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Articles

The Matrix of African American Sacred Music in the 21st Century

by Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan

**Based on the author's keynote lecture for RASHAD's Spring 2009 Religious History and Sacred Music Institute*

Music frames and shapes the worship and social justice life of most African American churches. Vocal and instrumental music accompanies Christians from birth to death, during special sacred holidays, weekly worship, and in protest against injustice and oppression. Socio-cultural and religious contexts, and the sacred and secular texts, inform music: a combination of sound and silence, affecting listeners on a deeply spiritual, sensual, physical, and psychological level. From making a joyful noise to moments of contemplation, from pomp and circumstance to baptism and funerals, music is integral to corporate worship. Simultaneously, worship does not just happen on Sunday in the sanctuary. Worship is a daily activity. Just as there is no monolithic African American church, there is no monolithic or single type of African American sacred music. The styles and choices of music used to worship vary from church to church, from denominational

to nondenominational environments, from Catholic to Protestant, to those faith institutions that align with but are not Christian at the core. The lived experiences and needs of the body of Christ from cradle to grave also change and inform music preferences. Issues of education, socio-cultural location, colorism, gender, and class often also shape affinity to particular musical types. Further, not only do the genres, uses, and performance styles of this sacred music vary, but they emanate upon and within diverse praying grounds, and the particular choices from venue to venue are contested.

When thinking of praying grounds, imagine multiple kinds of spaces. Where does one pray? Imagine having an attitude and experience of prayer, of communicating, of dialoguing with God, where one speaks and listens in venues or spaces that are sacred – churches, hallowed land, mosques, temples, synagogues, in nature, and places individuals think of as secular – in

concert halls, playing fields, in grocery stores; think of prayer in the academy, particularly in higher education; think of prayer as it emerges electronically on television, radio, YouTube, with streaming videos of events in real time. Sometimes these praying grounds combine many venues into one moment – it is possible to have a streaming video of a baccalaureate program for a university. When imagining contested terrains, think about times when you just knew you were correct, wanted to control the argument, and were not necessarily willing to agree to disagree without being disagreeable. Contested terrain, when focusing on music in general and African American sacred music in particular, often becomes a realm of conflicted meaning; that is, there are different beliefs and tastes about what is appropriate and what message the music conveys.

Thus contested terrain involves conflicted meaning and affects our understanding of the music, including the theology, how God is understood within the music, and how African Americans then relate to each other out of that understanding of God their philosophy, what and how they think about the music and the implications of that thought; and what doctrine or set of faith principles they think are important to convey in the music; that is, when they really think about the impact music actually has on the listener. There are also issues regarding how the music can move and transform people's lives, instrumentation, voicing, and programming of the music. People often fail to realize that some of the music that they find pleasing to their sensibilities—because it has a nice beat—may be

deadly to the health of other people, and void of justice and liberation. When they really listen to the words, either the theology or faith statements in the song are utterly meaningless or perverse; they may have no depth or may actually be blasphemous.

This essay explores the praying grounds and contested terrains of African American sacred music in the twenty-first century. After presenting a womanist interdisciplinary methodology for experiencing and analyzing African American sacred music, the essay then (1) provides a socio-historical overview of the various types of music in the canopy of Black sacred music (2) examines selected music from several genres (3) analyzes some theological and ethical doctrines grounded in and emerging from particular musical selections and (4) offers reflections on some critical issues that are contested and need to inform music used in worship given emerging issues in African American sacred contexts, particularly as we live in a twenty-first century global community.

Womanist perspective of theory and life

Womanist theological ethics, an interdisciplinary analytical lens, can help us expose numerous oppressions in our midst and our own complicity in such injustice. The term *Womanist*, coined by Alice Walker¹ from the term “womanish,” refers to women of African descent who are outrageous, audacious, in charge, serious, and responsible. The term refers to a Black feminist who takes seriously experiences of oppression due to gender, class, race, sexual orientation, ability, age, and

ecology. A commitment to justice requires us, individually and communally, to expose, name, and do all we can to stop all acts of injustice, of violence. *Womanist* thought provides a powerful, rich, expansive matrix and illuminating framework for doing critical, creative analysis, where one embraces self and community amidst love and vibrant flourishing, while obtaining knowledge, framed by the gift of humor, the contradiction of youthful wisdom, and the capacity to stay the course amid uncertainty.

Womanist sensibilities celebrate the freedom of being able to love all people, sexually and nonsexually, and confidently embrace the manifestation of woman's culture and life. To be *Womanist* invites balanced, holistic health and loving the spectrum of colors of Blackness. Ultimately, loving Blackness is the capacity to love all people, for all other colors together are a part of the color black. Interestingly, scientists have discovered the mutant gene to validate the anthropological theory that all humanity came out of Africa. As such, *Womanist* theory is aesthetic, physical, spiritual, emotional, and creative, and evokes a palette of variegated reality, yielding imaginative passion, love, hope, and change. *Womanist* theory, amidst a faith-based curiosity, seeks to discover, analyze, and honor the lives and gifts of the forgotten and the dismissed, of the silenced and the vulnerable.

Womanist theory invites, requires, that one live in the present time, while simultaneously being a student of history, engaging in radical listening and discerning, to see, know, challenge,

analyze, and make a difference. *Womanist* theory is a field of study and a way of thinking that takes seriously the exposure, analysis, and transformation of societal and personal injustices and oppressions that affect those who usually matter least in society, as symbolized by poor Black women. A *Womanist liberative* theory embraces engendering mutuality, community, the responsibility and stewardship of freedom, honors the *Imago Dei*, the image of God, the essential goodness and divine beauty in all persons; and engages texts held as authoritative with a careful, critical, creative reading.

Using *Womanist* spirituality to unpack themes in general and violence in particular, we explore and ask questions about which texts, what kinds of authority, who are the characters and what are their layers, by what rituals do they engage life, what are the dynamics around the use of language, and what are the various histories that are intersecting in a particular world view. Such a world view moves me to engage the music in the most holistic manner possible. For example, when living with, listening to, singing, and teaching the Spirituals, the type of *Womanist* methodology that emerged led to a four-fold approach: the socio-historical (context), the narrative-dialectic (story), the rhetorical-musical (voice amidst signifying), and the theological-philosophy (faith/thought).² When I studied the context of the Spirituals, both during the time of antebellum enslavement and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, I had to wrestle with racism, oppressiveness, and scapegoating of African diasporan peoples, using the thought of French

literary and cultural critic, Rene Girard, who speaks of how imitation, *mimesis*, is a driving factor in many societies, making us desire what others have. Our desire and fear often force us to need to control them, creating a double bind. One individual or group (disciple/pupil) wants to learn (object of desire) from the master. Think about *The Color Purple* when both Mr. _____ and Celie desire a relationship with Shug. The double bind occurs with the emergence of confusion where both parties lose focus over what they really now desire, creating major issues of control.

In the Antebellum Era the enslaved had to be controlled, made to be other, sub-human. When analyzing the story, the Spirituals forced me to examine all of the paradoxes, the ironies in the lives of those who created the Spirituals, which led me to the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois and his notion of double consciousness, being African and American, the “two-ness,” while being one. As I listened to the Spirituals and did the rhetorical-musical analysis, there were two voices at play, the voice of the lyrics or words and the voice of the music, thus double-voicing, as the songsters signified. The work of Henry Louis Gates, in his volume *The Signifying Monkey*, provided insight for this perspective. Often times you had to be on the inside to know that the dictionary meaning of the words was not the meaning conveyed in the singing of this amazing music. Finally, the aspect of faith and thought is the language of relationality, how we connect. Using the thought of Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber, of “I-Thou, I-It,” the spirituals came

even further to life; for “I-Thou” is the language of intimacy, of dignity, and respect. “I-It” is the language of other, of thing, of object. These four rubrics emerged out of my womanist listening and analysis of these texts—affording a rich, complex, multi-faceted hearing of these songs. Such a theoretical framework can be helpful in analyzing the rich matrix of African American sacred music.³

Overview of the Canopy of African American Sacred Music

The music within Black churches is varied and diverse. Spirituals, chants of collective exorcism, tell stories of life and death, of oppression and freedom, of faith and hope, of salvation and transformation. These songs, often based on biblical texts and imagery, are set for congregational singing or are arranged for choral performance. Traditional Spirituals evolved through the singing of the community. The lining-out hymn tradition in the Black church, beginning in the nineteenth century, involved a preacher or leader intoning a line or two that was then sung by the congregation. Lining-out was necessary, given illiteracy and lack of hymnals. Hymns are songs of praise to God: a metrical composition adapted for singing in a religious service, or a song of praise or joy; they can be a lament or plaintive with several verses or have verses with a chorus. Many Black congregations also championed Gospel music, sacred song that developed in urban and revival settings. Since the 1960s and 1970s, Gospel songs have involved ensembles with electronic instruments,

synthesizers, strings, and horns, performing in concert halls where the key performers use Gospel as a homiletical or preaching venue. Black churches also sing anthems, oratorios, revival songs, and contemporary praise songs. This music arises as engaging, spirit-filled, glorious, holistic, life-giving expressions and experiences as it codifies the theological, doctrinal, and socio-cultural history and consciousness of African American religiosity.

Part of the challenge of engaging the variety of song in Black churches concerns the capacities of the musicians themselves. Some musicians are trained in the Euro-American classical tradition, where the musical score is most important, and one is trained to honor that score to the letter. Music in African American church performance practice often rests on oral tradition. Choirs and musicians may learn music by rote and expect to take a great deal of liberty with interpretation as to how they render the music. The performance practice, couched in fluidity, involves timbre or sound quality, the handling of musical variables or technicalities of delivery, and manner of delivery or physical and visual dimensions of performance.⁴

From the time of the enslaved landing on these shores, music has been an integral way of engaging life and God. Music helped people in general and Black folks in particular deal with major crises, including the Spanish flu pandemic that killed 20 million worldwide, reconstruction; and massive, government sanctioned genocides and murders of over 200

million people in the 20th century. Black folk continued to produce music, despite turbulence, tension, and testimony. Despite the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, the 1930s depression, and two world wars, music has been a mainstay. The Harlem Renaissance set the stage for the creation of great literature, art, and music in the 1920s, and into the 1930s. The Blues continued to develop and Jazz came into its own, even as the 1930s saw the rise of organized crime, unionism, and heightened racism. Yet, this was a time of triumph for Joe Louis in boxing and for Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympic track and field events. People moaned sorrow songs during the violent inception and unfolding of World War II and the heinous activity led by Adolf Hitler. We can never forget the plight of the “Scottsboro Boys,” (1931-1937), where nine Black youth were framed and falsely convicted of raping two white prostitutes. The last “Scottsboro Boy” was released in 1946.⁵

Rhythm and Blues and Gospel music came into their own during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the murder of Emmett Till marked the beginnings of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. From 1955 on, more than two million United States veterans fought in the Vietnam War; fifty-eight thousand lost their lives while the Vietnamese lost millions. Along with the horrific violence experienced by Civil Rights protestors and the murders and political assassinations in 1968, Shirley Chisholm became the first Black female Congressional Representative. The 1970s produced Disco, Jazz, Fusion, and later House Music and Reggae.

In 1992, Carol Moseley Braun became the first Black female Senator, representing the state of Illinois.⁶ As Rhythm and Blues continued to blossom, Hip Hop had begun to emerge. Whether beginning within the church or coming from outside, each type of music had an impact on the other. Much has happened, particularly in this nation, to shape these sounds of Blackness, these contexts of praying grounds and contested terrains.

The later part of the twentieth century found much in the United States to regret and to celebrate. The 1970s revealed Watergate and the break-in of the Democratic party offices, eighteen year olds gained the right to vote, and Richard Nixon resigned. Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Ginsberg were the first women appointed to the Supreme Court, Challenger spacecraft exploded, and the Berlin Wall came down in the 1980s. With the 1990s, we saw the birth of the World Wide Web, an explosion of casinos and theme parks, the Gulf Wars, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in the horrific Waco FBI massacre, the O.J. Simpson trial, the Oklahoma bombing, the first bombing of the World Trade Center, the Columbine tragedy and the growing popularity of hip hop. Since 2000 and the passing of Y2K, we have experienced the first experiments in cloning; the September 11th tragic destruction of the World Trade Center; fighting with Afghanistan and Iraq; outsourcing of many industries to other countries; and now the housing foreclosure fiascos, economic downturns and bailouts—through all of this, Black folk have

continued to worship God, celebrate old songs, and create new music of faith.

Analysis of Selected African American Sacred Songs

I Got Shoes

I got shoes, you got shoes, all of God's children
got shoes

When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes

I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven (heaven)
heaven (heaven)

Everybody talkin' bout heaven ain't a goin' there
heaven (heaven) heaven (heaven)

I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven

"I Got Shoes" masterfully engages irony and signifying. The slave poet proclaimed a reality that everyone knew was not a fact. Slaves usually did not have or own shoes; they often went barefooted. Nor did they own other symbols indicated in the song: wings, a crown, and a harp.⁷ From a socio-historical view, these objects symbolize accoutrements of freedom. From a theological-philosophical approach, heaven indicated an eschatology to be realized in the near future, "on this side of Jordan," during their lifetime. For some enslaved songsters, heaven meant freedom now and freedom after death. The African bard had an enormous imagination engaging sensory modes of sight, hearing, touch, and affects. Here, walking, shining, flying, and

playing all over God's heaven signals visual and kinesthetic consciousness,⁸ signaling the ability for those who have nothing to have more. Such movement takes one from the least of these, the impoverished, the lowest on the socio-economic level to a higher level. One can never amass goods and status unless one can imagine the possibility. The slaves had a deep imagination for an improved socio-economic and equity status, which is where one begins in subverting classism.

Classism, an assumption of privilege, arrogance, and entitlement due to one's lifestyle, relates to socio-economics and individual and systemic politics—nurturing a hostility that is often misinterpreted as racism—emerging out of the language of social stratification. Class concerns economic status, particularly among people who either had similar life possibilities or who shared a similar experience in the marketplace. Max Weber understood class to engage power where a person or a group has the capability to impose its will on others, even if there is opposition from the others, based on political or economic resources.⁹ Slaves were on the bottom rung of society, slave holders with many slaves were in the middle to upper class, and most plantations only had about three slaves. Class may build upon a network of objective relations, based upon particular dispositions and perceptions, and a habitus, a habitual or typical condition.¹⁰

In "I Got Shoes," who has shoes and how many pairs of shoes or wings, crowns, or harps indicates one's class status, disclosing people's stories or the narrative-dialectic view of their

lives. Markers for class include education, occupational prestige, ethnic group position, kinship, etc.¹¹ Classism is the systemic violence and oppression exacted on others where the haves assume privilege and the have-nots are used to meet the needs of those who have plenty. The rhetorical-musical view of "I Got Shoes" involves the creative, repetitive use of words and music dynamics. One hears three times in the first line of each stanza about who has shoes: I, you, and all God's children. A sense of time, "When I get to heaven," signifies hope and a pledge to moving on one's own behalf to experience a better life situation, to move up as it were, in class status. The bard then affirms positively one's capacity to increase mobility, to move beyond the oppression of classism towards justice and freedom.

Anthem: "Magnify the Lord" by Virgie Carrington DeWitty

Virgie Carrington DeWitty (ca. 1913-1980), was a music teacher, choir director, and composer of anthems and other works. After her family moved from Oklahoma to Austin, Texas and joined Ebenezer Baptist Church, DeWitty began playing the piano by ear and performed her first solo at age five. DeWitty earned a degree in music and a teaching certificate in light opera (short operas with happy endings or operettas). She directed the first commercially-sponsored radio program over the Texas Quality Network, 1938 to 1940. DeWitty composed or arranged more than 100 Spirituals, Gospels, four-part-harmony anthems, and religious music for choirs. DeWitty was a significant local,

state, and national presence. Championing her classical background, DeWitty relied heavily on the Psalms as she placed the importance of praising God front and center and the place of intercessory prayer in all of her music. Active in the National Baptist Convention of America, she died in August, 1980, in Austin.

DeWitty's anthems include "Magnify the Lord," and "The Greatest of These Is Love." An anthem is a psalm or hymn sung responsively or antiphonally, with verses or stanzas and choruses. This genre of sacred vocal composition uses words from the Scriptures. They are sung in adoration to God with praise or gladness. An additional definition of an anthem is a song that characterizes, symbolizes, or exemplifies a particular subculture, movement, or point of view: national anthem and alma mater are such types of music. DeWitty's "Magnify the Lord" is a song of adoration, trumpeting the awesomeness of God, echoing the sentiments of the great Christological hymn, Philippians 2,⁹ "Therefore, God exalted [Christ] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

The song exalts, magnifies, and praises the Lord. This praise is to be forever and ever, throughout eternity. Set for piano, solo voices, and chorus, this anthem's socio-historical motif or context is that of a 20th century worldview, written by an African American life-long church musician

who loved God and loved celebrating God through music. Having met Ms. DeWitty while a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, I was impressed by her presence of grace and peace. She loved making music and training people to make music. The narrative dialectic or story of this work is the tension of the call to magnify and exalt God forever when we are finite creatures, when we often forget or when we take God for granted. Further, when we truly exalt God, we lose ourselves into God's trusting love, and thus do not fear that experience, so we have no need to fail to do it consistently. The rhetorical-musical motif here, or the double voicing, engages voice and piano, with chords and some triplets and tremolo signifying the power of Divine presence. The work begins with a soprano or tenor, with a descending line that then ascends, arresting our attention. The anthem has an alto solo, a soprano and alto duet, followed by a chorus. These two passages have a tighter chordal structure that sounds like a thoughtful, pensive hymn. Influences of her classical training, e.g., of Handel's *Messiah*, are present in this work. The theological-philosophical, or faith and thought focus, is that of worship, adoration, focusing on the Name of the Lord, the incarnated love. The very name has the power to move and transform empty, lost souls.

Gospel: Shirley Ceasar

Rev. Shirley Ceasar (1938-), a North Carolinian, is a contemporary Gospel singer, evangelist, pastor, civic leader, business woman, and soulful

spirit who emerged during the 1950s-1970s. When Caesar ministers, she preaches and inspires, dances, shouts, and moves with great vitality between pulpit, boardroom, and concert stage, as a concerned minister and citizen who focuses on giving a hand, not a handout to those in need. Caesar, one of twelve children, once knew such need because her father died when she was twelve and her mother was chronically ill. Caesar began touring with The Caravans in 1958. The African-American folk preacher style actualized by Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith (1904-1994) in Thomas Dorsey's Baptist Gospel-Blues tradition in the 1920s and 1930s, and perfected by Edna Gallmon Cooke (1918-1967), who often performed the first half of a song as a sermon and sang the second half, became Caesar's trademark: blue notes, slurs, and achieving rhythmic effects by repeating consonants, using intense nasality, and evocative yeahs. With her sermonized singing, Caesar also dramatizes or acts out parts of her songs. In 1966, Caesar began to sing "mother" songs and "house-rocking" songs. Her honors include five Grammy Awards and six Dove Awards for Gospel. First Lady and Queen of Gospel, she performs over 150 concerts a year and pastors in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Shirley Caesar exudes a kind of powerful energy. One of her most popular standards is "No Charge," the story of a small child who submits a bill to his mother for his chores and the mother who responds by listing all she has

done for him at no charge. The song begins with accompaniment in the background, with ballad-like sound, and Caesar does a voice-over as she states:

*My sister's little boy came
 Into the kitchen one evening
 While she was fixing supper
 And he handed her a piece
 Of paper he'd been writing on
 And after wiping her hands on an apron
 She took it in her hands and
 She read it and this is what it said
 For mowing the yard, five dollars
 And for making up my own
 Bed this week, one dollar
 For going to the store, fifty cents
 And playing with little brother while
 You went shopping, twenty-five cents
 For taking out the trash, one dollar
 And for getting a good report card
 Five dollars, and for raking
 The yard, two dollars
 Total owed, fourteen seventy-five
 Well, she looked at him
 Standing there and expecting
 And a thousand memories
 Flashed through her mind*

*So she picked up the pen
And turned the paper over
And this is what she wrote. . .*

Caesar then shifts from speaking to singing the following in ballad style:

*For the nine months I carried you
Growing inside me, no charge
For the nights I sat up with you
Doctored you, prayed for you
No charge*

*For the time and the tears and
The cost through the years
There is no charge
When you add it all up
The cost of my love is no charge . . .*¹²

The socio-historical context of this music is a situation where a child wants to be paid for everything that he does, so his aunt wants to help him understand about love and family and instill in him some values, helping him not to focus so much on money. The narrative-dialectic or story is actually two stories: one of the child and one of the aunt, while the mother is silent. The rhetorical musical part or signifying engages spoken voice over background music that is soothing, peaceful; that segues into a ballad that allows one to be empathetic to both parties and come to personal realizations of appreciation for all that God has done and is doing in our lives and how God's love gets incarnated in our lives. The philosophical-theological, the faith and

thought of this song, juxtaposes a child's sense of prosperity gospel with the wisdom and love of neighbor and ultimately of self, where one can embrace a sense of gratitude.

Theological and Ethical Doctrines in Music

Listening to the words of two historical hymns of the Christian church can help individuals think about timeless themes that emerge today in contemporary music. Hymns have weathered the years and invite listeners to consider the theology of these songs and go and learn about the stories of how they were created. Most hymns have three or four stanzas. This analysis includes one verse and chorus, or one verse if there is no chorus. While there are many themes from redemption, adoration, salvation, hope, faith, and creation, the three themes reviewed below are: love, grace, and blood as redemptive.

Love: Love Lifted Me

*I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful
shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more,
But the Master of the sea, heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.*

*All my heart to Him I give, ever to Him I'll cling
In His blessed presence live, ever His praises sing,
Love so mighty and so true, merits my soul's best
songs,
Faithful, loving service too, to Him belongs.*

*Souls in danger look above, Jesus completely saves,
He will lift you by His love, out of the angry waves.
He's the Master of the sea, billows His will obey,
He your Savior wants to be, be saved today.*

Chorus. *Love lifted me! Love lifted me! When nothing else could help Love lifted me!*

The hymn “Love Lifted Me,” a hymn of testimony, witness, and praise, was written by James Rowe (1865-1933), and the music is by Howard E. Smith (1863-1918). Set in a dance-like tempo of six pulses per measure, this song has three verses and a chorus, and reflects the scripture, Isaiah 63:9: “In all their distress, it was no messenger or angel, but His presence that saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.” James Rowe, an Irish immigrant, worked the New York railroads for a decade.¹³ After working as a Hudson Human Society inspector, he worked for music publishers in Texas and Tennessee. In his last years, Rowe worked with his daughter, an artist, writing greeting card verses.¹⁴ Smith was an organist in Connecticut and the two men wrote this great hymn in 1912.¹⁵

The socio-historical perspective for this hymn is the context where one is in deep pain, void of peace, and may be experiencing deep depression, disconnectedness, suffering, and strife, deeply aware of suffering, rejection, and betrayal. The narrative-dialectic or the story challenges us to seek God rather than addictive behavior, hopelessness, or getting trapped in materialism to get out of the abyss, a place where there is no clarity, joy, or true relationship with God. The redeeming, hopeful message is that love and only “love lifted me.” The rhetorical-musical view has a sense of swing and movement, using eighth

notes in 6/8 time. The ballad style of music is reassuring and affirming of the experience of love. The theological-philosophical is the reality that God never forsakes or leaves the faithful, for God’s love will lift them from the depths of pain and sin. With this love, one experiences covenant closeness with God, maintaining conscious contact with God on a daily basis while offering praise. When people are distraught or in danger, Jesus the Christ is there to save. This is the gift of love.

Sin: Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace (How sweet the sound)
That sav’d a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see!”

One of the most popular hymns of the church, “Amazing Grace,” was written by John Newton (1725-1807), verses 1-4; John P. Rees (1828-1900), wrote verse five, and the tune is “American Melody” from Carrel and Clayton’s *Virginia Harmony*, 1831. Being a seaman as a child, Newton eventually participated in the slave trade off the coast of West Africa. Afraid of being shipwrecked during a tempestuous storm, Newton read Thomas á Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*, which led to his conversion experience. Influenced by John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, Newton felt a call to ministry and began to create hymns for services that would be part of worship when he preached. “Amazing Grace” was published in the *Olney*

Hymns hymnal that Newton produced with William Cowper. Throughout his life, Newton was continuously amazed at God's grace that so totally changed his life.¹⁶

The socio-historical motif or context of this song is that John Newton wrote this powerful hymn after realizing what a terrible person he was for running slave ships. The narrative-dialectic is the story of a revealed self, where one was lost but then was found by God; that is, one is not lost in terms of missing in action, but the true personhood is lost due to sin, brokenness, and causing harm to others. The rhetorical-musical or signifying motif engages profound words with a simple American melody, which has such an impact over the world, both with the words and when played instrumentally. There is no more powerful, stirring melody than when bag pipers play "Amazing Grace" at the funeral of a law enforcement officer. The song is plaintive and poignant; it grabs one's soul, offering hope and possibility. The philosophical-theological, again, engages the recognition of the frailty of humanity and the power of God. When singing "Amazing Grace," I personally change the word "wretch" to

"child," for I am not a running slave; and further, as a confessional song, Newton saw himself as a wretch. The love of God invites individuals to see the beauty within, and the innocence of a child is profound.

Conclusion

Don Saliers reminds readers of the profound nature of music and theology, as they are both practices. Music, the combined sound and silence that moves and stirs the heart, can help change listeners. As a practice in general and exercise of faith in particular, music making, listening, and interpreting all come together when people connect music and faith. Theology or God-talk as practice involves sermons, prayers, teaching, preaching, confessions, covenants, and missionary statements. When theology and music are combined in authentic, holistic ways, listeners are moved to goodness, to contentment, and to joy. For oftentimes, when people forget the verbal and written teachings of their faith, they will remember the songs.¹⁷ ❖

1 Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

2 See Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1997).

3 For more information on Rene Girard's work, see *Violence and the Sacred*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

See Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washing Square Press, 1982). Du Bois discusses double-consciousness or "two-ness" in his 1903 collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*. See, for example, Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1957).

4 C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, "The Performed Word and the Black Church," in *Readings in African American Church Music and Worship*, compiled and edited by James Abbingtion (Chicago: GIA, 2001), 41-55, 65, 72; Mellonee V. Burnim, "Leading African American Song," in *Readings in African American Church Music and Worship*, compiled and edited by James Abbingtion (Chicago: GIA, 2001), 257-58; www.stannesdamascus.org/glossary.htm; www.humanities.eku.edu/Glossary.htm

- 5 Richard Stolley and Tony Chiu, LIFE: *Our Century in Pictures* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1999), 112, 117.
- 6 Ibid., 80, 90.
- 7 Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, "Spirituals and the Quest for Freedom" in *Modern Christianity to 1900: A People's History of Christianity*, Vol 6. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 324.
- 8 John Lovell, Jr. *Black Song: The Forge and Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 343, 551.
- 9 Lewis A. Coser, "Class" in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, Vol I, 445, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968, 1973).
- 10 Joan M. Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 55.
- 11 Coser, "Class," 441-445.
- 12 [www.top40db.net/Lyrics/?SongID=75365&By=Year&Match=;](http://www.top40db.net/Lyrics/?SongID=75365&By=Year&Match=) Viewed June 9, 2009.
- 13 *African American Heritage Hymnal: 575 Hymns, Spirituals, and Gospel Songs* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001), 504.
- 14 http://www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/t/o/w/rowe_j.htm; Viewed June 9, 2009.
- 15 http://www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/s/m/i/smith_he.htm; Viewed June 9, 2009.
- 16 Gwendolyn Sims Warren, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the African American Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 198-200.
- 17 See Don E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Horizons in Theology), (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

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