

A Thin Line Between Saturday Night and Sunday Morning: The Secularization of Sacred Song in the African American Religious Culture

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ABSTRACT

As contemporary Gospel artists continue to encourage and inspire their listeners, have they compromised the voice and the integrity of the gospel music industry by crossing over into the mainstream? Gospel music has had a type of “cross-over” appeal from its inception. The themes that are found in the popular music of today echo the sentiments of Gospel music in many ways. Songs of hope and freedom (deliverance) have always been very popular especially in Black popular culture. Regardless of the genre, Black music has embodied a power in which its listeners draw from a shared sense of fate and determination to just make it through another work day or week. The message has always been the same; however, the concern lies within the delivery of the message for many traditionalists of the Gospel music genre.

Introduction

“Gospel music”. The phrase alone has a conviction about it. It carries with it the images of Sunday mornings, Grandmothers, big hats and fancy clothes, hand-clapping, tambourines, shouting, worship, and the African American religious community as a whole. The message it conveys has always been one of hope, inspiration, salvation, and assurance. For many African Americans, the basis of their survival in this country has been rooted and grounded in the African American religious tradition of prayer, preaching, and music.

From Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Mahalia Jackson, and Lucy Campbell, to Kirk Franklin, Karen Clark-Sheard, and Donald Lawrence, Gospel music has never lost its content although the packaging of the product has drastically changed in some circles. In its elemental stages, Gospel music evolved from the simple harmonies of *a-capella* Spirituals sung in the midst of the campfire meetings, to the traditional, yet complex gospel hymnody of the Black Church. Over the span of several decades, despite its sacred text and religious impact, Gospel music can no longer be relegated to the “Church house” experience. After its seemingly incessant incubation, Gospel has been born into the secular scene with as much religious fervor as it has always had in appealing to more than the parishioners of the Black Church. With its infectious riffs, rhythmic and catchy lyrics, and familiar melodies and harmonies, Gospel music has claimed a seat at the table of African American popular music right next to Rhythm and Blues, and Hip-Hop.

Many of the legends of the industry along with much of the African American clergy feel that the purpose of the genre has been lost as it appeals to the emotion and the carnality of man. For example, the success of Kirk Franklin’s very urban sounding music made many “traditionalist” very uncomfortable as well as the overwhelming success of gospel rap. Much of the appeal is rooted in the fact that the majority of those who are drawn to this contemporary gospel sound because of the rhythmic charm and harmonic finesse, may not always recognize the genre’s religious base. Contemporary artists have assisted tremendously in drawing a fine line between the sacred sounds of Gospel music and the secular sounds of African American Rhythm and Blues/Hip Hop. While it is true that Gospel music today appeals to a very wide audience because of its cross-over appeal,

many of the hits within the genre can be heard both in the dance club on Saturday night as well as in the sanctuary on Sunday morning.

What's Blues Got To Do With It?

It would be almost impossible to talk about the secularization of Gospel music without mentioning its roots in Blues. Although many believe that Gospel music comes from a completely sacred cosmos, one would be remiss not to recognize the very significant influence the Blues had and still does have over this heavily respected genre of music. Blues music was rooted in the totality of the Black experience in the United States of America and the harsh reality of being Black in a racist society which was implied. Just as the spiritual sang about a life to come, Blues sang about life as it was for African Americans. Bluesmen sang of themselves, of their personal problems, and of their experiences. They sang songs that told stories which ranged from the aftermath of nature's disasters to the boxcars of their favorite train. They sang of anything within their perceptions or those of their listeners. Most of all they sang of love and/or sex. Some songs were mournful laments, others were lively dance tunes that set feel to stomping as they seemed to go on forever.¹ Coming to life in the midst of the Civil War era, very much like the Spiritual, the primitive form of the Blues as the fraternal twin of the Spiritual was a song laced in the sorrows and woes of the daily life of the slave. A major difference between the two primitive genres of Black music was that the Spirituals sang about a life to come along with the dreams and aspirations of someday being free, while the Blues sang about life as it was, while maintaining the ability to call on "de Lawd" for a source of strength and guidance even if the situations they sang about were not spiritual.

However, the two genres have a very strong commonality that will always liken them one to another. The composition of Blues song as well as the early spiritual called for a level of spontaneity that has long been a performance practice of the African American community.

The dividing line between the Blues and some kinds of Spirituals could not always be sharply drawn. Blues singers, like the singers of the Spirituals, often drew upon songs that belonged to the community repertory, borrowing from this one and that one, and refashioning the verse into a new song even as they were singing. Many Spirituals conveyed to listeners the same feeling of rootless-ness and misery, as did the Blues. The Spiritual was religious, rather than worldly and tended to be more generalized in its expression than specific, more figurative in its language than direct, and more expressive of group feelings than individual ones. Despite these differences it was nevertheless often difficult to distinguish between the two kinds of songs. Some songs had such vague implications that scholars today classify them as “Blues-Spirituals.”² In many instances, the trade off between the two genres has been as simple, yet as complex as examining the spiritual as a type of sacred Blues, while concurrently examining the Blues as sort of a secular spiritual.

In a thorough analysis of African Religion – that is, the way Africans experience religion - it becomes evident as to why and how the early Negro Spiritual and the more primitive form of Blues could easily overlap and intertwine. In traditional African culture, there was no formal distinction between the sacred and the profane realms of life, or between the material and the spiritual; thus there was in traditional African no word for “religion” because the Africans’ religion permeated and was the basis for all aspects

of life, including education, politics, harvesting, hunting, homemaking, and community welfare. Since religion permeated the everyday life of African peoples, the great number of religious beliefs that existed were not systematized into dogmas, but appeared as ideas and practices that governed everyday life in the various communities.³ Ultimately, the union of the two genres is embodied in what Paul C. Harrison calls “the spirit of Black consciousness.”⁴ This “spirit” is religious in every aspect. It is un-compartmentalized and all pervasive. This is why Blues singers, in their secular spirituality, sang “Lawdy Lawd” and called on “God” as they sang about the vagaries and vicissitudes, commonalities and potentials of life. For the Blues musician in performance, God was but a metaphor – a symbol of the generosity, sustenance, abundance, privations, insufficiencies, caprice, and authority of nature. Thus completing the cycle of cultural creativity, the musical ritual stimulated African and African American cultural memory and kept listeners in close touch with the sources and forces of Black musical prowess. The music that resulted from this was also a metaphor, a symbol of the African and African American ritual that made possible its creation. In this symbolic field resides the enchantment and mystery of the circle that signifies rebirth, the renewal cycle. In the cultural memory of African Americans, life is cyclic, as is time, as is their language and their music. All of these elements are symbolized in the circle as they contradict linear progression – a European ideology.⁵ For clarity, one must understand that music is indeed a specific language. It is not purely a set of grammatical conventions, but to a great extent it produces the understanding, values, attitudes, behavior, mores, and cosmos of a culture. To bring the psychology of life, time, language, and music as being cyclic into focus, it must be understood that in most West African languages, time was not

conceived as being linear. This is the direct antithesis of the European conception of time being on a continuum. Life on earth to West African societies was static with the sun coming up and going down. Nothing “moved.” Thus, using language as a vehicle, little if any distinction was made in the formation of verb tenses in much of West Africa. Therefore, the tendency of African people (including present-day African Americans) to ignore tense conjugations is not the inability to speak “proper” English, but a mere reflection of African world view.⁶ Hence, the insistence or ideology that all persons accept European norms and cosmologies as their operant psyches in actuality denies their own cultural heritage. Therefore, music as a language is not just a “what”, but it is equally a “how”, and how music is performed in the African American culture is often times more important than what music is performed. In fact, music is a product of culture and community and it reflects the ideals and priorities of that culture and society.

A Charge to Keep, I Have a God to Glorify: The Raising of a Hymn

Once emancipation had taken place circa 1865, African American people were supposedly free to move as they pleased. However, as they migrated out of the South, to more Northern territories, many of them stayed within their own social communities. During this time, segregation was a standard, however, many social circles served as places of refuge. As a result, there was a rapid rise in the growth and establishment of more Black Churches very much like the ones established in the South prior to emancipation. The Black Church stands tall in the center of the Black experience in the United States. It was the first institution to be controlled solely by Blacks, and it has remained their most powerful institution up to the present time. From the beginning, the

Church was more than a religious community: the Church set up infant schools and Sunday schools to care for its children and educate the former slaves; it sponsored benevolent and moral-reform societies; it organized literary and debating societies and library rooms; and it promoted recreational programs for its members.⁷ In short, the Church undertook the responsibility for providing Black communities with all the opportunities and activities denied them by a racist populace in the North and a slaveholding populace in the South. In the area of music, the Church played the particularly important role of patron. It sponsored singing schools for children and adults and offered showcases for the display of talent within the Black community through its promotion of concerts and artist recitals. It fostered the development of talent among the young, even to the extent of raising money for necessary musical study. Perhaps, most important of all, it provided a place where Black folk could experiment with composing all kinds of religious music, from the spiritual to formal anthems and similarly set pieces.⁸

The musical heritage of African American people has always emphasized group and personal expression that historically characterized several genres of music within the culture, which is native to Africa. In Africa, the art of expression in music was displayed often times through improvisation on the musical melody as well as the vocal melody. There were times when singers and musicians alike would make up a song as they performed. This act of improvisation has been an integral part of the African American culture in almost every genre of music from the work songs and field hollers of despondent slaves to hymns and anthems of well-educated gospel artists of today.

Although many well-known hymns are Euro-American in origin, the style in which many of these same hymns are delivered comes entirely from the African tradition of improvisation and collective spontaneity. The influence of Euro-American hymns in the worship services of the African American community increased dramatically as the Black Church as an institution continued to flourish, as well as with the increase of more literate African Americans around the turn of the twentieth century. These factors of course were the major aspects in the borrowing of Euro-American elements into their musical practices. Therefore, African Americans borrowed the elements they saw as useful solely for their purpose. As the twentieth century dawned, the ever-increasing literacy of the former slaves began to manifest itself, not only in music literacy, but in many other aspects of daily life. Clear evidence, religiously, was the Euro-American hymn, which became part and parcel of Black Hymnody. The metered music tradition did not require a high level of literacy; now, with literacy, the use of hymns was possible without the aid of a song leader who would set the tune of the song by singing the words every two lines.⁹

It was in this particular time frame, that the Black religious community began to take the Euro-American hymn and infuse various musical elements common to the culture as well as embellished meters and form. This improvisation was often times augmented by either piano or organ, shortly after the dawning of the twentieth century. This music was often times performed with both piano and organ accompaniment. Once African Americans became familiar with the Euro-American hymns, and gave to them the musical overlay common to the Spiritual and the Black metered music tradition, the hymns were forever changed. This fact was obvious when the original hymn tune was

sung “straight” or precisely as the musical notation demanded and then was compared with a rendition by any random body of Black worshippers who had not previously met. The lyric texts were identical, but the performance, musically was of another kind altogether. It was at this juncture of performance that the oral tradition introduced itself again. The “standard,” or well-known, Euro-American hymns required no special instruction for the Black rendition. The Black religious community added various embellishments and musical ornamentation, which gave the impression that African Americans instinctively “knew” how to sing these hymn songs. This mode of singing was common to the Black religious experience and was passed from one generation to another via an oral tradition in Black sacred music.¹⁰ During the period linking the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the foundations were laid for a distinctive African American musical genre. The African American and the Euro-American religious traditions were blended musically in such a way as to produce this new genre. This was music predominately African in tone, developed by slaves on plantations, passed on orally to free Blacks living in urban communities. Important to note is that the character of the music changed little if any as Black Americans migrated from nineteenth century slavery to twentieth century freedom. It was during this time that the most prolific changes took place in the life of the Black community as a whole.

Over the course of the twentieth century, as African Americans worked to build new communities and as they moved about the country seeking economic and educational opportunities, they produced a rich variety of musical styles that reflected the range of experiences they encountered. In jazz compositions, Blues songs, classically arranged Spirituals, gospel anthems, and many other forms of musical expression,

musicians gave voice to the community aspirations and invoked the extremes of feelings and experiences that were part of modern Black life.¹¹ The presence of Black Americans in urban centers clearly changed the configuration of Black Church life and style. Larger congregations were common in these urban areas during the beginning years of the “visible” institution due to the concentration of Blacks in these urban areas. This period of population growth for Black Americans yielded the urban Church environment for not only Blacks but whites as well. The increased number of sizable and impressive Church buildings within urban centers was patterned after the observable religious life of the dominant society. Physically, Black Churches became more auditorium and sanctuary oriented. Thus in sharp contrast to the simple needs of the once familiar rural-style worship that, at best, was intermittent, the Church life of Blacks in the cities became an every-week affair. In the rural areas, one-Sunday and two-Sunday a month services were all that were possible with limited transportation and leadership and therefore very common. It was the influence of these larger Church buildings that encouraged and often times promoted the introduction of the piano and the organ as was mentioned earlier. The advent of the hymnbook was at hand, followed closely with choirs and directors.

During this time, not everyone was literate, therefore, the introduction of the hymnbook into the African American worship service was somewhat difficult and required gradual adjustments. Choirs would often lead hymns in the services until the lyrics became familiar to the congregation to be used for “congregational” singing. It was during this stage of Black Church development that the Euro-American hymns came more into broad use. As long as a vast majority of Blacks remained illiterate, the hymnbook itself did not have much chance for survival in the Black Churches.

However, the use of instruments and increased literacy made a profound social statement among Blacks, indicating the degree of urbanization and physical development in the Black Church enterprise.¹² Although these developments were new and exciting for many African American parishioners, the most striking development, however, according to Eileen Southern was the emergence of holiness and sanctified Churches during the 1890's of which the Church of God in Christ developed into the largest Black religious organization.¹³ As the holiness movement continued to grow in number, many of the holiness Church leaders participated in the Azusa Street Revival held in Los Angeles, California under the leadership of William J. Seymour from 1906 to 1909. It was at the Azusa Street Revival where attendees "received the gift of the Holy Spirit," and their congregations thereafter became a part of the general Pentecostal movement. This religious movement was heavily influenced by the African traditions of religion and ritual. The Spirit possession, holy dancing, speaking in tongues, improvisational singing and the use of drums and other percussive instruments were common practice among the holiness Church members. Obviously, the Pentecostal Church fell direct heir to the shouts, hand-clapping, and foot-stomping jubilee songs, and ecstatic seizures of the plantation "praise houses."¹⁴

Between 1910 and 1920, the Pentecostal or sanctified movement flourished across the country as more African American people moved to urban centers. Women made up the bulk of these sanctified Church congregations. They therefore took on many prominent roles in establishing Church buildings, spreading the faith, and shaping the very distinct musical style that helped to define the sanctified tradition. Jerma A. Jackson states:

“As female missionaries embarked on city streets to reach the unregenerate, they took their music with them, transforming it from a mode of worship into an evangelical tool that they shaped to catch and hold the attention of passersby. When mass communication technology became available in the form of sound recordings, some of these women entered the recording studio, seeking to turn the new technology to their evangelical ends. In the process they took a first step in moving this style of music beyond the realm of the Church and into the commercial arena.”¹⁵

The Birth of Gospel Music

The Pentecostal movement was the impetus for the beginning of gospel music as it is known today. The founders of the Pentecostal Church of God in Christ, instituted their own services, characterized by testimonies and suitably emotional music, often improvised and sung in a highly charged style. These Churches, in contrast to many of the mainline Churches where leaders honored restraint over emotional expression, regarded exuberant worship as an expression of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the believer’s heart, soul and mind. Moreover, the belief that music flowed out of a holy encounter, and the emphasis placed on personal testimonies to the power of the Spirit within individuals, fostered a mode of worship that nurtured solo expression and instrumental accompaniment that ranged from washtubs to trumpets to guitars.¹⁶ The excitement generated by these intensely personal and powerful worship experiences

created a link to both Black and white gospel hymns, particularly as they were "African-Americanized" through syncopation, interval alteration (following African models), and call-response delivery. But even this kind of growth required yet more maturation before it could be recognized as Gospel.¹⁷

With the dawning of the Pentecostal movement, the parishioners of these "sanctified" Churches wanted to hear impassioned preaching; they wanted worship to be spontaneous and participatory, with ample room for interjections by the faithful, with such cries of "Hallelujah!" They expected "moaning," the term for the wordless humming and vocalization that Black Southerners used in accompanying the widely performed eighteenth century hymns of Dr. Isaac Watts who was a pioneer hymn writer of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Those Southerners who embraced the Pentecostal tradition also expected that the faithful might speak in tongues or be anointed by the Holy Spirit. In response, a new kind of Black minister appeared in northern pulpits, making powerfully emotional appeals, shouting and gesturing, and eliciting active responses from the faithful.

Gospel music was the musical counterpart of the profound changes in religious life that were catalyzed by the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North in the late 1800's. It built upon the revival songs of such late nineteenth century white evangelicals as Ira Sankey, who was an American Gospel Singer and composer of the late nineteenth century. The lyrics of these revival songs differed sharply from earlier Black Spirituals. Where the Spirituals addressed collective hardships, revival songs were profoundly individualistic. They employed sentimental language, and focused on individual salvation and on Jesus' role as a personal comforter.

By the late nineteenth century, white evangelicals began using the term gospel songs in referring to this nondenominational revival music.

Although African Americans embraced the lyrical conventions of the gospel songs, they made gospel music distinctly their own. Charles Albert Tindley was the first African American to compose and publish gospel songs. His 1916 collection entitled *New Songs of Paradise* included 37 of his gospel compositions. In 1921, Tindley gained even more recognition when the National Baptist Convention selected several of his songs for inclusion in its national songbook. Charles Tindley also inspired Thomas Andrew Dorsey, a prolific Blues pianist from Georgia, to begin writing Gospel songs. Known as the Father of Gospel Music, Dorsey toured the country with a troop called the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, which featured the illustrious Gertrude “Ma” Rainey before he began to take the new-found genre of Gospel music seriously. It was not until Thomas Dorsey relocated to Chicago, Illinois that he played a key role in formalizing even more the style of music known today as Gospel. Although Thomas Dorsey was a practicing Blues musician, he continued to write songs. He was noted for his embellishment of the hymn song with Blues elements, but it was not until 1921 that he penned his very first “gospel” song. Even later, in 1925, he finally accepted the advice of a minister and began composing gospel music seriously. After several excursions into the world of secular music during the early 1920’s, Dorsey achieved his first gospel music hit in 1926 – “If You See My Savior Tell Him That You Saw Me” – after two years of serious dedication to this field. Combining the sensitivity of Black audience demands and reactions with the sincerity and religiosity of Charles Albert Tindley, Dorsey composed songs that struck at the very base of the Black religious experience. He was the first musician to organize

and sophisticate the “call and response” technique of textual treatment in Afro-American songs which had been brought to this country by the slaves and impressed upon Black American culture through its use in the songs of the holiness and fundamental Black congregations.¹⁸

In 1931, under the leadership of Professor Dorsey and Theodore R. Frye - a very close musical acquaintance, the world’s first recorded gospel choir in a Black Church was organized at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago. In 1933, Dorsey, along with Sallie Martin, organized the first Black gospel music convention – the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses – in Chicago. The strength this organization still possesses today is reflected in the many delegates and conventioners that are committed to the preservation of this music. Thomas Dorsey was influential in the lives of numerous gospel singers, and because of his infusion of Blues based harmonies and chordal structures within his own compositions, gospel music began to rise to another level of musical appreciation not only within the Black Church, but outside of the Churches four walls as well. This infectious style of sacred song was taking hold of the country and it was evident in the various styles of gospel music that was performed in Churches across the nation as early as 1950. From this time forward, gospel music has re-vamped, re-modeled, and re-formed into a multi-billion dollar industry. The gospel artists of the “golden age” (from 1930 to 1970) such as Lucie Campbell, Roberta Martin, W. Herbert Brewster and Thomas Dorsey were, of course, the trailblazers into the world of recording and marketing the “good news”. Each of these legendary musicians contributed greatly to the development of gospel music as an identifiable genre of African American music from its inception. However, as generations have come and gone has the message of the

gospel been lost or compromised in the contemporary sound that gospel music as a genre has adopted?

The Gospel Music Controversy

When it all comes together, gospel music is the “good news” in song form. As a mode of communication, gospel is pleasing to the ear, the emotions, the spirit, the intellect, and the soul. Gospel as a genre of music is one of the four most significant musical creations that emerged out of the African American culture during the twentieth century along with Jazz, Blues, and Rap. However, the good news of gospel music has spread far beyond the choir stands of the Church. It has showed up during pop radio drive-time, in slickly produced videos, on commercial record labels, and in concert halls across the country.¹⁹ Many consumers of gospel music are aware of the ongoing debate of its secular appeal. Gospel music has created a distinct place for itself among the best in the world of secular entertainment. It has shared the stage with almost every secular form of African American music and has made significant contributions to several of these genres. Although the sound of the music has been altered drastically from its dawning, the message it contains is still the same. For many fans of gospel music, the contemporary flavor of the music is what makes it so appealing to the younger audience. However, the older audience views this new wave of hip-hop sounding gospel as a slap in the face of sanctification and true holiness.

Gospel artists such as Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, Karen Clark-Sheard, and even Yolanda Adams have infused the gospel genre with elements from Hip-Hop, Jazz, and even rap. Their albums have reached the top of the charts in both sacred and secular circles, and their live performances packed huge auditoriums, bringing a resurgence to

gospel as young people found their sound a refreshing alternative to the decidedly secular tone of hip-hop.²⁰ Yolanda Adams and Kirk Franklin became so popular among non-gospel listeners as well as serious gospel listeners that radio stations across the country began to include many gospel songs on their playlists.

As the contemporary sound of gospel music continues to flourish, many traditionalists of gospel frown on the success of this “worldly” sounding music. While the contemporary sound of gospel music draws in an even broader listening audience, the traditionalists of gospel continue to ask why artists constantly water down the gospel message and compromise it with carnal sounding music. The message of love, hope, peace, joy, and freedom from sin in the music is obviously there, however the concern of many lies in the fact that the message seems to be blurred by the “cross over” appeal that several contemporary gospel artists have adopted.

Traditionalists of gospel are distressed by the tone of contemporary gospels. They say that with several artists, the lyrics, not just the music suggest other types of intimacy than for God.²¹ For instance, the cross over success of Yolanda Adams song “Open My Heart” from the album *Mountain High, Valley Low* was astounding. This particular song was being played not only on the top gospel stations across the country but it was also a hit on some of the top urban slow jam love song stations. As a result, the song was easily mistaken by many as a secular love ballad: “*Alone in a room, It’s just me and you. I feel so lost, ’cause I don’t know what to do. Now what if I choose the wrong thing to do? I’m so afraid, afraid of disappointing you.*” It is clear why many traditionalists are concerned with the suggestive lyrics of some of the contemporary gospel songs as well as with the carnal sounding music.

Contemporary gospel artists, and secular artists alike have a tendency to refurbish the old and remake them into new for the purposes of mass appeal. For instance, Greg O'Quinn and his choir Joyful Noyze borrowed almost everything from the Isley Brother's classic ballad *Living For the Love of You*. This song, in its original packaging, was not only a love ballad but it was a sexually romantic love ballad. There is much doubt that when this song was penned by the Isley Brothers that there was even an inkling of sacred or religious undertone to the lyrics of the song. At any rate, not only was the song re-introduced on a gospel album, it was re-introduced in such a way that where the lyrics were not identical to the original Isley tune, the musical scoring was identical to the Isley tune, thus making the song very reminiscent.

One might question the spiritual integrity of the average gospel music fan, taking for granted that his spiritual walk and discernment would allow him to make a spiritual connection with the song no matter how worldly it sounds. However, the traditionalist view of this philosophy is rooted and grounded in the Holy Bible wherein it says, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!"²² Moreover, as the debate continues about the crossing over and mixing of sacred and secular music, the view of many traditionalists is strengthened in the second book of Corinthians wherein the apostle Paul pleads:

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my

people. Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”²³

Several gospel artists from decades past stood on the promises of God as they wrestled with the notion of compromise. Many artists were offered large sums of money to lend their voices to the world of secular music. Evangelist Shirley Caesar was asked to sing Rock and Roll music while she was at the pinnacle of her career. The music executives even offered to put her mother who at the time was a semi-invalid in the very best of nursing home care. She still did not compromise. She told them that the only way she would sing Rock and Roll is if they would allow her to, “Rock for Jesus and Roll for Christ”.²⁴ Many of the artists who actually left gospel music to pursue more posh careers in secular music did not straddle the fence, they remained in the world of secular entertainment. The single-most popular cross over artist who has had several secular albums as well as two very popular gospel albums is Aretha Franklin. Aretha’s success hinged on the fact that the public loved her from the very beginning. The daughter of famed minister Reverend C.L. Franklin, Aretha sang gospel until she was around fourteen years of age. She began to sing secular music shortly thereafter and she sang it with such a conviction, not forgetting her religious roots. With more than forty albums to her credit between 1956 and 2003, Aretha somehow slid past the traditionalists and blessed them with another gospel album in 1972. After the success of this album, Aretha ventured back into the world of secular entertainment, thus leaving an indelible impression on many up and coming secular artists that made it fashionable to sing secular

music as long as you go back every once in a while and remember from whence you've come.

This mentality, which seems to get more popular as the years go by has branched out to artists in almost every genre of African American music. However, as many traditionalists of gospel feared would happen, in September 2004, the ballot box revealed that secular rap artist Kanye West had been unanimously nominated to receive a stellar award for his very popular rap CD entitled *The College Dropout*. After much deliberation, the officials of the Stellar Gospel Music Awards Nominating Committee voted to remove the artist Kanye West from the ballot in the Rap/Hip Hop CD of the Year category. The reason for removing the CD from the ballot was that some of the songs on the CD contained explicit lyrics and the CD carried an explicit language warning symbol on its cover. The song on the CD that the nominating committee originally considered, because of its message was entitled, "Jesus Walks".²⁵ This song, which had many young gospel music fans and non-gospel fans alike in an uproar, was the epitome of compromise in the gospel message. While much of the younger audience argues that the song is a very cunning tool to draw non-believers to Christ, traditionalists retort that the profanity within the song as well as the rest of the CD sends out a mixed message. It says, you can continue to talk or act the way you act and everything will be fine with Jesus. You know, "Jesus walks with me." The underlying message is that as long as you acknowledge Jesus, whatever you say or do is okay.²⁶ This message is problematic mainly because of its subtle and contradictory teachings of the whole purpose and plan of salvation and redemption. How can we preach a message of

salvation, repentance, and redemption to the lost on one hand, and turn around and offer them the ways of the world on the other? The Bible clearly states in the book of James:

Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.²⁷

When “Jesus Walks” hit the airwaves, it began to take the young Black Christian audience by storm. It was popularized all the more by BET’s Video Gospel as well as other secular music video networks like VH1 and MTV. The song also received massive amounts of radio air-time on countless urban radio stations. As a result, many Christians took advantage of this opportunity to hang on to a piece of the world as “Jesus Walks” wore a guise of Christianity while many non-Christians used the song as a vehicle to affirm their spirituality. It is apparent at this point in African American music that secular artists singing gospel has become a major trend. Gospel music is now crossing over into several areas of the mainstream. It is hard to tell without listening closely to some of the lyrics if a particular song is purposed for a Sunday morning worship scene or a Saturday night club scene.

In a world where money and the power that it affords is the object of affection for many, several musical artists have joined the latest trend of singing the gospel. Has this crossing over of this musical genre overstepped the boundaries of African American religion? The debate is an ongoing one. Many African American popular music artists have their roots in the Black Church. Yet they, just as their predecessors, are keeping pace with the times while continuing to spread the message of the gospel. These changes have not always been welcomed in most religious circles, however they have moved a

people who were once chattel slaves to a liberated people with a contemporary hope and a future. When gospel was popularized, it was rooted in the totality of the Black experience in the United States which was subsumed in the heart of the Blues tradition. Therefore, gospel being born out of Blues has its own identity while it bears a striking resemblance to its parent. As Blues began to rightfully manifest itself in gospel, it reminded many people then as it does now of the nightclub atmosphere which served a community of sinners in need of repentance.

African American Christian belief and religious doctrine is often used to justify the dismissal of secular music and its influence on sacred song. The dismissal is not found in the musical scoring of a particular song, nor is it found solely in the lyrics. Rather, the point of cognitive dissonance lies within the delivery, the presentation, and the reception of the song by the consumers of the genre. The pioneers of gospel music created this genre with the intent of spreading the “good news” to a broader, more mainstream audience.

However, they did not intend for this genre to be compromised and manipulated by the popular music industry. When listening to contemporary gospel music, there is a very fine line of demarcation between what sounds sacred enough or what sounds too secular. Gospel music is a multi-billion dollar industry that has taken on a life of its own. However, the gospel artists themselves have been caught in the cross-fire of this massive religious debate. The intentions of these artists have been pure from the onset of the gospel idiom but we as a demanding public have insured their failure and success as they continue straddling the thin line between Saturday night and Sunday morning.

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