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# AFRO-AMERICAN GOSPEL MUSIC: A CRYSTALLIZATION OF THE BLACK AESTHETIC

Pearl Williams-Jones

## INTRODUCTION

If a basic theoretical concept of a black aesthetic can be drawn from the history of the black experience in America, the crystallization of this concept is embodied in Afro-American gospel music. The cultural traditions and ideals of West Africa are the ultimate source from which the basic concept of a black aesthetic definition is derived. There are many aspects of black American culture, such as folktales, speech patterns, religious beliefs and musical practices, which reveal connecting links to African roots in subtle and sometimes obvious ways. Black gospel music, however, retains the most noticeable African-derived aesthetic features of all (Washington 1973:19-35, 78-79). In concept and practice there has been some, but little significant deviation in gospel from many of the basic traits found in the traditional music of West Africa and the various phases of evolvement in the Afro-American cultural continuum. Deviation from or conformity to ancestral traditional practices is influenced by environmental factors. According to John Szwed, "Song forms and performances are themselves models of social behavior that reflect strategies of adaptation to human and natural environments." Black gospel music, then, reflects changes and retentions of West African musical style and context that can only be "understood within a synthesis of social and cultural change" (Szwed 1970:220).

The consistent and persistent retention in gospel music performance and practice of a clearly defined black identity growing out of the black experience in America is indicative of the indomitability of the African ethos. The process of acculturation and syncretism has done much to alter the social fabric of black life in America. In spite of this fact, cultural ties of the ancestral lineage have been preserved in various forms within the enclave of the black gospel church and its music—black gospel. Black gospel music is one of the new seminal genres of contemporary black culture which continually maintains its self-identity while it nourishes and enriches the mainstream of the world's cultural sources.

## THE FOUNDATION FOR A BLACK AESTHETIC DEFINITION

The concept of a black aesthetic definition has been increasingly debated in recent years among black intellectuals. Poets, writers, critics, and philosophers appear aware of the importance and desirability of formulating a comprehensive statement concerning the essential elements of the black aesthetic in black arts.

One essential purpose of the definition is the establishment in American cultural thought of the existence and profound significance of distinct and unique African-American art forms. The proper assessment of the black art forms, gospel music included, must emerge from aesthetic criteria which have been evolved through black thought and tradition. It must be realized, according to McPherson, *et al.* that,

... white aesthetic terminology, for all its avowed lack of social involvement, is rooted in racism of white society and therefore inappropriate for judging black expression (1971:264).

Stephen Henderson continues,

... the recognition of Blackness in poetry is a value judgment which on certain levels and in certain instances, notably in matters of meaning that go beyond questions of structure and theme, must rest upon one's immersion in the totality of the Black experience (1973:65).

In order to establish a black aesthetic definition as applied to black art forms, the implications of the black gospel church and the music associated with it should be brought into focus.

## THE BLACK GOSPEL CHURCH

If it is true, as it has been commonly claimed, that the church is a conservative institution, then we can assume that it is likely that many of those cultural characteristics which are typical of blacks would be preserved in their truest form in the black church and hence, in black religious music. This assumption appears valid if consideration is given to the ethnic-styled mode of worship and the style and function of music in this setting. Many of the black churches in urban as well as rural communities maintain worship services which are essentially unchanged from those of the slave's praise houses and the early black churches of the freed men. There are several accounts of these which have been historically documented. *Readings in Black American Music* (Southern, ed. 1971:62, 68, 70, 112, 113, 146, 147) give an indication of the close relationship of early black church worship with some contemporary carry-over. Hale Smith, eminent black composer and an articulate spokesman on black music has stated:

On the North American continent the Black musical definition is most clear in that music of the Black man who is closest to the soil or in the lower cultural or economic levels . . . you will find blues singers out of Mississippi or singers in the various store-front churches which come as close as anything can to the essence of the black experience through music (de Lerma 1970:69).

The singers "in the various store-front churches" referred to by Smith are performers of gospel, as well as other forms of black religious music.

Many of the practices which we commonly associate with the gospel church, such as dance, the emotional and musical delivery style of sermons, and the spontaneous verbal and non-verbal responses by preachers and congregations, have been appropriated and often emasculated by secular performers who seek to recreate what is essentially a genuine spiritual element in an authentic gospel performance. Ben Sidran states:

Both the association of music with magic in African cultures and the importance of music to the development of black Christianity in America have been cited as proof of connection between black music and black spirituality (1971:xvii).

While this spirituality may be one of the most emotionally potent forces in the arsenal of the black aesthetic, it has not necessarily remained the exclusive property of the black church. In the "world" it is known colloquially as "soul."

Significantly, black religious music more than secular music was one of the most potent moral weapons in the human rights struggle of the 1960s. A whole generation of young blacks were introduced to the power of gospel songs and spirituals to "... galvanize a group of individuals on an emotional, non-verbal level of experience" (Sidran 1971:xiv), which provided a bond of cohesiveness and strength to the movement. At the same time, generations of older blacks were reminded of the similar role which the spirituals had played in the course of black history from the period of slavery.

Because black gospel music is inadequately recorded and has had limited access to radio, television and the publication media (source and books), some blacks and many white Americans are totally unaware of the existence of this music. The black spirituals of slavery were similarly unknown outside of the southern slave community until the Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced the songs during their tours of the 1870s. Among musicologists and ethnologists there is a beginning awareness of black gospel music, and as a result, increasing numbers of articles and scholarly studies on the subject have begun to appear. Much of the difficulty in developing a body of materials about gospel music is the paucity of researched primary data on an idiom which exists principally and most authentically in an oral tradition. Since gospel music is transmitted primarily through oral tradition it is necessary to define this genre in the context of the black gospel church.

## BLACK GOSPEL MUSIC

Black gospel music, a synthesis of West African and Afro-American music, dance, poetry and drama, is a body of urban contemporary black religious music of rural folk origins which is a celebration of the Christian experience of salvation and hope. It is at the same time a declaration of black selfhood which is expressed through the very personal medium of music. Having been for most of its fifty years of existence an underground or counterculture body of music, gospel is among the least known or understood of the many black cultural expressions today.

While the influences of Western religious concepts and music upon black religious music are indisputable and have been factually documented through musicological and historical analysis, the overriding dominance of the Africanization of these Western influences is equally indisputable (Washington, 1973). "The very importance of song in black worship is an Africanism hard to overestimate" (Roberts:1972:174). Without negation of the presence of European-derived harmonies, forms, and instances of actual usage of white hymn tunes in gospel music, the principle emphasis is upon the utilization of these elements in an unusual way to create new forms. Unlike the art song arrangements of black spirituals, or the movement in "third stream" jazz techniques, which actively and deliberately incorporated European classical musical concepts and practices, black gospel music has not consciously sought the assimilation of European religious music practices or materials into its genre. If this has occurred, the materials have been improvisationally re-created to conform to black aesthetic requirements of performance. Donald Byrd, jazz artist, lecturer and music educator was quoted in the *Washington Post* as having stated:

Gospel music is one of the few black art forms that hasn't evolved into something else. There hasn't been any evolution in it like there has been in jazz, or folk, with the changing of the beat, the basic construction, and even harmonic techniques. It's one of the pure strains in the black heritage that hasn't changed from its birth in Africa, except for the first adaptation to the white man's church (Smith 1969: magazine section).

Gospel has distilled the aesthetic essence of the black arts into a unified whole. It is a colorful kaleidoscope of black oratory, poetry, drama and dance. One has only to experience a gospel "happening" in its cultural setting to hear black poetry in the colorful oratory of the black gospel preacher, or to see the drama of an emotion-packed performance of a black gospel choir interacting with its gospel audience, and the resulting shout of the holy dance. It is indeed a culmination of the black aesthetic experience.

As a relatively new manifestation of a long historical tradition of religious music, black gospel music has drawn upon such source music as spirituals, ring shouts, jubilees, chants, and camp meeting songs which

themselves had numerous retentions of Africanisms. Bruno Nettl (1965:180) takes the position that African features are retained and in evidence in the music most closely associated with religion or ritual. He and other scholars (Bastide 1971) maintain that while music of the U.S. blacks exhibits the least Africanisms of those areas in the Americas and the islands where there were African slaves,

U.S. Negroes retained much of the structure of the African heritage, and while their folk music does not sound African in the sense that the music of Haiti and Bahia does, it contains some African stylistic features (Nettl 1965:180).

Nettl's basic concept is one which adheres to the philosophy that, "only in the style of performance can we detect definitely African roots" (1965:180). Evidence of this concept is recognized in a comparative analysis of the stylistic performances of two well-known gospel singers: James Cleveland, Afro-American gospel singer and George Beverly Shea, Anglo-American gospel singer.

The vocal timbre, phrasing, rhythmic emphasis, and dramatic projection of the text in such a time-honored white gospel hymn as, "Peace Be Still" reflects the contrasting conceptual aesthetic form which each performance emanates. James Standifer (1972:100) notes that "the black performer makes a rendition strikingly 'black' by bringing himself and the black experience to that rendition." In "quasi-sermon" fashion, Cleveland utilizes the vast arsenal of vocal devices which are at his disposal through cultural tradition: moans, grunts, wails, shouts, gliding pitches, and song speech. Shea, on the other hand, has a style of delivery which stresses clear enunciation of words, clean, clear phrasing, and incorporates few glides or slides to and from pitches. In general, his delivery is a typical "straight" or literal representation of the song text and music. Stylistic comparisons of performance practices can also "... reveal much about the acculturation and assimilation process constantly working in reciprocity with blacks and whites in America" (Standifer 1972:100). The African and Afro-American concept of the "beautiful" singing voice does not entirely concur with Western concepts. Harold Courlander has noted,

In most traditional singing there is no apparent striving for the "smooth" and "sweet" qualities that are so highly regarded in Western tradition. Some outstanding blues, gospel, and jazz singers have voices that may be described as foggy, hoarse, rough, or sandy. Not only is this kind of voice not derogated, it often seems to be valued. Sermons preached in this type of voice appear to create a special emotional tension. Examination of African singing tradition indicates that there, too, "sweetness" of voice is not a primary objective, and that other considerations are regarded as more relevant to good singing (1963:23).

Some facets of West African musical practice are seemingly more dominant in the gospel idiom than in the primary black religious forms such

as the spirituals. The role and significance of accompaniment in gospel music is a case in point. Traditional spirituals were unaccompanied and limited in rhythmic accompaniment to swaying, footpatting, and handclapping. Instruments were generally unavailable or forbidden. This tradition of non-instrumental accompaniment (whether by choice, custom or circumstance singularly or combined) of the spirituals was continued long after slavery and well into the period during which blacks established their own churches. John W. Work stated that:

The folk church has forbidden instruments to be used in the service in the past apparently because the instruments available in the community, the piano, the guitar, harmonica, and the banjo were too closely identified with secular life or "the world," as opposed to the sacred church (1949:137).

Instrumental as well as rhythmic accompaniment in gospel is an integral part of the performance just as in African music.

What are some of the specific aesthetic requirements of black music which have necessitated the retention of certain Africanisms in the black religious musical continuum? The following list of distinctly African related traits are present to a large extent in Afro-American gospel performances, techniques, and form:

1. The use of antiphonal response.
2. Varying vocal tone.
3. Endless variation on the part of the lead singer.
4. Use of falsetto.
5. Religious dancing or "shouting."
6. Percussive-style playing techniques.
7. Handclapping and footpatting.
8. Emphasis on dynamic rhythms.
9. A dramatic concept of the music.
10. Repetition.
11. Improvisation.
12. Communal participation.
13. Immediacy of communication.
14. Oral transmission of the idiom.
15. Functionalism of the music.

It might appear that the retention of so many Africanisms would make gospel music more African than Afro-American. However, it is in the process of syncretism or synthesis that aspects of some or all of the clearly discernible Africanisms have become assimilated into the Afro-American style. An example in point is the alteration of the rhythmic element in Afro-American music.

The relationship of the rhythmic element in African and Afro-American music is somewhat obvious; however, the special quality known as "swing" in

black music in general as well as gospel, is peculiarly an adaptation of the African rhythmic fundamental. "Swing" is a term that has never been satisfactorily defined, but it is a tangible quality in rhythmic emphasis which distinguishes the complex metronomic polyrhythms of African drumming from the swinging rhythms of black American music. In his book, *Where's the Melody?*, Martin Williams says of "swing":

It is a quality empirically present or not present in a performance, and the particular rhythmic momentum of "swing" can be felt and heard (1961:10).

In black gospel, the special use of rhythms which are distinctly gospel, and which swing, were derived out of the holiness shout music of the early 1900s revival movements. Courlander in commenting upon the rhythms of the black church noted that:

It is commonplace that Negro church music and secular music not only "swing" but also have much more sophisticated elements of off-beats, retarded beats, and anticipated beats than does Euro-American folk music in general. . . . As remote as U.S. Negro rhythm is from the African today, it is certainly closer to it in rhythmic concepts than to either English or French folk tradition (1963:29).

Euro-American traits in Afro-American gospel music are evidenced primarily in form, employment of certain characteristic scales, European harmony, and the surge singing technique which had origins in the New England psalmody practice of "lining-out." The concept of individual authorship of a composer is also primarily European, and the creation of gospel songs by individual composers was begun by Thomas A. Dorsey and continued by an early generation of gospel composers who followed his example, notably: Lillian Bowles, Lucie Campbell, Theodore Frye, Roberta Martin, Kenneth Morris and others. The form which these early writers used most often was the traditional protestant hymn type of verse and chorus. Some of the well-known examples are: "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" by Dorsey, "Just to Behold His Face" by Lucie Campbell, "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" by Kenneth Morris. Form, however, was merely the framework around which improvisation could take place. Gospel songs are composed songs but within the clearly discernible gospel performance tradition which is often more reflective of general folk stylistic traits than distinct compositional techniques of the individual composer. In this regard, gospel music may be considered "composed folk song" which is transmitted primarily through oral performance traditions in much the same fashion as folklore. The musical score of any gospel song gives faint clue to the vocal or instrumental improvisation which is assumed by the composer. There existed a similar tradition of improvisation in European music in the seventeenth century when the figured bass and the da capo aria styles were in vogue.

Gospel music utilizes the diatonic and pentatonic scales for the most part which, according to Chase, is not incompatible with some African tonal systems. "The diatonic scale is common to both systems and forms, indeed, the



strongest link between them as well as the mark that distinguishes them from all other systems" (1955:75). The rock/blues musician, Al Wilson, has suggested, according to Roberts that

... both the blues and soul music use basically five-note scales, but different ones... C, D, E, G, A, C, to gospel music and soul, and C, E-flat, G, A, B-flat, C, to the blues. ... If Wilson were right, it would certainly help to explain why the blues element in much soul music, though there, is far less obvious than gospel music (1972:190).

Harmony in gospel music is based upon the European tradition coupled with blues tonality which results from the use of certain blue notes with primary and secondary chord changes. This combination, as we have seen in other forms of black music, gives the music its distinct harmonic sound.

There is strong evidence to support the belief that black gospel singing style has been influenced by the practices of "lining out" which occurred in New England psalm singing during the seventeenth century. It is a practice which was carried on in early black churches and is still practiced in a large number of Baptist and Methodist churches today. Chase states that this practice

... opened the door of the introduction of the florid style... Negro singing in America developed as the result of the blending of several cultural traditions is certain; and it seems equally certain that one of these traditions was the folk style of early New England psalmody and hymnody, carried southward in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Chase 1955:239).

This performance style when combined with the special vocal timbres and sonorities of the black sound aesthetic produces the unique black gospel singing style which has been so widely copied or carried over by the black soul singers, many of whom were former gospel singers. This leads us into a discussion of the art of gospel singing and performance practices.

Gospel singing style is in a large measure the essence of gospel. It is a performers art and a method of delivering lyrics which is as demanding in vocal skills and technique as any feat in Western performance practice. Learning or acquiring the art takes time, practice, and dedication. The performing process is so intuitive as to be almost unteachable. The greatest gospel artists are usually those who were born nearest the source of the tradition. There are high aesthetic standards which are evident in the performances of many of the best known gospel singers, but these standards can also be observed in many obscure and unknown gospel churches throughout the U.S. where gospel talent often flourishes in abundance unrecognized by all except the knowledgeable few. Emerging from some such beginnings to achieve honor and recognition among their peers and the gospel cognoscenti has been the late Mahalia Jackson, the late Clara Ward, James Cleveland, Alex Bradford and others. In addition there are the innumerable known and

unknown choirs, congregations, quartets, and groups which proliferate throughout the country. What is the model for achieving the gospel singing ideal?

There are two basic sources from which gospel singing has derived its aesthetic ideals: the free-style collective improvisations of the black church congregation and the rhetorical solo style of the black gospel preacher. In seeking to communicate the gospel message, there is little difference between the gospel singer and the gospel preacher in the approach to his subject. The same techniques are used by the preacher and the singer—the singer perhaps being considered the lyrical extension of the rhythmically rhetorical style of the preacher. Inherent in this also is the concept of black rhetoric, folk expressions, bodily movement, charismatic energy, cadence, tonal range and timbre. Aretha Franklin, a consummate vocal artist in the gospel tradition, has credited her father, a noted black gospel preacher, with having had the greatest influence on her in his singing style and fusion of rhythm with words and preaching. She said: “I learned vocally from him. He gave me a sense of timing in music” (Garland 1969:198). The gospel preacher does not act alone. The total gospel experience is one in which congregation and preacher interact in an African related call and response pattern. For example,

(Call) What’s the matter with Jesus?

(Response) He’s alright!

(Call) I say, what’s the matter with Jesus?

(Response) He’s alright!

(Call) He’s bread when I’m hungry,

(Response) He’s alright!

(Call) Water when I’m thirsty!

(Response) He’s alright!

This typical up-tempo gospel shout song leads inevitably into a series of chants and the holy dance.

Chant I. “Well, Well, Well”

Chant II. “Ho-ly Gho- -st”

This gospel experience is almost ritualistic in its sustained drama and spiritual intensity. People are possessed and overcome in this state of high religious ecstasy.

These dual influences reflect the general aesthetic preference for an intensity which use of the chest voice or open tones can produce. It enables gospel singers to create innumerable variations of vocal color from the strident quality of traditional hollers and laments to tonal utterances and nuances in vocal contour which may be meaningful only to those who are sensitive enough to cultural practices to understand such subtleties. Singing styles are

highly prized for the individuality which the gospel singer can bring to the music. Originality is greatly esteemed. Some of the important gospel stylists, such as Shirley Ceasar, and James Cleveland, are noted for the quasi-preaching approach to a gospel song. There is the country gospel flavor of the Staple Singers; the rock-gospel of Andrae Crouch and Edwin Hawkins; the surge singers such as Robert Anderson and J. Robert Bradley. There are the balladeers such as the Reverend Charles Watkins and Archie Dennis; and the holiness shouters such as Isaac Douglass, Myrna Summers, Madame Ernestine Washington, Mattie Moss Clark and the many quartet leaders. The soloist in the gospel idiom has been as important in the historical development of the gospel music style as the solo blues artist in the development of blues concept and form. In both the blues and gospel, the projection of the individuality of the performer, his feelings, beliefs, and desires become known. The solo medium is very personal. LeRoi Jones thoroughly explores the socio-cultural implications of solo forms through his analysis of blues and blues structure. He said:

The whole concept of the solo, of a man singing and playing by himself, was relatively unknown in West African music (Jones 1963:66).

The solo concept is more an acculturated pattern which the black artist adapted to his own needs. As stated earlier, the gospel singer may be considered the lyrical extension of the gospel preacher. In the early days individual street singers carried on a gospel singing tradition that originated in rural churches. The soloist was usually the preacher himself or one whose voice was exceptionally suited to song leading and skillful improvisation. The gospel soloist is virtually a stylized representation of the preacher or congregational song leader.

An essential element in gospel singing technique is a breathiness in tone production which adds a certain emotional intensity to the performance. Breathing between words and short phrases is not considered improper to the idiom. The audible breath intake and expulsion of air acts as a rhythmic factor and is an essential part of black timing and rhythmic pacing. This is heard to particular advantage in black gospel sermons and has a seeming direct connection to the practice of rhythmic timing in work songs. It is a distinctive ethnic phenomenon firmly rooted in tradition. The melismatic embellishments of gospel singing can achieve dizzying heights of virtuosity among the most skilled gospel singers. Two of the most noted exponents of this style are Marion Williams, former lead singer with the all female Clara Ward Singers, and Dolores Barrett Campbell, formerly of the Roberta Martin Singers. Each of these artists has a vocal instrument of beauty (by conventional Western criteria) with exceptional range and considerable vocal agility comparable to the coloratura. And like the coloraturas, Miss Williams and Miss Barrett

incorporate a barrage of pyrotechnics into a gospel song which lifts the simplest one to aria status in mere moments.

Black speech is a significant aspect of the gospel performance idiom, and as such it is often equated with black poetry. In the introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry* by Stephen Henderson, the author defines black speech as follows:

By Black speech I mean the speech of the majority of Black people in this country, and I do not exclude the speech of so-called educated people. By Black speech, I also imply a sensitivity to an understanding of the entire range of Black spoken language in America. This includes the techniques and timbres of the sermon and other forms of oratory (1973:31).

There are several forms of black speech which Henderson refers to as "Black linguistic elegance." One such category is called, "worrying the line,"

... the folk expression for the device of altering pitch of a note in a given passage or for other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the Black tradition (Henderson 1973:41).

As a solo technique, worrying the line is most often encountered in the gospel selections which are in slow tempo. This allows the maximum opportunity for the inventiveness of the soloist in improvisation and building an emotional climax. Aretha Franklin's early gospel recording of the hymn, "We'll Never Grow Old" is a classic example of worrying the line with the added device of word repetition to build dramatic impact:

There is a land where we'll never, never,  
n - e - v - e - r grow old. . . .

Interaction between the congregation and the gospel performer is a tradition which has been observed in a similar pattern among Africans by Herskovits (1958:152). Audience involvement and participation is vitally important in the total gospel experience. Interjections and responses to singers such as, "go 'head," "that's alright," "yes, suh," and "sho' nuf" are common practices which act as an emotional catalyst to spur the singers on. Among the Africans, Roberts (1972:176) noted that during the narration of traditional tales by the griots it was considered impolite to listen "dumbly" without response in some appropriate comment. This response trait is clearly traceable in the accounts of black sacred and secular situations. One is as likely to encounter interaction between performer and audience at Harlem's Apollo theatre as in the gospel church. Passive audience attitudes are Western European aesthetic norms.

The charismatic appeal of the gospel singer's performance style has been effective in dramatizing the song lyrics as well as serving as a gauge of his intense emotional involvement, often called "gettin' happy" or "feeling' the spirit." The greatest gospel performers utilize movement, tonal contours, and

verbal expressiveness in a manner of total consummation. Ben Sidran makes the following description:

The ability to perform music at the peak of emotional involvement, to be able to maintain the pitch of this involvement, and continue the process of spontaneous composition separates black entertainment from almost all of Western tradition. This stage presence, which accounts for the impact of the black personality on the entertainment industry in general and the music industry specifically, is reinforced in black churches today (1971:47).

The dance which is an essential part of African religious ritual was carried over into the religious worship practices of the slaves where it was known as "ring shouts." Several accounts of these were published in magazines around the 1860s, the most famous of these being found in the *Nation* of May 30, 1867. There are descriptive parallels which also occurred in the camp meetings of the white revivalists of the 1890s. However, the shout, or the holy dance may be an instance in the mutual accommodation of similar cultural patterns of African and American origins.

Finally, in the broad spectrum of Afro-American arts which retain roots of the African heritage, black gospel music has the unique position of close proximity to purely African related origins. It is that which is instantly heard and felt in the presence of the gospel sight-and-sound experience. Furthermore, it is to be desired and anticipated that gospel music will not abandon its significant and singular role as the dominant force in the preservation of black cultural identity. Because it is a profound statement of black culture, it is hoped that the acceptability, respectability and universal receptivity to gospel music will not eventually bring a "kiss of death" and route to the dilution of this art form. It is imperative that black gospel maintain its strong self-identity and continue as the positively crystallizing element in the emerging black aesthetic.

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