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Joyce Marie Jackson

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The Changing Nature of Gospel Music: A Southern Case Study

African American gospel music forms an important part of the community's aesthetic expression and is a synthesis of music, dance, poetry, and drama distilled into a unified whole. Gospel music also represents a strong link to African roots in both subtle and sometimes obvious ways.

While gospel music is strongly entrenched in the African American "folk church" tradition, it also attracts many who identify as much with its expression of African American values, aesthetics, and life experiences as with its expression of religion. Participants in the tradition, with varying degrees of expertise and from a wide range of ages, denominational affiliations, and geographic locales, readily articulate its significance in the African American community.

The factors involved in making gospel music what it is are numerous and complex, and only by considering all of them can we begin to approach satisfactory explanations of its changing nature. In this study I wish to suggest that it might be more profitable for researchers to undertake more comparisons involving cultural, societal, and historical processes that influenced the development of gospel music rather than to consider musical structures alone. Although comparisons of musical structures are important, it is probable that further research into processes will result in the discovery of more regularities in musical behavior.

Conducting regional comparative studies of gospel music that utilize quantitative musical analysis would certainly be a phenomenal venture, and probably a very revealing one. For instance, E. Dwight Franklin, an extraordinarily talented full-time minister of music for various churches in New Orleans, has observed that

in Los Angeles the organ is an accompanying instrument to the piano—here the piano leads—whereas the piano is not the lead instrument in New Orleans. When you hear choirs from the West Coast, their voices are higher for some reason. . . . Tenors have no problem singing A flats and B flats on the West Coast. Take for example the gospel compositions of Margaret Dureaux. (Interview)

Of course, this type of comparative study could also be misleading, because there is a tremendous amount of overlap between the various regions. In the early history of gospel music this type of study could have been done more easily; however, today, due to the influence of gospel composers/arrangers and technological advances in media (commercial recordings, radio broadcasts, music videos, and television), it would be much more difficult.

The evolutionary history and analysis of gospel music is complex, and researchers, practitioners, and aficionados have encountered many problems in attempting to delineate different styles and genres of the tradition, since it has such a changing nature.

Joyce Marie Jackson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. She earned her Ph.D. at Indiana University, Bloomington in folklore/ethnomusicology. She has been a Rockefeller and NEA Fellow. Her research focuses on African American traditional music and culture and their relationship to other areas of the African diaspora. She is currently completing a book manuscript and documentary recording on the sacred *capella* quartet tradition.

Some sources discuss gospel within various sub-categories, such as country or folk-styled gospel and jazz-styled gospel. The most popular designations are traditional, contemporary, urban contemporary, and inspirational—categories used on the popular awards shows such as the Grammy, Stellar, and Dove Awards. For Al Hobbs, chairman of the Announcers' Guild of the Gospel Music Workshop of America, traditional gospel

is used to set the mood for a morning worship service; contemporary gospel can be used in a worship service, but is primarily heard at a concert; and urban contemporary goes out to people who may never hear the gospel message unless they hear it in a song played on a soul station or through a gospel music video on television. (Haynes 80)

Gospel music has also been classified chronologically, historically, and categorically by designated years—often without explanation as to why these years were chosen. Because we end up with too many categories, several of which overlap, this process of classification tends to confuse rather than clarify. In addition, while the battle rages over whether traditional or contemporary is the “real” gospel, problems arise on another front: studies that rely primarily on description and analysis of musical practices. These studies are important in the total gospel research domain, but they are limited in scope. Often times, such research is plagued with the misapplication of Western concepts, vague or inappropriate terminology, and an inadequate fixed notational system. What we must not fail to remember is that gospel music is an evolving, dynamic, and vernacular art form.

In an attempt to foster a clearer understanding of gospel music and its changing nature, I wish first to establish the conceptual link between the spiritual and gospel music in order to demonstrate that the aesthetic values and practices intrinsic to the gospel

music tradition do not represent a break with the traditional past. On the contrary, the gospel music tradition offers absolute evidence of the existence of a continuum in African American music, and a “continuity of consciousness.” However, it is also important to recognize how and why the music has changed over time, which will be the second part of the discussion. Finally, the discussion will focus on how this musical tradition has evolved in one Southern city—New Orleans, Louisiana.

In order to grasp the intricate, changing nature of African American gospel music, one must understand the interrelationship of socio-cultural and historical factors during the evolution of the tradition. The context, function, repertoire, and intent of the performance must all be examined. These factors reveal the primary determinants of, and the essence of stylistic development and change in, gospel music. Understanding how these elements are interrelated eventually unfolds a complex, multidimensional, evolutionary process that explains the changing nature of gospel music.¹

The music created by gospel performers resulted from interaction between the original tradition (spirituals) and those new environmental situations that African Americans encountered in their lives. Some of the characteristics that define this creative process have been reinterpreted over time to correspond to the natural process of adjusting to new conditions and environmental factors. The changing nature of gospel music can be described similarly to the way Lawrence W. Levine describes the nature of culture:

Culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the past and present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined not by a culture's ability to withstand change, which indeed may be a sign of stagnation not life, but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation. (5)

There is a "continuity of consciousness" that flows through various aspects of African American culture, and this continuity is evident in gospel music. Yet for almost one hundred years, African American gospel practitioners have reacted creatively to a multitude of new conditions in their lives. Thus, the resultant development of dynamic styles of performance illustrates both continuity and change, since many of the aesthetic values and musical practices intrinsic to gospel music represent a definite link with the traditional past.

As many students of religion have pointed out, the African American "folk" church has historically represented the single cultural institution through which African Americans have been able to express themselves freely and without constraint (Mays and Nicholson; Lincoln; Nelsen and Nelsen; Frazier). It was in the context of the African American experience of "folk" religions that the gospel music tradition evolved, serving as both a personal and a collective response to extrinsic and intrinsic factors in the African American community. As the music developed, it continued to exhibit the most salient African-derived aesthetics. In concept and practice there has been little significant deviation in gospel from many of the fundamental elements found in the traditional music of West Africa.

Since the church is the most conservative institution in the African American community, it is logical to assume that ritual services, including the mode of worship and style and function of music, would be preserved there in their truest form. Many cultural ties of the African ancestral lineage have been maintained within the enclave of the African American folk church. Pearl Williams-Jones characterizes the folk church as:

at once a mystical, invisible body of believers unified by a common Christian theology as well as a visible body and community of Black people united by common cultural ties. We may consider the Black folk church as

being an institution controlled by Blacks which exists principally within the Black community and which reflects its attitudes, values and lifestyle. It is a church of everyday people and one of any denomination . . . ("Musical" 21)

Many of the ritual practices which we commonly associate with the African American folk church, such as freely structured services, dance, improvisational music, the emotional and musical delivery style of sermons and prayers, and spontaneous verbal and non-verbal responses by preachers and congregations, have essentially emerged from African values and aesthetics.

The music created by African American slaves before and after the Civil War reflected their status and served as a response to the environment that controlled their lives. This religious music—later known as the folk spirituals, and commonly referred to as the "Negro Spirituals"—was the 18th-century creation of African American slaves who sought to express their religious beliefs in a way that was uniquely meaningful to them. The slaves created the folk spirituals in contexts free of white control. These songs commented on their love for God, desire for freedom, total disdain for the institution of slavery, and plans for secret meetings or escape as expressed in the familiar lines "Steal away to Jesus, I ain't got long to stay here," and "Follow the drinking gourd."

The structural form and performance style associated with folk spirituals are derived from West African musical practices. In West Africa, the geographical origin for a large number of the slave population, cultural mores govern group singing at a musical event. These principles require the participation of group members who are present. Individuals become involved either by singing, dancing/shouting, hand-clapping, foot-stomping, or some combination of these rhythmic textures, which also provide the accompaniment for the layered voices.

This type of animated and emotional ritual was valued by the slaves so much that many would risk being beaten or killed in order to continue to worship in a manner which represented a continuity with African performance aesthetics. Numerous instances have been cited by travelers, journalists, and ex-slaves that lived during this era (Levine; Lovell; Epstein; Courlander). Many of their meetings took place in undisclosed "praise houses" and "hush harbors" deep in the woods at night.² Here is one account from an ex-slave regarding the drive for emotional expression:

Referring to a plantation located in Louisiana, Mrs. Channel says: "On this plantation there were about one hundred and fifty slaves. Of this number, only about ten were Christians." We can easily account for this, for religious services among the slaves were strictly forbidden. But the slaves would steal away into the woods at night and hold services. He [the speaker] would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated or cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender's mouth [or put the offender's head over the vessel]. (Herskovits 210)

The concept of group participation is further reinforced in the structural formula of the song itself. The songs, spontaneously created by an individual and/or group, were sung in an antiphonal style, with no predetermined length. Throughout West Africa, many songs subscribe to the antiphonal, call-response, or leader-chorus structure, in which the leader spontaneously improvises text, time, and melody and the remaining group members respond with a short repetitive phrase which can also be expressed by making slight changes in time, text, or melody.

The gospel music tradition offers absolute evidence of the existence of a continuum in African American music, and a "continuity of consciousness."

The antebellum folk spiritual is based on this same call-response structural principle—one which allows for latitude and flexibility on the part of the leader (the call), and at the same time allows other group members to participate by singing short repetitive responses (chorus). Although occasionally some of the songs are sung in harmony, singing in unison appears to have been more common. When deviation from the basic melody occurs, the resulting sound is known as heterophony.

Repetitive texts were spontaneously improvised and sometimes taken from other genres, including African songs, Protestant songs, and work songs. Other texts were drawn from vocabulary and phrases from the Bible, phrases from sermons, and everyday life experiences of slaves. Many of the spirituals were communally conceived and performed; how-

ever, individuals also sang them as a form of personal expression and communication with God and each other.

The unaccompanied folk spiritual served as the most important African American musical tradition up to the Civil War. After this period, this sacred music of sorrow, rebellion, and hope was transformed along with the slave populace. Gospel is the modern-day counterpart of the antebellum spiritual. The traditional spiritual represented a profound expression of African Americans' desire and ability to demonstrate their unique world view—their definition, understanding, and interpretation of the world that surrounded them. This same ideological principle was operative when they migrated to urban centers and created the gospel idiom.

Gospel's First Period: 1900-1929

Prior to the early 20th century most African Americans lived in the rural South. However, with the outbreak of World War I, the urban centers held a promise of economic and social opportunities and personal freedom for Southern rural African Americans, who came north to escape a legal system of discrimination that prevented any improvements of their status. Unfortunately, life in the city did not meet the expectations of the migrants.

African Americans acknowledged the complex adjustments required in migrating from an agrarian context to an industrial one—from an overtly racist environment to one which covertly sanctioned the same “Jim Crow” statutes, or as they were called in some states such as Louisiana the “code noir” (black code). The practice of discrimination in employment, housing, education, and the use of public accommodations forced African Americans to create an alternate life style.

Gospel, a new sacred music reflecting the concerns of urban life, replaced the rural traditions, such as the folk spiritual, and gave a sense of pride and hope to those who had recently uprooted themselves in pursuit of a dream that seemed increasingly difficult to attain. African Americans confronted their difficulties through the process of consciously recreating rituals, continuing certain performance practices, and maintaining those values and aesthetics which were at the focal point of their mental and physical survival in the rural South.

They had to unite, and once more the most important context for this union was the African American folk church—not the middle-class-oriented, mainstream establishment churches, but the small “storefront” churches³ which served as the contemporary

counterpart to the “praise houses” of the institutionalized slavery era. These churches were free of constraints which characterized the mainstream denominations, and their official doctrine encouraged a freedom of expression which was manifested in spontaneous testimonies, prayers, and praises from individuals. The congregants were committed to worshipping in this manner despite negative views from non-members (Hughes; Huggins).

Around the turn of the century, many African American church congregations still worshiped with no instruments. They sang in the *a cappella* style of the folk tradition. However, there were some that had tambourines and guitars (sometimes played by blues musicians). Pianos were rare, and church choirs also did not exist at this time.

There are many accounts describing the musical practices that played such a significant role in the ritual services of these churches (Bontemps and Conroy; Stoddard). Mahalia Jackson, gospel contralto, lived next door to a Sanctified church in her native New Orleans. She recalls the nature of the services and acknowledges the profound effect this exposure had on her development as a gospel musician:

These people had no choir and no organ. They used the drum, the cymbal, the tambourine, and the steel triangle. Everybody in there sang and they clapped and stamped their feet and sang with their whole bodies. They had a beat, a powerful beat which we held onto from slavery days, and their music was so strong and expressive it used to bring tears to my eyes. (32)

The physical behavior that accompanied the performance—including hand-clapping, foot-stomping, and other body movements that had been integral performance practices of the folk spiritual—became the foundation of the new gospel music performance style. The spirited and emotional music was essential to the worship services of Pentecostal churches, and it was full of African American folk imagery, every-

day language, and cheerful tunes that were easily learned and often compared to secular music. Author Langston Hughes encountered the music of the Holiness churches for the first time in Chicago during World War I, and he compared this religious music to the blues:

I was entranced by their stepped-up rhythms, tambourines, hand clapping, and uninhibited dynamics, rivaled only by Ma Rainey singing the blues at the old Monogram Theater. . . . The music of these less formal Negro churches early took hold of me, moved me and thrilled me. (qtd. in Levine 180)

Reverend Charles A. Tindley, renowned during his lifetime as an eloquent Methodist minister, is credited with being the first African American to compose (both music and words) and publish the new genre of African American religious song. Although Tindley wrote from 1901 to 1906, many of his songs did not become popular until the early 1920s, when the Holiness groups began using them (Boyer, "Gospel" 36-38; Bontemps 76-77). According to George Robinson Ricks, "The Holiness groups used Tindley's songs as a model and began a repertory of religious folk songs characterized by free expression and rhythmic instrumental accompaniment" (133). Many economically disadvantaged African Americans were a part of the Pentecostal church, which was considered the primary influence on the emergence of gospel music during the 1920s.

After the Civil War and through the turn of the century, small vocal ensembles and quartets became increasingly popular among African Americans. Some originated at educational institutions and others in the communities. They were referred to as "jubilee" singers.⁴ These groups' repertoire consisted of folk spirituals, jubilee songs, hymns, and classical compositions. The university ensembles, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, performed in front of white audiences for profit,

and some community-based quartets also performed for white audiences in minstrel shows. The jubilee quartets, however, developed into gospel quartets in later years.

Gospel's Second/Transitional Period: 1930-1945

The year 1930 launched the second historical period in the development of gospel for African Americans. The demise of the Harlem Renaissance and the crash of Wall Street ushered in the Depression in 1929, and African Americans endured poverty and deprivation on a scale unprecedented since the abolition of slavery. It was inevitable that they began to look once more to their religion and music for consolation, and it was also inevitable that the music would change.

It was in the context of the Depression era that gospel music came to fruition; its major catalyst was Thomas A. Dorsey, a blues pianist known as "Georgia Tom" who wrote and accompanied performers such as Ma Rainey and Tampa Red. However, after surviving a serious illness and the death of his wife, Dorsey dedicated his musical talents to the service of God and the church (Boyer, "Thomas" 23; Heilbut 21; Levine 182).

Dorsey's gospel songs were not accepted at first because of his background and the obvious influence of the blues on his music. But Dorsey established his own publishing company, utilized persistent promotional methods aimed at church congregations, and composed songs that communicated hope to the masses in difficult times, and this eventually led to his being accepted. As Dorsey states it, the songs communicated "good news in bad times" (qtd. in Broughton 48). Not only were African Americans suffering from a lack of jobs, food, and clothing during the Depression, but

also from a lack of hope and dignity. Dorsey's gospel music directly addressed these needs.

The music was not only noted for what the lyrics communicated, but also for its lively rhythms and instrumental accompaniment. Bluesmen were sometimes hired to play in Pentecostal churches. Zora Neale Hurston, while collecting folklore for the Works Progress Administration in Florida in the 1930s, observed that

in Jacksonville there is a jazz pianist who seldom has a free night; nearly as much of his business comes from playing for Sanctified church services as for parties. Standing outside of the church, it is difficult to determine just which kind of engagement he is filling at the moment. (qtd. in Levine 180)

Because of the spirited and emotional characteristics of the music, it was immediately accepted by the Holiness churches and gained acceptance gradually with the more orthodox denominations.

Most of these early gospel songs have verse-chorus structure or strophic form. They are based on primary triads and seventh chords with the third and seventh degrees of the scale often varied to create blue notes. Although appearing frequently in written form, the gospel song is rarely performed as written. Since the songs are transmitted aurally, they are classified as "composed folk songs" and are interpreted individually by singers as well as instrumentalists.

During this period male quartets and female and mixed groups were prominent. Singers who continued to function locally for church services and other activities in their own communities tended to continue singing the folk spirituals, but as the years progressed, they began to include the gospel songs which were gaining popularity in African American church congregations. Charles A. Tindley, Lucie Campbell, Thomas A. Dorsey, Theodore Fry, Herbert W. Brewster, and other early pioneers in the field tended to compose especially well for

four-part-harmony quartet and small-group arrangements.

The gospel groups and quartets were developing during this period. They toured outside of their home communities as professionals or semi-professionals and wanted to please African American as well as white audiences. Before the turn of the century, African Americans had performed for white audiences on the minstrel stage, but in the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance and the 1930s whites patronized African Americans on an even larger scale. The market for the music and performers was at an all-time high. Therefore, expansion of the repertoire was necessary to please different audiences in such contexts as churches, cafés, movie theaters, and even night clubs.

Structurally, the quartets maintained the overlapping call-response form during the 1920s. However, with the advent of the new Pentecostal movement and the new gospel songs in the 1930s, quartet lead singers began to assume a more prominent role. This new development was not the result of any grand design; it was more the outgrowth of a lifting of prior restraints by a new religious movement in the African American church and community.

Unlike the first period of gospel music's development, in the transitional period the stylistic transformation encompassed innovative strategies, including the lifting of prior harmonic and vocal restraints, and the increased prominence of the bass voice and soloist. Soloists frequently sang an entire verse, while the remainder of the group provided support by repeating a word or phrase of the verse in harmony or harmonizing on one chord. Harmonic and melodic structures became more varied as voices formerly used to fill in chords were given greater latitude. Lead singers now improvised on the melody without adjusting rhythm and tempo to accommodate entrances of the background. Lead singers' vocal techniques also increased the use and variety of melod-

ic devices such as various melismatic ornamentations, *portamentos*, and *glissandi* (the voice gliding gradually from one tone to the next). A fifth singer was added to the quartet and more instrumental accompaniment was used. During this transformation the unified group concept was altered to one which emphasized the soloist.

Gospel's Third Period: 1946-Present

The fourth decade of the 20th century brought the country out of the Depression and into World War II. After the war ended in 1945, small but perceptible changes began to take place with regard to integration in the United States as a result of alterations in the economic and social organization of African Americans as they became increasingly urbanized. The most important of these was the increase in occupational differentiation. The proportion of African Americans in professional occupations also increased.

As a consequence of the above changes, a sizeable middle class surfaced, as evidenced in occupations, education, housing, social life, religion, dress, and other aspects of living. Although the standards of living changed for many African Americans, E. Franklin Frazier would contend in 1964 that

... the Negro community still remains the social world in which the majority of Negroes live. Although Negroes have increasingly adopted middle class standards, they still find in their own institutions, especially churches, and social clubs and other associations embodying cultural interests, the main means of self-expression. (694)

African Americans today still maintain their own institutions to serve their own needs because the fact of color has retarded their integration into American life as a whole. Still barred from many

areas of social and political life, the majority continue to turn to the church for self-expression, recognition, and leadership. In the 1940s the church remained the most powerful institution in the African American community (Frazier 694).

With regard to musical activities, African Americans were more prolific than ever. Since the late 1940s, gospel music has become big business, and this factor perhaps more than any other has influenced changes in performance. World War II ended the Depression, and with affluence came an increase in purchasing power, high volume record sales, and billboard top-seller lists. Numerous independent record companies were set up immediately following the war to serve the renewed demand for gospel "race records." The radio also served as an outlet for the promotion of gospel music. Quartets and groups (female and mixed) began to tour on a large scale. They competed with each other, and in this strong competitive atmosphere, versatility and virtuosity became even more necessary.

The concept of the soloist being an independent part of the group definitely developed at this point. Lead singers began to perform extended solo passages, while incorporating vocal embellishments, the shouting cry, and other devices. They alternated tone colors, by using falsetto, growls, vibrato, and by switching the lead between different singers. In addition, the lead singers began to add text interpolations—improvised personal statements and testimonies in the manner of gospel soloists and preachers. Quartet and group singers refer to these embellishments of the text as "working sections," in which the lead spontaneously creates melodic lines and vocal phrases over the group's harmonized repeated background of one or two chords. Sometimes the leader gives a cue for all the background to "drop out," and he or she continues indefinitely with a soft instrumental background. The lead can then "preach,"

"work the audience," or "shout the audience" to elicit response. This preaching style, which can be spirit-induced, became a standard with many gospel singers; it is used to reinforce the message and to showcase the creativity and improvisational ability of the lead singer.

In the 1950s bass singers began to play a lesser role because of the increasing use of instruments. The bass guitar tended to take the place of the vocal bass. (Most groups no longer have "true" vocal bass singers, and if they do, the vocal bass is usually doubled by the bass guitar or piano.)

Although congregational singing was still prevalent in the churches, church and community choirs began to proliferate in the 1950s with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, the development of a new African American consciousness, and subsequently a uniting of religious institutions for a common cause. Choirs also increased because of easy access to choir conventions, the circulation of more published music, and technological advances such as the radio and phonograph.

In the late 1960s gospel music crossed over to the secular charts for the first time. "Oh Happy Day," recorded in 1969 by the Edwin Hawkins' Singers, reflected the secular style of soul music and launched gospel music into a new era. It was the first gospel song to cross over to the soul charts. Since then other innovations have occurred, such as the use of full orchestras, gospel songs arranged from secular compositions, and the production of gospel-based musicals, among other things.

In the late 1980s, yet another form, "rap gospel," emerged as an outgrowth of the rap music cultural phenomenon that is presently making an impact on not only African American communities but also the nation.

In sum, changes in the African American cultural, social, and histori-

cal environment, along with economics, technological advances, and artistic and religious movements, affected the nature of gospel music.

Radio broadcasts, commercial recordings, and touring influenced the development and popularization of gospel, and the launching of race series and the acceleration of live radio broadcasts featuring African American performers further exposed quartet and group singers to an audience beyond local communities. Over the years, gospel music has evolved to encompass performance practices of several genres of music—from spirituals and hymns to blues, jazz, soul, and rap.

The change in context, repertoire, and function of performance also caused changes in the style of performance, within a communal milieu. As the historian Lawrence Levine contends,

while the message of black gospel music manifested a high degree of acculturation to a modern religious consciousness, its style and performance were being revitalized by an intensified connection with the roots of traditional Afro-American religion and the sounds and styles of the twentieth-century secular music of the black community . . . (189)

Change has not involved a simple, one-dimensional process, but a complex process of shifting emphases and reaffirmation, of allowing certain new traits to permeate the style while simultaneously reemphasizing specific traditional loyalties and characteristics. In essence, it is an emergence of the new changes and a revitalization of the old continuum.

A Case Study of a Southern City—New Orleans

New Orleans has been one of the prime centers for jazz and

rhythm and blues, and has always been famous for distinct styles for both genres. Even though gospel was overshadowed by secular music in the media, recordings, and the tourist market, the sacred tradition was always pervasive in the African American community, co-existing with the secular.

The first significant point in the development of gospel in New Orleans was the organization of a *cappella* jubilee quartets. The first documented *a cappella* quartet to be organized at a university in Louisiana was at New Orleans University (now Dillard) in 1914. During this time the groups performed spirituals and art songs in the style of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, but in later years they began to add Protestant hymns and gospel songs. One quartet at Dillard, the Frederick Hall Quartet, changed its name to Delta Rhythm Boys and continued to perform after the men left the university. They traveled widely and began to add secular songs to their repertoire ("Musical" 114-16). Southern University, first established in New Orleans in 1880, also organized a university quartet which was initially recorded in 1935.⁵

The university jubilee quartets and ensembles influenced the development of some of the independent community-based quartets, since some were started by and drew part of their membership from university singers. Others were organized in churches, by family members, and at the workplace.

Several sugar refineries existed in the rural areas surrounding New Orleans. One, the American Sugar Refinery in Arabi, was the founding site for the Four Great Wonders Quartet. In 1934, James Payne began harmonizing with friends from his neighborhood who were also fellow workers at the refinery (Abbott, *Soproco* 31). Professor J. W. Williams,⁶ an itinerant chorister who, like Payne, moved to New Orleans from rural Mississippi in the 1920s, explains:

That's how they started, harmonizing on the job. . . . They'd start work 7:30 in the morning. And they would work till 12:00. . . . Then they'd have an hour for lunch; they'd run eat a little bit, then get behind a pile of sugar and start harmonizing. (qtd. in Abbott, *Soproco* 32)

The style of these early community-based jubilee quartets encompassed a well-blended, close four-part harmony, a limited amount of solo singing, basic harmonic arrangements, and no instrumentation. They sang spirituals, jubilees, and hymns in the traditional call-response structure. Other male quartets in New Orleans that performed in this earlier jubilee style were the Osceola Five, the Second Zion Four, the Duncan Brothers, and the Humming Four (Abbott, "Humming").

While this tradition was primarily male-dominated, there were some females who dared to adopt the repertoire, four-part close-harmony voicings, and general stage manner and style of the male quartets.

Even voice classification was borrowed from the male tradition, and hence a number of outstanding female baritones and basses emerged during the thirties and forties. One of the first and most outstanding female quartets was the Southern Harps, organized in 1934 by Alberta French Johnson. Johnson, who came from a musical family—her brother was jazzman Albert "Papa" French—was able to attract a number of gifted singers to her group. . . . (Boyer, "Tracking" 10)

One of those gifted singers was Bessie Griffin, who went on to gain fame in Chicago as one of the members of the Gospel Caravans and later as a gospel soloist. The Southern Harps recorded "What A Friend We Have in Jesus" on the King label in 1947 while on a concert tour in New York. Another female quartet from that era recorded "Heaven Bound Train" in 1949. This group, the Jackson Singers, was organized in 1936 by Alma Jackson (Boyer, "Tracking" 11).

Two of the most notable male quartets to come on the new Orleans sacred music scene in the late 1930s

were the Soul Comforters and the Zion Harmonizers. The Soul Comforters (formerly the New Orleans Humming Bees) began as a "doo wop" group, harmonizing the latest popular songs on the street corners. After singing sacred music for a time, one of the original members, Henry Byrd, changed his style, left the group, and later became the legendary rhythm and blues pianist "Professor Longhair" (Abbott, *Soproco* 131).

The Zion Harmonizers, formed in New Orleans in 1939, is still very vibrant and popular under the leadership of Sherman Washington. The popularity of the group may be related to their adaptability. Over the years the Zion Harmonizers have chosen to modify their performance style according to the dictates of their audience. Such modifications include incorporating an instrument, a lead guitar, into their performance. They have also added the hard-shouting gospel style of singing, while continuing to perform selected numbers in the *a cappella* jubilee style. In 1956 the Harmonizers first performed a live radio broadcast on station WMRY for Schiro's Shoe Store. Now, they perform periodically for WYLD, where Sherman Washington works as a disc jockey for the gospel programming on Sunday mornings (Jackson, "Performing" 16).⁷

Singing contests, or "song battles," as many participants called them, were a very important component of the quartet tradition. These contests functioned primarily to promote and maintain high standards of quartet performance. Because these events provided a forum for the sharing of collective expressive behavior and aesthetics in the community, they created a sense of identity in individuals and a sense of unity in groups of people who could relate to the shared cultural values reflected in the performances. Many quartets participated in these events, including those previously mentioned.

The performance practices, musical arrangements, and popularity of the traditional gospel quartets had a major

influence on the emerging rhythm and blues and popular-styled vocal groups that began to appear after World War II. New Orleans was known as a jazz and rhythm and blues city, but this secular music was greatly influenced by gospel. Most members of the first rhythm and blues vocal groups began as gospel performers, and record producers in New Orleans incorporated the gospel sound into the secular commercial music. In 1949, Imperial Records began recording Fats Domino and became one of the three top recording companies nationally, while New Orleans became one of the country's major rhythm and blues recording centers (Maultsby, "Rhythm" 12).

Quartets organized after World War II reflected the new mixture of sacred and secular styles. The secular performers adopted not only the vocal and instrumental styles of the sacred groups, but also their arrangements, call-response structure, group makeup, and stylized movements. Because rhythm and blues was more lucrative and popular, some quartets "crossed over" or performed on "both sides of the fence." For example, when the Delta Southernaires crossed over to secular music, they called themselves the Spiders; when the Humming Four sang on secular programs, they referred to themselves as the Hawks (Abbott, "Humming").

The sacred/secular dichotomy has been a primary factor in determining the image and identity of the quartet within the African American community. Although a distinction exists between both realms, there is a degree of flexibility. Some secular music is performed by sacred quartets, and some sacred music is performed in secular contexts. First Revolution, a young gospel quartet in New Orleans, performs in both sacred and secular contexts. Their performance venues range from churches to parks, cafés, restaurants, nightclubs, and the streets. They have performed in the French Quarter at Jackson Square (park), Storyville Jazz Hall (nightclub), and on Bourbon

Street. When asked his opinion concerning performing sacred music in secular settings, Larry Bell, lead vocalist and manager of First Revolution, replied:

Well I don't have any regrets on it, because from reading the scriptures . . . the thing that sticks in my mind on this is when they had a controversy when Jesus visited Matthew at his home. The words came out that folks that are not sick don't need the doctor. So I can't work on a patient if he is already well . . . (qtd. in Joyce M. Jackson, "Performing" 82-83)⁸

In other words, the person in the streets and the nightclubs needs to hear the gospel message more than the person in the place designated for worship—the church—does.

This is not a new concept: Some gospel pioneers made this radical step at a very early stage in the history of the tradition. For instance, the Dixie Hummingbirds have their view of "playing" nightclubs. One member recalls: "We played our first night club [sic] at Number 2 Sheridan Square in New York in 1939" (Dixie 65). They believe different formats and contexts can be used to entertain as long as you "never get off the spiritual track." Other performers who made this radical move in the early years were Clara Ward and the Clara Ward Singers, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Staple Singers. Some gospel singers believe that you should sing whenever and wherever you have an audience that is receptive to you.

The sacred/secular dichotomy is also evident in the Gospel/Blues Club that opened on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter in 1990. In this club, gospel performers are featured in the early evening, and after a certain time bluesmen are showcased. Religious gospel performers claim that even in secular settings you can still bring the message of God to the people, and that it will be heard regardless of the set-

ting. They also feel that communicating their spiritual message may "cause someone to come to Christ."

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the male-dominated gospel quartet tradition began to decline, and the female groups began to emerge. Previous female quartets had performed in the

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four-part male-quartet style, while these newer groups sang three-part-harmony arrangements, accompanied by piano or organ. Female groups were organized and began traveling to help fill the increasing demand for this accompanied sacred music. In New Orleans the Johnson Sisters was one of the first accompanied female groups. This group, consisting of three sisters (Lois, Thelma, and Bernette), was organized in the middle forties (Boyer, "Tracking" 17).

Male and mixed accompanied groups were also formed during this time. In 1939 the Wilson-Watkins

Singers were formed with Frank Williams as their accompanist. In 1947 he opened the Williams School of Music, where he taught classical and gospel piano. James E. Gayle organized the Gayle Jubilee Singers in the mid-'20s, at which time they were singing only spirituals and art songs. It was not until the mid-'30s, when he met Thomas A. Dorsey and Sallie Martin, that he began to add gospel music to his group's repertoire.

In the mid-'20s Gayle organized the Gayle Jubilee Singers and established the James E. Gayle and Sons Music Store in New Orleans. For over two decades Gayle had the regional monopoly on selling published religious music, tracts, books, and Bibles from the National Baptist Publishing Board in Nashville (Boyer, "Tracking" 15-16). Since Dorsey made trips to New Orleans seeking agents to sell his pub-

lished songs, it was inevitable that the two would meet. Boyer reports that Gayle

served as host to Dorsey and Sallie Martin (b. 1896) on their frequent trips to New Orleans to demonstrate his songs and organize gospel choirs. In the thirties [Gayle] began composing gospel music and in 1940 when Sallie Martin and Kenneth Morris (b. 1917) opened their publishing company in Chicago, he entered a long time association whereby they would publish his music, and he would serve as their Louisiana agent. He supplied the emerging accompanied gospel singers and choirs with the newest gospel songs. (16)

The Gayle Jubilee Singers, however, never stopped their performance of spirituals (Boyer 16-17).

Despite the popularity of quartets, groups, and soloists, gospel choirs became prevalent in the late 1940s and early '50s. However, in New Orleans during the '30s, Jackson Acox included gospel songs in the repertoire of St. Mark's Fourth Baptist church choir, of which he was director. In addition, Professor J. W. Williams, director of the Old Zion Baptist Church choir, included gospel songs in their repertoire in the early '40s (Williams). It was not until 1948, when Williams organized the Southland Gospel Chanters, that he caused a major change in the course of the historical development of gospel music in New Orleans.

The Southland Gospel Chanters, a young-adult group, traveled widely and successfully, and featured the gospel songs of Thomas A. Dorsey and other composers of this era, including Professor Williams. After the Chanters' success with the gospel sound, most African American Protestant churches in the city followed suit by organizing a gospel choir (Williams).

In the 1960s gospel choirs began to take on a new sound. They began to use more intricate harmonies than their predecessors and often sang in contrapuntal style with independent interplay between voices. In addition to the piano, electronic organ, and percussion

instruments, a variety of other instruments were added. Horns, electric bass, and the drum set became popular, as gospel choirs moved closer to the secular music, called "soul," which had taken its initial style from gospel. The decade of the '60s also saw the entrance of gospel music into the Civil Rights Movement. Some gospel composers began to replace biblical themes with timely topical text concerning social and political issues.

By the 1970s the gospel choral sound had evolved into two categories—traditional and contemporary. This became evident, in most churches with sizeable congregations, as the need arose for more than one choir. (Smaller churches tend to adhere to older and more traditional religious and musical practices.)

In Louisiana, the late 1960s and 1970s also witnessed the formation of gospel choirs in Roman Catholic churches. New Orleans has the largest predominantly African American Catholic parish in the United States and holds the distinction of having established the first gospel choir in a parish of this composition. St. Francis de Sales' gospel choir, directed by Lois Dejean, was organized in 1968 and is still one of the most notable choirs in the city. Other Catholic churches have also organized gospel choirs, including St. Monica and St. Joseph the Worker in Marrero (across the Mississippi River from New Orleans).

In the 1980s community choirs and ensembles proliferated. The Inspirational Youth Choir, the 100-voice Gospel Soul Children (formerly directed by the late Albert Hadley), and the Ramon Miles Ensemble are the paramount exponents of contemporary gospel, often anticipating the newest direction of the genre in their performances. The 1990s have ushered in newer ensembles in the city, such as Judah, a sixteen-member group of talented singers, directed by E. Dwight Franklin.

Personalities other than performers in the gospel network are also very

important for the maintenance of the tradition. Disc jockeys, booking agents, promoters, composers, and publishers play an important role in promoting gospel groups and programs not only in the African American community, but within the larger populace as well. Most radio stations programmed by African Americans have several hours per day designated for gospel programming. On radio station WBOK, Vernon Winslow, affectionately known in the community as "Dr. Daddy-O," was the gospel music programmer for several decades in New Orleans. Everyone interested in "being in the know" about religious music and programs, "tuned in" to "Dr. Daddy-O." Prior to his retirement, he gave a complete listing of gospel programs and special church activities in the area, along with playing special requests for particular tunes (Washington).

Another confirmation of the importance of maintaining the music today is the growing prevalence of twenty-four-hour gospel stations. In New Orleans WYLD and WBOK, which are both AM stations, offer 'round-the-clock gospel programming. There has only been one FM station in the city to have this format, and it is no longer programming gospel music. KKNO offers gospel programming during the day only, and WWOZ offers it on Sundays.

There has also been a rise in gospel music publications. In New Orleans there are two monthly publications that have recently appeared in the community, the newspaper *Gospel*

Music Echo and *United Gospel Magazine*. Though brief and without citations, their articles and news items are valuable because of their descriptive accounts of events and informative interviews with performing artists and groups.

There is no doubt that African American gospel music will continue to exist as a changing expression of cultural identity. It remains one of the most genuine forms of the community's expression of values and aesthetics, and has remained the least encumbered by Euro-American influence. In her chapter on Mahalia Jackson, Hettie Jones contend that

by the forties gospel music had become an institution in black communities Gospel music was a national affair, but a national Negro affair Gospel was private, African, Negro, black. (81-82)

Despite the influence and popularity of some performers, gospel music has remained essentially African American. This is due to the fact that the music is an intricate part of gospel and thus cannot be totally separated from the African American church and subsequently from centuries of the African experience in America. Gospel music continues to speak to and for people of African descent in the vernacular as a dynamic expressive form of folk spirituality and creativity.

Notes

1. The importance of taking socio-cultural factors into consideration in musical analysis is also emphasized by the ethnomusicologist Portia K. Maultsby in her reference to gospel quartets. Maultsby states that the use of existing terms and musical analyses "cannot accurately describe style unless there is a discussion of context, function, use and intent" (Rev. of *Jubilee* 164).

2. *Praise houses* and *hush harbors* were designated by slaves as places of worship. These worship settings could, for example, have been one of the cabins in the slave quartets or under one of the large oak trees in the woods. Many slave owners did not allow their slaves to worship; however, they continued to worship in a clandestine manner, thus the term *hush harbors*.

3. "Storefront" churches were abandoned stores or warehouses where worship services were held. This practice became prevalent in the early 20th century after African Americans who had arrived in urban centers sought a place to hold worship services.

4. The term *jubilee* has various meanings, depending on context and historical period. It has been used to designate rejoicing songs of freedom, special celebrations, religious narrative songs, a body of black religious folk songs, the style that the songs are performed in, and the groups that sing these songs.

5. The main campus of Southern University was moved to Baton Rouge in 1914; however, the board continued to maintain a branch of the campus in New Orleans. There is also a branch in Shreveport. The Southern University Quartet was recorded by Bluebird Recording Company on a field trip with a mobile recording unit (Goodrich and Dixon 11, 13).

6. The respectful title *professor* or *fess* (shortened version) is given to African American musicians who have displayed a cultural competence in the performance of some form of African American music—sacred or secular. It does not, in the vernacular, designate an academic degree.

7. The New Orleans Chosen Four/Soproco Singers also broadcasted live on radio. (The New Orleans Chosen Four is the same group as the Soproco Singers: Their name was changed when they began advertising for the Soproco Soap Company, and in later years they changed the name back to the original one.) Their WWL broadcasts carried them into thirty-two states and yielded numerous invitations for concerts. According to the *Louisiana Weekly*, the group made its official debut in 1940 in a "City-Wide Singing Contest" (Abbott, *Soproco* 59).

8. Bell was referring to Matthew 9:10-13.

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