

THE GIFT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SACRED SONG¹

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From the African Mother Continent, African men and women, through the Middle Passage, throughout the Diaspora, to the Americas, carried the African gift and treasure of sacred song. To the Americas, African men and women brought sacred songs and chants that reminded them of their homelands and that sustained them in separation and in captivity, songs to respond to all life situations, and the ability to create new songs to answer new needs.

African Americans in sacred song preserved the memory of African religious rites and symbols, of a holistic African spirituality, of rhythms and tones and harmonies that communicated their deepest feelings across barriers of region and language.

African Americans in fields and quarters, at work, in secret meetings,² in slave festivals,³ in churches, camp meets and revivals, wherever they met or congregated, consoled and strengthened themselves and one another with sacred song—moans, chants, shouts, psalms, hymns, and jubilees, first African songs, then African American songs. In the crucible of separation and suffering, African American sacred song was formed.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass wrote:

Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. 'Make a noise,' 'make a noise,' and 'bear a hand,' are words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence amongst them. This may account for the almost constant singing heard in the southern states. There was, generally, more or less singing among the teamsters, as it was one means of letting the overseer know where they were, and that they were moving on with the work. But, on allowance day, those who visited the great house farm were peculiarly excited and noisy. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild notes. These were not always merry because they were wild. On the contrary, they were mostly of a plaintive cast and told a tale of grief and sorrow. In the most boisterous outbursts of rapturous sentiment, there was ever a tinge of deep melancholy.⁴

As early as 1691, slaves in colonial homes, slave galleries or separate pews participated in worship services with white slave holders. They learned to sing the traditional European psalms and hymns from the *Cambridge Short Tune*, the *Dutch Tune* or the *Hymns and Psalms* of Dr. Watts, which they loved and adapted to their own style and use.⁵ In 1755, Reverend Samuel Davies wrote:

The Negroes . . . have an Ear for Musick, and a kind of ecstatic Delight in Psalmody and there are no Books they learn so soon or take so much pleasure in, as those used in that heavenly Part of divine Worship.⁶

Slave records dating back as far as 1723 show there were proficient slave musicians—singers and instrumentalists who played fiddle, violin, trumpet, drums, guitar, French horn or flute, slave musicians highly valued for their musicianship, slave musicians, some who were able to read and write.⁷

In 1801, Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, published *A Collection of Hymns and Scriptural Songs from Various Authors*,⁸ hymns and songs which were used by slaves and fugitive slaves in worship. In 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers began concert tours of America and Europe, which for the first time brought the original sacred song of Black America to white audiences and to the concert stage. Harry Burleigh, John Wesley Work, James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson scored and arranged Black American sacred songs for soloists and ensembles in concert performance. In 1921, Thomas A. Dorsey, the Father of Gospel Music, composed "If I Don't Get There", and initiated a new rhythm, a new harmony and a new style. Gospel singers like Kenneth Morris, Roberta Martin, Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland and Edwin Hawkins enriched Black sacred song.

In the sixties, Father Clarence Joseph Rivers revitalized Catholic worship, inaugurated a revolution in liturgical music, stirred international interest in the indigenization of Catholic Liturgy, and brought new hope, joy, and spirit to millions of Black Americans when he introduced the melodies, rhythms, harmonies, symbols and rituals of African American Sacred Song into Roman Catholic worship. His *American Mass Program* and subsequent compositions and recordings popularized Black music for Catholic worship. His *Soulfull Worship* and *The Spirit in Worship*⁹ analyzed the history, theology, theory and practice of Black sacred song and its appropriateness and effectiveness in Catholic liturgy and worship.¹⁰ Rawn Harbor, Grayson Brown, Eddie Bonnemere, Leon Roberts, and others began to compose for Catholic worship.

Black sacred song is soulful song—

1. *holistic*: challenging the full engagement of mind, imagination, memory, feeling, emotion, voice, and body;
2. *participatory*: inviting the worshipping community to join in contemplation, in celebration and in prayer;
3. *real*: celebrating the immediate concrete reality of the worshipping community — grief or separation, struggle or oppression, determination or joy — bringing that reality to prayer within the community of believers;
4. *spirit-filled*: energetic, engrossing, intense;
5. *life-giving*: refreshing, encouraging, consoling, invigorating, sustaining.

Influenced by Africa, the Middle Passages, the Islands, Europe and the Americas; created, shaped, treasured, and shared by Black American Christians across time, geographic, socioeconomic and denominational lines, our heritage of sacred song encompasses a vast variety of kinds, styles, and forms.

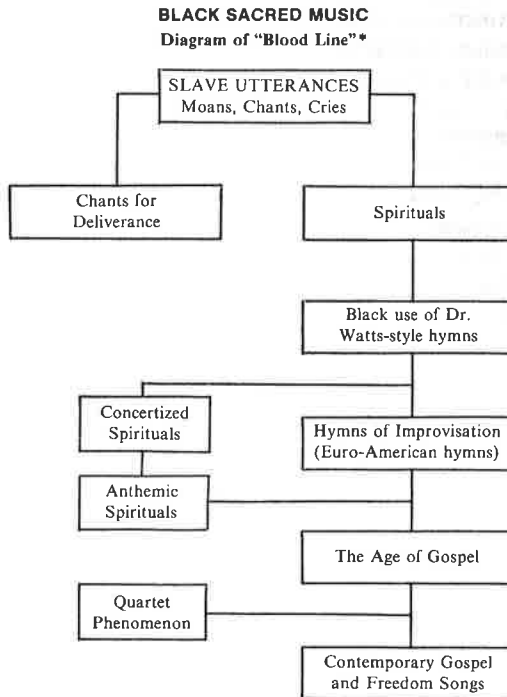
Wyatt Tee Walker charts the development of five distinctive kinds of Black Sacred Music:



TIME BAR
Black Sacred Music
Period of Development & Dominance

- SLAVES UTTERANCES/Moans, Chants, Cries for Deliverance
- SPIRITUALS/Faith-Songs, Sorrow Songs, Plantation Hymns, etc.
- METER MUSIC/Watts, Wesley, Sankey et al.
- HYMNS OF IMPROVISATION/Euro-American hymns with "beat"
- GOSPEL MUSIC/Music of Hard Times (Cross fertilization with secular)

Wendel Whalum shows how the various kinds of Black sacred song are related:



*Adapted from Wendel Whalum's diagram appearing in *Review and Expositor*, Spring, 1972, p. 581.

Black sacred song celebrates our God, His goodness, His promise, our faith and hope, our journey toward the promise. Black sacred song carries melodies and tonalities, rhythms and harmonies; metaphors, symbols and stories of faith that speak to our hearts; words, phrases and images that touch and move us.¹³

Stephen Henderson says of Black speech:

Certain words and construction seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and psychological weight, so whenever they are used they set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels . . . I am speaking of words . . . which have levels of meaning that seem to go back to our earliest grappling with the English language in a strange and hostile land. These words, of course, are used in complex associations, and thus form meaningful wholes in ways which defy understanding by outsiders. I call such words "mascon" words, borrowing from (of all places!) the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA invented the acronym to mean a "massive concentration" of matter below the lunar surface after it was observed that the gravitational pull on a satellite was stronger in some places than in others.

I use it to mean a massive concentration of Black experimental energy which powerfully affects the meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry — if one, indeed, has to make distinctions.¹⁴

Black sacred music lifts up Biblical symbols which bear the accumulated meanings of four hundred years of experience of the Black community in America:

God is Father, Mother, Sister, Brother, Captain,
King, Liberator, Friend;
God is a God of Peace, a God of War;
God is water to the thirsty, bread to the hungry,
shelter to the homeless;
God is my rock, my sword, my shield;
God is rest in a weary land;
God is my all and all.

African people are diunital people, seeking richness of meaning in *apparent* contradiction. They are comfortable with bringing together realities which may appear contradictory or in opposition: for example, body/spirit, sacred/secular, individual/community. They reach toward unification or synthesis of opposites. God is like father and mother (Father - mother - sister - brother symbols are not sexist). God is like fire and balm. African people are comfortable with symbol. African Americans for 400 years have used symbol and song to express a faith and yearning too high, too low, too wide, too deep for words, too passionate to be confined by concepts. As Father Rivers writes:

Music is important for worship because in worship we have to express the unexpressable, the transcendent, human values that defy ordinary expression. Music, like its other self, poetry, seems capable of doing what plain rational words cannot do: namely, to express the unexpressable, to touch men's hearts, to penetrate their souls, create an experience of things that cannot be reasoned.¹⁵

Black sacred song—old or new, folk or composed, rural or urban, traditional or contemporary—is in a very real sense, the song *of the people*.

- The music comes from a people who share and claim a common history, common experience, common oppression, common values, hopes, dreams and visions.
- The singer, the singers, the instrumentalists voice the experience and faith of the community.
- The leader (some would say soloist) leads the community in worship. The leader revives and inspires.
- The worshipping community is active, not passive. People participate — sing, pray, clap, sway, raise their hands, nod their heads. Eye contact, voiced response, the silent testimony of tears, a smile of relief or contemplation or ecstasy says, "This is my story; this is my song."
- The singer is chosen from the people by the people to suit their immediate need.
"Sometimes *I* feel like a motherless child."
"*I* just came from the fountain."
"*I* love the Lord."
"*My* Heavenly Father watches over *me*."
- The first person pronoun, the 'I' reference, is communal. The individual sings the soul of the community. In heart and voice and gesture the Church, the community responds.
- The singer lifts the Church, the people, to a higher level of understanding, feeling, motivation, and participation.

Among African peoples, most art is designed for use, that is to express a feeling or insight, to have an impact in the real world.¹⁶ Song is not an object to be admired so much

as an instrument to teach, comfort, inspire, persuade, convince, and motivate. Music is chosen precisely for its effect upon the worshipping community. The aim is *effective* worship. Black sacred song is designed to move. It moves because depth of feeling gives it "spiritual power." Father Clarence Rivers explains:

A singer who performs without feeling lacks soul. As in original biblical concept of the spiritual, the spirit or the soul is the life principal, the source of life and liveliness, of dynamism and movement, of motion and emotion. That which is unmoved and unmoving is not spiritual, it is dead! To be spiritual is to be alive, to be capable of moving and responding to movement . . . Since the Spirit moves, that which does not move would seem to lack the presence of the Spirit.¹⁷

Black sacred song has been at once a source and an expression of Black faith, spirituality and devotion. By song, our people have called the Spirit into our hearts, homes, churches, and communities. Seeking to enrich our liturgies and lives with the gift of sacred song, we pray:

"Spirit, Sweet Holy Spirit, fall afresh on me."

"Everytime I hear the Spirit
Moving in my heart
I will pray."

¹ Confer Pope Paul IV, "To the Heart of African," *The Pope Speaks* 14, (no. 3, 1969): 218-219. This citation concerning cultural pluralism within the Church gives the theological foundation for this essay. Similarly, Pope John Paul II has written numerous commentaries on the place of cultural expression in the Catholic Church.

² See Miles Mark Fisher *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 32-33, 66-79.

³ Festivals in which slaves in large numbers sang in their own African languages survived in the English colonies. Africans gathered to share stories, dances, songs and customs of various nations in Africa. See Miles Fisher *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 66-79.

⁴ Frederick Douglass *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: 1855), 96, 97.

⁵ See Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: Norton & Company, 1971), 30-45.

⁶ Quoted in Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 59.

⁷ See in Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 27-29.

⁸ Early American Imprints, Nos. 38, 39, Series No. 2 (1801-1820).

⁹ *Soulfull Worship* (Washington, D.C.: National Office for Black Catholics, 1974). *Spirit in Worship* (Cincinnati: Stimuli, Inc.), 1978.

¹⁰ Confer "The Church at Prayer, A Holy Temple of the Lord," December 4, 1983, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, page 23, #45; and Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, "Sacrosanctum Concilium," 4 December, 1983, 37-40.

¹¹ "Somebody's Calling My Name" *Black Sacred Music and Social Changes* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1979), 38

¹² From Wyatt Tee Walker, "Somebody's Calling My Name," 146.

¹³ The Bishops' Committee on Liturgy, "Music in Catholic Worship," Revised Edition, 1983, 3, 41.

¹⁴ *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973) 44.

¹⁵ Father Clarence Joseph Rivers, *Soulfull Worship*, p. 39. See also, *The Spirit in Worship*, 14, 15.

¹⁶ "The Church at Prayer, A Holy Temple of the Lord," 14, 15.

¹⁷ *The Spirit in Worship*, 22.