 35.

result of this unwillingness to explicitly address the bad news of African-American oppression is that from its inception, generally the Gospel music genre has self-consciously avoided prophetic critique of the ravages wrought upon Black people by white supremacy. In the final analysis, the political quietism of Gospel music—its unwillingness to critique the bad news of the injustice and exploitation suffered by Black folks—has contributed to the maintenance of the oppressive American social order by domesticating the outrage that would otherwise have fueled political resistance and activism bent on establishing a more just American society.

Residues of the Prophetic

To acknowledge the generally non-prophetic character of Gospel music, however, is not to claim that the genre has been totally devoid of songs exhibiting socio-political sensibilities. To be sure, some of the early Gospel songs seem to stray from Dorsey's definition of the genre. In fact, a number of the early Gospel songs do explicitly acknowledge socio-political and socio-economic realities. Significant examples include "No Segregation in Heaven" and "Stalin Wasn't Stallin,'" both recorded in 1942 by the "Golden Gates Quartet," and C.A. Tindley's early (Tindley died in 1933), yet still popular composition "Leave It There," which begins:

> If this world from you withhold,
> All its silver and its gold
> And you have to get along on meager fare...

Indeed, some of Tindley's songs were exhortations specifically addressed to the poor and downtrodden, as in "I'll Overcome":

> If in my life I do not yield
> I'll overcome some day.

Socio-political sensibilities are also seen in early Gospel pageants that stressed racial pride. The remarkable Lucie Campbell (1885-1963) who, incidentally, was the first African-American woman to publish a Gospel song, was hailed for presenting a number of such events, including "Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice" and "Ethiopia, Stretch Forth Your Hands unto God."[40] And who can listen to Mahalia Jackson's renditions of "How I Got Over" and "My Soul Looks Back and Wonders" without hearing the sting of Jim Crow, the hurt of exclusion, the gnawing pain of unjust enforced impoverishment? Or the "Soul Stirrers" "Any Day Now," in which the plaintive tones of the group's lead singer, Sam Cooke, as Michael Dyson observes,

> evokes a world teeming with cultural nuances hidden from white society....Though Cook is singing about going to heaven, he masks a complaint about earthly restrictions on black life by pining for a day when there's 'no sorrow or sadness/Just only complete gladness....'It's the way Cook bends the notes, shaping his desire for freedom...[41]

Rev. W. Herbert Brewster is probably the most noteworthy example of a Gospel songwriter whose works reflect socio-political sensibilities. A political radical for his time, Brewster wrote numerous tracts urging Black liberation. He coined the

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[40]Luvenia A. George, "Lucie E. Campbell: Her Nurturing and Expansion of Gospel Music in the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A.," in *We'll Understand It Better*, 116-117.

[41]Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (New York: Oxford, 1996), 60-61. Here Dyson uses "Cook," the original spelling of the singer's name before changed for show-business purposes.

motto, "Out of the amen corner onto the street corner," by which he both indicted the lack of social action of his ministerial colleagues and attempted to cajole them to act. Among his musical compositions was a pageant play with pronounced political resonances entitled, "From Auction Block to Glory," as well as "Deep Dark Waters," a social commentary about drugs.[42] In a clear act of racial pride, Brewster even renamed a young choir singer "Q.C. Anderson" in honor of Queen Candace of Ethiopia.[43]

Brewster's lyrics seemed always to have as a subtext the socio-political-economic realities facing African Americans. Songs like "How I Got Over" and "Move on Up a Little Higher" (both later popularized by Mahalia Jackson), while extolling the "good news" of triumphant deliverance, in good prophetic fashion also evoked the injustice that the singer—and the hearer—seeks over which to triumph. "The fight for rights here in Memphis was pretty rough on the Black Church," explains Brewster. "The lily white, the black, and the tan were locking horns; and the idea struck me and I wrote that song, 'Move on up a Little Higher"....That was a protest idea and inspiration."[44] For instance, consider "These Are They," Brewster's rich evocation of images found in the Book of Revelation:

> These are they from every nation
> Who have washed their garments white,
> Coming up, coming up through great tribulation
> To a land of pure delight.

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[42]Kip Lornell, *Happy in the Service of the Lord: African-American Sacred Vocal Harmony Quartets in Memphis*, 2d ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1995), 141.

[43]Ibid., 143.

[44]Herbert Brewster, "Rememberings," in *We'll Understand It Better*, 201.

The line "coming up..." evokes the image of "they" as the downtrodden who, in the context of Brewster and his African-American audience, would certainly be identified as Black folks, struggling against oppression. A student of New Testament Greek, Brewster was probably aware that "thlibo," the Greek term from which "tribulation" is typically translated, does not simply signify bad luck or random trying circumstances, but literally means "to press down"—signifying "oppression," which is political and systemic in nature.

Other songs exhibiting socio-political sensibilities featured applications of biblical passages that exhorted deliverance from subjugation, such as "If I Had My Way":

> Well they tell me God almighty
> Rode on the wings of the wind
> And he saw old Samson and he called to him
> Said he whispered low into Samson's mind
> Said "Deliver my children from the Philistines."

Thus, it is clear that some of the early Gospel songs do acknowledge exploitation and social injustice; nonetheless, the consistent solution they imposed is not the kind of prophetic engagement that is prescribed by the Spirituals. They do not critique the social order that withholds wealth from Black folks and relegates them to subsisting on meager fare, to use Tindlay's lyrical social description. Rather than requiring action against the systemic causes of poverty, the Gospel songs can instead be understood to counsel inaction. An instructive example is seen in Tindley's "Leave It There." Although the song laments the effect of the exploitative American social order, it concludes by advising, in effect, "don't bother to try to change things, simply..."

...Take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there.

Despite the existence of a socio-politically conscious stratum in the genre, most early Gospel songs eschewed explicit reference to the ongoing bad news of the socio-political plight of African Americans. Still, because oppression, marginalization, and exploitation represented a large part of the lived experience of African Americans, some early Gospel songs did implicitly reflect that social reality, sometimes consciously so, if in the most subtle terms. Unlike early Gospel, however, the Gospel music of today not only seldom reflects recognition of African-Americans' plight, but often seems to gloss it over. This can, of course, reflect the lower level of politicization of African Americans today that apparently is the result of the dismantling of systematic de jure white skin color privilege and the lowering of the most blatant barriers to Black advancement. But it probably also exposes an alarming lack of popular awareness of the continuing legacy of de facto white skin color privilege in America that, in turn, is the result of successful hegemonic obfuscation of the racist underpinnings of much of United States domestic and foreign policy. Of contemporary Gospel's lack of recognition of socio-political realities, Gospel pioneer Miss Sallie Martin observes, albeit a bit exaggeratedly, "I think the old songs were written out of some kind of burden....Nowadays nobody has no worry or struggles."[45]

The Evolution of Gospel Music

If the Spirituals are normative Black sacred music, as we have argued, then why did Gospel music evolve sensibilities that diverged from it? Indeed, how do we account for the

[45]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 17.

development of the Gospel music genre?

As we just discussed, the fundamental theological shifts and perspectival differences between the Spiritual and Gospel musical genres are pronounced and, in some ways, profound. This writer believes that these differences are largely the result of the shift in the mode of production of the masses of African Americans from rural agrarian to urban industrial.

If the rural agrarian setting of the Spirituals in some ways empowered Black folks, the urban industrial settings to which they migrated in the first decades of this century in other ways dis-empowered them. Whereas the rural settings of the Spirituals afforded some measure of expanse and possibility, the tone of the stifling, overcrowded urban ghettoes is one of constriction and severely limited horizons. And whereas many enslaved Africans and, later, Black sharecroppers and smallholders, had known the sometimes small, yet often meaningful affirmation that comes from agricultural production, most urban blacks know only alienated labor which afforded them little sense of the satisfaction of creation and accomplishment.[46]

The majority of Black laborers in urban industry, particularly males, work in factories, mostly as assembly-line workers. What is significant is that assembly-line labor, by definition, is mind-numbing and dis-empowering. Indeed, Frederick Taylor, the father of assembly line production, or "Taylorism," as it first was called, declared, "In our scheme, we do not ask the initiative of our men. We do not want any initiative. All we want of them is to obey orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quick."[47] To assembly workers in general he

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[46]See note 23.

[47]George F. Will, review of *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*, Robert Kanigel, *New York Times Sunday Book Review* 15 June, 1997, 8.

remarked, "[We] have you for your strength and mechanical ability, and we have other men for thinking."[48] Being confronted by a mode of labor that so discounted their basic humanity could only have compounded the migrants' sense of dis-empowerment and further dashed their sinking hopes for life abundant.

The Apocalyptic Origins of Gospel Music

Although the de facto chattel status that Black migrants found in Northern urban industrial settings was in many ways no worse than that to which they were accustomed in the rural South, the stifling working conditions and the alienated nature of the labor they performed, ultimately prevented their chattel status in the North from being offset by the psychic satisfaction of being producers and cultivators as it had been to some extent in the South. The Black workers were now simply cogs in a wheel who produced neither crop, craft, nor the fruit of personal ingenuity; as assembly workers they performed tasks that, by themselves, were meaningless and abstract. Under both the slavocracy and Reconstruction the hope of would-be immigrants to the Northern cities was on freedom, on leaving behind the white-hot heat of Southern oppression. But having followed the "drinking gourd" to the northern Promised Land proclaimed by the Spirituals and still finding themselves counted as chattel, the Black migrants' hopes of justice were sorely disappointed.

Urban life subjected them to new indignities compounded by their alienation from the agrarian lands to which their lives and livelihoods had been tied. Instead of fertile soil and the

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[48]Ibid.

ubiquitous greenery of nature, they now pondered concrete and asphalt. In the rural South there at least had been the possibility that they might one day own a plot of land free and clear, but in the urban landscape property ownership was a grudgingly, if not bitterly, acccepted impossibility for most. Further, limited and grossly inadequate urban living facilities often resulted in the separation of the extended families that had been a mainstay of their lives in the rural South. In short, the world of the Black urban migrants offered few of the social support mechanisms they had known in the South. As one commentator put it, "There was no Promised Land to own in the North, just landlords threatening eviction of those who fell behind in their rent. A better name would have been the 'Promises Land.'"[49]

When the harsh realities of their new setting in life became inexorably clear, it must have seemed to the weary migrants that if neither Lincoln's emancipation nor urban migration had brought them relief from oppression, then maybe there simply was no relief to be had in this world. So, like the oppressed and beleagured first-century Christians who, as the result of their accumulated traumas, became unable to envision justice under the Roman Empire, and looked instead to "a new heaven and a new earth" (cf. Rev. 21:1), so too, the Black urban migrants also succumbed to apocalypticism and began to direct their fading hopes from the here-and-now, which was the locus of defeat and disappointment. This did not offer the prospect of justice to the apocalyptic "new heaven and new earth," a locus that did offer the possibility of justice and victory. Indeed, having left the South for the idealized freedom of the North, where else could these Black

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[49]Karl Evanzz, *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 55.

migrants now hope to run except to a "new heaven and new earth"? In this sense, the hope of Gospel music is a hope born of disappointment, of powerlessness, of conceding the dominion of life on earth to the principalities and powers of earthly domination. It is a hope that says, in effect, "It is clear that there will be no justice for me in this world. Nothing I can do will make a difference, so I'll just wait on the Lord. I'll just leave it all to Jesus." At its core, then, Gospel music embodies the classic apocalyptic feeling of powerlessness to forestall the oppressive forces of this world which, in turn, is accompanied by a sense of resignation to ongoing social misery at the hands of oppressors until the apocalyptic "day of the Lord" (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2).

Mode of Production, Mode of Presentation: Assembly Lines and Trickeration

The influence upon the evolution of Gospel music by both urban industrialism and the assembly line mode of production that emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century is not only seen in the apocalyticism of the genre, but also in the way Gospel music itself is produced, i.e., in its own mode of production. Just as the restrictive housing patterns and living conditions that were the result of industrialism fractured the extended family form that had characterized the agrarian mode of production, causing discrete, separate nuclear families and fragmented families to eventually predominate; and just as the demands of Taylorism divided manual labor into firmly regimented sets of separate and specialized tasks, Gospel music was also influenced by and succumbed to the specialization demands of the new urban industrial culture in which the new migrants found themselves. Notwithstanding

Sally Martin's testimony that the early Gospel she witnessed and participated in retained some of the sense of the collective production of the Spirituals,[50] the production of most Gospel music, almost from its beginnings, was caught in the wake of the larger productive forces of the American political economy, itself becoming widely specialized and individualized. The roots of this process lie with none other than Thomas Dorsey, who in 1926 published his first Gospel tune, "If You See My Savior, Tell Him That You Saw Me." This began the process of Gospel songs being sold as commodities, first as sheet music, then as recordings. Individuals owned copyrights to the songs, which were not identified with locales or the conditions and plights that spawned them, as was the case with the Spirituals, but with particular individual performers, thus effectively removing them from their respective contextualizing socio-political referents.

The specialization spawned by the urban industrial mode of production is also reflected in Gospel's mode of presentation, with soloists for the first time becoming the norm in Black sacred song. There had often been a leader in the Spirituals' tradition of call-and-response, which was the descendent of the traditional African ring shout, but the role of the solo in Gospel music is much more pronounced. In Gospel music there are two basic types of soloists: individual soloists singing alone, and solo leads of quartets. The earliest "quartet"[51] soloists, or lead singers, generally were not emphasized; the accepted practice was that they were given

[50]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 17.

[51]In Gospel parlance, the term "quartet" refers generally to a small group of indeterminate number singing in harmony, rather than specifically denoting a group of four members. Thus, the term can designate a quintet or even a sextet. The term's emphasis is on function rather than form. See Lornell, *Happy in the Service*, 49.

no special position with respect to other group members, but simply sang their solos and blended back into the group harmony. This practice changed as the result of the innovations of several Gospel groups, particularly the "Soul Stirrers," who not only brought the lead singer physically out in front of the other singers, but who also incorporated a second "lead" singer to replace the first one's role in the quartet harmony. Also, this innovation effectively freed the first lead to take much longer solos without concern for disrupting the group's harmonic flow. This breaking of precedent yielded another development that has become a mainstay in gospel music: the technique of ad-libbing, or "hard Gospel" style, which was given its first wide exposure, again by the "Soul Stirrers" and their original lead, Robert H. Harris, on the recording "Shine on Me, Featuring R.H. Harris," which was produced in the mid-1940s.

The Advent of "Clowning"

Initially, for all its ecstatic, emotional quality, the limits of the performance-orientation of Gospel music were, for the most part, circumscribed by the emphasis on dignified comportment that most Gospel singers were known to maintain even at the height of ecstatic celebration, or "getting happy," in keeping with Gospel's emphasis on emotional comfort and personal moral and spiritual uplift. For instance, the decorum and dignified bearing of singer/songwriter Miss Lucie E. Campbell was said to be so inspiring that folks came from miles around just to see her walk across stage.[52] However, the freedom to perform and ad-lib that evolved in Gospel music eventually led to a startling new development that transformed

[52]Walker, "Lucie Campbell," in *We'll Understand It Better*, 126.

Gospel's emphasis on dignified bearing. That development, with its apparent beginnings in the 1940s, was the practice of "clowning," so-called by early Gospel afficionados to denote actions or phrasings undertaken primarily for their entertainment value. In a startlingly candid recognition of the emphasis of this practice on manipulation of the audiences' emotions to maximize the impact of Gospel performances, Ira Tucker, the veteran leader of the "Dixie Hummingbirds," called it "trickeration."[53]

Rev. Julius Cheeks of the "Sensational Nightingales," a highly popular group in the 1940s and 1950s, claims to have begun the practice of clowning: "I was the first to cut the fool...[to] do what the people wanted."[54] Ira Tucker made the same claim, asserting that all Gospel singers before him sang "flat-footed." "I started this hip-slapping all the quartets do," Tucker claimed. "I jumped off my first stage in Suffolk, Virginia [in 1944]....Shoot, what James Brown does, I've been doing."[55]

Despite the claims of Cheeks and Tucker, the "clowning" performance-orientation in Gospel music was also in evidence as early as the 1940s in the Virginia-based "Golden Gate Quartet's" performances with swing bands, and in the appearances of the guitar-playing Sister Rosetta Tharpe at New York's Cotton Club and Cafe Society Downtown night spots.[56]

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[53]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 49.

[54]Ibid., 121.

[55]Ibid., 48.

[56]In some of her recordings Tharpe sounds eerily reminscent of the seminal Depression-era Delta bluesman Robert Johnson, particularly in her classically bluesy "Nobody's Fault But Mine." Interestingly, this song mentions neither God nor Jesus, although it does mention prayer. For comparison, consider "Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings" (Columbia/Legacy C2K 64916). For further information on Johnson, an important figure in Black music in his own right, see, in addition to the accompanying liner notes, Robert Guralnick, *Searching for Robert Johnson* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1989).

Although the emphasis on performance-orientation does seem to have been heightened, if not originated, by the antics of Ira Tucker, it became much more marked in the fifties and sixties with the "Clara Ward Singers," who regularly performed their highly stylized and flamboyant act in night clubs, often sporting huge identical wigs and fancy outfits sometimes bordering on the outlandish. It can be argued that it was the "Ward Singers" who set the stage for the intense commercialism and widespread acceptance of the heightened performance-orientation that now characterizes contemporary Gospel music. In this sense, Ward can be seen as the precursor of such developments in Gospel as Kirk Franklin's appearance on the long-running R&B, funk, rap television show "Soul Train," as well as of similar appearances by Gospel artists in other pop music venues.

Like many Gospel performers today, Clara Ward defended her group's behavior by paraphrasing Lk. 14:23, the biblical verse often used to justify Gospel performances in secular commercial entertainment venues: "the Lord told us to go into the highways and hedges as well." On one such occasion an angry young man is said to have replied to Ward,"You know folks don't come to clubs to get saved. They want to see Negroes make damn fools of themselves."[57]

The exaggerated "clowning" performance-orientation of Gospel music was taken to new heights in the 1960s and 1970s by a number of artists, including the flamboyant Alex Bradford, whom Gospel music scholar Anthony Heilbut calls "Gospel's Little Richard."[58] By this time "wrecking the house," i.e., moving an audience to the heights of emotional pandemonium, had long been the widely accepted goal of Gospel per-

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[57]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 105.
[58]Ibid., 145.

formances and remains so today. In the contemporary era, this performance-orientation is seen not only in the vocal gymnastics and the purposefully repetitive arrangements by which Gospel artists routinely attempt to eke every bit of emotion out of songs, but also in the choreography of artists such as Hezekiah Walker and Ricky Dillard, the latter of whom "cut up" as a featured performer in "Leap of Faith," Steve Martin's motion picture critique of the excesses of the performance-based strain of contemporary evangelical religion.

In response to the pervasive emphasis on the "clowning" and performance-orientation of the genre, one of the key-figures in early Gospel, Rev. Claude Jeter, who sang with the "Swan Silvertones" from the 1940s to the 1950s, acknowledges, "We've had too much form and fashion on stage."[59] The venerable Thomas Dorsey was a primary architect of the apolitical apocalyptic perspective that came to permeate Gospel, and his business acumen was an important factor in its commercialization. Still, Dorsey professed to be no advocate of "clowning" and excessive performance-orientation:

> I find some...who have too many embellishments that may be mistaken for spirit. Variations on the piano or organ or swinging a song beyond its beauty is not spirit. Loud vociferous singing, uninspired gesticulations or self-incurred spasms of the body is not spirit. I believe in shouting, running, and crying out if the holy spirit comes upon one, but I don't believe in going to get the spirit before it comes.[60]

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[59]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 116.

[60]Thomas A. Dorsey, "Ministry of Music in the Church," in *Improving the Music in the Church*, ed. Kenneth Morris (Chicago: Martin and Morris, 1949), 42.

The politically astute Rev. Herbert Brewster goes further, characterizing the performance-orientation of Gospel music as "all heat and no light."[61] Brewster observed of the early days of Gospel,"We didn't have none of this modern clowning."[62] No less than Aretha Franklin argues passionately that, "when it makes you want to dance and pop your fingers, believe me, it isn't [G]ospel....Gospel is a higher calling; [G]ospel is about God."[63] In the final analysis, however, although "clowning" initially caused Cheeks and other practitioners to be ejected from churches rejecting what they felt to be the trivialization of Black sacred music, the practice eventually became an accepted phenomenon, its entertainment value and appeals to emotion apparently winning the day. The triumph of entertainment sensibilities can be witnessed weekly in every broadcast medium. One of the most popular of these venues is "Bobby Jones Gospel," a syndicated television program seen weekly by five million viewers. "Bobby Jones Gospel" presents Gospel performers in a variety show entertainment format in which each seems intent not only on praising the Lord, but on "wrecking the house" as well. "Bobby Jones Gospel" is the epitome of the performance-orientation that has pervaded Gospel. Unfortunately, "Bobby Jones" and programs like it regularly showcase this orientation to America as being normative for Black sacred music, thus effectively mitigating popular critical engagement of the excesses of Gospel.

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[61]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 104.

[62]Ibid., 117.

[63]Aretha Franklin, *Aretha: From These Roots* (New York: Villard, 1999), 220.

Commodification and the Evolution of "Audience"

With the development of the specialization and the heightened performance aspects of Gospel, members of the believing community for the first time became auditors of the music: they became "audience" to performances by Gospel soloists or quartets, rather than the full participants in collective community expression they had been in the production and performance of the Spirituals. It is the advent of this performer/audience dichotomy that underlies Gospel music's presentation-orientation. It apparently is also with the advent of this dichotomy that audience acceptance became a driving force of the genre, causing it to become even more entertainment-oriented and geared even more toward engendering responses that elicited audience approval, having jettisoned the Spirituals' apparently less performance-friendly prophetic proclamation of justice on earth as in heaven. This separation of the production of the music into writer/performer + audience was of crucial significance because it signaled the production of Gospel songs for exchange, i.e., in return for popular acceptance resulting in some form of remuneration, rather than being primarily produced for the psycho-emotional and socio-political edification of the communities that spawned them.

The forms this remuneration can take range from public acclaim and deference to financial compensation, although the latter is usually a function of the former. In this sense, the production of Gospel music has become overwhelmingly market-driven. By this measure, Gospel songs are commodities, that is, goods produced for sale. Anthony Heilbut observes of this development in the genre, "Instead of looking to the hills [i.e., to God; cf. Ps. 121:1-2], it looks to the charts."[64] However, this does not mean that Gospel music does not have the edification of its

[64]Warren, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit*, 270.

consumers as its goal. Rather, it means that the forms that edification takes are strongly influenced, if not driven, by market forces. Therefore, the problem with the commodification of Gospel music today is not that it is profitable; if financial compensation is to be realized at all, it should be grasped by the creators and performers of Gospel music. No, the problem with the commodification of Gospel music is not that it is profitable, but that it is profit-driven.

Thus, it is the commodification of Black sacred music that was begun in earnest by the Gospel genre, accounting for its mode of performance. In response to the demands of the market it has become firmly and patently performance-oriented. This is particularly the case with regard to the genre's "clowning" aspects. Replete with highly-stylized dress and sometimes dazzlingly choreographed movements, well-staged crescendoes of "spontaneous" emotion, and music purposefully arranged to showcase vocal gymnastics and pyro-technics, Gospel music today appears to be almost totally performance-driven into a species of the cathartic vehicle of emotional release Karl Marx apparently had in mind when he bitingly rejected religion and its expressions as "the opiate of the masses."[65] In a recent Associated Press article about the growing phenomenon of churches utilizing professional musicians and song stylists as a way to "lure" new members, the president of the Nashville-based Gospel Music Association willingly underscored the importance of the performance-, entertainment-orientation to Gospel music: "[Churches] recognize this is one of the ways they not only minister to their flock spiritually but also to their entertainment needs" [emphasis in the original].[66]

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[65]Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 42.

[66]Frank Breeden in Janelle Carter, "Rocking the Flock: More Churches Using Professional Musicians," *Dayton Daily News*, September 4, 1999.

Summary

The commodification of Gospel music and the performance-orientation it fuels, its reduction of the collective havoc wrought upon African Americans by systematic white skin color privilege into individual problems and needs, along with its apocalyptic apoliticality, have combined to make Gospel music today a force of little consequence in the ongoing struggle of Black folks to enjoy the full measure of comfort and security of American society. As a genre, Gospel lacks most of the normative elements of Gospel music that evolved through Blacks' sojourn in America. Rather than collective acknowledgment of oppression, Gospel offers individualized expressions of hope and praise. Instead of prophetic critique, it offers political quietism. Gospel songs do not exhort resistance to injustice; it counsels resignation instead. Thus, other than its empathic dimension, Gospel music today does not embody the normative features of Black sacred music as this study understands them.

Conclusion: No More Clowning, No More Dope

Kirk Franklin is the most commercially successful figure on the Gospel scene today. His music reveals his sincere effort to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. He is clearly a young man of great faith and purpose. In his touchingly revealing autobiography, Franklin writes, "I want to reach nonbelievers in nontraditional ways. I want to see revival come back to this land."[67] And in some of his songs, Franklin does reveal strong social sensibilities. Consider his song "Lean on Me":

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[67]Kirk Franklin, *Church Boy: My Music and My Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 21.

There's a man standing on the corner with no home
He has no food and his blue skies are gone.
Can't you hear him crying out?

Consider, as well, his hip hop-influenced "Revolution":
Do you want a revolution?
Sick and tired of my brothers
Killing each other...
No more racism...
No pollution.
The solution: a revolution.

It is important to note that although he speaks of "revolution," the social vision of Kirk Franklin excludes real revolutionary engagement of the systemic causes of the social ills he decries. As with most of his Gospel contemporaries, Franklin's solutions to socio-political problems are exclusively in the realm of individualized conceptions of salvation. Moreover, in the startling statement to *Vibe* magazine that began this essay, Franklin inadvertently reveals his estimation of his own music to be consonant with Marx's assessment of religion and its modes of expression as "the opiate of the masses": "People need to get high off something spiritual, and I'm the holy dope dealer. I got this drug; I got this Jesus rock. And you can have a type of high that you've never experienced."[68] To be fair, Franklin probably spoke in such shocking terms to capture the attention of *Vibe's* youthful, hip hop-oriented readership. Still, with his use of the term "Jesus 'rock'"—clearly a metaphor for crack cocaine—Franklin himself characterizes his music as an opiate, a palliative, a drug—

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[68]See Light, "Say Amen, Somebody," *Vibe*, 92.

a description whose evocation of political quietism could apply to most contemporary Gospel music.

In a nutshell, this is the basic problem with Gospel music today. As the result of the "clowning" that has become normative and its pervasive performance-orientation, its emphasis on "wrecking the house," and shameless appeals to emotion, the contemporary Gospel music genre has come to function as an opiate for the masses of African-American people. Like a drug, sensations and emotions have come to be its focus. Like a drug, its goal is not to empower its users to change reality, but simply to change the way they feel. Like a drug, it temporarily lifts the people's despair; yet, in direct contradistinction to the prophetic mandate of the Spirituals, leaves the causes of that despair unaddressed, unscathed, even unmentioned.

Gospel music doesn't attempt to free the people, but simply seeks to make them feel good. It doesn't exhort them to political liberation; instead, it lights their emotional fires. Rather than calling for resistance, it rocks the house. And in place of the prophetic mandate, today's Gospel music offers "praise." In fact, "praise," which focuses on extolling God's mercy, grace, and magnificence, has become an important part of the Gospel music equation. Certainly God is worthy of all praise. But unfortunately, the definition of "praise" offered by Gospel music is an attenuated one that begins and ends with singing, clapping hands, speaking in sometimes suspiciously well-timed "unknown" tongues, and "holy" dances that, amazingly, seem never to miss a beat. Sadly, the genre never goes so far as to praise God as a God of justice or to advocate praising God by dismantling the systems of oppression that afflict God's beloved human creation of all colors and creeds. Gospel music hears not, sees not and speaks not of the evil

of the oppression of the people that love it so.

The sad reality is that if we follow the lead of Gospel music today, not only will systemic evils never be addressed, they will never even be mentioned! The "holy" dope will continue to tell us to just "leave it to Jesus" while we sing, dance, shout, and overdose on the musical opiates we so gladly consume and purvey. Indeed, if African Americans did everything that Gospel music asks, where would we be? Would we be moved to address the social system that continues to devalue our humanity and our intelligence, that demonizes our children, that seems poised to try to turn back the clock on the social progress that we have made? If Black folks followed the social vision of Gospel music, would we be free?

Put simply, for all its popularity, Gospel music today no longer embodies the best of the Black sacred music tradition. Indeed, as basic a constituent of that tradition as the empowering logic of the Exodus liberation typology is almost nowhere to be found in today's Gospel. This absence of liberation sensibilities is reflected in the observation of Cheryl James of the popular rap group "Salt-N-Pepa," who also shared her views on Gospel music with *Vibe*. Ms. James, who appears on Franklin's hip hop-influenced platinum recording "Stomp," explains that the appeal of the Gospel music that Franklin and his contemporaries exemplify is precisely that it does not evoke liberation motifs or resistance sensibilities. "It's not about slavery and the old ways," she remarks.[69] This posture of refusing to inform the relative freedom of the present with awareness of the freedom struggles of the past is a basic constituent of the apoliticality of contemporary Gospel music.

What is overlooked by Ms. James and those that believe as she does is that the "old ways" they discount are, in reali-

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[69]Ibid.

ty, the resistance sensibilities that have brought Black people this far. However, in actuality it is not simply old-fashioned ways that are discounted by contemporary Gospel music, but the historical logic of freedom that is still much needed by African Americans if we are to throw off the importunities of systematic white skin color privilege that afflict us even now. That it is resistance sensibilities and not simply old-fashioned ways are rejected by contemporary Gospel artists is evidenced by their unwillingness to evolve new resistance paradigms that fit their own sensibilities. The importance of this is seen in the example of the enslaved African Americans who produced the Spirituals. Not only did they live under the most intense form of systematic domination and de-humanization ever enacted, but also under the most intense campaign of obfuscation and sacralization of oppression ever waged. Yet, through the prophetic critique and prophetic consciousness of the Spirituals, they were ever reminded that although chattel was their status, it was not their identity. Indeed, it was the slaves' clear-headed understanding of their plight that gave the Spirituals their power, and the slaves their perseverance. The clear understanding of African-Americans' situation today that can result from prophetic proclamation and prophetic critique can afford us that same power—not only to persevere, but to change the world.

Epilogue:
From Spirited Singing to Spirit-led Action

This writer personally does not want to live in a world without Gospel music. It has produced songs of great power and unspeakable beauty. It can move its listeners to emotional and spiritual peaks as no other musical genre can. Who can

hear Richard Smallwood's "Total Praise" or "My Tribute" by Andraé Crouch or Kirk Franklin's "Silver and Gold" without being moved to the heights of reverence? The beauty and power of Gospel must ever be maintained. Yet, it cannot be left unchanged, not as long as its energies are spent on entertainment and emotion rather than on exhorting freedom, justice and equality for and by its listeners. Let those of us that love Gospel build upon its strengths, and together strengthen its weaknesses. Therefore, Gospel music today must reject the "clowning," the trickeration, the entertainment-orientation, the dealing of dope—"holy" or not. It must stop acquiescing to the popular sensibilities that seductively equate entertainment with evangelism. It must end its refusal to engage in prophetic critique of systemic evil. It must stop reducing the causes of human suffering to weak faith or poor morality on the part of the victim, or to ethereal, disembodied sources for which no one has responsibility, for the sad consequence of this trivializing of the oppression of Black people is that systematic white skin color privilege not only is ignored, but ultimately is exculpated from responsibility for the everyday horrors it continues to wreak upon Black people of all ages and all social strata.

Half a century ago, the great Gospel songwriter and prophetic social critic, Herbert Brewster, offered the prescient observation that Gospel must be a marriage of "sentiment and doctrine,"[70] that is, a coupling of inspired emotion and informed socio-political sensibilities. We who both love Gospel music and are dedicated to freedom for all God's children, labor together to marry the emotionality of Gospel with the prophetic consciousness and resistance sensibilities

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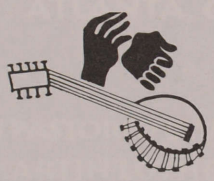
[70]Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 98.

of the Spirituals to produce a new generation of resistance music that moves Black people, indeed, all people, not just to emotional frenzy, but to that divinely inspired action we know as the struggle to establish God's kingdom of justice-on earth, as in heaven. Gospel music must move beyond preaching Jesus, to preaching what Jesus preached; it must move beyond spirited singing to Spirit-led song that proclaims to all, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free" (Lk. 4:18).



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