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PRAISE GOD AND DO SOMETHING: THE ROLE OF BLACK AMERICAN

GOSPEL ARTISTS AS SOCIAL ACTIVISTS, 1945-1960

A Dissertation in

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by

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ABSTRACT

Music in the oral culture of Black Americans is both functional and meaningful in the way it communicates culture. Music is functional as a transmitter of messages and ideas. Music is meaningful as a ritual and serves as a form of community maintenance. Sacred music in particular was crucial in maintaining culture because it was often through religion that enslaved Africans were able to practice modified African rituals under the guise of Christianity.

Black American sacred music has historically been a medium that has functioned as an outlet for the frustration against the dominant ideology of racial oppression in the United States. This dissertation examines the intersection between Black American sacred music, cultural production, and social protest during an emerging civil rights awareness from 1945 to 1960. As a crucial part of the trajectory of sacred music in the 20th century, gospel music during the 1940s and 1950s captured the collective sentiment of Black Americans.

The popularity of gospel music after World War II coincided with civil rights awareness. This dissertation, based on oral history of gospel musicians, examines how the music created and reinforced social awareness at a time when Black Americans had limited access to mass media. It argues that, contrary to the view that sacred music served as an escape from the mundane world of politics and social issues, gospel music and performance functioned as an outlet for messages of social awareness.

This time frame is significant for two reasons. First, this period is widely considered the Golden Age of Gospel. Gospel music was able to reach a mass Black American audience largely through the influx of independent recording companies and radio stations that focused on the Black American community as a viable niche market. Radio served as an important means of dissemination of gospel music and messages of social awareness. Second, this period is
significant because it overlaps a period of early civil rights victories, tragedies, and protests.

Social relevancy did not stop with the spirituals. Gospel music in 1930s also reflected the Black experience and addressed worldly issues and even more so 1940s and 1950s, while coinciding with an emerging civil rights awareness.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Music in the Black American community is a communicative medium that has historically functioned to foster a sense of community, disseminate information, and provide a means of social critique. Amiri Baraka states, “The most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time.”\(^1\) In that sense, music can be understood as a reflection of the collective awareness of Black Americans. The ability of Black American music to function as an expression of social and political thought is rooted in an oral culture that can be traced back to Western Africa--the native region of most Black American ancestors. In Western African culture, singing was a part of everyday life. Singing preserved a way of life as it reflected the religion, cultural values, and customs of the people. Similarly, Black American music has always been functional, in that it is a part of daily living and closely related to the conditions of life and the maintenance of community.\(^2\) After several generations, as Africans became exposed to Christianity and their descendants identified themselves as more American than African, the music changed to reflect the hybridity of the Black American experience.

According to Horace Boyer, gospel music refers to a sacred folk music created by Black Americans with origins in slave songs, field hollers, Baptist lining hymns, and Negro spirituals.

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of the slave era and standard Protestant hymns and especially composed songs. Gospel music is firmly based in religion and is composed and/or arranged with performance in mind. All artists whether they are local singers or professionals are conscious that a component of their performances are for entertainment purposes. As a genre, this definition differs from southern gospel which refers to song performed by Whites and based on folk and country music. These two genres did not develop separately. Black American and White singers influenced each other. They made a conscious attempt to borrow songs and styles they heard on the radio and in recordings in order to be innovative and expand their repertoires. Hovie Lister, the White lead singer of the southern gospel group, the Statesmen, often arranged Black American spirituals for his quartet. Lister later adapted “Get Away Jordan,” a song that was introduced and taught to the Statesmen in 1950, by the Gospel Harmonettes, a Black American female group from Birmingham, Alabama. According to James R. Goff, “The passive interaction of white and black quartets in the 1950s was actually quite extensive.” Many White gospel quartets were familiar with the Black American quartets that dominated the gospel market, like the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Five Blind Boys, the Fairfield Four, the Nightingales, the Harmonizing Four, and the Golden Gate Quartet. The Black American group, the Golden Gate Quartet from Norfolk, Virginia, began their professional career in the 1930s. By 1935, they had their own radio program at WIS in Columbia, South Carolina and WBT in Charlotte, North Carolina, and later for CBS in New York. They were most recognized for their rendition of spirituals and


4 Alan Young, Woke Me up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), xx.

5 Many groups were considered quartet groups even thought they consisted of four or more members.
jubilee songs. Their style of a cappella harmony was considered smooth and was popular among White audiences. Garnering national success by the 1940s, promoters often paired the Golden Gate Quartet with prominent White quartets, such as the Statesmen and the Blackwood Brothers Quartet from Mississippi.

As a crucial part of the trajectory of sacred music in the 20th century, gospel music during the 1930s emerged and captured the collective awareness of Black Americans much like its secular counterparts, blues and jazz. Gospel music quickly gained mass popularity after World War II, in part through studio recordings and radio broadcasts. In the post-war era, gospel music became enormously popular among Black Americans, and was the leading form of sacred music. Gospel groups and singers became national celebrities, and the period from 1945-1960 became known as Gospel’s Golden Era. 6 Contrary to scholars like Lawrence Devine who assert that “the overriding thrust of the gospel songs was otherworldly,”7 gospel music functioned as a crucial medium that communicated messages of social justice.

Even though gospel reflected a stylistic shift from hymns and spirituals, it still retained a polysemic nature that allowed it to be just as much a reflection of the Black American religious life as it was a reflection of their worldly life. A conventional notion of understanding the transitions of Black music is that messages of social awareness, which were evident in early sacred music did not translate to gospel music. Yet despite the seeming discontinuity of Black American sacred music, gospel functioned in a way that showed the continuity of Black American music as a communication medium.

6 Wyatt Tee Walker, Somebody’s Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), 151.

7 Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 175.
Music communicated beliefs, whether consciously or unconsciously, that helped shape the identity of Black Americans. The ability of gospel to convey symbolic messages to the community over many generations can be attributed to the understanding of musical performance as a ritualistic form of communication. Although slavery destroyed other cultural artifacts of Africans, music remained intact; in part due to its intangibility as an oral and aural cultural form. As a communicative medium, Black American music maintained its ritualistic function. James Carey explains that ritualistic practices contribute to the maintenance of society over time by playing a crucial role in the dissemination of messages. Using religious practices as an example, Carey notes that rituals work by bringing people together in fellowship and commonality. He continues, “The projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form…creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but conformation… to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process.” In the oral culture of Western Africa, the ritual of singing music maintained a belief system throughout several generations. The characteristics of Black American sacred music were retained primarily through religious practices in bondage and later institutionalized in the Black American church. In addition to communicating through ritual, music allows for the dissemination of information and ideas over distance. Carey explains this as a transmission view of communication, a process where messages are sent over distance to provide information. Music in the oral culture of Black Americans is both functional and meaningful. Music is functional as transmitter of messages and ideas from person to person and from group to group. The meaning of music is maintained through rituals and used as form of community maintenance. Music functions as glue for the

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9 Ibid., 19.
Black American community. The subject matter of music does not negate the function or the meaning of the music. Sacred and secular music communicate ideas to Black Americans that at the same time reaffirms cultural values within the community.

Though Christianity was imposed upon and eventually accepted by the majority of Black Americans, the syncretic religion of Black Americans provided a means to maintain their African heritage through the ritual of singing, unbeknownst to Whites. Throughout several generations, the rituals soon began to serve the purpose of reaffirming White Christian beliefs as well as maintaining Black American values.

James Cone suggests that singing had social and political implications because it helped to retain African and Black American culture, while simultaneously reassuring Whites about the assimilation of slaves into European culture. As such, sacred music served a counterhegemonic function:

African-American music is social and political. It is social because it is black and thus articulates the separateness of the black community. It is an artistic rebellion against the humiliating deadness of western culture. Black music is political because in its rejection of white cultural values, it affirms the political “otherness” of black people. Through song, a new political consciousness is continuously created, one antithetical to the laws of white society.  

Black American music functioned as a co-culture to oppose the dominant ideology of White oppression in the United States. As a ritualistic form of communication, Black American music functioned within the ideological struggle between systematic marginalization and

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\text{\textsuperscript{10}} \text{James H. Cone, } \text{The Spiritual and the Blues: An Interpretation} \text{ (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 6.}
\]

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\text{\textsuperscript{11}} \text{Subculture is defined as a group of individual who share particular interests, ideologies, and practices. The groups are understood to form their identity in opposition with the dominant culture. The prefix “sub” also connotes 'under', 'beneath', or 'below', 'inferior to'. For this reason, I have chosen to use the term co-culture instead of sub-culture to reference Black American culture. It is understood that Black American culture co-existed with mainstream culture and while simultaneously was in opposition with the mainstream.}
\]
assimilation. Gospel music served as an alternative medium through which to express social and political sentiment on both a local and mass levels when other means of mass communication were limited. Ben Sidran argues that Black American music, as a part of a larger oral tradition, facilitates an awareness of the individual emotions and has the ability to reflect an unconscious collective sentiment:

[The] oral man is, at all times, emotionally involved in, as opposed to intellectually detached from, his environment through the acts of communication. This can be called the basic actionality of the oral personality. McLuhan has characterized this lack of intellectual detachment as contributing to a superior sense of community, a heightened “collective unconscious” and “collective awareness,” within oral cultures.12

The singing of gospel music is often an emotional experience with singers and listeners experiencing moments of ecstasy invoked by the Christian Holy Spirit. As a part of a ritualistic custom, music is an emotional experience for a group in an oral culture. It is also an active process in which playing, dancing, and listening to music is a conscious act; however, the meaning behind the process is often unconscious. Although the gospel artists during this era actively included messages of social awareness, for other artists sending such messages this was an unconscious action. Some gospel artists did not consciously reflect on the polysemic potential of their music or believe that their actions were in some way socially motivated. However, even as an unconscious act, their voices were heard through the music as a part of a collective social action. Robert Bowman explains this process by applying Christopher Small’s concept called musicking. Small suggests that the producers and consumers of music are doing three things. First, they are exploring, affirming, and celebrating a sense of identity. Second, they are taking part in an ideal society that has been brought into existence for the duration of the

performance. Finally, they are modeling in the actual sounds of the music the relationship of their ideal society.  

Review of Literature

In recent years there has been an increase in scholarly attention given to gospel music produced between 1945 and 1960. However, only a few books and scholarly articles specifically address gospel music during the post-World War II period and even fewer have linked gospel music with social awareness and discussed communication. Some books address gospel music in general; others are biographical accounts of specific artists. While these studies have contributed greatly to the understanding of gospel, they make only passing references to the encoded and underlying social meaning of gospel music.

Anthony Heilbut examined gospel music in his book, *The Gospel Sound: Good News in Bad Times*, the first book-length study of gospel music which traced its historical development. Heilbut relies on interviews with key figures in gospel as well as his own observations. Heilbut uses these interviews and observations to illuminate the lifestyle of gospel singers during this period. Heilbut focuses on several subjects, including the gospel pioneers, the Holiness Church, and the gospel life. Heilbut links gospel music and the struggle for civil rights in his chapter on the contributions of Reverend W. Herbert Brewster. Heilbut describes Brewster’s song-writing


14 Most notable biographical books include Laurraine Goreau’s, *Just Mahalia, Baby*; Willa Ward-Royster’s, *How I Got Over: Clara Ward and the World-Famous Ward Singers*; Alan Young’s *The Pilgrim Jubilees*; and Jerome Zolten’s, *Great God A’mighty!: The Dixie Hummingbirds*; Nick Salvatore’s, *Singing in a Strange Land: C.L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America*; Peter Guralnick’s, *Dream Boogie: The Triumph of Sam Cooke*; and Gayle F. Wald’s, *Shout, Sister, Shout!: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe*. 
ability as “a beautiful example of the progressive impulses nurtured by gospel and developed in
the freedom movement.”15 The book’s first-person accounts of the period, the attention given to
early pioneers, and the comments about the lifestyle of gospel singers makes this a valuable
study. Heilbut also pursued the work of Reverend Brewster in a later article titled, “If I Fail,
You Tell the World I Tried”: Reverend Brewster on Records.” In it, he emphasizes Brewster’s
contribution to the golden era, calling him a “key architect of the gospel sound.”16 Heilbut
stresses the importance of gospel music for the promotion for social and political activism in the
Black community.

Horace Clarence Boyer gives a succinct overview of gospel music during the golden era
that focuses on individual players along with the form and structure of gospel music in an article,
title “Gospel Music.”17 Although Boyer does not associate gospel music with social activism,
the work is a brief synopsis of the history of gospel music and key artists and composers who
aided in its development. Boyer continued his work with a more extensive piece titled
Age of Gospel.19 Once again, the book is primarily historical, covering the rise of gospel music
and providing a typology of the various regions in which gospel flourished, tracing musical
innovations, and highlighting the contributions of several pioneering artists during the Golden
Age of Gospel.


Pearl Williams-Jones’ article, “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic”\textsuperscript{20} explores how the theoretical concept of the Black Aesthetic can be applied to the features of gospel music. The Black Aesthetic was a concept derived by Black American artists and critics in the 1960s. They created their own standards of exceptional artistic work which were antithetical to Western intellectual standards of art and culture. As a Black American art form that rose to prominence from 1945-1960, gospel music was inherently reactive against the status quo of discrimination. In turn, the music was an affirmation of Black American culture and could help convey social messages.

Wyatt Tee Walker dedicates various parts of his book, \textit{Somebody’s Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change} to gospel music in the post-war era. It traces the development of gospel music along with the rise of the Black America church. In addition, Walker provides a historical context to gospel music by focusing on the social and political issues that were looming during in the post-war era. Walker also uses a typology, including flow charts, to address the social significance of gospel music. In one diagram, Walker designs a Black Sacred Music “Blood Line” to trace the development of Black music, clearly showing that gospel music is a progenitor of Freedom Songs and the Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{21}

Chapter four in \textit{Black Gospel: An Illustrated History of Gospel Sound} by Viv Broughton is dedicated to the Golden Age of Gospel. In it, he highlights artists singing and events that took place during the period. He argues that World War II marked a pivotal moment in gospel and was a catalyst for the golden age. Broughton notes Jefferson County, Alabama as an important


\textsuperscript{21} Walker, \textit{Somebody’s Calling My Name}, 1979.
A geographical region in the development of gospel quartet music in the South. However, he does not mention the social and/or political implications of gospel music.\(^{22}\)

Mellonee V. Burnim’s article, “The Black Gospel Music Tradition: A Complex of Ideology, Aesthetic, and Behavior,”\(^{23}\) examines the ideology of gospel music by delineating the concepts that shape the music. She covers topics such as the delivery and sound quality of the music. Birnim’s research gives insight into the historical foundation as well as the technical aspects of gospel music.

Ray Pratt argues in his book, *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music*, that spirituals and gospel music function as statements and reflections of social and political resistance. When specifically addressing the political implications of gospel music, he identifies gospel as a “free space in a world of trouble.”\(^{24}\) Although he does associate gospel music with politics, most of his analysis is heavily based on Anthony Heilbut’s book *The Gospel Sound*.

Brenda McCallum’s article, “Songs of Work and Songs of Worship: Sanctifying Black Unionism in the Southern City of Steel,”\(^{25}\) examines how steel miners and industrial workers in Birmingham, Alabama, changed religious songs into union songs. She argues that these songs articulated an emerging social awareness and collective identity among gospel singers and union


workers. Although McCallum’s focus is on gospel music during the 1930s, this article is useful because of her argument about the function of gospel music to address social awareness.

Ray Allen’s book, *Singing in the Spirit: African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City*,\(^{26}\) is an examination of the production and consumption of non-commerical sacred quartet singing in New York. He uses theories and methods from folklore, anthropology, ethnomusicology, communications, and oral history to inform his study. His book focuses on the history of local semi-professional groups, while also exploring contemporary groups analyzing their performance styles and the rituals within the quartet community.

Alan Young’s book, *Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life*,\(^{27}\) is an oral history that explores the aspects of music and the culture surrounding it. Although Young’s study does not focus on gospel music during the golden age, it is useful for his application of oral history. He focuses on the grassroots culture of gospel music by interviewing regional gospel singers, religious figures, radio announcers, and gospel evangelists.

Guido van Rijn’s book, *Roosevelt’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR*,\(^{28}\) is an examination of political commentary in blues and gospel recordings during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Rijn focused on a period from 1902 to 1945. Like Young, the range of Rijn’s study does not extend to the golden age, however, it establishes a social and political context for Black Americans prior to World War II. Unlike his book, Rijn’s article focused specifically on gospel songs post-1945. Titled “‘Climbing the Mountain Top’: African


\(^{27}\) Alan Young, *Woke Me up This Morning*, 1997.

American Blues and Gospel Songs from the Civil Rights Years,” the article is more closely related to the current study. While Rijn explores Black American social awareness primarily through example from music lyrics, the current study interprets this awareness primarily through the narrated experiences gospel artists during the post-World War II era.

In her book, Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age, Jerma Jackson separated herself from other treatments of the era by focusing on historical developments in gospel music and attributing the popularity of gospel music to economic trends the occurred in the recording industry. These changes, she argues, led to the phasing out of race records and the proliferation of independent record labels specifically devoted to Black music.30

Robert Darden’s book, People Get Ready!: A New History of Black Gospel Music, is a chronological history of gospel music. Beginning with its African roots, Darden gives a thorough treatment of the gospel genre.31 Darden’s book is considered a recent publication as it was published, in 2004. He was able to make connections between the roots of gospel music and contemporary gospel music of the 1990s and 2000s.

Anita Bernadette McAllister’s dissertation, “The Musical Legacy of Dorothy Love Coates: African American Female Gospel Singer with Implications for Education and Theater Education”32 discusses the musical performance history of Dorothy Love Coates, the lead singer of the Original Gospel Harmonettes, a nationally known group from Birmingham, Alabama.


McAllister interviewed Coates and other public figures to showcase Coates’ talent as a musician, tracing her influence in the fields of education and theater.

Bernice Johnson Reagon’s edited book, *We'll Understand it Better By and By: Pioneering African-American Gospel Composers*\(^{33}\) is a study of the history and development of gospel music. Many of the book’s contributors focused on the major composers during the early development in the 1930s. However, some chapters did focus on gospel music during the golden age, including Portia K. Maultsby’s contribution titled, “The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry,” which argued that post-war gospel music helped to popularize the secular music industry. She specifically focuses on the commercialization of gospel music, the role of performance in creating a public space for Black Americans, and the impact of gospel music on radio.

In summary, these works have contributed to the foundation of this study. Yet, their contributions have mostly related to historical aspects of post-war gospel music, with only a few specifically correlating gospel music and artists with social awareness. Most research examined the trajectory of Black American music and indentified the various characteristics of various genres, illuminating changes in structure and theme of the specific genres. In the study of Black sacred music, the social and political functions of the music has been largely overshadowed in favor of highlighting the commercialization of the genre and celebrity of the artists. While that is still an important topic to cover, the social and political implications of gospel music should not be dismissed.

Statement of Purpose

This study examines how sacred music, in particular gospel music in the 1940s and 1950s, created and reinforced a collective social awareness that coincided with the emergence of the modern civil rights movement in the 1960s. This is be done by examining the oral narratives and music of gospel artists who used this music as a means to voice social commentary from 1945 to 1960. This research broadens the understanding of communication and culture by examining the role of Black American gospel singers as facilitators of a collective identity tied to civil rights awareness.

This time frame is significant for two reasons. First, this period is widely considered the Golden Age of Gospel. There were gospel artists who were socially active before 1945; however, the scope of this research focuses on artists professional careers began in the post-World War II era because the period begins a mainstreaming of gospel music. Gospel music was able to reach a mass audience of Black Americans and Whites largely through the influx of independent recording companies and radio stations that focused on the Black American community as a viable niche market. Second, this period is significant because it overlaps a period of early civil rights victories, tragedies, and protests. The narratives give a voice to historical actions through the lived experiences of gospel singers.

Further discussion of the purpose requires an explanation of how gospel music and gospel artists will be defined throughout this study. Black American music, much like African music, blurs the line between what is considered the realm of sacred and secular. There is a hesitation often by artists to categorize Black American music into genres. Most notable was Rosetta Tharpe, who in the late 1930s and 1940s crossed the line between the sacred and secular her entire music career, singing blues and gospel. There were other artists; however, that
recorded gospel music exclusively at different points in their career, most notably Sam Cooke who began his professional career in 1950 singing gospel music and recorded rhythm and blues music exclusively by 1957.

As a researcher, I am aware of the methodological issues surrounding the definition of gospel music and gospel artists. Defining and categorizing Black American music has mostly been done for marketing purposes, like the term “race records” to denote Black American music of the 1920s. This and later market categories have been developed by people outside of the Black American culture. I also recognize that by privileging the narratives of gospel singers, it is important to understand how the performers regarded themselves. All of the participants in this study worked within the recording industry and defined themselves as gospel singers performing gospel music. This study identifies gospel artists as those who exclusively performed and recorded gospel music as it was categorized within the music industry. It is recognized that some artists sang gospel exclusively at different points during their career. In those cases, attention will be given to period when the artist exclusively recorded gospel music.

The Federal Trade Commission granted radio licenses to small entrepreneurs in anticipation of television as a dominant medium. These entrepreneurs developed local shows that appealed to specific demographics, rather than paid for expensive network programming that featured White performers. In communities with large Black American populations, radio stations featured live performances and recordings by gospel artists. The few Black American disc jockeys at these stations played a crucial role as disseminators of gospel music and provided a voice for the community in an otherwise restricted space.

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34 Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 107.
Since sacred music has traditionally reflected the sentiment of the Black American community, gospel singers who lived during this period addressed these social issues in their music, thus helping to facilitate an emerging civil rights awareness. Scholars have explored the role of the Black American church and sacred music in sustaining the civil rights movement. Usually, much credit is given to the mostly male-led national organizations and church leaders during the movement, while the role of local community leaders has been largely ignored. Leaders in the church commonly became leaders in the civil rights struggle. Pastors were given a great deal of respect in the community. The pulpit was a platform that served not only to reaffirm religious beliefs, but to indict the White power structure for injustice and to call for social action. The church was as an ideal institution to foster a movement because congregations were a captive audience, and the network of churches provided the infrastructure needed to sustain a movement.

In seeking to communicate messages through gospel music, there is little difference between the gospel singer and the gospel preacher in the approach to his subject.\(^{35}\) The singer can be considered the lyrical extension of the rhythmically rhetorical style of the preacher.\(^{36}\) This point is more clearly stated by pioneering gospel composer, W. Herbert Brewster. Anna L. Brooke, the pianist for Brewster, quoted him stating, “If [a gospel song] is Bible-based and Christ-centered, you got a sermon set to music.”\(^{37}\)

The celebrity generated by the growing popularity of gospel music provided singers with a platform from which to address issues in the community. They had various means to propagate


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 381.

social awareness that was implicit or explicit in their music. As singers in the church, they also had access to the captive audience of the congregation. Nationally known gospel singers potentially had a larger audience than any pastor in a community because of the dissemination of their music through records and on the radio. Nationally-known groups sang in auditoriums that gave them access to people outside of the church. While local singers did not have the reach of the national singers, they performed throughout the community and often opened concerts for national singers, thus they still had the potential to reach a sizable audience and play a similar role in the community.

The evolution of gospel music during this period is easy to follow, due to the role of the phonograph record as a mode of dissemination. The fact that these artists have been recorded means that a map exists from which the text can be examined. An oral history of gospel music during this period is significant because some of the performers during this period are still alive and can provide valuable first-person accounts of their experiences. Yet, gospel artists who were active during the golden age are aging and dying. There is a sense of urgency to conduct this research because as time passes, collective memory fades. As a narrative, this study examines the minds of common people through words and language. The goal of this research is to examine the meaning that common people placed on their actions. Gospel artists represented the common voices of Black Americans during the civil rights era that have historically been overlooked.

38 Young, *Woke Me up This Morning*, xxi.
Research Questions

These research questions provide access to valuable data to understand function, meaning, and creation of gospel music in the Black American community.

1. Why was gospel music used as a means to express the values and sentiment of the Black American community?

2. To what extent was gospel music politically meaningful; used to confront social injustice; used to foster a collective identity; or used to promote social awareness?

3. How was gospel music an extension of an African oral tradition?

Theoretical Context and Methodological Approaches

This research is positioned within the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. The theoretical framework provides understanding of the production and transmission of culture as it relates to Black American sacred music. The theories identify broad constructions of meaning and practice, which allow for the analysis of gospel singers as social actors. Applying theory to this analysis provides a meaning of gospel music and its producers within a social, political, and economic context.

Interdisciplinary approaches within this research are not limited to the theoretical framework. This research draws upon two of the five traditions of qualitative inquiry as identified by John Creswell, which include biography and ethnography.\(^\text{39}\) Each tradition is rooted in diverse disciplines and is associated with specific methodological approaches. It is important to note that in this study, methodological approaches are not mutually exclusive to specific

traditions. It is recognized that the use of so many traditions may seem unorthodox. As such, it is necessary to define and rationalize the use of various traditions and methods.

Oral history was applied as a method by conducting interviews to gather personal recollections of events. These personal recollections included life stories, historical events, and song lyrics. As an ethnographic study, this research describes and interprets the culture and behavior of the participants by conducting interviews and briefly observing the behavior in their chosen environment. I consider this research an ethnographic oral history. Though I did not immerse myself in the participants’ environment for an extended period of time, I did conduct in-depth interviews to gain insight into the culture of Black American community and the music industry.

Since oral history was used as a primary methodological approach, it is necessary to give a detailed definition of oral history and an explanation of why it was chosen; how the research was designed using oral history; and the disadvantages of the method. Oral history is a way to examine collective thinking and meaning attributed to texts. According to Startt and Sloan, oral history refers to the historical recovery of the remembered but unrecorded past. As an oral history, this project examines the minds of common people through words and language. Oral history is a way to examine collective thinking and meaning attributed to specified texts. Also oral history can test the social function of the theoretical to see how the theories relate to lived experiences.

40 Ibid., 49.

41 Ibid., 65.

The purpose of using oral history as a primary tool of inquiry is to capture and represent the voices of traditionally marginalized groups and social actors. Oral interview was chosen as the best method to capture the participants’ voices. According to Donald Richie, “Oral interviews are often conducted after the event, when memories have grown imprecise, but they have the advantage of being conducted by an interviewer who can raise questions and challenge answers.” Also, oral history can test the social function of the theoretical suppositions to correlate the theories to lived experiences.

The significance of oral history can also be attributed to the lack of authority and agency given to Black American scholars in the Academy. Early efforts at constructing revisionist history were through recording the life stories of ex-enslaved Africans. According to literary scholar Bernard Bell, “[T]he first major projects to collect and preserve the life stories of ex-slaves were at black institutions, Fisk University in Tennessee in 1928 and Southern University in Louisiana in 1929, under the direction of such sociologists as Charles S. Johnson at Fisk and such historians as John B. Cade at Southern.” Bell continues, “[T]he voices of enslaved Africans and African Americans were not generally valued in white American historiography until the Black Studies movement inspired revisionist scholarship in the 1960s.” In the tradition of these Black American scholars, I am attempting to validate and valorize previously excluded experiences of Black American gospel singers during the emergence of the civil rights movement.

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45 Ibid., xvii.
The participants in this study were semi-professional and professional gospel singers. They have perspectives on this period in American history that has not been previously revealed. Their perspectives give insight into the world of Black American gospel singers and their role in becoming catalysts for social awareness from 1945-1960. The participants in this study lived through a period in history when speaking in a socially unacceptable way could threaten their lives socially, economically, and physically. That reality of racial subjugation makes oral history even more relevant because it gives the participants a platform to reflect and talk about issues that they may have been afraid to voice in the past. While the research is primarily based on the narratives of gospel singers, the narratives of radio announcers will also be included. The inclusion of radio announcers will illuminate the role of radio in the dissemination of gospel in the Black American community as well as outside of that community. Radio announcers played a key role in community maintenance. As the dominant medium of mass communication in the Black American community, radio kept people informed about news and events while being entertained. The announcers give insight into their role in the dissemination of gospel as well as speak to social issues in the Black American community.

It should also be noted that the voices of women are prominent in this study. Many of the male gospel singers have died, while the female singers have survived to tell their story. While Black American women in general were prevented from leadership in the Black American church and in civil rights movement, female performers dominated the latter years of the golden age. Traditional expectations of women required them to be exemplars of the society, and provide the major socialization for children. In the Black community women were expected to fulfill familial responsibilities as well as hold full time jobs outside of the home.46 Historically,

Pastorships of Black churches remained a male reserve and were not generally available to women. As a result of these restrictions, the voices of women have not been prominent in the histories of the civil rights movement. This research seeks to compensate for the lack of women’s voices by including them in this study.

The issue of objectivity and distance to the interview subject should be addressed given the chosen method. The goal of this project is to present a supportive voice that pushes the participants’ voice into the limelight. The intention is not for the participants to represent the official experience. It is understood that their lives do not represent the experiences of all Black Americans during that period. Thus, the goal is to create a self-reflexive and respectful distance between the researcher’s and narrators’ voices. As a researcher I am employing oral history as a method, it is important to allow the participants to speak for themselves. The participants often identify themselves as Black as opposed to African American. In order to represent the emic experience of the participants and to minimize confusion for the reader, I have chosen to use Black American to refer to the descendants of Africans living in the United States. I choose to use White to refer to people of European decent living in the United States.

A total of eight gospel artists were interviewed. Several strategies were employed when indentifying participants for the study. When identifying gospel singers and radio announcers, a snowball or chain strategy was employed. A snowball strategy “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who are information-rich.” This strategy was used because it was

47 Ibid., 275.
49 Ibid.
difficult to know whom to contact and how to contact them. As stated earlier, many people from this era have died or are not able to function physically or mentally. On the other hand, there are gospel performers who are still living and are relevant to the project, but are retired and live quiet lives out of the spotlight. Because of this, they were not as accessible. The snowball strategy provided the means to identify these singers, thus creating a network of people who have worked together and witnessed the same events.

The search for gospel singers began by meeting with scholars who had done similar research in this area. Dr. Jerome Zolten, Associate Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University-Altoona provided addresses and telephone numbers of gospel artists. In addition, Rev. George Stewart, Director of the American Gospel Quartet Convention located in Birmingham, Alabama, provided similar access to several gospel singers and radio disc jockeys as well. Preliminary research included attendance at a gospel concert which proved to be valuable in identifying potential participants. Record labels were also a valuable resource for finding potential participants, most notably Malaco Records in Mississippi. As a part of preliminary research, a cover letter and consent form were devised. These documents informed the potential participant of the researcher’s identity and gave a summary of the project. The documents also asked for their participation while describing the parameters of the project and what would be expected from them. The decision of whom to contact first was based on the estimated ages and relevance to my project. The first participants to be interviewed were eighty years old and above. The decision of whom to contact first was based on the estimated ages and relevance to my project. The first participants to be interviewed were eighty years old and above.  

50 Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 119.

51 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 88. Ritchie suggests that oral historians should start with the oldest and most significant players in the events or community that you are pursuing.
particular subject was vast, their ages became secondary factors and they were interviewed as soon as possible.

Potential interviewees were sent cover letters and consent forms first. They were called within a week to speak in-depth about the study and get a verbal conformation of their participation. For potential interviewees whose addresses were unavailable, their homes were called using a telephone script. They were then called back within a week to get verbal conformation of their participation.

Persuading the individuals to participate presented its own set of problems. Most of the potential interviewees were apprehensive about being interviewed by a stranger. The mention of Dr. Zolten, Rev. Stewart or a previous participant greatly increased their level of trust. Once credibility was established, most were enthusiastic about telling their story and having it written down. Some participants, however, were more suspicious and thought the research was exploitive. Their suspicion became stronger when presented with an informed consent form, which is required by the Institutional Research Board at The Pennsylvania State University. The consent form informed the interviewees of their rights and gave them an option of voluntary participation with no compensation. In addition, it indicated that their identities would be revealed in the study.

My credibility is a major issue that should be addressed in this study because without the trust of the participants, the ethnographic methods could not have been employed effectively. I went through a sometimes difficult process to prove myself trustworthy to the participants. Some interviews never took place because a level of trust could never be established between myself and the participants. This was an issue that I confronted very early in the process of collecting data. It was at this point that I realized I needed to change my approach and form a
familiarity between myself and potential participants fairly quickly in the conversation for them to be willing to be interviewed. I often referenced my southern roots. For many participants this fact seemed to form some connection, perhaps because many were raised in the South or still had memories of the South. My southern heritage put some participants at ease, but other participants were suspicious of my motives. For example, when I told Tommy Ellison of the Singing Stars that I was conducting research on gospel singers, he immediately suggested that I was planning to write a book for profit. Though Ellison understood that his participation in the study was not going to be compensated, he requested that I provide him with compensation if the research was ever written as a book. Monetary compensation was an issue that emerged once more and prevented the fruition of an interview. In one incident I spoke with a potential participant for several weeks about being interviewed and explained that participation would not be compensated. When I decided to move forward with planning the formal interview, negations for an interview fell through when the potential participants asked for compensation anyway.

In most instances I had to talk with these participants for hours before turning on the audio recorder. Many of these conversation entailed restating my purpose for the research and explaining the consent form. I often had to tell the participant more about my personal background and try to make connections with them, informing them of previous interviews that I had conducted with other gospel artists. The participants’ suspicions of me were not unwarranted. They were conscious of the potential for this project to be exploitive. Years in the music industry have made some of the participants very cautious of individuals outside of their inner circles. One participant required a lawyer to review my informed consent form before allowing me to use any interview material in my research. In addition, many of the participants were retired and on a fixed income. For some participants, the thought of someone entering their
life to record their story for profit was unacceptable without compensation. I believe that the factor that had the most influence on the participants’ trust of me was my racial identity as a Black American. Even though I am not an insider of the culture of the music industry, I grew up experiencing certain aspects of the Black American church and community. I understand that the Black American community is not monolithic, but my personal experience did shape the questions that I asked. I believe that the participants felt a connection to me because of my race and trusted that I was there to accurately tell their story.

Most individuals were available for interviews, with only a few people declining to participate because of health reasons. The participants’ ages range from the early sixties to early nineties. Since mobility was an issue for most of the participants, most interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes. The face-to-face interviews required me to travel to various states including Alabama, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina. Face-to-face interviews were conducted once and follow-up interviews were planned and conducted via telephone.

There were two instances when telephone interviews were the primary means of gathering oral histories. The interviewees lived in Pennsylvania and New Mexico. The decision to use the telephone was based on time constraints, funding limitations, as well as the distance of the interviewee from my place of residence. There are, of course, problems with using the telephone to conduct interviews; a level of access and trust was lost that could have otherwise been obtained through a face-to-face interview. As Seldon and Pappworth state, “Very few people will talk as frankly on the telephone as in a personal meeting, especially if they do not
know their interlocutor." To build trust with participants, they were called frequently so that a rapport could be established with them preceding the official telephone interview.

Another issue encountered while conducting this research was interviewing participants who could not remember certain events. This is a problem that can occur with anyone, no matter the age group however; the issue is more salient among older people. The effects on the research is that certain factors are forgotten and chronology is confused, and incidents are conflated with others including incidents that were not personally experienced. While these lapses in memory were not frequent enough to be considered a problem, the fallibility of memory was taken into account when speaking to interviewees and analyzing the interviews. The instances when this did occur were in relation to remembering the titles of songs they listened to growing up. In this study, I highlight such contradictions among given testimonies within the footnotes.

Faulty memory was not the only factor that affected the content of the narratives. The tendency to self-report was also taken into consideration. As a researcher, I recognize that the individuals were telling their narrative from their perspective. In addition, there is an issue of trust that I as a researcher must have from the participants. As time passes, there could have been a tendency by the participants to recount stories so that they themselves are deemed favorable. The same questions were asked to all the participants in order to identify themes as well as to triangulate stories and events. Some of the questions varied based on the background of the participant. Some follow-up questions were dependent on the participants’ responses. Their responses allowed me to cross-examine stories and events for validity and reframe anecdotal evidence to get at issues of the function, meaning, and creation of gospel music.


This stage of analysis began with the transcription of the interviews. The decision was made to outsource the transcription of interviews. It is recognized that the disadvantage of having the transcriptions outsourced is that the researcher is at least partly alienated from the transcription.\textsuperscript{54} The analysis involved identifying similar stories of events which happened in the lives of the participants. According to Chandinin and Connelly, narrative researchers “specifically look for names of people that appear in the text, places where actions and events occurred, story lines that interweave and interconnect gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear.”\textsuperscript{55} The comparisons of their oral histories give insight into the music they created and the meaning they attributed to it. Themes were identified by analyzing the most significant songs of the gospel singers. These themes were compared with the participant responses to give insight into what the songs meant to them. Validity of the research was maintained through member checking, which involves corroborating my interpretation periodically with the interview participants.\textsuperscript{56} Participants were presented with final transcripts so they could approve the accuracy of the comments and their interviews. There may be discrepancies and contradictions between people about events, which will be noted in footnotes.

Chapter two provides a historical overview of Black American sacred music and role of the Black American church in its development. The chapter will highlight early composers of Negro spirituals as well as address the social significance of the music. It will conclude with a


\textsuperscript{55} D. Jean Chandinin and F. Michael Connelly, \textit{Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research} (California: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 131.

\textsuperscript{56} Margot Ely and others, eds., \textit{Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles} (London: Routledge, 1991), 165.
focus on the pioneers of gospel music and the factors that lead to the rise in popularity of gospel music during the post-World War II era.

Chapters three, four and five will present the participants’ narrative responses and thematic analysis. Each chapter is labeled according to topics covered in the interviews. Various participant responses are presented consecutively in correlation with chapter topics. The participants’ responses are placed in conversation with each other so that their experiences could be easily compared by the reader. The responses to these topics provide first-hand accounts of the setting and life of gospel artists in the post-World War II era. The analysis summarizes themes that emerged from the participants’ responses. Direct quotes from the interviews are included to illustrate how the respondents’ comments support the analysis. The responses are also evaluated in light of the extant literature regarding music and social awareness, and noted where appropriate.

My foremost justification for using oral history as a methodological approach is to allow the voices of participants to speak for themselves; however, as a researcher, I am aware of the power I wield as an interpreter and constructor of this narrative. As an interpreter, I decide what comments are important and irrelevant, given the scope of the project. These decisions to use certain narratives while excluding others was based whether the narratives adequately illustrated whatever theme that preceded them and provided a smooth transition into whatever discussion followed them. I am aware that this makes me vulnerable to charges of “taking quotes out of context,” However, edits were made at what seemed to be natural breaks in the conversational theme. In light of these changes, the full transcripts, while not included in this work, will be available and placed on file indefinitely.
As a constructor of this narrative there is also an inherent authorial power in deciding who speaks first in the narrative. In most of the narrative presentation, Tommy Ellison speaks first, followed by Anne Munson, Margaret Allison, Mildred Howard, Evelyn Hardy, Cleopatra Kennedy, Roxie Moore, and Bill Pinkney. There was no specific reasoning for the narrative order; however, Mildred Howard, Evelyn Hardy, and Cleopatra Kennedy were placed together because they were members of the same gospel group, the Gospel Harmonettes—Howard and Hardy being original members and Kennedy serving later in a different configuration. Although this project is foregrounding gospel artists, radio announcers are also included in the narrative at various points. The radio announcers’ narratives will be placed after the gospel artists. They include Rev. Dr. Olin Harris, Sr., George “Toby” Young, Linwood Heath, and Nims Gay. I chose comments that would flow seamlessly and provide illustrations for specific themes, it is for that reason that some participants only appear sporadically consecutively throughout a chapter.

Perhaps my most difficult decision was whether I should edit the narratives for grammatical standardization. The pattern of speech used by my participants is typical of how older people talk, particularly those reared in the South. The conversations were filled with repetitions, asides, and sometimes, interruptions. I decided to minimally edit the responses for the readers’ sake, while trying to faithfully maintain the participants’ colloquial speech patterns.

Participants

Tommy Ellison

Tommy Ellison was the founder and lead singer of Tommy Ellison and the Singing Stars. Ellison was born on September 15, 1932, in Wagner, South Carolina. He left South Carolina as
a teenager and began singing professionally with gospel pioneer, Madame Edna Gallmon Cooke. Ellison later sang with the Sensational Nightingales, the Chosen Gospel Singers, and The Harmonizing Four. In the early seventies he organized Tommy Ellison and the Singing Stars. Ellison was interviewed on June 7, 2007 at his home in Baltimore, Maryland. At the time of the interview his group was still touring. Ellison died on January 3, 2009.

Margaret Wells Allison

Margaret Allison was the founder of the Angelic Gospel Singers (the Angelics) which was one of the earliest groups to find national success in during the golden age with the release of a song titled, “Touch Me Lord Jesus.” Allison was born on September 25, 1921 in Plum Branch, South Carolina. In 1925, her family moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania so her father could find employment. Allison began playing piano at an early age and served as pianist for her church. She also served as a pianist for a singing group called The Spiritual Echoes. Allison organized the Angelic Gospel Singers in 1944 and recruited her sister, Josephine McDowell, Lucille Shird, and Ella Mae Morris. Although there were many personnel changes over the years, the Angelic Gospel Singers remained active recording and performing. Allison was interviewed on July 3, 2007. At the time of her interview she was completing a studio recording. Allison died on July 30, 2007.

Mildred Howard

Mildred Howard was a member of the Original Gospel Harmonettes. The Original Gospel Harmonettes was organized in 1940 at the National Baptist Convention in Birmingham, Alabama.

57 Tommy Ellison, interview by author, audio recording, Baltimore, Md., 7 June 2007.

Alabama. Born in 1923 and raised in Birmingham, Howard is credited with organizing the group and serving as initial lead singer. Other members included Evelyn Starks Hardy, Odessa Glasgow Edwards, Vera Conner Kolb, Willie Mae (Biddie) Brooks Newberry. By 1951, Dorothy Love Coates joined the group. Coates and Howard shared lead vocals and Herbert “Pee Wee” Picard served as pianist and studio organist. Having lived in Birmingham for most of her life, Howard is now retired and currently residing in Cincinnati, Ohio. She was interviewed on July 13, 2007.

**Evelyn Starks Hardy**

Evelyn Hardy was a singer, arranger, and accompanist for The Original Gospel Harmonettes. Born in 1922 and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, Hardy sang with The Original Gospel Harmonettes throughout 1953. She attended Miles College in Birmingham and travelled with the group on weekends. Hardy stopped singing professionally and served in the Birmingham Public School System for a number of years. She is retired, but is still active as the director of the male choir in her church. She currently resides in Birmingham, Alabama. Hardy was interviewed on April 17, 2007.

**Cleopatra Kennedy**

Cleopatra Kennedy was a singer with a later incarnation of The Original Gospel Harmonettes. Born in Birmingham on April 25, 1943, Kennedy joined The Original Gospel Harmonettes at the age of 16 and was a member of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights.

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60 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, audio recording, Birmingham, Alabama, 17 April 2007.
Rights Choir. She was very active in the Civil Rights Movement, frequently serving as a soloist at civil rights rallies lead by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She performed as a backup singer for gospel pioneer, Rev. James Cleveland, and in the secular pop music realm for Ray Charles and Bruce Springsteen. Kennedy currently lives in Birmingham and still performs with several local gospel groups, including the Birmingham Community Choir, Inc.  

Anne Munson

Anne Munson was born on October 13, 1929, in Fort Motte, South Carolina. Munson and her family moved to Washington, D.C. in 1944 when she was sixteen years old. As a young adult she sang with several local gospel groups including The Traveling Crusaders and the all-female Victory Stars and Queens of Faith. As a semi-professional artist, she gained regional notoriety with The Victory Stars, which opened gospel concerts for professional gospel groups in the Washington D.C. and Maryland area. Munson also worked as a gospel concert promoter in Maryland. Munson lives in College Park, Maryland and though she is retired from singing and concert promoting, she is active in her church organizing retreats and writing plays. 

Roxie Moore

Roxie Moore was a semi-professional singer who travelled with Sister Roseta Tharpe and a group called the Echoes of Heaven in the 1940s. Born on March 15, 1916 in Neabsco,


Virginia, Moore loved poetry as a young woman and during the 1950s she became a songwriter for a professional gospel group called the Dixie Hummingbirds. As a lyricist and singer, she penned songs such as “Will the Lord Be with Me,” “I’ll Keep Living After I Die,” and “Loving Hand.” Her songs contributed to lasting legacy of The Dixie Hummingbirds who are still performing as the oldest active quartet group. Moore is a retired postal worker and lives in Maryland. She was interviewed on August 1, 2007.

**Willie “Bill” Pinkney**

Bill Pinkney was a member of Doo Wop/ Rhythm and Blues group, the Drifters. Pinkney was born on August 15 1925 and raised in Dalzell, South Carolina. As a teenager, Pinkney enlisted in the Army where he served in World War II. When Pinkney returned, he sang gospel with the Southern Knights and was a pitcher in the National Negro Leagues. Pinkney met Clyde McPhatter and Gerhardt and Andrew Thrasher while singing gospel in 1949 and in 1953, McPhatter organized the Drifters. After experiencing success with number of records, the Drifters disbanded in 1958 due to several management disputes. Later that year, Pinkney reorganized the group as the Original Drifters, having owned the rights to the name. In 1988, Pinkney and the other original members were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In addition to singing with the Original Drifters, Pinkney organized a second group and began recording gospel music in 1996. Under the moniker, Bill Pinkney and the Gospel Drifters, Pinkney was still performing with both groups at the time of the interview on May 23, 2007.

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63 Roxie Moore, telephone interview by author, audio recording, 1 August 2007.
This last surviving member of the Original Drifters died less than three months later on July 4, 2007.  

**Rev. Dr. Olin Harris, Sr.**

Olin Harris is a television and radio announcer in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He was Harrisburg’s first full-time Black radio and television announcer. Born in Milledgeville, Georgia, on October 3, 1934, Harris’ family moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania when he was four. His broadcast career began in 1957 when he founded Harrisburg’s first gospel program, “Echoes of Glory” on WKBO. The program is now hosted by Harris’ friend and colleague, Toby Young on WTKT, while Harris hosts “Gospel Cavalcade Live” on WTCY with his daughter, Kirsten, and grandson, Christopher. Harris was interviewed on July 26, 2007.

**George “Toby” Young, Jr.**

Toby Young is a radio and television announcer in Harrisburg. Young was raised in Alabama near Birmingham. He moved to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania as a teenager and had a career in state government. Young has been a gospel promoter in Harrisburg for decades as well as a quartet singer. He has also produced and hosted many broadcast programs including “True Gospel” and the “Toby Young Show.” Young currently hosts “Echoes of Glory” on WTKT in Harrisburg. Young was interviewed on June 25, 2007.

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64 Original Drifters, Inc. (Eulogy presented at the funeral of Willie “Bill” Pinkney, Sumter, South Carolina on July 9, 2007), Williams Funeral Home, Inc.
Linwood Heath

Linwood Heath was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1941. He began singing with the Savoy Singers in 1957. Heath has worked with many radio stations in Philadelphia. He began his career in broadcasting in 1965 on WDAS. In 1982, Heath worked for WYIS and he currently hosts a morning show, “Great Moments in Gospel” on WNAP. Heath was interviewed on June 23, 2007.

Nims E. Gay

Nims Gay was a radio announcer on WJLD in Birmingham, Alabama. Gay was born in Choccolocco, Alabama, on January 25, 1923. At 84 he still serves as a gospel radio announcer in the city. As a participant in the civil rights movement, Gay organized the Alabama Christian Movement Choir and served as the choir director for many years. Gay was interviewed on May 18, 2007.
Chapter 2

**Historical Context: Social Awareness and the Black American Sacred Music Tradition**

Jazz singer Billie Holiday’s 1939 recording and performance of “Strange Fruit” almost single-handedly changed the politics of American popular culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary Black American musical culture. A metaphor for lynching, the song was a bold commentary about the hate, indignities, and eruptions of violence that threatened Black Americans in the United States. Angela Davis calls “Strange Fruit” “one of the most influential and profound examples-and continuing sites-of the intersection of music and social consciousness.” Angola Davis’s analysis of Billie Holiday and “Strange Fruit” does much to highlight the influence of secular music to bring about changes in social awareness; however, sacred music has long been a catalyst for social change and awareness. Holiday initially performed “Strange Fruit” at Café Society, known at the time as the

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65 Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), p. 184. Although “Strange Fruit” was Holiday’s signature song, it was not written by her. The song was actually written and composed by a White English teacher from New York named Abel Meeropol. For more further reading on this subject refer to David Margolick’s, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* and *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song.*

66 Ibid., 182.

67 Ibid., 196.
first integrated nightclub outside of Harlem, New York. Established by Barney Josephson, a former shoe salesman and John Hammond, a record producer, Café Society featured entertainment infused with social commentary. Their goal was to provide an integrated environment for entertainment, unlike venues like the Cotton Club in Harlem, where Black Americans were allowed to perform, but not to enter as patrons. In the 1940s Café Society “was a place that drew no lines, where the riffraff and the elite were free to mix without prejudice.” As Jerry Zolten states, “The strategy was to pull in the crowd with entertainment and sway them with the political message.” Holiday along with other blues, jazz, and gospel singers dispelled the essentialist notion among the White middle-class that Black American musical talent was attributed to natural instincts and that Black American music was devoid of any intellectual political and social awareness.

Though a secular venue, Café Society featured sacred music by performers like the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Golden Gate Quartet. Both groups performed spiritual standards like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and would occasionally sing patriotic songs like “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” These singers, who were accustomed to performing sacred music, were exposed to the variety of Black American artists and intellectuals who frequented the nightclub. Not all members of the groups were comfortable singing songs with social and/or political messages, but Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds and Bill Johnson of the Golden Gate Quartet was the most receptive to the agenda of the club. Tucker felt the messages could

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70 Ibid., 107-108
71 Ibid., 110.
position the Dixie Hummingbirds’ music to be an influence for change. Johnson, described by Tucker as “guy who could be very political,” was a composer who incorporated secular commentary in his music while still being rich in biblical reference. In 1939, Billie Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit” brought social awareness through secular music and just three years later in 1942, the Dixie Hummingbirds’ performance represented an intersection between sacred music and social awareness. Their performances at Café Society had a lasting effect on the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the Golden Gate Quartet and would shape their distinctive singing styles, stage presence, and lyrical content. These performances at Café Society were not the first instance Black Americans using music to address social issues. Indeed, Black American music has a long history of containing social commentary.

Music has historically been a communicative outlet for Black Americans to deal with their moods, and to be reactive and proactive in their community. Research focusing on the intersection of music and social awareness has largely examined secular music. Blues and jazz music in particular have been noted for worldly narrations of Black American life. These genres reflected, and were a product of, socioeconomic transitions taking place within the Black American community, including a mass migration from the agrarian South to the industrial North. Furthermore, Black Americans participated in two world wars in hopes that they would someday experience the freedom that they were fighting for overseas. Despite their valor, when the wars were over their status as second-class citizens was still intact. Blues and jazz musicians “had no intention of accepting the pre-war social conditions nor the music that such an

72 Ibid., 111.
73 Ibid., 111.
environment had produced.”\textsuperscript{75} This frustration fueled the aggressive nature of a new type of blues music, complete with harsh singing and electric amplification.\textsuperscript{76} Jazz musicians differentiated themselves from swing jazz of the era and played complex rhythms and varied melodies as a conscious act of rebellion which mirrored the militant mood of young Black Americans. Examining secular music provides a glimpse into the mood of Black Americans during the post-war period; however sacred music during this period has been overlooked as a site for social discourse.

The tone of sacred music in the Black American community during the post-World War II period can be traced back to its function in the Black American church, which has historically been considered a “safety valve where thwarted desires and emotions may be freely vented.”\textsuperscript{77} The church played a key role in maintaining the African oral tradition within the Black American community.\textsuperscript{78} One of the ways the oral tradition was maintained was through the use of music and rituals associated with it. Central to its role of maintaining the oral tradition, sacred music is functional, as is all Black American music.\textsuperscript{79} Just as secular music captured the pulse of Black Americans, sacred music did the same and has a longer history of doing so. Indeed, the roots of sacred music go back to slavery and its use to address the social environment of Blacks Americans did not stop when they were emancipated in 1863. The tradition continued into the

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} Hart M. Nelsen and Anne Kusener Nelsen, \textit{Black Church in the Sixties} (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 5.


20th century, and by 1930, gospel emerged as a new kind of sacred music, which was heavily influenced by the blues and reflected the social condition of Black Americans.

The roots of gospel can be traced back before the 1930s. Black American Baptists and Methodists generally sang modified spirituals as well as hymns similar to those sung in White churches. The transition from spirituals and White-composed hymns to newly composed music by Blacks Americans can be attributed to Charles Albert Tindley. A gospel preacher, Tindley had several ministerial appointments before he was assigned to Bainbridge Street Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (later named Tindley Temple in 1924). It was here that Tindley began composing songs for his own congregation. He often accentuated his sermons with verses or choruses of his own songs. His lyrics often focused on worldly sorrows, blessings, as well as the joys of the afterlife. There are no records of when Tindley composed his music, only when it was published.\textsuperscript{80} He was not a trained musician and composed songs in his head and requested musicians to transcribe his music after he had completed the compositions.\textsuperscript{81}

Tindley published a total of eight songs in 1901 in C. Austin Mile’s New Songs of the Gospel. The success of his songs prompted Tindley, along with three other ministers, to form Soul Echoes Publishing Company. The company’s first publication in 1905 predominately consisted of Tindley’s songs. In 1916, Tindley formed the Paradise Publishing Company, with the company’s main function being to publish Tindley’s songs. Between 1901 and 1926, Tindley published songs on twelve occasions. It was Tindley’s music that influenced the first generation of gospel composers. His music was introduced to masses of Black American congregations when the National Baptist Convention published \textit{Gospel Pearls} hymnbook, which included six songs by Tindley. While Tindley’s compositions were published before gospel

\textsuperscript{80} Horace Clarence Boyer, “\textit{The Black Perspective in Music},” 11, no. 2. (1983), 107-108.

became widely accepted by the Black church, his music had a tremendous influence on
composers whose music would come to dominate the sound of the church in the 1940s and
1950s.\footnote{Boyer, \textit{Black Perspective in Music}, 110.}

\section*{Development of the Black American Church}

Slavery in the United States contributed to the development of the Black church.
Christianity was taught to the Africans and Black Americans because it was thought that it would
make them subservient and legitimate their plight. Social cohesion among Africans was lost due
to their capture and introduction into the plantation labor system in the New World. Language,
the basic system for maintaining communication and culture, was largely destroyed as Africans
were not allowed to speak their native language once they were in the United States.

Before physical places of worship were established, enslaved Africans\footnote{In an effort to be specific, I have chosen to use to the term enslaved Africans and enslaved Americans instead slave.} had secret
meeting places which scholars call the “Invisible Church.”\footnote{C. Eric Lincoln, \textit{The Black Experience in Religion} (New York: Double Day, 1974), 52.} These meetings, filled with singing,
dancing, and preaching, created social cohesion and allowed enslaved Africans to distance
themselves mentally from servitude. These types of gatherings were prominent in the South as
there were few independent Black American churches in the North.\footnote{Wyatt Tee Walker, \textit{Somebody’s Calling My Name: Black Sacred Music and Social Change} (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979), 19.} It was in the Invisible
Church where African customs were maintained and reinterpreted through Christianity.
Preachers became informal leaders in the Invisible Church. An ex-slave wrote, “Our preachers
were usually plantation folks just like the rest of us. Some man who had a little education and has been taught something about the Bible would be the preachers.\textsuperscript{86}

The earliest form of sacred music that expressed the sentiment of Black Americans was the spiritual. When introduced to Christianity, enslaved Africans learned the songs taught to them by missionaries.\textsuperscript{87} By attending church with their masters, enslaved Africans were also exposed to European sacred music through hymns. Named “Watts hymnals” after Dr. Isaac Watts, an English minister and composer whose music had been used in throughout the colonies, enslaved Africans occasionally borrowed melodic ideas and textual themes from Watts hymnals, including scriptures and psalms.\textsuperscript{88} They reinterpreted the songs by changing melodies and rhythms, replacing original words with new texts that combined English words and phrases with those of African origin.\textsuperscript{89}

Spirituals primarily emphasized themes that suggested God would supernaturally deliver them from their plight, although a number of songs dealt with literal escape and dissent.\textsuperscript{90} Some spirituals were rebellious songs that dealt with the conditions of physical life. These were songs of defiance, revolt, and escape. As such, these messages had to be conveyed in a cryptic manner in order to be acceptable. A number of spirituals had multiple meanings. According to Bernice Johnson Reagon, “The African-American oral tradition is full of stories about the use of spirituals like ‘I Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray,’ ‘Wade in the Water,’ ‘Steal Away,’ and ‘Run

\textsuperscript{86} E. Franklin Frazier, \textit{The Negro Church in America} (The University of Liverpool: Schocken Books, 1963), 23.


\textsuperscript{89} Maultsby, \textit{More Than Dancing}, 33.

\textsuperscript{90} Walker, \textit{Somebody’s Calling My Name}, 34.
Mourner Run’ as signal songs of escape in general or, more specifically, with the efforts of those working on the Underground Railroad."\(^91\)

Free Black American preachers in the North and some in the South vocalized opposition to slavery. Preachers were permitted as leaders among enslaved Africans, but their message was expected to convey passiveness and consolation.\(^92\) Indeed, for a preacher to be permitted on a plantation, his message could not be considered seditious. As a consequence, preachers usually dealt with the otherworldly escape from daily life. The belief that there would be future rewards beyond the natural world had a powerful attraction for Black Americans who lived in slavery.

The development of the Black American church and church music among free Black Americans was attributed to their organized community life and the missionary efforts of Whites.\(^93\) These Black Americans lived in cities in the North and South where the plantation system was not dominant or had never been established. Early White Methodist and Baptist missionaries preached a message of liberation, and thus attracted a large number of Blacks. Over time, however, a schism developed between churches in the North and South over the justification of slavery on Christian grounds and the overall issue of the status of Blacks in the church.\(^94\) To remedy this problem, many churches banned Black Americans from worship or set up separate churches. The churches that were established modeled the organization of the Methodists and Baptists that had ordained their ministers.\(^95\) The music that accompanied the

\(^91\) Bernice Johnson Reagon, If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 75.


\(^93\) Ibid., 28.

\(^94\) Ibid. 31.
church service consisted of psalms, hymns, and anthems. Black American congregations often used the hymns of the White dominations to which they belonged. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, “lining” out hymns and psalms was a common practice. The deacon would chant on or two line at a time, followed by congregational singing of the lines. By 1830 progressive churches of all denominations began introducing choir singing into their services, though it was resisted by some congregations.  

Although modeled after White churches, Black American congregations developed their own syncretic religion that mixed elements of the African tradition with the rituals and music of the White world. The first independent Black American congregations were Baptists. Baptist churches had a greater degree of autonomy than other denominations, so it was easier for Blacks to become preachers, and therefore leaders in the church. In response to the indignity of segregation and lack of opportunity in White churches, Black Americans established a separate denomination in Philadelphia. In 1786 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were removed from a segregated church for sitting in White section. They left the church and formed the African Free Society. Ready to establish a church, Allen and Jones disagreed whether to model the organization after the Methodist or Protestant Episcopal. As a result, Jones organized the African Protestant Episcopal Church and Allen the African Methodist Episcopal Church.  


98 Nelsen and Nelsen, Black Church in the Sixties, 71.

an independent organization, the AME church published hymn books for their church, however, the use of instruments caused conflict as well.  

After the Civil War the masses of Black Americans were concentrated in the Baptist and Methodist churches established by free Black Americans. Those denominations provided a more emotional and ecstatic form of worship that the Protestant, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches. As a result of the social stratification of Black Americans after Emancipation, schisms soon developed and separate church organizations emerged based on distinctions of color and standards of civilized behavior. Some biracial and free Black Americans were more assimilated into White culture. There was difference in the character of religious services from those with a background of freedom and those just released from slavery.  

The attitude in the free Black American churches was in opposition to the singing of spirituals and other characteristically African worship such as dancing and shouting. Music and dance were interwoven with African religion and its American adaptations. In his observations of cultural shifts in African and Black American music, Amiri Baraka quotes an African dictum stating, “The spirit will not descend without song.” In the non-middle-class and rural churches, demonstrating physical and emotional forms of worship were incorporated in Black American religion as enslaved Africans. The influence of African traditions upon religious ritual was more evident in the holiness churches than in other churches. Holiness churches

\begin{enumerate}
\item Southern, The Music of Black Americans, 127.
\item Frazier, The Negro Church in America, 36-37.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
encouraged the belief in spirit possession, holy dancing, speaking in tongues, improvisatory singing, and the use of drums and other percussive instruments.\footnote{Southern, \textit{The Music of Black Americans}, 262.}

Pentecostalism emerged from a Holiness movement that emphasized a process of being “born again” through “the Holy Spirit.” William J. Seymour, a Black preacher, was one of the first Pentecostals. He led the Azusa Street Revival held in Los Angeles from 1906 to 1909.\footnote{Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya, \textit{The Black Church in the African American Experience}. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990), 77.} The religious revival was initially integrated, but later split along racial lines. Both Holiness and Pentecostal traditions gained preference in Black American communities at the turn of the twentieth century. The popularity of Pentecostal churches increased exponentially in the rural South. As Black Americans moved throughout the country into urban areas they took the songs they were accustomed to into the storefront Pentecostal churches that catered to the needs of poor Black Americans. As a result the largest denominations such as the Church of God in Christ, the United Holy Church, and the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church were located New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia. For workers from the South, the music provided a release from hard and monotonous labor.\footnote{Robert Darden, \textit{People Get Ready! A New History of Black Gospel Music} (New York: Continuum, 2004), 138-140.} By the 1920s the Pentecostal church had its own stylistic characteristics that displayed features of both sacred black music and secular music. It was often described as the secular counterpart of the blues, with the text being the only distinction.\footnote{Southern, \textit{The Music of Black Americans}, 457.}

\textbf{Secularization of the Black American}
Between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the beginning of World War I in 1917, the Invisible Church merged with the independent Black American churches to form several visible churches.\textsuperscript{109} The Reconstruction period saw the establishment of schools for Black Americans, an opportunity to participate in local politics, as well as the establishment of thousands of churches. Former enslaved Americans were now preachers and leaders in the church. Similarly, those who were educators and community leaders came from the church. However, after Reconstruction was abandoned and Jim Crow was established as the \textit{de facto} cultural code in the South, those Blacks who acquired power became powerless. The former enslaved Americans began moving, first into cities throughout the South and later to the North. The church was also losing its foothold in the community. In the South especially, in light of the established White power structure, the Black American church lost its zeal for freedom and softened its drive for equality.\textsuperscript{110} According to James Cone, “The passion for freedom was replaced with innocuous homilies against drinking, dancing and smoking; and injustices in the present were minimized in favor of a kingdom beyond this world.”\textsuperscript{111} With the church no longer at the center of community and with Blacks settling throughout the South and North, the spiritual, which had served as an emotional release valve for slaves, ceased to communicate messages that resonated with the experience of Black Americans post-slavery.

During the decades following the Civil War, secular music occupied a prominent role in communicating the condition of Black Americans in the South. Blues as a musical genre was


\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
being played in the late 1800s during Reconstruction or after. The blues emerged as a direct response to the displacement of Black Americans experienced after slavery. No longer restricted by location, former enslaved Americans moved throughout the South to explore other professions. Active blues communities developed in the Mississippi River Valley, the Piedmont area of the southeast, and east Texas. The blues became a symbol for the freedom of Black Americans. The themes in blues music often focused on sex, despair, and love. Instead of focusing on the otherworldly escapes from reality, the blues focused on the present, addressing problems of the human condition like relationships and sex. Because of its attention to the body and its ability to speak concretely about Black experiences, James Cone calls the blues “secular spirituals.”

Spirituals did not completely disappear after Emancipation. Black American churches disagreed over musical styles. Educated church leaders shunned the musical and worship styles of rural Blacks Americans, while retaining the denominational hymnals. Spirituals did remain, however, in smaller, rural churches. The commercialization of Black sacred music began after Emancipation as Black American institutions of higher education were beginning to be established and jubilee choirs and quartets traveled and performed to White audiences raising money for the schools. Trained in the European aesthetic of harmony and intonation, these groups rearranged spirituals and folk songs. Singing in harmony became popular among Black Americans since the 1850s through the use of shape-notes. Shape note singing is a form


of musical notation where the pitch is determined by the shape of the note rather than the position on a musical staff.\textsuperscript{115} During Reconstruction, shape-note singing introduced many southern Black Americans to singing in harmony. Singing in harmony was also popularized by minstrel performance groups. Jubilee songs, which were essentially mid-tempo to rapid tempo spirituals, also popularize harmonized singing. Some of the well-known schools that featured quartet groups were Fisk University in Tennessee, Hampton University in Virginia, and Tuskegee University in Alabama.

The Back American spirituals of slavery were unknown outside of the southern slave community until the Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced the songs during their tours from 1871-1878. In 1897, the Fisk Jubilee Singers was established to help raise money for a fledgling Fisk University which had been founded a year earlier. George L. White, the school’s treasurer, was appointed as the director of the choir. Made up of men and women, the group performed to White audiences first regionally, then nationally and internationally. In search of a repertoire, White allowed the choir to sing spirituals which were tailored for their audience. According to Lawrence Levine, “In the process of transmission from the praise house to the concert hall the songs were denatured into a form more compatible with Euro-American musical tastes.”\textsuperscript{116} These jubilee songs employed a slightly more sophisticated kind of poetry and a more Westernized sense of harmony.\textsuperscript{117}

The Fisk Jubilee Singers are responsible for the emergence of the jubilee quartet and the dissemination of jubilee music. In 1905 Fisk University began featuring male quartet singing

\textsuperscript{115} Allen, \textit{Singing in the Spirit}, 2.
\textsuperscript{116} Lawrence W. Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 166
instead of the mixed choir. As those men graduated or left Fisk, the continued to teach at other schools and in their communities. Jubilee groups were so prevalent in the Black American community that scholar James Weldon Johnson stated, “Pick up four colored boys or young men anywhere and the chances are ninety out of a hundred that you have a quartet. Let one sing the melody and the others will naturally find their parts. Indeed it may be said that all male Negro youth in the United States is divided in quartets.”

By the 20th century, blues became increasingly popular as aspiring and professional blues singers travelled throughout cities in Black minstrel, tent, and medicine shows. Theatres opened in cities with large Black American populations. In Harlem, New York the Lincoln Theatre opened in 1909 and the Lafayette Theatre opened three years later. Many of the performers on the vaudeville and travelling circuit earned less than Whites. In addition, the Theatre Owners Booking Agency (TOBA) arranged for Black American artists to play for all-Black audiences throughout the North and South. The management company was nicknamed “Tough on Black Asses” by Black American performers, indicating the economic difficulties many performers faced. The popularity of blues music also began to be noticed by the music recording industry. In 1920, Okeh Records recorded Mamie Smith singing Crazy Blues. Other major record companies like RCA, Victor, Vocallion, and Columbia began to sign blues artists,


120 Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 224.


122 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 225
whose success spawned a new recording market called race records. These recordings were performed by and marketed to Black American consumers.

**Planting the Seeds of Protest: Wartime, Struggle, and Progress in the Black American Community**

This period of emigration was known as “The Great Migration,” which at its zenith coincided with World War I (1914-1920). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Black Americans developed an identity apart from slavery. By 1914, Black Americans were more educated, owned more businesses, and founded more social and fraternal organizations than during Reconstruction. Illiteracy rates among Black Americans decreased from 30.5 percent in 1910 to 23 percent in 1920. As literacy rates rose, the middle-class subsequently expanded. Migration to northern cities as well as the wartime economy increased the number of white-collar positions among Black Americans. Middle-class Black Americans obtained their income from services they rendered as white-collar entrepreneurs. These businesses consisted of insurance companies, banks, newspapers, retail stores, restaurants, and funeral homes which served the needs of segregated Black American communities.

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126 Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 43.
Black Americans particularly in the cities embodied a new identity, that of a “New Negro.” They were identified as New Negroes because of their increased economic status and progressive attitudes. Distancing themselves from the memory of slavery, these Black Americans openly challenged the dominant ideology of second-class citizenship. Black Americans’ domestic efforts and willingness to fight abroad became a major catalyst for social, political, and economic change. When World War I began in 1914, Black Americans closed ranks with the nation and joined the war effort. In a surge of nationalistic identity, many Black Americans rallied behind the United States and at least temporarily sacrificed the domestic fight for equality.

Various organizations were founded at the start of the century with varying viewpoints on how to attain social, political, and economic progress. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was co-founded in 1909 by W.E.B. DuBois and pursued social justice through the courts. Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and moved to the United States in 1916, emphasizing independence and identity with Africa, in addition to advocating a mass movement of Black

127 Gerald D. Jaynes, ed., Encyclopedia of American Society (London: Sage Publication, 2005), 597. The term “New Negro” was popularized in the first three decades of the twentieth century by Black American leaders, journalists, artists, and some Whites. It was used to suggest the distance in terms of identity that African-Americans had come from the institution of slavery. In 1900, use of the term marked the emergence of an educated, politically, and culturally aware generation of Black Americans


129 Ibid.
Americans back to Africa. In 1925, A. Phillip Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first Black American labor union.\textsuperscript{130}

With massive migrations to northern cities, Black Americans found it difficult to transition into impersonal urban environments. Even though Jim Crow law was not imposed upon Blacks in these areas, they still faced poverty due to economic inequality and job discrimination. Many of the Black American churches which were established in the North attracted poor congregations. The larger pre-existing churches in the North adapted to meet the needs of the growing population.\textsuperscript{131} Churches now decreased their otherworldly rhetoric and began to focus attention on addressing the social condition of the Black American.\textsuperscript{132} These larger churches began to participate in social justice organizations like the NAACP and the National Urban League, founded in 1910. For many Black Americans migrating from the South, the large churches in the North did not adequately serve their religious and social needs. In this unsettling environment, some Black Americans turned to the numerous storefront churches, charismatic orators, and separatist religious organizations such as the Black Muslims “in a quest for a religion which could make the new and strange burdens of urban life somehow seem tolerable.”\textsuperscript{133} These smaller churches attracted lower and lower middle-class Black Americans. The storefront churches were smaller served an important function by fostering a sense of community and identity for Black American migrants in the large cities. In addition, unlike the larger middle-class churches that frowned upon a worship style that included dancing


\textsuperscript{132} E. Franklin Frazier, \textit{The Negro Church in America} (The University of Liverpool: Schocken Books, 1963), 56.

\textsuperscript{133} Nelsen and Nelsen, \textit{Black Church in the Sixties}, 43.
and shouting, smaller churches encouraged free religious expression, which was more familiar to poor Black Americans from the South.\footnote{Frazier, The Negro Church in America, 56.}

**A New Kind of Music-The Rise of Gospel**

The rhetorical shift in the churches from otherworldly expectations to the natural world reflected a new type of sacred music that was influenced by the blues and the spirituals. Unlike the spirituals, however, which grew out the experience of slavery primarily in the South, this new scared music was rooted in the urban experience of Black Americans.\footnote{Reagon, Don't Hinder Me, 5.}

It was in this urban environment that a Black American minister named Charles Albert Tindley made his contribution to the genre that was soon to be called gospel. Tindley was born in Maryland around the beginning of the Civil War and raised in a free Black family. He eventually settled in Philadelphia and, in 1902, started his own church. Tindley sang and preached throughout the area and his church was well known for their music, much of which was written by Tindley. By 1901, he was copyrighting his music and in 1916 he published a collection titled, *New Songs of Paradise.*\footnote{Ibid., 16.}

The economic viability of religious music for Black American had long been realized. In 1801, Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church published a collection of hymns for use in his congregation titled, *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs*

It was Charles Tindley’s compositions that would directly influence the development of gospel music. Just as spirituals interpreted oppression as a result of slavery, Tindley’s songs interpreted the oppression Black Americans experienced in the North. His songs focused on suffering and persevering through life with the belief in Jesus Christ. While his songs did not predominately focus on the rewards of an afterlife, they did help Black Americans cope throughout their physical life. According to Viv Broughton, “Previous emphasis had been placed on salvation, conversion, etc with very little recognition of the hardships undergone by black people in everyday lives.”\textsuperscript{139} Included in Tindley’s first group of songs copyrighted in 1901 was “I’ll Overcome One Day,” which later became the theme song of the civil rights movement sixty years later as “We Shall Overcome.”\textsuperscript{140} The two songs demonstrate gospel’s

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\textsuperscript{139} Broughton, *Black Gospel*, 39.

\textsuperscript{140} Reagon, *Don’t Hinder Me*, 20.
potential as an outlet for expression and as a medium for communication in the Black American community, as both songs draw a direct connection between gospel music and social awareness.

For many of the composers, the writing and copywriting of their music was a business opportunity. The National Baptist Convention (NBC) became the most prominent outlet to disseminate the new music to the churches. The NBC was founded in 1880 and established a music department in 1900.\textsuperscript{141} It was here that singers and songwriters were encouraged to performed and introduced new music. Lucie Campbell, a public school teacher in Memphis, Tennessee was one such songwriter. Campbell received her copyright for a gospel song in 1905, and by 1916 was serving as the music director in the NBC. In 1921, she also served on the committee which compiled the first song book published by the NBC called, \textit{Gospel Pearls}.\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Gospel Pearls} was the first publication by a Black congregation to use the term “gospel” in the title, and helped popularize the word and its association with Black American sacred music.\textsuperscript{143} The dissemination of compositions in \textit{Gospel Pearls} helped to shape the characteristics of gospel music and led to an increase its popularity.

By the 1920s Black American church music was characterized by jubilee songs and groups who sang traditional spirituals; secondly by preachers who traveled delivering sermons and singing hymns; and thirdly by travelling street evangelists, who often played a guitar in a blues style.\textsuperscript{144} A number of singers and preachers visited churches and revival meetings across

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{141} Southern, \textit{The Music of Black Americans}, 458.


\textsuperscript{143} Darden, \textit{People Get Ready!}, 164.

\end{flushleft}
the country. These artists benefited from a burgeoning recording industry that had begun to recognize Black American blues artists in the 1920s. Reverend J.M. Gates was the most well-know of the preachers. Gates recorded *Death’s Black Train Is Coming* in 1926 on Columbia Records. Columbia also recorded a blind guitarist named Blind Willie Johnson, who from 1927 to 1930, recorded thirty records for Columbia including, *Jesus Makes Up My Dying Bed*. Reverend A.W. Nix, a co-editor of the NBC’s *Gospel Pearls* hymnal, found success recording his sermons as well. His most popular sermon on record was the *Black Diamond Express to Hell* recorded in 1927. Other popular preachers were J.C. Burnett, F.W. Mc Gee, and D.C. Rice.145

The success of recorded sermons had even lured some blues singers to record religious songs as well, including Blind Lemon Jefferson (as Deacon L.J. Bates), Charley Patton (under the name of Elder J.J. Hadley), Blind Roosevelt Graves, and Blind Joe Taggart.146

A small number of Black-owned record companies were established during the decade as well. Although many Black-owned companies had access to vast talent pool, they could neither afford to advertise on a national level nor disseminate their product outside of local areas. Thus, none of these companies were able to sustain any long term success, some for three years or less and some releasing as little as recordings. Notable companies included Black Swan established in 1921, Sunshine Records established in 1922, Merritt Records established in 1925, and Black Patti established in 1927. Independent companies, both Black and White-owned, simply could not compete with major companies. Major record labels such as Okeh, Columbia, Victor, and Decca soon emerged as leaders and with the success of race records expanded their catalog to include sacred music.147 Talent scouts went to small towns searching for solo artists, quartet

145 Alan Young, *Woke Me up This Morning*, 1997, 193.

146 Darden, *People Get Ready!*, 146.
groups, and preachers to record. By the end of the 1920s, the music landscape was changing. Despite the popularity of recorded sermons, very few preachers continued recording in the 1930s. The brevity of their careers can be attributed to the deterioration of the economy brought on by the Depression which made buying records unaffordable. In addition, the rising accessibility of radio decreased the demand for such recordings. One notable exception to this decrease in demand was the religious musical groups, comprised of jubilee groups. 148

The early groups to record these race records and achieve commercial success were the Norfolk Jubilee Quartet, the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet, and the Silver Leaf Quartet, all from Norfolk Virginia. In addition, several cities such as Birmingham, Alabama, Jacksonville, Florida, and Memphis, Tennessee were noted for their jubilee groups. 149 These early recordings contributed to the mass consumption of Black music and were treatment as commodities.

The early spiritual singers and preachers helped to popularize sacred music in the cities, but it was Thomas Dorsey, a blues musician, who made the greatest contribution to the development of gospel music. Dorsey is often referred to as the “Father of Gospel Music.” His blues compositions, filled with sexual double entendres, often contradicted the messages of salvation in the sacred music he wrote. Dorsey’s repertoire reflected his sometimes tenuous relationship with a worldly, yet religious, lifestyle. Born in Georgia in 1880, Dorsey grew up in a musical and religious Baptist family. He learned how to read music and play the organ at an early age, being influenced by the Watts hymnals as well as the blues. Dorsey gained a local reputation as a blues pianist in Atlanta where he played on the TOBA circuit and witnessed blues

148 Darden, People Get Ready!, 147.
149 Ibid., 154.
performers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who encouraged him to pursue his musical 
talent.\textsuperscript{150}

Dorsey moved to Chicago in 1916, became known as “Georgia Tom” on the blues circuit, 
and began writing and publishing his music. His sacred and secular influences synthesized after 
he attended the 1921 National Baptist Convention. It was here that Dorsey was inspired by 
Reverend A.W. Nix stating, “My inner being was thrilled… my emotions were aroused; my 
heart was inspired to become a great singer and worker in the Kingdom of the Lord-and impress 
people just as this great singer did that Sunday morning.”\textsuperscript{151} A short time later that same year 
he wrote his first gospel song, “If I Don’t Get There,” for the second edition of \textit{Gospel Pearls}. 
He also composed, “If you See My Savior, Tell Him That You Saw Me” and “How About 
You?” Dorsey tried to make a living writing, copyrighting, and selling his new music but was 
turned down several times. His infusing of blues rhythms to sacred lyrics was not well-received 
and Dorsey was unable to make a living selling his music. He returned to blues music and wrote 
a suggestive blues song called, “It’s Tight Like That.” However, his situation changed when in 
1930, his performance of “If you See My Savior” at the NBC in Chicago was successful.\textsuperscript{152} This 
was the first time gospel music was publicly endorsed by the Convention, thus 1930 is generally 
considered the beginning of the history of gospel music and Chicago, as its birthplace.\textsuperscript{153} The 
popularity of gospel music cannot be attributed solely to the talent and ingenuity of Dorsey. The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[150] Broughton, \textit{Black Gospel}, 33-34.
\item[151] Boyer, \textit{How Sweet the Sound}, 59.
\item[152] Darden, \textit{People Get Ready!}, 169.
\item[153] Southern, \textit{The Music of Black Americans}, 484.
\end{footnotes}
social and political environment caused by the Great Depression 1929 provided a need for uplifting songs. Dorsey’s music spoke to the needs of Black American during the Depression.\textsuperscript{154}

Though initially Dorsey was not commercially successful, the influence that he and his contemporaries had in popularizing gospel music from 1930 to 1945 cannot be overstated. Not only were they talented artists, but savvy entrepreneurs who established publishing houses, traveled, and demonstrated how to sing gospel music. In 1931, Dorsey and Theodore Frye organized the first gospel chorus at Ebenezer Baptist Church as well as the Chicago Gospel Choral Union, Inc. In 1932, he and singer, Sallie Martin founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, Inc. Also in 1932, he founded the Dorsey House of Music, the first music publishing company that exclusively sold the music of Black American gospel composers.\textsuperscript{155} These compositions were even popular to White audiences. Two publishers for White churches, Stamps-Baxter and R. E. Winslett, released a collection of Dorsey’s tunes in the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{156}

Dorsey worked with a number of singers and songwriters throughout the 1930s who assisted him, and made a name for themselves in the gospel music business. Dorsey became the director of the gospel choir at Pilgrim Baptist Church, his home church in Chicago. It was there where he met Sallie Martin relocated to Chicago, from Georgia in 1919, and auditioned for his choir. Martin toured with Dorsey in the 1930s, demonstrating his music, but her biggest asset was her organizational skills. She noticed the potential of marketing gospel music to the masses remarking to Dorsey, “You know, you have something here, but you don’t know what to do with


\textsuperscript{155} Southern, \textit{The Music of Black Americans}, 461.

\textsuperscript{156} Cusic, \textit{The Development of Gospel Music}, 53.
it.” She knew how to market sheet music, save on printing, charge for voice lessons, and save money. Martin also organized his music store, hired assistants to work as the registers, and kept records of the inventory. From 1931 to 1944, it was said that Martin established more than 100 choirs to sing gospel music. Dorsey credited her for “being responsible for much of the success of gospel songs and singing.” In 1940, Martin left Dorsey after numerous personality clashes and founded a gospel publishing company with jazz pianist and gospel composer Kenneth Morris.

Roberta Martin (no relation to Sallie Martin) started as a pianist for the Dorsey-Frye choir at Pilgrim Baptist Church. In 1933, she started her own group called the Roberta Martin Singers consisting of five young men. By 1940, Martin included females in the group. In 1939, she founded her own publishing company called the Roberta Martin Studio of Music. In 1943, she wrote and published, “Try Jesus, He Satisfies.”

By the 1940s, even though gospel music was an outlet for musicians trying to make a living, this did not mean that they did not face social, political, and economic marginalization. In fact, the success of the music is partly due to the fact that the Black American church, the primary venue for the music, was independent and outside of the mainstream society. The success of gospel music, however, did not change the fact that Black Americans still lacked opportunities. When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Black Americans believed

that participation in this war would present opportunities and a chance to be treated equally. World War II represented the seedtime of the postwar Black American revolution in America.¹⁶²

This tension is exemplified in the work of A. Phillip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first Black labor union in the United States. He threatened a march on Washington in 1941 to protest the high unemployment rates and discrimination within the defense industry.¹⁶³ Randolph founded a mass member organization called the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), after the United States entered World War II, to maintain pressure for change. In one address, he articulated the dilemma Black Americans faced in terms of closing ranks with the Nation in the new war:

There is no escape from this dilemma. There ought not to be escape. For if the war for democracy is not won abroad, the fight for democracy cannot be won at home. If this war cannot be won for the white peoples, it will not be won for the darker races.

Conversely, if freedom and equality are not vouchsafed the peoples of color, the war for democracy will not be won. Unless this double-barreled thesis is accepted and applied, the darker races will never whole-heartly fight for victory of the United Nations.¹⁶⁴

The “double-barreled thesis” Randolph was referring to was an idea shared by most Black leaders and many citizens. First appearing in the Pittsburgh Courier, the “Double V” campaign advocated a fight for democracy abroad and at home and attempted to elevate the morale of the Blacks and channel the hostility to a positive attitude about their role in the war.¹⁶⁵

The Double V campaign highlighted the role of the Black Press as a cultural force in the Black


community. Gunnar Myrdal stated that the press was “the greatest single power of the Negro community.” In terms of business, the Black Press was one of the leading Black American industries and had a following second only to the Black American church. By the 1940s and 1950s, the goal of civil rights for Black Americans was distant, but visible. The fight for social equality during World War II and its aftermath in the United States created a momentum that culminated into a mass movement for equality in the 1960s.

Gospel Music and Civil Rights in Post-World War II United States

After World War II, an overall level of prosperity swept the nation. For Black Americans, it spurred more massive migrations to the North. This second wave of migration was larger than that seen during World War I era. The problems of living in urban sprawl increased and the political landscape was changing. Increased voter registration provided Black Americans in the North and South with some influence over the condition of their community. Even with the opportunity to elect Black American councilmen, southern Black Americans still lived under the constant threat of violence under Jim Crow law, which included segregation in schools, public transportation, and restaurants.

A series of events occurred in the 1950s that set in motion the massive civil rights protests of the 1960s. In 1954 the NAACP successfully won the Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools in Brown v. Board of Education. The reality of racial violence became visible to the nation in 1955 when a fourteen-year-old boy, Emmett Till, was lynched in


167 Ibid., 963.

Also in 1955, the battle against segregation on public transportation was fought with the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott. In 1960, students in Greensboro, North Carolina, initiated a sit-in movement to desegregate local restaurants. During these unstable times, the Black American church again served not only as a place of refuge, but a place of activism. Gospel artists were not oblivious to racist conditions. They experienced racism in their everyday lives even as more artists turned to music as a viable profession. Many performers faced harassment by Whites and law enforcement as they traveled to performances by automobile. Additionally, public and private institutions were segregated, including segregation in interstate transportation terminals for buses and trains.

Gospel music’s popularity increased in the decades following World War II as radio station operators, recording companies, and promoters took an interest in the music. As stated earlier, the recording industry identified a niche market for race records in the 1920s; however, Black American music flourished and crossed racial lines after World War II. The proliferation of Black American music came on the heels of wartime restrictions on the recording industry because of the demand for shellac used to press records and a recording ban by the American Federation of Musicians. In addition to the restrictions in the recording industry, during World War II, travel was inhibited because of the rationing of gasoline and rubber for tires. As a result, the radio industry played a greater role in decimating gospel music. Groups sought out opportunities to perform on radio due to the travel and recording restrictions. The radio


170 Ibid., 18.

171 Ibid., 38.

performance did not garner much income; however, the live engagements that resulted from radio exposure were lucrative.\(^{173}\) After the war, independent recording companies like Chess, King, Specialty, Savoy, Excello, Nashboro, Peacock, and Gotham emerged to compete with the major companies by concentrating on rhythm and blues and gospel. In addition, radio stations became a lucrative entrepreneurship venture with many owners focusing on local markets, especially in cities with a large Black American population. Many radio stations played rhythm and blues at night and featured gospel shows on Sunday. For Black Americans, hearing national and local gospel artists on the radio fostered racial pride. Brian Ward states, “…[R]adio was far more consistently important as a source of news and information, not to mention education and entertainment for the mass of Black Americans in the South—and arguably nationally than either television or the printed press.”\(^{174}\) Radio played an important role in the mainstreaming of gospel music. Unlike race records that were marketed specifically to Black Americans, radio allowed Whites access to the Black community.\(^{175}\)

The gospel circuit that flourished in the 1940s and 1950s was comprised of full-time professional singers and thousands of weekend performers.\(^{176}\) These groups traveled throughout the South and in many northern cities. The genre prominently featured quartet groups and gospel singers. Quartet style was historically composed of five male singers who did not use accompaniment. Gospel singers, on the other hand, were composed of female soloist, duets,

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\(^{176}\) Broughton, Black Gospel, 64.
trios, quartets, or choral groups. The gospel singers often used accompaniment, typically the piano or organ. These singers hailed from various regions in the North and South. The musical style differentiating one group from another had as much to do with the individuals in the groups as the region from which the group hailed. Places like Norfolk, Virginia, and Birmingham, Alabama, were well-known for their regional sound and the success of groups from those areas.

In the 1950s, concerts were organized to promote the new recordings of professional singers. Concerts differed from the gospel programs in the 1930s which normally took place in churches and whose funding was dependent on the voluntary offerings of the congregation. Concerts were often held in theaters or other non-sacred venues and charged admission. Events with multiple stars were booked in venues like the Apollo Theater in New York and Birmingham, Alabama’s Civic Center. These events were promoted on radio stations, newspapers, and posters throughout the Black American community. Local groups sometimes served as opening acts and sold tickets in addition to encouraged the purchase of records and publicity photographs. As public interest increased, recording companies began expanding into concert promotion and booking agencies scheduled larger venues.

The burgeoning visual medium of television provided a new outlet for gospel artists to not only display vocal talents, but also showcase performative techniques honed in the Black

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178 Jerma A. Jackson, Singing in My Soul, 108.

179 Lornell, Afro-American Gospel Quartets in Memphis, 30.

180 Jerma A. Jackson, Singing in My Soul, 109.
American church and on the concert circuit. The broad exposure of gospel in the Black American and White communities through these various media, the period from 1945-1960, became known as the Golden Age of Gospel Music.\textsuperscript{181} Male quartets like the Harmonizing Four, the Radio Four, the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, the Swan Silvertones, and the Sensational Nightingales, the Soul Stirrers and the Pilgrim Travelers lasted from the mid-forties into the fifties. By the mid-fifties, women dominated the field with soloist Mahalia Jackson, Ernestine Washington and Rosetta Tharpe. Female groups included the Ward Singers, the Davis Sisters, the Gospel Harmonettes, and the Caravans.

A clear example of the mainstreaming of gospel during the 1950s would be the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. They found mainstream success in 1957 when they were invited to sing at New York’s Carnegie Hall as well as at the Queen Elizabeth Theater in Vancouver, British Columbia.\textsuperscript{182} Similarly, Willa (Ward) Moultrie performed with her group the Willa Moultrie Singers at Radio City Music Hall in 1959. \textit{Sepia Magazine} described the event:

Perched on top of a big stage backdrop, with a production set up the likes of which the theater has never seen, the Moultrie singers electrified the audience who were seeing a large scale gospel production for the first time….the girls in red dresses sang “When the Saints Go Marching In,” as 30 ballet dancers and the famous rocket girls appeared as angels, and huge flames seemed to lick around them on all sides. At the same time a smoke machine sent clouds of smoke, seeming like clouds all over them, giving it a realistic reproduction of what we believe heaven looks like…. It was so stupendous that numerous people returned more than once to see it. Critics called it the most unusual Radio City Music Hall show they had ever seen.\textsuperscript{183}

\textsuperscript{181} Walker, “Somebody’s Calling My Name,” 151.


\textsuperscript{183} Dave Hepburn, "Willa Moultrie and Her Singers," \textit{Sepia Magazine}, February 1964, 60.
Moultrie was an original member of the Ward singers, a group that included her mother Gertrude and sister, Clara. The matriarch of the Ward family, Gertrude was the architect of the group who successfully branded the Wards name—so well in fact that at one point there were multiple Ward groups traveling throughout the country. As this 1959 article in *Sepia Magazine* proclaimed, “Wherever gospel singing rears its head these days—and that seems to be everywhere—the Ward family or someone from the original Ward family seems to be there…. The Wards of Philadelphia seem to have a monopoly on the art form which is sweeping the country.”

While gospel’s golden age occurred in an era of prosperity in the United States, it also occurred in an era of social unrest. Black American music, both sacred and secular, became an escape from the realities of racial subjugation. According to Russell Buchanan, “During World War II few Negro entertainers injected social messages into their performances.” Most of these artists during the golden age began singing professionally in a postwar, highly segregated environment. Commercial success did not shield these individuals from the racial and social ills experienced by masses of Black Americans. The subject matter of gospel music “reflected the ebb and flow of rising expectation, frustration, celebration, and despair that accompanied the unfolding civil rights struggle.” The role of music in the civil rights movement of the 1960s has been well-documented and has largely been undisputed. Williams-Jones states, “Significantly black religious music more than secular music was one of the most potent moral

184 Ibid., 59.
weapons in the human rights struggle of the 1960s.” She quotes Ben Jones stating that the gospel songs and spirituals “…galvanized a group of individuals on an emotional, non-verbal level of experience,” which provided a bond of cohesiveness and strength to the movement.

There is no question that music has played a prominent role in sustaining the civil rights struggle for Black Americans and the religious and social life of Black Americans in general. During the civil rights movement, gospel music from the church filtered into the streets to embolden and unite protesters. According to Keith Negus, “Gospel can be understood as a ‘bifocal’ form of Black expression that seeks to communicate to a broader audience while creating a sense of solidarity and shared knowledge of African-Americans.” Much of this music was appropriated for protest purposes, with song lyrics changed to reflect a social justice orientation. This moment of enlightenment did not emerge serendipitously. Black American music has historically functioned as an implicit and sometimes explicit rebellion against White oppression and aesthetics. Early semi-professional jubilee and gospel quartets in Birmingham, Alabama, were organized or composed of workers from various mine sites, industrial plants, and steel mills. When decrepit conditions invoked the calls for union membership, according to Brenda McCallum, “Southern black workers’ narratives and songs began to address social

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188 Ibid.


problems as well as spiritual problems; they were used to praise the gospel of unionism, with an implicit message of social protest.”\footnote{191}

Professional gospel artists also wrote and performed songs with social messages. These messages sometimes conveyed the sentiment in the Black American community. In addition to addressing issues of racial inequality, gospel music featured messages about social issues such as drug use and drunk driving. In this sense, gospel performers were activists as well, who, instead of marching, performed throughout the chitlin’ circuit of Black American churches and through recordings spread the “Good News” of Christianity and awareness of social issues.\footnote{192}

The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet is perhaps the earliest professional gospel quartet during this period to sing explicitly socially conscious music. Hailing from Norfolk, Virginia, the Golden Gate Quartet began in the late 1920s singing jubilee style music. In 1935, “The Gates” appeared in radio broadcasts in North Carolina and South Carolina. Two years later they began recording for Victor Records and successfully performed at Carnegie Hall, in addition to being featured on a CBS live broadcast. Their music was generally optimistic with Bible-derived text.\footnote{193} By 1939, their repertoire had expanded to include issues of social and political awareness with the recording of “This World is in a Bad Condition.” In 1941, the Golden Gate Quartet performed at Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s inauguration, after which they recorded “Why I like-a Roosevelt.” Roosevelt was a common focus for both secular and sacred artists. Similarly, after Roosevelt died in 1945, gospel singer Otis Jackson, a former member of the


\footnote{192} Mark Anthony Neal, \textit{Songs in the Key of Black Life: A rhythm and blues nation}. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 30. The Chitlin’ Circuit was an informal network of nightclubs, juke joints, and after hours clubs that gave African American secular acts a venue to perform and be innovative with their craft.

\footnote{193} Boyer, \textit{How Sweet the Sound}, 44.
Dixie Hummingbirds, wrote a tribute to the former called “Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt.”¹⁹⁴ Another pioneering gospel quartet, The Soul Stirrers, led by R. H. Harris, recorded “Why I Like Roosevelt,” parts I and II in 1947.¹⁹⁵

“Tell Me Why You Like Roosevelt, Part I”

I cried about Roosevelt (One more ‘gain)
I cried about Roosevelt (One more ‘gain)
I cried about Roosevelt (One more ‘gain)

God a’mighty what a poor man’s friend
The president administration, Congress assembled
Great God a’mighty the poor folks trembled
The rich would ride in the automobile
Depression made poor people rob and steal
I lived next door to our beloved neighbor, wasn’t getting thing for their hard labor
Great God a’mighty there was moonshine stealing,
Talk about a crime, people robbing and killing
After other presidents made us mourn,
Roosevelt stepped in gave poor people a home

That’s why I like Roosevelt (One more ‘gain)
That’s why I like Roosevelt (One more ‘gain)
That’s why I like Roosevelt (One more ‘gain)

Lead singer of the Golden Gate Quartet, Willie Johnson, an ex-law student, wrote “Stalin Wasn’t Stallin” in 1943. It reflected the United States favorable reception (at the time) to Russian Premier, Joseph Stalin.¹⁹⁶ They also recorded “No Restriction Signs in Heaven” and “Atom and Evil” both in 1946. Nonetheless, by the end of World War II, the Golden Gate


¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 331.

Quartet’s sound fell out of favor in America as they found themselves in competition with proliferating Black American gospel quartets. Unwilling to switch to a gospel style, the Golden Gate Quartet toured Europe in 1954, wherein they found success. Shortly after, they settled permanently in Paris, France.197

Contemporaries of the Golden Gate Quartet were the Dixie Hummingbirds. James Davis formed the first incarnation of the Dixie Hummingbirds in 1928 in Greenville, South Carolina, and they began recording in 1939 with Decca Records. Originally specializing in the jubilee tradition, the group included James Davis, Wilson Baker, Barney Parks, and Jimmy Bryant. By 1938 Ira Tucker, Willie Bobo, and Beachy Thompson had joined the group. In 1942, “The Birds” settled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where they enjoyed a vibrant and growing gospel community.198 Philadelphia was the home of many gospel singers, including the Ward Singers, the Angelic Gospel Singers, and the Sensational Nightingales. The city was centrally located and provided access to other northern cities along the Northeast Corridor. In addition, there were multiple independent record companies in the area.199

The Birds’ first venture into socially conscious material was in the late 1930s at the Café Society, a New York City night club owned by White music producer, John Hammond and Barney Josephson. The Dixie Hummingbirds’ experience of singing songs that were politically

197 Boyer, How Sweet the Sound, 45. Boyer notes that their first trip to Europe was in 1953, however, the official website of the group states 1954.


199 Jerome Zolten, Great God A’mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds, 85.
relevant at Café Society made an indelible impression on the group, for example, in 1952, Ira Tucker penned “Wading in Blood and Water” in response to the Korean War.  

The Dixie Hummingbirds’ attention to social issues increased with the inclusion of James Walker in 1954. Walker was previously a lead singer for the Southern Sons, based in Jackson, Mississippi. He wrote “A Prayer for Tomorrow” in 1953 for the Southern Sons. The song reflected his sentiment about the emerging civil rights awareness. In the wake of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, Walker rewrote the song for the Dixie Hummingbirds and they released it in 1964 as “Our Prayer for Peace.” Walker stated, “I always wanted to sing songs I could get a feeling from…not just a beat. I like to sing songs with a message.”

“Our Prayer for Peace”

Lord, teach us how to love each other  
Every creed, Father and every color  
Let every man, Lord, Father, let them know that it is a sin  
To hate their brother because of the color of his skin  
I want you to guide our mind and tone  
Lord, keep our hands from doing anything that is wrong

Oh, Lord, Jesus, I know you are able to let all hatred cease  
Teach us how to love and live together Father, in perfect peace  
Let me live to see that great day come  
When everybody will be as one  
When there will be no more separating, Lord  
When there will be no more discriminating  
Jesus died to save us all  
Together we’ll stand, and divided we all will fall  
Lord come on and let all this hatred ceased  
Teach us how work and go to school together in perfect peace

200 Ibid., 219.

201 Ibid., 236-237.

The Dixie Hummingbirds and the Golden Gate Quartet are the earliest examples of gospel artists using music for the purpose of social awareness. These groups were the progenitors of the Golden Age groups that would come to dominate the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In the socially charged environment of the civil rights era, music provided a space for Black American performers to utilize the music as a movement and the performance as a space to foster social awareness. This music was sometimes explicit in illuminating social awareness. Although the intensity of racism differed depending on location, Black Americans all felt some sort of racial indignity and lacked the outlet to speak out about issues in the world. Gospel artists gave a voice to the common Black American. Three professional gospel groups who recorded during this era are noted as examples of the use of gospel music to address social awareness during the civil right era.

The Gospel Harmonettes were formed after the 1940 National Baptist Convention in Birmingham, Alabama. The members were Evelyn Starks, Odessa Edwards, Vera Kolb, and Willie Mae Newberry. In 1951, the group added Dorothy Love Coates to the group for the recording session. With the addition of Coates to the group, their popularity increased, in part due to Coates’ “sanctified timbre and preacher’s delivery.” Coates was also unique because of her song-writing ability. She composed many of the Harmonettes’ songs which reflected her religious faith and social and political issues, including “Trouble in the Land Will Soon Be Over” and “Lord, Don’t Forget About Me.”

Trouble in the land will soon be over, all over this world
Suffering in the land will soon be over, all over this world

Trouble on land and trouble on sea
Nobody knows the trouble I see
Trouble in the east, north and west

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Boyer, How Sweet the Sound, 214.
Nowhere to find peace nor rest 
All these things will past away 
If we only get down on our knees and pray 

Fighting in the land will soon be over, all over this world 

This world is filled with trouble and strife 
Trouble by day and terror by night 
This terrible war is taking fathers and sons 
Many I know will never return 
We are blind with sin, filled with hate 
If we open up our eyes, it won’t be too late

Odessa Edwards specialized in the spoken sermonettes that were a feature of the Harmonettes’ performance. Her sermonettes, delivered while the other members of the group harmonized in the background, spoke of hope and faith in the face of adversity. According to Anthony Heilbut, “Edwards was the gospel highway’s first and most powerful exponent of civil rights.”

The Pilgrim Jubilees, founded by brothers Cleave and Clay Graham, were based in Chicago and recorded their first recording in 1952. Though not well known for social commentary, the group did record some songs dealing with social and political issues. A mainstay of the group was Major Roberson who penned “Mr. President,” a song opposing the Korean War in the mid-sixties. It was not released until 1969, at a time of growing opposition to


205 According to Alan Young, “A sermonette is a bridge between singing and preaching. It is a morality tale usually told by the lead singer while the rest of the singers hum or sing softly in the background.” Probably the performer who is most associated with sermonettes in the golden age is Edna Gallmon Cooke. She adopted the use of sermonettes from gospel pioneer Willie Mae Ford Smith. Cooke was a prolific songwriter and recorded for several labels often backed by a male quartets Cooke. Her songs usually focused on Biblical stories and parables. Alan Young, Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singer and the Gospel Life (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), 63.


207 Anthony Heilbut, in accompanying booklet, When Gospel was Gospel, compact disc, 2005.
the Vietnam War. According to Pilgrim Jubilees’ biographer, Alan Young, this song represented the first time the group ventured into social commentary. Young categorized “Mr. President,” as “an anomaly in the Pilgrim Jubilees’ recording career and [it] seems to be an experiment in content and style.”

Though written in the mid-seventies, Clay Graham’s “Trouble in the Streets,” he says, was written from his observations of the lives of Black Americans in Chicago:

We are having a lot of trouble in the streets y’all.
Even the policeman that are on the beat
They are tired of being called pigs and shot at
And I don’t blame them for not liking that

Police will tell you to obey the law
In the cruel meanest way that you ever saw
They will raid homes and shoot men without a cause, y’all
But they don’t know that one day they’re gonna pay for it all

Memphis-based Chalice Records, a subsidiary of Stax Records, featured a number of semi-professional groups that sang socially conscious gospel music. Two of the most notable group were the Jubilee Hummingbirds who recorded songs such as “Our Freedom Song” and “Stop Laughing at Your Fellow Man,” and the Dixie Nightingales. Initially signed to Nashboro Records, the Dixie Nightingales recorded “Forgive These Fools” and “The Assassination.” The latter song was written by group member, Ollie Hoskins shortly after President John F. Kennedy’s death in 1963. According to Chris Smith and Rob Bowman, Nashboro refused to allow the group to record “The Assassination” because it was not a gospel song, and consequently he feared the gospel market would not be accepting of such a radical departure. Ollie Hoskins is quoted, “‘The Assassination,’ was too hip for Nashboro!”


209 Young, The Pilgrim Jubilees, 137.
Assassin in the window, down in a Texas town
He waited till he saw him,
then he shot the President down
(Trouble)
Oh, what a shame it was
Oh, what shame it was
Oh, what shame it was
He shot the President down 211

The commercialization of gospel music in the mid-1940s made it possible for the music
to emerge from the mainstream and become a popular form of music into the 1950s. Gospel
concerts and radio programs disseminated music in Black American and White communities.
Subsequently, Singers became local, regional and national celebrities. Music has always been a
cornerstone within the Black American community, but with the appeal of gospel spreading
throughout the country, music not only became a means of employment for these artists, but an
opportunity to express their feelings about the world around them.

As singers in a commercial market, gospel artists were cognizant that they were operating
in a largely White-owned industry. The tension between the artists and the industry manifested
itself in different ways. Artists had to be aware of the image they were projecting, not in public,
but in private. Affiliations with social justice organizations were best kept a secret. As Bill
Pinkney stated, “That was a time when the White man was making you what you wanted to be as
an entertainer. You couldn’t speak out. You could, yeah you could, but if you did you could
hang it up.”212 From Pinkney’s point of view, performers could not speak out against social


injustice. He felt unable to speak out against a power structure when he worked within that structure. For Pinkney, speaking out could have meant risking his record contract.

Another issue that performers dealt with was the shifting space of performances. It was stated earlier that the Black church was a safe haven for Black American social and religious expression. With gospel music being commercialized, the music was taken out of the church and turned into a spectacle that was able to be viewed and purchased outside of the Black American community. This development changed not only the way people listened to gospel, but the way gospel was sung. Gospel singers now had to control their body, whereas in the church they had the freedom of spontaneity. The churches encouraged expression through the voice and the body. As a product, gospel was packaged. Margaret Allison explained how restrictions in the studio affected her recordings:

Now you can perform in a studio like you would in a church. It used to be years ago you couldn’t do that. They had like maybe one boom mike and everybody had to stand around that boom mike and sing. You better not sing loud in that microphone ‘cause if you did that White man would come out there and tell you get out of that mike. You couldn’t do no stomping and clapping and hollering in there. Some of the studios didn’t like that. They didn’t want nobody in there clapping and stomping their feet and all that.\(^{213}\)

For gospel artists, the use of their body was at stake. In church they were free and encouraged to express themselves. Their body was as much of an instrument as their voice

Not only was the body at stake, but the spirit as well. In the church, singing brought about the Holy Spirit. In the studio the spiritual feeling was difficult to attain. The artists were more concentrated on the technical emphasis, rather than the spiritual emphasis of the song. The participants were aware that when they were not in church, they had to work harder to convey a

\(^{213}\) Margaret Allison, interview by author, audio recording, Philadelphia, PA., 3 July 2007.
certain feeling that would have otherwise come naturally had they sung in church. Mildred Howard explains how she dealt with invoking a spiritual feeling in the studio:

You know you got to have it right, if you’re singing in the studio and you got to put something in it, make it a feeling in it in the studio. It’s not forced. But you got two things. You’re praying and asking the Lord to let you feel it and then you got to pray to keep what you’re supposed to have to put it out there.214

The narratives revealed that gospel artists were not only aware of the complexities of working as Blacks Americans in a predominantly White-owned industry, but also as gospel singers singing in secular spaces. These tensions affected the participants’ ability to speak out against social injustice for fear of losing their record contacts. In addition, the industry determined how gospel was performed. Singers were forced to control their physical movement and vocal abilities in order to conform to market standards. Gospel singers also had to control their spirit, by praying for a spiritual feeling outside of the church.

The worldview of gospel singers was also shaped by their experience as youth in a segregated United States. In addition, gospel artists had a unique perspective on their social environment because as performers they travelled and experienced racism overtly and covertly. Along with the concerts, records, and radio, gospel artists had a massive audience within the Black American community that extended well outside of the community.

The following chapters explore the lives of eight gospel singers, using emic insight to understand the meaning of gospel music during the post-World War II era. Chapter three begins the analysis by highlighting the participants’ experiences growing up in the United States during segregation. In addition, the chapter explores how these participants dealt with racial discrimination. Finally, chapter three gives insight into the participants’ introduction to gospel singing in light of the social environment in which they lived.

214 Mildred Howard, interview by author, audio recording, Cincinnati, OH, 13 July 2007.
Chapter 3

“AT LEAST WE KNEW WE WAS BLACK”

Mildred Howard was a member of the Gospel Harmonettes from Birmingham, Alabama. Now retired, she lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. As I interviewed her about her experience growing up in Birmingham, it became clear to me that talking about incidents from the past was not always comfortable. Howard stated, “I really don’t like to talk about it, but it’s something that I have to talk about.”\(^\text{215}\) As a researcher, I acknowledge that the subject was not easy to talk about, especially for individuals who witnessed violence against Black American citizens as she did. “No, you wouldn’t know nothing about it,” Howard stated.\(^\text{216}\) Her statement further emphasized the importance of highlighting the experiences of participants versus scholarly interpretation. The participants have an emotional connection with the past that I as a researcher do not have. Their narratives provided an emotional connection to the past that could not be conveyed solely through scholarly interpretation.

I asked questions of the participants that illuminated their experience of living in a segregated United States. Using segregated facilities was the most common and vivid

\(^{215}\) Mildred Howard, interview by author, audio recording, Cincinnati, OH, 13 July 2007.

\(^{216}\) Ibid.
experience described by the participants. Bill Pinkney, who sang with the Original Drifters as well as the Gospel Drifters, described his experience growing up in Dazell, South Carolina:

They had water fountains that says, “Colored only” to drink from. They had water fountains that says, “Whites only.” They had movie theaters that Black folks couldn’t even go to, but the Black folks had their own theater, and the white folks had two or three theaters. Eventually they would let the Black folks go on the side steps and go upstairs on the balcony, eventually. That was only in one of the theaters. But the rest of them of you weren’t allowed in there.  

Pinkney’s experience with discrimination was not unique. All of the participants recounted memories of discrimination at some point in their lives. Those who lived in the North may not have experienced the overt racism of the South, but structural racism played a significant role in poverty-stricken urban areas. Whether in the South or North, racial discrimination had a profound effect on how the participants viewed the world and their place in it. The narratives revealed how these individual understood racism and how they dealt with discrimination. They also explained the role of music during their formative years, in light of facing social and economic hardships.

The participants’ use of music as a means for promoting social awareness was rooted in their experiences as youth in a segregated United States. The participants witnessed and experienced discrimination that shaped their worldview. Their families played a primary role in instilling a value system based on Christian principles in the Black American church. The church functioned as a training ground for the participants where they were nurtured and encouraged to develop their talent as musicians and singers. This chapter provides first-person narratives of gospel singers, which give insight into early familial influences, socioeconomic background, and social ties within the Black American community. The participants’ reflections

on their formative years in the segregated United States provide firsthand accounts of life in the Black American community in the 1930s and 1940s. The participants’ early experience with racism influenced how they would later address racism as semi-professional and professional gospel singers.

As Christians, the participants’ perception of social justice was shaped by the Black American church, which was a stalwart institution in the community. Scholars have debated the nature of Black American religion and the Black American church. Some scholars view it as an institution that primarily focused on the otherworldly, while others insist that the church focused on mundane issues and was militant. Even music, which has always served an important function in Black American religious worship, has been interpreted for its social and political relevance. Many scholars have suggested that sacred music, such as gospel, focused on the otherworldly. This research validates the view that the Black American church--along with its sacred music--contained elements that were both otherworldly and mundane. Gospel singers not only sang about the otherworldly, but helped Black Americans confront social issues in their day-to-day existence. The participants’ early social interaction with family and the broader Black American community gives insight into how their views on social justice took shape.

This chapter examines the experience of the participants as they came of age during segregation in the United States. While Black Americans shared a common experience of being marginalized in the United States, the degree to which they were personally affected and dealt with racial marginalization depended on various factors such as their location, socioeconomic background, support systems within families, and relationships within the Black American

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219 Ibid.
community. Through first-person narratives, the participants recounted their formative years and discussed social influences such as family and religion. In addition, the participants discussed their experiences with racial discrimination and how these experiences affected their understanding of social injustice. The participants also addressed the role music played in their lives and how they were introduced to semi-professional and professional singing.

“The Neighborhood was Like a Village”: Family in the Black American Community

Narrative

Tommy Ellison: I left [Wagner, South Carolina] at a young age and went to New York, say, thirteen, somewhere along there. Fourteen, somewhere in that area. My mother was in New York. See, my grandmother and grandfather raised me.

Anne Munson: Came to be raised up with mother, father and grandparents in that big house down in Fort Motte, [South Carolina] down the road from New Bethany Baptist Church where we was all raised up. My mother brought us to DC [because of] no work and stuff [in South Carolina], and wanted the kids to have an education. I came on my 16th birthday [to Washington, D.C.]. I think it was 1944 when I came up.

Margaret Allison: There were six children in the family, three girls and three boys. My father worked, he came to [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania], from South Carolina. He came here and got a job working, doing construction work.

Mildred Howard: [Birmingham, Alabama] was like growing up in any southern city.
I had a beautiful mother; she was as sweet as she could be. I had a beautiful grandmother; she was sweet as she could be. We had a loving family and daddy, he was real nice. Everything was just nice, but we didn’t have everything like everybody else, like some people, but we had enough for us.

**Evelyn Hardy**: I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. At that time when I was growing up, we grew up in a neighborhood that you might call almost a village because everybody in the neighborhood, the older people cared for the children in the neighborhood. We were like a family; I’ll put it like that. We all played together, we stayed on the outside. We didn’t have all of the modern things that you have now to play with.

**Cleopatra Kennedy**: I was born and raised right here in Birmingham, Alabama. While I was growing up it was fun for me good for me because I had parents that made life easy for the children. It was four of us and I just had that motherly love that protected me in all areas so I can’t remember no bad days, like a lot of people say I remember when I had no food. I can’t remember those days because my mother would do whatever it took to get food to put on the table. …I didn’t even put focus on other things at that time because my mother made life as easy as possible without us feeling intimidated or feeling like we were left out. She made us think we were the world, although we wasn’t.

**Roxie Moore**: I was born in a little place in Virginia called Neabsco. Neabsco, Virginia. It’s in Prince William County. We were really happy and weren’t wealthy. We lived a country life, but we had good food and a decent home to live in. I had a very large family. My mother had eighteen children. Of course, she only raised eleven of them. My father was a very old man
when I was born. He was eighty-two years old when I was born. And he left home when I was three years old because he was eighty-five then and he said he was too old to work and he didn’t want to be a burden on anybody.

My mother was a White woman and my father was a Black man of Indian descent. I never learned his background completely, but he was a tall, dark, brown-skinned man with sort of curly hair. And my mother was a little white girl that he had taken from a gypsy camp where they had stolen her from a boarding school. So when my oldest sister was born and the midwife came she told my mother to declare that she was “Colored” because otherwise they would lynch my father, and her, and the baby. So my mother always said she was “Colored,” but people knew that she wasn’t. But anyway, we grew up very happy. My sisters and brothers and myself.

“The Neighborhood was Like a Village”: Family in the Black American Community

Analysis

The participants indicated that their families, which included extended family members, was very influential in shaping their personal value system. Tightly-knit family relationships were able to shield many participants from the racial discrimination they confronted outside of the Black American community. Cleopatra Kennedy stated, “My mother made life as easy as possible without us feeling intimidated or feeling like we were left out. She made us think we were the world, although we wasn’t.”\(^{220}\) The participants did not rely solely on biological family members for support. Members of the community often functioned as a surrogate family, with church members as well as elders nurturing the youth. According to Evelyn Hardy, “We grew up in a neighborhood that you might call almost a village because the older people cared for the

\(^{220}\) Cleopatra Kennedy, interview by author, audio recording, Birmingham, AL., 17 May 2007.
children in the neighborhood. We were like a family….“

None of the participants grew up in middle-class households, yet their parents instilled a sense of pride that did not depend on the possession of material goods. It is that sensibility that has not lured these participants to sing secular music in spite of it being a more lucrative field. Tommy Ellison stated, “No matter how much money I get, I ain’t going to forget where I come from. That’s the wrong thing to do.” The experience of a working-class household provided the participants credibility to relate to issues involving common Black Americans. For those participants who did sing secular music, they believed that singing gospel was a way of staying grounded by reminding them of their past. Bill Pinkney sang with the Original Drifters and found fame with songs like “White Christmas” and “Under the Boardwalk.” He stated, “God fixed it where I made the money. But I never got away from the gospel. Gospel is my roots. That’s why I returned to gospel after all those years.” In fact, Pinkney was successful in singing both secular and sacred music. He could have continued singing secular music exclusively, but still decided to sing gospel.

“Church is where You Get Your Spiritual Food”: Church in the Black American Community

Narrative

Tommy Ellison: Well, I came from a very religious family and I had to go to church. I’ve been in church all my life, working for the Lord.

221 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, audio recording, Birmingham, AL., 17 April 2007.

222 Thomas Ellison, interview by author, audio recording, Baltimore, MD, 7 June 2007.

**Anne Munson:** It was always church, church all day. All day Sunday. All day. All day. And then sometime you’d go to church and if you’d get sleepy, they’d put a pad on the back of the church on the bench and lay there while they keep on praising the Lord. I sang in the Sunday school choir and they would have Bible study from house to house, but they did pray. They prayed all the time for any situation—in the church, out of the church, like for something going on in the neighborhood. The sexton would go to the church and sound the bell. Each tone of the bell had a meaning. If it’s a fire, it rang real fast. And then if it’s something serious going on they would all gather to the church. When the bell goes off, all pots off of the stove and everybody would go rushing to the church. It’s how they get their news. There was a lot of love back there. A lot of love in those days. Place where you could go to sleep and leave the windows open, or your doors not locked.

We were taught the 23rd Psalm and the Ten Commandments. Those were the things that people raised up their kids by. They taught them ethics out of that. In school we had to say Bible verses and you couldn’t say the same one every morning, you’d have different ones. So you learned that too in school.

**Margaret Allison:** Church was real important. My mother saw to it that we all went to church. My mother was member of the Pentecostal church; my father wasn’t at the time. She saw to it that we would go. They would have church like Tuesday nights and Thursday nights, and she take us to church on Tuesday and Thursday. And then we would get up Sunday morning, go to Sunday school. And then you would be in church just about all day Sunday. You would come home and eat your dinner, and go back for the night service, and that would be, say, after 10:00,

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224 A person tasked with the maintenance of a church.
maybe 11:00 when you get out of that night service. Then you had to get up and go to school the next morning. So we were really church going people. I stayed in it until I was about 18 years old, and then I left the church.

**Mildred Howard:** Church was everything to our family. Trinity Baptist Church, it’s a life thing. We had to go to church every Sunday starting at 4:00 in the morning. We would leave there, come home and eat breakfast, and get ready to go back to the 11:00 a.m. service. If there was a 3:00 p.m. service we would go back or we would stay over to the 3:00 p.m. service and we’d come home and eat dinner and go back and then we’d stay until, well, at the time when we was growing up it was the BYPU [Baptist Young Peoples Union]. That’s the Baptist, you know, their Bible class in the afternoons, then we’d go to the night service at 7:00 p.m. Then we’d come home. That was our day on Sunday.

**Evelyn Hardy:** The church I grew up in was St. James Baptist Church. Church made me who I am today. You know, I just believe in right, period. I grew up and I believe in that [Bible] verse that says, “Train up a child in the way that it should go and when it’s old he will not depart from it. And if he does, he’ll come back.” You know? He may go out there, but he’ll come back. Those things that you grew up with as a child became a part of you. They make you who you are.

On Sundays we went to church, we would go to church from morning service through classes and go back at night, so we were church going people. We didn’t go to movies very much. There was nothing, really to do, so I guess maybe some of us decided we would form little groups and we would sit around on the steps and sing, you know, with somebody next door.

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225 The Baptist Young People’s Union was a youth organization of the Black American Baptist Church. The organization trained the youth for positions in the church.
and you had a lot of those kinds of little things growing up going on. But it was a different time, it was a quieter time, it was an innocence that you’ll never have again.

Cleopatra Kennedy: Church was very important and [mother] taught us that’s where you get your basics. Church is where you get your spiritual food. Church is where you get what you need to take you through the week and the next week. “You keep God first,” my mama said all the time, “If you keep God first, good things will always happen to you.” And she planted that seed and one day I just started believing it, so I started speaking it.

Roxie Moore: All of my life I’ve known about church. As far back as I can remember we went to church and of course I was baptized at Mount Olive Baptist Church when I was seven years old. Every vicinity had its church, and each vicinity would have a service on a different Sunday, and so our church had service on the third Sunday. But then there were some who had service on the first and second and fourth Sundays, and we would go around and visit those churches.

“Church is Where You Get Your Spiritual Food”: Church in the Black American Community

Analysis

The church was the social center for many Black Americans. Whether small or large in size, Black American churches developed a distinctive church life. Church on Sunday was an all-day affair and provided wholesome activities, while White-owned establishments neglected Black American social and recreational needs. Anne Munson stated, “That’s all we had to do during that time. Wasn’t no night club and all that stuff. So it was always church, church all

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226 Fallin, Jr., *African-American Church in Birmingham*, 41, 49
day. All day Sunday.” In the typical church, Sunday’s activities began at 9:30 in the morning with Sunday school. Following Sunday school was the regular worship service that usually began at 11 o’clock. At 3:00, the youth would hold their meeting. Evening services usually began at 7:00 p.m.

In addition to fostering a spiritual life, churches “promoted moral discipline, and furnished a social life.” For some participants, church fundamentally shaped their character and encouraged them to be morally responsible. Evelyn Hardy stated, “Church made me who I am today. You know, I just believe in right, period.” There was a common culture among most churches. Black American churches sang similar songs made up of spirituals, congregational hymns, and gospel songs. In addition, long and intense prayers were a part of services in almost all churches. Anne Munson explained the function of prayer in her community:

They prayed all the time for any situation. In the church, out of the church, like for something going on in the neighborhood. The sexton would go to the church and sound the bell. Each tone of the bell had a meaning. If it’s a fire, it rang real fast. And then if it’s something serious going on they would all gather to the church. When the bell goes off, all pots off of the stove and everybody would go rushing to the church. It’s how they got their news.

227 Anne Munson, interview by author, audio recording, College Park, MD., 9 June 2007.
228 Fallin, Jr., African-American Church in Birmingham, 41-42.
229 Ibid., 37.
231 Anne Munson, interview by author, 9 June 2007.
Although the participants identified with different Christian church denominations, their experiences and perceptions of the Black American church were consistent. According to Washington, “Here and there this folk religion may be identifiable with a given congregation, yet wherever and whenever the suffering is acute, it transcends all religious and socio-economic barriers which separate Negroes from Negroes.”\(^{232}\) Their narratives support Joseph Washington’s notion that Black Americans share an invisible bond through religion that is rooted in the common experience of racial discrimination.\(^{233}\)

**“Working for the Lord”: Participation in Church**

**Narrative**

**Tommy Ellison:** I sung in the choir a little bit down there. It’s something I always enjoyed doing and something I loved to do. Dedicated singing. So I left the choir and went into the gospel like I am now.

**Anne Munson:** I sang in the Sunday School choir, in the church. That’s all we had to do during that time. Wasn’t no night club and all that stuff.

**Margaret Allison:** Actually, I was a church pianist because the church did not have a piano player. The only time they had somebody to play was if someone would come to visit the church, then they would play. But they didn’t really have a piano player of their own. So I just learned to play, so I taught myself to play, until I got, let’s see, I was about twelve years old then, until I got about eighteen, then I stopped playing for them, because I had, you know, young girls at eighteen, they don’t want to be stuck in church all the time.

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\(^{233}\) Ibid.
There was a lady that used to come to our church; she didn’t belong there, she would just came there as a visitor. She’d come if they had a program or something there. She’d come sing and she play the piano. Her name was Valerie Stark, I’ll never forget her. And she, I just loved to hear her sing and play. Sometimes before I learned to play I would go to the piano after church was over, sit on the stool and pretend I was her. And she really influenced me a great deal.

Evelyn Hardy: I remember going to church and sitting up there in the choir stand. I started playing for my church when I was about nine years old, so I’ve been playing for the church a long time. We’d sit up there and of course when I got through playing I would go and sit with the rest of the children. They would talk and I would talk with them and then I would look down and see my mother looking at me. I knew what was going to happen next, especially when I got home. So we obeyed our parents, we did what they said. That’s why I said, it was a quieter, gentler time.

“Working for the Lord”: Participation in Church

Analysis

The Black American community and Black American religion are inseparable. For the participants and their families, being active in church was a means of contributing to the maintenance of their community. In addition, the participants’ credited their participation in church for establishing their foundation in music performance. Evelyn Hardy stated, “I

234 Ibid., 26.
remember going to church and sitting up there in the choir stand. I started playing [the piano] for my church when I was about nine years old, so I’ve been playing for the church a long time.”

The participants’ experiences in church were their first introduction to singing gospel. It was in church where they saw the function of music in the lives of Black Americans. Music was not a task that was forced on the participants. Ellison stated, “It’s something I always enjoyed doing and something I loved to do.”

Music for them is a pastime that turned into a passion. The church often nurtured the participants’ talent out of necessity. Often there were churches with pianos and no one to play them. Sometimes children would be groomed to play instruments. Margaret Allison stated, “Actually, I was a church pianist because the church did not have a piano player…”

The church congregation was an early audience for the participants and they learned how to present themselves as performers.

The participants were not virtuosos as musicians or as singers. It took them many years of practice and mentorship to develop as performers. Several of the participants sang in church choirs and played instruments. The church provided a weekly venue to hone their skills. Many participants admired and modeled their talent from other people within the church and the community. Evelyn Hardy stated, “I had seven years of teachers. I won a scholarship from a Frenchman, He came to Birmingham when I was a child and we were, most Black people were poor. And he came and he offered scholarships to talented young people.”

Hardy’s training as a trained pianist contributed to her admiration of pianist and choir director, Roberta Marti, who


236 Tommy Ellison, interview by author, 7 June 2007.


238 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.
was a classically trained pianist. Margaret Allison’s training was more informal. Allison could
not read musical notes; rather she played by hearing the music. Allison learned to play the piano
by observation. She modeled her playing style from a frequent visitor to her church named
Valerie Stark. Allison stated, “Sometimes before I learned to play I would go to the piano after
church was over, sit on the stool and pretend I was her.”239 For Hardy and Allison, their
participation in the church and in the community groomed them to be professional singers and
musicians. As the stalwart institution in the community, the church nurtured their talent and
provided them with the means to showcase their talent, while still serving the religious
community.

“We Weren’t Wealthy”: Economics in the Black American Community

Narrative

Anne Munson: …I loved the country, the garden, grew the vegetables, canned them. Just a full
country life. Milked the cow, whatever. In Fort Motte, [South Carolina], our grandparents had
somewhere along the line put money together and bought certain areas, hundreds of acres of land
and split it between the farmers and all that. So we grew up where we didn’t have to work too
much for the, I mean compelling to going into the White man’s field until we had gathered our
own crop, and then when we had got our own crops together then [White farmers] would ask my
grandfather to come and help get theirs together.

Margaret Allison: Well, we were a poor family, we weren’t wealthy. Then for a while, we had
to go get on welfare because during the Depression everything was bad. So we had to get on
welfare and it was kind of rough because sometimes when we paid the bills, the light bill and the

239 Ibid.
rent, you didn’t have much money left so it was kind of rough with the family. But then when our father was fortunate enough to get a better job, then things got a little better.

**Mildred Howard:** We didn’t have everything like everybody else, like some people, but we had enough for us.

**Evelyn Hardy:** We went to school. Most of us went to school. At that time some people would go to elementary school and they’d think of going to high school. They had to get out and help. We didn’t pick cotton or anything like that, but they had to get out and go to work in the steel plant with their dads to help make a living.

**Cleopatra Kennedy:** She would wash, take in ironing, she would clean houses, she would do whatever it took so that we would have what we’d need. Although we didn’t always have everything we wanted we had the basics we needed growing up, so life was OK with me for that because that was all I knew at that time, until later on in life and I started growing up and finding out different things in life that other people could get that I couldn’t get and places they could go that I wasn’t able to go.

**Roxie Moore:** We were really happy and weren’t wealthy. We lived a country life, but we had good food and a decent home to live in.

“**We Weren’t Wealthy**: Economics in the Black American Community

**Analysis**
Most Black American churches in southern cities like Birmingham, Alabama, were made up of working-class individuals. Most of the male members were miners, industrial workers, and household servants. Most of the women were homemakers who worked for wealthy Whites.  

Evelyn Hardy stated, “[S]ome people would go to elementary school and they’d think of going to high school. We didn’t pick cotton or anything like that, but they had to get out and go to work in the steel plant with their dads to help make a living.” Cleopatra Kennedy stated that her mother would “wash, take in ironing, and clean houses.” Most people worked six days a week and regarded Sunday at church as a welcomed break from a week-long routine of work.

Growing up in poverty made music seem like a viable occupation for the participants. Many of them saw their parents struggle to maintain the bare minimum standard of life. Margaret Allison lived in Philadelphia during the Depression and had vivid memories of her father working to support the family. Even though her father was working, Allison stated, “We had to go get on welfare because during the Depression everything was bad.” Manual labor was common for the participants. Even as women, the expectation to work was no different. Anne Munson enjoyed her time in South, but still helped on the farm to contribute to her family. In addition, Munson’s move to Washington, D.C. was delayed two years because she volunteered to assist her uncle in raising his children. Munson stated, “I wanted to stay to help

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240 Fallin, Jr., *African-American Church in Birmingham*, 47.


243 Fallin, Jr., *African-American Church in Birmingham*, 41.

244 Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
my uncle, my mother’s baby brother. He had eighteen kids, seventeen, eighteen kids, and I just had a heart that he needed some help.”

The economic environment had a profound influence on the participants. Like other Black Americans, many of the participants’ families turned to the church for support or for a relief from the reality of their economic situation. Providing hope in a time of sorrow has been one of the functions of gospel music since the 1930s. With the stigma of racism and discrimination compounding the social environment, the music of the church provided a sense of hope in times of turmoil. Munson stated, “We tried to sing the song with meaning that would help someone or comfort them or draw them, to give their life to Jesus.” In a segregated environment, Black Americans often dealt with the economic issues within the community thus, there was solidarity fostered through similar experiences. The participants who experienced discrimination by Whites as well as the solidarity by Black Americans related to the feelings of the working-class Black Americans. Even as a successful performer Tommy Ellison still identified with working-class Black Americans. “I don’t care how much money I get, I want to be around my people,” he stated. This dedication to the Black American community can be attributed to the participants’ experience with poverty, segregation, and solidarity of the Black American community.

“It was Heavy”: Experiencing Racial Discrimination

Narrative

Anne Munson: [Fort Motte, South Carolina] got a place that would have buses to bus the kids, but we never got one. We still had to walk.

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245 Anne Munson, interview by author, 9 June 2007.
246 Ibid.
I used to work after school over in upper D.C., Northwest, and there was a Murphy’s Five and Ten that wasn’t integrated yet. It was White in the beginning of integration and we came through one day and about eight of us and we ordered some food. The Five and Ten had a food section and an area where they sold everything else, and after we ordered the food, the girl just fixed the food for us, and we said we were going to sit down and eat it there. This manger came and told us we couldn’t sit there, we had to take it out. We said, “Well everybody else is sitting here.” So we walked out and didn’t pay for it. He called the policeman. He talked to us and sent us home.

**Margaret Allison:** We went to school when I was about six years ‘cause I went to an integrated school, Black and White, and then after we moved out of that neighborhood, the neighborhood we moved in was an all Black school. So then we went to that all Black school until I graduated in the eighth grade, finished that.

…Everybody who wasn’t White was a nigger. Well, actually, it wasn’t, as I said, I went to an integrated school, so we were in school with the Whites, but sometime you would have to beat some of them up because they would make racial remarks to you, you know. So you got to beat them up and once you beat them up they’d be nice to you.

**Mildred Howard:** It was terrible. That was something we went through. At least we knew we was Black. They always wanted you to go to the stores and buy things, but you was treated as if you was worse than Black. We had White water and Black water. You had your separate fitting rooms and all, they had theirs and you had yours. But you was paying the same thing for the clothing, but they had their separate fitting rooms from you, and I don’t know, you had to act like
you didn’t know what was happening. That’s the way we carried on all my life, until they started picketing the different places.

**Evelyn Hardy:** It was heavy. It was really, I mean it wasn’t like they were hanging people from trees or nothing like that, but you just knew what they called “your place.” When you go to the department store you knew automatically to go to the end of the thing. To get on the elevator, you didn’t ride the elevator with the rest of the folk. You thirsty, you go where it said Colored. It really wasn’t that bad, but they were bad enough.

**Cleopatra Kennedy:** They had places they could go that we didn’t have. We couldn’t go to those places. All we could do was go skating. We didn’t have buildings and places we could go unless we just came together ourselves and just got together and found a hill to go down and just have fun. They had skating rinks and things back then, the white people did, but we didn’t have that, so I wondered why we don’t have these places, why can’t we go. Even to the movies, because I remember when they integrated the Alabama Theater downtown. I was one of the people that was so glad, and I was angry at the same time, because, I said, “We should have been able to go all the time, why can’t we?” Our money’s the same color, it’s cut the same, and our parents work just like everybody else. Why can’t we go to these places like the rest of them, and then places you had to go in the back door, they could come in the front door?”

**Roxie Moore:** The racial climate was terrible, but yet if you sort of stayed in your corner and mind your business, nobody would bother you.

“**It was Heavy**: Experiencing Racial Discrimination

**Analysis**
The participants’ early experience with racism was not unlike the majority of Black Americans in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. In the South, legal and legislative action had been proven to be limited instruments as Supreme Court decisions desegregating facilities were still largely ignored there.\textsuperscript{247} The U.S. Congress was dominated by racist Southern senators and representatives who rejected innumerable petitions for enactment of civil rights legislation.\textsuperscript{248} In the North in places like Philadelphia, Black Americans were still segregated due to the limitations on where they could live in the city. Margaret Allison initially began her education in an integrated school, but later moved to a school that was predominately Black American. She recalled her experience in the integrated school stating, “[T]hey would make racial remarks to you, you know?”\textsuperscript{249} As children, the participants had to deal with racism on a regular basis. Their experiences, which were compounded in adulthood, provided them with empathy for Black Americans who also understood the stigma of racism.

Many of the participants were cognizant of how they were being treated at an early age. Racism was so pervasive that it was a normal aspect of life. Mildred Howard stated, “That’s the way we carried on all my life.”\textsuperscript{250} As youths, none of the participants spoke out against the treatment they faced, but recognized inequality and hypocrisy in the Jim Crow system. Cleopatra Kennedy, “Our money’s the same color, it’s cut the same, and our parents work just

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  \item \textsuperscript{249} Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
  \item \textsuperscript{250} Mildred Howard, interview by author, 13 July 2007.
\end{itemize}
like everybody else.” Racial discrimination created restrictions for the most basic of needs. Mildred Howard stated, “We had White water and Black water.” They were taught that speaking out or behaving in manner that defied the status quo of discrimination could result in jail or threats to their life.

Segregation provided a means for the Black American community to prosper without interacting with Whites on a regular basis. Roxie Moore grew up in Virginia and stated, “[I]f you sort of stayed in your corner and mind your business, nobody would bother you.” For many Black Americans, the church was a sanctuary from racial discrimination. The church was the only place in American society where the Black American experience could be celebrated with impunity. According to Tommy Ellison, “They didn’t mess with us in the church. They didn’t mess with the church people period back then.” The influence of the Black American church was most widely felt through sacred music, which as a cultural artifact reflected the ebb and flow of social progress and setbacks of Black Americans. The participants’ experience with White racism, along with their cultural identity within the Black American church would later inform their roles as social activists through their performance of gospel music.

There was Nothing that You Could Do: Reaction to Racial Discrimination

Narrative

Anne Munson: Then we had problem with the [White] kids walking to school. Sometimes they would wait until we got into a group, They’d wind the window down and spit out, try to spit on

252 Mildred Howard, interview by author, 13 July 2007.
253 Roxie Moore, telephone interview by author, audio recording, 1 August 2007.
254 Thomas Ellison, interview by author, 7 June 2007.
the kids like that. Until [we] stopped that. The kids stopped that. They set up a spot where they would gather together and pile up some bricks and that’s when they stopped that. When the bus began to slow down for them to spit out the window then we’d let the bricks go, and that stopped that.

At that time we took it to our pastor. We had a lot of little songs, songs we used to make up ourselves, because of what we were going through, but we really didn’t feel the impact like other states and other people did. Even [in South Carolina], with that going on down there, we didn’t, as I said my grandfather had his own thing, so we didn’t have to lean heavy and depend on the White man to go work for them to get money. They had to really talk to us, keep us from getting in trouble down there.

Margaret Allison: It was bad, because there were certain places, stores that you would go into, they didn’t want us there, use certain things. They seemed to feel like Black people weren’t supposed to have nothing nice, you know. There wasn’t nothing we could do about it so you just had to deal with it.

As a teenager, we felt like if we were in a mixed school, as I said, and we felt that if we showed the White people that we were just as smart as their race, their children, and we fixed ourselves up, go to school looking nice, be clean and all that, and a lot of the white children wanted to be friends with you.

Mildred Howard: There was nothing that you could do. What could you do? You couldn’t go in the place and take over the business. You couldn’t go in there as one person and do nothing. So when you look up, everything would be going wrong. So I don’t know, it was terrible, that’s all I can say. I really don’t like to talk about it, but it’s something that I have to talk about.
When they was marching down there it was really sad. They was burning all those homes up there, and doing everything to us. Having us running around, they were just terrible. Even policing was bad because [Police Commissioner] Bull Connor was over our city, and he was a terrible, nasty man. He did everything he could to hurt Black people and then, let me come tell this, he did everything he could to hurt, but he didn’t know that when he got down, even the Black people had to wait on him. The prisoners had to do for [Bull Connor], had to take care, bathe him, and all this stuff, but they didn’t mistreat him; but he mistreated our kids. So when we started to marching on and going on down there, it was sad. They burned Mr. Gaston’s motel, just after Martin Luther came out of the building it was bombed that same night, after he went to church. It was hard. Everything was bad down there for a while, and not a while, all the time. Until lately, and it’s a little better now. At least you can go in the stores. We used to have a lovely downtown section. All our main stores were there, but they moved them all out, closed up some of them. It was sad, now you’ve got used to it now. Even grocery stores are moving way out. So it’s sad, but it’s not sad, it’s making us be people.

**Evelyn Hardy:** But I’ll tell you one good thing, we had our restaurants, we had our barbeque places and we had people who could cook very good and all, but when we became integrated, [Blacks] started catering to what had been opened up to us which caused our places to go down. [The Black establishments] suffered. They did. And I also think the same thing was true with schools, with integration in schools.

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Arthur G. Gaston was the wealthiest Black American in Birmingham, Alabama. He owned a funeral home, hotel, as well as other business establishments.
Cleopatra Kennedy: I couldn’t understand [racial discrimination]. What’s the difference? We’re all humans. But I had to learn what was actually going on in order to realize where I was at that point, but it took to get to that point for me to realize what was really actually going on. I just couldn’t understand why we had certain times we could go certain places and the White people could go anytime they wanted to. You could tell it was segregation at that time, and I started realizing that we are really segregated. They could do stuff that we can’t do, and they’ve been doing it for years, and we’re just beginning to like creep in a little at a time and I couldn’t understand that.

Roxie Moore: My mother had many White friends and many Black friends and everybody visited us. I talked with some of the people in my latter years and we discussed family history and that sort of thing. One minister there told me his grandmother and my mother and father were very close, and he said that they told him that everybody knew that my mother was White but everybody kept quiet. They kept it quiet because most of the white people were very good, but we did have some of the Ku Klux Klansmen there.

“There was Nothing that You Could Do”: Reaction to Racial Discrimination

Analysis

The substance of Southern racial attitudes changed only modestly through the mid-twentieth century. Whites regarded Black Americans with strong emotions, affection as well as fear, but seldom in a way that allowed them fully human dimensions.\textsuperscript{256} Roxie Moore, who is

biracial, grew up in Neabsco, Virginia, and had unique experiences interacting with both Black Americans and Whites. The treatment of Moore’s family is a demonstration of how racial attitudes varied depending on the community. Moore continued, “My mother had many White friends and many Black friends and everybody visited us. Everybody knew that my mother was White, but everybody kept quiet. They kept it quiet because most of the White people were very good, but we did have some of the Ku Klux Klansmen there.”

Economic independence provided some Black Americans with relief from White oppression. Anne Munson grew up on her grandparents’ farm in Fort Motte, South Carolina. Seeing her grandfather economically independent made her more willing to confront social injustice. She stated, “We didn’t have to lean heavy and depend on the White man to go work for them to get money. They had to really talk to us, keep us from getting in trouble down there.”

Many Black Americans had to ignore their racist surroundings while humbling themselves amid rules meant to diminish their humanity. Mildred Howard stated, “You had to act like you didn’t know what was happening.” Daily humiliation was woven into the fabric of American life. For their part, Black Americans tried to maintain self-esteem by conducting themselves in a manner that was beyond reproach and was antithetical to dominant stereotypes about Black Americans, such as lack of intelligence and physical cleanliness. Margaret Allison, who attended an integrated high school in Philadelphia, stated, “[W]e felt that if we showed the

257 Ibid.

258 Anne Munson, interview by author, 9 June 2007.


White people that we were just as smart as their race, their children, and we fixed ourselves up, go to school looking nice, be clean and all that, and a lot of the White children wanted to be friends with you.”

Although Black Americans in the North did not have to live under Jim Crow laws, discrimination in employment and housing was pervasive. Margaret Allison admitted that, “sometimes you would have to beat some of them up because they would make racial remarks to you.” Separate and second-class facilities marked Black Americans’ position in public education, health care, and public lodging, but in no place was segregation more clearly evident than in the public educational system.

In the South, Whites’ feelings about Black Americans were manifested through the creation of the Jim Crow laws, racial rules that normalized the notion of White supremacy through the segregation and disenfranchisement of Black Americans. The police often enforced these laws. In Birmingham, Alabama, Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor demonstrated that his concern was only for the safety of White citizens. According to Mildred Howard, Connor “did everything he could to hurt Black people.” Connor was elected as Public Safety Commissioner in 1937. Serving until 1951, Conner left office only to re-emerge six years later, basing his campaign on the maintenance of segregation. Connor regained his old position of Public Safety Commissioner. Before assuming office, Connor issued a strong warning against all attempts at integration. Connor went beyond enforcing Birmingham’s

261 Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.

262 Ibid.

263 Weisbrot, Freedom Bound, 5.

264 Mildred Howard, 13 July 2007, audio recording.
segregation laws by arresting and fingerprinting protestors, tapping their phones, and confiscating personal property with or without a warrant. It was images of Connor directing the hosing of protesters that was broadcasted on television as the civil rights movement gained national media attention. Connor “mistreated our kids,” Howard stated.\textsuperscript{265} The police “[had] us running around, they were just terrible,” she continued.\textsuperscript{266} Through his callous methods of enforcing the segregation laws, Connor became the most visible symbol of segregation and racial injustice.\textsuperscript{267}

“\textit{It’s on my heart to get a group, a gospel group to sing”}:\textit{Introduction to Gospel Singing}

\textbf{Narrative}

\textbf{Tommy Ellison:} I’m the only child to my grandfather and grandmother, that’s my father’s mother and father. They didn’t know nothing about professional singing and stuff like that. All they talk about is hard working. Basically what my grandmother and grandfather taught me, basically, I still have that. But there were certain things I had to let go, like they always taught me to be a hard worker. I said, “Why I have to work hard? Why can’t I just work?” I had to cut that hard thing loose. I work hard, [singing] but not way hard the way they’re talking about. See, I can go sing and be on the stage an hour then I can go rest.

I was singing quartet when I was in South Carolina with a group called the Staley Brothers from Wagener, South Carolina, before I went to New York. [Madame Edna Gallmon

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{267} Fallin, Jr., \textit{African-American Church in Birmingham}, 142-143.
Cooke] found me through her husband, Barney Parks. They had me on the road and they was just like my mother and father. I went on the road singing gospel music when I was around seventeen. Then I left her and went with the [Sensational] Nightingales. I left the Nightingales and went with the Harmonizing Four of Richmond, Virginia, one of the greatest groups ever sung gospel. All of them are passed now. Back then I was the youngest lead singer on the road and Sam Cooke was a little older than me. He was with the Soul Stirrers and I was with the Harmonizing Four. I was the youngest and he was a little older than me. And then I left them and organized Tommy Ellison and the Singing Stars.

The group that really was inspirational to me and I learned a lot from was the Harmonizing Four. Before the Harmonizing Four got me I was doing bad out here on the road. But when I got with the Harmonizing Four I started wearing tailor-made suits, flying; money in my pocket. That’s right, money. When they picked me up, I haven’t looked back. Things changed in my life for the better. When I went with the Harmonizing Four, the first rehearsal I had with them, they said, “You sound like you’re straining your voice. You’re not in your right key.” That was a blessing. They put me with the right key, because I was singing with a straining. Before I got with them, singing was singing me, I wasn’t singing, singing. Singing was getting me, but when I found my voice, my key, then I could master singing, nice and easy.

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268 Barney Parks was an original member of the Dixie Hummingbirds, from South Carolina. The Hummingbirds first organized in 1928 and began recording in 1939 with Decca Records. Parks later formed the Sensational Nightingales in 1942. Parks’ wife, Edna Gallmon Cooke, was a soloist who found success with Republic Records in Nashville, Tennessee.

269 The Soul Stirrers was founded in 1927. Sam Cooke joined the Soul Stirrers in 1951 at 19.

270 The Harmonizing Four was founded in 1927. They made their first recording in 1943 for Decca Records and are noted for their 1957 recording of the Black American sacred standard “Farther Along.”
Anne Munson: We started to go to church in Washington, D.C., and then some guys used to live on the block across the street from me. We used to sit on the step and sing gospel. We decided we would start a group and I was the only girl in the group. The rest of them were young men. The Traveling Crusaders, we called ourselves. I was nineteen, going into the twenties. We was on a program with a all female quartet group called the Victory Stars and they heard me singing with them and they needed another singer so they asked me to come and sing with them. After the Victory Stars began to fade out, the Queens of Faith was birthed out of the Victory Stars but still was a female quartet group.

Margaret Allison: I started the group in 1944, so I was about twenty three years old then. I was playing [the piano] for another group, which was something like a chorus called The Spiritual Echoes. Then one night I had a dream and I dreamed that the pastor of the church asked me why I didn’t form my own group. I said to her, “I don’t know anything about forming no group; I just play for the Spiritual Echoes.” And she said, “Well, if you would form your own group, the Lord would bless you and you would have your own group.” And in this dream I kept talking to her and I said, “Well, if I would start a group what I would name it?” She said, “You can name it anything you want to name it.” I mentioned the name Angelic Gospel Singers in that dream, and when I told the girls in The Spiritual Echoes two of the members said to me, “That’s good, now if you want to start your own group remember now we’ll help you, we’ll join you.” So I kept talking around, I talked it over with my husband and he thought it was a good idea that I should do it. And then my sister, her name was Josephine McDowell, her husband said to me, “Let your sister sing with you, ‘cause she’s not working, she’s not doing nothing.” I talked to her about it she said she would like to sing with us. I said, well we’ll start rehearsing. There was
just the four of us. Ella May Norris, she was from Greenville, South Carolina and the other lady
was Lucille Shird, she was from Asheville, North Carolina, my sister, Josephine, and myself.

On a Sunday we’d maybe make four different churches on a Sunday, go from one to the
other. And then there was a gentleman, a promoter there. After he heard us, he insisted that we
get recorded. This record company was here in Philadelphia, and it was called Gotham
Records. And the owner said to me, “I want you to sing something. Record something that
nobody else had recorded and, even if you didn’t write it, if you arranged it, that’s the most
important thing. If you arranged the song yourself; that’s your style, he said, and that way you’ll
establish your own style of singing.”

I heard a girl at the church that I was attending then sing “Touch me Lord Jesus,” and I
didn’t like the way she was singing it. I didn’t know who wrote it, so I went to a music store
here in Philly where they sold music on everybody. I looked until I found that song, and I
brought it home and I said I’m going to change this arrangement ‘cause I couldn’t play notes
anyway, so I changed it up and played it my way. So, “Touch Me” was our first recording and
that was the beginning of the Angelic Gospel Singers.

**Mildred Howard:** Well Odessa and myself went to the city auditorium to hear Sally Martin and
Roberta Martin in a concert up there, and it was during the time of a convention. We went up to
the concert that night, big old thing and Evelyn [Hardy] was on one baby grand and Georgia Lee
Stafford was on the other one, and those people really did sing. Sallie and Roberta was out there
in the vestibule out there selling music and we heard them singing “It’s a highway to heaven,
none can walk up there but the pure in heart,” After we left from hearing all that beautiful
singing, I said “Odessa, you know what? We need to get a group.” And she said, “What’d you
I didn’t know Evelyn, but I had seen her at her church and I said, “That girl that was playing that piano, her name is Evelyn that lives on Third Street and Sixth Avenue, right on the corner. And I said, “Evelyn, she would play, we could ask her.” And Odessa said, “Well, [her mother] won’t let that girl play.” So after, we went to Evelyn’s house and asked her mama. [She said], “I’ll tell you what, I think she can do it, but I’ll have to be the chaperone.” So she was our chaperone. Then we all started being around with Evelyn and we got [Willie Mae Newberry and Vera Kolb].

**Evelyn Hardy:** This group of people came down [for the] National Baptist Convention. I had just finished high school, and they came down and had a group with them called The Roberta Martin Singers. Let’s see, who else was with them, Roberta Martin and the Sally Martin Singers and there may have been one or two others groups. I had never seen anything like that. They were doing things that I wanted to do. I liked that. I wanted to do what was in me.

I didn’t start the [Gospel Harmonettes], they got me. It was five of us. I traveled with them until 1953. From the time we started I was always there. I trained them and I did all that type of stuff; pianist, director, and composer, until I got Dorothy Love Coates. And I say I because I heard her singing and I thought she would be a good addition to the group and for once

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271 Both the Sallie Martin and Roberta Martin Singers laid the foundation for traditional gospel music. Roberta Martin’s group was comprised first of all men and later women. Sallie Martin’s group was known for their unrefined but well-arranged harmonies. Roberta Martin is most known for her piano style which integrated Western European classical chords into her group’s harmony.

272 Dorothy Love Coates joined The Original Gospel Harmonettes in 1950s and was a singer/songwriter, credited with writing and arranging over 300 songs. She was known for her “raggedy” voice and excitement while singing.
I was right. She was. She was. Dorothy Love was one of the greatest leaders, one of the greatest singers of gospel music, period.

I would leave, but then in the summer, I would go back and go with them. And then a lot of times I would get out of school on Friday and go to Newark, [New Jersey] or someplace, wherever they were playing and stay up there and then catch a plane and come back. Sometime I wouldn’t get home until Monday morning early enough to go to school. I didn’t leave completely all the way out.

Roxie Moore: I always wrote. I loved poetry and I would learn poems and read books and find everything I could on poetry. And I began writing. I was a pretty good writer by the time I was fifteen. I had written on, was writing on tablet paper you know, but I had written a whole book of poetry. I always wrote poetry. But let me tell you, when I was sixteen years old I got very sick. I got saved in a Pentecostal church and the Lord healed me. And I think that’s when I began to write songs. That is when I began to write songs. I think I was about nineteen when I wrote my first song, that they started singing in church. I would just write about the Lord; about salvation; about His mercy and all of that; and the hope of eternal life.

I married a gentleman from Spartanburg, South Carolina, and he and Mr. [Ira] Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds had grown up together, had played together as children. So one day they were talking and Ira said to Roosevelt, my husband was Roosevelt Moore, said “I sure need some new songs. I wish I knew somebody that could write songs.” And Roosevelt said to him, well Roxie’s always around the house writing a song and picking it out on the piano. So he said, “Is that so?” Tell her to get me something.” So I had been messing with a song called “I’ll Keep
on Living after I Die,” and I put it on a tape for him. So he loved it, and they recorded it. Then they got me a contract with Don Robey of Peacock Records, to write for them.

“I’ve on My Heart to get a Group, a Gospel Group to Sing”: Introduction to Gospel Singing

Analysis

The church served as a support network and continued to be central to the Black American community as millions moved into the cities. The church was a safe haven for those who felt isolated in a new environment. Music that was sung in the South was taken into the cities and was as an essential component of religious worship, creating a sense of familiarity among Black Americans. The music communicated a shared experienced of transition and struggle in the urban areas. Gospel music, as a sacred genre emerged from the Black American experience in the city and reflected in part how they dealt with life in the city.

The popularity of gospel music expanded beyond the Black American community during the post-World War II era and became commodified as independent record companies sought talent within the Black American community. Radio provided an even larger platform for the music to be heard outside of the Black American community in the 1940s and 1950s. Some Black Americans became local and national celebrities by singing gospel music semi-professionally and professionally. Performing offered an alternative to limited menial employment opportunities. For instance, Tommy Ellison of the Singing Stars believed singing music was a better alternative than returning to South Carolina to perform manual labor:

I ain’t never, back in the days when we would ride miles and wouldn’t make no money, I ain’t never said I’m going home. All I want to know where the next program is at. Although going home was nothing. There’s people home that’s doing bad…. Before the Harmonizing Four got me I was doing bad out here on the road. But when I got with the Harmonizing Four I started wearing tailor-made suits, flying, money in my pocket.
That’s right, money. When they picked me up, I haven’t looked back. Things changed in my life for the better.\textsuperscript{273}

Ellison wasn’t the only participant that alluded to the financial benefit of being a singer. Evelyn Hardy mentioned that she was inspired to perform was the Sallie Martin Singers and the Roberta Martin Singers. Hardy stated, “They were doing things that I wanted to do.”\textsuperscript{274} Both groups were organized by women who were highly skilled musicians as well as entrepreneurs. Other participants’ entry into professional singing did not seem to be planned or anticipated, for example Margaret Allison’s started the Angelic Gospel singers after having a vision in a dream. The voice stated in her dream, “[I]f you would form your own group, the Lord would bless you…”\textsuperscript{275} For most of the participants the money was not a motivating factor for entering the music business. Many participants had no knowledge of the business aspect of the music industry; however, once in the business, they all had to learn and conform to structure of the industry.

The music industry fueled competition among gospel artists and those who were less knowledgeable of business practices were taken advantage of. Recording companies reaped most of the monetary benefits of recording Black American music, with performers not seeing much profit for their efforts. The selling of sheet music singer/songwriters added an element of competition fueled by profit. Writing credits on songs became more important as publishing houses were established within the gospel music industry. Sometimes writing credits were not attributed to individuals who wrote the songs. Many artists were not knowledgeable about the economy of the music industry. Artists routinely wrote songs that were not attributed to them.

\textsuperscript{273} Tommy Ellison, interview by author, 7 June 2007.

\textsuperscript{274} Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.

\textsuperscript{275} Margaret Allison, telephone interview by author, 3 July 2007.
This practice caused competition and sometimes confrontation among gospel singers. Inez Andrews, a professional singer with the all-female group the Caravans, explained how her knowledge of the music industry was lacking as an early performer:

When I was out here every day, I was out here because I loved to sing, not because I was getting paid. Because singing gospel at that time, you had to love it. You had to be sincere about it…. I didn’t know I was supposed to be paid to sing until I came to Chicago, because I was singing in Alabama for nothing. I was writing songs and didn’t know I was supposed to be paid for them.276

Gospel artists experienced racial discrimination like many Black Americans in the 1940s and 50s. Their music and performance were used to “express the longing for a better life,”277 and became a medium to address social issues and critique social inequality. In addition to expressing faith, singing provided a time for fellowship and socializing.278 The participants organized groups as teenagers and singing gospel music was treated as a recreational activity. Evelyn Hardy, of the Gospel Harmonettes stated, “There was nothing, really to do, so I guess maybe some of us decided we would form little groups and we would sit around on the steps and sing.”279 Singing helped ease the transitions of Black American youth migrating throughout the United States. It was singing that helped Anne Munson, who had moved from South Carolina to Washington, D.C. as a teenager, acclimate to her new environment. She stated, “We started to go to church in Washington, D.C., and then some guys used to live on the block across the street


278 Ibid., 108.

279 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.
from me, we used to sit on the step and sing gospel.” Membership in these groups was informal and rosters changed frequently. The neighborhoods in which the members lived were tight-knit, with many of the teenagers knowing each other. These changes in the roster group did not seem to be based on rivalry or contention among members, but rather the needs of the group. For example, Munson began singing semi-professionally when neighborhood teenagers organized the Travelling Crusaders. She stated, “We was on a program with a all female quartet group called the Victory Stars, and they heard me singing with them and they needed another singer so they asked me to come and sing with them.”

Several participants were pianists as well as singers, and through a tight-knit network of churches, they served as choir directors, in addition to accompanying various neighborhood groups. Before Margaret Allison organized the Angelic Gospel Singers, she was a pianist for a community choir called the Spiritual Echoes. Allison stated, “A friend of mine started the Spiritual Echoes, but we was from different churches, everybody wasn’t from the same church. So she asked me if I would play for them, so I did. I started playing for them.” Like Allison, Evelyn Hardy joined the Original Gospel Harmonettes after being observed playing the piano by Mildred Howard at the National Baptist Convention in Birmingham, Alabama. Howard recalled how she met Hardy:

I didn’t know Evelyn, but I had seen her at her church and I said, that girl that was playing that piano, her name is Evelyn that lives …on Third Street and Sixth Avenue, right on the corner. And I said, “Evelyn, she would play, we could ask her.” And Odessa said, “Well, [her mother] won’t let that girl play.” So after we went to Evelyn’s house

280 Anne Munson, interview by author, 9 June 2007.
281 Ibid.
282 Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
and asked her mama. [Her mother said], “I’ll tell you what; I think she can do it, but I’ll have to be the chaperone.” So she was our chaperone.283

The interview narratives provided insight into fundamental influences in the participants’ lives. The Black American church functioned as an institution, central to the maintenance of the Black American community. As a result, the values and ethics taught in the home and in church were often synonymous. Their experiences as youth in a segregated environment gave much insight into how they interpreted race relations. The participants’ perspective on race in their youth shaped the way in which they later addressed racial injustice as semi-professional and professional gospel singers. The following chapter will explore the participants’ introduction to professional gospel singing as well as their experiences with racial discrimination as performers. The chapter will also examine the participants’ use of gospel music to address social issues and their participation in civil rights protests. These artists used their profession as singers to address social issues on stage and some artists consciously wrote and performed songs that addressed social issues.

283 Mildred Howard, interview by author, 13 July 2007.
Chapter 4

“BELIEVE JESUS AND GET UP AND DO SOMETHING”

“It’s not like it used to be,” Cleopatra Kennedy stated. As the youngest participant I interviewed, Kennedy was a teenager at the height of the civil rights movement. She began her professional singing career in 1962 at the age of sixteen, with the Gospel Harmonettes after several original members left the group. Given the social environment of the 1940s to the 1960s, Kennedy noted a difference in the type of music they performed and contemporary gospel music. “During that time music had more of a meaning than music now, most of the people are just caught up into the beat. The words don’t mean anything to some of them, they’re just words,” she stated.

For Kennedy and other participants, the words of gospel are a defining characteristic of the music. Margaret Allison stated, “What makes a difference with gospel music is gospel music is something everybody can relate to. Like say for instance, if you had a problem in life, a gospel singer can express your feelings better than you can.” It was the gospel singer who had the ability to interpret those words and relate it to the experience of the audience. Segregation provided a common experience for the gospel singers and their audience. Song lyrics not only expressed the feelings of the audience, but the gospel singer as well. In addition, radio provided

285 Ibid.
a means for the messages of gospel music to affect people outside of the Black American community. Bill Pinkney stated, “…I thought it was a love thing. I thought the music was like love, music joined people together. Music did a big part in integration, integrating the people.”

Constant discrimination bred mistrust and cynicism towards Whites as well as finally, it magnified the separation between the privileged Whites and the Black American community. Gospel music during the 1940s to the 1960s included traditional messages of hope, but also messages that brought awareness to the social environment of Black Americans.

All of the participants grew up in segregated environments and experienced racism on various levels. The discrimination they experienced in their youth shaped their perception of racial relations as singers in the music industry. As performers, the participants traveled regionally and nationally promoting their music. On the gospel circuit, they traveled extensively throughout the South and North and faced discrimination that restricted Black Americans to certain hotels and barred them from eating in certain restaurants. The participants were subjected to the same treatment as most Black Americans in the United States; however, unlike most Black Americans, the participants had a platform to address the discrimination they experienced in their everyday life in the form of music.

These performers operated in a society where they witnessed and were victims of racial discrimination. In addition to singing for religious expression, artists utilized the stage and gospel music explicitly and subversively to promote social awareness. While singing provided alternatives to limited types of employment, it possessed its own set of challenges. In light of racial subjugation, gospel singers utilized the stage as a platform for enacting agency. These artists used their platform to speak about social issues on stage and some artists consciously

wrote and performed songs that addressed social issues. Gospel music was not only a personal expression of the singer, but helped define and reinforce the collective identity of the audience. Even artists who did not consider their music socially meaningful, even the act of performing at civil rights functions, associated gospel music with a stance against racial discrimination.

This chapter examines the participants’ use of gospel music to facilitate social awareness. The participants addressed their experiences as young performers on the gospel circuit during segregation. A significant portion of their narratives recounted the discrimination they faced while travelling. In addition to being singers and musicians, many of the performers were also songwriters. For songwriters, racial incidents were particularly salient. They address how those incidents shaped the content of their music and were sometimes included in performances. In addition, the participants commented on their involvement in the civil rights movement and how it impacted their lives.

“You Knowed How Things Were”: Reflections on Racial Encounters as Gospel Performers

**Narrative**

**Tommy Ellison:** Back then we couldn’t stay in the motel, the up to date motels. The Holiday Inn was the first motel that Blacks was allowed to stay in. Before Holiday Inn come along we was traveling, we had to go off the highway into the Black section and find a Black motel. ‘Cause you know, like when we’d get ready to eat, we’d go to a restaurant, we had to go around to the back, the back door, they had a place for Blacks. Sometimes they’d poke the food through a hole.
I write songs through experiences that I see every day. I would tell [the audience] the experience that I had, like I remember the time when we was out in Mississippi and Alabama. We pulled up to the gas station to get gas. The man would come out and say, “What’d you want niggers?” We’d say, “We want some gas, sir.” We’d gas up and leave and before we’d get out of the city limits the police pull us over. He’d done called the police and told them, said, “Well some niggers just gassed up, better check them out.”

All I could do was just accept it, ‘cause I wasn’t in the position to really do nothing about it. All I could do accept what was going on, so we just conducted ourself according. Like when they would come up and say you want gas, nigger? Yes, sir, we want gas. It was hard, you was in a no winning situation. You could have, you could rebel and they lock you up, you know. They locked Dr. King up, so you knew what they would do with us. It just comes natural. You knewed how things were. They had White signs on bathrooms, for the White and a sign on the bathroom for Blacks, Colored people they would say. They had signs on the bathrooms, “Colored and White.” And you knewed to go in the “Colored” one. And if you went into one of them restaurants, you knewed to go to the back, or you’d get locked or whatever.

**Anne Munson:** Well, we had our own car. We didn’t travel with the guys. That’s all they did, that was their job, but it wasn’t our job. So we would have to go on the weekends. We didn’t run into any problem at all. Huh uh, no problem at all. Thank the Lord. I don’t know why we didn’t run into problems. We were never looking for any and I’m glad we didn’t run into any. But one of the girls’ mother was a member of Bible Way Church. Before we’d leave the road, she’d take holy oil, and just [pour] over the car, wheel and all, anoint everything. And she’d say you all go and act like Christian women, and God will take care of you, He’ll fight for you. So
we never had any problems at the time. But with these other groups, I can see why they’d run into a lot of problems, because they’d stay in hotels and stuff. Then they’d travel from one place to another, they’d call it a gig, but I call it a program. They’d finish here on a Sunday, probably stay there until Monday and leave, trying to make it to the other place, might have, back then they’d have a program in the middle of the week, and the church would fill then. But no, we didn’t run into problems, because we didn’t travel during the week and all that stuff, as I said, living in hotels, didn’t have to stop at restaurants and stuff like that.

Margaret Allison: When I got up a little older when we started travelling, then we found out that it was kind of rough on you. But as a child here in the city of Philadelphia we didn’t feel too much of that. But as we got older and you were traveling, there were places that you couldn’t go and there were places where you went would say, that had Colored water and they had White water. And see when we first started traveling we were traveling by train and occasionally by bus. We didn’t have a car to drive in. So you felt it more because you were segregated and when you got on the train you had to sit in the last coach on the train. And if they had a diner on the train where they served meals, they only had two little tables in the diner for Blacks and the rest of the tables were for the Whites. So we felt a lot of the pressure behind that because they showed that they didn’t want to have Blacks in there eating with them, or even sitting with them on the train.

I know one time we went into a train station and the restroom, they had one part was for Blacks and we wanted, all of us wanted to go to the restroom before the train came, and we couldn’t use their rest room. And if anything was wrong with the water fountain they had for
Blacks, you couldn’t drink out of the White folk’s fountain. And they would, some of them would say to you, “You can’t use this.” Sometime I felt like saying, “Why, why can’t I use it?”

**Mildred Howard:** It was bad out there for Blacks, and especially a group of Blacks. [When] we’d leave home, we’d always try to be gassed up so we didn’t have to stop. Most time we tried to stop at the places where they got rest stops. So we would do that and we wouldn’t have to go in no service station. When we would go on down the road and stop and maybe want some food, you could get food but you’d have to go back door. So we said, “No,” but we wouldn’t tell him, we’d just go on, ‘cause they’re mean sometimes. And we’d eat in the car or we would stop some place if it was in the day time, under a tree or something and eat. That’s the way you had to do it then, you couldn’t go in those places. You couldn’t even drink their water. You couldn’t do nothing. But they could take your money and give you their gas. I don’t know. It was a mess. We’d leave the service station talking about it, Odessa would say sometimes, or some of the rest of them, “These people need prayer, let’s pray for them.” And that’s the way we’d have it.

**Evelyn Hardy:** When we got ready to go into the city to live in a hotel we had to go to the Black hotels because you dare not, just like you wouldn’t go to the White one here. It was the same thing all over, well in Chicago, maybe in New York it might have been a little bit different, you know, but in most of the places it would be the same. I think most Black folks period, not only the Harmonettes, everywhere you went you would find there was unity in the fact that this has just got to end. We were all in one accord.
“You Knowed How Things Were”: Reflections on Racial Encounters as Gospel Performers

Analysis

Based on the participants’ narratives, the most common form of racial discrimination occurred while touring. The participants were subjected to segregation of public facilities such as water fountains, restrooms, and buses. While it was clear that these negative conditions affected these performers, they needed to comply with the status quo or be faced with being incarcerated or threatened with violence. The participants clearly articulated displeasure with the way they were treated; however, many chose to be non-confrontational rather than speak out. Margaret Allison stated, “Sometime I feel like saying, why can’t I use [the water fountain]?”\footnote{Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.} Tommy Ellison added, “It was hard, you was in a no winning situation. You could rebel and they locked you up. They locked Dr. King up, so you know what they would do to us.”\footnote{Tommy Ellison, interview by author, audio recording, Baltimore, MD., 7 June 2007.} These comments indicate that some artists perceived a lacked of agency in order to act against hegemonic racism. To possess agency, one must be able to wield power and in order to wield power, one must first be aware of the powers exerted on them.\footnote{Ibid.} All of the participants were conscious of the power exerted on them by the dominant White power structure; however, as Ellison explained, this consciousness did not manifest into action due to potential legal reprisal at the least. Consciously or not, the participants wielded power musically and performatively in its...
most basic sense by having voice and a platform to disseminate awareness. Christopher Smalls explains the authority of the gospel singer to convey experiences through music:

> From the start the key to the singer’s power in the church was not the possession of a beautiful voice…, but authority, the authority of one who has lived what he or she sings about, and the ability to communicate the sense of experience. If you haven’t lived it, they say, you can’t sing it… The authority comes not from the song, but from the singer…

Not only did the participants possess authority, but they were held to a high moral standard by their audience. Gospel singers were similar to preachers because gospel singers were given the same access and attention to the congregation. The church community admired these performers for expressing their faithfulness through song. It was important that gospel singers did not appear to be hypocritical. As gospel music became more commercial, the church community became more critical because it felt the singers were adopting much of the practices of the secular community. By the 1960s, commercialism became widespread with performers selling photographs of themselves and developing highly emotive stage acts that included falling to one's knees, contorting the body in anguish, and jumping off the stage. These techniques were designed to evoke the reactions similar to that of the Pentecostal churches.

Despite criticisms of commercialism, gospel singers did live the life they sang about and related their experiences to life of their audience, from growing up poor, to experiencing racism as children, to being subjected to discrimination while traveling.

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Semi-professional and professional gospel singers had a unique experience with racial discrimination because singing required them to tour extensively and experience various degrees of racism in other parts of the country. The participants also indicated a difference in how they were treated based on their status as semi-professional and professional singers. Unlike the professional singers, Anne Munson indicated that traveling did not pose a problem for her group, because of their status as semi-professional singers. Since her group did not have to rely on singing for their primary income, they did not spend as much time touring. In addition, they traveled regionally and usually short distances, not needing to utilize hotels or restaurants.

Munson was also aware of Whites’ negative perception of secular Black American musicians. She and the members of her group stressed the importance of behaving like “Christian women” and distanced themselves from customs that would associate them with professional entertainers. Munson stated, “With these other groups I can see why they’d run into a lot of problems, because they’d stay in hotels, they’d call it a gig, but I call it a program. We didn’t run into problems, because we didn’t travel during the week.”

Munson’s comments indicate that Black Americans seemed to be profiled while traveling. Munson was cognizant of that profile and countered it by displaying behavior and using language that would not make her or her group conspicuous to White law enforcement officials or the local community.

Professional singers traveled both regionally and nationally. Mildred Howard indicated that harassment was due to the fact that they were Black Americans traveling in numbers. “It was bad out there for Blacks, and especially a group of Blacks,” she stated. Perhaps Black Americans were harassed more often in groups because groups seemed more threatening than

293 Anne Munson, interview by author, audio recording, College Park, MD., 9 June 2007.
294 Mildred Howard, interview by author, audio recording, Cincinnati, OH., 13 July 2007.
individuals. In addition, during the emerging civil rights movement there were individuals, from
the North traveling South and were considered “outside agitators” by some Whites in the
community. A group of Black Americans in a car with an out of state license plate could have
provoked a response from local Whites. The participants indicated they were harassed most often
at gas stations. Tommy Ellison described experiences in Mississippi and Alabama:

We pulled up to the gas station to get gas. The man would come out and say what’d you
want niggers. We’d say we want some gas, sir. We’d gas up and leave and before we’d
get out of the city limits the police pull us over. He’d done called the police and told
them, said, well some niggers just gassed up, better check them out. 295

Some of the participants tried to avoid the gas stations when they could. Howard stated,
“[When] we’d leave home, we’d always try to be gassed up so we didn’t have to stop. Most time
we tried to stop at the places where they got rest stops.” 296 Not all singers possessed cars to
travel. Some participants had to travel by mass transit to arrive at venues. Margaret Allison
stated, “We didn’t have a car to drive in, so you felt it more because you were segregated and
when you got on the train you had to sit in the last coach of the train.” 297 By riding in a car, the
participants had some autonomy and was somewhat shielded from the constant feeling of
oppression. While in the car, they bonded with each other and was able to support each other
openly about the discrimination they felt, for example if the Gospel Harmonettes were treated
unfairly at a gas station, they would talk about it among themselves. Howard stated, “We’d
leave the service station talking about it, Odessa would say sometimes, or some of the rest of
them, ‘These people need prayer, let’s pray for them.’” 298 It is significant to note that Edwards’

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295 Thomas Ellison, interview by author, 7 June 2007.
297 Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
first reaction was to pray for individuals instead of react in a retaliatory manner. Instead of reacting to the individual, she used the stage to address her frustration with racial discrimination. In addition with the pressures of being an active performer, traveling presented the participants with a wide array of challenges and the stage was used to express feelings about those challenges.

Finding lodging was a constant challenge for the participants. Sometimes a group could be provided lodging by church members in the Black American community; however, often the participants were restricted from staying in White hotels and were forced to find Black hotels or hotels that would accept Black American customers. Evelyn Hardy talked about her experience of finding lodging in Birmingham, Alabama. She stated, “When we got ready to go into the city to live in a hotel we had to go to the Black American hotels because you dare not, just like you wouldn’t go to the White one here.” This treatment was not limited to the South. Hardy continued, “… [I]n Chicago, maybe in New York it might have been a little bit different, you know, but in most of the places it would be the same.” Hardy’s comment reinforces the point that gospel singers had a well-rounded understanding of the racial condition not only in the South, but in the North as well. Music became a platform for many of them to express their understanding of racial inequality and other social issues affecting the Black American community.

“There’s a Message in Every Song that You Sing”: Social Meaning of Gospel Music

Narrative

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299 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, audio recording, Birmingham, AL., 17 April 2007.
Tommy Ellison: Whenever I recorded a song I would record a song with a message that would reach out and help people. Reach out. Have a type of record that they could relate to like “Let This Be a Lesson to You (Drunk Driver).” Since I made that song, gentlemen have walked up to me and said, “I was driving along the highway and the record come on and I’d have to pull over.” It’d get to them, you know? And a lot of them, they was heavy drinkers and that song have stopped them from drinking.

I could be riding along the highway or walk out my door and see something happening in the street, and I put a song together about it. Like, I wrote the song about standing at the crossroads. I see so many people in my life and in my experience is at that crossroads. They don’t know which way to go. So I was making song trying to help them out. Since they don’t know which way to go I’m trying to tell them don’t take the left road, take the right road. Even the right road might be a little hard sometimes, might be, you know, not crowded, but stay on the right road. [The way to solve the problem is to] believe in Jesus and get up and do something. That’s just like, you could sit right here and don’t try to get no money, ain’t none going to drop out the ceiling. You got to make a move. Like Dr. King, he didn’t talk, he had to make a move. After he talked he’d make a move. If something were going on somewhere in Alabama, Black people was being mistreated, he’d go in there and try to do something about it. We got a lot of them today that talk, but they ain’t going to go make that move, get out on a limb and do something about it.

Anne Munson: I always tried to pull out songs that deal with what’s going on, even when I go to minister now I never just get a scripture out to read. If we have Men’s Day at the church or Women’s Day at the church, and I have to handle the scripture, I try to have a scripture to have
to deal with what’s going on. That’s what comforts the people, to know what God has to say about it. So we used to pick out songs for certain occasions. One song we would sing for the Civil Rights Movement was “Guide me Oh Thy Great Jehovah:”

Pilgrim through this barren land  
I am weak but thou art mighty  
Hold me with your powerful hand

That was one of the songs we would sing for Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement. On particular nights we used to quote it before we would sing it and tell people that we need Him, need God to guide him because His light was in, being a Black man moving as fast as we was. We used to encourage people like that, so just because just because you’re not down there, up close to it, we got to pray. We got to pray for them.

I had one song people would request when they were upset with a friend ‘cause they’d want me to dedicate and I wouldn’t dedicate it to that particular lady, I’d dedicate it to the whole church, “God’s Got His Eyes On You:”

Sees everything you do  
Hears every word you say  
God’s got His eyes on you

Sees everything you do  
hears every word you say  
God’s got His eyes on you

It was for [Whites] too. ‘Cause God knows what you’re doing, that you might have my people in slavery and bondage, but God knows. And just like the Israelites were in bondage for 400 years, God knew it. And the song had a lot of meaning, because a lot of that stuff was going on. Not only just friends, but going on race like, so the song had a lot of meaning.
**Margaret Allison:** I never did say on stage what happened to us on the road or anything. I felt like if there were Whites in the audience, I didn’t want to start no bickering or nothing. And we weren’t there for that, we were there to sing and talk about the goodness of the Lord. And we would say, sometime I would say, one of these days we all gonna be together. If you go to Heaven it’s going to be mixed up there, if you go to Hell it’s going to be mixed there. Sometime I would just be talking to an audience and say that, but I would not actually say, point out nothing, no experience that we had on the road. I wrote a song called “I Can’t, But God Can.” It says:

I can’t move the mountains that block my way  
I can’t turn storm clouds into a sunny day  
I can’t speak to the mountains and can’t speak to the wind and the wind will obey  
I can’t, but God can

I always said there’s a message in every song that you sing. It’s according to what your predicament is. You get one message and I would get another one. Somebody else would get another message out of it. [The song can relate to social issues] because there are certain things you can do, and then there’s some you can’t do, cause you know God will do it for you.

**Mildred Howard:** Odessa [Edwards] used to tell the people, “You go around to all these places thinking it was going to be better than down south and it’s worse here there than in Birmingham.” It’s on a lot of her tapes. Sure is, she’d say that. Then they’d just laugh and she’d tell them, “It’s just as bad here as it is in Birmingham. You ran up here, but you didn’t go to anything any better.” And they didn’t. She sure did. It’s just, I don’t know, when you lived
through it it’s different, but if you hear about it it’s surprising. But it’s not surprising; it’s just things that really happened.

Odessa used to speak about it. She’d could bring that in, connect it to different songs. She could tell about different things that would happen. She wouldn’t be lying, she’d be telling the truth. She’d say when you would stop and want food they wouldn’t even serve you their food, that kind of stuff. People would be aroused over it and that’s the way, and she would say I keep telling you if you’re on the road anyplace else, you’re just like we are in Alabama and that kind of stuff. She could bring that in. That girl was poison. You know really, Odessa used to narrate our songs and honest to Christ when Odessa gets finished most times that house is ready for us. I don’t know where Odessa got that from.

We didn’t [sing at rallies often], but the promoter would have the program and it would be named as a civil rights program and I used to go around and sing at home, at the rallies. [We would sing] regular songs. Songs with soul. Songs with meaning. We was in Atlanta at one of the things, but singing I think and Martin Luther King was there. Mahaila Jackson was there.

Always did [feel like I was connected to something bigger than myself]. Well, number one, I couldn’t feel anything unless it was God, and God had to be in it to make me have this feeling of Him and I knew it was bigger than me. It’s just, when you get up to sing and I guess that’s the way pop singers feel, like they, when they get all wrapped up in it, it’s something that’s making them do it, I don’t know what it is. I couldn’t do it without Him. That’s right. Because that movement meant so much to so many of us. And we had to, people would just go every night, every time, if there was any kind of meeting, they would go. They would just go in droves, to this church or different churches. It made me want to go and Odessa’s mother and daddy didn’t miss a one. Sure didn’t.
**Cleopatra Kennedy**: It’s a song that, [Dorothy Cotton]³⁰⁰ used to do called, “Why am I Treated So Bad:”

Tell me why am I treated so bad?
I’m all alone, I’ve done nobody wrong
Why am I treated so bad?

That’s one song right there. Why do you do us like this? We’re people just like you are. We bleed the same color blood you bleed. We eat just like you eat. We get hungry like you get hungry. Why we always have to be in the background of everything, and you be in the front, you get all the good stuff, we get what’s left over? That makes a difference right there. And then there was another song she did called, “Mommy, Why Were We Darkies Born?” Mommy, why were we darkies born? In other words, Black people. The song went on to say:

Why were we darkies born?
Somebody had to pick the cotton
Somebody had to pick that cotton
Somebody had to pull the corn
Somebody had to fight for freedom
That’s why we darkies were born
That’s why we darkies were born

She said we should make up stuff. We made them up. A lot of freedom songs were songs that were made up as the freedom riots went on and you made up stuff and sang it to make yourself stay happy; to ward off fear; and just have fun, because we enjoyed singing. Singing just kept us going.

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³⁰⁰ Dorothy Cotton was the director of Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Citizen Education Program.
“City called Heaven” was a song Martin Luther King used to love to hear me sing, and then I was in the Alabama Christian Movement Choir for Human Rights and I was one of the lead singers in the choir, but they used to love to hear me sing by myself too, and City called Heaven was one of the song the movement loved to hear me sing, even today. That’s why it became so popular, because everybody used to love to hear me sing it. “City called Heaven” is almost self explanatory. The song says:

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow  
I’m tossed in the wide world alone  
No hope have I of tomorrow  
So I’m trying to make Heaven my home  
My mother has reached the bright glory  
My father’s still walking in sin  
My sisters and brothers won’t know me  
Because I’m trying to get in  
Sometimes I’m tossed and driven  
Sometimes I don’t know which way to roam  
But I’ve heard of a city called Heaven  
I’m trying to make Heaven my home

So it’s letting you know, regardless of what’s going on down here, if I can make it to Heaven everything’s going to be all right. Because everything I got to go through to get there, if I keep my focus on Jesus and live what I’m singing about it, I can’t do nothing but go to Heaven and see Jesus, and I know Heaven’s better than what’s down here. That’s what that means to me, so when I’m singing that song, I’m really letting God know I want to see him. In the end whatever happens, long as I get to see Him, if I get to see His face, I know I’ll be all right because Heaven will be my home.

[Radio announcers] would let you know where the mass meeting was going to be. Every Monday night. And who’s going to be speaking and stuff like that. [Announcers] had to be careful about telling what things were going to be like that, because people were so cruel, until
they didn’t know what might happen, so [information had to be said] in a way where people would know what they’re talking about but didn’t give the enemy the upper hand to do nothing to try to block anything before that night. Automatically knew every Monday night we’d have a mass meeting, then they’d put flyers and all kind of stuff around and in the mass meeting they’d tell you what was going to be the following Monday night at the mass meeting. They had to know how to do it for protection and everything else.

**Roxie Moore:** I really don’t think I [addressed social issues in music]. I was thinking about two groups that we used to sing with. I did sing with a group that never became very famous in the forties back in Baltimore. We were called the Echoes of Heaven, and we used to sing around with some of the other groups. There was one group, their theme song was called “Freedom after While,” and it was the Southern Sons.

**Nims Gay:** You’d have a different signal that you would use. Now like Shelley Stewart⁴⁰¹ used to come on [the radio] and he’d come on and pick a song that we would sing, ‘cause we could turn it around and he could be on there singing, “Standing on the Promises of Christ the Savior.” That’s going to be at New Hope Baptist Church next week. That’d mean we were going to meet there. He would play the song and name it. “Standing on the Promises of Christ my Savior,” that will be one of the gospel songs they’ll do at New Hope next week, Monday night. That’d let you know they were going to be there Monday night. And people listening knew what they meant. We could take like any song, and put a message to it. You could turn it around and say something easy. Sometime you could say, “Now lookie here now, walk together children, don’t

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⁴⁰¹ Shelley Stewart was a Black American radio announcer at WEDR in Birmingham, Alabama.
you get weary there’s a great camp meeting in the promised land. It’s telling you to stick together. That wasn’t hard to pick up. And then sometimes you’d pick up a song, like we’re having a problem, we’ll say, well we’re going to sing this today cause He ain’t never left us alone.

**Toby Young**: There was a group here called the Fighting Five. These were Black men and they bought radio time so that they could get the word out about voting. These were doctors, they were lawyers, they were from different walks of life. They were politically involved. These are men who went away to college and they were from Harrisburg, native Harrisburgers. Some of them just transplanted in and they may have come out of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North or South Carolina, so they wanted to be a part.

[We needed] to get some folks in these places to represent us, you know. We [needed] some people on school boards. So they started to say, let’s get it out to the people, so they had a program on Sunday morning, 15 minute program. So they come on and they’d have choirs or soloists come in and sing. And then they’d say, well don’t forget to get out and vote.

“**There’s a Message in Every Song that You Sing**: Social Meaning of Gospel Music

**Analysis**

Music and performance became a way to define society through the artists’ eyes. The participants’ use of music to express the sentiment of the Black American community is reminiscent of the ritualistic use of music during slavery. For a historically marginalized social group that did not have control over defining, ordering, or classifying their social environment, music became a form of mass media. Dick Hebdidge states, “Commodities can be symbolically
‘repossessed’ in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very groups who originally produced them.” \(^{302}\) Although gospel music by the 1940s was turned into a commodity, it did have oppositional meaning for the gospel artist who created and performed the music.

Even though gospel was commercialized, the participants indicated that their music and performance was used to project oppositional ideas. The Gospel Harmonettes of Birmingham, Alabama were known for integrating social commentary in their recordings as well as their performances. Odessa Edwards sang contralto and rarely sang lead, but she specialized in the spoken sermonettes that were featured on the group’s recordings and in live performances. As mentioned previously sermonettes are morality tales usually told by the lead singer while the rest of the singers hum or sing softly in the background. \(^{303}\) Song leaders usually told sermonettes in the first person, or manage to identify themselves with the main character of their story and upcoming song. Performers who mastered the use of sermonettes were able to share their intimate thoughts, feelings, and life experiences publicly, thereby confirming the sincerity of the presentation. \(^{304}\) Sermonettes emphasized not only earthly hardship, but also the believer’s ability to overcome hardship and to achieve peace in their present situation. In this way, the gospel narrator is virtually a stylized representation of the preacher or congregational song leader. \(^{305}\) Edwards delivered sermonettes in the introduction or between songs in order to speak directly to

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Fellow Harmonette, Mildred Howard, vividly remembered Edwards’ more socially charged sermonettes. Howard stated, “Odessa used to tell the people, you go around to all these places thinking it was going to be better than down south and its worse there than in Birmingham.”\footnote{Mildred Howard, interview by author, 13 July 2007.}

Edwards’ commentary framed the social, political, and economic plight of Black Americans in a national–instead of a regional–context. As a traveling performer, Edwards witnessed Black Americans in other regions of the United States being treated unjustly or living in worse conditions than in the South.


The sermonette was a part of the hidden transcript to which Kelley is referring. The narrative technique was performed on stage to critique the social condition of Black Americans to Black Americans.

Tommy Ellison was well-known for his use of sermonettes. As a songwriter, Ellison wrote his own sermonettes based on life experiences or observations. He stated, “I could be riding along on the highway or walk out my door and see something happening in the street, and
I put a song together about it.”

As a traveling performer who has lived in the South and North as well as urban and rural environments, Ellison has a wealth of experience to draw upon for material. Ellison stated, “Whenever I recorded a song I would record a song with a message that would reach out and help people.” One of his most popular songs is “Let This Be a Lesson to You (Drunk Driver).” The entire selection is a sermonette spoken by Ellison. In it, he tells the story of a young man who habitually drives while drinking. After being chastised once by his mother for his carelessness, the young man continues to drive while drinking. The young man is later involved in an accident that puts him in the hospital, while killing someone in another vehicle. As the young man awakens to see his father standing over his bedside, he asks for his mother. The father says to him, “It’s too late. The lady you hit was your mother. Your mother told you. You wouldn’t listen. Let this be a lesson to you.” Ellison cited “Drunk Driver” as an example of his music providing social awareness:

Since I made that song, gentlemen have walked up to me and said, ‘I was driving along the highway and the record come on and I’d have to pull over.” It’d get to them, you know? And a lot of them, they was heavy drinkers and that song have stopped them from drinking.

Edward’s and Ellison’s use of the sermonette is an example of gospel music and performance consciously being used to address social issues; however, songs were also used to explicitly address social issues. Cleopatra Kennedy was an active participant in the Birmingham,
Alabama protest. Kennedy explained the role music played in maintaining positive morale. She stated, “You made up stuff and sang it to make yourself stay happy, to ward off fear, and just have fun because we enjoyed singing. Singing just kept us going.”

Kennedy remembered a song called, “Why? (Am I Treated So Bad),” sung by Dorothy Cotton, the highest ranking female in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The song was often performed during public gatherings to inspire participants. Kennedy explained the meaning of the song:

> We’re people just like you are. We bleed the same blood you bleed. We eat like you eat. We get hungry like you get hungry. Why do we always have to be in the background of everything and you be in the front? You get all the good stuff. We get what’s left over. That makes a difference right there.

The Staple Singers, a gospel group from Chicago, recorded “Why? (Am I Treated So Bad),” for their 1965 album, *Freedom Highway*. The song peaked on the Billboard 100 list at 95 for one week in June of 1967. A family group consisting of patriarch, Roebuck “Pops” Staples and his five children started out singing folk music and gospel. In the late 1960s, they were signed to Stax Records in Memphis, Tennessee. The group gained a reputation for singing message songs focusing on the civil rights movement. At the urging of Dr. Martin Luther King, the Staple Singers used their music to help bring attention to a young Jesse Jackson, who was establishing Operation Breadbasket in Chicago, an organization to address economic inequality in the Black American community.

Living in Washington, D.C., Anne Munson was far from ground zero of the civil rights protests in the South; however she utilized music to inspire her congregation. Munson stated, “I

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313 Ibid.
314 Ibid.
always tried to pull out songs that deal with what’s going on.”\textsuperscript{315} One song we would sing for the civil rights movement was “Guide me Oh Thy Great Jehovah:”

Pilgrim through this barren land
I am weak but thou art mighty
Hold me with your powerful hand

Munson sang this song in order to encourage her congregation to pray for Dr. Martin Luther King and the other protesters in the South. She stated, “We used to encourage people like that, so just because just because you’re not down there, up close to it, we got to pray. We got to pray for them.” Kennedy’s and Munson’s explicit use of music served different purposes, given the contexts in which they were performed. For Kennedy the singing of “Why?” served as a release valve for the frustrations felt at the hands of the Whites and for Munson “Guide me Oh Thy Great Jehovah” helped to inspire people and remind them of purpose for the struggle.

Some participants did not believe that their music was socially meaningful, but still recognized the potential for the music to be socially relevant. Margaret Allison stated, “It’s according to what your predicament is. You get one message and I would get another one.”\textsuperscript{316} Much like the message songs during slavery, gospel music communicated a shared meaning, which resonated within the Black American community on an ecclesiastical and mundane level. This function of Black American music was observed in Anne Munson’s most requested song “God’s Got His Eyes on You,” that warned of the omnipresence of God in light of personal transgressions. According to Munson, the song can be interpreted as an admonishment of

\textsuperscript{315} Anne Munson, interview by author, 7 June 2007.  
\textsuperscript{316} Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
Whites’ discriminatory behavior towards Black Americans. She stated, “It was for Whites too, ‘cause God knows what you’re doing. You might have my people in slavery and bondage, but God knows.”  

Margaret Allison’s “I Can’t, But God Can,” focused on individual moral behavior and divine intervention in adversity. “I always said there’s a message in every song that you sing,” she stated. Although Allison did not write the song with social commentary in mind, she recognized music as polysemic in nature. Allison stated, “You get one message and I would get another one.” Her song could also be interpreted as veiled social criticism of the White power structure when placed in the context of social justice during the Civil Rights Movement. Allison agreed that “[the song can relate to social issues] because there are certain things you can do and there’s some you can’t do, ‘cause you know God will do it for you.” Even though Allison agreed that her music could be interpreted for its social meaning, she would be hesitant to speak out on stage. Allison stated, “I felt like if there were Whites in the audience… I didn’t want to start no bickering or nothing. And we weren’t there for that, we were there to sing and talk about the goodness of the Lord.”  

Allison’s comments indicate that there were some participants who did not feel comfortable using the stage as a platform to speak out about social issues. Her comment also provides an opportunity to explore how the participants defined civil rights protest and how they identified themselves within the civil rights movement.

317  Anne Munson, interview by author, 7 June 2007.
318  Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
319  Ibid.
320  Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
321  Ibid.
Radio played an indispensable role in the dissemination of gospel music and imbuing gospel music with social significance. Radio announcer, Olin Harris stated, "The beauty of our music would always pick up the essence and the tempo of what was happening in the contemporary society." Not only did the music communicate the mood of the community, it was useful in that music was a conduit for messages of social justice. During the civil rights movement radio stations became a "talking drum," a continuation of the West African tradition of communicating messages through voice. Codes were used to outmaneuver White authorities. Nims Gay’s narrative reveals how important radio was to mobilize people in Birmingham. Songs were used give signal to the public on where civil rights meeting would be held. "Standing on the Promises of Christ my Savior," that will be one of the gospel songs they’ll do at New Hope next week, Monday night," Gay stated. "That’d let you know they were going to be there Monday night. And people listening knew what they meant," Gay continued. Radio announcers treated gospel like spirituals. Not all the spirituals were explicit in nature. What made them political was the rebellious way they were being used by enslaved Africans. Like the spirituals, the songs used by the radio announcers were not explicitly political, but because gospel was used in the civil rights movement to mobilize, the music became political. In addition, Toby Young’s revelation about the Fighting Five, a gospel group that promoted voting, supports the notion that gospel music was used to address social issues. Young stated, "So [the Fighting Five] started to say, let’s get it out to the people, so they had a

322 Olin Harris, interview by author, 3 June 26 2007.
325 Ibid.
program on Sunday morning, 15 minute program…. And then they’d say, well don’t forget to get out and vote.” The lyrics of the Fighting Five may not have been overtly political; however, the use of the music is a political action. Both of these examples highlight the important and significant radio and gospel as dominant media in the Black American community. Perhaps the reason why gospel was chosen to address these issues or mobilize individuals is the connection that gospel has with the masses of Black Americans in general and the church community in particular. Since church was central to the values of the Black American community, the music of the church was needed to inspire a change in those values.

“I Did it My Own Way”: Participation in Organized Civil Rights Activities

Narrative

Tommy Ellison: I never did no marches, but I was for it, but I never, I was more or less what you would say, look and wish them well, you know. But I never, but I was tied up singing and different things. But I was behind it all the way. That was what inspired me to go to Dr. King’s funeral. I was living in New York and he got killed, they riot up there, broke and stole. There was a lot of things I could have got, but I didn’t want nothing. And I felt, I kind of felt bad for what all he had did for me and I hadn’t participated, you follow me. So I say I got to go show my respect. So I got on a plane and went on in Atlanta and attend his funeral.

I’ve been active in my small way, you know. Like if I see somebody being mistreated, I go, like I said, to the people that can do something about it. Just like, I don’t try to do it myself. I go to the NAACP. Like where my lead guitar player, Sam Williams, lived, Barnwell County, South Carolina. People down there were being mistreated and the local NAACP fellow

326 Toby Young, interview by author, 25 June 2007.
supposed to be over that area, he wouldn’t do anything about it, so I got mad, Whitey had done bought him out. He said what they wanted said. So I saw that going on and I went and reported that to the NAACP. I said, Down in Barnwell County, you all need to check it out. Your representative down there ain’t doing nothing but what Whitey said do.” I said, “I know he come to the conventions, he says everything is all right down there. You all need to check him out. They got rid of him.”

Anne Munson: Some people were raising money to give to people who was really doing the work. Sometimes we would have programs and put the funds to help send somebody to a meeting or something. And then they would have a program to help with proceeds to help the person that needed to go. We knew we were at a critical point where this and this is happening and that’s happening. And get the whole audience involved. I would normally make my introduction, when we get up. The fact that this has happened today and this one got killed because of this and this one is locked up for that. And it’s not fair, but I always tried to base it on what happened in the Bible, let’s see how Jesus handled it, what happened in the Word. So I’d go and pull a scripture out. Share the scripture with the crowd and then before we’d start singing we’d go in prayer for that specific thing. And handle the situation. So you get to witness to people and by the time, people was devastating, like when Dr. King got stabbed, that was devastating. When they locked him up; when they turned the dogs on the kids in the war. People would call a special night for prayer for things like that.

Mildred Howard: I didn’t go to any protests. I was down there when they put the hoses on the boys and the girls and when they put the dogs on the boys and the girls and the men in the street.
I don’t know. It was just terrible. [Police Commissioner] Bull Connor would put them in that school bus and carry them to jail and stand them out there in the rain and all that kind of stuff. Had so many, they had no room in the jail. I don’t know nothing about the jail, can’t tell you nothing about them nowhere, because I never been in one.

**Margaret Allison:** I wasn’t involved in it because, first of all I couldn’t have marched with them, and I always prayed for them. I wasn’t against it now, I wanted to see a change, I wanted Martin Luther King to change things, but I just wasn’t the kind that would get out there and march with them. I just, it’s just that I always stayed in the background of everything. Not that I didn’t like it or believe in it. I believed in it and I was hoping that whatever they was fighting for they’d get, that they’d win. But I just didn’t, I never went out front to do anything. I thought to be connected you had to hang out with them. You know, when they had them marches and their meetings and all that, you’d have to go to their meetings and all. And I never went to any of their meetings. I just felt like everybody that was connected to it was the ones that I saw that would be, like if I’d see somebody on TV or something that’s talking for it, and all that, but I didn’t go to places to talk for them or anything. But if they ask for donations, I gave it. I would be on the program, and I have given donations for the NAACP and different things. I’ve been giving donations to them and told them don’t even mention that I gave it to them a donation because I just wanted to help them. I didn’t look for no praise.

**Cleopatra Kennedy:** I did the whole nine yards. I went to jail more than one time, so I know what it was like. But even as a child I demonstrated. I didn’t ask, I slipped and went anyway because I wanted to be a part of it. The first time I went out I got arrested the same day. Me and
a friend of mine. Couldn’t stop me. They couldn’t stop me because there were so many children out there. Then they come, they had so many young people they was ordered to put mattresses on the bunks. We let them come in and put mattresses on every one of the bunks and as soon as they left we took all the mattresses and stacked them as high as we could against the wall because we didn’t go there to sleep, we went there to fight. I was young. I can’t remember exactly the age I was, but I was a teen, I was real young, I was a teenager. See the box that was your music. You put your foot on box, then the guys were in the other cell, but you couldn’t see each other, but we would sing and they would answer them back. We would sing and they would answer us back. And that’s what we did.

I was in school, but I didn’t care. We walked out. There were so many children being a part of that they couldn’t stop them. They went on their own. They walked out. They didn’t care. They were determined, if this was going to help us get better things, we wanted to see if it was going to happen. So we was determined, I don’t know what’s going to happen, if we get killed in the midst of it, we want to see it.

**Roxie Moore:** [I was involved] indirectly by contributing money or writing letters, giving advice, that sort of thing. I admired them greatly. I didn’t think I was qualified to join those in the upper ranks, and I didn’t think I was physically capable of joining those who went out and just marched and got beat up and that sort of stuff. I mean, they were mostly male ministers, at the top of the ranks. It’s just been recently that women have become so flamboyant in the ministry.

I’ve always known myself as a leader, but sort of in a subtle manner. I’ve always been one people come to for advice. I’ve always been one people come to for prayer. When I was in
the Baptist church it was very hard. I remember we had one lady minister that used to come to our church and she was really ostracized. That’s when I was young. And then the Church of God and Christ, that was my Pentecostal church, which always will be, we just didn’t have women preachers. We had evangelists, we called them teachers, which I was licensed to teach in 1938, but we didn’t get up in the rostrum where the men were. We always sat down, the men always sat a little higher than we did.

“I Did it My Own Way”: Participation in Organized Civil Rights Activities

Analysis

During the mid 1950s, the civil rights movement began to crystallize throughout the South due to extensive organization. Community institutions, particularly the Black church were becoming more explicitly political and played a key role in organizing. Mass meetings with political oratory and protest music were frequent.327 Cleopatra Kennedy considered herself a very active participant in civil rights protests. This revelation is not surprising given the fact that the civil rights movement was closely associated with the actions of the youth. In Birmingham, Alabama, the role of children became prominent because they did not have to risk losing employment, yet could still be as effective as adults. Cleopatra Kennedy participated in a school walk-out that involved hundreds of youth from six to twenty years of age who marched to City Hall. Kennedy, along with more than 600 children, many with nightgowns and toothbrushes, were jailed:328


The first time I went out I got arrested the same day. Me and a friend of mine. Couldn’t stop me. They couldn’t stop me because there were so many children out there.... Yeah, they walked out. They didn’t care. They were determined, if this was going to help us get better things, we wanted to see if it was going to happen. So we was determined, I don’t know what’s going to happen, if we get killed in the midst of it, we want to see it.329

Although the 1950s and 1960s were marked by organized civil rights protests, many of the participants chose to contribute monetary support to organizations, rather than participate in boycotts, sit-ins and marches. Tommy Ellison did not participate in any protests, but instead felt that he provided “moral support,” because he “was tied up in singing.”330 Instead of confronting racial discrimination through direct action, Ellison preferred to rely on established organizations. Ellison stated, “I’ve been active in my small way, you know. Like, if I see somebody being mistreated, I go to the people that can do something about it. I don’t try to do it myself. I go to the NAACP.”331 Margaret Allison also preferred to give moral and monetary support. She stated, “I would be on the program, and I have given donations for the NAACP and different things. I’ve been giving donations to them and told them don’t even mention that I gave it to them because I just wanted to help them.”332 The participants’ decision to give monetary contributions instead of participating directly could be due to threats of violence. Members or affiliates of the NAACP faced physical and economic reprisals if they were identified. According to Aldon Morris, “Southern White power structures attempted to drive local branches of NAACP out of existence by labeling them subversive and demanding they make their


330 Thomas Ellison, interview by author, 7 June 2007.

331 Ibid.

332 Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.
Bill Pinkney of the Gospel Drifters, rarely made his organizational affiliations public, stating, “I don’t tell them that unless they ask me. They ask me, I say yeah, I’m a member, I’m a paying member.”

The church was one of the few places for Black Americans to feel a sense of empowerment over their environment and many civil rights organizations were tied to churches. Organizations such as the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had community meetings in church buildings. Black American women, however, found themselves excluded from positions of leadership. Some participants did not participate in direct-action protests because of such gender restrictions. Roxie Moore focused her efforts on contributing money because she did not feel “qualified to join in those upper ranks” because “most of the leaders were men.” Historically, women have numerically dominated the Black American church. According to C. Eric Lincoln, “Both historical and contemporary evidence underscore the fact that the black churches could scarcely have survived without the active support of black women, but in spite of their importance in the life of the church, the offices of preacher and pastor of churches in the historic black churches remain a male preserve and are not generally available to women.” Gospel music, however, can be understood as an alternative medium for Black American women to voice their concerns in the church and in the civil rights movement. The gospel genre was dominated by female stars such as Clara Ward, Albertina Walker, Mahalia Jackson, and Dorothy Love Coates. Though these women were considered entertainers, they had

access to an audience both inside and outside of the church. This access provided female gospel performers with a platform similar to that of pastors and other leaders in the Black American community to speak out against social inequality. This platform was expanded by the dissemination of music through recordings and radio.

The spread of popularity of gospel music through recordings and radio underscored the economic motivations for singing gospel music. Singing for most of the participants was an employment opportunity with various types of obligations. Semi-professional and professional artists sang for profit, with performances not only in churches, but in secular venues such as concert halls and auditoriums. Protest rallies were also a common venue for performances, but some interviewees were more motivated by economics than by social consciousness. The participants revealed that promoters often decided the theme of a concert. As singers, their responsibility was to perform, which highlights the political economic confines in which these performers operated. When examined as a cultural ritual within oppressed Black American communities, singing can be interpreted as politically motivated. These artists were negotiating their power through music. As Robin Kelley states, “[D]aily acts have a cumulative effect on power relations. Although meaning and effectiveness of acts differ according to circumstances, they make a difference, whether intended or not.”

Although some of the participants did not consider themselves a part of the movement, the fact that they sang music was empowering. For those participants who consciously spoke out, singing did shift power relations by giving them a voice that they may not otherwise have. Some participants may not have intended for their music to be interpreted in a civil rights context; however, the music was meaningful and was able to relate to experiences of Black Americans.

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337 Robin D.G. Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem”: 189.
While all of the participants supported the goal of protest, some did not consider their singing and performance a significant act of protest. The participants’ comments suggest that they believed movement participation was indicative of direct action and mobilization. While monetary contributions supported the movement, some participants considered their contributions a substitute for direct action, but realized the importance of money as an invaluable resource for organized protest. Anne Munson stated that she raised funds for people “who were really doing the work.”\footnote{Anne Munson, interview by author, 7 June 2007.} It is also clear that media coverage helped to shape the definition of participation in the civil rights movement. Margaret Allison stated, “I just felt like everybody that was connected to it was the ones that I saw…on TV or something….”\footnote{Margaret Allison, interview by author, 3 July 2007.} Allison’s observation gives insight to her perception of participation in the civil right movement. With television providing the direct action protesters with the mainstream attention, it is understandable for Allison to feel as though direct action was a sign of protest. Prior to the 1960 sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, direct action was rare, which is why it was newsworthy in the first place. For Allison, seeing people on television marching, boycotting, and visibly speaking out was a dramatic form of participation.

The interview reaffirmed the notion that singing was essential to community maintenance. The earliest form of gospel in 1930 reflected the social, political, and economic environment of Black Americans at the time. Even as gospel developed into a more commercial form, the narratives indicated that the music still retained its core function of providing hope and uplift, while providing a window into the social condition of Black Americans. For many participants, their introduction to semi-professional and professional singing began as a social
activity within the Black American community. In light of social inequality, the commodification of gospel provided an alternative means of employment. For some performers, singing provided an opportunity to leave the segregated South. Gospel artists worked within a society where racism was normalized and attained a unique prospective on racism and civil rights based on their role as travelling performers. Gospel artists were able to use music to address social issues within a dominant culture of racism that limited the voice of Black Americans in the mass media. The music, a cultural and ritual practice in the Black American community, communicated messages that coincided with the emerging civil rights consciousness. The following chapter will explore the participants’ definition of gospel music and how its meaning is an extension of an African oral tradition.
Chapter 5

“IT’S LIKE A BEAT”

Music is as natural as breathing to Roxie Moore. The day I interviewed the ninety-one-year-old Moore, she stated, “I sang about ten songs this morning to myself.” As a child growing up in Neabsco, Virginia, Moore was an avid reader of books and poems. She soon began writing and described herself a “pretty good writer” by the time she was fifteen. Moore’s love for writing was so insistent that she had written a book of poetry and even wrote on toilet paper. When Moore was sixteen, she started writing songs after an extended illness and religious conversion in the Pentecostal church. Three years later at the age of nineteen, Moore wrote her first gospel song. As a songwriter, Moore’s reflection on the meaning of Black American sacred music makes an appropriate connection to the Black American experience in slavery. Moore stated, “I think the slaves brought us the most beautiful songs, spiritual songs that ever existed. I think all of them old beautiful sacred hymnals came out of the songs of the African slaves that came here and moaned before the Lord, and sing out their souls to Him. To me that is the most precious message.” It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of gospel and how that meaning related to the Black American experience. Gospel does not propose absolute truths rather it is an essential ingredient that defines the essence of the Black American experience.

Moore stated, “Gospel music is something that comes from your own association with other people… Gospel music is more of a social religious expression.”

Gospel music has different meanings for different people. For some, gospel refers to any type of religious music. Mildred


Howard of the Gospel Harmonettes doesn’t make a distinction between gospel music and other sacred genres, stating, “I just love singing and I can feel any kind that I’m doing.”

Singing is a powerful source of communication that connects individuals and cultures for social and spiritual purposes. For Black Americans, sacred music has always provided a source of emotional comfort and extends into the arena of social protest and change. Spirituals provided an emotional release and an opportunity to incorporate symbols of hope in everyday life through biblical references to the oppressed Hebrews in the New Testament of the Bible. Influenced by spirituals and secular music forms such as blues, gospel served the indispensable function of being a release valve for the frustration of Black Americans in the United States.

Music served a functional purpose both in African and Black American culture. The performance of gospel music was a site for the maintenance of African identity as well as a site for resistance. This chapter examines the meaning of gospel music and its kindred relationship to an African oral tradition. The participants commented on their definition of gospel music and how they compared and contrasted gospel with other genres of sacred music. The participants also commented on how African culture is retained and manifested through the performance of gospel music. The participants’ narratives presented the ways in which African culture was enacted, consciously and unconsciously. Gospel not only has meaning, but a feeling. This feeling is based on rhythm, instrumentation, and style.

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342 Mildred Howard, interview by author, audio recording Cincinnati, OH., 13 July 2007.

“Gospel is Our Heritage”: Meaning and Essence of Gospel Music

Narrative

**Tommy Ellison:** [W]e had songs that we had a beat. But it was smooth, you know. It wasn’t like loud, our music wasn’t loud.

**Anne Munson:** It’s our heritage. That’s our heritage and it comes from slavery. They had to call on somebody to help them. There was a reason why they was there. So that’s our heritage. Gospel is our heritage. And if you go to “Precious Lord” and all those other songs that were written, it was because of what they were going through. And it comforted them. That was a consolation to sing Negro spiritual songs.

**Evelyn Hardy:** I was playing for the National Baptist Convention, and of course they sang church songs. They did songs like, “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” and “Precious Lord” and I never heard songs with a beat to it. They had a beat to it, you know. I was accustomed to listening to songs like “I Come to the Garden Alone,” “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,” “Holy, Holy, Holy.” All of those are songs that are written by the other race of people. They were not our songs. We sang them because they were there, that’s all we knew. We just knew that Sunday morning we were going to sing “I am Thine O Lord,” I’m going to sing “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus,” and things like that. So those were things that we did.

[Roberta Martin] would take numbers like that and they would put a beat to it, you know, and as Afro Americans, African or whatever we are this time, we have rhythm you know and I think anyway, we have rhythm so that gave us a chance to use our, use what was a part of us. That’s us. They were doing things that I wanted to do. I liked that.
Bill Pinkney: Gospel is more or less a beat. It’s almost a beat. And if you notice, gospel and blues are almost about the same.

Roxie Moore: Spiritual music is something that comes from your spirit. Gospel music is something that comes from your own association with other people. Spiritual music is something between you and God. Gospel music is more of a social, a social religious expression. Gospel music speaks to emotions.

Cleopatra Kennedy: [Spirituals] are message songs and gospel is good news.

“Gospel is Our Heritage”: Meaning and Essence of Gospel Music

Analysis

Black American religious music in the twentieth century included Dr. Watts hymns, Negro spirituals, revival songs of the late nineteenth century, and the newer standard hymns of White and Black American composition. Religious affiliation became the most important variable in determining the style of music in a musical performance. In the Black American Presbyterian and Episcopal churches, attended for the most part by upper- and middle-class Black Americans, singing was generally confined to congregational or choral performances of standard Euro-American hymns or select spirituals. In the Black American Baptists and


345 Ibid., 188.
Methodist churches, Euro-American hymns were also widely used. These songs became a common aspect of religious ritual.

The rise of literacy rates and growth of urban churches led to the standard use of hymnbooks in Black American worship. Although literacy rates rose, not everyone was literate and church choirs led the musical worship. Songs in the hymnbooks were European and appropriated and adapted to traditional Black American rhythms. Evelyn Hardy recognized the European influence in the music she sang as a child:

I was accustomed to listening to songs like “I Come to the Garden Alone,” “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,” “Holy, Holy, Holy.” All of those are songs that are written by the other race of people. They were not our songs. We sang them because they were there, that’s all we knew.”

Hardy makes an important revelation. As a member of the Baptist denomination, many churches discouraged the use of gospel songs in their church, even though *Gospel Pearls* hymnbook contained gospel songs. Many churches maintained their use of the older hymns. Black Americans took these hymns and added their own unique imprint on their performance. They exaggerated measures and included syncopations aided with the use of a piano or organ. Jesus “Keep Me Near the Cross,” was written by F.J. Van Alstyne in 1869 and is a standard hymn in Black religious community. The hymn focuses the individual’s relationship with Jesus. Other songs reflected the condition of the Black American religious community and included messages of inspiration and hope.

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346 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, audio recording, Birmingham, AL., 17 April 2007.

Near the Cross

Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain
Free to all, a healing stream
Flows from Calvary’s mountain.

In the cross, in the cross,
Be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.

Gospel artists added another layer of improvisation with their arrangements of traditional hymns and original compositions. Gospel music crystallized into a distinctive musical form during the 1930s due to the work of composers like Lucie Campbell, Sallie Martin, William Herbert Brewster, Jr., Roberta Martin, and Thomas Dorsey. Dorsey was highly influenced by the blues which featured a distinctive syncopated rhythm and harmony, characterized by a sequence of three chords.\(^{348}\) Blues utilized improvisation, call and response, and instruments such as the guitar and piano. Gospel utilized the same vocal techniques and blues harmonies. Charles Tindley’s music featured piano and voices and primary instruments. Gospel utilized the piano, but included the electric organ, amplified guitar, and later percussion instruments.\(^{349}\)

“Thomas Dorsey comes along and he takes that same feeling, but he changes it around and tells you about what God can do,” stated Evelyn Hardy.\(^{350}\) She continued, “He has a lot of songs that were just plain blues. He had a song, ‘If You See My Savior,’ bluesy, bluesy, all the way.”\(^{351}\) Other artists have noted the relationship between gospel and blues. Conducting research on

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\(^{350}\) Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.

\(^{351}\) Ibid.
Black American gospel quartets, Alan Young interviewed Melvin Mosley of The Spirit of Memphis: 352

They say gospel basically does stem from the blues. I agree with that, because in traditional gospel, the musical changes, the patterns are the same as blues. The musical changes, like from [chords] C, F, to G, are basically the same, but you’re singing different words. 353

Growing up in Birmingham, Hardy heard secular music in daily life. The secular music of her youth in the Black American community was blues and jazz which spoke to the conditions of Black Americans as worldly individuals. Blues music was teeming with sounds and lyrics familiar to the Black American experience. Hardy spoke of her affection for the blues stating, “I love the blues I love the blues, period. The feel is the same.” 354

As a member of the Gospel Harmonettes, her love for the blues was evident in the style of piano playing. Even though the group sang gospel exclusively, there were moments in the studio when the blues influence would emerge. During some down time in a session recorded on August 14, 1953 for Specialty Records, Hardy, on the piano starts into an original blues instrumental with the other Harmonettes clapping in rhythm. At the end of the rendition producer Art Rupe says enthusiastically, “That’s alright!” 355

The comparison to the blues is not surprising because based on the participants, blues and gospel served similar functions in the Black American community. The response to the gospel

352 The Spirit of Memphis was organized in 1928 as the T.M. & S. Quartet in Memphis, Tennessee. Although called a quartet, the group featured six or seven singers.

353 Alan Young, Woke Me Up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 74-75.


by church officials was also similar. Just like blues was rejected for highlighting the worldly temptations of man, gospel music was rejected for its relationship to the blues. The elders in the Baptist and Methodist churches found it hard to accept the bluesy sounds of gospel music. Dorsey and his singers were often driven out of churches where they tried to perform. Like the blues, gospel spoke to the changing social conditions. There were also class issues that affected the acceptance of gospel music. Gospel singers invoked a strong sense of communality and helped to maintain a tradition among Black Americans who had recently uprooted themselves and experienced post-World War I race riots, lynching, discrimination, and the Great Depression. Gospel gave hope to those poor and working-class Black Americans most affected by the Depression. Roxie Moore stated, “It comes from the heart, it comes from the depth of the experiences that the people were having. It comes out of your desire to live a better life.” For ministers of churches with middle and upper-class congregations, gospel initially was associated with poor Black Americans.

By 1940, gospel was being accepted in the Baptist and Methodist churches. This acceptance was evident by inclusion of the Sallie Martin Singers and the Roberta Martin Singers that same year at the Baptist National Convention held in Birmingham. Roberta Martin’s contribution to gospel music was her gospel piano style. Martin made a huge impression on Evelyn Hardy who was in attendance at the National Baptist Convention and explained Roberta Martin’s influence:

That was my inspiration. Whatever she did was right. That’s the way I felt about her. She played beautiful and she wrote music… [Roberta Martin] would take numbers like


357 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 188.

that and they would put a beat to it… [W]e have rhythm, so that gave us a chance to use what was a part of us. That’s us.\textsuperscript{359}

Hardy’s use of the term “beat” to describe gospel was common among other participants. For example, Bill Pinkney of the Gospel Drifters stated, “Gospel is more or less a beat. It’s almost a beat. And if you notice, gospel and blues are almost about the same.”\textsuperscript{360} The term was widely used in the gospel music industry by performers and producers to describe various aspects of the music. For Hardy and Pinkney, the beat refers to a blues rhythm introduced by composers like Dorsey and Roberta Martin. Not only does the beat refer to the rhythm, but it also characterizes a group’s style of music. Establishing a style was the key to a group’s success and longevity as performers. With hundreds of groups traveling locally and nationally, the public’s attention span was short. The style of a group could be characterized by the way they arranged songs, the blend of harmony, and the use of instruments. The Philadelphia group the Angelic Gospel Singers’ style was established after founder, Margaret Allison, arranged an older song called, “Touch Me Lord Jesus.” Being novices to the record business, the owner, Ivin Ballen explained how to create their own style. “Record something that nobody else had recorded and, even if you didn’t write it, if you arranged it, that’s the most important thing. If you arranged the song yourself, that’s your style, he said, and that way you’ll establish your own style of singing,” Allison recalled.\textsuperscript{361}

Tommy Ellison sang with the Harmonizing Four, a group well-known for close harmony and smooth sound. Describing the group’s style Ellison stated, “[W]e had songs that we had a

\textsuperscript{359} Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.

\textsuperscript{360} Bill Pinkney, interview by author, audio recording, Dazell, SC, 23 May 2007.

\textsuperscript{361} Margaret Allison, interview by author, audio recording, Philadelphia, PA, 3 July 2007.
beat. But it was smooth….” As a defining characteristic of group’s style, there are often claims of styles being copied by other groups. Alan Young’s biography of the Chicago quartet, the Pilgrim Jubilees, illustrates this point in his interviews with the group. The Pilgrim Jubilees’ first major success was in 1959 with the song ‘Stretch Out,’ on Peacock Records. Member, Clay Graham stated, “‘Stretch Out’ set the trend for that beat… You can’t get away from our beat.” Cleave Graham reiterated, “Just about everybody out here’s got something of the Jubilee beat. Everybody! Every last one of them that come up after us.”

“Stretch Out” was not an original song for the Pilgrim Jubilees. It first appeared as “In These Dark Hours of Distress” in the mid-1940s. Rosetta Tharpe recorded it in 1947 and was listed as the arranger of the song. The Roberta Martin singers recorded the song in 1957 as “Dark Hours.” What made the Jubilee’s version different was the inclusion of the upright string bass. The relationship of gospel to blues is also reflected in the recording of this song. The Jubilees used the upright string bass on “Stretch Out” that differentiated it from other versions of the song. Willie Dixon was known as a blues producer, musician, and songwriter for the legendary Chicago blues scene. He played bass and produced sessions for Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and Little Walter. Dixon was also outsourced to produce gospel groups as well.

The Pilgrim Jubilees’ description of the beat refers to the introduction of instrumentation gospel music. Early quartets performed without instrumental backing. Accompaniment was encouraged by record companies, which felt that instruments filled out the quartets’ sound and made them more competitive with other recorded music. Don Robey, owner of Houston-based Peacock Records, claimed to put the “beat” into records. Robey stated, “I put in the first beat—

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363 Young, The Pilgrim Jubilees, 76.
which was not a drum—then after the public started to buy the beat, why, then I put drum into it... [I]t got to a point where if you didn’t have a beat in a religious record, you had no sales.”

The Pilgrim Jubilee’s signed to Robey’s label and contended that adding the instruments was a trend that was spurred on by record companies, but insisted that it was their use of the bass fiddle in ‘Stretch Out’ that was the catalyst for the transition:

We were the first that really made that bass thing popular. Groups used to have bass singers, going poom, poom, poom with their mouths. Then we came with [the bass fiddle]. And there was such a beat that they had it in the juke joints and everywhere. People were dancing to it.

According to the Pilgrim Jubilees, the success of the song invoked record companies to include more instruments in studio recordings. The use of instruments had an adverse affect on live performances. Cleave Graham stated, “When you go on stage, you don’t have all those instruments so you don’t have that sound you had on that record.” This caused a self-perpetuating trend for singers to add more instruments to both their studio and live performances.

The participants’ definition of the beat can be related to the ritual understanding of communication. Based on the narratives, the meaning of the beat can be explained in musical terms with the use of instruments or through an emotional feeling. This characterization should not be limited to gospel music, but can be applied to sacred and secular Black American music. The beat is present in all of the music and can be traced back to one of the earliest Black American music and dance rituals, the ring shout.

In the antebellum period, enslaved Africans were assimilating the values of their White masters. Slave masters forbade the use of drums, so in defiance enslaved Africans used

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364 Young, *Woke Me Up This Morning*, xxvii


366 Ibid., 85-86.
alternative rhythmic devices like hands, feet, spoons, and tambourines to supplement their worship. According to Harold Courtlander, “Often there persisted African elements which gave a special character to motion and motor responses, rhythm, and the relationship between sound and movement and between dancing and community purpose or meaning.”\textsuperscript{367} The ring shout could be described as religious or semi-religious activity that combined music, devotion, and music. It included Euro-Christian and veiled elements of Western African religious practices. The ring shout was a ritual dance was a part of the invisible church of enslaved Africans that took place in “praise houses” or outside. The ring shout required the participants to move in a counter-clockwise circle to the accompaniment of singing, stomping and heel clicking. Sometimes the participant would tap the floor with a stick rhythmically. The tempo would gradually increase until it reached a peak. At this point, the participants would be ecstatic with jubilant cries, singing, and shouting.\textsuperscript{368} The ring shout is a demonstration of how sacred music had both function and meaning in the Black American community. In a transmission sense of communication, the songs literally disseminated messages and as a ritual, the ring shout was a form of community maintenance that preserved African culture.

Like the ring shout, gospel music serves a dual purpose of transmission and ritual. While transmitting a religious message of hope and social awareness, singing gospel is also ritual practice of community maintenance. The beat of gospel is binding element of the music that makes it recognizable to the participants. With that said, it the social meaning of gospel music is the music itself. Even if the lyrics of music are not overtly socially conscious, or the performers don’t consider themselves socially conscious, what matters is how the music is used. If gospel

\textsuperscript{367} Harold Courtlander, \textit{Negro Folk Music U.S.A.} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 194

\textsuperscript{368} Ibid., 194-195.
music is used as a part of the civil rights movement, during or before political rallies; the act of singing instills social and political significance.


Narrative

Tommy Ellison: Yeah, radio is important. It lets the people hear what you got. Let’s the public know what you got. But see, like me, they can’t hurt me because I have a name. And people have a stack of my records in their homes, so they can’t kill me. I never promoted myself. My record company promoted me. When I promote myself anywhere when I go sing it’s on stage, and then I might go to a radio station, and he’ll interview me, stuff like that, promote myself.

Anne Munson: Well, one time they had a favorite or payola system, but a lot of the DJs wouldn’t go into that. Some of the gospel DJs did it, but a lot of them [in Washington, D.C.] wouldn’t do it because it cost some of them their jobs. When the groups found out they’d report them, you know, it cost a few of them their jobs. Put a fear in the others, cause they weren’t there to do that, they were there to do a community service. Supposed to play everybody’s record and you shouldn’t have to pay to get your record played.

Margaret Allison: A company in Nashville, Tennessee, which was the record company called Nashboro, the owner of it had a radio program on the air every night, and the station he was on was called WLAC, it was a 50,000 watt station, and you could pick it up just about anywhere you would go, and he started using that “Touch Me Lord Jesus” as his theme song every night.
And people would call up, they would rush home, wherever they were at they would rush home, get home to turn the radio on to hear that theme song, “Touch me Lord Jesus.”

**Mildred Howard:** Radio played a big role in it because when you go in the city and they’d been playing your records and they’re playing and giving all that advertisement, and that went to all of the groups. [Y]ou could hear mostly every house you passed had a radio and the people was playing the gospel. [I]t played a big part in it because of advertising all day on radio.

**Evelyn Hardy:** Without [radio] the public would not have known about us. It all goes back to the tape, because if radio had not had the tape to play, the public would not have even known who we were. Before the records came out we were the only female group in Alabama I guess. So when we went to California and did “Get Away Jordan,” “Just Behold His Face,” and all those songs, we were the first in Alabama, maybe in the South. I don’t know anybody else in Mississippi, except in Chicago, back up that way. So the disc jockeys started calling us “our girls” we became their girls. So they pushed us that way and that’s the way it’s been going every since.

**Cleopatra Kennedy:** Radio played a big part in gospel music because as the people played their new records and things came out they would play it and put it the audience and the listeners would automatically respond to it. They had the point in the records where you would call in and tell them what you think about it and stuff like that and it just kind of flowed from that. [Listeners] would call in, they tell them what they want to hear, what they want them to play. And they would play it. And the more they played the more you get in the spirit of the people.
And the more they hear it the more they liked it. So when you had a big concert people bought tickets and came out to see it at the auditorium and places like that.

**Roxie Moore:** Back then I [listened to a lot of radio]. Yeah, there used to be a lot of gospel on the radio, but I would listen to anything that was informative. Oh, there were so many [gospel programs]. Radio was very important. There wasn’t a lot going on and to have gospel music on the radio was very precious to us, because those of us growing up in the Black neighborhood, we’re sort of nitty gritty and we like, there’s a segment of us like blues, and some like gospel, some like spiritual. And to those of us who were Christians the spiritual music was very precious to us and we were just delighted to have it on the radio so we could listen to it.

**Linwood Heath:** All we had to hear our music was radio. Many times the station only would give you maybe half hour of spirituals, or maybe 15 minutes of spirituals in the morning, and that same jockey would then play blues, or rhythm and blues for the rest of the day. In some places, especially down South, one person ran the station. The station manager was also the program director and also the salesman and on-air personality. So it’s been the voice of the community. Even though a lot of times they were White owned stations the music was geared towards, and the disc jockeys were also mostly Black.

They were like a celebrity. They were treated like a celebrity. Some of them were as popular as an artist in some towns. So they were held very highly respected. And the same thing with the gospel disk jockeys. They were highly respected. Most of them were females in a lot of places.

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A number of gospel groups had network radio programs. The CBS Trumpeteers and the Golden Gate Quartet, and the Wings Over Jordan Choir all had shows on CBS. In addition to national programs, several groups had shows local stations including the Gospel Harmonettes, the Swan Silvertones, the Soul Stirrers, and the Fairfield Four on the massive WLAC in Nashville.
The only big black ones I remember was Joe Bostic up in New York. He was like the man. Joe Bostic.  

Nims Gay: Radio was really the backbone of how gospel music got to be spread around. When we come along, we was playing gospel music and the people would hear the records and buy them. Radio had a voice, an outreach. Just plain as that. When you hear something and you can relate to it, then it’s knowledgeable. When the Davis Sisters, the Ward Singers, all them come in town, they always visited the station. That’s why they had the popularity.


Analysis

Radio has always played an important role in the dissemination of religious music. The earliest programming on radio featured religious content. In the 1920s, preachers, choirs, soloists, and quartets were featured on radio broadcasts. It was also in the 1920s when the first Black American announcer was featured on radio. In 1926, Jack L. Cooper hosted *The All Negro Hour* that focused on various aspects of Black American life and played jazz, blues and

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370 Deborah Smith Pollard, *Contemporary Gospel Music: When the Church Becomes Your Party* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 113. Notable Black American female radio announcers of the 1940s and 1950s included Gertrude Roberts in Chicago, Illinois; Mother Mattie Davis in Muskegon Michigan; Frances White in Washington, D.C.; Vermya Phillips in Inglewood, California; Pauline Wells Lewis of Baltimore, Maryland; and Irene Johnson Ware of Mobile, Alabama.


It was radio that helped to expose the country to jubilee quartets. Quartets began performing live on radio at the same time they were recording race records in the 1920s. These Sunday broadcasts would be fifteen to thirty minute shows. Groups like the Silver Leaf Quartette and the Golden Crown Quartet of Virginia were featured as early as 1928. Radio especially played an important role during the Great Depression. While radio networks provided programming to larger stations throughout the country, low-powered, regional stations were able to create local programming that allowed them to develop broadcast identities. Radio announcers, sponsors and performers became familiar with their audience. The medium became an escape for millions of people affected by poverty. In addition, radio was more affordable than buying recordings. All one had to do was buy a radio receiver and they had access to free entertainment. Even when people could not afford to buy radios there were methods of rigging a transmission to make reception available to a community. In rural areas local residents could “grapevine” radio transmission. The method involved a wire connected to a radio in a local storeroom that would then be extended cross-country over fences, telephone poles, bushes and trees. Anyone in the vicinity could use the signal if they paid a fee to the radio owner.

Gospel music’s golden age would not have been golden had it not been for radio as a disseminating medium. Just as independent label emerged to record gospel music, radio stations were there to play it. The record labels needed radio stations to play their records because it

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373 Pollard, When the Church Becomes Your Party, 113.


376 Ibid.
provided their artists with exposure for sales and touring. Radio owners took advantage of the millions of Black American that were moving throughout the country after World War II and there was no shortage of quartet groups that wanted to be featured on radio. For the gospel groups, singing live on radio provided notoriety for the radio stations the groups provided cheap programming that focused on a lucrative audience. Radio allowed gospel music to transition from a regional genre to a form of popular music that was able to be heard by Black Americans as well as Whites.

The radio airwave was one area where the color line was seemingly invisible. Whites and Black Americans had the ability to listen to the same music. Even though radio allowed for this cross pollination of culture via medium, ownership still affected the content of programming. There were only a few Black American radio announcers and fewer Black American radio station owners. Linwood Heath of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, explained the operation of the local stations:

Many times the station only would give you maybe half hour of spirituals, or maybe 15 minutes of spirituals in the morning, and that same jockey would then play blues, or rhythm and blues for the rest of the day. In some places, especially down South, one person ran the station. The station manager was also the program director and also the salesman and on-air personality. So it’s been the voice of the community. Even though a lot of times they were white owned stations the music was geared towards, and the disc jockeys were also mostly Black.

By 1943, only four stations were programming exclusively to Black Americans, but by 1953, that number had jumped to 260 stations. The most prominent stations that played gospel were WDIA in Memphis, Tennessee; WXLW in St. Louis, Missouri; WLOF in Orlando, Florida;


378 Linwood Heath, interview by author, audio recording, Philadelphia, Pa., 23 June 2007

WDBJ in Roanoke, Virginia; WNOX  in Knoxville, Tennessee; WLIB in New York; WIS in Columbia, South Carolina; WLAC in Nashville, Tennessee, WOKJ in Jackson, Mississippi, and WMMB in Miami, Florida.\textsuperscript{380}

With the influx of new Black American formatted stations and further commodification of gospel music, airtime became increasingly competitive. This completion was not exclusive to gospel music, but to popular music in general. The music industry participated in payola deals. Payola was an illegal practice of “pay for play” negotiations between record companies, distributors, and radio announcers.\textsuperscript{381} Although the practice was normally associated with secular artists, Anne Munson stated, “Some of the gospel DJs did it, but a lot of them [in Washington, D.C.] wouldn’t do it because it cost some of them their jobs.”\textsuperscript{382} According to Brian Ward, staffs at Black-oriented radio stations were more susceptible to engaging in payola because they devoted a significant amount of their schedules to recorded music. In addition, Black American radio announcers were paid low wages and relied on payola to sustain a living.\textsuperscript{383} Although payola may have supplemented the income of some radio announcers, the practice was unfair to independent artists and individuals signed to smaller labels that were unable to match the sums distributed to announcers by larger record companies. If gospel artists did not get airplay, their chances of publicizing and selling tickets to a program were slim. Black American gospel singers as well as announcers were aware that payola prevented and advanced their careers. However,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{381} Brian Ward, \emph{Radio and Struggle for Civil Rights in the South} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 123.
\bibitem{382} Anne Munson, interview by author, audio recording, College Park, Md., 9 June 2007.
\bibitem{383} Ward, \emph{Radio and Struggle for Civil Rights}, 123.
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some participants noted that in light of payola, their records sales remained stable. Tommy Ellison stated, “[T]hey can’t hurt me because I have a name. And people have a stack of my records in their homes, so they can’t kill me.”

Black radio announcers were held in high esteem in the community. According to Linwood Heath, “They were like a celebrity. They were treated like a celebrity. Some of them were as popular as an artist in some towns. So they were very highly respected.” Like the gospel singers gospel announcers creating programs whose content and style spoke to the experience of working class Black Americans. They served as emcees on gospel programs and stations publicized local church events. Regular listeners could call in to the stations and get their favorite songs played and radio announcers dedicated songs to listeners as well.

Cleopatra Kennedy stated, “[Listeners] would call in, they tell them what they want to hear, what they want them to play. And they would play it. And the more they played, the more you get in the spirit of the people.”

Kennedy’s comments reflect a central point about the significance of radio in the 1940s and 1950s. Radio created a community among Black Americans as they traveled and settled throughout the country. Radio held the community together through music. Radio became an extension of the oral culture of Western Africa. The radio announcers disseminated information as well as entertainment that resonated with working-class Black Americans. During the civil rights movement, radio announcers were indispensable because they had voice that reached throughout the entire community was able to mobilized hundred of

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384 Tommy Ellison, interview by author, audio recording, Baltimore, Md., 7 June 2007.


386 Alan Young, Woke Me up This Morning: Black Gospel Singers and the Gospel Life (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 142.

individual by the playing of music. The gospel radio announcer and the gospel artist worked in tandem as unified voices, speaking and listening to the Black community.

“We Had A Lot of African Stuff in Us”: A Cultural Connection between Africa and Gospel Music

Narrative

**Tommy Ellison:** I don’t know nothing about Africa, I’m an American. I ain’t got nothing against Africa, I wouldn’t go over there to live, would you? In fact, I’m particular about leaving the United States. If I leave I’m in a hurry go get back. [I have a] connection with my ancestors here…slaves here. See, I didn’t get all this (clapping and stomping) from Africa, I got it from the United States, cause I was born here. I’ve never been to Africa, don’t know nothing about it.

**Anne Munson:** I like the way [Africans] move, I like the way they do their singing and stuff like that. I love it. We got some of the same heritage as the Africans. My church had the bongos, and the drums.

**Margaret Allison:** To be frank with you, the feeling I had was what I was brought up within the church.

**Mildred Howard:** Well being a Black person I’m naturally connected with Africa, some kind of way, but I don’t know just how.

**Evelyn Howard:** A lot of the songs that the slaves sang were bluesy; they had an Asiatic type of feel to it. Like they might have come out of Africa, come out of Asia, they brought that with them. That’s why the White man can’t get it. He didn’t come from there and see, you had to
come cross that Middle Passage. You know, when they brought us here and brought us across, upside down. They brought a different breed of person. That’s why they’ll never understand us, they never understand us and we’ll never understand them. I think the blues was born out of that.

When we first started singing we just stood up. Didn’t even move, you know, just stood up. So I had a chance to go to Chicago and I watched a group up there, and they were moving and they were shouting and they would sing until they would just get full of the spirit. I came back to Birmingham and I told them, I said, “You got to move your hands.” I said, “You act like you’re dead. You got to get ugly and you got to mean every word you say. You got to put a little swing in it.” So then finally we put a little swing in it. The public went along with it fine. They went along until I got Dorothy [Love Coates]. And Dorothy came in, baby she came in like a whirlwind. She would jump back and the group learned how to jump back behind her and the folks went, “Yes!” We had a lot of African stuff in us.

**Cleopatra Kennedy:** Yeah, I do [have a connection], because Africans, everything they do, any kind of beat they hear they got a move to it, and they got a move to almost any type of beat they hear, they got a move to that beat. If it’s fast, they’re going to move fast. If it’s slow, they’re going to move slow. They’re going to clap and they harmonize. They hear it in their head. Music is a part of them. It’s in them. Music is the soul of them, they just love music and they clapped to it so as the African American you’re watch them do what they do you’re doing something they like and they do something you like. Music has a rhythm, music has a beat, music has s tempo, music has a down tempo, music has just about anything gospel music would
even have in it. It’s almost the same, it’s just, maybe different words. So it’s automatically a
collection, we do what they do, they do what we do.

We don’t have to see them, it’s just a connection. And just hearing about it is a spirit
world connection that you just automatically know it’s there. It sounded good. You don’t
constantly know what it’s all about because you hadn’t lived any of that, but you like it because
it makes you move and it connects you with dancing. When you grow up you like to dance and
you just like to move to the beat of the music so it’s already in your spirit. So any time you hear
a beat…as a Black person, music is just a part of Black people. Whether it be singing or dancing
or whatever it is, music is just a part of Blacks that has been there ever since day one, even little
bitty babies, when they hear music first thing they do is start moving and wiggling because it’s in
them. It’s from our forefathers, our parents behind us. It’s been generation to generation as far
back as far as you can see on any tape or movie or anything, Black people have always moved to
a rhythm. So it’s just there. You can’t even know it, it’s just there.

“*We Had A Lot of African Stuff in Us*: A Cultural Connection between Africa and
Gospel Music

**Analysis**

Gospel music is a part of a continuous evolution of Black American music. The entry of
Black Americans into the mainstream of American life after Emancipation brought them closer
to the individualism valued by the majority of White culture. According to Lawrence Levine,
“Africans lived in a world of sound; a world in which the spoken, chanted, sung, or shouted word
was the primary form of communication.” The more Black Americans identified as

\[\text{Ibid., 106.}\]
American, the more an erosion of African religious practices became prevalent.\textsuperscript{390} Even in secular life, Africa did not have a strong cultural significance in the consciousness of Black Americans. The role of African and Black Americans in the history of the United States was conspicuously absent in public school textbooks. Even at historically Black colleges and universities, the goal was to acculturate Black Americans even more into the mainstream of American life. Although Black Americans understood that they descended from African ancestors, Africa did not represent a significant a cultural bond. Mildred Howard stated, “Being a Black person I’m naturally connected with Africa, some kind of way, but I don’t know just how.”\textsuperscript{391}

Analyzing transmogrification of identity from African to Black American, poet Amiri Baraka argues that first-born Africans in America knew about Africa through the stories and songs of their older relatives, but after a few generations, slaves were unable to retain African traditions. So after only a few generations in the United States the descendants of slaves identified as Black Americans.\textsuperscript{392} When asked whether he felt a relationship with African culture through singing gospel music, Tommy Ellison preferred to identify himself as American. Ellison’s feelings about Africa reflect the acculturation that took place among Africans in this country over several generations:

I don’t know nothing about Africa, I’m an American. I ain’t got nothing against Africa, I wouldn’t go over there to live, would you? In fact, I’m particular about leaving the United States. If I leave I’m in a hurry go get back. [I have a] connection with my ancestors here…slaves here. See, I didn’t get all this (clapping and stomping) from

\textsuperscript{389} Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness}, 157.

\textsuperscript{390} Ibid., 164.

\textsuperscript{391} Mildred Howard, interview by author, 13 July 2007.

Africa, I got it from the United States, ‘cause I was born here. I’ve never been to Africa, don’t know nothing about it.  

There was no separation between the sacred and secular life of the African; however, the gulf widened as Africans became Black Americans. At a time when Black Americans were becoming more mainstreamed into American culture, gospel singers reinforced aspects of African culture through music. By employing blues rhythms, including movement, and shouting, gospel singers played a significant role in bridging the gap between the sacred and secular. Early gospel composers and singers defended the performance of gospel in the mainline religious churches. “Don’t let the movement go out of the music,” Thomas Dorsey warned. “Black music calls for movement! It calls for feeling. Don’t let it get away.” The Holiness and Pentecostal tradition, however, were more accepting of movement as a part of religious worship. Dorsey’s mentee, Willie Mae Ford Smith, explained, “I’ll sing with my hands, with my feet…. I believe we should use everything we got.” For Smith, music and movement was essential. One can not exist without the other. In addition, there were issues of power that were implicit in the movement. Pastors did not approve of a woman trying to preach in the church. Smith resented the fact that she was being chastised for her movement while singing as Black Americans were already limited outside of the church and the burden on Black American women was compounded by gender restriction in the church. For Smith, her movement was not only statement about her spirituality but her power in the church as a woman. Other female groups faced adversity because they challenged the role of women because of their expressiveness. In

393 Thomas Ellison, interview by author, audio recording, Baltimore, MD., 7 June 2007.
394 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 157.
395 Ibid., 184.
one incident while rehearsing for a performance, Dorothy Love Coates of the Gospel
Harmonettes was admonished for her preaching. The pastor of the church where she performed
that evening made his displeasure known. He stated, "Dorothy, I don't mind you singin', you can
do that all you want, but I don't want no woman preaching in here." Coates quieted him by
responding, "Now you know in God's house there is neither male nor female." 396

The Gospel Harmonettes were particularly known for their movement during
performances. Earlier groups often choreographed songs, but the movements were restrained and
formally arranged. Lead singers especially, would use all the stage room available, running from
side to side, falling on one or both knees or even leaving the stage to sing among the audience. 397
Movement and choreography was a key component of the Original Gospel Harmonettes’
performance. Initially, the all-female group did not include movement. That changed when
member Evelyn Hardy went to Chicago and witnessed the Roberta Martin Singers who were
including choreography and excitement in their performances:

I came back to Birmingham and I told them, I said, “You got to move your hands.” I
said, “You act like you’re dead. You got to get ugly and you got to mean every word you
say. You got to put a little swing in it.” So then finally we put a little swing in it. The
public went along with it fine. They went along until I got Dorothy [Love Coates]. 398

Roberta Martin was influenced by expressiveness in the Pentecostal church and the Roberta
Martin Singers functioned as evangelists in the church. According to Pearl Williams-Jones,
when they performed, “The tempo of the services increased with hand-clapping, foot-patting and

396 Odessa Edward; Singer with the Original Gospel Harmonettes; [Chicago Final Edition], available from

397 Young, _Woke Me Up This Morning_, xxvii.

398 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.
a few soul standing up to continue expressing themselves in the spirit.”

One of the members of the group, Eugene Smith would “run the aisles, stomp his feet, or as the gospel people say, “Let the spirit have its way.” Similarly, as lead singer of the Original Gospel Harmonettes, Dorothy Love Coates was an electrifying performer, physical, animated, and unpredictable. Coates had a “sanctified timbre and preacher’s delivery.” Specialty Records owner Art Rupe sometimes feared she would suffer a heart attack in the recording studio. Evelyn Hardy stated, “She came in like a whirlwind…. She would jump back and the group learned how to jump back behind her and the folks went, ‘Yes!’” Other participants clearly identified features of African culture in Black American religion and gospel music. Anne Munson stated, “We got some of the same heritage as the Africans. My church had the bongos, and the drums.” Cleopatra Kennedy stated, “Yeah, I do [have a connection], because Africans, everything they do, any kind of beat they hear they got a move to it[…]… It’s almost the same, it’s just, maybe different words. So it’s automatically a connection, we do what they do, they do what we do.”

The church has traditionally been a public space for Black Americans. It is here that the majority of African culture was maintained. It is through music that experiences were conveyed


400 Ibid., 274.


403 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.

and maintained within the community over time. Hardy explained how the experience of slavery contributed to the authenticity of gospel music:

That’s why the White man can’t get it. He didn’t come from there and see, you had to come cross that Middle Passage….They brought a different breed of person. That’s why they’ll never understand us, they never understand us and we’ll never understand them. 405

There are several features of African music that still exist in Black American music. Improvisation was a feature of African music that is present in all genres of Black American music. Gospel singers seldom sang a song the same way twice and never sang it according to its exact musical notation, which was a reflection of the oral culture of Africa, where songs and stories were not written down, but passed on through performance and participation. Gospel singers produced what jazz musicians referred to as “head arrangements” proceeding from their own feelings, from the way in which “the spirit” moved them at the time. 406 For Baraka, Black music is the expression of an attitude about the world and secondarily an attitude about the way the music is made. 407 Baraka’s observation speaks to the difficulty in conducting such research. Because the performances are done in the moment, it is sometimes difficult to for the participants to be reflective about their feelings of meaning. That is however, what makes gospel music so unique. Even as a professional singer, spirituality gives way to improvisation that allows the gospel singer to focus the moment. Each performance is a new experience for the singer and the audience. After the moment is gone, it cannot be reclaimed.

405 Evelyn S. Hardy, interview by author, 17 April 2007.
406 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 186.
This chapter sought to explain the meaning of gospel music based on the narratives of gospel singers. The participants’ understanding of the essence of gospel music provides insight into the music’s function in the Black American community. In addition, the gospel singers’ interpretations show how gospel music evolved, yet still retained aspects of African oral and performative tradition. Gospel music retained musical features of African music and functioned polysemically. Like the early spirituals, gospel music played a dual role of expressing the religious and mundane relationship of Black Americans as citizens in the Unites States.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

“I WANTED TO DO WHAT WAS IN ME”

Since the introduction of gospel music in the 1930s, the music has reflected the social condition and sentiment of the Black American community. Like the blues to which it is so closely related, gospel addressed the mundane as well as spiritual needs of the Black American community. The commercial potential of gospel music was realized by early composers in the 1930s. By the 1940s, gospel music was being introduced on a mass scale outside of the Black American community through media such as radio and television. The popularity of gospel music occurred during a period of overt racism and discrimination in the United States. In light of the popularity of gospel music, gospel artists experienced racial discrimination as touring performers. Gospel artists’ experience with racism shaped their worldview about social inequality and awareness. Music provided an outlet for gospel artists to critique the social environment of the Black American community on a mass level at a time when there were limited spaces outside of the community to do so. The dissemination of gospel music outside of the Black American church into secular venues like auditoriums, festivals, and radio stations took gospel artists outside of the Black American community and provided a platform to express not only religious messages, but to bring attention to worldly issues affecting the Black American community.

This study examined the meaning of gospel music and its role in creating and reinforcing social awareness within the Black American community during a post-World War II era that coincided with the emergence of civil rights awareness and protest. The research supports the
viewpoint that gospel singers played a significant role in bringing awareness to social issues in
the community. The participants’ narratives provided first-person accounts of their experiences
as Black Americans during segregation in the United States as well as gospel artists in the music
industry from the 1940s to the 1960s. Themes emerged from the narratives that provided insight
into meaning of gospel music in the Black American community. The participants were key
contributors to the production and maintenance of Black American culture through music. It is
within the space of music that the sentiment of the Black American community can be
interpreted and debated. Valuable data in the form of oral narratives illustrated the function,
meaning, and creation of gospel music in the Black American community. The research
questions were as follows:

1) Why was gospel music used as a means to express the values and sentiment of Black
American culture?

2) To what extent was gospel music:
   socially meaningful?
   used to confront social injustice?
   used to foster a collective identity?

3) How was gospel music an extension of an African oral tradition?

It is important to recognize the significance of professional and semi-professional gospel
singers in the post-World War II era. Gospel artists were products of the Black American
community and gospel music not only conveyed religious messages, but was a reflection of the
Black American community. Gospel artists related to the frustration and hope of Black
Americans, because they too had experienced it. Thus, gospel artists were not only performers,
but social critics who used music and performance to critique their social environment. The
commercialization of gospel music in the mid-1940s created opportunities for gospel artists to
record and travel. The expansion of gospel outside of the Black American community due to
recordings, radio, and later television provided gospel artists with a means to reach a mass audience.

A myriad of factors shaped the gospel singers’ perspective on social issues within the Black American community. One theme that emerged from the narratives indicated that the church played an important role in shaping the lives of the participants and cultivated a sense of purpose to serve within the community. At the nucleus of the Black American community, church attendance shaped the participants’ values as young adults. The church congregation was an extended family and the church itself was an outlet for inspiration, education, and recreation. All of the participants noted that they were very active in religious life including, singing in choirs and playing instruments. These talents were cultivated in the church and within their neighborhood.

The narratives also indicated that singing gospel was a regular pastime among youth. For Anne Munson, singing gospel was more that a pastime. When she moved from South Carolina to Washington, D.C., singing in gospel groups with other youths in her neighborhood helped her establish new relationships. The tendency for the participants to form singing groups speaks to the relationship of the gospel to the broader Black American community. Gospel music was truly a product of its environment. As a social activity, the music was not only a reflection of what was occurring within the church, but outside of the church as well. It was the participants’ early experiences in the church and in their neighborhood that instilled a sense of responsibility. Gospel music symbolized the essence of the Black American community. Although singing secular music clearly was the more lucrative professional option, some participants felt that singing gospel was a means of supporting their community. For Tommy Ellison, staying true to the community meant not crossing over to sing secular music. Even participants who sang
secular music at various points in their career like Bill Pinkney and Cleopatra Kennedy felt the way to reconnect with the Black American community was to revert back to singing gospel music.

A subsequent theme in the narratives addressed the participants’ experience living during segregation in the United States and the role of music in dealing with those experiences. The church served as a shelter from racial discrimination, but outside of the church the participants were still confronted with racial encounters. Based on the responses, there was a feeling of helplessness among the participants. As youth participants were taught to behave in a manner that would not provoke White authorities or citizens. The participants, particularly in the South, lived in a hegemonic culture of racism in which there were unwritten and sometimes written rules meant to maintain White social, political and economic dominance. Even in the North, racial subjugation, although not as overt as the South, could not be avoided. The church and its music provided a buffer between White society and Black American society, which could explain why singing was so pervasive in the Black American community. Singing was performed within a space that was acceptable for Black Americans to express themselves freely and critique their social environment. Singing allowed them to maintain community through an oral tradition.

As professional and semi-professional gospel artists, the participants experienced racism as they traveled throughout the country. However, most of them felt they lacked agency to speak out or significantly act as individuals against racism. The participants’ revelations were not surprising given their experiences living in segregated environments as young adults. They acted in accordance with the accepted social codes within their given environment. The participants’ responded by either ignoring discrimination or finding ways to avoid interacting with Whites.
There were also more practical reasons that influenced their reaction. Speaking out could have been a threat to their financial stability. If artists were confrontational, they could have been threatened with violence or jailed, which could prevent them from keeping their tour dates.

Most of the participants did not consider themselves active participants in the civil rights movement. They instead preferred contributing monetarily to established organizations. As stated earlier, many participants did not believe they could significantly confront discrimination as individuals. Contributing to the movement monetarily was the most common means of displaying support. Some were members of and contributed to NAACP and appealed to the organization when witnessing racial discrimination. Even with monetary contributions, some participants hesitated to consider their actions socially relevant. Seeing direct action protests was a unique experience for many Black Americans. For many of the participants, direct action in the form of marching, boycotting, and sit-ins stood out as a significant action. Roxie Moore mentioned that she could not have participated because she did not feel capable of withstanding marching and beatings. The significance of direct action protests was magnified by the fact that protesters were featured in the mass media. Margaret Allison thought that people who were significantly involved in the movement were those individuals featured on television.

The business of singing affected the participants’ perception of their social activity. Singing was considered a means of employment. As the business of gospel singing became lucrative, money increasingly became the motivating factor in performances. Venues that featured gospel groups were booked by agents and tickets were sold throughout the community. There were participants that were scheduled for civil right rallies; however, these participants did not consider these types of music performances socially relevant. Artists recognized that these
performances were scheduled by booking agents and their presence did not necessarily reflect the gospel artists’ stance on social issues.

Cleopatra Kennedy’s perception of the role music in addressing social issues was notably different from the other participants. As the youngest participant, she was very active in the civil rights movement. She readily made connections between music and its ability to speak to social issues. As a child she often questioned the unfairness of segregation, but as a professional singer, she was empowered by singing about social issues at civil rights rallies and involved in many direct action protests. Her participation could be explained by her age. Apart from the NAACP, many civil rights organizations and activities were associated with the youth. In some instances, youth were encouraged to participate because, unlike their parents, many of whom were employed by Whites, they would be less affected by economic sanctions if they participated.

There were significant examples of the participants using music and performance as a platform for commentary; however, there were more instances of participants using their music to address issues within the Black American community, rather than confronting issues of racial discrimination by Whites. Margaret Allison was hesitant to speak out about racism because she did not want to alienate Whites who may have been in attendance at her concerts. In addition, Tommy Ellison felt disempowered to act against racism, yet he often used sermonettes to address social issues like drunk driving. Similarly, Odessa Edwards, used sermonettes to critique the actions within the Black American community like the massive migration of Black Americans to Northern states.

Chapter one highlighted various gospel groups as proof that gospel music’s function was more than just religious, but also a reflection of the social, political, environment in which it was
produced. An underlying assumption of this research was that the participants explicitly addressed racial discrimination through their music. This was not the case. Instead, the narratives revealed that most of the participants didn’t consider themselves very socially active and did not consciously intend to address racial issues through their music. The participants did, however, consciously set out to address issues that were not race specific. Although many of the participants did not intend for their music to address specific racial issues, they recognized the potential for music to be interpreted to address racial issues. They understood that music could have multiple messages depending on the receiver.

One of the most significant themes to develop from the narratives was the participants’ explanation of the meaning of gospel music. Although the participants were interviewed separately, three of the interviewees used the same language to explain the meaning of gospel music. The description of gospel music as having a “beat” was mentioned multiple times. In addition, the literature review contains research that also includes interviews with gospel singers. Those participants also used the word “beat” to describe their definition of gospel music. The similarity of the definitions speaks to the communal nature of gospel music within the Black American community. No singular definition can provide a holistic understanding of what gospel music represents. Based on the narratives, gospel does not seem to have a meaning, but a feeling. This feeling is based on rhythm, instrumentation, and style. These characteristics mentioned by the participants can also be related to an African musical tradition. Only two of the participants acknowledged the connection of gospel music to African music. The significance of African culture to the Western region of the world has been largely overlooked. The performance of gospel music was a site for the maintenance of African identity as well as a site
for resistance. The narrative presented the ways in which African culture was enacted, consciously and unconsciously, by the participants.

The participants provided first-person accounts of race relations in the United States. Gospel artists were true products of their environment and their dedication to gospel also signified a dedication to the issues in their community. Gospel artists believed that their music was a significant contribution to the Black American community. Their music often addressed issues directed at the Black American community rather than explicitly commenting on racial issues. While many of the participants did intend to address racial issues in their music, they supported the notion that their music could be interpreted by the audience in contexts. Gospel singers were admired in the Black American community not only for their talent, but because of their dedication to Christian values. Their celebrity status spurred on by concert appearances and radio appearances only strengthened the role of the gospel singer to address social issues within the Black American community. The music provided a platform to express their ideas and emotions, which is similar to the function of African music. As a part of African culture gospel music addressed issues within the Black American community as well as provided a critique of the dominant culture of oppression in the United States.

Opportunities for Future Research

There are abundant opportunities for future research on gospel music and singers. Many of their stories have never been told from a first-person point of view. While there are a multitude of future research opportunities for scholars, there is also an urgency to capture these voices from the past before they are gone. It was already stated in the purpose of the project that many of the participants are dying. Since the beginning of this research, three participants have
died, which increases the urgency of preserving these voices as a record of the civil rights era. For this reason, future research based on the oral histories of gospel singers would be an invaluable contribution to the history of gospel music and civil rights. Other subjects of analysis could include the oral histories of radio announcers and listeners of gospel music during this same area. Much has been mentioned about the importance of radio in popularizing gospel music outside of the Black American community. In addition, interviewing listeners of gospel music during this period could provide more insight into how gospel functioned within the Black America community. The analysis of the producers, audiences, and disseminators of gospel music could provide a unique and multifaceted insight into the communication of culture through media and ritual.

Future research could also examine the coverage of gospel artists by Black magazines and newspapers in order to trace the public sentiment of gospel music during in the post-World War II era. Coinciding with gospel’s golden age, Black American magazines such as Ebony began publishing in 1945 and focused on Black American achievement in various aspects of American society. Black American newspapers like the Chicago Defender, Detroit Free Press, Pittsburgh Courier, Baltimore Afro-American, and Philadelphia Afro-American could serve as valuable resources to examine the popularity and perceptions of gospel artists in the Black American community, as most of these cities had a strong gospel music presence during the post-World War II era.
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Appendix A
Tommy Ellison and the Singing Stars
Tommy Ellison of the Singing Stars
The Queens of Faith (Anne Munson, standing far right)
Anne Munson of the Queens of Faith
The Original Gospel Harmonettes (Mildred Howard, far left; Evelyn Hardy, second from the right)
Evelyn Hardy of the Original Gospel Harmonettes
Cleopatra Kennedy of the Dorothy Love Coates and the Gospel Harmonettes
The Angelic Gospel Singers (Margaret Allison, far left)
Bill Pinkney of the Original Drifters
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