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Sound Business: Great Women Of Gospel Music And The Transmission Of Tradition

Abstract

From the 1930s to the present, women have played instrumental and visible leadership roles in the remarkable growth of African American gospel music. Through both creative and entrepreneurial activities, these women paved the way for the expansion of an emotive sacred music expression from the worship practices of southern migrants to audiences around the world. This dissertation focuses on the work of three cultural trailblazers, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Karen Clark Sheard, who stand out in the development of gospel music as virtuosic vocalists and pivotal figures whose sonic imprints can be heard both in sacred songs performed in churches and in American popular music. By deploying exceptional musicality, a deep understanding of African American Christianity, and an embrace of commercialism, the three singers have conserved and reworked musical elements derived from an African American heritage into a powerful performance rhetoric. By using musical mastery, they have forged paths for gospel music as a commercial phenomena and a vehicle to transform discourses of race, gender, class, and religion. At the same time, they have managed other duties and responsibilities in their families, in their communities, and in the music industry, thus demonstrating that “greatness” in gospel music is the outcome of extraordinary skills and various interwoven forms of labor.

Through the study of the musical lives of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard from an intergenerational perspective, this dissertation posits that they participate in making a feminist music culture that prioritizes spiritual authenticity and the commercialization of musical knowledge as a counter-hegemonic practice. Thus, their contributions should be first viewed as “cultural work,” a form of African American women’s activism that consciously advances a female musical perspective in the service of community furtherance. In broad terms, this exploration of women’s gospel music legacies elucidates the cultural, spiritual, and commercial processes that have shaped African American sacred music practices, and as such, it provides new insights into a creative domain which has produced the most influential vocal idiom in American popular music.

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SOUND BUSINESS: GREAT WOMEN OF GOSPEL MUSIC AND THE
TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION

Nina Christina Öhman

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SOUND BUSINESS: GREAT WOMEN OF GOSPEL MUSIC AND THE TRANSMISSION OF
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DEDICATION

For my parents

Christina Öhman and Matti Öhman

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ABSTRACT

SOUND BUSINESS:

GREAT WOMEN OF GOSPEL MUSIC AND THE TRANSMISSION OF TRADITION

Nina Christina Öhman

Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.

From the 1930s to the present, women have played instrumental and visible leadership roles in the remarkable growth of African American gospel music. Through both creative and entrepreneurial activities, these women paved the way for the expansion of an emotive sacred music expression from the worship practices of southern migrants to audiences around the world. This dissertation focuses on the work of three cultural trailblazers, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Karen Clark Sheard, who stand out in the development of gospel music as virtuosic vocalists and pivotal figures whose sonic imprints can be heard both in sacred songs performed in churches and in American popular music. By deploying exceptional musicality, a deep understanding of African American Christianity, and an embrace of commercialism, the three singers have conserved and reworked musical elements derived from an African American heritage into a powerful performance rhetoric. By using musical mastery, they have forged paths for gospel music as a commercial phenomena and a vehicle to transform discourses of race, gender, class, and religion. At the same time, they have managed other duties and

responsibilities in their families, in their communities, and in the music industry, thus demonstrating that “greatness” in gospel music is the outcome of extraordinary skills and various interwoven forms of labor.

Through the study of the musical lives of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard from an intergenerational perspective, this dissertation posits that they participate in making a feminist music culture that prioritizes spiritual authenticity and the commercialization of musical knowledge as a counter-hegemonic practice. Thus, their contributions should be first viewed as “cultural work,” a form of African American women’s activism that consciously advances a female musical perspective in the service of community furtherance. In broad terms, this exploration of women’s gospel music legacies elucidates the cultural, spiritual, and commercial processes that have shaped African American sacred music practices, and as such, it provides new insights into a creative domain which has produced the most influential vocal idiom in American popular music.

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CHAPTER 1: Women's Gospel Music Legacies

Since the early 20th century, many visionary women have played important roles in gospel music's expansion from African American churches to the global marketplace.¹ In the her-story of gospel music, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Karen Clark Sheard stand out as pathbreaking vocalists and musical innovators whose sonic imprints can be heard in music performed in African American church worship services and in popular music worldwide. When speaking about Aretha Franklin's immeasurable impact on gospel music, Pastor Robert Smith Jr. of New Bethel Baptist Church addressed this musical actuality with a rhetorical question: "How many people get up every Sunday morning trying to sing like Aretha Franklin, singing 'Amazing Grace' or 'Precious Memories?'"² For that matter, I add, how many people at any present-day popular music

¹ A growing body of scholarship addresses the gender perspective in gospel music. See for example, Jerma A. Jackson, "Testifying at the Cross: Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Politics of African-American Sacred and Secular Music" (PhD diss., Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, 1995); Roxanne Reed, "Preaching and Piety: The Politics of Women's Voice in African-American Gospel Music with Special Attention to Gospel Music Pioneer Lucille E. Campbell" (PhD diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2003); Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Tammy L. Kernodle, "Work the Works: The Role of African American Women in the Development of Contemporary Gospel," *Black Music Research Journal* 26, no. 1, Spring 2006: 89-109; Alisha Lola Jones, "'We Are a Peculiar People': Meaning, Masculinity, and Competence in Gendered Gospel Performance," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015); Mellonee V. Burnim, "Voices of Women in Gospel Music: Resisting Representations," in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation*, ed. Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (New York: Routledge, 2016), 201-214; Alisha Lola Jones, "Are All the Choir Directors Gay? Black Men's Sexuality and Identity in Gospel Performance," in *Issues in African American Music*, ed. Maultsby and Burnim, 216-235.

² Pastor Robert Smith Jr., Interview with Author, July 14, 2011, Detroit, MI.

stage, whether a small town karaoke bar or on American Idol, try to sing like Aretha Franklin? The influence that each singer has exerted through virtuosic command of gospel music performance aesthetics spans several generations, and as such, it presents a significant but previously unexamined phenomenon in the study of African American music. As the first in-depth intergenerational study on the musical lives of women in gospel music, this dissertation sheds new light on the cultural import of Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Karen Clark Sheard as singers whose voices, both literal and metaphorical, have made major interventions in the American cultural landscape.

The magnitude of the three singers' cultural contributions reflects the "greatness" of each as I posit in the title of this dissertation. As much as I believe that their musical contributions merit attention, this is not a hagiographic study; instead I examine their musical lives from a feminist perspective that consciously advances an expanded notion of "great" artistry that recognizes how spiritual and cultural labors produce gospel music mastery. Musically speaking, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. describes Clark Sheard's exceptional vocal abilities in the following way:

Rather than view this genius [another word for spectacular music mastery] as the result of "natural talent," (or even "extravagant religious emotions" as one historical actor called performance in the black church) we might think about it better as the result of intellectual work—as conscious artistic choices grounded both in an engagement with African American cultural history and in contemporaneous styles.³

³ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "When Master is a Woman: Rhetoric and Device in Karen Clark Sheard's Will to Blend," *Musiqology* (blog), June 20, 2011, <http://musiqology.com/blog/2011/06/20/when-the-master-is-a-woman-rhetoric-and-device-in-karen-clark-sheards-will-to-blend/>.

Using Ramsey's elucidating take on the intellectual work that predicated gospel music mastery as the starting point for my thinking, I will explore the ways in which Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have developed their vocal skills and careers at the same time as they have carried out activities and responsibilities related to their gendered roles in their own families, communities, and in the music industry.⁴

From this intellectual standpoint, my dissertation will proceed to show how gospel music offers a context and a medium for making a feminist music culture. In support of this perspective, I will add a few words on musical mastery and its meaning in my study. My references to the "greatness" of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard draw upon epistemological ideas which have been circulating among gospel music audiences and in the marketplace for quite some time. Take for instance one of my interlocutors in the field, an accomplished musician who respectfully referred to the collective of the three singers in our conversation as "the great women in gospel music," a kind of a shorthand expression for their cultural authority and even canonicity.⁵ In fact, these beliefs can also be attributed to the marketing department of Columbia Records or to the individual who titled Mahalia Jackson's debut record for the label *The World's Greatest Gospel Singer* (1955).⁶ My point is that in public discourse, the idea of gospel music greatness

⁴ This thought derives from the need to give attention to the totality of women musicians' lives, as explored in Carol Muller and Sathima Bea Benjamin, *Musical Echoes, South African Women Thinking in Jazz* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 221-222.

⁵ Tammy L. Kernodle uses this expression in her article "Work the Works" in reference to Clara Ward, Mahalia Jackson, and many other women in gospel music. (p.95)

⁶ Mahalia Jackson, *The World's Greatest Gospel Singer*, CL 644, 1955.

draws upon the music's dual orientation toward the culture and commerce. In the mid-1960s the Chicago Art Ensemble coined the term "Great Black Music" which jazz composer, artist, and scholar George Lewis views "as an intervention in an ethnicized canonization process, an assertion by the subaltern of authority to determine who and what is 'great.'"⁷ If jazz has traditionally constituted a masculine context for working out representational politics, gospel music has provided a shared space in which women and men together cultivate musical mastery according to an African American system of values. What needs to be emphasized here is that contrary to many other fields, in gospel music, "greatness" is often ascribed to African American *women* vocalists, musicians, and composers. This is important because I believe that it reflects the longstanding function of gospel music as what Patricia Hill Collins calls a "Black female sphere of influence" in which African American women have been able to craft "independent and oppositional identities" for themselves and exercise unencumbered creativity on their own terms.⁸ Broadly speaking, my dissertation also addresses the ways in which ideas about musical greatness are circulated in writings about gospel music and among communities of believers. Thus throughout the following pages, the recognition of intersecting gender and race ideologies tied to the constructions of greatness in gospel music informs my study on the musical lives of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard.

⁷ George E. Lewis, "Singing Omar's Song: A (Re)construction of Great Black Music," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 4 (1998): 81.

⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2009 [1990]), 218.

As musical innovators and revered cultural figures, Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Karen Clark Sheard have played significant roles in gospel music's development into an instrument for challenging issues of race, gender, class, and religion in African American churches and in the society. At the same time, however, their wealth and superstardom reflect elite status, societal privilege, and access to power that few can achieve in the communities they represent. When viewed this way, each singer has attained a complex position within the American capitalist economy which owes its prosperity to the slave labor provided by Africans and their descendants and in which many African Americans still struggle to overcome problems caused by racism, discrimination, and structural inequality as adverse effects of the history that created the current world order.⁹ In this light, the convergence of the musical, religious, and economic factors that determine each singer's exceptionality presents a continuum of practices that raise further questions about their engagement in gospel music: Why are they so invested in gospel music innovation and its commercialization? Are they simply turning musical talents into profits, deploying cultural resources for prophesy, or some combination of the two? And what does their gospel music "greatness" mean in their communities of support? In the following chapters I provide answers to these questions by exploring the many musical and extra-musical ways in which Jackson, Franklin, and

⁹ See, Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015 [1983]); Eric Williams traces the various form of trade that connects slavery, the growth of various industries and the emergence of the commercial capitalist project (and industrial capitalism that caused its eventual demise) under British colonial rule. Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1944]).

Clark Sheard have induced historical shifts in gospel music performance expressions, while also considering their influences in the realm of American popular music.

Based on my research, I present the thesis that through musical mastery, Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard participate in making a feminist music culture that prioritizes spiritual authenticity and the commercialization of musical knowledge as a counter-hegemonic practice. On that account, I contend that their contributions should be first viewed as “cultural work,” a form of African American women’s activism that consciously advances a female musical perspective in the service of community furtherance.¹⁰ Second, I connect their commercially inspired mode of music making to a culturally grounded business ethos which emerged at the colonial marketplace where some enterprising slaves, many women among them, used the economic system of their oppressive environment for profit-seeking pursuits so that they could purchase freedom for themselves and their loved ones.¹¹

¹⁰ Here I am applying the theoretical views of Patricia Hill Collins, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Sheila Radford-Hill as presented in Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought*, 216-241; Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” in *Home Girls-A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1987), 356-68; Sheila Radford-Hill, “Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Laurentis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 157-72.

¹¹ One such avenue was the trade in spiritual services, which grew out of the nation’s first occult-oriented enterprises established by Africans in colonial America. In *The History of Black Business in America, Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, Juliet E. K. Walker makes a compelling argument for this culturally specific business ethos, which has helped me understand issues surrounding the commercialization of African American sacred music and its relationship to capitalism. Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America, Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship, Vol. 1, To 1865*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 57; 89-95.

I present my research on the musical lives of the three singers in individual chapters as follows: I chronicle the life and career of Mahalia Jackson as a pioneer who established a blueprint for gospel music success, I demonstrate how Aretha Franklin's career originated from a gospel music family business, and I examine the musical and spiritual continuities in Karen Clark Sheard's familial lineage as a way to understand the intergenerational transmission of the gospel music tradition. In my final chapter I examine the three singers' musical activities in concert as "cultural work" for community furtherance based on theoretical perspectives on African American women's activism provided by Patricia Hill Collins, Bernice Johnson Reagon, and Sheila Radford-Hill, which Collins brings together in *Black Feminist Thought*.¹² I find Collins' synthesis of the aforementioned authors' ideas on "cultural work" particularly useful because it helps uncover the counter-hegemonic ideas driving spiritual, cultural, and commercial processes that have shaped gospel music tradition through time.

More generally, my thinking in the final chapter follows Collins' theoretical perspective on the complex arena of African American women's activism through two interdependent dimensions: "struggles for group survival" and efforts to confront and transform institutional power asymmetries.¹³ While the singers discussed in this study have not only contributed to but also made history using music to directly challenge institutional power asymmetries (take for instance Mahalia Jackson's performance at the March on Washington, 1963), my study primarily seeks to shed light on their

¹² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 216-224.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 219.

empowering and sometimes less visible forms of action to advance “group survival” through gospel music, which again provides a context and a medium for making a feminist music culture. To support this position, I draw influence from Collins’ perspectives on how Black women create their spheres of influence as a multifaceted and often veiled resource for actions which aim to challenge the oppression they encounter in everyday life.¹⁴ Indeed, gospel music can be seen to constitute one such sphere of musical practices that foster self-determination and help sustain independent consciousness.¹⁵ Furthermore, because the mastery of gospel music entails both conserving and reworking the musical elements derived from African American heritage into art that asserts self-definition and resists the valorization of hegemonic aesthetic ideals, I believe that the musical lives of the three singers reflect the dual nature of community uplift strategies which Collins describes as “simultaneously conservative and radical.”¹⁶ I ultimately demonstrate how the three singers perform cultural work in three

¹⁴ Ibid., 218-225.

¹⁵ This “sphere of influence” is first a space of consciousness created through music making activities, although it can form in a physical space, for ex. church which has historically provided a place for women’s own religious expression. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes “Sanctified Church(es)” in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Redford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, associate ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 433. This space can and often does occur through musical interactions in which women and men participate together and in which it can be viewed partly through different inter-gender communication strategies which Ellen Koskoff describes in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 9-14.

¹⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

areas identified by Bernice Johnson Reagon: making culture, the transmission of folkways, and building a shared way of seeing the world.¹⁷

Gospel Music Tradition in the Marketplace

So the gift that God has given us, the uniqueness, I think that they were captivated by was that Twinkie would say, “ok I want y’all to do this run, but let’s do it in harmony. Do this riff but let’s do it in harmony.” And when they see us do that in harmony, they would just get up on their feet and be like, “wow, we’ve never heard that before!” And that’s something that my mom put in us, she always had something unique she wanted to pull out...It was always like what can I do that people haven’t heard of? That was always in her mind. — Karen Clark Sheard¹⁸

Not to come out of your element but to stay true to your element, that you know what you have, but to also understand that you don’t let anybody water- or melt down, what God has given you. So staying true to the task of ministry and the way God wants us to, to me is important.— Jacky Clark Chisholm¹⁹

Since in the 1970s, a small group of writers within the emerging African American music studies fought for gospel music to be a legitimate research subject, the steadily growing scholarly interest in this multifaceted musical practice and repertoire has

¹⁷ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers,” in *Women in Africa and African Diaspora*, ed. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley and Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1987), 167-180, quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

¹⁸ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

¹⁹ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

resulted in the strengthening and broadening of the field.²⁰ After the early writers on gospel music established the aesthetic and cultural terms for the field apart from the criteria used in the study of Western classical music, in the ensuing decades scholars expanded the thematic scope of literature and established biographical inquiry as an important aspect of research on which subsequent studies, like the present one, could build upon.²¹ While recent attention has tended to concentrate on special topics in contemporary performance practices, my dissertation represents the first in-depth intergenerational study on African American women's gospel music legacies. As such, it provides a gospel music perspective to increasing body of literature that foregrounds generation as a key area in the study of African American women and music, while it also offers a gender view to the nascent scholarship on African American sacred music in the

²⁰ Some of the foundational texts include, Pearl Williams Jones, "Gospel Music, Crystallization of Black Aesthetic," *Ethnomusicology* 19, no. 3 (1975), 373-385; Horace Clarence Boyer, "Contemporary Gospel Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 1 (1979): 5-58; Horace Clarence Boyer, "Gospel Music Comes of Age," *Black World/Negro Digest*, November 1973, 42-48, 79-86; Horace Clarence Boyer, "Thomas A. Dorsey, Father of Gospel Music" in *Black World/Negro Digest*, July 1974, 20-28; Pearl Williams-Jones, "The Musical Quality of Religious Folk Ritual," *Spirit* 1, (1977): 21-30; Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound, Good News and Bad Times*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Limelight Editions, 1997[1971]); Mellonee V. Burnim, "The Black Gospel Music Tradition: Symbol of Ethnicity" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1980).

²¹ Although the music and lives of prominent gospel music figures have been described throughout the foundational texts, some of the in-depth studies that followed in their tracks include, Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues, The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Roxanne Reed, "Preaching and Piety"; Jerma A. Jackson, "Testifying at the Cross"; Bernice Johnson Reagon ed., *We'll Understand it Better By and By, Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

marketplace.²² Since I started my dissertation research, the study of music and capitalism, now also referred as “economic ethnomusicology,” has emerged as a subfield within ethnomusicology. My work also seeks to advance this developing field from the perspective of gender by demonstrating how gospel music provides a sphere for African American women to perform a variety of creative functions as active participants in the capitalist economy.²³ Before presenting my research, in the following section I take a moment to illustrate how the intersection of gender, generation, and commerce serves as a crucial site for examining cultural processes that continue to shape the development of gospel music. Particularly, I explore this nexus to premise my consistent insistence

²² Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Eileen M. Hayes, introduction to *Black Women and Music, More than the Blues*, ed. Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 6. While the intersection of gender and generation is an unexplored topic in gospel music, particularly the study of hip hop has produced some important works including (as also mentioned by Hayes) Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play, Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Kyra Gaunt, “Dancin’ in the Street to a Black Girl’s Beat: Music, Gender, and the ‘Ins and Outs’ of Double-Dutch,” in *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in the Twentieth Century America*, ed. Joe Alan Austin and Michael Willard (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Tyron Cooper, “Tyscot Records: Gospel Music Production as Ministry,” in *Issues in African American Music*, ed. Maultsby and Burnim, 180-197; Mellonee Burnim, “Crossing Musical Borders: Agency and Process in the Gospel Music Industry” in *Issues in African American Music*, ed. Maultsby and Burnim, 79-88; Portia K. Maultsby. “The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry,” in *We’ll Understand it Better by and By*, ed. Reagon, 19-33; Timothy Dodge, *The School of Arizona Dranes: Gospel Music Pioneer* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013)

²³ Two recently published book-length works mark an important moment in the contemporary study of the relationship between capitalism and music: Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism, A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, ed. *Audible Empire, Music, Global Politics, Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

throughout this dissertation to keep music performance and commercialism in a full view that allows us to understand practices that women have embraced in building gospel music legacies.

I. Musical lineages

In this dissertation, I examine the intergenerational transmission of gospel music tradition through musical lineages that form in actual kinship networks and cultural milieus. At the very basic level, as Bruno Nettl argues, the transmission of musical content entails imparting aural or written “units” (e.g., melodic and rhythmic motifs) which are embedded in repertoires as well as the “stylistic superstructures” (e.g., singing style, intonation).²⁴ My study expands on Nettl’s conceptualization by including contextualized practices and ideologies surrounding the use of music. To that end, my study provides new insights on African American feminist traditions and derives influence from Angela Davis’ landmark work on African American blues women, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*.²⁵ While Davis focuses on working-class cultures surrounding the blues performance, my attention to gospel music sheds light on the emergence of a feminist music culture in the context of gospel music’s gradual acceptance across social classes.

²⁴ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts*, 2nd Edition (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005 [1983]), 295.

²⁵ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xix-xx.

I believe that the concept “musical lineage” is of paramount importance because it helps explain how gospel vocalists’ intergenerational musical relationships position them as culturally and politically significant actors in their communities. My research shows that all three vocalists in this study are embedded in kinship networks through which they have acquired musical, spiritual, and commercial knowledge. They skillfully use this knowledge to create music that offers a medium for the diasporic imaginings of ancestral kinship ties that bind them and their core audiences to a shared past and present. Whether this knowledge is comprised of cultural “retentions” and/or continuities with variations, its expressivity derives from musical source materials which slaves from heterogenous West African backgrounds and their descendants used for forging a common culture in North America.²⁶

In the case of the three singers, “musical lineages” often merge with “spiritual lineages” that delineate kinship networks in which African American religious thought and practices are passed from one generation to the next. All three singers refer to their parents and/or grandparents as religious authorities who exerted a spiritual influence in their lives. Importantly, these religious inheritances also connect them to a deeper context in which their African American foremothers and forefathers adopted Christianity as a religion for experiencing and expressing a “black sacred cosmos.”²⁷ Through the teachings and practices of African American Christianity in their familial and church

²⁶ Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African American Culture, An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992 [1976]), 52-60.

²⁷ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005 [1990]), 2-7, 17.

contexts, the three singers gained understanding of its distinct religious cosmological outlook.²⁸ Based on the sacred songs of the slaves Lawrence Levine describes this worldview in terms that explain the continuity of symbolism and some of the beliefs expressed in gospel songs of today. According to Levine it was a worldview over space and time created by slaves who “extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond.”²⁹ This outlook provided a mode through which communities of slaves could find solace in God and imagine ancestral lineages that provided stability under precarious conditions. This was true even in familial terms. Heather Andrea Williams shows that religious music, as “a balm for emotional pain” caused by the forced separation of families during slavery, served to evoke memories of loved ones and to help sustain hope for reunification in the heavenly home.³⁰ The continued importance of a culturally specific cosmological outlook for community making can be gleaned from

²⁸ While in general terms, Lincoln and Mamiya argue for a more enduring form of this sacred world view, Levine notes that from the Spirituals to gospel songs, the emphasis on transcendent temporality changed into to a more “compartmentalized” idea of the present and the concept of heaven in the future. He also notes that the past became less important than the future as “Jesus rather than the Hebrew Children dominated the gospel songs.” But as Levine also points out, African American culture evolves through both the new and the reworking of the old, which I believe serves to underline how the three singers in this study creatively draw upon their knowledge of the spiritual past to make meaningful sacred music for the present. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* 30th Anniversary Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1978]), 33, 174-189.

²⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

³⁰ Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me Find My People, The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5, 112-113.

many contemporary gospel songs. I will explore this topic in depth in the last chapter of this dissertation.

Because gospel music's expansion from churches to the wider world is intricately linked to commerce and its mechanisms of distribution, I believe that any attempt to understand gospel music transmission processes locally and globally must conceptualize musical lineages in a way that considers the changing technologies in the production and consumption of music. To this end, I refer to Carol Muller and the late Sathima Bea Benjamin's book *Musical Echoes, South African Women Thinking in Jazz*, which provides a theoretical basis for thinking through some of the pertinent issues that emerged in the course of my study. Their work adapts the concept of lineage to the study of music in media influenced cultural landscapes of African diasporas in a manner that opens new possibilities for interpreting processes of contemporary musical transmission over space and time. According to Muller, "Musical lineage or kinship as a transnational musical process describes new social formations forged out of a belief in common ancestry, sometimes defined by race, mostly revealed in the lived experiences of social, economic, and political oppression."³¹ Drawing on Muller's assertion that the global movements of people and the circulation of cultural products have influenced the ways in which diasporic musical lineages form across geographies and in the global market, my work addresses how mediaticized forms of spirituality also play a part in the creation of musical kinship ties between artists with each other and in building their communities.

³¹ In their book Muller provides a comprehensive conceptualization of musical lineage and kinship based on the anthropological origins of this topic of study. Muller and Benjamin, *Musical Echoes*, 95-127.

II. Selling the Sacred

Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have managed to induce transformative changes in the creation and reception of contemporary vocal performance practices partly because they have embraced the commercialization of gospel music. Mahalia Jackson once said when she negotiated song selections with the record executive Mitch Miller in a recording studio: “Mitch you just a great salesman, but what *I* want to sell is God...”³² What was clearly a conversation between two business people in a recording studio, the heart of the music industry’s commodifying enterprise, highlighted this unmistakable fact: to make gospel records for the market is to sell the sacred.

A number of existing studies focus on the blending of sacred and secular musical practices as a driving force of gospel music’s popularity and “cross-over” success. Some readers of this literature might conclude that the religious intent behind the music gradually diluted through increasing encounters with “the world,” when in actuality, as my study shows, gospel music performance has been a religious *and* commercial practice since its beginnings. Certainly, gospel music’s expansion to the mass markets has been accompanied by tightening corporate control over performance aesthetics, venues, and distribution. But to sidestep the economic motivations of musicians and composers whose enormous toil has produced the popularity of gospel music would be to undervalue the agency that they have often proudly exercised in the marketplace. It is true, however, that

³² Jackson preferred “good old gospel songs” over the “sweetened-water stuff” Miller asked her to sing. Laurraine Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby, The Mahalia Jackson Story* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1984 [1975]), 216-217. Given that Goreau’s book was published after Jackson passed away in 1972, it is unknown whether Jackson would have approved the printing of this statement.

while many gospel stars have openly enjoyed the material rewards of their work, success in the business of sacred music has always been a careful balancing act. For instance, in the fall 1954 Jackson said in front of an audience at the Pilgrim Baptist Church that her first paid performance made her realize that singing gospel music for pay offered a way out of domestic work. Yet around the same time she published an article “Why I Turned Down a Million” in *Bronzeville News* to convince the public that despite her gospel stardom she has not made money an idol.³³

Jackson’s ambiguous position between prosperity and piety reflects her awareness of the pitfalls involved in profiting from religious leadership, particularly as a woman faced with the high moral expectations and gender bias in the church.³⁴ However, what complicates any understanding of her intents is that gospel music is a tradition shaped by a confluence of customs and concerns that stem from longstanding and sometimes controversial religious practices. On one hand, spiritual entrepreneurship as a viable but sometimes prosecuted practice can be traced to the economic activities of Africans in 17th century America who capitalized on the prevailing beliefs about their conjuring powers and the establishment of the market for their spiritual services. Their legacy still continues in the modern day supernatural labor and services performed by religious

³³ Mahalia Jackson, “Why I Turned Down a Million,” *Bronzeville News*, September, 1954, 2. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 28, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

³⁴ Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 154-155.

advisors and faith healers in churches alongside clairvoyants and spiritual consultants elsewhere in both urban and rural settings.³⁵

On the other hand, Christian church leaders have also commodified religious knowledge for communal and personal gain since at least the late 19th century. John Giggie describes Reverend Joseph A. Booker as an example of black preachers in the postbellum South who commodified “their status as community leaders” and sold various consumer goods and some religious items to their congregations as a way to offer them freedom to consume outside white distribution networks and purchase products which helped bolster their social and spiritual identities. Although these preachers were often salesmen for northern white manufacturers, this role enabled them to raise money for their churches as emerging black institutions. As Giggie shows, already since the Emancipation churches gradually integrated with markets through investments in material acquisitions from decor symbolizing “progress” to building ownership, although by the end of the 1800s clergymen came under increased criticism as they expanded their marketing strategies to overt advertising to reach consumers in and outside the church.³⁶

Referring to Giggie’s work, Lerone A. Martin connects the early pursuits of these religious entrepreneurs to that of preachers from the 1920s onward who recorded sermons

³⁵ Lashawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 94-122; Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 57; Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

³⁶ John M. Giggie “Preachers and Peddlers of God’ Ex-Slaves and the Selling of African American Religion in the American South,” in *Commodifying Everything, Relationships of the Market*, ed. Susan Strasser (London: Routledge, 2003), 169-190.

using technologies available at the time and thereby made the ritual of preaching a commodity for the mass markets. As a culturally transformative new phenomena, he asserts, these religious broadcasters authority and influence derived from commercial celebrity (“rather than profession, custom, and education”). By the same token, he notes that the difference between preachers of the past who commodified sermons and their contemporary media icon counterparts (e.g., T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, and Juanita Bynum), is in Martin’s words “one of technological and financial scale, not religious ideology.”³⁷ As religious marketing and brand-management has intensified, skeptics ask whether religious leaders actually work toward communal or self-serving ends? In this historical light, it is easy to see that early spiritual workers and postbellum preachers made important inroads in establishing spiritual authority and skill as services and commodities that gospel artists could later rework into musical products in the religious marketplace. At the same time it is unsurprising that along with the growing rewards of doing religious business, gospel artists have, openly or not, taken advantage of the increasing array of “worldly” aspects of making and marketing of music.

III. The Gift of Music

As I show in this dissertation, commercial concerns permeate gospel music production and consumption; at the same time, however, I believe that it would be a grave mistake to reduce the worth that artists and audiences place on gospel music to the

³⁷ Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8.

monetary value that the marketplace sets for recordings and performances. Evidence of this can be found in the common gospel music discourse about the divine musical “gift” for it encapsulates the notion that what is given— by God to an artist who transmits it to her listeners—cannot be measured.”³⁸ While goods are fungible, as Christopher Agnew points out, gifts are personal and singular because they carry the sentiments and emotional labor of the giver.³⁹ What this means for gospel music is that as much as the market economy offers the formal structure for the exchanges that take place between artists and their audiences, some underlying mechanisms of musical transactions are better understood from the perspective of a gift economy.

When being interviewed Karen Clark Sheard commonly refers to the gift of music as a divine endowment that should be kept safe but should also be shared for the benefit of others.⁴⁰ This “keeping-while-giving,” which anthropologist Annette Weiner describes in her classic work *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, helps examine the gift of music, which manifests through spectacular musical mastery as an “inalienable possession;” unlike a true gift that is given away, the keeping-while-giving gift is simultaneously expended and withheld as a basis for the holder’s authority

³⁸ *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*, s.v. “Gifts and Reciprocity.”

³⁹ Jean-Christophe Agnew, “The Give-and-Take of Consumer Culture,” in *Commodifying Everything, Relationships of the Market*, ed. Susan Strasser (London: Routledge, 2003), 30-31.

⁴⁰ Clark Sheard and other Clark Sisters speak about the gift of music as a gift from God that should be used in a way that can touch people’s lives. At the same time, they refer to the importance of living Christian life to ensure the spiritual authenticity of their music, or in other words, that their music stays “anointed.”

and power.⁴¹ As it is also relevant to the present study, Weiner challenges utilitarian perspectives on reciprocal gift-exchanges among men by showing that women can occupy central positions in the processes of the production and transmission of inalienable possessions, like the Maori women who prepare cloaks from cloth, a “signifying medium,” that serves as repositories of human labor imbued with spiritual, political, and kinship symbolism.⁴²

Thinking through the mode of “keeping-while-giving” helps us understand how the “inalienable possession” of musical mastery provides a mechanism with which Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard can mediate the need to maintain authorial status and the practical use of musical knowledge for cultural production and even commodification. According to Weiner:

What makes a possession inalienable is its exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through life and its history is authenticated by fictive or true genealogies, origin myths, sacred ancestors, and gods. In this way, inalienable possessions are transcendent treasures to be guarded against all the exigencies that might force their loss.⁴³

When applied to gospel music, this definition of an “inalienable possession” connects with ideas surrounding musical mastery as the product of divine inspiration and musical and spiritual inheritances. These spiritual and ancestral sources of authentication that are

⁴¹ Although the general idea of “keeping-while-giving” is based on Weiner’s research in the Oceania, she points out that it too operates in Western economies. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 33.

“perceived to be outside the present,” as Weiner points out, legitimate the differentiation and influential position of its holder. It thus follows that the prioritization of spiritual authenticity demonstrated by the three singers in this study provides a key insight into gospel music performance as a locus of spiritual, political, and commercial powers that a performer simultaneously retains and expends on reciprocal musical transactions (in person and via records) through which the participants seek to access the inalienable possession itself.

Then the sharing of the gift of gospel music with the world, predicates that one sells gospel music but does not “sell out.” As such, the keeping-while-giving constitutes a demanding economic and political commitment, as Weiner observes from Polynesian women’s involvement in the production of sacred cloaks, because its effects on a person’s or group’s social identity depend on the strategies of conserving the inalienable possession and the political power vested in it. Based on her research, Weiner remarks that goods exchanged for wealth give the illusion that everybody is sharing on the largess, but in actuality, the political impact (and risk) resides in what one is able to keep or even what might be seized “by those bold and wealthy enough to capture someone else’s inalienable possessions, embrace someone else’s ancestors, magic, and power, and then, transfer some parts of these identities to the next generation.”⁴⁴ In the context of gospel music, similar issues emerge in the marketplace which, as I have mentioned above, also operate inside churches, but, more observably whenever the music industry acts as a broker between artists and consumers. The endeavor of “selling God,” as

⁴⁴ Ibid., 47.

Jackson proclaimed to Miller, entails complex negotiations about how to guard the “inalienable possession” for the benefit of oneself and the group it represents while giving it away (or selling it) in a manner that deals with cultural concerns that are bound up with those of cultural appropriation.

Although the commercialization of gospel music comes with pressures to make the music accessible to an expanding base of listeners, it is remarkable that at the same time Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have managed these pressures by mastering an aesthetic expression that, in its complexity, poses a great challenge to definability and control. Dense musical narratives and an abundance of stylistic elements in their songs practically create obscure song surfaces for sovereign spaces that keep the sources of the music’s power hidden away from attempts to discern its workings from the outside. For example, it is easy to see from countless writings on Aretha Franklin’s music that efforts to capture the totality of her emotional expressivity on the page prove futile. Even the most detailed transcriptions fail to grasp her multifarious vocal presence. Although what can be observed from her evocative style, as well as Jackson’s and Clark Sheard’s, is that her “keeping-while-giving” takes shape through a trade in what could be called “the currency of emotional excess.” On one hand, her music compels us to listen because it exemplifies the aesthetic of excess that in Katya Mandoki’s words “captures attention, engages our sensibility, and seizes our imagination.” On the other hand, Franklin’s aesthetic of excess makes an opaque guard for the music’s impactful essence. This paradoxical duality attests to Mandoki’s point that excess “is never aesthetically

neutral.”⁴⁵ Indeed, it seems that in the music of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard, the aesthetic of excess is commercial and political at the same time; the trade in the currency of emotional excess provides a strategy for transforming musical materials into gospel songs that acquire various registers of value and for creating of an independent African American feminist music culture.

Methodology

An intergenerational study of pioneering gospel music vocalists presents a particularly multifaceted topic of inquiry because over time, gospel music has emerged as a religious music style that holds cultural significance for African American listeners outside congregational settings and represents varying meanings for other audiences as well.⁴⁶ Because Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have played important roles in cultural and commercial processes driving gospel music’s expansion, I formulated a methodology that combined ethnography in their core communities with research that sought to understand their influences on a national and even an international scale. Fortunately, for some time, scholars in the study of music have recognized that “one size does not fit all” and that increasingly varied configurations of the field require a matching repertoire of methodological approaches. Thus to study the music and lives of pioneering

⁴⁵ Katya Mandoki, “Material Excess and Aesthetic Transmutation,” *Parallax* 7, no. 1 (2001): 67.

⁴⁶ Mellonee Burnim, “Tropes of Continuity and Disjuncture in the Globalization of Gospel Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Suzel Ana Reily and Jonathan M. Dueck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 469-486.

women in gospel music, I conceptualized a multilayered and multi-sited field that is comprised of different Christian denominational communities, concerts, and virtual sites such as the YouTube video streaming service and social media applications.⁴⁷ To gain a better historical perspective I studied archives that contain documents about the three singers' lives and times. My research took me to several important cities on the gospel music map of America including Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, Washington D.C., and New Orleans.

Core Audiences of Gospel Music

I use the term “core audiences” throughout this dissertation in reference to African American gospel music listeners who belong in church-based communities and/or actively participate in gospel music concerts and consume mediated forms of the music. Members of the Greater Emmanuel Institutional Church of God in Christ (GEI), led by Bishop J. Drew Sheard and Karen Clark Sheard exemplify a dedicated gospel music core audience. Several congregants who attend weekly worship services at the GEI also support Clark Sheard’s musical career. For instance, a busload of church members traveled to Chicago for her and Kierra Sheard’s live album recordings in January 2011 and September 2013. Furthermore, members of GEI and other fans of Clark Sheard

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that because of present day connectivity enabled by information technology and possibilities for “virtual ethnography,” what today constitutes “the field” is ever present. Rebecca S. Miller, Svanibor Pettan, Anne K. Rasmussen, and Margaret Sarkissian, “Negotiating the Personal and Professional: Ethnomusicologists and Uncomfortable Truths,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 48 (2016), 192-193.

provide an enthusiastic audience for Clark Sheard's live songs that were recorded at GEI.⁴⁸

In terms of African American gospel music enthusiasts who gather in concert settings, I offer an example of listeners who attended the corporate sponsored performance of Dorinda Clark Cole at the "Singers Lounge Showcase" in New York in August 2011.⁴⁹ Through my conversations with several individuals in attendance, I learned that many of them (like others I met through my fieldwork) are effectively lay scholars of gospel music who possess extensive historical knowledge of the music and closely follow its trends.⁵⁰

The Field

African American church communities across the nation form a central support network for the performance of gospel music and the circulation of songs that members in those communities first hear on the radio or through other media channels.⁵¹ Many

⁴⁸ Several tracks on the following albums were recorded at GEI, Karen Clark Sheard, *Heavens Are Telling*, Elektra 62894-2, 2003; Karen Clark Sheard, *It's Not Over*, WD2-886379, 2006.

⁴⁹ Dorinda Clark Cole, *The Samsung Experience Presents "The Singers Lounge Showcase,"* August 15, 2011, Time Warner Center, New York, NY.

⁵⁰ Since the early years of study of gospel music in the academy, some scholars have also written on the topic as public intellectuals, which demonstrates overlapping scholarly and community uplift oriented goals of the field. See for example Boyer, "Gospel Music Comes of Age"; Boyer, "Thomas A. Dorsey"; Williams-Jones, "The Musical Quality of Religious Folk Ritual"; Reagon, ed., *We'll Understand it Better, By and By*.

⁵¹ Members in local congregations can collectively influence the local popularity of a gospel song by word-of-mouth. It is also commonplace that church choirs adopt well liked songs into their own performance repertoire.

large and small churches serve as venues where gospel artists perform in worship contexts and hold concerts for predominantly religious audiences including some of their most loyal fans. At the same time, most professional performers themselves are contributing church members. For example a church bulletin issued by the Greater Salem Baptist Church suggests that Mahalia Jackson paid tithes at her “church home” in Chicago.⁵² Furthermore, when I interviewed Jacky Clark Chisholm of the Clark Sisters she said that belonging to a “church home” provides an indicator of a gospel artist’s commitment to God.⁵³ Undoubtedly a gospel superstar’s association with a church also contributes to its prestige and reputation. This synergic relationship between artists and churches can be observed from the examples provided by several famous gospel singers (e.g., Donnie McLurkin, Hezekiah Walker, and Kim Burrell) who are widely known for their church affiliations.

Gospel concerts that are held in commercial venues outside churches draw audiences including churchgoers and others who simply enjoy and value the music for various reasons. These venues range from gospel supper clubs to Carnegie Hall and the annual Essence Festival, one of the largest music festivals which primarily caters to the musical tastes of African American women. (An All-Star Gospel Tribute was organized to

⁵² In “The Voice” published by Greater Salem Baptist Church, Mahalia Jackson’s church in Chicago, the financial statement includes the names of all who have financially contributed to the church. The long list includes “M. Jackson” (perhaps in reference to Mahalia Jackson) who had paid \$0.5. Church bulletin, The Voice of the Greater Salem Baptist Church, Chicago, IL, ca. July, 1954, 6. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 458, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

⁵³ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

honor the Clark Sisters at the Essence Festival in July, 2016) In addition, over the past several decades gospel music has moved far beyond American borders as a result of the hard work of touring artists and the worldwide distribution of gospel recordings.⁵⁴

Thus, a researcher aiming to follow gospel music's many trails has to be vigilant in seeking the formal and informal channels through which record labels and artists promote performances. Large concerts are often advertised through gospel music radio programs, but smaller concerts and even famous artists' appearances at church events are advertised through the Internet, promotional flyers, social media, church bulletins and announcements, and word-of-mouth, depending on the promotion budget reserved for the event. Only for major concerts, are tickets advertised and made available through commercial ticket outlets. When I pursued my research, it was easy to learn about Aretha Franklin's concerts from the radio and a simple search on the Internet produced several concert dates and sites for ticket purchase. Although Karen Clark Sheard's and the Clark Sisters' concerts were also occasionally advertised on corporate sponsored sites, many of them were not. For instance, I was fortunate to learn about Clark Sheard's free concert at a community outreach block party in Pontiac, MI through my interviewee Jeffrey Cross.

Detroit

⁵⁴ See, Timothy Rommen, *Mek Some Noise, Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Burnim, "Tropes of Continuity and Disjuncture In the Globalization of Gospel Music," 469-486; Kevin Simmons, "The Gospel Truth About Japan," *The Massachusetts Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer, 2005): 189-194; Mark W. Lewis, "The Diffusion of Black Gospel Music in Postmodern Denmark: With Implications for Evangelization, Meaning Construction, and Christian Identity" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008).

The primary site of my ethnographic research was Detroit. Although I did not live in Detroit during my fieldwork, between October 2010 and August 2011, I regularly spent time in the Detroit area on trips that varied in length from a few days to two to three weeks at a time. During these visits, I attended worship services and concerts, interviewed interlocutors, did archival research, learned about Detroit's history and participated in different aspects of social life with friends who were native Detroiters.⁵⁵ My fieldwork centered around two church communities in which I got to know congregation members, musicians, and clergy.



Figure 1.1. Greater Emmanuel Institutional Church of God in Christ, Detroit, MI.

Greater Emmanuel Institutional Church of God in Christ (GEI), the church in which Karen Clark Sheard serves as the First Lady, provided a primary setting for the

⁵⁵ Though my field research did not follow the traditional mode of taking residence in the field my approach was not particularly novel. In more ways than one, I was following in the footsteps of Jeff Todd Titon whose biographical collaboration with Aretha Franklin's father Rev. C.L. Franklin in the 1970s brought him to Detroit for research visits. Records documenting Titon's interviews and correspondence with C.L. Franklin are held in the C.L. Franklin papers (box no. 1) in the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

research and analysis which I present in the chapter about Clark Sheard and her music.⁵⁶ In the church circles of Detroit, Clark Sheard is known for being very accessible to her congregation members and fans. I found this to be true, as Clark Sheard and her husband along with the congregation members of GEI warmly welcomed me to their close-knit community and facilitated my access to interviews. At the GEI, I attended worship services, choir rehearsals, and other events hosted by the church several times a week, a regional Holy Convocation (gathering of church leaders and COGIC parishioners), and annual special events such as the Easter program, the Pastor's Anniversary, and The First Lady Love Day. The GEI worship services were usually led by Bishop J. Drew Sheard. GEI members also appreciatively told me that Clark Sheard prioritizes her weekly church attendance while maintaining an intense touring schedule as a gospel singer. The worship services at the GEI were usually filled to capacity by attendees from all walks of life. In addition to the rich musical atmosphere, what makes the GEI uniquely attractive to visitors from near and far is that on any given Sunday one might see a national recording artist in the pew or hear the singing and preaching by Detroit's own stars (e.g. Marvin Winans of The Winans) and Clark Sheard's family members Kierra Sheard, J. Drew Sheard, J. Moss, Jacky Clark Chisholm, Dorinda Clark Cole, and Twinkie Clark Terrell. I also attended Dorinda Clark Cole's concert at the Bailey Temple of Detroit, Kierra Sheard's live recording at Harold Washington Cultural Center in Chicago, and Karen Clark Sheard's live recording at House of Hope in Chicago.

⁵⁶ The pastor's wife is frequently called the "First Lady" in various African American denominations.



Figure 1.2. New Bethel Baptist Church, Detroit, MI.

New Bethel Baptist Church is the church where Aretha Franklin's father Rev. C.L. Franklin served as a celebrated pastor for over three decades. As the preacher's daughter, Aretha Franklin's talents were nurtured in this church and throughout the years, and since her father's passing, she has maintained a relationship to New Bethel. According to the current pastor Robert Robert Smith Jr., she continues to provide great support and publicity for the church.⁵⁷ For example she recorded her Grammy-winning live gospel album there in 1987, which according to Pastor Smith generated an increase in membership. She also organizes gospel music events at New Bethel and regularly returns there for performances. Pastor Smith has been at the helm of New Bethel Baptist Church since the passing of C.L. Franklin. Personable and forthright, Pastor Smith is accustomed to answering questions presented by scholars and journalists who continue to visit this landmark church and its history room which includes plaques and photographs

⁵⁷ Pastor Robert Smith Jr., Interview with Author, July 14, 2011, Detroit, MI.

chronicling the people and events that define its legacy. Pastor Smith who has served in several spiritual and political leadership positions continues the politically conscious religious engagement that C.L. Franklin advanced at New Bethel. Pastor Smith's sermons typically offer a Bible-based take on contemporary issues. Although worship services include both new and older music styles, the New Bethel community upholds its musical heritage which is best reflected in the lining out hymns led by the pastor or deacon. The young church musicians that I interviewed at New Bethel were keen to assert that although they have the ability to play contemporary styles, they still can perform traditional gospel music in contrast to many in their generation who do not play traditional songs. I also attended other events which the members organized, one of which was the "Official Hat Day" held one Sunday to celebrate African American women's tradition of wearing beautiful hats to church.

In Philadelphia, New York, and Washington D.C. I attended church services and concerts. Like Detroit, Philadelphia is a major gospel music city with a rich musical history and a flourishing contemporary scene that one can observe in weekly worship services and concerts given by local and national performers. The recurrent field methods course led by ethnomusicology professors Carol Muller and Timothy Rommen has an established research collaboration with local African American churches for documenting musical practices in these communities.⁵⁸ I studied those films as part of my research. One of the Penn's faith-based partner communities is the Second Antioch Baptist Church

⁵⁸ Course website, "West Philadelphia Music," University of Pennsylvania, accessed April 12, 2017, "<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/music/westphillymusic/>"; Jonathan Dueck, "West Philadelphia Music," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 40 (2008): 212-213.

of Philadelphia pastored by Joe E. Nock who is also a very active community leader. I attended Sunday services and choir rehearsals at the Second Antioch fairly frequently over two years. I also participated in the very musical Sunday services intermittently at the Mt. Airy Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and I attended several gospel music concerts that were held there. In Philadelphia, like in Washington D.C. and New York I attended a range of non church-based gospel music events, including, inter alia, “the Church Girl” stage play featuring Karen Clark Sheard, Aretha Franklin’s concerts including the unique occasion of Franklin teaming up with the former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for a charity concert, and a Mahalia Jackson stage play at the historic Tindley Temple United Methodist Church.

I conducted research in several important archival sites in or around these cities including the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library, and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit.

Chicago and New Orleans

To examine primary resources about Mahalia Jackson’s life and career I traveled to study the archives located in her two “hometowns,” Chicago and New Orleans. Specifically, I visited the Chicago History Museum and the Williams Research Center of

the Historic New Orleans Collection. The latter contain the William Russell Jazz Collection, which includes a detailed record of Russell's time as Jackson's assistant and rare recordings from her rehearsals. Because she is an historical figure, for the most part one can learn about Jackson's personality and actions through oral histories and written resources. For example, when I was listening to recordings of Jackson's rehearsals at the Historic New Orleans Collection, one small detail stood out: the care and agency with which she guarded her representation as an artist. When Russell recorded her performances, she simply did not allow the tape to run; instead, she required it to be stopped during moments when she was not comfortable having her singing or speaking recorded.

Reflections

Following the direction set by scholars who have argued for the importance of reflection and the researcher's consciousness about being a social actor in the study of music, I offer an account of some personal experiences that have shaped my interest in the topic of this research.⁵⁹ In reality, this dissertation is a product of my lifelong interest in gospel music, which oddly enough, began in the context of my Lutheran upbringing in Finland. As a teenager, I was first drawn in to the dynamic sounds of gospel music

⁵⁹ See, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade," *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2001): 1-52; Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, 136-138; Deborah Justice and Fredara M. Hadley, "Collaborative Fieldwork, 'Stance,' and Ethnography," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 47 (2015): 64-81; Timothy J. Cooley and Gregory Barz, "Casting Shadows: Fieldwork Is Dead! Long Live Fieldwork!" in *Shadows in the Field*, 2nd ed., ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

through the rite of confirmation which, at the initiative of my church's new progressive pastor, concluded in a worship service that featured music with "gospelized" rhythms and spirited singing. Certainly this unusual liturgical music inspired my peers and I into an emotive spiritual and communal expression, which differed markedly from that evoked by hymns that were quietly sung in regular Sunday worship services. Without a doubt, in my initial encounter with gospel music, I was an eager participant much more than a participant-observer, but as such, it constituted a pivotal moment in my quest to learn more about the origins of this beautiful music and its religious background. During the ensuing years, I sought gospel recordings, which were rarely easy to find. I remember going to a record store and when I asked to buy "a gospel record" the associate sold me an R&B album *Love Confessions* (1987) by Miki Howard which I still have in my collection. (Although unbeknown to me at the time, Howard is another example of mother to daughter transmission of music. Her mother Josephine Howard was a member of the famous gospel group The Caravans).

My more direct form of learning about the African American culture dates back to my arrival in the United States to play basketball as a scholar athlete for a college team in which the majority of members were young African American women. For over four years, we lived together in the same dorm rooms, practiced and played basketball for several hours a day, and even spent most of our social time with each other (including holidays which coincided with the basketball season). We gathered in social spaces where R&B and hip hop music were seemingly always around, which thus provided the soundtrack for our life in college. I highlight my experiences in basketball here because I

believe that learning about another culture through team sports, perhaps not unlike when playing jazz in a cutting contest, offers a unique mode of interaction in which the spirit of positive competition helps not only to develop the players' skills, but also to build deeper interpersonal understanding, camaraderie, and solidarity.⁶⁰

I choose to highlight my experience in playing basketball here because I believe that it has shaped my research stance. What is relevant is that through the game of basketball, I was able to learn about African American stylistic preferences that can be observed in sports as in gospel music. In those days, I could not theorize about this theme, but today I can recognize similarities between cultural expressions of great skill in both realms with the help of Michael Eric Dyson's take on the superb qualities of the basketball "craft" of Michael Jordan: "will to spontaneity (improvisation)," "stylization of performed self," and "the use of edifying deception" which Dyson attributes to the seemingly superhuman or magical (in my words) "hang time" of Jordan's leap in the air which transcends preconceived boundaries and as such operates toward "subversion of the culturally or physically possible through the creative and deceptive manipulation of

⁶⁰ A great number of ethnomusicological research now incorporates reflective accounts which offer information on the ways in which researchers built and negotiated friendships in the field. Less is written, however, about the ways in which these friendships possibly influenced the researchers perspectives on the research itself. Certainly the quality of friendship and its influence on a researcher's stance is hard to evaluate. In social sciences, Brent Berry writes about the difficulty of quantifying friendship in this way: "As with interracial marriage, friendship segregation is a desirable measure because it reflects contact. Friendship has received less attention, but may be one of the best gauges of race relations because it is a less formal and less permanent relationship than either marriage or residential segregation." Brent Berry, "Indices of Racial Segregation, a Critical Review and Redirection," in *White Logic, White Methods, Racism and Methodology*, ed. Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 211.

appearance.”⁶¹ As is clear, and confirmed by the word “craft” used by Dyson, these features should *not* be viewed from an essentialist frame of reference, but rather in stylistic terms. In an essay that addresses this point, Jeff Greenfield puts it succinctly: “A poor boy who is black can play “white” and a white boy of middle-class parents can play “black.”⁶² (I would add “or a girl” in both cases) Greenfield then adds, in a way that I believe ties well with my view on using sports as a form of intercultural learning: “...and what makes basketball the most intriguing of sports is how these styles do not necessarily clash; how the punishing intensity of “white” players and the dazzling moves of the “blacks” can fit together, a fusion of cultures that seems more and more difficult in the world beyond the out-of-bounds line.”⁶³

Years later when I embarked on the fieldwork for this study, I found that some of my interlocutors could relate to me better, and opened up, after I told them about my past as a basketball player. However, in the field, unlike on the basketball court where I was one of the players in the game, I was a researcher and a cultural outsider, two roles which came with a set of new expectations and negotiations.

First, I must emphasize that church communities in which I did my fieldwork welcomed my research warmly and expressed appreciation for my interest in (their) great

⁶¹ Michael Eric Dyson, “Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking, A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagele Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 410-411.

⁶² Jeff Greenfield, “The Black and White Truth about Basketball,” in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking*, ed. Caponi, 378.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

women of gospel music. It is possible, as one interlocutor told me, that since I was from Europe (albeit via the University of Pennsylvania), I was so much of a “cultural outsider” that my presence in the African American communities of my study was perceived with somewhat fewer reservations than if I were an American white. Nonetheless, I was conscious of the power asymmetries and the oppressive histories that my race represented as one pastor reminded me that coming from Scandinavia I was indeed “the whitest of the whites.” I was also mindful that as a white researcher pursuing the study of “human subjects” (as per my IRB forms) in African American communities, I became a part of an Academic research tradition which has a problematic past. While modern Western science took shape through practices that advanced ideological thoughts which were in support of slavery and colonialism, a specific 20th century strand of this tradition was built by white American and European scholars who often studied and interpreted African American communities to address a range of social “problems” or to simply use them for unethical research studies like the Tuskegee syphilis experiment.⁶⁴ Famous examples of the former include the branch of urban sociology that used Chicago as a “laboratory” to study racial conditions in ways that provided foundations for ideas about social pathology that were notoriously presented in the *Moynihan Report* (1965). Still, ethnography produced to study the “underclass” in the 1980s continued to perpetuate similar

⁶⁴ Tukufu Zuberi, *Thicker than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), 5-15; James H. Jones, “The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment,” in Ezekiel J. Emanuel, Christine Grady, Robert A. Crouch, Reidar K. Lie, Franklin G. Miller and David Wendler ed., *The Oxford Textbook of Clinical Research Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86-96.

pejorative views.⁶⁵ Although I focused on studying music, which could seem relatively “harmless” compared to the field of medicine for instance, I nonetheless felt that I always carried the “baggage” of this scholarly history with me in the field as an inescapable frame through which my interlocutors and I used to evaluate each others’ words and intentions.

In my view, one way to mitigate the power asymmetries that my racial and professional presence in the field represented was to openly present myself as a researcher who was *not* intent on staying in the communities of study for an extended time. (Traditionally, researchers have lived “in the field” for months or years in order to integrate into social fabric of local communities.) I communicated my comings and goings clearly to all those who I befriended, to honestly demonstrate that my role as a researcher was primarily to learn and collect information for a scholarly analysis, which would be made public in my dissertation one day. I still remain in touch with some of my interlocutors, and I believe that their continued communication signals that this mode of research was successful in terms of relationship management.

One reason for this positive outcome of my research method is probably that I studied gospel singers who are celebrities in their communities. As I mentioned earlier,

⁶⁵ Alford A. Young, Jr., “White Ethnographers on the Experiences of African American Men,” in *White Logic, White Methods, Racism and Methodology*, ed. Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 187; As early as the 1940s, a Swedish scholar Gunnar Myrdal was invited to the U.S. to conduct a study on the issues of African Americans in America, in which he concluded that “the problem” should be actually located in the conflict between American ideals of democracy and the inequitable position of African American citizens in the society. *American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1944).

several of my interlocutors were delighted to offer views on gospel music and vocalists whose music they hold in high personal and cultural value. Furthermore, when I interviewed Karen Clark Sheard and her sister Jacky Clark Chisholm, their confidence and poise reflected the fact that both are public figures for whom interviews (by the press and media) are “a part of the job.” Thus, one can expect them, like anybody else representing a profession or a collective in the public eye to easily slip into the “institutional voice,” which Beverley Diamond calls a style of discourse that echoes the rhetoric of an institution (or a “brand” I might add) associated with an individual. For instance, a gospel music professional’s “institutional voice” might draw on denominationally specific religious discourses. In addition, they might repeat polished parts of personal history that are already printed on press releases that record labels use to market (and brand) an artist’s music and manage public relations. Thus when interviewing Clark Sheard and Clark Chisholm, I sought to ask new questions that differed from those they encounter by the press, to enable their “personal voices” to come forth.⁶⁶

In studying the music and lives of celebrity vocalists through interviews and archival research, I was aware of the power relations between me and my famous subjects that were practically the inverse of those of scholars and their interlocutors in small and often marginalized community settings. To be sure, power relations between researchers and their subjects are intricately connected to issues of access. Indeed, the

⁶⁶ Beverley Diamond, “The Interpretation of Gender Issues in Musical Life Stories of Prince Edwards Islanders,” in *Music and Gender*, ed. Pirkko Moisala and Beverley Diamond (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 106.

problem of access has played a major part in the relative lack of study about key decision makers and others laboring within the powerful institutional structures of the music industry. In 1992, Sara Cohen argued for the ethnographic study of popular music by recounting Simon Frith's assertion ten years earlier that "very little has been written about how commercial decisions are reached. We still don't know much about how musicians make their musical choices, how they define their social role, how they handle its contradictions"⁶⁷ Since then the ethnography among music audiences in various social settings has become an often used mode of popular music research. However, thirty five years later, we still do not have many answers to those questions from the most influential and visible individuals in the music industry whose decisions and actions greatly shape popular culture. The likely reason is that scholars rarely have the opportunity to do research inside the recording studios and boardrooms where cultural, economic, and political elites operate. It is also important to note that scholars who study the lives of prominent entertainers, policymakers, and other international superstars from their contributions (e.g., music, art, speeches) are small and relatively weak actors within the profit-driven and litigious corporate world. This is a fact that can complicate the research and the goal of publishing the results. Kellie Marshall elucidates this issue in a writing on her efforts to publish a collection of dancer-actor Gene Kelly's interviews, a process which was halted because of a lawsuit that Kelly's widow pursued based on

⁶⁷ Simon Frith, "British Popular Music Research," IASPM UK Working Paper, no. 1, 1982, 9 in "Review of The Hidden Musicians" by R. Finnegan, in *Sociological Review* (1991): 199-201 quoted in Sara Cohen, "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music* 12, no. 2 (May, 1993): 127.

claims to hold copyrights to all his interviews. The outcome was eventually in Marshall's favor; the lawsuit was dismissed by a judge in California, but as she explains, it came at a high personal cost, publication delays, and the decision to redirect her scholarship.⁶⁸

Marshall's text refers to Rebecca Ganz's article that offers informative legal reasoning on the ways in which estates of celebrities use and misuse intellectual property rights legislation as a form of censorship to protect the image of the deceased and the family's privacy. When millions of dollars are at stake, Ganz asserts, the estates, drawing on their ample resources, are motivated to pursue legal battles that pose a challenge to the fair use doctrine. In this way the estates' economic and private motivations are often in conflict with the true goal of copyright protection to promote progress in arts, ultimately, for the public benefit.⁶⁹ Power dynamics between scholars and their high-ranking research subjects are a little explored but an important theme in popular music studies. I believe that questions about our access to the elites, their power, and what the absence of knowledge from and about them means for our scholarship, present important avenues

⁶⁸ Kellie Marshall, "When Your Scholarship Goes to Court," *Chronicle Vitae*, March 27, 2017, <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1746-when-your-scholarship-goes-to-court>.

⁶⁹ Rebecca F. Ganz, "A Portrait of the Artist's Estate as a Copyright Problem," *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* 739 (2008): 739-762.

for exploration, reflection, and even legislative advocacy for scholars and university presses interested in publishing their work.⁷⁰

What follows next is a presentation of my intellectual orientation, which I provide by discussing central themes that emerged from my research. To better explain my approach to those themes, I elucidate each using pertinent scholarship. After Chapter 2, I will provide my research in three chapters covering the musical lives of Mahalia Jackson, Aretha Franklin, and Karen Clark Sheard. In the final chapter, I draw theoretical conclusions from materials that I present in this dissertation.

⁷⁰ One recent exception is Andrew Florry's *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2017). Florry was uniquely able to study Motown's archives and gather internal information that helped him write this book. Economic and political elites rarely open themselves up for criticism, rather opting to tell their own stories. From autobiographies and memoirs we can gather some valuable views. For example, music mogul Clive Davis's autobiography offers behind-the-scenes insights on the music industry over a time span that extends several decades. Clive Davis with Anthony DeCurtis, *The Soundtrack of My Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2013).

CHAPTER 2: The Practice of Gospel Music: Thematic Perspectives

Central Themes of this Dissertation

In the following section I explore several themes that emerged from my research and that I believe to be central for an understanding of women's gospel music legacies. Under each theme, I discuss existing theoretical models that help elucidate relations between my research findings and the cultural and historical contexts within which they can be accurately examined.

The Sound

While the artistic contributions of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard span different overlapping gospel music eras, taken together, these singers represent generational shifts and specific innovations in the tradition. Each has introduced and popularized distinct performance approaches within their respective communities of support and social networks. In parallel, all three are admired by national and international audiences because of their great mastery of performance conventions that define African American music. In *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, Samuel A. Floyd Jr. presents a detailed set of these conventions. In doing so, he refers to the ring shout ritual as the primary context in which African slaves and their ancestors in America preserved and cultivated essential elements of African American music including

calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions; hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off-beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be derived); timbral distortions of various kinds; musical individuality within collectivity; game rivalry; hand clapping, foot patting, and approximations thereof; apart-playing; and the metronomic pulse that underlies all African-American music.⁷¹

Within the framework described by Floyd, gospel music can be viewed as a style saturated with African American heritage and an evolving tradition shaped by syncretic processes that generally characterize African American music. Nonetheless, what distinguishes the art of gospel singing and performance practices from other styles, according to gospel music scholar and musician Pearl Williams-Jones, is the aesthetic ideal that is derived from two basic sources: “the free-style collective improvisations of the black church congregation and the rhetorical solo style of the black gospel preacher.”⁷² Since childhood, Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have been congregants and members of families dedicated to serving God in churches where these two sources have been embraced as central elements of African American Christian tradition. Immersion in tradition has enabled them to observe and listen closely to the communicational techniques and aims between preachers and their congregations.

In becoming a gospel vocalist, a figure that Williams-Jones characterizes as the musical counterpart of the preacher, all three singers have developed musical devices to

⁷¹ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music, Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

⁷² Pearl Williams-Jones, “Gospel Music,” 381.

demonstrate their intense emotional and spiritual involvement in the delivery of a religious message through a song. Among the typical devices they deploy are the use of chest voice to produce varied tonal colorings and breathiness and application of black speech forms such as “worrying the line” as a means to build drama in the course of a song.⁷³ These singers’ masterful application of African American stylistic elements in the context of a gospel song demonstrates the complexity of an art form, which music theorist and gospel music scholar Horace Boyer views as a tradition differing greatly and in contrast to the Western European aesthetic.⁷⁴ Through an analysis of the musical elements of timbre, range, text interpolation, and improvisation, both melodic and rhythmic, Boyer pinpoints numerous expressive subtleties that the best gospel singers, like the women discussed in this study, incorporate into music. Take for instance the strained, full-throated sound ideal (unlike the “unencumbered” sound of the Western European Classical tradition), which developed through the practice of singing in churches without amplification and which some vocalists with lighter voices fashion through use of the “growl.” In addition, Boyer mentions the tasteful manipulation of vibrato. He also points out the variety of choices available for a singer in creating melodic figures from neighboring tones or *gruppettos* composed of several disjunct and conjunct tones that embellish or decidedly depart from the underlying harmony. In addition, he emphasizes the importance of rhythmic innovation, a topic which he illustrates through a transcription of Mahalia Jackson’s recording of “Amazing Grace.”

⁷³ Ibid., 383.

⁷⁴ Boyer, “Contemporary Gospel Music,” 23.

In his score, Boyer uses several compound time signatures to describe how Jackson manages tone duration to induce syncopation.⁷⁵ Taking all these intricate dimensions together, Boyer's article confirms the challenge of accurately transcribing the complexities of gospel music performance using Western music notation.

Most recently, gospel music scholar and choir director Andrew Legg has sought to address the problematics of transcribing gospel music vocal expression by expanding the taxonomy of singing techniques established by Williams-Jones and Boyer with transcription and analysis that reference specific audio tracks.⁷⁶ One vocal gesture that Legg elucidates for his readers is the "gospel moan." He argues that both Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin produce a "simple moan" by using a closed-mouth technique. For example in the song "The Upper Room," Legg illustrates Jackson's "simple moan" and a similar sound that she creates by extending the humming-quality of the soft nouns "n" and "m." This point is in line with Legg's view that individual interpretation and improvisation valued in gospel singing provides for a great range of interpretative possibilities that bend and blend established techniques.⁷⁷ To this end, I offer Clark Sheard's "squall" as an example. While many gospel music fans use the term "squall" to describe a fervent type of call or a shout as expressed by any artist, among gospel music enthusiasts, Karen Clark Sheard and her sister Elbernita "Twinkie" Clark

⁷⁵ Ibid., 24-36.

⁷⁶ Andrew Legg, "A Taxonomy of Musical Gesture in African American Gospel Music," in *Popular Music* 29, no. 1 (2010): 103-129.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 120.

are admired for their particularly gripping use of this vocal device. Clark Sheard's technique is similar to what Legg identifies as Clarence Fountain's shout that evolves into a scream in the song "When I Come to the End of My Journey."⁷⁸ Clark Sheard uses the device for an intensifying effect, but while doing so, she often colors it with a deep but a pitched growl and infuses it with a piercing quality by exploiting the bright resonances of her voice. Additionally, in performance one can observe how Clark Sheard usually executes this gesture by leaning to her right side with squinted eyes and singing to the microphone with an open mouth in a posture that highlights the centrality of her entire body in its production. (See figure 2.1.)



Figure 2.1. Karen Clark Sheard executes a vocal gesture.

While gospel music vocal style is definable by specific musical gestures and their functions as the aforementioned scholars illustrate, its scope of expression has expanded

⁷⁸ Ibid., 113.

over time as a result of frequently controversial but common use of secular music materials. The music of the three singers in this study confirms that each has consciously drawn influences from sounds and techniques typical to jazz, blues, Western classical music, and other secular music styles. The variability of sources not only demonstrates the constantly evolving nature of gospel music, but also the singers' creative albeit cautious risk taking that their audiences expect and embrace. When describing her musical influences Mahalia Jackson openly recalls her childhood efforts to imitate Bessie Smith's recordings by using specific mouth positions.⁷⁹ Jackson, who had a distinct Southern accent, also confirms that upon migrating to Chicago, she studied diction from Marian Anderson's records to be better understood by her audiences (presumably in the North).⁸⁰ From New Orleans to Chicago the abundance of music and sounds around Jackson provided a rich musical education not unlike the extraordinary musical environment of Aretha Franklin's formative years in Detroit, particularly in her father's church and on his Gospel Caravan tours. Franklin not only learned first hand from the gospel music elite, but she also developed a finely tuned ear for music through hearing the many styles played on Detroit's streets, jukeboxes, radios, and record players, as well as the music in her home played by her father's friends who were some of the most celebrated and talented American entertainers such as Art Tatum and Nat "King" Cole.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 24.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸¹ Aretha Franklin and David Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots* (New York: Villard Books, 1999), 39-40.

Like Franklin, the Clark Sisters grew up in Detroit. “The Motor City” was once a global symbol of modernity and the capital of the American auto industry, but even when heavy industries went into decline Detroit produced some of the most famous and best-selling popular music of the 20th century. Similar to the secular Motown Records superstars, the Clark Sisters’s sacred music performance projects the glamour of the Supremes, the showmanship of the Jackson 5, and the musicality of Stevie Wonder. The Clark Sisters themselves and the group’s leader Twinkie Clark have admitted to having composed sacred music from secular sources, even using a Pepsi Cola jingle.⁸² They also refer to the jazz music origins of their famous scat singing, a vocal expression which they often execute using a stunning machine-like precision of repeat vocables as pointed out by their famous peer CeCe Winans.⁸³ Yet perhaps in another nod to the industrial landscape of their hometown, Karen Clark Sheard has invented a vocal “echo effect,” a type of enactment of sound technology that she says resulted from her attempt to create her own reverb with a microphone.⁸⁴

Overall, the collective artistry of the singers in this study demonstrates that they are all keenly conscious of musical organization in any given song and use that knowledge for the creative application of vocal stylings. Jackson, who seems to have

⁸² Bob Marovich, “Twinkie Clark Looks Back with Humility,” *The Black Gospel Blog*, accessed March 5, 2016, <http://www.thebluegrassspecial.com/archive/2011/april2011/gospel-twinkie-clark.html>.

⁸³ “Twinkie Clark Interview with CeCe Winans (TBN 2011),” *Trinity Broadcast Network*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhO1FYIPqoA>.

⁸⁴ Steven Jones, “Insider with Karen Clark Sheard,” *Gospelflava* (2006), accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.gospelflava.com/articles/insider-karenclarksheard.html>.

adopted the “centre tone” approach used by Bessie Smith, frequently built the melody around the pitch C5 on which her voice resonated particularly well.⁸⁵ Later, her increased use of clear, near *bel canto* style head tones on albums produced by Columbia Records for mainstream audiences demonstrates that she likely catered to their taste for a Western classical music aesthetic. At the same time, Jackson was highly attuned to the sounds in her environment and was able to use them as source materials for her vocal craft. In an interview with Jules Schwerin she recalls the jazz, blues, and street vendors’ calls and other music from her childhood New Orleans. Her sung example of a produce vendor’s sad tone suggests that she recorded tonalities, musical gestures, and rhythms in her memory as a form of a sound archive that she later utilized in her own musical expression.⁸⁶

Sometimes their approach to song presentation is enhanced by proficiency with musical instruments. Aretha Franklin’s gospel recordings as a teenager demonstrate her markedly mature ability to creatively interweave expressive elements into a song structure, but more than that, on several of those recordings her outstanding musicianship also manifests itself when she accompanies herself on the piano. Today, the synergies between her vocals and piano playing are well known to produce an electrifying effect on her audiences. Karen Clark Sheard, who learned singing by mimicking riffs that her sister

⁸⁵ Richard Hadlock, *Jazz Masters of the 1920s*. Reprint (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998) 223-224, quoted in Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64.

⁸⁶ Mahalia Jackson interview “Recollections of early childhood,” *I Sing Because I’m Happy*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. SFW90002, 1995.

played on the organ, is recognized for her use of an instrumental approach to her singing. She usually does not play the piano and drums in public, but instrumental knowledge appears to help her direct and communicate with her background musicians. For instance, sometimes when performing, if the accompanying musicians do not know her repertoire, she cues the musicians on the key in which she is comfortable and which likely is the best fit for her vocal stylings within a given song.⁸⁷ This technical awareness of one's vocal capabilities and resonances in different registers is apparent in Franklin's longstanding embrace of the pitch F5 and Clark Sheard's common use of F5 and G5 for dramatic effect. Whether used in wailing, calling, or shouting, in music industry parlance these peak moments in performance are called "money notes," a shorthand for a star performer's awe-inspiring high notes that reward the audience for their ticket purchase (and presumably keep them coming back to subsequent performances).

Visual Dimensions of Gospel Music Performance

In discussing gospel music vocal expression as a syncretic art form saturated with elements from African American heritage, it is necessary to consider the close

⁸⁷ See for example in this video before launching into "Hallelujah!" Clark Sheard instructs the band "Give me B-flat!" Karen Clark Sheard, "Karen Clark Sheard "The ULTIMATE Hallelujah", accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVKDs9dUxBA> (comes around 1:17 mark); See also Karen Clark Sheard, "COGIC Praise Break Part 1 - Karen Clark Sheard - Hallelujah" (her instruction to the band to play in Bb key takes place at 1:08), accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16XoNHjCQwk>. One of commenters on this video observes that Clark Sheard has to instruct the band on the key in which to play the song. In his opinion, it is common knowledge among musicians in COGIC that she sings "Hallelujah!" in Bb. His view demonstrates how closely musicians within the denomination study her artistry.

relationship between body movement and music. According Olly Wilson, the idea of physical motion as an integral part of music-making is a sub-Saharan concept present in African American music. Wilson traces the continuity of a musically engaged body from an early spiritual expression to worship practices in receptive Christian denominational contexts; he points out that the ring shout ritual of slaves was preserved as a form of religious dance in church contexts. Relatedly, secular examples of this conceptualization include work songs in which the labor constitutes a part of the sound as a whole, and marching band music of which the rhythmic foundation is provided by the marching motion of the players.⁸⁸ Because the visibility of sound production in body movements is so central to gospel music, it is apparent that vocalists like the three women in this study manage their kinetic expressions in performance as an important dimension of the music. Nonetheless, the musical presence of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard on stage and their individualized gospel aesthetics have evoked both admiration and scrutiny that can be related to longstanding discursive practices that aim to control black women's bodies both in the church and in the society at large as I will explain next.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Olly Wilson, "A Black Conceptual Approach to Music-Making," in *More Than Dancing, Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene V. Jackson, (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 9-23.

⁸⁹ Some of these discursive practices and religious women's efforts to negotiate them are presented by Wallace Best in his essay "The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit, African American Preaching Women and the Paradoxes of Gender," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance*, ed. Mare Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 101-127.

Using her body in dramatic, uninhibited, and even seemingly seductive ways when singing, Jackson engaged with her audiences through the physicality of the performance. The presentation of the female body in this manner was not initially welcomed in Northern churches, where a reserved upper class decorum set the standards for the proper worship behavior. Among the mechanisms that church leaders used to control her expression, she was asked to wear a robe to conceal the swaying motions of her hips and other body parts.⁹⁰ At times, she was simply prohibited from performing. Although her evocative expression gained acceptance over years, one of her first appearances on national TV provides evidence that those in charge of the programming sought to telecast a rather disembodied voice. When Jackson sang “These Are They” on the Ed Sullivan Show (1956), the visibility of her body and movements was offset by a thick black silk robe and camera work that zoomed in on her face when her swinging movements to the rhythm of the song intensified.⁹¹ A consummate artist, Jackson found alternate avenues for physical expression through lively facial expressions and hand gestures which one interviewer observed as “the most expressive hands” that he had ever seen.⁹² To this expression, one could add a piece of front hair that often detached from her coiffure in the fervor of performance. It was these fallen strands of hair that helped a

⁹⁰ Brother John Sellers interview, *Mahalia Jackson, The Power and the Glory*, Directed by Jeff Scheftel (Santa Monica, CA: Xenon Pictures, 2002 [1997]).

⁹¹ *Rejoice and Shout*, directed by Don McGlynn (Greensboro, NC: Deep River Films, 2010).

⁹² Garry Moore, Script # 13, The Garry Moore Show, CBS Television, Tuesday, December 22, 1959. This program is available in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

congregant identify Jackson as the same performer in her church as the one she had seen in concert as a child in Chicago.⁹³ This all confirms that Jackson conceptualized her entire body as part of music making, and by claiming that 200 pounds was her “singing weight,” Jackson’s asserted that her full figure was important for her vocal sound.⁹⁴ She dieted on occasion, especially when ordered to do so by her doctor. Nonetheless, as a gospel singer, she could distance herself from mainstream beauty ideals, more so than female stars in popular music, among them her friend Sarah Vaughan, whose image makeover is discussed in depth in Elaine M. Hayes’s Ph.D. dissertation (2004).⁹⁵ Aretha Franklin is another case in point. Like Jackson, Franklin (who is 5’5”) has referred to her best “singing weight” as 160 pounds, and she has claimed that she can hear the changes in tones and sound that result from any fluctuations from this weight.⁹⁶ Since the early

⁹³ Ernestine P McNeil, a letter to the editor, *Ebony*, December 1961, 18.

⁹⁴ “Two Cities Pay Tribute to Mahalia Jackson,” *Jet*, April 1972, 70.; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 227.

⁹⁵ Elaine M. Hayes, “To Bebop or To Be Pop, Sarah Vaughan and the Politics of Crossover” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004).

⁹⁶ Aretha Franklin, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1999, accessed March 18, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyp_yyJ2-f8. In his famous essay “Grain of Voice,” Roland Barthes discusses “the grain of voice” as the sounding of different elements of the body producing the sound (mouth, throat etc.) He contrasts it to those voices in which the presence of these elements can not be heard. The idea of “singing weight” and its possible allusions to athletics, boxing in particular which is Franklin’s favorite sport, suggests that the “grain of voice” is not just the body in the voice, but the body *at work* in vocal performance. Put differently, the singers’ references to “singing weight” as it indicates optimum (peak form of) physical fitness for singing suggests that we should consider the role of inner athleticism in vocal performance which the technical ability of breath support (to which Barthes refers) alone cannot achieve. Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill Farrar, 1977)

1960s when photos of a slender young Franklin appeared, substantial changes in her weight have been a longstanding topic of interest for the public.⁹⁷ While the American public has embraced “The Queen of Soul,” the media interest in her struggles to maintain a slim figure prove that her body, despite producing the nation’s beloved voice, remains a subject of intrigue. The fact that an artist’s concerns for the voice and musical performance and the outside expectations about body image might be at odds suggests that women in gospel music as in other genres, more than the men, face significant pressures to manage both the aural and visual dimensions of their performances.

If religious debates about the place of “the body” in gospel singing were central to the early years of the art form, in recent decades, the shifting nature of commercial interests in gospel music has been a major force in shaping ideas about body image. Even as full figured women have been admired and generally more accepted in gospel music than in the realm of popular music, the current trend is moving toward a slimmer body ideal in the genre.⁹⁸

As an extension of the body, careful attention to dress and other ways to adorn oneself have characterized gospel music performance since the style’s beginnings. Matching suits of gospel quartet members, glamorous gowns like those championed by

⁹⁷ Most recently, Franklin has given interviews about losing tens of pounds after changing her eating habits as a result of a health scare in 2010.

⁹⁸ Deborah Smith Pollard, *When the Church Becomes Your Party* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 104-106. In February 2016, Kierra Sheard wrote a blog post about her plastic surgery to remove extra skin in her arms that resulted from losing 80 pounds during a diet. Kierra Sheard, *Surgery Sucks and My Holding Cell*,” accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.iamkierrasheard.com/#!/Surgery-Sucks-and-My-Holding-Cell/tfgef/56d088110cf26bd1d3f059e1>

the Ward Singers, and elaborate hats worn by gospel singers and congregants alike, are all creative expressions that index historical ideas about fashioning individuality through stylish dress in African American culture.⁹⁹ Dressing up in one's "Sunday best" is an enduring tradition that first formed in the sphere of the Antebellum church, where the worship service was a special occasion for wearing individualized attire instead of work clothes that often served as a reminder of a subordinate status in the society.¹⁰⁰ Today, the colorful and even flamboyant fashions worn by contemporary gospel music artists can be traced to traditions that West Africans carried to America; speaking in broader cultural terms, because of this historical grounding, the expressive dress can also be seen as a celebrated cultural practice under difficult social conditions in America.¹⁰¹

In this light, I believe that the three gospel singers discussed here have not only expressed their creativity through dress, but in doing so, they have also incorporated culturally grounded ideas about beauty and pride into their fashioning of self as African American women. Whether wearing a robe or a gown, Mahalia Jackson's hair was always styled in an elegant hairdo. As an owner of a hair salon, she was her own advertisement

⁹⁹ A cultural history of African American fashions as a visual form of self expression is provided by Shane White and Graham J. White in their book *Stylin', African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁰ Karen J. Gilmer, "Church Hat," in *Ethnic Dress in the United States: Cultural Encyclopedia*, ed. Annette Lynch and Mitchell D. Strauss (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 84-85; Shane White and Graham White, "From "Strolling, Jooking, and Fixy Clothes'," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking*, ed. Caponi, 444-448.

¹⁰¹ Pollard, *When the Church Becomes Your Party*, 79-109; White and White, *Stylin', African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*.

and a representative of the beauty industry. On other occasions, Jackson's classic style was defined by conservative dresses and skirt suits. Thus far, I have not seen a single picture of Jackson wearing pants. When she performed at the March on Washington in 1963, Jackson wore a new hat, which in many photographic images of the occasion constitutes a visible marker of her religious identity. In a similar manner, over four decades later, Aretha Franklin wore a majestic hat made for the occasion when singing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" at the Presidential Inauguration of Barack Obama in 2009. As demonstrated by the many impressive head wear designs worn by the singers in this study, an elaborate church hat can be the ultimate fashion statement that represent "a peculiar converge of faith and fashion that keeps the Sabbath both holy and glamorous."¹⁰² When it comes to dressing up for church, Clark Sheard is a fashion leader who is widely known for her colorful garments which she often matches with designer shoes. Clark Sheard whose mother taught her the importance of dressing well, also passed the tradition to her daughter Kierra Sheard, who recently launched a clothing line that carries the name "Eleven60" after the birth month and year of Clark Sheard.

Religious Conventions and Denominational Influences

¹⁰² Craig Marberry, "Interviewer's Note" in *Crowns, Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats*, written by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 4.

Several writers have explored the blues as one of the arenas used by African American women to construct individual and collective voices.¹⁰³ Women, however, have been equally if not more influential in gospel music than in the blues. All of the singers in this study self-identify as Christians, and based on this religious background, their gospel singing careers have followed paths shaped by the gendered religious and institutional conventions of the church. For example, each singer started developing musical gifts through singing instead of directly pursuing preaching like some male members in their families. Through music, they have not only been able to express spirituality but have also been a part of an evangelical culture fostered by other musical women who have performed from street corners to sport arenas spreading the Christian message to the world.¹⁰⁴ In the music industry context gospel music thus has also served as a unique niche in which these women have been able to maintain some control over representation.

As part of their Christian backgrounds, each singer's denominational affiliation has served as a major context for launching a career and consequently "branding" their music. Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin, both of whom adhere to the Baptist tradition, have negotiated their representational strategies in dialogue with the ideologies

¹⁰³ See for example Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*; Hazel V. Carby, "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls, Blues Queens of the 1920s* (Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000 [1988]).

¹⁰⁴ Ties between evangelism and commercialism in gospel music are explored in Jerma A. Jackson's book *Singing in My Soul, Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (2004).

within the denomination which grew in the decades after Reconstruction into the largest African American Christian denomination in America. To this end, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's study *Righteous Discontent, The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* elucidates the discourse advanced by Baptist women who championed faith-based racial uplift activities during the early decades of the denomination's growth. Higginbotham argues that during the early 20th century, their assimilationist efforts to address structural inequities and negative images of African Americans in the society could be characterized through a "politics of respectability," which emphasized respectable behavior including the Protestant work ethic and piety that was demonstrated through good manners and high morals as a measure of "one's worth" rather than being judged by race or income. The reformists specifically viewed home and church as spaces for positive moral influence in contrast to the street, which became a metaphor for immoral behavior where one could be lured by vices such as jazz music and improper dancing.¹⁰⁵

Mahalia Jackson's formative years coincided with the later years of the Baptist women's movement, which according to Higginbotham inspired the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement who "transformed the songs of the church into the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement."¹⁰⁶ Among the leaders, Higginbotham identifies Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Medgar Evers. To this list, I would

¹⁰⁵ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent, The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004 [1993]), 185-229.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

add Mahalia Jackson. A few years later, Aretha Franklin followed suit. Reflective of their generational leanings, the “politics of respectability” informed Jackson’s and Franklin’s approach to representation in the commercial arena, albeit in differing ways. Jackson, who was well known for refusing to perform in nightclub settings or to sing secular music, published a self-penned article titled “Why I Turned Down a Million” in the *Bronzeville News* in September 1954. In the article, she confirms that despite the opportunities for her to “sing in night clubs and theaters, and making jazz and blues records” she has vowed to sing only for “God’s Glory.” This article, which appeared at a time when Jackson had finalized contract negotiations with Columbia Records and launched her radio program, also assured her core audience of her firm commitment to religion even as she was taking gospel music to the American mainstream.¹⁰⁷ Since then, her closely guarded image of piety has become a defining feature of her legacy as the “World’s Greatest Gospel Singer.” One can only speculate whether the word “great” would still be applied to her had she actually crossed over to the “vernacular” arena of the blues, recognizing that the term is typically used in reference to the “great” men of the Western classical tradition.¹⁰⁸

Addressing the tension between religious values and secular music, Aretha Franklin also wrote an article “From Gospel to Jazz is Not Disrespect for the Lord!” that was published on August 26, 1961 in the *Amsterdam News*, a newspaper that circulated in New York where she was launching her career as a secular singer. Writing this article

¹⁰⁷ Mahalia Jackson, “Why I Turned Down a Million,” 2.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, “Singing Omar’s Song,” 69-92.

fifteen months after her first night club debut in a Chicago cafe, Franklin responds to the numerous inquiries she received from “church people” on her decision to pursue secular music. At the crossroads between respectability discourse and the rights discourse of the Civil Rights Movement, her defense centers on the cultural and social value of the blues expression “because true Democracy has not overtaken us here.”¹⁰⁹ Unlike Jackson, Franklin believes in the social uplift value in performing at secular venues. Evidence of the rights discourse that was emerging alongside respectability politics, Franklin gives a nod to her predecessors by stating in the concluding paragraph that Mahalia Jackson, “one of the greatest artists in the gospel field,” was someone who has refused to sing in nightclubs and places that serve liquor but collaborated with Duke Ellington and had close friends in the jazz world. She concludes, “I haven’t deserted the field of religious music entirely.”¹¹⁰

In contrast to the gradual acceptance of gospel music in Northern Baptist churches in which restrained religious expression in the early 20th century was commonly accompanied by hymns and Western classical music, emotive worship style has customarily been central to spiritual practices in the Church of God in Christ, which emerged from a sect of the Holiness movement in the South to become the largest African American Pentecostal church in America. Karen Clark Sheard, or “Sister Sheard” for her congregation members, grew up in the COGIC tradition in which music is perceived as a

¹⁰⁹ Aretha Franklin, “Singing Jazz is Not Disrespect for the Lord!,” *Amsterdam News*, August 26, 1961, 17.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

divine gift bestowed upon a believer to be used for God's work.¹¹¹ Furthermore, while her talents were nurtured within COGIC congregational environments, which embraced the passionate demonstration of spirituality through speaking in tongues, dynamic music, shouting, and testifying, the organized church network of the denomination constituted a hierarchical institutional context in which her mother, Mattie Moss Clark, achieved a prominent position as the director of the Music Department. It is important to note, however, that it is with the purpose of sanctified living that women in COGIC, like Clark Sheard and Moss Clark, have forged their paths in the denominational context. In *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*, Anthea Butler contends that in contrast to the early 20th century Baptist women's external focus on issues in the society, the women of GOCIC conceptualized "respectability" through the scripturally based pursuit of holy living that sought the adherence to the will of God as the ultimate measure of an individual's value. Butler demonstrates how the standards of "sanctification," have shifted through time and motivated and guided women's lives in COGIC through instructions encompassing dress, behavior, and religious practices.¹¹² To this end, sometimes when being interviewed, Clark Sheard describes denominational practices, such as prohibitions on wearing pants, and the importance of prayer and fasting in her life.

¹¹¹ Anthea Butler explores the history and culture that women have fostered in COGIC in her book *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); The music's place as a divine gift in COGIC is explored in Jerma Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 21-23.

¹¹² Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 14.

Women in Gospel Music

Mellonee Burnim cautions against assuming that women's power and status in gospel music has resulted from their use of music as an "equalizer, a meta-language through which women can communicate forthrightly, without barriers."¹¹³ To this end Burnim emphasizes that many women in gospel music fought hard to achieve their leadership positions.¹¹⁴ In like manner, the careers of the women in this study provide evidence of their negotiations on many fronts including the church, the music industry, and family. For instance, in her article Mahalia Jackson writes about the "bitter battles" that she overcame against the clergy (usually men) who initially resisted her style of singing in churches in the North.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, officials of the church resisted Mattie Moss Clark's ambitious attitude by claiming that she was "too anointed."¹¹⁶ In addition, the Atlantic Records executive Jerry Wexler curiously claimed upon Aretha Franklin's first success at the record label: "I took her to church, sat her down at the piano, and let her be herself."¹¹⁷ Wexler's claim might have been a clever way to market Franklin, although it seemingly exaggerates his authorial influence in her life. After all, Franklin

¹¹³ Burnim, "Voices of Women in Gospel Music," 202.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 493-494.

¹¹⁵ Mahalia Jackson, "Why I Turned Down a Million."

¹¹⁶ Eugene B. McCoy. *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark: Climbing Up The Mountain, the Life and Times of a Musical Legend* (Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1994), 65-68.

¹¹⁷ Craig Werner, *Higher Ground, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 129.

and her father have always vehemently asserted that she “never left the church,” wheter that should be taken in religious or musical terms.¹¹⁸

Nonetheless, Wexler’s position as a music industry gatekeeper serves as a reminder that each of the singers in this study have relied on a male figure for career advancement at some point, either as a collaborator or as a sponsor and ally. For instance at the beginning of her career, Mahalia Jackson collaborated with Thomas Dorsey, who was already a director of a gospel choir at the Pilgrim Baptist Church and whose popularity was growing in the National Baptist Convention. The instrumental role that C.L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin’s renowned reverend father, played as a church leader and her manager cannot be over emphasized. Because of the support of Bishop Bailey as a high ranking official in the COGIC, Mattie Moss Clark was able to establish his church, The Bailey Temple, as the “Apollo Theater” of gospel music and eventually climb the denominational ranks into the COGIC’s Music Department leadership. Clark Sheard often credits her bishop husband as a force behind her entrepreneurial pursuits. Although, it seems that they have worked as a husband and wife team in a way that his career advancement in the COGIC and the growth of his church Greater Emmanuel Institutional COGIC has equally benefitted from his wife’s fame and the family legacy in the denomination.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ C.L. Franklin, “Remarks by Reverend C.L. Franklin,” *Amazing Grace*, Atlantic Records SD 2-906, 1972.

¹¹⁹ Bishop J. Drew Sheard also continues a family legacy of preaching. His father, Bishop John H. Sheard is a high-ranking official in the Church of God in Christ.

It is vitally important to recognize that all the while these women have pursued gospel singing careers, they have juggled roles as wives and mothers. Often the women's husbands and children have provided balance and support to their careers, but close familial relationships have sometimes strained their emotional, personal, and financial resources. Published reports document Jackson's troubled marriage to her second husband, and Clark Sheard and her sister Clark Chisholm have openly stated that their father's resentment towards Mattie Moss Clark's success eventually caused their divorce.¹²⁰

Biographical Detail and Fashioning of Gospel Identity

Because this study draws from biographical materials, both primary sources and secondary sources such as biographies and published interviews, it bears mentioning that in gospel music, the artist's biography uniquely situates as a reference point between the performer and the audience. To this end, in his well-known composition "I'm Going to Live the Life that I Sing About," Thomas Dorsey presents an ethical ideal that underlies a gospel music performance. In overlapping notions of personal and professional standards, a singer's perceived adherence to Christian values constitutes a frame from which audiences assess the spiritual level of a gospel music performance. This is worth noting because, as Mellonee Burnim explains, the goal of spiritual transformation of both

¹²⁰ "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," *TV One*, December 1, 2008; *Philadelphia Tribune*, "Mahalia Jackson Divorces Mate: B-Girl Admits Intimacies With Ill Singer's Husband Handsome Spouse Broke Hand Trying To Strike Her, Mahalia Testifies," April 18, 1967, 1.

personae and space as a ritual dimension of gospel music sets it apart from secular music traditions within African American culture. In rejecting the word “performance” or “concert” in favor of “service,” the audiences of gospel music acknowledge the transformative experience which takes place through communication between the singer, God, and the audience. Based on her ethnographic findings, Burnim asserts that in this process, the audience monitors the performer’s communication of sincerity “that the presentation be convincing” and looks for evidence that the performer is “getting into” the song.¹²¹ In the same vein, I contend that a singer’s life can offer “evidence” of her or his commitment to God and convince the audience of the singer’s spiritual authenticity. To this end, singers and their audiences engage in ethical evaluation and reflection as a process which Timothy Rommen calls an “ethics of style.”¹²² Similarly, audiences and performers commonly use the word “anointed” to express approval of music which they believe to be divinely inspired. Clark Sisters, who strictly adhere to Christian music and lifestyle, commonly use this term when they make a point of the spiritual integrity of their music.

I believe that biographical details, whether through autobiographies, biographies, or published interviews, are central to understanding the ways in which gospel singers like the women in this study fashion their identities in relation to their audiences and the prevailing discourses surrounding their artistry. My work has been influenced by Angela

¹²¹ Mellonee V. Burnim, “The Performance of Black Gospel Music as Transformation,” in *Music and the Experience of God*, ed. David Power, Mary Collins, and Mellonee Burnim (Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1989), 54-55.

¹²² Rommen, *Mek Some Noise*, 2007.

Ards' analysis of black women's autobiographical narratives through which she argues that "building the burgeoning field of black women's intellectual history requires that scholars consider not only geographies, that is, how place and history contextualize ideas, but also intellectual genealogies, the social discourses and various interlocutors subjects engage."¹²³ Ards' work shifts the emphasis from the interrogation of the "truth" based on stated facts to reading for authorial intent. This approach then provides alternative avenues for using gospel musicians' autobiographical accounts to understand their representational aims and success strategies. Take for instance Mahalia Jackson's widely quoted recollection about her one and only vocal lesson in its various iterations since it first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* as part of an interview by her future autobiographical collaborator Evan McLeod Wylie.¹²⁴ As I discuss in the chapter dedicated to Mahalia Jackson and her music, the slightly differing descriptions about her interchange with a classically trained Professor Du Bois/Kendricks/Gullat proclaims her defense for gospel music aesthetic with mindful attention to ongoing discourses about race, class, and gender whenever the recollection was made public. From its title, *Aretha Franklin, From These Roots* Franklin's autobiography can be viewed first as an homage to her father and church background. This can be observed also from small details, like

¹²³ Angela A. Ards, *Words of Witness, Black Women's Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 5.

¹²⁴ Mahalia Jackson as told to Eva McLeod Wylie, "I Can't Stop Singing" in *Saturday Evening Post*, December 5, 1959, 19-21, 99-100. Available in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

her use of the colloquial expression “sangin” to claim gospel music mastery in a text that describes her performance of song “Precious Lord” at fourteen years old.¹²⁵

It is important to note that the same principles cannot be applied to the reading of biographies as autobiographies because in biography the textual outcome is intricately connected to the relationship between the author and his or her subject. To an extent, however, biographical information can be analyzed in light of the intentions of the author. In the case of Mattie Moss Clark, the author of her biography Eugene B. McCoy is her self-proclaimed long-time colleague and friend who claims that their collaboration was divinely ordained. The book was published to celebrate Moss Clark’s 25 years of service as the President of the COGIC Music Department, and it was sold at the COGIC conventions. This denominational orientation confirms that its intended readership was primarily within COGIC churches. Nonetheless, amid the highly religious accounts detailing her work in music and dedication to excellency, McCoy writes candidly about gender issues in the church, for example, “as a woman working with men, she often encountered colleagues who felt she had stepped into territory reserved for the ‘brethren.’” Commentary of this nature aids a reader to interpret the entire biographical narrative in a feminist light.¹²⁶ Interestingly, however, insofar as the text includes direct quotes and third person descriptions of Moss Clark’s personal experiences like the one described above, the narrative is still told through the male voice of the author as a “proxy” whose credibility remains elusive in the absence of statements regarding his

¹²⁵ Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 74.

¹²⁶ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 66.

method of gathering the information. As a takeaway from the book, this diplomatic approach to delivering feminist statements to readers including the “brethren” of the church leads one to consider possibilities for other indirect strategies that women like Mattie Moss Clark might have had to use to assert a strong presence in gospel music. An example might be the fact that she groomed her daughters to lead the next generation of gospel music vanguard.

Commercialism

Although many gospel singers commonly claim a divine calling as the motivation for gospel singing, the three women in this study demonstrate that economic interests have also figured significantly in their choices to pursue gospel music as a career. The belief in a marriage between the spiritual value and commercial appeal of gospel music is a part of the evangelical culture fostered by singers and musicians. In *Singing in My Soul, Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age*, Jerma A. Jackson charts the course of gospel music from missionary work carried out by many women to the mass marketed commodity in the postwar commercial landscape that evolved along with the growth of the music industry. By exploring the music and life of Rosetta Tharpe, an itinerant evangelist in her mother’s group who became the champion of “swinging spirituals” and the first gospel singer to appear on the Cotton Club stage, Jerma Jackson shows how changing economic conditions for making and distributing music generated an increasingly lucrative but also a complex field for singers like Tharpe. In this vein, Jerma Jackson discusses the

continuing negotiations of the religious and commercial aspects of popularizing gospel music.¹²⁷

While gospel music gained acceptance as a style, it is important to note how its increased profit potential formed an avenue for economic independence to many gifted artists like Mahalia Jackson. For Jackson, the music provided a way out of hard work as a laundress. As Jerma Jackson writes, missionary work was a source of pride and satisfaction for many African American women in contrast to menial labor available to them in the general society.¹²⁸ In the case of Mahalia Jackson, the mere satisfaction from the evangelical work was not enough. She was determined to sing gospel music for a living, demonstrated by her willingness to invest earnings from music in a vocal lesson. Later on she pursued economic independence through music strategically; she expanded her markets through singing in churches (particularly for migrant audiences), at funerals, at political meetings, and even in her hair salon.¹²⁹

As the business of gospel music grew, the monetary rewards for singing became an expected and valued part of a gospel vocalists' work. As part of this process, gospel music became a trade in which individuals, groups and collectives including families engaged for the profit and economic uplift of their communities. In this vein, Aretha Franklin's father C.L. Franklin was her first manager. He claims to have "launched her

¹²⁷ Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 36.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 87; Jackson and McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967 [1966]), 99.

career in every detail”which included singing as a soloist based in the New Bethel Baptist Church and performing on his Gospel Caravan Tours. He also arranged her first recording contract and supported her entry to secular music.¹³⁰ Like Franklin’s father, Clark Sheard’s mother played a managerial role in the Clark Sisters’ careers for several years which started when she frequently took her daughters to the churches where she worked as a choir director and had them sing as soloists with the choirs. The first two albums of the Clark Sisters were produced and released on their uncle Bill Moss’ record label.

Gospel music became an industry in postwar America, but the commercial impulse that has propelled the pursuits of entrepreneurs in the changing gospel music landscape can be traced to early business activities among African descendants in America. Some of the most successful gospel musicians might have achieved the wealth and independence captured in today’s catchphrase “financial freedom.” The place of slavery in the history of American capitalism, however, sheds a different light on the term; for over 250 years of slavery, freedom was actually bought and sold in the marketplace for black bodies that were commodified as property. In the first volume of *The History of Black Business in America, Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, Juliet E.K. Walker describes the antebellum entrepreneurial activities among African American people, both free individuals and slaves, whose business pursuits sought to generate enough profits “to purchase freedom for oneself, family and friends.”¹³¹ Walker

¹³⁰ Jeff Todd Titon, “Transcript of interview with C.L. Franklin,” February 27, 1976 and October 5, 1977. Available in bulk 1963-1984, box no. 1, C. L. Franklin Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

¹³¹ Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 65.

specifically connects African American women's early enterprising pursuits to traditions of pre-colonial African commerce which survived the transatlantic passage and consequently was "passed from one generation of slave women to the next. Each generation was propelled by the desire to earn money to purchase their children's freedom." This desire, according to Walker "became the driving force that maintained an African commercial cultural ethos, which has been kept alive by slaves and their descendants from the seventeenth century to the present time in seeking economic opportunities."¹³² The matrilineal transformation of gospel music tradition as a profit-seeking enterprise for social good in Karen Clark Sheard's family is a case in point.

The will to trade expertise for a way out of servitude and social uplift can also be mapped out in Mahalia Jackson's family history. Her great grandparents, a highly regarded cook and a coachman, capitalized on their specialized skills in exchange for a privileged position and the freedom to express dissent to slave holders. Their son Paul, a former slave who was Jackson's grandfather, was a valued manager on several plantations; at the same time, he was a barber and a preacher. Much later, in the 1950s, C.L. Franklin's racial uplift ideology was featured as an important element in his recorded sermons through which he sold "the experience" of his church, as did the first recordings of her daughter Aretha. He initially made these recordings in collaboration with an independent African American record store owner Joe Von Battle.

According to evidence provided by Walker, spiritual work as a trade can be traced at least to 17th century America, when individuals of African descent capitalized on

¹³² Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 89.

prevailing beliefs about their supernatural powers. According to Walker, at the time some African women were folk healers and root and herbal specialists; several were known for their healing arts.¹³³ It is important to note that trade in spiritual practices, whether occult or Christian, has been a way to exercise power to influence one's life and surroundings within existing oppressive social structures. As Yvonne P. Chireau argues, practices of conjuring and Christianity have developed through often fluid interactions of the two that are distinguishable as follows: "magic is a self-serving enterprise that derives from personal, egotistical motivation; religion, a public activity, yields benefits for an entire community."¹³⁴ While the three gospel singers in this study have carefully guarded their brands from accusations of heresy, consciously or not their expressions have projected power and an aura that the public has sometimes perceived in magical terms. This was exemplified in the accusations toward Mahalia Jackson for her "snake hips" at a time when ideas about voodoo circulated among northern imaginations. Anyone who has witnessed Karen Clark Sheard in performance has heard her bluesy vocal prowess and seen her magnetic visual presence that like magic, captures audience attention.

Family Ties and Business

Despite the major inroads created by scholarship in documenting the roles of wives and girlfriends as organizers and managers in the sphere of jazz, the role of the family as a unit of analysis in African American music research is an understudied

¹³³ Ibid., 57.

¹³⁴ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 39.

subject, with the exception of Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr.'s *Race Music*.¹³⁵ Examples abound in gospel and secular genres in which musicianship has been inspired, enabled, cultivated, and supported in a familial context. Take for instance music making among families as a pastime, sibling musical groups, or support network formed by family members like Mahalia Jackson's cousin Atchalya whom she credits for exposing her to blues records, and her Aunt Hannah who inspired her departure from the South and with whom she stayed while establishing herself in the North. When broadening the view to the fictive kinship system of the church, nearly all gospel musicians and those who crossed over to secular music have been influenced by real or imagined familial ties. For the women in this study, their church affiliations have provided a central support base and sometimes configured as part of the brand as I will explain in detail later in this chapter.

With the expansion of the music industry, family networks in general have played an increasingly important role in helping individuals turn musical pursuits into big business. Perhaps the best known case is Berry Gordy Jr., the founder of Motown Records, whose first music venture was financed with money he applied for and received from his entrepreneurial family's fund Ber-Berry Co-op, but like the case of these gospel singers, there are numerous family members of renowned stars who have worked as personal assistants, role models, managers, producers, musicians, and background singers.¹³⁶ Similarly, gospel musicians and their family networks have been significant

¹³⁵ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music, Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹³⁶ "Gordy Family" *Motown Museum*, last accessed November 28, 2016, <https://www.motownmuseum.org/story/gordy-family/>.

for the genre's development. C.L. Franklin's church grew and gospel recordings reached wide audiences at the same time that he groomed his daughter Aretha as a soloist in his church and on gospel tours. All the Franklin sisters were highly musical and they also sang background vocals on Franklin's recordings. Aretha Franklin's brother Cecil operated as a driver and later became a pastor at his father's New Bethel Baptist Church. C.L. Franklin's mother, Rachel Franklin, is a lesser known figure, but one of the most important in their family. When Aretha Franklin's mother moved to Buffalo, New York, Rachel Franklin arrived to take care of C.L. Franklin's household and his four children and later, she also took care of Aretha Franklin's and her sister Erma Franklin's children so they could pursue careers in music. Likewise, under the firm direction of Mattie Moss Clark, Karen Clark Sheard and her sisters became successful recording artists. Currently, Clark Sheard frequently sings with her daughter and several of her productions are made by her cousin J. Moss and her son J. Drew Sheard II. Her niece Angel Chisholm also sings background for her.

The idea of a family business might be easily explained as a business to which family members contribute in various capacities. Scholars in the field of business, however, have problematized the term by offering a variety of factors that distinguish a family business from a non-family business as several contributors to the edited volume *The Landscape of Family* argue. In this volume, Pramodita Sharma and Frank Hoy point out that during the past 25 years, scholars' efforts to define this complex phenomenon, yielded two orientations: "a components based approach which focuses on family members involvement in ownership, management, and governance and the essence

approach which focuses on family members' involvement in terms of distinctive behaviors such as the intention to pursue a controlling family's vision for the business or a desire to sustain the business across generations." As the authors point out, however, the scholarship has often lacked discussion of what defines a family.¹³⁷ Since the present study is not concerned with a comparative analysis in which specific variables can generate statistically significant differences, but it rather approaches the practice of commercial gospel music through a theoretical frame, I believe it is useful to think of family business through the "essence approach" and recognize that the African American kin-structured networks discussed in this study can be conceptualized through an extended family that an early study described as a

multigenerational, independent kinship system which is welded together by a sense of obligation to relatives; is organized around a 'family base' household; is generally guided by a dominant family figure, extends across geographical boundaries to connect family units to an extended family network and has a built-in mutual aid system for the welfare of its members and the maintenance of the family as a whole.¹³⁸

While the work of Billingsley and subsequent scholars have pointed out the two other family types, the primary families that are traditionally thought of as nuclear families on one side and augmented families as extended families, which also include friends and other non-biological members on the other side, it is interesting to note in light of Sharma and Hoy's dimensions of business that in the life stories of the women in

¹³⁷ Pramodita Sharma and Frank Hoy, "Chapter 6: Family Business Roles," in *The Landscape of Family Business*, ed. Ritch L. Sorenson, Andy Yu, Keith H. Brigham and G. T. Lumpkin (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2013), 115.

¹³⁸ Elmer P. Martin and Joanne Mitchell Martin, *The Black Extended Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 1.

this study, the non-biological kin does not usually appear as controlling members of the business enterprise.

Professional Partnerships

The familial ties described above sometimes constitute overlapping parts of a sophisticated network with music professionals through which the singers in this study have constructed their careers. These sometimes public associations with other musicians, producers, managers, and business persons influence the branding of their music and its aesthetic direction. In parallel, the behind the scenes help from a team of publicists and lawyers, stylists, and personal assistants contributes to producing the desired representational outcome at a high cost. In the early stages of gospel music history, Mahalia Jackson joined forces with Thomas Dorsey in a creatively and commercially successful collaboration which proved instrumental in expanding markets for gospel music in Chicago and then elsewhere. During many successful years as a soloist, Jackson was accompanied by Ralph Jones and pianist Mildred Falls, who later became her musical director. More than just providing the musicianship that shaped the aesthetics of Jackson's performances, they acted like family. Their constant presence in Jackson's many endeavors, and even at her bedside in a hospital, was a form of dedicated support through which the value of their perspectives and companionship in sustaining and steering Jackson's career cannot be underestimated.

The careers of Aretha Franklin and Karen Clark Sheard demonstrate how partnerships with other musicians, producers, and record label executives have had an

impact on the aesthetic direction of their music. Jerry Wexler, the Atlantic Records executive who was instrumental in Franklin's soul music career, produced her best selling album "Amazing Grace" and was responsible for choosing the rhythm section he knew from the realm of blues and jazz and an organist.¹³⁹ The most prominent collaborator on "Amazing Grace" is James Cleveland, an early influence on Franklin and later "The King of Gospel" who sang, played piano, and directed the choir. Aretha produced her next gospel album "One Faith, One Lord, One Baptist" herself, but with the approval of Clive Davis, the legendary music executive who has been responsible for orchestrating some of her successful career milestones since the 1980s. Since her highly acclaimed debut album in 1997, Clark Sheard has continued her fruitful collaboration with Donald Lawrence, a classically trained choir director, gospel music artist, and choir director along with her cousin J. Moss and later on her son J. Drew Sheard II.

Musical and Social Settings as Part of Branding

For each of the women in this study, an affiliation with a well known church has provided a vital setting for building a career. Whether a small storefront church or a large congregation, the church has been the site of their early musical experiences as congregants and choir members. From the choir each has moved to a position as a soloist, and Mahalia Jackson and Karen Clark Sheard then moved to gospel groups. Thus as a

¹³⁹ Aaron Cohen, *Amazing Grace* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 77-79.

training ground, the church can be seen as a space where gospel singers are groomed from the congregation to the choir, to groups, and to sing solo.

At the same time, the careers of these women show that a specific church affiliation can play important part in her branding. Although Mahalia Jackson remained a member of the New Salem Baptist Church of Chicago, she launched her career in the Pilgrim Baptist Church, a prominent main line church now commonly identified as “the birth place of gospel” pastored by the well-known Rev. Julius Austin. Later on an article in *Life*, intended to publicize her in the mainstream, featured the Pilgrim Church as her “original” environment.¹⁴⁰ Aretha Franklin’s association with her father’s church, New Bethel Baptist Church, was an essential feature of her early image. Karen Clark Sheard’s affiliation with the Bailey Temple was featured on her debut solo album and the Greater Emmanuel COGIC was featured on her two later recordings.

Media

In seeking to expand the ways in which the public can engage with their music and to reach new audiences, the singers in this study have been responsive to media platforms available in their environment. Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the two major broadcast media at the time, Mahalia Jackson’s path breaking pursuits included her own gospel music radio program broadcast in the Chicago area in 1954 and the nationally broadcast TV series “Mahalia Sings!” that aired in 1961. She also appeared

¹⁴⁰ “Gospel Queen Mahalia, She Makes Hymn Singing Pay,” *Life*, November 29, 1954, 63-66.

as a guest and performer on several variety shows and in three feature films. In the 1950s Aretha Franklin's first recordings were made and marketed in conjunction with the forward looking pursuits of her father C.L. Franklin, who successfully expanded his ministerial presence by selling recorded sermons and airing radio broadcasts of worship services.

When entering each new media, they have had to find ways to translate the interactive aesthetic processes of live gospel music to audiences far away. This was a concern for Jackson whose early performances on TV were noticeably restrained. Several decades later, the Clark Sisters' TV appearances in the 1980s, including "The Saturday Night Sing!" and the Grammy Awards of 1985, featured lively expressions and fashionable dress that made for a fascinating presentation on the small screen. Because of the energetic musical expression they had established, the Clark Sisters were casted alongside James Cleveland and other gospel music elite in a motion picture *Gospel!* (1981), a film that was produced with the latest technology for an "experience based viewing."¹⁴¹ Their spirited performance in angelic translucent robes proved evocative to both live and cinematic audiences. Confirming this, a *New York Times* critic quoted the film's production notes in which Frederick A. Ritzenberg, the film's co-director recounts the Clark Sisters' performance and says: "It seemed that the whole building was going to take off and rise toward heaven. It was a high that I had never experienced before." The

¹⁴¹ Jack McDonough, "Golden Door Sets Film Release," *Billboard*, September 11, 1982, 32.

critic then asserts that “for movie audiences, ‘Gospel’ communicates something comparable.”¹⁴²

The film has been released on VHS and DVD for home viewers, and today, scenes of the film, like the VHS of Clark Sheard’s solo debut recording at the historic Bailey Temple of Detroit, can be found in the video-streaming website YouTube. Presently, the vast popularity of video sharing websites, streaming services, social media, smartphone applications, blogs, and other web based forums have prompted gospel artists, their fans, and record labels to take advantage of the promotional and other communications opportunities they provide. The need to include photos and video footage in the content has placed increasing emphasis on the artist image and visual aspects of the gospel music performance. On the whole, since the early days, the many distribution channels have served as instruments in the creation and cultivation of audiences from the first appearance of Mahalia Jackson on TV to the reality TV show of Karen Clark Sheard.

Auxiliary Businesses

Beyond their gospel music careers, all of the three singers have spearheaded or participated in other commercial enterprises. Today the most visible example is provided by Clark Sheard who serves as the “First Lady” of her Bishop husband’s church and owns a record label Karew Records. Most recently her daughter Kierra Sheard launched a

¹⁴² Janet Maslin, “Screen: Gospel Concert,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1983, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/23/movies/screen-gospel-concert.html>.

hosiery line called “Sheers by Sheard.” Aretha Franklin has leveraged her gospel music foundations to the secular realm to the extent that one could view her career in soul music as a lucrative “auxiliary business.” However, the original entrepreneur in gospel music was Mahalia Jackson, whose “product tie-ins” included a hair salon, a flower shop, and even a chicken franchise. She was also an owner of an apartment building. Through economic independence produced by her diverse businesses, Jackson could attain artistic freedom from the often strict music industry dictates and the demands of fickle markets.

Gospel Music Vocal Performance as Labor

The creative work and business pursuits of each singer in this study, should be viewed in the broader context of American labor history in which they have served as both role models for other African American women and laborers within the institutional settings of the church and the American entertainment industry. In *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family*, a study on the history of African American women’s labor in society and at home, Jacqueline Jones describes the importance of the few exceptional black female singers as role models to other working women in the 1930s. I believe that because of the longstanding labor market disparities, her insights can be applied to singers in the later decades as well. Jones posits that singers like Marian Anderson, Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, and others represented the entertainment field which “fueled “the dreams of black girls who yearned for a life’s work of glamor and triumph.” According to Jones, through their fancy public images these singers “beckoned listeners away from the routine of the white woman’s kitchen

and into a glittering world of public adulation.”¹⁴³ Mahalia Jackson understood this part of her relationship to her audience very well, which is reflected in her frequent public telling of her personal history from a washerwoman to a gospel star.

What then is the work of a gospel singer? Behind the glamorous image and audience admiration, gospel singers like the women in this study, perform an extensive amount of creative, physical, and spiritual work, both paid and unpaid. The continuous creativity and innovation valued by gospel music audiences impose great demands on a singer’s craft in the studio and on the stage. The work of improvisation, the cognitive effort in expressing a myriad of runs, rhythmic placements, timbral inflections, and other musical and kinetic expressions throughout a song, is a complex and demanding task in itself, but work and discipline are also required outside the stage and studio for maintaining good vocal health. While Karen Clark Sheard’s good care of her voice has enabled her to sing as well as ever in her 50s, it seems that years of smoking have possibly affected Aretha Franklin’s voice and her high notes. Due to aging and persistent health issues, Mahalia Jackson’s voice deteriorated in her later years.

Beyond technical execution, sacred song expression is predicated upon discipline and practice of religion. For instance Jacky Clark Chisholm says that Mattie Moss Clark required the Clark Sisters to prepare for performances through fasting and prayer.¹⁴⁴ However, to a great extent, the spiritual labor of gospel music expression and the mental

¹⁴³ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 185.

¹⁴⁴ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

focus that enables the performer to engage in communication with the audience and with God take place on stage.¹⁴⁵ One way to understand this work is to view it as similar to the “emotional labor” as described by Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. She explores the ways in which the performance in service sector occupations (which are often occupied by women) includes invisible form of labor in managing one’s own feelings or dealing with the feelings of others to achieve the goals of a commercial enterprise. For example, this form of labor is concealed in the constant smile of an airline steward or in a military officer’s intense efforts to motivate a crew. Relevant to thinking of gospel music as a form of performance art, Hochschild describes how this emotional labor is produced in the theater. To that end, she distinguishes between surface acting as the manipulation of the muscles to express an outward gesture and deep acting which can be a direct exhortation of a feeling or making use of the imagination. The latter case involves the actor’s need to accumulate a rich deposit of “emotional memory” based on real life events, and by recalling them in the course of a performance, he or she can access different feelings that the events evoked. This also requires the suspension of the reality testing in order to allow the situation to seem real.¹⁴⁶ The gospel singers that I interviewed referred to personal memories as sources of musical expression that reflect the kind of “emotional memory” of spiritual experiences that the singer channels into a song. Considering both the emotional and the

¹⁴⁵ Burnim, “The Performance of Black Gospel Music as Transformation.”

¹⁴⁶ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 [1979]), 37-42.

spiritual demands of a gospel music performance, it is a very labor intensive musical performance craft. A case in point is Karen Clark Sheard's performance, which I describe at the beginning of the chapter about her. On stage she was the highly energetic, charismatic, and powerful gospel recording artist that the audience came to see. Based on her energy level, one could not have known that in fact this performance 30 miles from Detroit took place in the middle of an exhausting day when she also participated in a holy convocation that she and her bishop husband hosted in their church. In our interview, I mentioned that particular performance to her and she recalled being very tired that day, but she added that: "Sometimes that's when God uses me the most, when I'm burned out. I have to push more, past my tiredness. I have to tell my daughter [Kierra Sheard] that you can't go the way you feel, giving up. That may be the very moment somebody's life gotta be touched. You have to push the past way you feel. God uses those moments."¹⁴⁷

Frequent travels and the physical nature of gospel music performance can impose a heavy toll on the singers' body. For instance, Mahalia Jackson's intense touring schedule exacerbated the prolonged illness that eventually claimed her life. In 1965, at a time when Jackson was once again hospitalized, an article in the Pittsburgh Courier stated that "overwork, combined with other factors seems to be one of the main factors contributing to the rash of illnesses of several Negro entertainers during recent months. And it seems especially to have picked on the female entertainers of song." The article names Pearl Bailey, who collapsed during a performance (and had to be given oxygen in between singing), Ella Fitzgerald who suffered a near nervous breakdown on-stage at a

¹⁴⁷Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

European concert (and had to be restrained by her drummer), and Mahalia Jackson who had been stricken with a heart ailment.¹⁴⁸ In an interview printed in *Essence*, Aretha Franklin's sister Carolyn Franklin recalls that an early manager in Aretha Franklin's secular music career "worked her too hard, too often, and too much. Aretha was half dead most of the time" and so that she could keep going, the manager fed Aretha "pep pills."¹⁴⁹ The physical toll of touring from city to city and the pressures of nightly performances were intensified under the harsh conditions of the segregated South where Mahalia Jackson and Aretha Franklin toured. Even though gospel singers now travel in luxury coach buses and on first class flights, the time away from one's loved ones can be challenging. This was affirmed by Dorinda Clark Cole at a performance in New York in which she stated that in the touring life of a gospel singer, staying in hotel rooms can get lonely.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ "Rash of Illness Plagues Overworked Entertainers," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 11, 1965, 19. Jackson's health problems are also mentioned in "Mahalia Jackson Needs the Rest," February 9, 1965, *New York World Telegram and Sun*. Furthermore, Jackson had to stop another tour in 1967 due to health concerns. See, "Mahalia Jackson Halts Concert Tour," *Newsday*, August 29, 1967. Both aforementioned articles are located in Mahalia Jackson clippings available at the at the The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York, NY.

¹⁴⁹ Alan Ebert, Aretha, *Essence*, December, 1973, 39, 80. Located in Aretha Franklin clippings available at the at the The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York, NY.

¹⁵⁰ Dorinda Clark Cole, *The Samsung Experience Presents "The Singers Lounge Showcase,"* August 15, 2011, Time Warner Center, New York, NY.

Travels and Geographies

Through the decades since gospel music's birth (1930 - present) it has evolved as a music style closely connected to ideas about mobility and economic opportunities. It was originally a music nurtured among Southern migrants who had come to North in search of a better life. Specifically, Chicago is seen as the origin of gospel music, although Detroit has emerged as its rival to the status of the gospel music capital. Using these two cities as their home base, the women in this study have forged new pathways in the American gospel music geography. At the same time, as residents of these two cities, all three women in this study associate with the experience of migration, as they and/or their parents moved from the South to the North. For a gospel musician, evangelization and business are mutual pursuits by necessity because being on the road is impossible without financial means, yet it is hard to maintain other employment while traveling away. The mobility these women have achieved translated to social mobility as well, This is reflected in their choice of travel. Although Mahalia Jackson first arrived in Chicago by train, after her aptly titled big hit "Move on Up a Little Higher," she could journey in her Cadillac around the nation and sail overseas in the first class cabins of luxury ship.¹⁵¹ As much as their careers required travel, mobility has also figured in these singers' creative processes. For example, Aretha Franklin's rousing performance of "Precious Lord" was enhanced by the enraptured audience at the Oakland Colliseum. When Mahalia Jackson was driving with her pianist Mildred Falls on tour in the South, they actually composed a

¹⁵¹ S.S. United States, "List of First Class Passengers," Available in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

song “I’m on My Way to Canaan land” while on the move.¹⁵² Additionally, touring can be artistically rewarding as Jacky Clark Chisholm said that sometimes audiences away from home have a greater appreciation for the music that the home crowd takes for granted.¹⁵³

Politics

In *Race Music*, Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. identifies the church as one of the “community theaters” within African American culture, where the in-group meanings of music are negotiated. Ramsey concludes that churches have provided an important context for “the working out of cultural representation, social class debates, gender performance, spirituality, and various other issues associated with identity.”¹⁵⁴ The history of gospel music demonstrates the evolving nature of these negotiations through which the music acquired political currency from being a musical expression associated with Southern migrants to becoming a symbol of black ethnicity in America.¹⁵⁵ Gospel artists have often played central roles in these processes. Mahalia Jackson was a significant early figure who voiced support for politicians from local statesmen to U.S.

¹⁵² Jackson and Falls composed the song when they were singing in the car while driving in South Carolina. William Russell, (journal entry) July 31, 1955. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 653, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection

¹⁵³ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 28, 2011, Detroit, MI.

¹⁵⁴ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 164-165.

¹⁵⁵ Burnim, “The Black Gospel Music Tradition,” 1980.

presidents. She also contributed to the aesthetics of politics by performing in their events and thus paved a way for the music's use in efforts to advance social justice. Aretha Franklin, the daughter of a preacher and a civil rights leader, started as a soloist building up emotional readiness for his politically charged sermons and, after taking the music and discourses surrounding it to the secular arena, she eventually became emblematic of a gospel singer as a political figure. While her music in the 1960s and early 1970s provided the soundtrack for the Civil Rights, Black Power, and feminist movements, the enduring political potency of her gospel styled vocals was confirmed by her 2011 performance at a high-profile gay wedding in New York.¹⁵⁶ If mid-20th century gospel music was used as an instrument of the Civil Rights Movement era, its more polished contemporary form has proved a valid medium to take a political stand for the next generation of performers and audiences and their political issues. In analyzing the music of three of Detroit's leading gospel groups, the Clark Sisters, the Winans, and the Commissioned (all of whom earned their chops at Mattie Moss Clark's midnight musicals), Cauldrena Harold demonstrates how each used sacred music from an "activist Christian" perspective to critique Reagan era issues ranging from the U.S. government's engagement with the South African apartheid regime to the structural problems affecting people of color in declining urban centers in America.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Sarah Maslin Nir, "The Wedding as Spectacle, Bearing a Message," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/24/nyregion/wedding-of-bill-white-and-bryan-eure-is-extravagant.html>

¹⁵⁷ Cauldrena Harold, "Almighty Fire: The Rise of Urban Contemporary Gospel Music and the Search for Cultural Authority in the 1980s" *Fire!!!* 1 No 1 (2012), 25-48.

The lives of three singers in this study show that with church, family has provided an important setting for the development of a political consciousness. The fact that C.L. Franklin's leadership fostered Aretha Franklin's outlook on social justice is perhaps the best example, but also in the lives of Jackson and Clark Sheard, familial networks have been central to forming attitudes about how music can be used to advocate and further communal well-being. In her introduction to the collection of essays "Art in the Family," art historian Kellie Jones demonstrates that her scholarly journey and its intrinsic connection to her will to effect positive change in the world through cultural engagement emerged from dialogic relationships about and around the arts when growing up in an intellectual family invested in culture and politics and being surrounded by extended family members and friends who were artists, thinkers, writers, and other persons involved in the field of culture in its many forms.¹⁵⁸ I believe Jones' experience is relevant to my thinking about the three gospel singers' journeys in music because they all have grown up in environments in which family members around and as part of their musical activities, have shaped the ways in which they use music making as an uplift strategy. For instance, Mattie Moss Clark showed her daughters how women can gain recognition and influence in the church through musical mastery.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Kellie Jones, *Eye-Minded, Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-33.

¹⁵⁹ Angela Ards also describes the discussion Hannah Arendt and Ralph Ellison had about "political children" which means children who are placed by their parents and communities in the fight for social justice. In this regard she also discusses the Little Rock 9. Ards, *Words of Witness*.

Conclusion

Within a time frame spanning several generations, Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard are among the most celebrated vocalists in a music tradition in which women have played key roles from pioneering the tradition to broadening contemporary gospel music's appeal to different audiences. While their vocal styles and aesthetic choices demonstrate individualized artistry, they are all towering cultural figures who have paved the way for gospel music through creative and spiritual labors that consciously advance a female musical perspective in the service of community furtherance. Over the course of the following three chapters, I will describe my research findings on the musical lives of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard. In the final chapter, I will draw conclusions and explore broader theoretical implications for understanding women's gospel music legacies.

CHAPTER 3: It Pays to Serve Jesus: Mahalia Jackson's Success Story

An Opening Number: "How I Got Over"

On August 28, 1963, Mahalia Jackson, the world's best known gospel singer at the time and a singer who had performed the National Anthem at an Inaugural Ball for President John F. Kennedy less than two years earlier, made a historic musical intervention in American politics at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. On that monumental day in the nation's capital, Jackson sang two sacred songs on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that encouraged and inspired the tens of thousands of demonstrators who had gathered on the National Mall to demand legislative action providing social and economic rights for African American citizens. First, Jackson's poignant expression of the Spiritual "I've Been Buked and I've Been Scorned" stirred the crowd, and its "heart-touching witness" evoked the collective memory of many disenfranchised African Americans' experiences over generations.¹⁶⁰ Her second number was a dynamic rendition of the gospel hit song "How I Got Over" through which she projected the demonstrators' democratic visions in Christian imagery and catalyzed their

¹⁶⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1996 [1903]), 207.

spirited mood into a sense of hope and determination.¹⁶¹ After Jackson's performance, a spontaneous remark by the next speaker Rabbi Joachim Prinz spoke volumes about her musical mastery: "I wish I could sing!"¹⁶²

Jackson's catalytic performance merits closer examination. On this occasion, Jackson performed an abbreviated version of "How I Got Over," which was a song she knew well, as did gospel music audiences. Written by William Herbert Brewster, a composer known for his politically and socially interpretable religious songs, "How I Got

¹⁶¹ While video recordings of her performance are available through the YouTube video streaming service, the clip I refer to here is embedded in an article which appeared in the *New Yorker* on August 28, 2013. The article offers a small piece of background information relevant to the sound of Jackson's performance. Apparently, the elaborate and expensive the sound system that was set up for the event was destroyed the evening before the march by saboteurs and "had to be rebuilt by the Army Signal Corps of Engineers." "Dream Songs: The Music of the March on Washington," *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/dream-songs-the-music-of-the-march-on-washington>.

¹⁶² Rabbi Joachim Prinz, "The Speech," Joachim Prinz - Civil Rights, last accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.joachimprinz.com/images/mow.mp3>. His remarks can be heard in the very beginning of this partial recording of the events at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963. Immediately following Prinz, Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Over” was recorded by Jackson for Apollo Records in 1951, around the time gospel singer Clara Ward also released a popular version of the song.¹⁶³

Jackson renders the song in energetic tempo that propels the song forward and underscores the sense of progress expressed in the lyrics. Set in a 32-bar song form commonly used in popular and gospel music, the exhortative church feel of the song is further evoked by the bouncy syncopated organ accompaniment. Singing to several microphones on the podium, which were likely better suited for public speaking than for amplifying Jackson’s already sonorous voice, she manages to project a pleasing vocal sound and grab the peoples’ attention; their cheers gradually mount into unified hand clapping on the beats two and four. Over the course of the song, she intensifies this grip through an electrifying push-and-pull effect by melodically and rhythmically

¹⁶³ The recording took place July 17, 1951 in New York according to liner notes included in a compilation *Complete Mahalia Jackson, Intégrale Mahalia Jackson, vol. 3 1950-1952*, Frémeaux & Associés 1313, 1998. Jackson’s vocal expression and the song form at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 resembles the recording she made for Apollo Records. As such it is different from the slower and extended version she recorded live in Sweden on April 18, 1961 (under a contract with Columbia Records) according to the liner notes included in a compilation *Mahalia Jackson, Gospels, Spirituals, & Hymns, Vol.2*, Columbia C2K 65597, 1992. William Russell’s notes include set lists for her various concerts, from which I conclude that that she might not have performed the song regularly in the 1950s, but she performed the song in a concert at South Shore Baptist Church on Monday, March 28, 1955. The song “How I Got Over” is variously credited to Herbert Brewster (as actually his reformulation of an old Spiritual) and Clara Ward, who says she reworked it from an old hymn. Willa Ward-Royster as told to Toni Rose, *How I Got Over, Clara Ward and the World-Famous Ward Singers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 99. Anthony Heilbut argues that Brewster’s major contribution to gospel music is “the social and political message implicit in his music.” Heilbut also points out conflicting copyright claims of Jackson and Ward surrounding compositions credited to Brewster in an essay ““If I Fail, You Tell The World I Tried, William Herbert Brewster on Records,” in *We’ll Understand it Better, By and By*, Reagon, ed., 234.

emphasizing the engaging call and response patterns of the song structure. She also draws lively participation from the crowd using her signature bouncy rhythmic sensibility.

Jackson's blues-influenced delivery draws attention to gospel music as a style that was originally associated with Southern worship practices and embraced among migrants who formed large parts of the urban working-class in the North. Although by 1963 gospel music had become a widely popular sacred music style, its blues idiom that was basically traceable to field hollers and work songs of the past, continued to articulate a particular working-class sensibility on par with the demonstrators demands for economic equality that they tied to labor market issues like minimum-wage regulations.¹⁶⁴ Jackson understood their plight well; although she was now a wealthy superstar, she had once been a migrant laundress in Chicago. Her well-known story seemed to serve as a source of empathy and an experience that she could use to evoke collective imageries as signaled by the word "we" that she sometimes subtly substituted for the word "I," particularly in the beginning of the song.

Musically speaking, Jackson's vocal performance demonstrates her skill in synthesizing tradition and innovation to express an uplifting song. Set in the key of A-flat major, common in gospel music, Jackson sings the melody within an octave and half

¹⁶⁴ For some, Jackson actually represented ideas about lower class status in unfavorable terms. In discussing the role of music at the March on Washington, Brian Ward writes that "veteran educator-writer-activist Anna Arnold Hedgeman" [t]he only woman on the march's organizing committee," had "objected to Jackson's place on the official program, considering her too crude and ill-educated, her music too raw and emotional, for this relentlessly respectable affair." Charles Euchner, *Nobody Turn Me Around: A People's History of the 1963 March on Washington* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 155, quoted in Brian Ward, "Sounds and Silences: Music and the March on Washington," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Supplement 11, 2015, 43.

from Ab3 to a Db5. While she develops the melodic contour using several vocal devices and inflections, she basically anchors the song around the tonic Ab4. She emphasizes this recurrent pitch with vibrato and loud gestures in a manner that resembles the “centre tone” approach of her early role model Bessie Smith.¹⁶⁵ The song’s original melody offers a frame of reference upon which Jackson improvises with gospel vocal devices: bent/blue notes, heavy vibrato, hollers, word interpolations, and timbral variations, just to name a few. These gestures, when used in a repeat and revise blues-manner called a “worrying the line,” create catchy call and response moments throughout the song.

Jackson masterfully blends gospel and blues idioms, and her true artistry emerges from the creative ways she puts them into play. Perhaps the most curious yet utterly small detail might offer insights into her vast musical imagination. Within the word “mighty” in the line “We had a *mighty* hard time coming on over,” one can hear a sound that seems like a vocal crack resulting from strain and inadequate breath support, but when considering her usually steady vocal control and the placement of that “incident,” it might actually be a device she deploys for dramatic emphasis. In the broader context of the song’s sprightly narration, she fluidly alters her narrative voice between introspection and declaration variously using melismas and straight notes that she finishes off with an accent that seems to serve as a sonic exclamation point. As the song builds up toward its climax, Jackson increasingly “growls” to dramatize the effects of her delivery, so much so that she eventually colors near all lines with the powerful sound of growling. At one point, she sings “Thank God for how he kept me!” maintaining a rough voice quality

¹⁶⁵ Hadlock, *Jazz Masters of the 1920s*, 223-224.

while changing the syncopated rhythm of the previous line into a marching rhythm as a way that seemingly underscores the theme of the occasion. If the physical labor of singing intensifies as the song progresses, Jackson shows no sign of strain. As the exhilarating finale of the song she keeps a firm grip on the listener by repeating “thank you!” as in a chant. She ultimately resolves this exciting tension by singing “thank you for being so good to me” by maneuvering through a blues scale to the tonic pitch. She finishes the song by stretching and exploiting the nasal sound of “me” using it effectively as a sonic showcase of rock star bravado and vocal prowess that earned her the title the “world’s greatest gospel singer.”

Introduction

The subject of my first case study is Mahalia Jackson, who is widely recognized as a torchbearer of gospel music vocal performance. By all accounts, Jackson was a pioneer who helped to expand gospel music from its beginnings as a marginalized sacred music expression among African American migrants into a music style consumed in the mainstream American society. In this chapter, I examine Jackson’s musical oeuvre, her life stories, and other primary sources in order to elucidate the ways in which she used musical knowledge to forge a multifaceted career as a cultural authority, a spiritual leader, a businesswoman, and a political actor. The chapter is organized in the following manner: first, I lay out the social world of Jackson’s youth in New Orleans with a particular attention to its musical aspects; second, I describe her migrant experience in Chicago and the career she built as a gospel singer within the economic, social, cultural,

and political arenas of the city; and finally, I explore her successful years in the business of gospel music and examine the linkages between her musical and her extra-musical activities.

Before I proceed, it is important to explain how I approached the study of Mahalia Jackson's musical life from an observational perspective that pays attention to how she variously, and often fluidly, positions herself in relation to music, religion, and commerce. Very few known original sources chronicle Jackson's life and music prior to her commercial recording career. In order to create a composite of her early years, I compiled and read information provided by Jackson's recordings, films, popular writings, and primary sources which mainly included the meticulous notes William Russell wrote as her assistant.¹⁶⁶ I also used the information provided by three biographical books to which Jackson personally contributed: an autobiography written with Evan McLeod Wylie titled *Movin' On Up* (1966), the often-quoted biography by Laurraine Goreau titled *Just Mahalia, Baby, The Mahalia Jackson Story* (1975), and the quasi-ethnographic

¹⁶⁶ William Russell was a jazz music researcher, collector, and Mahalia Jackson's good friend and confidant who wrote incredibly detailed notes during the time ca. 1954-55 he worked for her as an unpaid personal assistant. His journal entries provide valuable insights on her work and life at a critical juncture in her path to American mainstream success. Russell's archives are located in the Williams Research Center of the Historical New Orleans Collection. <http://www.hnoc.org/programs/william-russell-jazz-collection>; Kristine Somerville, Speer Morgan, and Jennifer Maritza McCauley, "Traveling with Mahalia: The Notebooks of Bill Russell," *The Missouri Review* 39, no. 2, (2016): 129-159.

biography *Got to Tell It: Mahalia Jackson, Queen of Gospel* (1992) by Jules Schwerin.¹⁶⁷

In so doing, I remained mindful of and concerned with the limitations of biographical narratives as literary constructs that are often written by non-scholars in a style tailored for general readership; their claims to “authenticity” cannot be taken at face value. For instance, I was piqued by Goreau's claim that Jackson suggested to her in 1967: “You write the real book of me, Laurraines.”¹⁶⁸ Without a doubt, this statement which Goreau writes at the opening of the preface to her book, seeks to confirm her authorial credibility. Still, if indeed Jackson said this, was it an admission that her recent autobiography (1966) was not “real” but rather a telling account about the singer’s public-self at the time of its publication?

The *Music and Gender* (2000) volume edited by Pirkko Moisala and Beverley Diamond includes a set of essays that offer tools for scholars who seek to explore music and gender-related themes using musicians’ life stories.¹⁶⁹ Following a postmodern approach for the study of gender as a construct, contributors to this collection offer

¹⁶⁷ Mahalia Jackson with Evan McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 3rd printing (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967 [1966]); Laurraine Goreau, *Just Mahalia, Baby, The Mahalia Jackson Story* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1984 [1975]); Jules Schwerin, *Got To Tell It, Mahalia Jackson, Queen of Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). An additional note, Edwin Gersbach, an avid listener of Jackson’s music from Switzerland, has compiled a useful discography of Jackson’s recordings based on album liner notes that often include pertinent details such as original recording dates. With the help of his discography, together with the actual liner notes I chart Jackson’s recording career in this chapter. Mahalia Jackson discography, http://edwin-gersbach.alpha-host.ch/eg_en_mahalia.html. Last accessed June 1, 2017.

¹⁶⁸ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, vii.

¹⁶⁹ Moisala and Diamond, ed., *Music and Gender*.

insights into the many ways in which individuals form their subject positions through continuous negotiations within prevailing societal structures. For the purposes of my study on gospel music, I have been observant of other relevant variables that influence these negotiations, for example, race, class, and religion. Consequently, in my study of Jackson's musical life story as a multifaceted and ongoing narration, I have drawn upon the following beliefs that Diamond posits based on ideas articulated by bell hooks: "oral narratives must be heard or read not so much in terms of what the subjects accomplished but in terms of what they desired, not just in terms of what they did but in terms of the individuals to whom they sought to relate by their actions and in terms of both what they actualized and what they excluded about themselves."¹⁷⁰ Drawing on Diamond's idea that individuals perform their musical life stories "creatively and situationally rather than uniformly and consistently," I studied the alleged "truths" that were told about Jackson at various times, alternate claims to them, and inconsistencies between different narratives.¹⁷¹ Indeed it was easy to notice that several commonalities, divergences, and omissions characterize narratives by and about Jackson.

As the profit-potential of Jackson's music offers an incentive for the music industry to continue bringing previously unheard and unseen materials to the marketplace, the enduring recognition of Jackson's cultural importance serves to attract

¹⁷⁰ Beverley Diamond, "The Interpretation of Gender Issues in Musical Life Stories of Prince Edwards Islanders," in Moisala and Diamond, eds., 100; Diamond refers to bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 217.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 128. Diamond uses this expression to describe the ways in which two women she interviewed in the field told their musical stories.

growing scholarly interest. The developments in these two realms, commercial and scholarly, confirm that Jackson's music and life can provide valuable insights into social and cultural processes in America and around the world. To that end, I believe that the present study into and across sounds, visuals, and texts can create a new path in our understandings about Jackson's artistry with specific attention to the intersection of her music, religion, and commerce.

New Orleans and Sources of Musical Knowledge

Family History

Most biographical writings construct Jackson's family history around social relationships that formed in response to Southern economic conditions. From her biographical narratives, one can gather that some of her closest family members, as they are described in her familial networks, were individuals who demonstrated a strong will to prosper amid social and economic hardships in their environments. To this end, I will explain in the following description that as far as her family tree can be traced to both great-grandparents who lived in the 19th century, Jackson's foremothers and forefathers seem to have demonstrated an industrious spirit which they passed down through generations as a key to economic advancement and social mobility.

Born on October 26, 1911, Mahalia (born Mahala) Jackson lived the first 16 years of her life in New Orleans, Louisiana, during an era when musicians blended and transformed various local music styles in a creative process that gave the world the music

now known as jazz.¹⁷² Jackson's mother Charity Clark, who had left rural Louisiana with her siblings and cotton picking as their only occupational option, worked as a maid in New Orleans.¹⁷³ Mahalia Jackson's father Johnny Jackson was a barber who also worked at the wharf. Like other major figures in Jackson's life, religion was important to Johnny Jackson, who served as a clergyman on Sundays. When Jackson was still alive, published accounts usually portrayed her birth home as a traditional nuclear family. In Goreau's posthumously published biography, however, the author writes that Jackson's parents were no longer seeing each other at the time Jackson was born, and the involvement of

¹⁷² Whether Mahalia Jackson's actual year of birth was 1911 or 1912 is a question that researchers and other writers have raised. Even though some of them have pointed out that the year 1911 is marked on her birth certificate and on census records that does not rule out the possibility of an error in record keeping. In the past even her close family members have seemed to uphold both possibilities as evidenced by the program booklet for Jackson's funeral services, which they presumably approved. On the cover of the booklet her birth year is marked 1911, but in the obituary inside the birth year is 1912, the same as the year inscribed on her above ground tomb located at Providence Park Cemetery, Louisiana. There is also a little confusion about the year she departed for Chicago. Some writings claim that the year Jackson migrated to Chicago was 1927 but in his article "Mahalia Jackson Meets the Wise Men: Defining Jazz at the Music Inn," Mark Burford cites census records and oral histories as evidence that Jackson migrated to Chicago in November, 1931. For more information and discussions about these issues, see Mark Burford, "Mahalia Jackson Meets the Wise Men: Defining Jazz at the Music Inn," *Musical Quarterly* 97, 3 (2014): 476; Roxane Orgil, *Mahalia, A Life in Gospel Music* (Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 2002), x; Jerry Brock, "Hallelujah! Mahalia," *Know Louisiana, The Digital Encyclopedia of Louisiana and Home of Louisiana Cultural Vistas*, 2012, <http://www.knowlouisiana.org/38907/>; Mahalia Jackson Funeral Service Program Booklet, House of Branch Funeral Home, Chicago, 1972. This program booklet is located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

¹⁷³ I have synthesized this biographical background mainly from the three book-length texts mentioned in the introduction.

Jackson's father in her early life was limited.¹⁷⁴ Whether Jackson's parents were married at some point (by law or custom), as Jackson claims in her autobiography, most narratives seem to agree that Jackson grew up in a house where her mother, six aunts, and their children lived, and that after Jackson's mother passed away when Jackson was only five years old, she was raised by her aunt Duke, a strict disciplinarian and a devout Christian family leader.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 5. Thus far Goreau's text constitutes the most detailed account about Mahalia Jackson's life and music. Despite being written for a lay audience, it has been widely quoted in scholarly writings. When read together with Jackson's autobiography with Evan McLeod Wylie (1966), a biography by Jules Schwerin (1992), interviews, and other texts, one can find inconsistencies and omissions in Goreau's work. Despite these obvious problems, Goreau's version opens up multiple lines of inquiry into Jackson's life and the ways in which she navigated the presentation of her public self at different career stages. The question about Jackson's family history is a case in point. When Jackson was still alive and her autobiography with McLeod Wylie was published in 1966, the roles of her mother and father were seemingly constructed to depict an image favorable to public perception in the American mainstream, where the normative "American family" was a two-parent nuclear family. Goreau's version tells a different story about Jackson's mother as a single parent. Thus, to help a presumed mainstream reader understand that Jackson's mother (in particular) did not engage in deviant social behavior, Goreau explains the social history of Jackson's community in which an unwed mother was not stigmatized. As evidence Goreau gives social, legal, and historical reasons related to practices during slavery and the black's distrust toward the white system of governance. The reasons she offers have been substantiated by scholarly work. See for ex. Katherine M. Franke, "Becoming a Citizen: Reconstruction Era Regulation of African American Marriages," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 11 (1999): 252; Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black & White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, 1996), 161; Hendrik Hartog, *Man & Wife in America: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 93; Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 32-35. Bernice Johnson Reagon, *If You Don't Go, Don't Hinder Me The African American Sacred Song Tradition* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2001), 112-117.

¹⁷⁵ Jackson with McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 17.

Jackson's ancestry can be traced to slavery through her great-grandparents.

Regarding her paternal lineage, Goreau mentions Jackson's interest in listening to the stories of her paternal great-grandmother Sarah Lemoire, an ex-slave who lived to the age of 104. Regarding her maternal lineage, a rare biographical source provides a few more occupational details on her great-grandparents "a prized cook" and "family coachman" who had relative privilege and status even though they were slaves.¹⁷⁶ Both resided on a Merrick family cotton plantation near the Atchafalaye River. Interestingly, one may learn about their tactics of resistance and professional pride from a memoir written by Caroline E. Merrick, the mistress of the Merrick plantation and a somewhat well-known champion of women's suffrage. Her memoir *Old Times in Dixie Land, A Southern Matron's Memories* was published in 1901 as a chronicle of life in the South before and after the Civil War. Obviously, the memoir was written after slavery was abolished. Because Merrick had built a reputation for social justice work that focused on women's rights, she likely inserted the direct quotations from her slaves in the text to portray her benevolence as a slave owner.¹⁷⁷ Nonetheless, for the interests of the present study, two such quotations deserve closer attention. In one, Merrick cites her coachman who once refused her orders to speed up the coach because he knew (better than she did) how fast he could make her horses run without killing them. In another account, Merrick cites her cook of

¹⁷⁶ Jackson with McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 12-13.; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Caroline E. Merrick, *Old Times in Dixie Land, A Southern Matron's Memories* (New York: Grafton Press, 1901), 17-18. Full text available at *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill, 1997, accessed March 12, 2017, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/merrick/merrick.html>.

12 years who “scorned [her] inexperienced youth” and told the young mistress to let her cook a proper meal for the misters. Unfortunately, by omitting the names of her slaves, as was common in white narratives of the Old South, Merrick wrote off their identity and any evidence to further confirm that indeed those voices belonged to Mahalia Jackson’s maternal great-grandparents.

Their son, Jackson’s beloved grandfather Paul Clark is portrayed in Goreau’s text as a “substantial man in the black community” whose commercial acumen and status as a spiritual leader prefigured those of Jackson’s.¹⁷⁸ Following the precedent set by a small number of antebellum blacks in the South (both free and enslaved) who productively took part in capitalism and the marketplace by establishing profit-seeking enterprises, Clark was a hard-working man who capitalized on opportunities to profit from the local economy.¹⁷⁹ Like many former slaves who remained working on plantations after Emancipation, Clark stayed on as a supervisor of a plant that ginned cotton from three plantations. Because of his elevated status he was also able to rent land (instead of working it) and pursue an education. Additionally, on Saturdays he worked as a barber mainly for white people, and on Sundays, he was often a guest preacher in a Baptist church on the plantation.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 7.

¹⁷⁹ Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 108-163; Loren Schweninger, “Black-Owned Businesses in the South, 1790-1880” *The Business History Review* 63, no. 1, (Spring, 1989): 22-60.

¹⁸⁰ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 7.

On one hand, at the time when the postbellum barbering industry in the South was nearly void of white competition willing to do the “job of former slaves,” African American barbers like Paul Clark who targeted white customers were able to maximize profits and advance socially and economically into the small black middle class.¹⁸¹ On the other hand, as Eileen Southern’s and Josephine Wright’s reading of postbellum artworks demonstrates, a preacher in the African American community context who provided spiritual leadership with roles as a counselor, mediator, comforter, counsel, healer, and friend held a central place as a “folk institution.”¹⁸² Described as “gray-eyed, imposing, with a natural flair for language,” Paul Clark appears to possess a distinctive demeanor and vocal dexterity expected of an effective African American preacher at the time.¹⁸³ His charismatic presence reflects the aesthetics of the early Black church in which the preacher was a spiritual authority who could deliver a fiery sermon from the pulpit in a manner similar to his enslaved predecessors who led the seemingly magical rituals of hush arbor church that included preaching, singing, and shouting. As Southern and Wright note, some features were common to many black folk preachers, like the quality ascribed to Paul Clark as “the flair for language,” which they say entailed engaging the congregation in a dialogue through an individualized style and the “use of

¹⁸¹ Quincy T. Mills, *Cutting Along the Color Line, Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 63-64.

¹⁸² Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, *Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture, 1770s-1920s* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 122.

¹⁸³ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 7.

timing as a device to control the pace of the sermon and the use of pitch as a tension builder.”¹⁸⁴

When taken together, the strands of Clark’s success story as a believer could be viewed in line with Booker T. Washington’s ideas for the economic and moral uplift of the race. Consistent with the ideology of self-help and the religious views that Washington promoted, Clark serves as an exemplary of economic and social advancement produced with specialized skills and hard work, and which in turn can attract the uninitiated and bring those wondering closer toward Christianity.¹⁸⁵ Mahalia Jackson held her grandfather in high esteem, and Clark’s influence on her religiosity is presented in biographical texts. In Jackson’s Chicago era recollections, Paul Clark emerges as a key figure in the following event to which Jackson attributes her decision to sing only sacred music. During a visit to see his granddaughter in the North, Clark unfortunately suffered a stroke. It was then, Jackson says, that she made a promise to God not to enter vaudeville or nightclubs in exchange for “Papa’s” recovery. He survived the stroke, and thereafter Jackson would follow in the path set by her promise.¹⁸⁶

New Orleans and Its Sounds

¹⁸⁴ Southern and Wright, *Images*, 136.

¹⁸⁵ Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro in the South, His Economic Progress in Relation to His Moral and Religious Development; Being the William Levi Bull Lectures for the Year 1907*. Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs, 1907, 7-75, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/washdubo/menu.html>.

¹⁸⁶ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 68-69; Jackson and McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 67.

The early 20th century New Orleans of Jackson's youth had a rich but stratified social world which resulted from the distinct heritage of the city and the racial segregation implemented under the Jim Crow legal system. A unique city in the South, over time this former French colony had emerged as a major port city shaped by many people and events including European settlers, entertainers, tourists, agricultural commerce, escapees from the Haitian Revolution, and the slave trade. "The largest and most cosmopolitan city in the lower South" in the 19th century, New Orleans became a site for various creole identities and languages as well as class distinctions.¹⁸⁷ At the dawn of the 20th century, however, the city went into a decline when the local agricultural economy could not compete with the economic output of more industrialized cities. Although people from different races interacted to some extent at the beginning of Reconstruction, during the decades leading to the First World War, the increased enforcement of Jim Crow Laws drove the consolidation of racial categories into a bipartite society divided into African Americans and whites.¹⁸⁸ Perhaps for this legislative reality and its weight in political discourse, Jackson often described her hometown's race-

¹⁸⁷ Roger A. Fisher, "Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans," *The American Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (February, 1969): 928.

¹⁸⁸ Elizabeth Fussell, "Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans," *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3. (2007): 846-85.

related themes in terms of blacks and whites, although in all likelihood, she was well versed in the various identity politics of New Orleans.¹⁸⁹

In telling her personal narrative, Jackson often candidly recounted her own and her family's efforts to cope with poverty after they settled into Pinching Town, a low-income area in New Orleans inhabited by African Americans and immigrants from various European countries. Although she lived in a shotgun house in an underprivileged neighborhood which decades later acquired the name Black Pearl, Jackson maintained aspirations for "living better."¹⁹⁰ Thus when Jackson was old enough, she started juggling school and household work at home and elsewhere for pay. Domestic work paid little but it was a typical and "respectable" occupation available for women at the time, and Jackson was driven to excel for "nobody could beat her for cleaning or ironing, singing as she worked."¹⁹¹ It is worth mentioning here that after Jackson became a wealthy and famous gospel singer, the accounts about her humble beginnings in New Orleans provided a source for fashioning herself in musical and extra-musical contexts. Throughout her life, Jackson upheld the dignity of being poor and took pride in overcoming race-based discrimination and inequality. In the popular press, her childhood poverty became somewhat of a trope for establishing a "rise from a 'shot-gun shack' to

¹⁸⁹ Jerah Johnson, "Jim Crow Laws of the 1890s and the Origins of New Orleans Jazz: Correction of an Error," *Popular Music* 19, no. 2, (2000): 243-251; For a discussion about identity politics in relation to jazz cultures in New Orleans see, David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 10-40.

¹⁹⁰ Mahalia Jackson, "Recollections of Early Childhood," *I Sing Because I'm Happy*, 1995.

¹⁹¹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 39.

riches” story.¹⁹² Take for instance an article in *Life* titled “Queen Mahalia, She Makes Hymn Singing Pay,” which was written to introduce Jackson to the American mainstream readership. (The article was published at the beginning of her career at Columbia Records in 1954.) The article basically celebrated Jackson as a financially successful gospel singer who emerged from dire circumstances in early life through hard work.¹⁹³ The article is illustrated with a photo of Jackson relaxing at home by a stereo with a caption: “Mahalia listening to Mahalia: her recent hit ‘It Pays to Serve Jesus,’” which underscores the “always religious and now also prosperous” message conveyed by this article.

Although the early 20th century New Orleans provided meager material benefits for its disadvantaged inhabitants, the city’s cultural environment was abundant in sounds and sights that intrigued the young Mahalia Jackson. To that end, her later recollections about her childhood musical experiences emerge as a rich repository of sounds etched in her memory. For instance, in a recorded interview with Jules Schwerin she describes how

¹⁹² One can note that Jackson’s public narratives echo the path of millionaire entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker who was Jackson’s role model in the business of beauty. Walker’s early marketing strategy reportedly included using her personal narrative of having been a “a poor woman who migrated from the farm to the city and who experienced hair loss.” Amanda Roberti and Lisa Hetfield, “Madame C.J. Walker: Leadership Grounded in Social and Racial Uplift,” in *Junctures in Women’s Leadership: Business*, ed. Lisa Hetfield and Dana M. Britton (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 48; As an example of her proudly presenting this narrative in public, Walker once went against Booker T. Washington’s efforts to prevent her from speaking at the National Negro Business League meeting and told the crowd that she was “promoted by others ‘from the cotton fields of the South’ to ‘the wash tub’ and finally acquired self-promotion in ‘the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations.’” Ibid.; Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes, Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 54.

¹⁹³ “Gospel Queen Mahalia, She Makes Hymn Singing Pay,” *Life*, November 29, 1954.

hard life was for the people who tried to make ends meet in her part of town. When describing a produce vendor she recalls: “You would perhaps hear a man coming down the street selling bananas, in a tone that was very sad, (or vegetables,) a very sad song: ‘vegetables today, we have bananas today,’ things like that.”¹⁹⁴ To recapture his melancholia, she recites the man’s sad tone by using a weary intonation while sliding down from an F note an interval that approximates a minor third and applying a listless speech-like rhythmic placement on syllables in each phrase.

Schwerin’s recorded interviews and Jackson’s biographies describe a wide range of musical styles that influenced Jackson from music played and sung in streets and churches to recordings she listened to and overheard.¹⁹⁵ In this manner, as Johari Jabir has observed, Jackson’s early musical education was “like the aural equivalent of Louisiana gumbo.”¹⁹⁶ Famous for her own version of gumbo made with okra, the peerless chef lauded by Duke Ellington and many others, Jackson probably would have appreciated Jabir’s metaphor.¹⁹⁷ What needs to be pointed out too is that from a

¹⁹⁴ Mahalia Jackson, “Recollections of Early Childhood,” *I Sing Because I’m Happy*, 1995.

¹⁹⁵ Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 24-26.; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 11-14, 37-39.; Jackson and McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 29-31.

¹⁹⁶ Johari Jabir. “On Conjuring Mahalia: Mahalia Jackson, New Orleans, and the Sanctified Swing” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3, (2009): 560.

¹⁹⁷ Jackson’s *Mahalia Jackson Cooks Soul* (1970) is dedicated to the memory of her aunt Duke “whose influence made [the] book possible.” Culinary arts seem to have been a family tradition in view of the fact that Jackson’s great-grandmother was a “prized cook” as described earlier in this chapter. Mahalia Jackson, *Mahalia Jackson Cooks Soul* (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1970).

remarkably diverse diet of “food for musical thought,” Jackson learned to prepare and blend ingredients of different flavors, colors, and textures into a wholesome sonic meal for the nourishment of the mind, body, and soul of her listeners.¹⁹⁸

To better understand how Jackson’s musical thought and performance might have drawn inspiration from the lives and traditions that she encountered in the early 20th century New Orleans, it is worth examining her recollections a bit closer. To begin, in the 1910s, the strong musical spirit of Jackson’s hometown manifested in an extraordinary variety of styles and music making activities nearly anywhere in the city and by anybody eager to participate.¹⁹⁹ In her often quoted childhood memories, Jackson provides glimpse of the early jazz scene, its influential creators and their musical milieu well before the 1920s and the emergence of the “Jazz Age” that propelled them to world renown:

New Orleans was full of music-ragtime and jazz and the blues when I was born there 1911. They had all the famous brass bands that rode around town in the advertising wagons and played at funerals and picnics and fish fries and lodge parties. There was music on the showboats on the Mississippi and in all the cabarets and cafes where musicians like Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver were playing. Louis Armstrong was an eleven-year-old trumpet player in the New Orleans Waifs’ Home Band.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ In other contexts, gumbo has been used as a metaphor to describe the variety and variability of African American lives and cultures “within that special element of ‘roux’ that binds them.” See, *Black Is, Black Ain’t*, directed by Marlon Briggs (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 1994).

¹⁹⁹ Burton Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 19-23.

²⁰⁰ Jackson as told to Evan McLeod Wylie, “I Can’t Stop Singing,” 20.

In addition to the above, Jackson remembers hearing sounds of grocers calls for customers, railroad men singing, funeral processions and “the second line,” and the Mardi Gras parades, which she disliked, however, because of the violence that took place during the festivities.²⁰¹ Additionally, she notes that one could hear Enrico Caruso’s records being played when passing by white people’s houses.²⁰²

By the time Jackson entered her early teens blues singers including Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey had made their first recordings. Jackson readily admits that early on she was influenced by her cousin Fred’s secular music records which she would listen in secret from Aunt Duke. Not just an avid listener, Jackson describes learning blues singing by adjusting her mouth to mimic Smith’s vocals as follows: “When I used to listen to Bessie Smith sing ‘I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down,’ I’d fix my mouth and try to make my tones come out just like hers.”²⁰³ Given Jackson’s strong alto voice, which was not unlike Smith’s, one can imagine that even as a young girl, she could match Smith’s range and tone fairly well. Whether she was encouraged by her own ability to perform Smith’s vocals or by the power of Smith’s voice, Jackson’s “vocal lessons” with Smith were successful as evidenced by her early recordings for Decca (1937), on which,

²⁰¹Mahalia Jackson interviews, “Recollections of New Orleans Music,” “Recollections of Early Childhood,” and “Recollections of New Orleans Violence and Role of Church,” *I Sing Because I’m Happy*, 1995; Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 33-34; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 37-39; Jackson and McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 29-31. Robert Marovich, “Bon Temps and Good News: The Influence of New Orleans on the Performance Style of Mahalia Jackson,” *ARSC Journal* 42 1 (2011): 51-62.

²⁰² Jackson and McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 29.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 36.

for example, Jackson frequently builds melody around “Smith-like” sustained calls on one pitch that are marked throughout by controlled intensity in tone and vibrato. By the time of the Decca recording session, Jackson had dedicated her life to singing sacred music, but she saw no problem in still using a blues-based style because she was convinced that the sounds adopted from the blues could carry a Christian message. As she would often claim, the difference between gospel and blues “should not be reduced to the notes or the rhythm, but the sense of hope conveyed by the music.”²⁰⁴

It was in the realm of the church, however, where she learned the most about singing sacred music. In Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church, where Jackson was baptized at the age of 14, Jackson sang as a soloist with the choir. She remembers that at the time, the church was the only recreational place for children although the powerful music and worship services also drew her in.²⁰⁵ The musical lessons Jackson learned as an active member in the church are in line with the two main sources of gospel music identified by the pioneering gospel music scholar and performer Pearl Williams-Jones: the preaching and congregation singing.²⁰⁶ In regard to the influence that preaching had on her singing Jackson remembers

²⁰⁴ Mahalia Jackson, “Why I Turned Down a Million,” 2.; Jackson describes the sentiment “blues singing feeling” in an interview provided by the first gospel music dissertation which George Ricks wrote based on ethnography he conducted among some of the most prominent figures in gospel music at the time. *Some Aspects of the Religious Music of the United States Negro: An Ethnomusicological Study with Special Emphasis on the Gospel Tradition* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1960), 140.

²⁰⁵ Mahalia Jackson interview “Recollections of Musical Influences,” *I Sing Because I’m Happy*, 1995.

²⁰⁶ Williams-Jones, “Gospel Music,” 373-385.

I liked the way the old preacher would preach. In his message, he weren't [sic] educated like some of our ministers of today, but there was a way that he would preach, would have a singing tone in his voice that was sad, and it done something to me...really, it is the basic way I sing today. From hearing the way the preacher would sort of sing...I mean would preach in a cry, in a moan, would shout, sort of like in a chant way of growling sound which would penetrate to my heart.²⁰⁷

She also points out the sound of congregational singing: "I always did love the way the congregation would sing the song. It seemed that it had a different tone quality than what the choir would have." Although she does not further explain the differing "tone qualities," it is likely that she refers to the heterophony of voices typical to collective music in African American churches in the South that resulted from improvisational and individualized layering of individual singing in contrast to the (usually) rehearsed homophonic choral arrangements.

Outside of the church, Jackson's keen ear absorbed the sounds she heard from the neighboring Sanctified/Holiness church. She recalls the cymbals, drums, strings, and tambourines played by the congregants together with their vigorous hand-clapping and feet-stomping through which the participants "sang with their whole bodies!" Embodied musical engagement of this nature, which can be connected to the participants' African American heritage, later became an important marker of Jackson's gospel music expression.²⁰⁸ Horace Boyer determines that these two denominational influences (together with the blues) contributed to her vocal style of "moaning and bending of final

²⁰⁷ Mahalia Jackson interview, "Recollections of Influences of Musical Influences," *I Sing Because I'm Happy*, 1995.

²⁰⁸ Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 30; Wilson, "A Black Conceptual Approach to Music-Making," 9-23.

notes in phrases (what W.C. Handy called “worrying over a note”)’ and “full-throated tone, delivered with a holy beat and the body rhythm to accent that beat.”²⁰⁹

If the early 20th century New Orleans had a strong musical spirit, it too sounded a religious heterophony of old and new faith practices. In Jackson’s youth and today, the leisurely cultural atmosphere of New Orleans is enriched by a strong and visible influence of religions that in their co-existence and even co-optation can be said to express a kind of ecumenical voicing of local identities. Since the turn of the 18th century, the colonial influence of the French and Spanish settlers established a stronghold in the Roman Catholic Church in the region. Despite the dominant Catholicism in New Orleans, however, religious engagement within its diverse populations also included smaller Christian denominations and other religions, some of which were uniquely shaped by the syncretic fusion of the cultures in the area. Among them the most famous example is voodoo (or hoodoo), which is a religion based on a set of African and Catholic influenced spiritual beliefs and rites that were originally brought by refugees after the Haitian revolution.²¹⁰ Despite being outlawed, conjuring traditions seemed to be well established in the 1920s “Hoodoo Capital of America” according to the reports of Zora

²⁰⁹ Horace Boyer and Lloyd Yearwood, *How Sweet the Sound: The Golden Age of Gospel* (Illinois: Black Belt Press, 2000 [1995], 85; Jackson stayed a Baptist “through and through” all her life, which however, did not prevent her from performing in churches of other Christian denominations. For years Jackson publicly discussed her plans to build a “non-segregated” and “nondenominational” temple, which, however, she did not realize in her lifetime. Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 202; “Mahalia Jackson Set for New TV Series,” *Jet*, April 20, 1961, 58; “Mahalia Jackson to Build Evangelist Temple,” *Jet*, December 24, 1959, 51.

²¹⁰ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 6.

Neal Hurston, who did fieldwork there as a pupil of several practitioners.²¹¹ Although voodoo was a common practice in New Orleans at the time Jackson was growing up, it is mentioned sparingly in Jackson's biography by Goreau. Nonetheless, the reader does learn about Aunt Duke's gift of using special potions and spells to cure physical and spiritual ills, yet it is unclear whether she practiced magic or forms of traditional healing, and whether she received monetary compensation for her services.²¹²

Jackson's own views on voodoo are indeed brief, but taking into account the longstanding musical intermixing and religious cross-pollination in New Orleans, potential resonances that emerge at their intersection in Jackson's artistry deserve attention. To this end, credible evidence is provided by Richard Brent Turner, who uses Hurston's ethnography to demonstrate the ways in which hoodoo spirituality and practice are coded in second line parades, a tradition that Jackson recalls in her remembrances.²¹³ Furthermore, the alleged "South of conjurors" and magic that northern audiences associated with Jackson's migrant background provide a way for speculating how consciously or not, directly or indirectly, the aesthetics of voodoo might have suffused into her performance aesthetics and reception history among church audiences who

²¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *On Mules and Men* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978 [1935]), 193.

²¹² Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 34.

²¹³ Richard Brent Turner, *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 12-38.

projected their own imaginings about New Orleans culture on her and her musical performance.²¹⁴

To begin, as Davarian Baldwin suggests, the jerky movements that were part of Jackson's performance style can be read as spirit possession.²¹⁵ Add to this her sometimes contorted facial expressions, which might have led audience members to envision what Zora Neale Hurston, a participant in a ceremonial hoodoo dance meant by observing, "But the faces! That's where the dedication lay."²¹⁶ Some of Jackson's critics in the North were shocked by her "snake hips," a reference to the swaying movements she made while singing. These critics may have connected Jackson's performance to the "snake hips" dance style popularized by Earl "Snakehips" Tucker in Harlem in the 1920s. This dance style, which can be traced to slavery appeared also in Katherine Dunham's "Flaming

²¹⁴ Jackson's relative silence on the topic of voodoo can be understood as an effort to distance herself from it as heresy. Nevertheless, through her stated fear of voodoo, she (or Goreau) too seems to avoid any association that might cast her in light of a widespread stereotype of witchcraft as a practice of women. Recognizing that conjuring traditions have served as forms of resistance in African American history, some observers might have interpreted voodoo-like gestures in Jackson's performance for their subversive potential. In mainstream perception however, any association with voodoo would have likely had negative effects on her career. On gendered ideas surrounding witchcraft/voodoo, see for example, Kameelah L. Martin, *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature: Women, Spirit Work, and Other Such Hoodoo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012); Kimberly B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, and Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 24-25.

²¹⁵ Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*; Also see, Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 1997 [1971], 66.

²¹⁶ Hurston, *On Mules and Men*, 248.

Youth” dance number that premiered in 1927.²¹⁷ As Katrina Hazzard-Donald points out, the dance has roots in old hoodoo religion.²¹⁸

The symbolic meaning of snakes and their use in voodoo are widely known but a closer examination of the legend of Marie Laveau, the Creole Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, offers a way to understand how popular ideas about spirit possession, snakes, women, music, and body movement can seep into the imagination surrounding Jackson’s performance style. In a historical study, Martha Ward portrays a scene of a Sunday afternoon gathering at Congo Square in New Orleans around the early 19th century in which Marie Laveau performed her dance routine with an enormous snake. As the story goes, a band was playing while the snake coiled around the swaying body of Laveau, who thereby sought to internalize its spirit. The band, which offered a highly rhythmic accompaniment to Laveau’s dance included animal skin drums, rattles, tambourines, reeds, and a banjo among other instruments. Other dancers and instrumentalists joined the unfolding of the mesmerizing spectacle.²¹⁹

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* article titled “Fanatic Devotees of Voodoo in Deep South Preserve Weird Rites: Superstitious Blacks Cling to Belief in Sorceries and Charms Devised by Vanished 'Kings' and 'Queens'” shows that in 1933, the legend of Marie

²¹⁷ “Bal Negre Program,” in *Kaiso! Writings By and About Katherine Dunham*, ed. VeVe A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 294.

²¹⁸ Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, Chicago Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013), xi.

²¹⁹ Martha Ward, *Voodoo Queen: The Spirited Lives of Marie Laveau* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 8-9.

Laveau was still circulating in the North when Jackson was beginning her career as a singer.²²⁰ Illustrated by a large portrait of Marie Laveau (albeit probably her daughter with the same name) and a description of a voodoo “orgy” which she conducted, the article describes the voodoo rituals upheld by the “fanatic devotees in [the] deep south.”²²¹ Education, the author claims, provides an antidote for eradicating voodoo as a form of savagery. It should be mentioned that the idea of using education to counter the practice of voodoo was not new and could already be found as the central theme of Scott Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha* (1911).²²²

The text and imagery used in the article brings together many strands of a discourse that posited voodoo as a practice associated with the lack of education, southernness, blackness/creolenness, and femininity. One cannot overlook the role such discourse might have played in early criticism of Jackson’s evocative performance. Insofar as gospel music performance goes, however, Jackson obviously did not change her style but continued to use her entire body for creative expression. After all, one might ask, if blues-based vocals (“the devil’s music”) could effectively carry the good news, why not the dramatic embodied gestures adopted from voodoo? As Jackson’s eventual popularity confirms, through her expressivity she was able to capture many fascinated

²²⁰ John A. Mcnaugh, “Fanatic Devotees of Voodoo in Deep South Preserve Weird Rites: Superstitious Blacks Cling to Belief in Sorceries and Charms Devised by Vanished ‘Kings’ and ‘Queens’,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 24, 1933, G8.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ann Sears, “Political Currents and Black Culture in Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha*” in *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi Andre, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 103.

“devotees,” first from Chicago’s educated elite and then from American mainstream audiences.

As Jackson’s music and interviews show, she consciously ascribed the origins of her artistry to a musical era in New Orleans that, in its many facets, she represented in her singing. In this way, she could be seen as a preservationist of African American music and Southern culture.²²³ When the various sounds and sights of New Orleans were inscribed in Jackson’s memory as a child, her impulse to archive might have been less about politics than musical curiosity. Throughout her career Jackson emphasizes the “folk roots” of her artistry as a way to contrast her music-making from practices of Western art music, for instance by claiming that she knew nothing about the keys in which she was singing. In contrast to the Eurocentric aesthetic ideals of “high culture” Jackson’s stance represented a counter-hegemonic thought that sought validation and appreciation for the cultural history encoded in gospel music.

Early Years in Chicago and the Pursuit of Singing as a Profession

²²³ Taking into account the initial resistance by members of the Northern elite her example is not so different from that of Isaiah Shembe (c.1870–1935) a South African church founder and composer/arranger of several hymns for his congregation. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, Carol Muller explains how Shembe taught the hymns that he had received from ancestral sources to his congregation members. Thereby, the hymns were restored in their bodies and memories as elements of “Africanness,” which the elite ridiculed at the time but which were later used for nationalistic ends. Unlike Shembe who received the hymns directly from ancestors via dreams, Jackson built an archive from living sources. Her music nevertheless held ancestral connections to spirituals, work songs, and other sounds that can be traced to slavery, which is a fact that she also promoted. Carol Muller, “Archiving Africanness in Sacred Song,” *Ethnomusicology* 46, no 3. (2002): 409-431.

Jackson arrived in Chicago with her Aunt Hannah in December 1928, at the end of a period known as The (First) Great Migration (1916-1930) and only slightly before the Great Depression would severely reduce many African Americans' economic prospects and employment opportunities in the North.²²⁴ Like thousands of migrants Jackson's material resources for the journey were sparse, but what she had was an enterprising streak and resourcefulness that enabled her to make a way through the economic decline both as a laundress who could "iron a man's shirt in 3 minutes with not a wrinkle in it" and a gospel singer.²²⁵ Although the influx of migrants changed the demographic landscape of Chicago and fostered an environment for gospel music's acceptance, Jackson's pathbreaking success also resulted from her own determination to change the discourse about "Southernness" in the North.

In contrast to Aunt Duke's controlling tendencies, Jim Crow Laws, and economic hardship back home, Chicago held promise for social and physical mobility as a place where African Americans "rode in buses and trolleys with white people and even had

²²⁴ As I mentioned earlier, the precise years of her migration have been disputed by various writers.

²²⁵ In his notes, William Russell describes a jovial discussion between Jackson, Mildred Falls, and him about an article in the *Chicago Tribune* in which Jackson claims, "I can still iron a man's shirt in three minutes without a wrinkle in it... You ask a good laundress about that —she'll tell you that's all right." Clay Gowran, "Mahalia's Rise to Fame Rapid," *Chicago Tribune*, August 7, 1954. In his notes Russell writes: "...I kidded M. about not being able to iron a shirt in 3 minutes, and Mil told her several laundries would be calling up tomorrow (even with machines now, they'd figure she'd be a whiz at running them.) Everybody got into an argument on how to iron shirts, M. puts it down with a back up, irons collar & yoke 1st, then back, which also irons the front at the same time." William Russell (journal entry), Sunday August 7, 1955. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 654, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

their own automobiles.”²²⁶ In this regard, Jackson was like many other migrants who left the South for both domestic and social reasons.²²⁷ Jackson recalls that she initially aspired to become a teacher or a nurse, which provided the “two high careers thinkable for a Negro girl in New Orleans.”²²⁸ Some family members from Jackson’s father’s side were in show business, but in her own words, it was a world of “wildness” that frightened her.²²⁹ Furthermore, Jackson’s biographical information does not reveal whether she was familiar with the concert based Jubilee singing of Spirituals or the commercially recorded African American religious music of artists like Arizona Dranes, whose recording debut dated back to 1926.²³⁰ However, for a young working class woman in the 1930s, a career singing religious music may have seemed unrealistic, if not unimaginable when even the pastors in churches back home received very little compensation.²³¹

If the early 20th century New Orleans was an entertainment capital, Chicago was the epicenter of various industrial enterprises from steel mills to meatpacking. Big

²²⁶ Jackson with McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 41; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 93.

²²⁷ Farah Jasmine Griffin has explored the migrant experience and the complexity of reasons to leave beyond the mere pursuit of economic opportunities. These reasons include domestic conditions as well as witnessing oppression and violence. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13-47.

²²⁸ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 51.

²²⁹ Jackson with McWylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 38.

²³⁰ Dodge, *The School of Arizona Dranes*, 4.

²³¹ Mahalia Jackson interview, “Recollections of Musical Influences,” *I Sing Because I’m Happy*, 1995.

buildings and sounds made by steel and technology defined the urban landscape of the “Machine-city,” as both Jackson and her contemporary migrant Richard Wright observe in their recollections.²³² Both describe the icy cold and impersonal environment that initially caused a sense of loneliness and fear of the unknown.²³³ Their worries were well founded. While the “Land of Hope” was the symbol of economic opportunity and social mobility to many, the grim underside of Chicago was de-facto segregation, job and public sector discrimination, and violence.²³⁴ Add to this the harsh living conditions, which many endured in dilapidated housing and overcrowded kitchenettes as Wright later illustrated in his documentary essay *12 Million Black Voices*.²³⁵

Although Jackson’s and Wright’s first impressions reflect a sense of disconnected and dehumanized urban existence, both soon discovered that the desires and despairs of the city’s varied inhabitants provided a wealth of source materials and inspiration for cultural expression. In the case of Wright, upon arrival, he describes encountering rented,

²³² Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harperperennial, 2006 [1944]), 262; Goreau, 53; Jackson with McWylie, 48; Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002 [1941]).

²³³ Wright, *Black Boy*, [1944], 262. Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 53. Jackson with McLeod Wylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 48.

²³⁴ St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945); Alan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967); Arnold R. Hirsh, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998); Grossman, *Land of Hope*; Adam Green, *Selling the Race, Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*.

²³⁵ Wright, *Black Boy*, [1941], 106-119.

shabby housing including “a tiny, dingy two-room den that was ‘alive with vermin,’” a description reflective of the blues hued sociologist impulse of his later writings. In sharp contrast, Jackson describes landing in her Aunt Hannah’s house at 3250 Prairie Ave., which was “a building with an iron fence, pretty gate, and a high rise building like people’s you’d work for.”²³⁶ In no uncertain terms, this seemingly middle-class building located in the Bronzeville neighborhood represented the wealth, independence and upward mobility that Jackson aspired to attain. The place Jackson describes still stands today as a historic building of elegant masonry, which is nothing like the shotgun shacks of New Orleans. Its beauty and class provided physical evidence confirming that one could indeed “live better,” and gave a sense of hope that Jackson later conveyed through her first million seller titled “Move On Up a Little Higher.”

To spiritually and socially ground herself in the precarious urban environment, Jackson attended church. In this way she was like the majority of migrants who didn’t leave church behind upon arriving in the North but “continued to seek refuge, help, fellowship, and collective community efforts in the confines of the only institution they had known.”²³⁷ Early on, The Greater Salem Baptist Church became Jackson’s “new center of warmth” and the church of her lifelong membership, although in time she would also start attending the Pilgrim Baptist Church located near her Aunt Hannah’s house.²³⁸ Importantly, she joined the Johnson Gospel Singers in the Greater Salem Baptist Church.

²³⁶ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 51.

²³⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 117.

²³⁸ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 54.

As the group's popularity grew and paid engagements increased, Jackson had a chance to sing in front of various congregations and build relationships with members of other church communities. To that end Jackson's warm, personable Southern style (she was known to address her interlocutors as "baby" and "darling") must have helped her to embed herself in religious social circles. In this way, her work with the Johnson Gospel Singers and as an emerging solo artist also broke ground for the future market of her music.²³⁹

When at first some of the larger Chicago area churches disapproved of Jackson's expressive performance style, she learned that social divisions were marked in musical preferences that encoded hierarchies of class and denomination.²⁴⁰ Generally speaking, middle-class African Americans were often attracted to African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and Baptist churches where an unemotional worship style similar to white customs featured selections from Western classical music repertoire and arranged Spirituals. Some of the largest area churches were of these denominations. For example, the Pilgrim Baptist Church pastored by Junius C. Austin Sr., was the second largest African American church in Chicago in 1930 with a membership of over 2000.²⁴¹ Working-class African Americans, many of whom were recent migrants attended the

²³⁹ Michael W. Harris writes that around 1931, equally business-minded Thomas Dorsey deployed choral performances of his songs as a strategy to create a market for his music and set the stage for the acceptance of gospel blues in big established denominations. Harris, *The Rise of the Gospel Blues*, 190.

²⁴⁰ Jackson with McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 66.

²⁴¹ Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 45.

several Holiness or “sanctified” sects typically housed in storefront churches that encouraged emotive religious expression by incorporating ecstatic singing and rhythmic instrumental music throughout the worship service.²⁴² Jackson’s own example as a migrant and a member of a Baptist church still shows that some congregations were comprised of both upper and working class members. Additionally, although in the numerous storefront churches parishioners were disproportionately poor and female, some also attracted members among those in the “mixed” and “best” neighborhoods.²⁴³

Savvy in business and prepared to make a way despite greedy promoters, Jackson did not simply perform in churches where her music was welcomed, but she surveyed the congregations that came to see her using observation skills developed in her childhood New Orleans. To this end, William Russell writes how Jackson boasted about the information she accumulated: “If anyone wanted to know the capacity of any church in Chicago, just ask her, for she had them all counted.”²⁴⁴ Surely a sharp eye on seating and attendance helped Jackson to keep account of income for ticketed performances. Beyond that, considering the interactivity of a gospel music performance and the expectations of establishing performer-audience rapport, it is likely that she also paid close attention to facts concerning the race, class, age, denomination, and gender of the people who came to hear her.

²⁴² Ibid., 44-45.

²⁴³ Ibid., 55.

²⁴⁴ William Russell (journal entry), Pilgrim Baptist Church, Sun. Oct 10, 1954. Located in Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 440, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

A later piece of evidence suggests that she studied those who came to hear her in order to create a performance in which listeners could hear themselves in her music. On Sunday October 10, 1954, William Russell attended a worship service at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago, which featured Jackson as a special guest. Jackson was booked to sing and speak at the Pilgrim Baptist Church as part of her efforts to promote her new radio show on PBS. Because her appearance was organized following her signing of the contract with Columbia Records and because a *Life* reporter was there to write an article about her (“Gospel Queen Mahalia, She Makes Hymn Singing Pay,” November 29, 1954, which included a photo taken at this event), it is likely that the purpose of this occasion was also to drum up publicity for her career launch on Columbia Records and to connect with her original support base in anticipation of her debut on the label which was released by the end of 1954. In his journal entry Russell writes:

She [Jackson] said (she) [sic] could have gone to her own church for this, but had reason for not doing so. Then she went on to explain that for 2 reasons, Prof. Dorsey & Prof. (Gallett) [sic] she came here. She said Pilgrim was about the 1st place she ever sang where she made some money from her singing, which was \$4 she thot,[sic] (the tickets were only a dime she said.) So after that concert when she got \$4 she said she told people she wouldn't go back to the house where she was working if she could make that much money from singing. But then she didn't make any money from singing for a long time. She was (also?) working at a laundry on the N. side (or perhaps this was the [laundry] in the (white) woman's house.)

So she took out 1.50 from the \$4 and went to Prof. G. to have her voice trained, & that meant a big job she said. Prof. G. could teach both anthems & the “Negro Spirituals” (that were form [sic] in slavery she said) The 1st song he taught her was “It's me oh Lord- standing in the need of Prayer.” But he didn't really have to teach it to her because she had sung it ever since she was a little girl in La.”

M. asked to have her pic taken with Prof. Dorsey, then with Rev. Austin Jr. & make [sic] a joke about him, & said come here honey. She had the cong[regation] laughing this half of her speech...²⁴⁵

After Jackson made a few more remarks about Thomas Dorsey who was present that day along with a promotional pitch for her radio show, she sang her hit song “Move On Up a Little Higher.” Regarding the audience reaction to the song Russell notes

M. really got into Move On Up. She didn’t move around very much, but did go away from the mike, to the N. side, but still was plenty loud. 1/2 way thru the crowd started to get excited! The man across the aisle was going full force, standing up at times, but went almost unnoticed due to the constant hum of appreciation throughout the congregation. The tpt [trumpet?] players, who had played very softly & muted for the choral no. was [sic] now blowing open & full toned. The photographer moved across the pulpit in back of M. & begun shouting from the S. piano. M. was really excited, [and] *plenty of women* [and] others in congregation were shouting. (emphasis mine). [-unclear] the ushers were not called into service.²⁴⁶

From Jackson’s references to domestic work together with audience reactions to her performance, Russell points out in these notes that one can gather that Jackson understood *who* made up her constituency, and more than that, she knew *how* to connect with them through music performance. It is significant that this 1954 event marked the highest stage in Jackson’s career so far. Thus, it was apparent that although she couldn’t escape being a domestic worker in the 1930s by singing in churches like the Pilgrim Baptist Church, obviously at this point in 1954 she had “Moved on Up a Little Higher” to gospel music superstardom. Indeed, the congregation that day might have included some

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

individuals (including Thomas Dorsey) who had witnessed her journey first hand.

Therefore, as much as the congregational “hum of appreciation” and the women’s shouts affirmed Jackson’s emphatic delivery, they too might have expressed the multiplicity of experiences and aspirations that those present imagined through her music. Take for instance Jackson’s references to domestic work that were relatable to both her contemporaries and younger African American women who ardently sought to find alternatives to the exploitation and hard labor it represented; if being a domestic or a laundress had been the occupations commonly open for migrant women in the 1930s, in the post World War II America, they again were among the few choices left for African American women forced out of war-time industrial jobs by racial discrimination and “new immigrants.”²⁴⁷

Importantly, from Jackson’s remarks it is also possible to gather information about historical discourses surrounding music, gender, and social class, which she managed to influence through some tough negotiations, like those she alludes to when explaining that Prof. Dorsey and Prof. Gallet [Gullat] were the two reasons why she came to hold this

²⁴⁷ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 216.

promotional event at the Pilgrim Baptist Church.²⁴⁸ Speaking on the verge of her mainstream career, Jackson's seemingly laudatory remarks veil a past in which the two men represented different ideological positions that she negotiated to overcome social constraints placed upon migrant women in her early years in Chicago in the 1930s. To lay out the history behind her remarks, I will next explain the ways in which Dorsey and Gullat represented Chicago's class-conscious church atmosphere of the 1930s and their connections to music as an ideological battleground on which Jackson eventually emerged triumphant.

Prior to Jackson's performance, Dorsey performed with his gospel chorus and Gullat directed the choir and sang a tenor lead in a "very fancy anthem" as noted by Russell in the same journal entry.²⁴⁹ Through their musical associations, namely gospel blues and Western classical music, respectively, the two men represented the two sides of a debate to which Jackson took part by applying, rather than abandoning, her Southern style musical performance expression.

²⁴⁸ Little information about Prof. Gullat is available. Two newspaper articles written around the time of his funeral include text about his tenure of 23 years as director of choir at Pilgrim. The funeral was held at the Pilgrim Baptist Church. T.C.S., "Rites Friday for Geroge Gullatt," *Daily Defender*, September 4, 1957, 9; T.C.S., "Hold Final Rites for Veteran Choir Master," *Daily Defender*, September 9, 1957, 9; Gospel historian Bob Marovich has documented a Watch Night service in 1939 at the Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago in which Prof. Gullat directs the Pilgrim Baptist Church Senior Choir with senior guest directors Prof. Edward H. Boatner (spirituals) and Prof. James Mundy (Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus"). Bob Marovich, "A Chicago Watchmeeting Service: Seventy Years Ago," *Journal of Gospel Music*, December 31, 2009, <http://journalofgospelmusic.com/gospel/a-chicago-watchmeeting-service-seventy-years-ago/> .

²⁴⁹ William Russell (journal entry), Pilgrim Baptist Church, Sun. Oct 10, 1954.

Before examining Jackson's remarks further, I will explain discourses about the use of gospel blues and Western classical music in church worship. In Chicago's rapidly changing urban milieu, in the largest established denominations, and in small storefront churches alike sacred music practices represented competing notions of "high culture" and "vernacular culture" that were seen to represent "the progress of the race" differently. For example, Pilgrim Baptist Church, which originally catered to the middle-class tastes for classical music as "dignified" worship music, became a setting for a particularly charged chain of events in 1932. Michael Harris explains how tension increased in the church when its leader Rev. Junius C. Austin, Sr. hired an increasingly popular and musically showy Thomas Dorsey to organize a gospel chorus in his church.²⁵⁰ At the time Boston Conservatory trained and generously remunerated Edward Boatner directed Pilgrim's highly regarded music ministry. Not only fearing that he might lose his privileged position, Boatner was concerned about the corrupting effects of Dorsey's "downhome" style music on church decorum.²⁵¹ Eventually, however, Dorsey's music became so popular that Pilgrim is now credited as "the birth of gospel music."²⁵² Boatner objected to this new musical direction and resigned one year later.²⁵³ Thereafter, at least

²⁵⁰ Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 122-124, 198-199.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁵² Bob Marovitz notes that Ebenezer was the real birthplace, but Pilgrim provided the platform for Dorsey's major success. Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), Loc 153 of 12774 [Kindle].

²⁵³ Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 198.

since 1934, George Gullat continued to uphold the Western classical music tradition in Pilgrim as a choral director and tenor soloist.²⁵⁴

To first put Jackson's remarks about Dorsey and Gullat in proper perspective, it is necessary to explore the background of music's role in the broader public discourses surrounding social justice and African Americans in the American society in the first part of the 20th century. During the 1920s-30s, the Harlem Renaissance took place as a nationally significant cultural movement with the assimilation oriented political goals of improving race relations. Perhaps as the best-known record of the era, the movement's "father" Alain Locke issued the now classic anthology *The New Negro* (1925) which featured writings on many facets of African American intellectual, creative, and social life. As a whole, the collection sought to demonstrate that African American achievements were of equal merit with white standards.²⁵⁵ Following on the heels of the Harlem Renaissance, a similarly motivated movement in Chicago, now referred as the "Chicago Renaissance," took place between the 1930-1950s.²⁵⁶

In Harlem, black nationalistic ideology provided a productive counterpoint to assimilation-oriented cultural thought, much of which can be attributed to Marcus Garvey's work. Unique to Chicago, together with activities that advanced the ideas of assimilation, the city's vernacular arena provided fertile ground for a form of black

²⁵⁴ T.C.S., "Hold Final Rites For Veteran Choir Master."

²⁵⁵ Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Touchstone, 1997 [1925]), 9.

²⁵⁶ Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey Jr., ed., *The Black Chicago Renaissance* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

nationalism that embraced the gospel music that Thomas Dorsey championed.²⁵⁷ It bears mentioning that the proponents within both the assimilationist and nationalist camps drew influence from ideas on music that were not new but were newly contextualized versions of conceptualizations that can already be found in the 19th century writings on music and its role in improving race relations. Specifically, as Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. has pointed out, the ideological split and tension between the politics advanced by each are made evident in two landmark studies: *Music and Some Highly Musical People (1878)* by James Monroe Trotter, America's first African American music historian, in which Trotter sought to "instill his people pride" through chronicling African American achievements in the Western classical music tradition, and *Slave Songs of the United States (1867)* by Harvard University graduates William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, whose work is the first published collection of Spirituals that was written with an aim to elevate the status of the Spiritual and thereby argue for the advancement and humanity of the race.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., "The Negro Renaissance: Harlem and Chicago Flowerings," in *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, eds. Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 21-43.

²⁵⁸ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940," *Black Music Research Journal* 16 no. 1 (Spring 1996): 11-42. To complicate Jackson's musical self-identification, however, one has to take into account her claims that in the North she started admiring the classical singers Marian Anderson and Paul Roberson (albeit who had the least formal training of African American concert singers) and that later in her career she increasingly used bel canto-like head tones and Euro-American and popular music arrangements. Burton W. Peretti, *Lift Every Voice: The History of African American Music* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 107; Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 107, 197.

In this historical light, Jackson's mention of Prof. Dorsey and Prof. Gullat as the two reasons why she chose Pilgrim as the venue for this occasion (e.g., rather than her own church The Greater Salem Baptist Church) allude to the "vernacular culture" and the "high culture" that each man has respectively represented since the Chicago Renaissance era. In this way, by juxtaposing the two cultural realms at the moment she was going to take gospel music appreciation to new commercial heights, she effectively claimed a victory in a historic musical battle for artistic value. In other words, she signaled that she had been successful in her efforts to overturn notions of inferiority attributed to Southerness and elements of African American heritage that gospel music features. To better explain Jackson's remarks I will next take a closer look at her musical relationships with Dorsey and Gullat.

First, since the early 1930s Jackson engaged in a fruitful and well documented collaboration with Thomas Dorsey.²⁵⁹ When Jackson started to perform with him in 1932, Dorsey had already gained some fame as a composer at the National Baptist Convention, which is still the leading organization of African American Baptist churches in America.²⁶⁰ Early on, Jackson worked with Dorsey as a song demonstrator, singing his compositions on street corners in Chicago. In church programs she would sing Dorsey's compositions with songs from the *Gospel Pearls*, thereby, also helping him sell his

²⁵⁹ In Michael Harris's study Dorsey states that he had already heard Jackson when he was a jazz musician; the site could have been the Pilgrim where Dorsey was a member before he became gospel choir leader. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 258.

²⁶⁰ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 56.

music.²⁶¹ Throughout the ensuing years they performed together in small churches and in large arenas as they paved way for gospel music's popularity and eventually made musical history in Chicago and around the nation.

Second, Jackson addresses Prof. Gullatt, a classically trained choir director, with remarks that seem innocuous but closer attention to them together with biographical sources reveal an unspoken comment that goes something like this: "So, you thought I couldn't make it singing the way I sing!" Jackson's biographies describe one formal vocal lesson that she had with an instructor who harshly critiqued her Southern style of singing. In descriptions of the lesson, the instructor's name is variably Prof. Du Bois and Prof. Kendricks but in all of them, she sang the spiritual "It's Me Lord/Standing in the Need of Prayer." Additionally, her vocal coach was a tenor and she had \$4 of earnings which she could invest in a lesson. According to Russell's journal entry, Jackson went to Prof. Gullat "to have her voice trained." If Jackson only took one vocal lesson in her life, Prof. Gullat probably was the instructor because Jackson talked about the lesson in Prof. Gullat's presence at the Pilgrim.

²⁶¹ As several scholars agree, *Gospel Pearls* was a groundbreaking hymnal published in 1921 compiled by Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. The hymnal used the word "gospel" for the first time to refer to the new music that was becoming popular in religious circles. According to Eileen Southern, the 164 songs in the book included "an anthology of the most popular black-church music of its time." According to the publisher's note, the *Gospel Pearls* was a response to an "urgent demand for real inspiring and adaptable music in all of our Sunday Schools, Conventions, and other religious gatherings." Eileen Southern, "Hymnals of the Black Church," *The Black Perspective in Music* 17, no. 1/2 (1989): 153-170; W.K. McNeil, "Gospel Pearls," in *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music*, W.K. McNeil ed., (New York: Routledge, 2010 [2005]), 152-153; Jon Michael Spencer, *Black Hymnody: A Hymnological history of the African-American Church* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 85-94.

It is significant here that in the early 1930s, before becoming Pilgrim's choir director, Prof. Gullat was already recognized as a "splendid director" in the Chicago church circles.²⁶² For example he was the leader of the West Point Baptist Church choir, which had over 75 members and which won a choral competition in 1930.²⁶³ It thus seems that to keep the vocal lesson incident apart from the realm of church or to honor the memory of Prof. Gullatt who passed away in 1957, Jackson's biographical texts locate Prof. Du Bois and Prof. Kendricks in a vocal studio setting on Chicago's South Side. If the lesson actually took place with Prof. Gullat, as the evidence suggests, his musical leadership role in the Baptist church circles confirms how marginalized Jackson was in the realm of dominant church culture as a migrant woman whose musical performance style was commonly associated with "lacking" in terms of education, culture, and religious propriety.

When addressing Prof. Gullat, Jackson's cheekily remarks that training her voice to meet the standards of Western classical music would have been "a big job." She also favorably compares her "self-taught" abilities to Western classical music training represented by Prof. Gullat by stating that he taught her the song "It's Me Oh Lord- Standing in the Need of Prayer," although "he didn't really have to teach it to her because she had sung it ever since she was a little girl in La." In this way Jackson implies

²⁶² Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender*, October 17, 1931, 15.

²⁶³ "Wins Trophy," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, June 14, 1930. 22. (Photo with a caption.)

that her Southern cultural sources had prepared her for a valid aesthetic expression of Spirituals as songs in a musical tradition in which she had grown up.

From Jackson's biographies one can read a more nuanced description of the incident, although they provide versions that contrast the aesthetic preferences of African Americans and whites with each other. To that end, a lay reader less aware of the African American Baptist church history may miss how social class differences contributed to tension between Jackson and her instructor.²⁶⁴ The version about "Prof. Du Bois," much like the version about "Prof. Kendricks," describes the instructor's unsuccessful efforts to have her sing in a slow solemn ("dignified") style. Of the two similar versions, Jackson's autobiography describes the instructor's final critique as follows. In the middle of singing the spiritual "Standing in the Need of Prayer," Prof. Du Bois interrupted her and said: "And you've got to learn to stop hollering. It will take time to build up your voice. The way you sing is not a credit to the Negro race. You've got to learn to sing songs so that white people can understand them."²⁶⁵ Jackson writes that she was puzzled as to why she should sing in a style that white people understood when she herself was a woman of color. Later, explaining the same point differently in an interview Jackson remembered that the formal style preferred by the teacher made her sound too polished, "and I didn't

²⁶⁴ What should be noted here is that Jackson's remarks at Pilgrim, a historical African American church, were directed to an audience among which discourses about music and class were still lingering. Instead, Jackson's biographical book (which also served as source material for Goreau's book that was in the works since 1967) was pitched to an American mainstream audience at the height of the Civil Rights movement in which gospel music served to represent the interests of all African Americans.

²⁶⁵ Jackson and McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 59.

feel good about it” because her aim was “not to sing to white people but to black people.”²⁶⁶

Since Prof. Gullat/Du Bois/Kendricks was an African American man of stature in the community, Jackson’s claim to “sing to black people” omits that she first negotiated class-based differences in aesthetic values in the realm of the African American churches in Chicago. Bearing in mind that Jackson worked on her autobiographical narrative around the time of the Civil Rights Movement, this description serves broader political ends as a reference to different aesthetic values of African Americans and white mainstream Americans at the time. In sum it is important to recognize that Prof. Gullat represented a Western classical music orientation that middle-/and upper classes congregants of large Baptist churches in the 1930s viewed as a proper way to worship. In this light, when Jackson defended her right to sing in a style that was associated with Southern migrants and their emotive practices of religion, she also asserted her right to be identified as a devout Christian woman, not a heathen.

Furthermore, across all three biographical recollections, Jackson’s role was that of a Southern migrant woman who sought the advice of an educated male authority in the North. It is interesting to note that Prof. Du Bois/Kendricks was annoyed by Jackson’s “hollering,” which is a possible cue about unspoken gender dynamics that might have factored into their interactions. The details of her encounter with Prof. Du Bois further suggest that he not only associated her “hollering” with a primitive use of voice but his

²⁶⁶ Ibid.; Richard Prince, “Mahalia Jackson: Praise for Her God,” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 1972, 36. Located in the Mahalia Jackson file at the Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

demand for her to stop hollering and his encouragement to sing in a slower and sweeter manner like her friend who also attended the lesson, points to a gendered idea of a “pleasing” voice. To that end, his comment can be connected to a historical distaste for women to sing loudly in contrast to a soft and sweet voice that has been viewed in more “feminine” terms.²⁶⁷ Curiously, at the Pilgrim, Jackson also challenged gendered roles in the church by speaking from the pulpit usually reserved for male authorities instead of the microphones that were set up for her at the front. It seems that she also did so through her playful personable way of calling Pastor Austin, Jr. “honey” at the picture taking instead of using a more formal address.²⁶⁸

Finally, Jackson’s remarks at the event confirm her eagerness to invest her hard-earned funds in vocal training as a form of professional development when the demand for gospel music was growing in Chicago communities during the Great Depression. In the 1920s the black Chicago community had nurtured a uniquely entrepreneurial spirit evidenced by numerous commercial activities including banking, businesses, insurance companies, investments in beauty culture, night clubs, publishing, and other small business ventures.²⁶⁹ When the Great Depression arrived, many previously prosperous professionals faced economic hardship which curtailed their optimism and hopes.

Jackson readily admits that her singing became welcome in many churches for financial

²⁶⁷ Elaine M. Hayes, “To Bebop or to Be Pop,” 32.

²⁶⁸ William Russell (journal entry), October 10, 1954.

²⁶⁹ William Howland Kenney. *Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History, 1904-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 26-27; Christopher Robert Reed, *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 71-117.

reasons.²⁷⁰ During the “Fat Years” the white population had moved out of the Black Belt area and black congregations bought the churches and synagogues they left behind at very high mortgage rates. Consequently, the Great Depression sent those congregations into severe indebtedness and to survive, they had to raise money for instance by organizing concerts and socials.²⁷¹ As a result, even the churches that had rejected Jackson earlier, recognized her rising popularity and her ability to raise funds through performances.

Jackson sought out different opportunities to advance her career in music, and occasionally she would have a chance to sing at revivals and other gatherings. To that end, her social skills proved valuable. For instance, she befriended Bob Miller, a politician, an underwriter, and her first manager who helped book her singing engagements at funerals.²⁷² Jackson credits Bob Miller with the idea of going to a studio to make her first record “You Better Run, Run, Run,” which they sold at the places where she sang. Unfortunately it seems that copies of the record no longer exist so today’s listener cannot learn more about Jackson’s early music style.

On that same note, politics offered an arena for her style of singing which was created when politicians took note of the influx of migrants and the electoral base they

²⁷⁰ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 62.

²⁷¹ Drake and Clayton, *Black Metropolis*, 415 - 418; Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 167; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 62.; Richard Prince, “Mahalia Jackson: Praise for Her God,” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 1972, 36. Located in the Mahalia Jackson file at the Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

²⁷² Jackson with McWylie, *Movin’ On Up*, 66; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 58.

formed.²⁷³ Interestingly, a direct link between Jackson’s “failed” vocal lesson and her involvement in local politics is written in the structure of Goreau’s biography in the following manner: “If Prof. Kendriks didn’t appreciate her voice, somebody else did: Alderman Wm. L. Dawson was running hard for Congress from District 1-1st and 2nd Wards—that summer of ’32, and Halie Jackson was running right along with him.”²⁷⁴ In this way, Jackson’s music contributed to the aesthetics of political meetings, which actually resembled worship aesthetics in some local churches. Henri Perez points out that Clayton, one of the researchers for the landmark study *Black Metropolis* wrote in his field notes that a Republican meeting on April 9, 1932 had “an atmosphere identical to that of certain South Side churches.” Another unidentified investigator made similar

²⁷³ Drake and Clayton, *Black Metropolis*, 342- 343.

²⁷⁴ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 58. Charles W. Carey, Jr., “Davson, William,” in *African-American Political Leaders* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 71-73. Although Jackson’s autobiography and biography present sometimes imprecise and even inaccurate information related to her early political involvement, they both speak to Jackson’s longstanding interest in lending voice to political campaigning starting from the local politics of Chicago. For example, Jackson’s claim that she helped Alderman William L. “Fred” Dawson to win a seat in Congress in 1932 is erroneous. The event in question was perhaps Dawson’s election to the Chicago city council in 1933. Dawson won a seat to Congress in 1942. In *Movin on Up*, Jackson claims that “ for twenty years I’ve been singing and hollering around the Second and Third Wards on the South Side of Chicago for people like Congressman Fred Dawson.” According to the co-author’s afterword, the book was written after his interview with Jackson for the *Saturday Evening Post* which was published in 1954. Dating Jackson’s political beginnings are likely even earlier; her biographer writes, “before Jackson was old enough to vote, an alderman Louis B. Anderson who had seen her mesmerize tentful, asked her to sing in his electoral campaign. She helped him to win” (Related or not, around this time she included an “i” in her name.)

observations about political meetings.²⁷⁵ Jackson, to whom the church had provided her first place of belonging in Chicago, thereby helped politicians' efforts to attract migrant votes by creating a church-like atmosphere in the meetings as a way to relate to those who felt lonely and homesick for old friends and institutions (often the church).²⁷⁶

Entrepreneurship, Commercialism, Recording Career

Through the first half of the 1930s, Jackson gradually built up her reputation in church circles as a solo singer and a member of the Johnson Gospel Singers while she performed low-wage service jobs. In the second half of the decade, she launched her recording career on the Decca label, and in concert with her musical activities, she expanded her prospects as a businesswoman through extra-musical commercial ventures, that included the business of beauty and the ownership of an apartment building. To that end, I contend that her steadfast work at seemingly various fronts toward the end of the 1930s should not be simply taken as a "survival strategy." More than that, through an engagement in various sectors of society, she built alliances, networks, and relationships necessary for building commercial success. It is also plausible that through differing interests, she diversified her "portfolio of assets," so to speak, in which losses in one area could be offset by gains in another. Put differently, it can be said that in Jackson's case

²⁷⁵ Henri Peretz, "The Making of Black Metropolis." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 595 (Sept. 2004): 169.; Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 89.

²⁷⁶ Christopher Robert Reed, "Black Chicago Political Realignment During the Great Depression and New Deal," *Illinois Historical Journal* 78, no. 4 (Winter, 1985): 242-256; David K. Fremon, *Chicago Politics, Ward by Ward* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 29.

her profit-seeking enterprises outside music were a means to maintain artistic independence in music.

By the time Jackson entered the Decca label's recording studios in May 1937, she had already experienced concerts and touring in the nascent gospel music industry but the contract with a major label provided a serious entry into the business of recorded sound. In contrast to the spontaneity and audience participation that characterize music making in a church setting, the laboratory-feel of a recording studio presented entirely different kind of considerations for an artist seeking success both in aesthetic and financial terms. To begin, the process of getting "the best take" of a song, from start to finish, requires engagement with technology and other musicians in very different ways than conducting a live performance that seeks to produce immediate emotional effects among the audience. At the same time, if in churches the negotiations behind the scenes often take place with promoters, clergy, and the like, in the studio environment, producers, engineers, and label representatives could significantly impact a recording and its "life" in the marketplace.

The four sides that Jackson recorded for Decca did not sell very well, but as the earliest recordings available by Jackson, they provide a basis for understanding the ways in which she developed her vocal craft and her uniquely versatile approach to recording. Jackson sings the two fast songs she recorded "Oh My Lord," which was a Johnson Singers' favorite and "God's Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tear" credited to Chicago publisher Lillian Bowles all the way through with a steady declarative tone on top of piano played by Estelle Allen, who was her accompanist at the time. For the most

part her dynamics range from moderate to full voice, which achieves the loudest resonances on a number of open vowels on which she projects blues-like fortitude. In addition, the growls, deliberate vocal breaks, and sing-shout style that Jackson uses particularly at emotional peaks of the songs contribute to an impression of a somewhat unpolished sound. To that end, her uneven phrasing acquires percussive quality due to obvious junctures between words and syllables.

On the two hymns she recorded, “Keep Me Everyday” and “God Shall Wipe Tears Away,” accompanied by Allen on organ, Jackson demonstrates her remarkable breath control and ability to sing long vocal lines in and through different registers with an even tone and bright resonance. This is especially noticeable at parts in which most of the melody is situated in her high register as in the refrain of “God Shall Wipe Tears Away,” a hymn composed in 1935 by Prof. Antonio L. Haskell who was also a music teacher and a high ranking official in Gospel Chorus founded by Thomas Dorsey.²⁷⁷ Had her vowels been any taller and rounder and had her words been strung in seamless legato lines, a listener could be sure that Jackson had intentionally blended aesthetic qualities of Western classical singing with a gospel style of singing. On the other side of this split, it is interesting to note that Jackson begins the traditional Protestant hymn “Keep Me Every Day“ with a melody marked by a bluesy melisma. This vocal gesture sung in a “moaning” style establishes a direct association with the tradition of Dr. Watts’s hymn singing, the lining out practice through which slaves learned hymns and which became

²⁷⁷ R.C. Fischer, “A.L. Haskell Honored for Music Work,” *Chicago Defender* (national edition), April 4, 1936, 2.

the setting for developing distinctly African American forms of sacred singing.²⁷⁸ Like the tradition of congregational singing, she sometimes slides between notes, shades vowels and nouns for instance the word “morning” sounds like “moaning” and an extended stay on the letter “n” turns the noun into a humming sound. Overall, she hardly utilizes the lower ranges of her voice, but possibly due to a fast recording speed, Jackson’s rapid vibrato and nasal tones sound much different than the dark vocal stylings on later recordings.

Essentially, the four recordings constitute Jackson’s first attempt under a contract with a major label to create a commercially viable gospel music performance within about three minutes of music that fits on a side of a 78 RPM disc. Indeed it is occasionally possible to hear a seemingly hurried Jackson sing slightly ahead of the accompaniment. Aesthetically, this meant that if the sides were seen as a means to reach a nationwide listenership within a set time limit, Jackson should sing the song in a way that appeals to a broader “race records” market to which Decca pitched her music, and in a way that caters to the tastes of church-goers and listeners outside of its realm. Recognizing that Jackson was signed to Decca by a well-known blues talent scout and producer J. Mayo “Ink” Williams it is no surprise that on the uptempo sides, Jackson

²⁷⁸ William T. Dargan, *Lining Out the Word: Dr. Watts Hymn Singing in the Music of Black Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 26.

freely displays her full sound and vocal gestures such as the growls and slides familiar to blues audiences.²⁷⁹

In thinking about the earlier critique Jackson received from the vocal instructor for “hollering,” it is clear that rather than trying to sound “pleasing” (as he would have preferred) Jackson made sure to create a large acoustical presence on this recording by projecting a loud sound. She was able to fashion a particularly powerful vocal identity because her voice was robust and resonant. Sometimes in a live concert, she would demonstrate how well her sound carried over without the help of technology by stepping away from the microphone and continuing to sing in full volume that was still “plenty loud” as Russell observed.²⁸⁰ In a studio setting, however, she had to sing to the microphone. This aesthetic of “loudness” could pose a problem that engineers in the 1920s blues recordings mitigated by compressing the dynamic range by bringing the

²⁷⁹ Decca had acquired Mayo “Ink” Williams to supervise its 7000 Race records series. Eventually, the series had records by some of the most prominent blues artists of the era along with some jazz artists that were later labeled rhythm and blues. Rosetta Tharpe’s first records were also released in the 7000 series. Howard Rye “Decca” in *Encyclopedia of the Blues Vol. 1.*, ed. Edward Komara (New York: Routledge, 2006), 260.

²⁸⁰ William Russell (journal entry), Pilgrim Baptist Church, Sun. Oct 10, 1954. She also gave a concert at Bethany Methodist Church in which she stepped away from the microphone and Russell noted that there was “no difference when M. was directly in front or even when she backed away entirely (as when she walked out on Sparrow [song] at the end.” William Russell (journal entry) Friday, April 22, 1955. The idea that a “big voice” was better than a small voice is reflected in William Russell’s journal entry in which he describes Mahalia Jackson’s telephone conversation with someone in which she said: “...people used to tell her, wait until you get on T.V., she said, well now that she is, she notices that all those little voiced singers (that are no good) are still on T.V. and going just as good as ever etc.” William Russell (journal entry) May 12, 1955. Russell’s journal entries located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 34 and F. 35, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

volume up and down during the recording.²⁸¹ It seems that Jackson found an additional way to demonstrate the power of the voice and the labor that produced it by infusing deliberate vocal cracks and using a controlled chest voice-based shouting quality into her singing.

Although Jackson's singing on the four songs is marked by African American blues and gospel stylings, it would be a mistake to overlook how she sometimes projects a voice quality which adheres closer to the aesthetic aims of Western classical music expression. It should be mentioned here that while the 1937 National Baptist Convention installed a mass gospel chorus that officially set forth the institutionalization of gospel blues nationwide, it continued to coexist with anthems and classical works as well as worship music.²⁸² In this light, Jackson's vocal versatility demonstrates that she developed vocal stylings that could also appeal to classically oriented tastes. This is supported by a 1937 newspaper column titled "Evangelist in Recital At Cleveland" about Jackson's forthcoming performances in mostly Baptist churches in the Cleveland area. According to the article, many Clevelanders who have heard Jackson say that she foreshadowed Marian Anderson, who was scheduled to perform in two months time. The article describes Jackson with terms "recital," "contra alto," and "soprano," adopted from the Western classical music tradition.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994 [1977]), 144.

²⁸² Michael W. *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, Harris, 270.

²⁸³ "Evangelist In Recital At Cleveland," *The Chicago Defender (National Issue)* December 17, 1938, 5.

Beyond making commercially viable recordings, Jackson's and other contributors' potential revenues were derived from intellectual property rights to their creative work. It is interesting to note that the song writing credit on the front label of the 78 rpm record *God's Going to Wipe All Tears Away* is given to Jackson although she recorded the song at the time its composer Antonio L. Haskell was a high ranking official in Dorsey's National Convention of Gospel Choruses.²⁸⁴ Whether this arrangement was an agreement between Jackson and Haskell or done for other reasons, the song writing credit indicates that although J. Mayo Williams's had acquired the nickname "Ink" at least partially for being able to convince musicians to sign away their rights to their recordings, Jackson was not one of those musicians.²⁸⁵ In fact, later evidence shows that Jackson was vigilant about intellectual property rights by keeping records of copyright registration receipts and

²⁸⁴ Mahalia Jackson, *God's Going to Wipe All Tears Away*, Decca (7321 A), 1937; R.C. Fisher, "A.L. Haskell Honored for Music Work."

²⁸⁵ Christopher A. Waterman, "Race Music: Bo Chatmon, 'Corrine Corrina,' and the Excluded Middle." In *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald M. Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 170.

by monitoring songwriting credits on record sleeves.²⁸⁶ Furthermore, the song “God’s Gonna Separate the Wheat From the Tare” demonstrates how members of the Chicago gospel music community supported each other through not only musical but also financial relationships. The song is credited to Lillian M. Bowles, who owned the Bowles House of Music, one of the major gospel music publishing businesses in Bronzeville. Interestingly, Jackson opted to record a song by Bowles instead of a song by, for instance Thomas Dorsey, who was her famous collaborator at the time. Through her career, Jackson recorded numerous songs written by women; the first was this song by Bowles, which is an example of the ways in which women in gospel music collaborated.²⁸⁷ In terms of Jackson’s Chicago based networks, it is necessary to also mention that Kenneth Morris, a composer and an influential pioneer in gospel music who worked as an arranger

²⁸⁶ William Russell (journal entry), Monday August 8, 1955. William Russell apparently helped Jackson copyright her songs, Russell mentions that he asked about how she wants him to title her Christmas songs; William Russell (journal entry) August 12, 1954. In this journal entry Russell mentions that he spent 1.5hrs in the public library looking up “M’s copyrights with Bess Music co.etc.”; William Russell (journal entry) Tuesday March 29, 1955. In this journal entry Russell writes that Mildred [Falls] read the label of the newly arrived 12” Columbia album (World’s Greatest Gospel Singer) from which she noted that the song “Woman at the Well” was credited to “Morris etc.” and [Didn’t it] Rain to Martin.” Russell also says that Jackson called him in to ask “what happened to her copyright fees (\$4)”; The mahalia Jackson papers also include an “(undated) Application for Domestic Money Order for \$10 to be paid to Register of Copyrights, Library of Congress, sent by Mahalia Jackson” Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 672, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

²⁸⁷ Another example is “Good is So Good” by Doris Akers, Jackson’s friend I mentioned earlier in this text.

for the Bowles's music, arranged two of the songs, "God's Gonna Separate the Wheat From the Tares" and "God Shall Wipe All Tears Away."²⁸⁸

When Jackson's career as a gospel music recording artist on the Decca label did not take off, she could have tried to expand her career prospects by venturing into secular music, but she remained firmly invested in the gospel music arena. Jackson claims that at a particularly difficult economic time in her life, her then husband Isaac Hockenhull pressured her into auditioning for the WPA Federal Theatre Project's production of "The Mikado" (1938). She won the role, but ended up not taking it because she did not want to sing secular music.²⁸⁹ Far from the blues, however, in this case, the music was a remake of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera by a cast of African American singers whose vocal expressions reflected the original operatic style. Although it was lauded for its colorful

²⁸⁸ Kenneth Morris self identified role as an arranger of "God Shall Wipe All Tears Away" is somewhat puzzling given that an arranger in gospel music was usually a person who notated music on paper based on instructions by a composer who did not write music. Horace Clarence Boyer, "Kenneth Morris: Composer and Publisher" in *We'll Understand It Better By and By*, ed. Reagon, 310. One would think that Haskell, however, could notate music given that he was a music teacher and a composer of classical material, for example the anthem "Nature's Hymn of Praise" (1940).

²⁸⁹ Although Goreau refers to this staging of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera by the name "Hot Mikado," and Jackson calls it "The Mikado" it is more likely that it is the WPA Theatre Project's "Swing Mikado," (1938) that had a lesser-known cast rather than the commercial version "Hot Mikado" which was staged a year later with a professional cast including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in the leading role of Mikado. Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 78-79; Brooks Atkinson, "The Play: Bill Robinson Tapping Out the Title Role in 'The Hot Mikado' at the Broadhurst Theatre," *New York Times*, March 24, 1939, 26.

visual setting, the general opinion was that the few “jazzed up” numbers did not make the production enough “swingcopated” to match the audience expectations.²⁹⁰

Taken at face value, “The Mikado” audition described in Jackson’s biographies conveyed the message that no earthly influence, including money, husband, prestige or otherwise, could convince her to perform in a theatre setting or sing anything other than sacred music. Standing firmly on sacred musical ground was Jackson’s oft proclaimed position, because for her, there was more to uphold than a public image. This way of articulating religiosity can be traced to ideas about “respectability” promoted by African American Baptist women during Jackson’s formative years. Specifically, in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham demonstrates how social reformist African American Baptist women at the turn of the 20th century drew a sharp division between edifying and detrimental musical practices and spaces. In this vein, they viewed home and church in contrast to “the street that with dance halls and nickelodeons as the metaphor for all that was unwholesome and dangerous.”²⁹¹ Grounding their efforts in religious beliefs, reformists saw that the pious and proper conduct of oneself in public would help advance the dominant society’s acceptance of the race. It should be mentioned that although many Baptist women and women in sanctified denominations promoted differing doctrinal

²⁹⁰ Cecil Smith, “Negro Players Stage ‘Mikado’,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* September 26, 1938, 13; Marvel Cooke, “WPA Show Upsets B’way Equilibrium: Federal Theatre Version of ‘Swing Mikado’ Accented with Splashes of Brilliant Color” *New York Amsterdam News*, (city edition) March 11, 1939, 16.

²⁹¹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 199.

views and religious practices, they all believed in the separation of sacred and secular spheres of music making. Although when it came to the use of secular sounds in sanctified denominations this line proved to be more porous.²⁹²

Thus, by using the ministerial purpose of music as approved by her church-based audiences, Jackson could focus on cultivating a singing career within a familiar arena. One should not overlook the possibility that later, during difficult negotiations with the media and major label record executives Jackson could leverage Christian values and the moral high ground to negotiate matters related to representation, image and repertoire. Additionally, Jackson's adhered to the idea of "respectability" as she articulated it through the church centered values that set her apart from her competitors Clara Ward and Rosetta Tharpe, whose entertainment oriented presentation and openness to perform in secular venues were seen as controversial in churches. Yet, by assuming a custodial role of gospel music, Jackson risked diminished financial rewards and marginalization in the music industry. Thus through auxiliary business opportunities, Jackson could generate additional income that she could use to maintain artistic independence.

The historical record about Jackson's early business ventures is sparse, but her biographies agree that around the late 1930s, Jackson entered the business of beauty. A few years after marrying her first husband Jackson started making beauty products based on her mother-in-law's recipes and selling them during her gospel singing travels across

²⁹² Jacky Clark Chisholm, interview with the Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI. Clark Chisholm mentioned in the interview that her mother Mattie Moss Clark did not allow her children to listen to secular records at home. Jerma Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 24-25.

the country. Well before the product tie-ins became common in the music industry of today, Jackson saw the profit potential of combining her two pursuits as a practical but also a fitting choice considering that churches were social spaces populated by many women who sought to attain certain standards of physical beauty, whether those standards pertained to the skin, hair, and bodily features that were seen as desirable in the society at large or were seen as “enhancements” on one’s natural look as was the case in sanctified communities.²⁹³ Jackson’s focus on the church market was nothing new: for instance since the first decade of the century the legendary beauty entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker had advertised her image and sold her products at religious conventions.²⁹⁴ By selling her products on church tours Jackson could use her own body as a marketing tool, similar to the early African American beauty product manufacturers who did so in their print advertisements and who reconfigured a positive image of African American women as “large boned and dark skinned with class backgrounds as domestics and laundresses.”²⁹⁵ What was unique, however, is that Jackson used the platform of gospel singing as a way to combine her predecessors’ marketing strategies with the emotional and aesthetic appeal of a musical presentation. Jackson says that although she made many

²⁹³ Butler, *Women of the Church of God in Christ*, 85.

²⁹⁴ Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000 [1996], 87.

²⁹⁵ Rooks, *Hair Raising*, 43.

sales that way, her husband's resentment toward her extended time on the road and dedication to gospel music eventually brought an end to their cosmetics business.²⁹⁶

Inspired by Mme. C.J. Walker's example, Jackson attended a beauty school and opened a hair salon in 1939. In doing so, she followed the path pursued by many African American women since the turn of the 20th century who had found work in the hair industry as one of the more attractive occupational choices among the few available for them.²⁹⁷ Whereas Jackson had sold cosmetics on her church tours, the hair salon was a local social space and a marketing arena where she sang while doing hair, built relationships with women, and stayed in tune with their lives.²⁹⁸ Additionally, Jackson whose own hair was always impeccable whether styled in waves, curls, or pinned underneath a stylish wig, was the best advertisement for her skills and sense of style. By 1942, Jackson's profits from singing and the hair salon had enabled her to broaden her business pursuits and purchase an apartment building for rental income. Two years after her national breakthrough song "Move On Up A Little Higher," Jackson opened a flower shop as a sort of "joint operation" where she says that some customers bought flowers if she agreed to sing at a funeral. Since these first businesses and throughout her career Jackson continued to envision and fearlessly pursue entrepreneurial projects that ranged

²⁹⁶ Jackson with McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 71.

²⁹⁷ Adia M. Harvey, "Becoming Entrepreneurs: Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender at the Black Beauty Salon," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 791-792.

²⁹⁸ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 86-87.

from unrealized plans to launch her own record label to an attempt to build a nationwide chicken franchise.²⁹⁹

After Jackson's brief term as a recording artist for the Decca label, she focused on paving the way for gospel music's popularity in churches by performing alone and together with Thomas Dorsey. Despite Dorsey's later claims to having groomed Jackson's talents and her rejecting his claims, by joining forces they pushed for a major shift in worship music around the nation's churches. Whether it was the creative synergy or a sense of competition between the two, or both, their productive collaboration fostered drama as a significant feature of gospel music performance style. As the following photo taken in 1939 shows, flirtatious looks, humor, and demonstrative body positions were elements in the "dramatic poses" that Jackson and Dorsey used to intensify their performances for a greater audience appeal. (See figure 3.1.)

²⁹⁹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 550; Advertisement for Mahalia Jackson Chicken Systems, Inc. is located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum. In her later years she had ideas about establishing a record label "Halleljuah!" Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 550. A true visionary, Jackson had a plan for a religious center as I mentioned earlier, a temple that was nonsegregated and nondenominational and was broadcast on TV. (like today's mega churches)

CHICAGO GOSPEL SINGERS VISIT PHILLY
The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967): Sep 23, 1939;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender
pg. 7

CHICAGO GOSPEL SINGERS VISIT PHILLY



Madame Mahalia Jackson and Thomas A. Dorsey, Chicago gospel singers, are shown here in Philadelphia in one of the dramatic poses which punctuate their singing. They were attractions at the

Baptist convention which closed there September 10 and remained over to fill other engagements. They are still in the Quaker City.—Photo by Mosley.

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Figure 3.1. Mahalia Jackson and Thomas Dorsey, Chicago Defender (National edition), September 23, 1939. Used with the permission of the Chicago Defender.

By 1941, not only did the alliance between Jackson and Dorsey help market the music of both, but it also helped further their leading status in the genre as demonstrated by a concert billing in Pittsburg that announced, “Thomas A. Dorsey, America’s Foremost

Gospel Songwriter...and Mahalia Jackson, Empress of Gospel Singers.”³⁰⁰ In parallel to their partnership, Dorsey worked to advance the choral singing of gospel blues as the head of the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, and Jackson became a soloist who was regularly featured at the National Baptist Convention with other rising gospel stars such as Clara Ward and Robert Bradley.³⁰¹ As a result of their hard work, by the mid-1940s, many African Americans enjoyed gospel music.³⁰²

It should be mentioned that while Jackson’s national fame grew she cultivated her Chicago community ties through performances and visible participation in the social scene of the city.³⁰³ Several decades before the televised gospel singing competitions of today (i.e., “Sunday Best”) Jackson sought to build her reputation through artist battles that were held as a popular form of gospel music promotion. For instance, on March 3, 1945 an advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* promoted “Artist Song Battle Between Mahalia Jackson and Silas Steele.” Although Jackson was known to have battled other female singers such as Ernestine Washington, in this instance, the event could be seen as a battle of “the sexes and singing styles” for Silas Steele was a principal male member of

³⁰⁰ Concert announcement, Dorsey and Jackson at the Metropolitan Baptist Church, Pittsburg, October 21. *The Pittsburg Courier*, October 18, 1941, 18. In some texts Dorsey is credited for calling Jackson the “Empress” which would be an obvious reference to Bessie Smith, who was the “Empress of the Blues” but also a promotional strategy that affirmed her royal status as his performance partner.

³⁰¹ “National Baptist Convention, Inc. Holds 66th Session in Atlanta,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* September, 9, 1946,12.

³⁰² Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 49.

³⁰³Ida Genr Mitcham, “In The Bend,” *The Chicago Defender*, February 19, 1944, 17.

the Blue Jay Singers, a highly influential Chicago based quartet.³⁰⁴ The same year, the *Chicago Defender* reported that “Miss Mahalia Jackson, Noted Gospel Singer” served as the mistress of ceremonies for Mrs. Lucille Henderson, President of the Southern Echoes Gospel singers in her birthday program. Jackson’s status at this event signals her recognition as a gospel music performer as well as her ties in the community. Jackson, although confirmed as a “noted gospel singer,” participated in an honorary role and not as a singer in this publicized social event. Henderson’s group the Golden Harps was one of the best known female quartets and it is possible that Henderson and Jackson already knew each other when Jackson sang with the Johnson Gospel Singers; both groups were affiliated with McQueen’s Progressive Quartet Association.³⁰⁵ Jackson’s work and visibility in the Chicago scene eventually paid off when her song “Move on Up a Little Higher” was issued by Apollo Records in 1948 and “[i]n Chicago alone, 50,000 records were sold in four weeks.”³⁰⁶ Indeed, Jackson had been building recognition for her brand of gospel music and creating a consumer base for it for years. Finally Jackson was finally able to harvest the fruits of her long labor. Although one can only guess the success of any record prior to its release, in retrospective, it is possible to see why “Move On Up”

³⁰⁴ Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 98. An image of this advertisement is available in Abbot and Seroff, *To Do This, You Must Know How: Music Pedagogy in the Black Gospel Quartet Tradition* (Jackson:University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 156.

³⁰⁵ Seroff and Abbott, *To Do This, You Must Know How*, 240-242.

³⁰⁶ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 116; Horace Boyer notes that Jackson recorded “Move on Up a Little Higher” on September 12, 1947 and it was released to the public in January, 1948. Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 89-90.

became a career-defining song for Jackson as it offered a fitting musical medium for expressing her sophisticated cultural, commercial, spiritual, and political sensibilities.

The dynamic feel of “Move on Up” results from a gradually intensifying push and pull effect, that Jackson’s creates with her virtuosic vocal expression. Although the song’s catchy title words “move on up” stands out, not least because Jackson usually iterates them on the same pitch, the frequent assertions “I’m gonna” and “I will/it will” convey an even a deeper determination to attain the higher ground whether in heaven or on earth. Jackson’s vocals communicate just this emotional terrain between desire and destination. As Horace Boyer, notes one side of the song sets up the journey from earth to heaven, which is characterized by an ascending melody line.³⁰⁷ What is more, when Jackson sings the song in the key Bb, that journey begins from the tonic (Bb) but ends an octave higher, which emerges as the most significant note of the song. She emphasizes the pitch by holding it while projecting a full sound with a slight crescendo effect and a noticeable vibrato. To add rhythmic “punch,” at times she punctuates the vocal line by cutting off the same note on a word like “up” in a staccato manner. Such contrasts, through which the sense of tension and release emerge, are at work in other elements of the song as well. For instance, as usual, Jackson exploits the letter “n” for its humming sound only to ascend from it to open throated lines on high notes. Although in general Jackson colors the melody in bluesy shades by moving through slides and melismatic figures in a fluid manner, she truly evokes the blues sonority when always singing a flatted version of the third scale degree on the song’s highest pitch D5. When the song ends on a retard, she

³⁰⁷ Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 90.

worries the line on several repeated vowels on the same pitch. It should be mentioned that by using Brewster's new composition rather than an established standard, Jackson is free to infuse her own expression in its novel qualities such as the couplets that "file in over and over, and over."³⁰⁸ Jackson's experience in the political arena also prepared her with instincts to highlight the political resonances of the song.

To be sure, the cultural and commercial success of Jackson's song derived from several factors. To this end, through an exploration of the song's urban-rural connections in its "creation, dissemination, and reception" along with "Jackson's virtuoso vocals and the notion of black progress in the song," Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. has identified it as a potent Afro-modernist cultural text.³⁰⁹ In this light, from a vocal standpoint the commercial potential of the song was enhanced by the combination of elements that drew from traditional southern sensibilities and from Jackson's "modern" rhythmic and vocal treatment which served as a meta-text for the fluidity between notions of the old and the new.

The song "Move on Up A Little Higher" featured James Lee on piano and James "Blind" Francis on organ. The combination of an organ and piano became a standard accompaniment in Jackson's music throughout her years. In this same year she started working with her long time pianist Mildred Falls, whose piano fill-ins would become an integral part of her music. For instance, to add variation on top of vocal repetition, Falls

³⁰⁸ Horace Clarence Boyer, "Brewster: The Eloquent Poet," in *We'll Understand it by and By*, ed. Reagon, 217.

³⁰⁹ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 54.

plays riffs across different octaves. She also contributed to the dramatic build up by playing dyads on thirds in triplets against common time. While Jackson did not read music, Falls, at least in part, would provide that support to her. For example, William Russell writes that in a rehearsal for the song “Holy City,” Falls and he decided that Ab (or F) would be too high for Jackson and put the song in Db.³¹⁰ Falls also helped Jackson in other music related matters including copyright processing and song composition.³¹¹ Being an accompanist for Jackson, however, was a full time commitment that included weekends and odd work hours with her when she was recording in the studio or rehearsing at home. When Jackson fell ill in 1955, Falls and her organist Ralph Jones were constant companions to her at the hospital. Likely, the loyalty to their employer prevented them from seeking other work and thus, according to Russell’s notes, Falls and Jones planned to apply for unemployment compensation.³¹²

With the success of “Move On Up” and subsequent hit singles, Jackson became gospel music royalty. She was appointed as the official soloist of the National Baptist

³¹⁰ William Russell (journal entry), Monday, September 6, 1954, pg. 1. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 478, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection. Jackson’s recording of the song with Percy Faith, set in key D#, would be released on her *Power and Glory* album in 1960.

³¹¹ See my earlier references to copy rights and to the song “I’m on My Way to Canaan Land” which Jackson and Falls composed when they were singing in the car while driving in South Carolina.

³¹² William Russell (journal entries) Tuesday September 6, 1955, September 7, September 8, September 12, 1955, and September 13, 1955. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 478-482, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection

Convention, and she became very wealthy.³¹³ As a marker of her new fame and financial status, she became known for driving a Cadillac. The Cadillacs of different colors, which she owned throughout the years, were mentioned in stories about her in press.³¹⁴ This is significant because as an emblem of success at the time favored by rock and rollers like Elvis Presley, a Cadillac was the ultimate way to declare “I have arrived!”³¹⁵

Jackson was more popular than ever, and her determination to sing sacred music was paying off. Jackson’s successful songs that followed, for instance “Tired,” were sold in mail order catalogs next to Rosetta Tharpe’s, Ernestine Washington’s, and later Clara Ward’s recordings; these three women were at the forefront of the market expansion of the era known as the Golden Age of Gospel. In addition to Jackson’s artistic recognition and financial status, her stardom was confirmed by her ability to hold annual concerts at major arenas such as the Golden Gate Auditorium in New York. In addition, in a few years she would launch her international career. In 1950, a writer in the *Melody Maker* lamented the non-availability of Jackson’s records in the UK. It did not take long before

³¹³ Schwerin, *Got to Tell It*, 67, 174.; Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 116.

³¹⁴ “Round up,” *Jet*, March 26, 1959, 21. This article mentions her new yellow Cadillac sedan.; “New York Beat,” *Jet*, May 7, 1959, 63. This article mentions how the police stopped “Mahalia Jackson’s chauffeur while he was Cadillac-ing through Mississippi and fined him \$50. [without telling what the charges were]; “Gospel Queen Mahalia” *Life*, 1954. This article mentions her “new Cadillac.”

³¹⁵ Angelo Van Bogart, and Brian Ernest, *Cadillac: 100 Years of Innovation* (Iola: Krause Publication, 2003), 77. As a confirmation of the long-standing rock and roll history of the Cadillac, several decades later in 1985 Aretha Franklin would sing about “ridin’ on the freeway of love” in her pink Cadillac which in the music video for the song has has a “Respect” license plate. This was pointed out by Steven Feld in his letter exchange with Charles Keil in *Music Grooves*. Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Tucson: Fenestra Books, 2005 [1994]), 221.

her records arrived to the UK, and a year after that, in 1952 she had her first European tour. However, the heavy workload would begin to take a toll on her and she had to return early due to a serious illness.

Along with commercial success, Jackson got opportunities to enter into the new, as Susan McClary calls them, “discursive communities.”³¹⁶ One of them was an invitation to perform at Carnegie Hall, one of America’s leading Western classical music arenas. The opportunity resulted from the efforts of Joe Bostic, a New York based DJ who had seen Jackson perform at the Golden Gate Atrium. This engagement exposed Jackson’s music to a few influential men who would end up playing significant roles in her career. Among them were John Hammond, Ed Sullivan, German radio executives, and Marshall Stern, Professor of English at Columbia University who later invited Jackson to an academic symposium where scholars probed her with questions about her singing style.³¹⁷ In 1938, Rosetta Tharpe had performed on the Carnegie Hall stage as part of the “Spirituals to Swing” concert that showcased African American music styles, but Jackson was a featured artist in a gospel concert.³¹⁸ Among the repertoire of spirituals, a ballad, and gospel songs that she sang in this concert, Joe Bostic remembers that the gospel tune “It Pays to Serve Jesus” was the one that really impressed the

³¹⁶ Susan McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” *Cultural Critique* 12, (Spring, 1989): 62, 76.

³¹⁷ For an insightful discussion about Jackson’s participation at this symposium, see Burford, “Mahalia Meets the Wise Men.”

³¹⁸ James Dugan and John Hammond, “An Early Black-Music Concert from Spirituals to Swing,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 2 (Autumn, 1974): 191-207.

audience.³¹⁹ Jackson's Carnegie Hall performance went so well that she would go on to perform there annually for several years.

Because Jackson became famous as a near 20 year "veteran" in the business of gospel music, she was prepared to make prudent decisions to maintain popularity. In terms of the Carnegie Hall engagement, Jackson and Bostic have both recounted that when Bostic initially approached Jackson about the performance, she strongly refused. Apparently, Bostic had to persuade Jackson several times before finally presenting her with a contract in Chicago to which she agreed. Jackson says she refused because "that was reserved for opera singers." In the way that Jackson frames the refusal, her rejecting Bostic's proposal stemmed from insecurity, but Jackson was not naive.³²⁰ More likely, she expected to see a contract before committing to the engagement no matter how prestigious it was. Furthermore, she was at a critical point in her career as a star specifically in the realm of gospel music. Her hesitance can also be understood in light of the market niche she had carved out for herself; crossing over to the realm of "art" could

³¹⁹ B. Dexter Allgood, "Black Gospel in New York City and Joe William Bostic, Sr," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): 112.

³²⁰ In his notes on August 1, 1955 Russell writes about Jackson's encounter with a booking agent whom she had met at the Opera house and who wanted to sign her right away. The agent claims that he had worked for Marian Anderson. Although the agent had promised to organize a European tour for Jackson, she had said that based on her previous experience in Europe and over 30 years on the road in the U.S. she required the agent paid her fees in advance to an escrow account before she would go. Thus, Jackson, said that "he found out that she wasn't stupid." William Russell (journal entry), August 1, 1955. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection

have resulted in the alienation of her audience, which would have been as disastrous as would have been crossing over to the blues.

After all, Jackson's popularity on Apollo records was built on her reputation as a singer for the "common people." This was demonstrated by Langston Hughes in his well known column in the *Chicago Defender* in which he sets up a debate between "I" and "Mr. Simple" (a fictive persona). "Mr. Simple" says that he prefers Mahalia Jackson over concert singers because "When Mahalia sings 'hand' she sings 'hand'-not hawnd."³²¹ A year later in the same column, Hughes names Mahalia Jackson, "who can out-sing an angel when it comes to gospel songs" among the things he likes about Chicago.³²² It is unclear whether he knew that Jackson had bought Marian Anderson's and Paul Robeson's records in the late 1930s to learn diction so that people could understand her.³²³

Further unsettling the classification of Jackson's music between folk/pop/art categories was that her Carnegie Hall performance preceded her entry into national TV as a guest in the Ed Sullivan Show.³²⁴ However, Jackson's entry into mainstream media was awkward because of Sullivan's obvious nervousness and difficulties in introducing her. In lacking the courtesy of never telling a woman's age, Sullivan started off by saying:

³²¹ Langston Hughes, "Simple is No Patron of the Arts: Loves Music He Can Understand," *The Chicago Defender*, December 11, 1948.

³²² Langston Hughes, "Things I Like About Chicago I Like, And What I Don't, I Don't," *The Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1949, 6.

³²³ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 75.

³²⁴ Jackson's performance in Ed Sullivan Show January 20, 1952. *Rejoice and Shout*, directed by Don McGlynn (Greensboro, NC: Deep River Films, 2010).

“There’s a young singer -not a young singer, middle-aged Negro star...” On this televised performance, like in upper-class churches in 1930s Chicago, Jackson’s body was concealed in a robe. It was a thick, dark and thick satin choir robe with a lighter lining of the sleeves and stylized diagonal fabric across her torso. The heavy fabric and limited visible spectrum of black and white TV rendered the outlines of her body practically invisible. Jackson’s voice was in top shape and her facial expressions were vivid, but as the song picked up the pace toward the end, and she started moving her feet, the cameras had already begun zooming closer to cut her entire body out of sight and to focus on her face. These subtle signs showed TV producers’ uncertainty about the way she was to be presented for the mainstream TV viewership.

The problematics of Jackson’s TV performance were recognized by a columnist in the *Amsterdam News* who evaluated the show as follows: “Mahalia Jackson, the Queen of Gospel Singers, was seen on the Ed Sullivan ‘Toast of the Town’ variety presentation on Sunday, but Ed who is usually very nice to his guest artists, didn’t treat her right. His introduction of Miss Jackson and her art (gospel singing), and the way the cameras worked on her, and the general lack of build-up certainly did her no good.”³²⁵ Despite these issues, Jackson’s appearance in the Ed Sullivan Show was the beginning of her pathbreaking career on TV both as a guest as well as a host.

New York gradually emerged as a major site for Jackson’s career providing an important music business infrastructure from studios to performance venues and

³²⁵ “Radio-TV Highlights: Radio-Show-of-the-Week” *Amsterdam News* (city edition) [New York, N.Y.] 26 Jan 1952, 14.

corporate offices. She made many of her Apollo recordings there, and it was the city where Columbia Executives including John Hammond first heard her. Her music, however, continued to strongly represent the Chicago-based gospel music community. While Jackson's repertoire during the Apollo years included a combination of standards such as "Amazing Grace" and "His Eye Is on The Sparrow," she also sang newly composed gospel songs at the time. Her repertoire included several songs by the "Chicago school of gospel," a community of composers, publishers, and singers including Thomas Dorsey, Sallie Martin, Theodore Rye, Roberta Martin, and Kenneth Morris.³²⁶ On Apollo, Jackson also recorded several songs by Rev. William Herbert Brewster, who although based in Memphis, was linked in the 1940s to the Chicago community through his work with arrangers Kenneth Morris and Theodore Frye.

The recordings that Jackson made for Apollo records between 1946-1954 are considered among her best by gospel music enthusiasts.³²⁷ It is true that on those recordings made both in studio and in concert settings, her voice is in an excellent form reflecting luster, fullness, maturity, and strength. She sings throughout different registers in a fluid manner although she now uses the power of her rich lower register often to deepen the emotional effects. Having built her vocal stylings for years in churches around the country, she incorporates slides, hollers, melismas and rhythmic interpolations at will. She continues to skillfully use the "worrying the line" approach as a mark of her Baptist

³²⁶ Reagon, "Pioneering African American Gospel Music Composers," in *We'll Understand It Better By and By*, ed. Reagon, 3-18.

³²⁷ Heilbut, *Gospel Sound*, 64; Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 91.

background. She even varies her diction in curious ways, like for example in the song “Lord I Want to Rest” she incorporates a hard “r” in a manner similar to the art songs she would later record for Columbia. Although Jackson herself would wonder about the idea of “blue tonality” that Marshall Stearn had used to describe her singing, it is not difficult for a listener to imagine this quality, especially in songs like “What A Friend We Have in Jesus,” which she sings as a lament, contrary to the polished major key version she would later record for Columbia. In that song she also infuses words with a growl, a device that she rarely used in later Columbia recordings. Contrary to how a classically trained singer would approach words as full units, she deliberately hums and breathes between the letters of even the most important words including “Jee-sus.”

Despite commonly held notions about Jackson’s “true” gospel sound on Apollo Records versus her “mainstream pop” output on Columbia Records, a closer hearing of her music proves that since the early 1950s (while still was still signed to Apollo Records), Jackson recorded both gospel songs and those familiar to the American mainstream. For instance, in 1951, she recorded a song “It’s No Secret What God Can Do,” a hit song by country music star turned gospel singer Stuart Hamblen. In 1953, her recordings with Belleville Choral moved away from bouncy gospel towards a more even rhythmic plane of American pop. The same year she also released a single “I Believe,” a thorough composed inspirational song that had been initially commissioned for a television show. The flip side had the song “Consider Me” by jazz and pop songwriters Ervin Drake and Larry Graham. In this song, she already incorporates head voices up to a rare Ab5 which she would often use on Columbia Records (She would record this song

again for Columbia). The record also included her own composition “Beautiful Tomorrow,” albeit in a bluesy but melodically simplified tune with a spiritual (not explicitly Christian) message. She also recorded experimental material including the song “I’m On My Way to Canaan,” which she had composed with Mildred Falls in a car (presumably her Cadillac) when the two were driving in South Carolina. The song is set to a rhythm featuring bongos and maracas, which Jackson had described in interviews on TV and radio both as a “primitive African rhythm” and a “Cuban rhythm.”³²⁸ On the other side of the single was even more “exotic” song “My Story,” which features “hypnotic” chromatic melodic figures. It is possible that Jackson recorded these songs not only to explore her artistic frontiers but also to introduce greater variety in her repertoire which could improve her marketability among different radio and TV audiences. By then, her crossover to American mainstream was already in the making.

American Mainstream Music Market

In 1954, after charged and much publicized debates about Jackson’s contract obligations to Apollo, Jackson signed a contract with Columbia Records.³²⁹ As one of the largest record labels in the world, Columbia Records had the marketing resources and the

³²⁸ Russell Williams (journal entry), July 31, 1955. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 653, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

³²⁹ For example, the *Billboard* followed Jackson’s contract negotiations closely. “Mahalia, Apollo and Columbia in Pact Hassle,” *Billboard*, August 21, 1954, 19; “Mahalia Jackson Nears Columbia Records Contract” *Billboard*, September 18, 1954, 18.

distribution networks to support Jackson's pursuit of mainstream success.³³⁰ This point marks Jackson's increasing need to juggle a variety of vocal and performance styles along with maintaining a well guarded public image for various audiences including church and concert attendees as well as those consuming her music through records, radio, and TV. Her audiences now included African Americans, mainstream Americans, and overseas constituents. The need to cater to various audiences that Jackson faced was not unlike the case of her friend Sarah Vaughan who had also been an artist on Columbia Records up to 1953. In her dissertation, Elaine M. Hayes convincingly argues that as Vaughan sought to cross over from jazz to popular music, she developed a versatile vocal aesthetic in order to contest the objectification and narrow views of her artistry.³³¹ Different from Vaughan's experience, however, Jackson also had to make sure that she could cross over without compromising her religious views and damaging her Christian reputation. Jackson remained loyal to gospel music although she broadened her repertoire with "inspirational" songs and with arrangements that increasingly included jazz-, pop-, and classical music style influences. It is remarkable that Jackson was able to negotiate a repertoire of sacred songs with Mitch Miller, the tough and feared Columbia Records

³³⁰ The time period when she changed labels sheds light on the very secular aspects of the gospel music business that she had to negotiate at that juncture. According to Jackson, a year earlier she had started discussions about the transition with John Hammond, legendary producer at Columbia Records. Jackson's decisions took place at the time when there was tension at Apollo Records, as *Jet* reported a "violent session" (in studio) in which Jackson had "walked out in the middle of a number. She temporarily forgot her religion long enough to 'bless' out Bess Berman, prexy of the firm." Mahalia told Bess she had a 'plantation attitude' toward negroes." *Jet*, June 18, 1953, 48.

³³¹ Elaine M. Hayes, "To Bebop or to Be Pop."

executive who famously fought with Frank Sinatra about song materials prior to Sinatra's departure from the record label. Letters between Jackson, Miller, and George Avarkian show that Jackson used sophisticated diplomacy to maneuver between the recording of gospel songs of her own choosing and songs that Miller chose for her, among which was "Rusty Old Halo," her first hit for the Columbia Records.³³²

The song "Rusty Old Halo" is a simple diatonic song set in waltz tempo which features Jackson's overdubbed basic vocals (instead of her powerful blues stylings) which was a novel recording technique at the time. The set also included another similar sweet waltz "The Treasure of Love." Both songs were written by well established popular music composers. The extended play single also included two more upbeat songs: "Walk Over God's Heaven" and "Jesus Met the Woman at the Well." The successful extended play single was followed by a full length album *World's Greatest Gospel Singer*, which included gospel songs by composers like Dorsey, Morris, and Anderson along with widely known traditional material like "When the Saints Go Marching In." Her recordings seemed to shift toward a "softer" feel than her earlier songs as shown by her new version of "Move on Up a Little Higher." Set in a steady upbeat tempo the song lacks the urgency of the earlier version as Mildred Falls plays triplets against the beat that

³³² A typed letter from George Avakian to William Russell, November 8, 1954. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 5, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection. In this letter Avakian mentions the issue that Jackson had not liked some tunes, which Columbia executive Mitch Miller suggested for her to record. Relatedly, this letter reflects how Jackson utilized indirect communication through Russell and Avakian as a diplomatic strategy to manage her relationship with Miller. To this end, at one point Avakian writes, "I told Mitch a little of the feeling Mahalia expressed, especially *what she asked you to tell me to relay to Mitch*, but I didn't want to lay too much on him or he might get sore." (emphasis mine)

creates some rhythmic complexity, and a guitar taking more of the call and response than the organ earlier. The drums played with brushes also set a mellow walking beat instead of the characteristic bounce of the original version. Songs on the album were often accompanied by the Mildred Falls Ensemble, which deemphasized syncopation by using the brushes on the drums. The first year on Columbia, Jackson also recorded a novel jazz influenced Christmas album, which George Avakian suggested to her. Avakian said, “I have a feeling that this album will be extremely successful because there is nothing like it on the market as yet, and I know that it will be an exceptional one from the musical point of view as well.”³³³

During the 15 years Jackson recorded for Columbia Records, she became a household name in America and a well-known artist worldwide. At the time of her negotiations with Columbia Records, Jackson was given a network radio broadcast contract with CBS, Columbia’s parent company. Her program commenced a few weeks before she entered Columbia Recording Studios. Although Jackson’s radio program ended up having a limited run, she was able to secure a TV show “Mahalia Sings!” on Chicago’s local WBBM network in 1955. Significantly, her success was fostered by a groundbreaking media presence which presented her with an ever more complicated task of dealing with the ways in which her artistry was presented to the world in print, on radio, and on TV.

³³³ Letter from George Avakian to Mahalia Jackson (typed on Columbia Records letterhead), February 24, 1955. Avakian said that the album would be titled *O Come All Ye Faithful*, a plan which probably changed because her first Christmas album on Columbia Records is titled *Sweet Little Jesus Boy* (1955). Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 8, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

This was evident when Jackson launched her first half-hour TV show on Sunday and Tuesday nights with her friend Studs Terkel (as the narrator) and Jack Halloram who had worked as the musical director for the radio show. A writer for the *Billboard* wrote about the show's appeal as follows: "The show is tops from start to finish, and is highly impressive because of the odd camera and audio technique. The camera presents almost all head shots. The background never varies, remaining a solid black with the exception of highlights directly surrounding the star." The reviewer further noted that "The show definitely has plenty of appeal for viewers of all types and ages" and among the strengths of the show he named "the typical gospel music beat which is very listenable and relatively light in tempo" as well as Jackson's personality "that presents wealth of appeal."³³⁴ Filming a gospel music show using camera technique that deliberately cuts off the body of a singer, an integral part of the musical expression, practically disembodies gospel music expression to the viewing public. Her early television appearances seem to reflect her reservations about TV as a medium in that she often stands rigidly on the stage when singing.

If Jackson's lively movements in performance were a cause for concern in some Chicago churches in the 1930s, the 1950s television world was an arena where the producers saw the need to conceal Jackson's body under an elaborate choir robe or to simply frame it out of view with camera techniques. In the past, Jackson had been proud of her full figure and referred to her "singing weight" at 200 pounds. Although Jackson's doctors had asked her to lose weight for health reasons, she was possibly also trying to

³³⁴ Steve Schickel, "Jackson TV Stint Tops Radio Effort," *Billboard*, April 16, 1955.

diet for the TV.³³⁵ In public she claimed, “Doctors say I have to lose 25 more pounds but I’m afraid I’ll end up looking like a skeleton.”³³⁶

Even when the camera removed her body from view, Jackson had an extraordinary talent for overcoming this way of disembodiment imposed on her artistry; she was able to naturally convey a multitude of emotions and to narrate compelling stories with her face and hands. Her facial expressions inspired journalists to come up with descriptions such as “Once she has moved from the wings to center stage, she erupts on spot, projecting waves of sound, warm twists and turns of melody. She locks her hands tightly before her, stares at the heaven she *knows* exists, and seems to be conversing with God. Her face takes on expressions of joy and ecstasy. She is at peace” and “..and it was sad to hear her sing “He was Alone” because there seemed to be tears in her eyes.”³³⁷

Indeed, body parts not veiled by a robe were her hands, which she used very well for expressive purposes. In fact, Jackson had noticeably beautiful hands with delicate but strong fingers and with always beautifully manicured fingernails. Her hands, set in prayer, were used alongside the introductory texts to her *Mahalia Jackson Sings!* show

³³⁵ William Russell, (journal entry), May 19, 1955, pg. 2. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 35, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection. Russell makes detailed observations about Jackson’s dietary habits, for example Williams notes her drinking black coffee, without cream and little sugar in the studio. According to Williams’s notes she also asked for black coffee when in studio on Sunday August 28, 1955. Coffee is an interesting choice, in some singers it influences vocal chords in terms of vibrato and other effects. William Russell, (journal entry), July 10, 1955, pg. 2 and August 28, 1955. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, F. 36, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

³³⁶ “Famous Fat Women,” *Jet*, May 8, 1952, 56-63.

³³⁷ Don Gold, “In God She Trusts,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, November, 1963.

and they were also pictured next to the end credits. This also served to emphasize that hand claps were an important feature of her live performance. Absent in most of her studio recordings, the hand claps in a concert setting draw audience attention and provide rhythmic accents in the course of a performance. When Jackson performed in Garry Moore's Christmas show, the host explained her use of hands to the audience as follows: "You know in introducing you, I said that you sang with your heart and mind...I was watching you and you have the most expressive hands I've ever seen." Mahalia: "Well, Garry, how can anyone sing of heaven and earth and all God's wonders without using his hands? When I sing, my hands demonstrate what I feel inside. I want my hands, my body, my feet to say all that is in me."³³⁸

In both 1957 and 1958, she performed at the Newport Jazz Festival. The festival which was instituted in 1954 and modeled after classical music concerts sought to help jazz shed some of its negative associations as it aimed to bring the music and its young consumers to revitalize the economy of an elite but antiquated resort site.³³⁹ As part of the festival's increasingly diverse offering of African American musical genres, Jackson's gospel music performance (like that of the Clara Ward Singers in 1957) signaled the genre's transition from the musical margins to the American mainstream.³⁴⁰ As part of

³³⁸ The Garry Moore Show, CBS Television, Tuesday, December 22, 1959. Script #13, Revision #1. This program is located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

³³⁹ Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't, Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 99-122.

³⁴⁰ Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance, Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature*. (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 76.

this process, Jackson's 1958 performance was recorded and released as a live album. Jackson was shocked, however, when she learned about the way that her performance was presented on the film *Jazz on a Summer's Day* which was made of the festival (1959). The film had included, without her permission, footage which "belittled her religion." A lengthy hand written note dated March 19, 1960 on the Statler Hilton Hotel's notepad from Jackson to her producer George Avakian reveals that Jackson was disappointed in him and furious because the film portrayed her work in "sacrilegious" terms due to the editing of a scene of people dancing. She speculated that the editors had taken another scene of people dancing in the festival and incorporated it into her song to make it look like they danced while she was singing although she says that they actually were not. In the concluding paragraph Jackson states, "This is the first time in my life that I feel that I have a blemish in my Christian work" and hopes that Avakian will "straighten this out as soon as possible."³⁴¹

By the late 1950s, her media presence extended across radio, television, and cinema. The year 1958 marks her entry onto the big screen through her role in the film *St. Louis Blues*, a story about W.H. Handy starring Nat King Cole and Pearl Bailey. She went on to appear in the movies *Imitation of Life* (1959) and *The Best Man* (1964). On TV, she performed in a drama series *The Dupont Show of the Month* (1957) and the

³⁴¹ Letter from Mahalia Jackson to George Avakian. March 19, 1960, Boston, Massachusetts. This letter is located in the George Avakian and Anahid Ajemian papers, (1908-2013) b. 39 f. 8 at the The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York, NY.

ecumenical anthology *Lamp Unto My Feet* (1963).³⁴² Furthermore she had numerous television appearances in variety shows, among which one stands out because it demonstrates the representational limits that she had to negotiate in order to conform to the ideologies advanced by this mainstream media channel. In 1958, she was the first African American guest to appear on the Dinah Shore Show. At the time newspapers speculated about reasons why Dinah Shore, contrary to other popular shows, had not employed any African American guests prior to Mahalia Jackson.³⁴³ One writer suggested that “while studio officials will not admit as much it is believed that the Chevrolet Motors had something to do with the decision to remove the program from its long lily-white policy.”³⁴⁴ However, Jackson’s challenges were not only on the corporate side of network TV but also in presenting an image acceptable to the show’s viewers. After Mahalia Jackson’s appearance on the Dinah Shore show on December 6, 1959 a letter between NCAAP officials reveals the scrutiny she was subjected to by those who watched her on TV. Barbara Coopersmith wrote to Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins: “Several people noted that Mahalia Jackson referred to Dinah Shore as “Miss Dinah” on the latter’s show Sunday Dec.6. I realize how very busy you are so almost hesitate to call such a relatively unimportant matter to your attention — but felt that someone close to Miss Jackson might

³⁴² Bob McCann, *Encyclopedia of African American Actresses in Film and Television* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2010), 176.

³⁴³ Hilda See, “Mahalia Jackson in ‘Debut’ for Dinah Shore Show” May 31, 1958, 19.

³⁴⁴ “Mahalia Jackson Breaks Ice; Guests on Dinah Shore TV,” *Daily Defender*, May 25, 1958, 18.

mention it had been noted with some negative reactions.”³⁴⁵ It is unclear exactly who the people were who had reacted negatively, but given the NAACP involvement in this issue, it seems that it was a matter of racial politics that some viewers sought to “correct” and thus control Jackson’s on-screen conduct. Seemingly without a backlash from this incident, Jackson continued to perform as a frequent guest of the Dinah Shore Show and spoke fondly about her in public.

Jackson’s musical output on record was moving to increasingly diverse stylistic directions. Although Jackson had recorded several of Thomas Dorsey’s songs on Apollo Records and Columbia Records, it wasn’t until 1956 that she recorded his famous song “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” (but the record would not be released until 1963). On this song Jackson perfects an aesthetic of polished singing complete with high head tones. Compared to “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” released by the teenage Aretha Franklin the same year, Jackson’s version of the same song was more contemplative and demonstrated her ability to achieve a tone very different from shouting and moaning styles that she was originally known for. In September of the same year, Jackson recorded “God is So Good (To Me)” a gospel ballad by Doris Akers, her friend who also became a member of the Mahalia Jackson Foundation advisory board.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ Letter from Barbara Coopersmith to Roy Wilkins regarding Dinah Shore Show (Dec. 6), December 14, 1959. Retrieved from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, available through the Library of Congress, Manuscript Reading Room, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/mss/>.

³⁴⁶ A program booklet for the 12th Anniversary of the Mahalia Jackson Foundation, “A Salute to Black Women,” November 8, 1969. This program is located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

As a culmination of her vocal explorations in Western classical music style, in February 1960, Jackson recorded songs from the predominantly white Christian repertoire with full orchestra directed by Percy Faith, who was known for the “easy listening” aesthetic of his productions. Their collaboration resulted in the highly acclaimed album *The Power and the Glory*. In Goreau’s biography, Jackson describes how Percy Faith instructed her: “Nobody had ever *dictated* the notes to her before. Song by song. Lord! Percy Faith scared her to death but he was great. ‘We’re going to do this until you sing the *note*—not sliding above or below or between but *on* the note.’”³⁴⁷ Their collaboration resulted in an excellent record in which Jackson’s lustrous voice is framed in polished string arrangements and she excels in Western classical type of teleological cadences. This, as were her other recordings that sought mainstream recognition, was made in Los Angeles.

The recording of *The Power and the Glory* took place less than a year prior to a milestone event when Jackson sang at one of the inaugural balls of President John F. Kennedy. On that day she was featured artist, like was Marian Anderson, the singer whom she held in high esteem and whose picture (and Paul Robeson’s) she had William Russell cut out from sheet music and frame on top of her piano.³⁴⁸ Although Jackson clearly wanted to be seen as a gospel singer and not as a vocalist in the Western classical

³⁴⁷ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 272.

³⁴⁸ William Russell, (journal entry), July 6, 1955, pg. 2. Located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, MSS 513, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

music tradition, she seemingly sought a “serious” image more similar to Marian Anderson than Rosetta Tharpe, which was well fitting for the political arena.

Returning closer to her original gospel style during another politically important year in March 1963, Mahalia Jackson set out to record several spirituals and gospel repertoire including the songs “In the Upper Room,” a remake of “Move on Up a Little Higher,” and “How I Got Over.” Edward Robinson accompanied her on piano and Billy Preston was on organ. Although her vocals sometimes seemed narrowly confined in arrangements with the Jack Halloran Singers, who had accompanied her on her CBS radio show, she showed her versatility in material that she knew very well including a remake of “It Is No Secret What God Can Do.” Jackson’s Civil Rights Movement work culminated at the March on Washington in August of the same year. Inspired by the interfaith collaboration at the event, and seemingly, to capitalize on its popularity, the following September she went to the studio to record the song “Let’s Pray Together” which incorporates the rhythmic and melodic structure of the famous Jewish folk song “Hava Nagila” and “Song for My Brother” written by Jewish women community members in the Civil Rights Movement.

During the second half of the 1960s Jackson recorded both studio and live recordings. She continued to record spirituals and hymns, while experimenting with contemporary tunes such as the show tunes “Sunrise, Sunset” from the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof* and “Like The Breeze Blows” from the musical *The Zulu And The Zayda*. (1966) At this stage, her expression started to show slight inconsistencies in long lines and occasional choppy phrasing. Her voice sometimes had a tremor or wobble in

more subdued passages, but when she was able to sing in full voice, energizing the vocal production with a lot of air, her voice could still soar. In a song like “It is Well with My Soul,” along with excellent melodic execution, her aging voice was a beautiful fit for the song. It is possible that the difficulties in her personal life at the time affected her deteriorating health and her voice.³⁴⁹

In 1969, when the song “Oh’ Happy Day” ushered in the style now known as contemporary gospel music, Jackson followed the trend by recording Jackie Shannon’s current hit song “Put a Little Love in Your Heart” which featured popular music instrumentation including an electric guitar, R&B style background singers, and tambourines. Her voice on the song lacks its characteristic strength and expressiveness. At the same time she recorded “What the World Needs Now” which is a funky disco track like “Don’t Let Nobody Turn You Around.” Moving from her previous album which pays homage to Abraham, Martin and John framed in an ensemble aesthetic, on this album, she moves to a funky aesthetic. Her last album *What The World Needs Now* (1970) could also be seen as Jackson’s “contemporary gospel” album.

Jackson continued setting gospel music milestones up to the last years of her life. In 1971, she went on a tour to India and Japan, which bestowed her artistry with global prestige beyond what she had achieved mainly in the West. During this tour she enjoyed a near diplomatic status demonstrated by the protocol and access usually reserved for state dignitaries. In Tokyo, Jackson became the first American singer to sing at an imperial birthday party in the Emperor’s palace. In India, she performed for Prime Minister Indira

³⁴⁹ “Mahalia Jackson Divorces Mate,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 1967, 1.

Grandi and exchanged words with her. She was courted by officials of the American Embassy. In anticipation of Jackson's visit, U.S. Ambassador K.B. Keating wrote an article about her in a local newspaper in which he enthusiastically recommended readers "to make any sacrifice to attend" her forthcoming concert.³⁵⁰

Mahalia Jackson passed away on January 27, 1972 after a prolonged illness that was undoubtedly made worse by her intense schedule of touring and her many career commitments. Her funeral services in both Chicago and New Orleans were majestic affairs attended by politicians, entertainers, and other public figures alongside tens of thousands of mourners who gathered for the silent tribute and funeral services in both cities. In Chicago, Robert Andersson sang Jackson's hit "Move On Up a Little Higher" and Aretha Franklin sang "Precious Lord." In New Orleans, vocal numbers were performed by Bessie Griffin and Lou Rawls who sang "Just a Closer I Walk with Thee."³⁵¹ Jackson was buried in a customary aboveground mausoleum at the Providence Memorial Park of Metairie located near the Louis Armstrong International Airport along the highway that many tourists travel on their way to the city. Her gated marble tomb, inscribed with the words "World's Greatest Gospel Singer," is set apart from other in-

³⁵⁰ Ambassador K.B. Keating, "Miss Mahalia Jackson, The Gospel Singer," *Nagpur Times*, April 25, 1971; "Songstress with a Divine Vision," *The Indian Express*, Saturday, May 8, 1971; "Mahalia Jackson," *Evening News of India*, Bombay, May 4, 1971; "Mahalia Jackson Sings at Palace," *Japan Times*, April 24, 1971; "Mahalia Jackson's Tour, Gospel Singer Fascinates Music Lovers in India," *The American Reporter*, May 5, 1971. These articles are located in the Mahalia Jackson Papers, 1950-1977 at the Chicago History Museum.

³⁵¹ Horace Clarence Boyer, "Tracking the Tradition: New Orleans Sacred Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (1988): 135; "Two Cities Pay Tribute to Mahalia Jackson," *Jet*, April 1972.

ground graves at this historic location where African American remains, including those of many slaves were moved in 1957 when the Girod Street Cemetery was deconsecrated to make way for what would become Champions Garage, the parking complex serving the Superdome and the New Orleans area. (White bodies were reinterred in Hope Mausoleum, located in the city.)³⁵² Jackson's grave stands out as a noble memorial within the graveyard where on the rainy day of my visit the flowers and memorabilia of other graves were scattered all around shifted bevel markers in the mud.

Today Jackson's legacy continues through reissues of her recordings, films, texts, programs posted on the Internet and events that are held to commemorate her life and artistry. A popular culture fixture, Jackson was inducted in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1997 because of her influence on R & B and Rock & Roll. Recently she was portrayed by the outstanding R'n'B artist Ledisi who sang "Precious Lord" in the 2014 film *Selma* about Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts to secure equal voting rights. In a tribute to the film that confirmed Jackson's central place in American popular music history, pop icon Beyoncé closed the Grammy Awards of 2015 with a slow version of "Precious Lord." Local musicians and churches continue to memorialize Jackson in theatrical productions such as "Hallelujah Mahalia" and "Mahalia, A Gospel Musical," staged in cities around the nation.

Jackson's carefully guarded gospel music brand is now in the hands of her estate as well as those in the music industry who hold rights to her music and are invested in its

³⁵² Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker, *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (University of California Press, 2013), 35.

continued profit potential. For instance, in an unsigned letter to Leonard V. Brady, MJ Family Corp. dated August 31, 1993 a person who identifies himself as “Mahalia Jackson’s principal producer at Columbia Records in the middle 1950s” solicits Jackson’s concert tape in his possession for a commercial release. Apparently, he had discovered this tape in a box that had been sealed since his residential move decades ago. Jackson had made the tape for Columbia executives to demonstrate the material she would like to record if she signed with the company.³⁵³ Another unsigned letter that seems to address the same concert tape confirms the author’s worldwide efforts to find a record company willing to distribute a record made of the tape upon the approval of her estate. The author is particularly concerned with finding a “reliable” company that understands the value of issuing a legitimate recording in the market where a flux of low-quality illegal recordings provide no royalties to the artists and others.³⁵⁴ When Columbia Records decided to reissue the *Jazz on the Summer’s Day* concert, an unsigned letter probably by George Avakian dated November 10, 1988 reveals his concern as the original producer for the footage incorporated in the film which falsely depicted people dancing to Jackson’s music and of which Jackson highly disapproved.³⁵⁵ The film was finally re-released in

³⁵³ Unsigned letter to Leonard V. Brady, MJ Family Corp., August 31, 1993. Available in the George Avakian and Anahid Ajemian papers, (1908-2013) b. 39 f. 8 located in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center.

³⁵⁴ A letter addressed to Mr. Shapiro. (no date) Available in the George Avakian and Anahid Ajemian papers, (1908-2013) b. 39 f. 8 located in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center.

³⁵⁵ Unsigned letter to “Jules,” November 10, 1988. Available in the George Avakian and Anahid Ajemian papers, (1908-2013) b. 39 f. 8 located in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center.

1997. Among the latest controversies is the re-release of Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige* album in which the recording engineer Phil Schaap inserted a 7 second snippet of Jackson saying "Jesus." On the record, the snippet is titled "studio conversation, Mahalia swearing." In an email exchange between members of a collective discussing Duke Ellington's music as well as among members of an online discussion group I found in the Internet, this sound byte was seen as a way to sell records at the cost of tarnishing her image.³⁵⁶ Another person who claimed familiarity with the original source tapes said that Jackson was not swearing, but instead had stated in "church" fashion "Jesus help me" of which the engineer had left out the part "help me." It is likely that debates like these will continue between those who wish to preserve the cultural value of Jackson's music and others who seek to profit from it in keeping with the interests of the markets.

³⁵⁶ Email exchanges concerning "7 seconds of 'Mahalia swears' (which she does not, according to Calvin Lampley, who was coaching her at the microphone), in the 2-CD 'Black, Brown and Beige' set," June 1999. Available in the George Avakian and Anahid Ajemian papers, (1908-2013) b. 39 f. 8 located in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center.

CHAPTER 4: Precious Memories: Aretha Franklin and the Family Business of Gospel Music

Branding Gospel Music Mastery

On October 28, 2014, only a week after Aretha Franklin released her latest top-selling album *Aretha Franklin Sings the Great Diva Classics*, her unauthorized biography *Respect, The Life of Aretha Franklin* written by her one time autobiographical collaborator David Ritz was published.³⁵⁷ The *Diva Classics* album which featured Franklin's cover versions of other female artists' pop hits and whose executive producer was a music industry veteran and Franklin's longtime partner-in-success Clive Davis, was a widely publicized testimony to her enduring reign as one of the greatest vocalists of our time. Ritz's book also confirms Franklin's artistic virtue (which in part rests, as his book rightly points out, on Franklin's ability to create superior cover versions of other artists' songs) but paints a less flattering portrait of the singer's personality, relationships, and struggles in life.³⁵⁸ There is no doubt that both projects, with timely released dates in the high-priority fourth-quarter ahead of holiday sales, helped generate consumer interest on each other. While readers were excited about the "tea" that *Respect* spilled on Franklin's personal life, the singer herself contemplated bringing a defamation law suit because of

³⁵⁷ Aretha Franklin, *Aretha Franklin Sings the Great Diva Classics*, RCA 88875022512, 2014; David Ritz, *Respect, The Life of Aretha Franklin* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014); Keith Caulfield, "Aretha Franklin Earns Her Highest-Charting Album Since 1985," *Billboard*, October 31, 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/6304294/aretha-franklin-highest-charting-album-1985>

³⁵⁸ Franklin and Ritz collaborated on Franklin's autobiography *Aretha, From These Roots* (New York: Villard Books, 1999).

“It’s lies, lies, lies and then more lies.”³⁵⁹ Apparently, one of the biography’s themes that Franklin rejected was the discussion of the promiscuous atmosphere of the gospel circuit in the 1950s (presented in a chapter titled “The Sex Circus”) on which Franklin performed as a teenager and which made her, according to Ritz, grow up fast.³⁶⁰

As Emily Lordi observes in her book review, *Respect* was not a book Franklin wanted written about her because the idealized autobiographical narrative of *Aretha, From These Roots*, which Franklin and Ritz wrote together in 1998, already portrayed her preferred public-self.³⁶¹ Certainly, Franklin’s reaction to Ritz’s book is understandable in personal terms; who would want one’s personal history publicized in a negative light? More than just an issue of privacy, what was at stake was Franklin’s “brand,” which she had built since her first recording was issued in the gospel music marketplace in the 1950s. According to Timothy Taylor “brands aren’t simply names of objects, but objects that carry meaning for people as things that make sense to them and communicate their sense of who they are to others.”³⁶² For Franklin, who maintains that she “never left the church,” this notion of branding closely connects to her role as a soloist in the New Bethel Baptist Church pastored by her famous father. Specifically, Franklin’s claims to an

³⁵⁹ Susan Hitall, “Aretha: Happy about 'Divas,' but the book - not so much,” *Detroit News*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/entertainment/music/2014/11/09/aretha-franklin-divas-cd-clive-davis-david-ritz/18784707/>

³⁶⁰ Ritz, *Respect*, 46-53.

³⁶¹ Emily Lordi, “How I Got Over: The Soul of Aretha Franklin,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 6, 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/got-aretha-franklins-soul/>

³⁶² Taylor, *Music and Capitalism*, 54.

idyllic childhood in her autobiography can be seen as a way to ascribe church-based spiritual purity to her vocal expression. After all, her vocal style still carries echoes of the “sonically imagined community” that C.L. Franklin created through the New Bethel Baptist Church, the Gospel Caravan tours, radio broadcasts, and recorded sermons.³⁶³ In the 1950s, this community was defined in part by Franklin’s emotionally intense vocal style, which connected believers through records and airwaves or physically to New Bethel worship services.

It is worth exploring the three aforementioned books and the *Diva Classics* a bit further in order to raise important issues related to the idea of gospel music branding. To begin, all three products contribute in their own ways to the continuous discursive construction of Aretha Franklin as a brand in the marketplace where success is not measured on artistic merit alone but in financial terms. The conflicting autobiographical and biographical portrayals of Franklin as a sassy soul star and a preacher’s daughter of a

³⁶³ Rommen, *Mek Some Noise*, 167; Later on in this chapter I will return to a discussion about “spiritual purity” in relation to longstanding negative stereotypes about African American women’s sexuality; Press releases for Franklin’s records issued by Atlantic Records and Arista Records confirm that Franklin’s background in her father’s church constitutes an important element in her public narrative. For example, a press release for Franklin’s 1978 album *Almighty Fire* (Atlantic Records) opens with a description of her gospel roots, “Ever since Aretha Franklin made her first ‘live’ recording at the age of 14 - in 1956, at her father, Rev. C.L. Franklin’s 4500 member New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit- she has been hailed as one of the most powerful and innovative blues and gospel-rooted singers in the world.” A press release for Franklin’s 1983 album *Love All the Hurt Away* (Arista Records) reads “Even before she became a familiar name to music across the globe, Aretha Franklin was stunning members of her father’s congregation at the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit while still in her teens.” Aretha Franklin, “*Almighty Fire*,” (press release), Atlantic Records.; Aretha Franklin, (*Love All the Hurt Away*), (press release) Arista Records, January 17, 1983. Both press releases are available in the Aretha Franklin file, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York.

happy childhood vis-à-vis an insecure woman and a survivor of several life tragedies actually mark a paradox. On one hand, Franklin's autobiographical self-fashioning demonstrates how she might attempt to protect her brand (and privacy) from the delicate position of being an African American woman in the white male dominated music industry and in the public eye. Furthermore, taking her religious background into account, the autobiographical idyllicism serves as a shield from the moral scrutiny directed at her personal and career choices as a singer rooted in the gospel music tradition. On the other hand, the accounts written by authors like Ritz not only serve the public with celebrity gossip but offer a view of Franklin's life through which fans seek to understand her creativity by imaginatively reconstructing the world from which she crafted her songs. Throughout her career, the popular press has played a major role in these processes: the best example may be the *Time* article "Lady Soul Singing it Like it Is" (1968) which claimed that her passionate vocal delivery is so convincing because the victim-like Franklin, who "remains cloaked in brooding sadness," truly expresses herself through music.³⁶⁴ Since then Franklin's hesitancy to speak to the press is commonly attributed to that *Time* article.

At the heart of the matter is Franklin's evocative vocal style that results from her mastery of the gospel music aesthetic. She is uniquely able to express the quality of "emotional intensity," which paradoxically serves to conflate her music and life in the minds of her listeners. Trineice Murlene Robinson-Martin explains how the expression of

³⁶⁴ "Lady Soul Singing it Like it Is," *Time*, June 28, 1968, 78-79.

emotional intensity becomes conceptualized as a key perceptual characteristic of the gospel vocal technique:

The ability to sing with intensity is a very important component in the gospel sound. The concept of maintaining emotional intensity is often mistaken for vocal intensity or singing loudly or with excessive tension in the body. Since gospel music is not traditionally performed to entertain but to minister to the congregation about the Word of God, the emotional intensity required of the gospel sound relates to the portrayal of the conviction and seriousness required to effectively relay the gospel message. The ability to sing with conviction requires a level of focus and sincerity on the part of the singer that can convince an audience or congregation that the spoken words are true.³⁶⁵

Time and again, the press and fans describe the “honesty” of Franklin’s music; she, after all, “sings it like it is” as the *Time* article posited. Seemingly, such views are complimentary. Nonetheless, when several of her popular songs are about the troubles of life, Franklin understandably goes to great lengths to negate the myths of tragedy that can easily overshadow her enormous musical achievements. In positing that Franklin’s emotional expression in a song is more of an artistic creation than product of her own life experience, I am influenced by Farah Jasmin Griffin who challenges the popular narratives about Billie Holiday’s tragic life and music, and their use in public discourse to define other Black women artists.³⁶⁶ To be sure, Franklin’s undeniable virtuosic command of emotional intensity is her stock in trade, but to put her mastery of producing this

³⁶⁵ Triniece Murlene Robinson-Martin, “Developing a Pedagogy for Gospel Singing: Understanding the Cultural Aesthetics and Performance Components of a Vocal Performance in Gospel Music,” (PhD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2010), 169-178.

³⁶⁶ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *In Search of Billie Holiday, If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*” (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 13.

aesthetic in a proper perspective, it is necessary to explore the beginnings of her career in the family business of gospel music.

A Short Biography

Aretha Franklin is one of the best known and most influential singers in the world. She is an American cultural icon who has been awarded many prestigious honors over the course of her recording career that spans more than six decades.³⁶⁷ Known as the “Queen of Soul,” Franklin is a singer firmly rooted in the gospel music tradition and the cultural milieu of the African American Baptist church. Gospel music has always been a family affair for Franklin whose career started in the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit pastored by her famous father Rev. C.L. Franklin. She first sang as part of the choir and then as a soloist. She made her first recordings in the mid to late 1950s as part of her father’s preaching engagements and Gospel Caravan tours, and since then, she has built a formidable career as an artist whose pioneering contributions to developments in contemporary sacred and secular music styles can be heard in gospel and popular music around the world.

³⁶⁷ In 2004, Aretha Franklin received the National Metal of Honor. Her position as a cultural and national icon has been confirmed on several historic occasions in which she was invited to sing, including the funerals of Martin Luther King Jr., Mahalia Jackson, Mattie Moss Clark, Clara Ward, and the civil rights activist Rosa Parks. She also sang “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” at President Barak Obama’s inaugural ceremony in January 2009. She was the first female inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1987), and she has received several other awards, honors, and honorary degrees, including an Honorary Doctor of Music degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 2007.

Aretha Franklin's remarkable "crossover" success from the realm of gospel to secular music presents complexities that several writers have addressed in scholarly studies and in the popular press.³⁶⁸ Although Franklin herself and many writers constantly emphasize the influence of her church background, its role in her artistry has remained an

³⁶⁸ Here, I am mindful of David Brackett's arguments toward the music industry's problematic use of the notion of "crossover." He argues that past *Billboard* charts demonstrate the ways in which the term "crossover" implies that styles are clearly demarcated from each other based on a hierarchy determined by political, ideological, and commercial factors. David Brackett, "The Politics and Practice of Crossover in American Popular Music, 1963-1965" *The Musical Quarterly* 78 (1994): 774-797. In light of Brackett's arguments, I believe that Aretha Franklin's music can offer interesting alternative views on the idea of "crossover." For example, given Franklin's assertion of identity first as a gospel singer rather than as a popular music star, could we think that in fact the mainstream audience purchasing the *Amazing Grace* album "crossed over" to gospel music? In addition to the aforementioned biographical projects, current literature on Franklin's life includes encyclopedia entries and various biographical projects geared toward lay audiences. These include, among others, Mark Bego, *Aretha Franklin: The Queen of Soul* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001); Ronaldo Radano, "Franklin, Aretha" in *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Black Women in America, Music*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Facts on File Inc. 1997), 115; Keil and Feld, *Music Grooves*, 218-226; Peter Guralnick, *Sweet Soul Music, Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 332-352; Jerry Wexler and David Ritz, *A Life in Rhythm & the Blues American Music* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Matt Dobkin, *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You: Aretha Franklin, Respect, and The Making of Soul Music Masterpiece* (New York: McMillan, 2006); Michael Awkward, *Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 25-80. The use of Aretha Franklin's voice and image is discussed in three essays in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry B. Elam, Jr. and Kennell Jackson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Pamela J. Greene, *Aretha Franklin: The Emergence of Soul and Black Women's Consciousness in the late 1960s and 1970s*, PhD. diss., (Graduate College of Bowling Green University, 1995).

under-explored topic. To this end, the following chapter presents a departure from earlier scholarship because it examines her career from a gospel music perspective.³⁶⁹

Family Background

Aretha Louise Franklin was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1942. A major city on the gospel music map of America, Memphis was the hometown of two pioneering gospel composers, William Herbert Brewster and Lucie Campbell. Since the 1910s it has been the home of the headquarters of the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal denomination known for highly emotional worship services and music that has greatly influenced gospel music performance practices through time. In 1944, Franklin's parents Barbara Siggers and Rev. Clarence LaVaughn (C.L.) Franklin, who became a nationally prominent Baptist minister and a civil rights leader migrated with the family's five children to Buffalo, New York, where C.L. Franklin assumed the pastorship of Friendship

³⁶⁹ Notably, Franklin's involvement in gospel music and its influence on her artistry has been explored by Anthony Heilbut in his insightful and captivating take on Franklin's gospel foundations in *The Fan Who Knew Too Much, Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church and Other Meditations*. (2012) His text elucidates the influence of gospel music on Franklin's vocal craft particularly well. Craig Werner offers a detailed summary of Franklin's father and his church in relation to Franklin's gospel music foundations in *Higher Ground, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield, and the Rise and Fall of American Soul* (2004). Aaron Cohen's *Amazing Grace* (2011) provides a valuable analysis and behind-the-scenes accounts on Franklin's landmark gospel album *Amazing Grace*. His small book is particularly important because the film of the live recording still remains unreleased. All three books are written in journalistic style for general readership. They nonetheless point toward the need to better understand how Franklin's church foundations figure in her musical life. Anthony Heilbut, *The Fan Who Knew Too Much, Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church. and Other Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 92-156; Werner, *Higher Ground*, 13-29; Cohen, 2011.

Baptist Church. A couple of years later, following a highly successful sermon that he gave at the National Baptist Convention in Detroit, he was invited to pastor the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit.³⁷⁰ He accepted the invitation and in 1946, the city became their family's new hometown where Aretha Franklin grew up and where her artistry evolved and blossomed.

Little is known about Barbara Siggers, who separated from C.L. Franklin in 1948 and who died unexpectedly from a heart attack in 1952.³⁷¹ According to many accounts, Barbara Siggers was a superb singer, and she played piano.³⁷² As the "First Lady" of C.L. Franklin's ministry, she was involved in the church affairs and social life, but she was focused on caring for the family's five children and supporting her husband, who was then able to concentrate on his rapidly growing ministry.³⁷³ When Siggers and her son Vaughan from a previous relationship moved back to Buffalo for unknown reasons in 1948, C.L. Franklin became a single father of four children while pastoring a growing

³⁷⁰ Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land, C.L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 87-105; Reverend C.L. Franklin, *Give Me This Mountain, Life History and Selected Sermons*, ed. Jeff Todd Titon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 19.

³⁷¹ There are some speculations about the reasons of Barbara Siggers's move back to Buffalo in 1948. It might never be known why Siggers had to leave or left of on her own will and whether the children continued to visit her in Buffalo, but there is no doubt that her departure was very difficult for her and the children, and her tragic death four years later was an immensely painful event in the lives of the then 10 year old Aretha Franklin and her siblings.

³⁷² Franklin with Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 3; Ritz, *Respect*, 23; Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 59, 96-97.

³⁷³ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 59-61, 96-97, 123.

church. Friends of the family, women in the congregation, and hired help assisted C.L. Franklin in managing the household, but eventually his mother Rachel Franklin moved to Detroit from Mississippi and became the backbone of the family. Rachel Franklin was a valuable and certainly a hard-working support to her son throughout the years when he conducted church affairs and preached around the country. Consequently, she played an important role in raising her grandchildren as well as the children that were born to Aretha Franklin and her sister Erma Franklin when they were teenagers.³⁷⁴ Rachel Franklin, whom the children called “Aunt Rachel” and “Big Mama” was a disciplinarian and a woman of faith who was known for her fervent prayers during devotional services in the church. She also supported her son’s ministry by serving on the church’s Mothers Board and the Missionary Department.³⁷⁵

Aretha Franklin’s father, Rev. C.L. Franklin was a charismatic preacher who became famous for his vocal dexterity and homiletic skills. Through his pastorate of New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, radio broadcasts and recorded sermons, he became known around the nation as “a man with a million dollar voice” and “a preacher’s

³⁷⁴ Ritz, *Respect*, 59.; Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 62.

³⁷⁵ Robbie McCoy, “Aretha Franklin’s Grandmother,” *Michigan Chronicle*, December, 1988, 1-A, 4-A; Jim Finkelstein, “Rachell Franklin, 91, Dedicated Churchwoman”, *Detroit Free Press*, December 2, 1988, 49. Both articles are available in the Aretha Franklin file in The Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Historical Library; Ritz, *Respect*, 36, 124-125, 222-223.

preacher.”³⁷⁶ His magnetic personality, social outreach activities, race pride, and sermons that were both intellectual and emotionally inspiring made him a successful church leader. At the height of his popularity, his church membership numbered in the thousands, his radio broadcasts had a nationwide listenership, and his recorded sermons became best sellers.³⁷⁷ Additionally, C.L. Franklin was a major civil rights leader who collaborated with his friend Martin Luther King, Jr. and led the organization of the March to Detroit that preceded the March to Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963.

Aretha Franklin’s Detroit Roots

In Detroit, Aretha Franklin grew up as part of “Detroit’s royalty,” a social standing that derived from her father’s prominence and prosperity. Although the Franklins were among the thousands of migrants who had left the South in pursuit of a better life in the North during an era now known as the Second Migration, Aretha Franklin’s experience was far from that of many other African American migrant adolescents. When the family arrived to Detroit, they landed in a nice house sponsored by New Bethel for its new pastor in which Aretha Franklin reportedly felt like a “fairy-tale

³⁷⁶ Bob Darden, *People Get Ready!: A New History of Black Gospel Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 247; “C.L. Franklin, 69, Activist and Father of Aretha Franklin,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1984, last accessed March 18, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/28/obituaries/cl-franklin-69-activist-and-father-of-aretha-franklin.html>.

³⁷⁷ According to C.L. Franklin’s autobiography edited by Jeff Todd Titon, the membership of his church “peaked at about 10,000 in the late 1950s.” Franklin, *Give Me This Mountain*, 23, 37(n18); Jeff Todd Titon, preface to *Give Me This Mountain*, ix; Jeff Todd Titon, “Reverend C.L. Franklin, Black American Preacher-Poet,” in *Folklife Annual 1987*, eds. Alan Jabbour and James Hardin (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1988), 89.

princess living in a castle.”³⁷⁸ In the 1940s, the large influx of migrants to Detroit caused an acute housing shortage, and due to the de facto segregation, many African Americans were often forced to establish residence in the Lower East Side section of the city in substandard living conditions.³⁷⁹ Because C.L. Franklin was able to settle his family into an elegant mansion at 649 East Boston Boulevard in a neighborhood occupied by lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, the Franklins joined other well-to-do African Americans who sought to define themselves and reside outside the troubled inner city conditions according to their class status.³⁸⁰

As a rising star among Baptist ministers, C.L. Franklin initially became a part of Detroit’s African American elite not because he was wealthy at the time but because he was a preacher who had gained recognition at the National Baptist Convention. This was in contrast to many other Detroiters who aspired to “make it” by pursuing relatively well paying blue collar jobs in the automobile industry or in the booming war industry that earned the city its nickname “the Arsenal of Democracy.” Through Detroit’s four economic recessions between 1949 and 1960, over the years when industrial decentralization and automation caused significant loss of jobs for the working class, C.L. Franklin’s family enjoyed the benefits of his expanding ministry and increasing

³⁷⁸ Ritz, *Respect*, 34.

³⁷⁹ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis, Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33-37.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

affluence.³⁸¹ Furthermore, from World War II to the end of the 1960s, Detroit's social and political environment was shaped by violence, racial tensions, strikes, and charged relations between workers, employers and labor unions.³⁸² However, through it all, the family's prominence helped keep Aretha Franklin and her siblings at a distance from the social turmoil that affected many working class families. Seeing that his children could avoid many of the common struggles, C.L. Franklin strongly encouraged them to pursue a college education and in the case of Aretha Franklin in particular, a career in the music industry.³⁸³

It is important to note, however, that although her father's accomplishments enabled Aretha Franklin to view society from a privileged position, C.L. Franklin fostered her political consciousness by demonstrating a passion for social justice and by bringing her to perform in his benefits and rallies even after she became famous. It was through his own example that C.L. Franklin showed her how star power could be used as an instrument of political power. At the height of his popularity, he was preaching sermons that encouraged and uplifted his listeners who numbered in the thousands, some

³⁸¹ Ibid., 126-141.

³⁸² These issues are explored for example in: Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying, A Study in Urban Revolution* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1998 [1975]); Joe T. Darden, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, Richard Thomas, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); David M. Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

³⁸³ Alan Ebert, "Aretha," *Essence*, December 1973, 39. In this interview, C.L. Franklin says that "Because it was my plan that she [Aretha Franklin] be a star, I was not too upset when she dropped out of high school at 13 to tour with me as a gospel singer."; Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 34.

over the airwaves and some captured by his recordings, others in the pews of New Bethel, and even those who couldn't fit inside, heard him from loudspeakers that were set up on the streets outside.³⁸⁴ He was a charismatic person and a compelling preacher whose sermons, such as "Ye Must Be Born Again" and "Give Me This Mountain," conveyed a spiritually-based vision of positive individual and social transformation for many African Americans in his audiences who struggled against subjugation to second class citizenship.³⁸⁵ A decade and a half later, the political spirit C.L. Franklin shared with his daughter was celebrated in grand fashion when thousands of people gathered to hear Aretha Franklin at a "Souled Out" Madison Square Garden concert where she accepted a plaque on C.L. Franklin's behalf "for services, humanitarian and religious, rendered to his people."³⁸⁶

In broad terms, the longstanding tradition of civic engagement in Detroit also shaped Aretha Franklin's social awareness; she recently confirmed that she embraces her

³⁸⁴ Titon, "Reverend C.L. Franklin, Black American Preacher-Poet," 97.

³⁸⁵ In his sermon "Ye Must Be Born Again," Franklin makes a passing reference to his belief that many of his listeners were born in the South. I believe this indicates that he, also a son of a southern sharecropper, was particularly sensitive to his listeners' experiences of legal segregation and its effects on one's view of the society. Both sermons "Ye Must Be Born Again" and "Give Me This Mountain," are transcribed in Reverend C.L. Franklin, *Give Me This Mountain*, 114-130.

³⁸⁶ "Garden Is Souled Out As Aretha Sings," *New York Daily News*, October 23, 1971. Available in the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

hometown because it is a “rallying city.”³⁸⁷ Living in Detroit throughout her childhood, Franklin was embedded in communal life, which has a history of church-based political activism. For example, as far back as 1836, the Second Baptist Church was organized as the first African American institution in Detroit; the church had also served as a major stop on the Underground Railroad for fugitives who were escaping to Canada.³⁸⁸ Later, during the First Great Migration in the first part of the 20th century, larger denominations like small “storefronts” and “spiritualistic” churches, provided solace and social services to migrants seeking to establish a life in their new urban environment.³⁸⁹ As time went on, the churches’ social involvement expanded to labor affairs. As Angela Dillard writes, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s some pastors acted as allies to the automotive industry endorsing candidates for jobs, while other religious leaders concerned about workers’ rights helped their unionizing efforts.³⁹⁰ Today, the church building that C.L. Franklin established for New Bethel on Linwood Avenue (after it moved because of

³⁸⁷ Gary Graff, “Aretha Franklin on Mentoring ‘American Idol’ Singers & Whether She Still Wants to Be a Judge,” *Billboard*, March 4, 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6487806/aretha-franklin-american-idol-interview>.

³⁸⁸ Karolyn Smardz Frost, “African American and African Canadian Transnationalism along the Detroit River Borderland: The Example of Madison J. Lightfoot,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 32, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 80-82; Brian Wilson, “The Spirit of the Motor City: Three Hundred Years of Religious History in Detroit,” *Michigan Historical Review* 27, no. 1, Detroit 300 (Spring, 2001), 44.

³⁸⁹ Elizabeth Anne Martin, *Detroit and the Great Migration, 1916-1929* (Ann Arbor: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 1993), 34-40. The book is also available online: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071309416;view=2up;seq=4>.

³⁹⁰ Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 4-7.

urban renewal on Hastings Street) stands a short distance from other historic churches like the Shrine of Black Madonna, a black nationalist church founded by pastor and political leader Albert B. Cleage, and King Solomon Baptist Church, a church well known for top quality sacred music and the site where Malcolm X delivered his Message to the Grass Roots.

New Bethel Baptist Church Community

Growing up as a talented daughter of a well-known preacher placed the young Aretha Franklin within the sphere of church as a principal institution in the African American community.³⁹¹ Having been born into a ministerial family, she did not have to look for a “church home” or acceptance in one. Instead, the churches that her father pastored, particularly the New Bethel Baptist Church, provided a supportive community throughout her formative years which nurtured her talents and enfolded her within its spiritual practices. Describing the birthplace of soul music, Viv Broughton describes the African American church as a “church that defends its children like a lioness.”³⁹² This refers to a collective approach through which many African American congregations protect and care for the spiritual development of their young members. In such way, a tight-knit congregation can provide a family-like community which participates in the upbringing of its youth by instilling Christian values, discipline, and proper behavior

³⁹¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 17.

³⁹² Viv Broughton, *Black Gospel, An Illustrated History of the Gospel Sound* (Poole: Blindfold Press, 1985), 92.

through social activities that keep the children safe from the ways of the world. One might add, that in return the congregation, like any loving parent, expects that when the child grows up, he or she will live by those values and principles. Musically speaking, this is a point that should be a part of any discussion about the longstanding reservations held by church communities toward their members who venture out into the world of secular music.

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya recognize black families and black churches as the “enduring institutions” in black communities that have traditionally come together to provide “special caring for young children.”³⁹³ Here Lincoln and Mamiya refer to the “fictive kinship” system, the adoption of non-blood relatives into an extended family, which reflected a uniquely empathetic view of children as it emerged as a response to the forced separation of African American families during slavery. In the church these kin-groups along with more traditional families formed a significant membership base that in turn enforced the sense of communal unity. In further describing the traditional overlap between the roles of church and family, Lincoln and Mamiya discuss church as an institution in which parents are expected to provide moral and spiritual education to their children and youth and socialize them through various activities including, the Sunday school, children’s choir, and special occasions, and provide them with role models among which pastors and laity were considered

³⁹³ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 310-313, 344-345. As part of their view, Lincoln and Mamiya reference Mary Berry and John Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 70-113.

important.³⁹⁴ In light of this tradition, Aretha Franklin was a member of a religious community in which her biological family and “church family” overlapped in a number of ways, particularly when viewed through her preacher father as a figure who was the family leader and her revered role model.

In New Bethel Aretha Franklin belonged to a uniquely inclusive congregation, which was comprised of many families including recent migrants from the South along with those whose membership extended to years before C.L. Franklin’s pastorate.³⁹⁵ In parallel, C.L. Franklin’s friendly and charismatic approach helped grow his flock. As C.L. Franklin biographer Nick Salvatore notes, C.L. Franklin showed a Christian sense of compassion and respect toward his fellow human beings through a friendly demeanor to people from all social classes, including prostitutes, drug dealers, and pimps as well as businessmen, professionals, and working class members who resided around the church at its Hastings Street location in a black commercial and entertainment district within the Paradise Valley neighborhood.³⁹⁶ In light of Detroit’s history of class stratification among denominations (like in other Northern cities), it was noteworthy that C.L. Franklin was able to cater to a variety of clientele.³⁹⁷ As Salvatore further writes, in New Bethel, “Teachers, lawyers, and insurance agents mingled each Sunday with working people,

³⁹⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 312-313.

³⁹⁵ Ryan Johnson, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit, MI.

³⁹⁶ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 132.

³⁹⁷ The current pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church, Rev. Robert Smith Jr., continues the tradition of social inclusion and uplift as demonstrated by his outreach efforts in the neighborhood of New Bethel and his active mission work abroad in Haiti.

some with well-paying union jobs but the majority far poorer. Among them were musicians and other Hastings street regulars.”³⁹⁸ To this end, in addition to his exceptional preaching, C.L. Franklin’s social and business skills were sure to help expand his congregation in the 1950s, a decade when the leading African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier observed that class conscious Baptist bourgeois church-goers were inclined to seek like-minded congregations, the leadership of an educated preacher, or even maintain a double membership that signified their social status, and other because their clients were in these churches.³⁹⁹

Influence of the Church on Aretha Franklin’s Musical Consciousness

The parishioners of New Bethel, from all walks of life, thus constituted an influential early audience that encouraged the young Aretha Franklin in performance with calls, hums of approval, and fervent responses to particularly effective vocal gestures. According to Franklin and other writers, she performed her first solo at nine or ten years old.⁴⁰⁰ Of this occasion, Aretha Franklin remembers the strong support her grandmother

³⁹⁸ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 133.

³⁹⁹ E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 89-90; E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 82-85.

⁴⁰⁰ Nick Salvatore identifies Aretha Franklin’s first known public performance based on an article by Isaac Jones, “In Detroit Churches,” *Michigan Chronicle*, August 23, 1952; Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 13; Ritz, *Respect*, 38. C.L. Franklin also says that when Aretha Franklin was ten years old he “realized she was special.” Ebert, “Aretha,” 39.

showed from her favorite seat at the church.⁴⁰¹ Confirming that audience response can have a lasting effect on a performer's confidence and ability to connect with listeners, Billy Preston, a famous keyboardist in secular and gospel music, told David Ritz in an interview about Franklin to "give the church some of the credit" when writing about her early years. To further clarify his view Preston explained how the black church provides the most supportive audience in the world, which could make a performer's "fear go away with shouts of praise." Then relating his own experience directly to that of Franklin's, he confirms the value of acquiring such foundational performance experience because since then, "no audience ever scared me because, no matter where I was, I'd close my eyes and pretend to be in church."⁴⁰²

Preston's views speak to the congregation's vital role in building the confidence and skills of church singers and musicians. Additionally, congregation members actively contribute to the aesthetics of gospel music performance by validating and responding variously to musical gestures that an artist presents in the course of a song. These congregational roles likely contributed to Franklin's foundational experiences as a soloist in her father's church. A microcosm of Detroit's black life, Sunday worship services in New Bethel offered an opportune setting for her artistic development and ability to connect with different listeners. As one critic later assessed,

Aretha Franklin's singing, an art, speaks directly to people she comes from: Americana—mostly Black, Leroi Jones's Blues People, shuffling in space-age dance halls knee to knee with super strivers and the postal aristocracy, Gangsters,

⁴⁰¹ Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 13.

⁴⁰² Ritz, *Respect*, 38.

Militants, Bourgeois inheritors of The Dream. All Black Americana can get to Aretha Franklin because she knows so many ways to get to them.⁴⁰³

What is missing from this insightful perspective is that Franklin's music has found special resonance among African American women across social classes. Since the late 1960s, songs like "Respect" and "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" have been heard by women across the board as feminist statements. In particular, as one commentator affirms, Franklin gave black women an unprecedented voice and visibility.⁴⁰⁴ Again, it is worth remembering that Franklin's vocal aesthetic was first cultivated when singing in front of the parishioners in New Bethel of whom, presumably like in most African American churches, a great number were women.

Even as C.L. Franklin preached about women in traditional roles as mothers and custodians of home life, he allowed women preachers in New Bethel. Because of the congregational autonomy within Baptist organizations and with the support of his church members, C.L. Franklin could go against the longstanding denominational disapproval of women on the pulpit. Speaking on this matter, he reportedly once justified his views in the following way: "Women have brought all the preachers into the world. I feel they should be allowed to preach if God has called them."⁴⁰⁵ In his Mother's Day sermon "Hannah the Ideal mother," Franklin once stated that bringing children into the world is

⁴⁰³ Clayton Riley, "All Out for Aretha," *The New York Times*, August 12, 1973, 26.

⁴⁰⁴ Evelyn C. White, "The Sock-It-To-Me Truth of Respect" November 26, 2000. NPR100, The National Public Radio, last accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2000/11/26/1114572/respect> .

⁴⁰⁵ C.L. Franklin (quoted) "Words of the Week," *Jet*, October 22, 1970, 32.

performing “a divine duty and responsibility.”⁴⁰⁶ In that light, his statement on women preachers could be read as an assertion that child bearing is both a natural and spiritual process that brings sons *and* daughters to the world whom God calls to preach.

C.L. Franklin’s support for women preachers may have been a way to bring in female religious leadership after his wife departed, but it too could be seen as a racial uplift strategy that sought to subvert stereotypes about African American womanhood in the dominant culture. Because C.L. Franklin chose not to remarry after his wife’s departure, his mother Rachell Franklin emerged as the unofficial “First Lady” of New Bethel.⁴⁰⁷ Considering the expectations of those women who were allowed to preach in black churches to “mother” their own congregations, visiting women preachers could contribute a welcome temporary “mothering” in the form of an authorial woman’s perspective on spiritual matters.⁴⁰⁸ More than that, their presence on New Bethel’s pulpit and the public discourse it generated was a way to promote the idea of a virtuous African American woman that had been historically devalued in American society. Religious historian Wallace Best explains that since the 19th century, the valorization of white and black women’s spiritual purity had evolved along different trajectories according to ideas surrounding their bodies and sexuality. According to an old Christian theological tradition, all women’s bodies represented “the flesh” in contrast to “the spirit” represented by men. Nonetheless, since the 19th century, the ideology of “separate

⁴⁰⁶ Reverend C. L. Franklin, “Hannah, the Ideal Mother” in *Give Me This Mountain*, 146.

⁴⁰⁷ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 223.

⁴⁰⁸ Best, “The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit,” 116.

spheres" created an idea of presumed natural spirituality and the piety of white women and consequently some of them were able to use it to carve pathways to the public sphere of preaching. In contrast, according to Best,

The dominant American culture did not recognize black women as embodying moral virtue or pure spirituality; indeed, in the ideology that had developed under slavery, black women *did not qualify to the exalted status of natural womanhood*. (emphasis mine) Black women who chose to act in a public way had difficulty invoking feminine virtue as a defense of their right to speak out or preach in a climate in which they were regarded as inherently lascivious. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the stereotype of the lascivious, promiscuous, and morally corrupt black woman had congealed in the white mind.⁴⁰⁹

Wallace explains that because these influential stereotypes endured well into the 20th century, the African American women who wanted to follow a call to preach could not do so by claiming feminine virtue but were further challenged to seek ways to manipulate the public perception about their bodies, for instance, by projecting “manliness” and an image of a “nonsexual” black mother.⁴¹⁰ When viewed in this historical light, the logic C.L. Franklin used to accept women preachers in New Bethel restores a natural spirituality and piety to *all* women. By using the idea of a mother as a progenitor of all preachers, he adroitly utilizes the asexual figure of “mother” to deflect attention from her body but at the same time, evoke an idea of innate spirituality that is passed on under the divine calling of a mother who “brings” a preacher, a man or a woman into the world. Thus when Aretha Franklin sings secular songs like “You Make Me Feel (Like a Natural Woman),” her vocal expression resounds a positive affirmation of complete womanhood

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 107.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

that is not only traceable to the well documented feminist consciousness of the blues tradition (which she masters), but contrary to popular beliefs about repressive church cultures, to her church background as well.⁴¹¹ Franklin recently gave a memorable performance of “(You Make Me Feel) Like a Natural Woman” in a tribute to Carole King, the song’s composer, at the Kennedy Center Honors (2015). In the mainstream press, Franklin’s moving expression gained wide acclaim as it made President Barak Obama shed “a single, soulful tear.”⁴¹² However, for all of its emotional appeal, I believe that the performance demonstrated her feminist consciousness and exemplified why she represents proud womanhood for so many women of different races and generations. Not only was the voice of Franklin at 74 years old buoyant and sensual like the female figure speaking through the song’s lyrics, but at the finale she declared “woman” several times before singing “woman” the last time triumphantly on her resonant favorite F5 pitch for a particularly rousing effect.⁴¹³

The “Sonically Imagined Community” C.L. Franklin Spearheaded

⁴¹¹ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*; Carby, “It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime”; Harrison, *Black Pearls*.

⁴¹² Alex Frank, “Aretha Franklin on the ‘Natural Woman’ Performance That Made President Obama Cry,” *Vogue*, January 13, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/13386861/aretha-franklin-interview-carole-king/>; David Remnik, “Soul Survivor, The Revival and Hidden Treasure of Aretha Franklin,” *The New Yorker*, April 4, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/04/aretha-franklins-american-soul>

⁴¹³ “Aretha Franklin (You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman - Kennedy Center Honors 2015,” Kennedy Center Honors, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHsnZT7Z2yQ>

By all accounts C.L. Franklin was a man ahead of his time; his charisma and religious leadership together with his progressive race uplift ideology and the church's unique musical worship environment that he spearheaded, drew parishioners to the rapidly expanding New Bethel through the 1950s. By the time New Bethel had settled into its Hastings Street location in 1951, its worship services featured performances of old and new sacred music, dynamic preaching, and spirited congregational singing.⁴¹⁴ A preacher and a singer, C.L. Franklin knew first hand how good quality music could elevate worship experience beyond the impact of its spoken elements and attract believers to his flock. Consequently, by incorporating a top notch blend of traditional and contemporary music in his church services, along with celebrity guest performers, C.L. Franklin built his national reputation and congregation from the mid 1940s through the 1950s around the "Golden Age of Gospel," when gospel music grew rapidly as a highly popular style of church music and a commercial phenomenon.⁴¹⁵ Because of his emphasis on reaching the believers' hearts thorough their ears, suffice it to say that C.L. Franklin's church leadership was sonically oriented. As the current musicians in New Bethel relayed to me in our interview, under C.L. Franklin's leadership, New Bethel's influential position in Detroit's gospel music history extended from several famous facets of his ministry (which, I add were sonic) including radio broadcasts and recordings featuring

⁴¹⁴ Jeff Todd Titon, "North America/Black America," in *Worlds of Music, An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples* 3rd ed. (Belmont: Schirmer, 2009), 107-110. This textbook includes a CD with a field recording of congregational singing that Titon made in the New Bethel Baptist Church in 1977.

⁴¹⁵ Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 49-57, 123-125.

New Bethel's preaching and music, particularly that of his famed radio choir and its soloists, among whom were his extraordinarily gifted daughter Aretha who became a "drawing card" to spark people's interest and attract them to the weekly worship services.⁴¹⁶

As much as this polyphony of captivating vocal expressions represented New Bethel to outsiders, it provides insights on the aural awareness C.L. Franklin deployed to fashion his church as a spiritual, cultural, and commercial collective. From the start he took a professional approach to building New Bethel's music ministry (as was common in larger northern churches at the time) by bringing in Thomas H. Shelby, Jr., who was an accomplished college educated musician and who had served as his music minister in Memphis and Buffalo.⁴¹⁷ Then as one focus area in New Bethel, like in other churches he had pastored, Franklin emphasized the importance of a good choir.⁴¹⁸ This is significant because, as minister of music and scholar James Abington argues, "in the African American church no group or organization is more visible and audible than the choir."⁴¹⁹ A choir's musical presence in worship could be as ensonifying as it could be absorbing: thus, one with a distinct sound and reputation of excellence could create an affective religious environment for the believers and serve to communicate their church affiliation

⁴¹⁶ Ryan Johnson, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit MI; Deontaye Clay, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁴¹⁷ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 92.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ James Abington, *Let Mt. Zion Rejoice, Music in the African American Church* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001), 31.

to the world. Eventually New Bethel became known for its Radio Choir as the church's sonic hallmark over the airways. Since C.L. Franklin launched his self-supported radio broadcasts in 1951, the full choral sound produced by 150 voices and talented soloists whose music framed his preaching helped captivate listeners near and far.⁴²⁰ The choir gained a reputation for featuring strong female voices including Wynona Carr who went on to pursue a successful career in Rock & Roll, Lucy Branch Layton whose daughter Margaret later became Aretha Franklin's background singer, and Grace Cobb who was a soloist at the National Baptist Convention.⁴²¹ Ryan Johnson, the current minister of music at New Bethel remembers that the radio choir was known for many first sopranos and as an example he points to their song "Only a Look" (used from 1970 onward) which Thomas H. Shelby Jr. adopted from the Roberta Martin Singers for a theme song of C.L. Franklin's broadcasts. The most observable features of this recording are soprano Lucy Layton's near western classical style solo and Grace Cobb's high vocal *obligado*. When this song came on the radio, which in Johnson's words features the distinct "ringing" high

⁴²⁰ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 153. Salvatore writes that until then the congregation had financially supported his broadcasts.

⁴²¹ Ibid., Ryan Johnson, Deontaye Clay, and Jenaire L. Garrett, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit, MI; "National Baptist Congress To Meet in Charlotte, N.C.," Philadelphia Tribune, July 3, 1965, 16; In Detroit the artists' inter-denominational musical engagements have shaped gospel music's development. For example, Lucille Lemon who was a pianist in New Bethel also at one time collaborated with Mattie Moss Clark, and was the head of the popular Lemon Singers, which included Delores and David Winans whose children formed the now famous gospel group The Winans. It is worth noting here that as a pioneering preacher in Detroit, C.L. Franklin could deliver a rousing sermon and he could sing. In this way he raised the bar for the art of preaching. Today Marvin Winans, a member of the Winans group incorporates singing parts into his sermons. He is a leading pastor and founder of the Perfecting Church, a mega-church based in Detroit.

soprano sound, “that’s how you knew you were tuned into New Bethel Baptist Church, 8430 Linwood, Rev. C.L. Franklin is the Pastor.”⁴²²

The choir also facilitated C.L. Franklin’s task as a preacher because rousing music could build the audience’s emotional readiness to hear the word of God as well as to assist in his own spiritual preparation to deliver a sermon. This was mentioned by Johnson, who also remembers that for those reasons, C.L. Franklin was known to chide his choir in public if its performance was not up to his standards.⁴²³ It is worth noting that Aretha Franklin also remembers preceding her father’s sermons and staying at the piano to accent his delivery. There is little doubt that when performing in this supporting role, she was mindful of C.L. Franklin’s high expectations for musically creating a conducive spiritual atmosphere for both the congregation and for himself.⁴²⁴

Further evidence of C.L. Franklin’s emphasis on choral music’s importance for both the worship atmosphere and New Bethel’s progressive image is that in the early 1950s, C.L. Franklin hired James Cleveland as a music minister (and his friend Melvin Rencher) to bolster the church’s music program.⁴²⁵ It seems that C.L. Franklin also brought Cleveland as a gospel “modernizer” to counterbalance Thomas Shelby’s more

⁴²² Ryan Johnson, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁴²³ Ryan Johnson, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁴²⁴ Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 64-65.

⁴²⁵ Franklin with Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 40.

formal and conservative approach to music.⁴²⁶ Cleveland, who had been a member of Thomas Dorsey's choir and whose "distinctly hot and classy" arrangements, as described by Viv Broughton, had propelled the Caravans gospel group to the "avant garde of female gospel," was an innovative and promising talent who could electrify New Bethel's choral performance and boost the church's eminence among Detroit churches.⁴²⁷ A member of the Franklin household for a time, Cleveland also helped Aretha Franklin develop her piano style and later contributed as a collaborator to the traditionally-rooted but commercially up-to-date gospel sound on her landmark *Amazing Grace* album (1972).⁴²⁸

To enter New Bethel in person or via records and radio was to enter a uniquely exciting sound world that captivated the ear and imagination of many, like that of Rev. Jesse Jackson, who remembers,

I must say I really came to Detroit...before I came to Detroit, I grew up listening to Reverend C.L. Franklin, New Bethel Baptist Church, each Sunday night over WLAC Nashville, Tennessee. From the time he did "The Eagle Stirs The Nest" to Aretha's first song, "Never Grow Old" we all had a great sense of fascination with

⁴²⁶ Ibid, 41. In her autobiography, Aretha Franklin says that Cleveland "was one of those people modernizing gospel while honoring its traditional soul and message." Franklin also mentions Mr. Shelby as her sister Erma's piano instructor. She usually played the "Flight of the Bumble Bee" (Rimsky-Korsakov) perfectly, but if not, Shelby "would rap her fingers with his pencils." Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 9.

⁴²⁷ Broughton, *Black Gospel*, 80.

⁴²⁸ Phyl Garland, "Aretha Franklin 'Sister Soul': Eclipsed Singer Gains New Heights" in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. David Brackett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009[1967]), 205; Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 65.

Reverend Franklin and with New Bethel. And all the great gospel artists and preachers kind of rotated around New Bethel.⁴²⁹

In referring to a “great sense of fascination with Reverend Franklin and with New Bethel,” Jackson confirms that New Bethel became what Timothy Rommen calls a “sonically imagined community” of participants who sought to experience its enthralling preaching and music.⁴³⁰ Thus, with the lead of C.L. Franklin, New Bethel acquired an aura of magnetic spirituality and gospel music glamour that was aurally transmitted to those who took part in worship either in person, through the airwaves, or from C.L. Franklin’s recorded sermons. The homiletic skills of C.L. Franklin were widely acclaimed, but by having a “hypnotic voice” as his daughter Erma observed, C.L. Franklin could also lead a long meter hymn superbly.⁴³¹ For instance, his signature prayer hymn “Father I Stretch My Hands to Thee” could be so evocative that according to New Bethel’s current pastor Robert Smith Jr., Franklin sometimes had trouble finishing the hymn because his audience was so overwhelmed by emotion.⁴³² New Bethel’s worship services also featured the voices of other highly talented soloists. Among them was Sammie Bryant, whose voluminous voice was as much a source of amazement as a curiosity confirmed by the unfortunate fact that in all writings, past and present, her

⁴²⁹ Louis Jones, “Rev. Jesse Jackson interview” June 3, 2003, Remembering Detroit and C.L. Franklin, *DAAHP project*, Wayne State University, Detroit, last accessed May 17, 2013, <http://www.daahp.wayne.edu/Transcripts/jjackson.html>.

⁴³⁰ Timothy Rommen, *Mek Some Noise*, 167.

⁴³¹ I will return to Erma Franklin’s description of his father’s voice later on in this chapter.

⁴³² Pastor Robert Smith Jr., Interview with Author, July 14, 2011, Detroit, MI.

starring role is never without a mention about her dwarf stature. On any given Sunday, the New Bethel congregation could enjoy a selection performed by C.L. Franklin's child prodigy Aretha Franklin or superstars including Clara Ward, Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cook, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Arthur Prysock and Lionel Hampton, just to name a few.⁴³³ Simply attending the worship services could be one of Detroit's many celebrities, such as Mary Wilson of the Supremes.⁴³⁴

New Bethel thus emerged as both a site for the best mix of old and new sacred styles, and as an aurally constituted community of believers which played an important role in the making of Detroit as gospel music's American headquarters, or even "The Vatican of Gospel" as Jesse Jackson referred to Aretha Franklin's hometown at her live album recording in New Bethel in 1987.⁴³⁵ In other words, with C.L. Franklin at its helm, New Bethel became a sonic force that helped reconfigure Detroit in the topography of

⁴³³ Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 128-129.

⁴³⁴ It can be concluded that the young Aretha Franklin's musical and entertainment business education came in part from the stars of the entertainment and gospel music worlds who visited her father in their home.

⁴³⁵ In a "Testimonial Resolution" the Detroit City Council commends Larry Robinson, the owner of the historic God's World Record Store for using his business acumen for "making the city of Detroit 'the Gospel Music Capital of America.'" Detroit City Council, *Testimonial Resolution*, October 24, 2009. Available at the God's World Record Store, Detroit, MI; Deborah Smith Pollard, *When the Church Becomes Your Party*, 3; Aretha Franklin, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*, AL-8497, 1987.

gospel music as more than a rival to Chicago's capital status.⁴³⁶ Musically speaking, beyond being just a local practice, with the important contribution of C.L. Franklin's music ministry, the "Detroit gospel sound" emerged as a sonic signifier for a particular register of spiritually defined musicality. Today, New Bethel's musicians describe Detroit based gospel with terms like "a spirit feel," "an experience," and "almost a genre in gospel music."⁴³⁷ Proud of New Bethel's contributions to what they call the "rich" Detroit gospel sound, as an example, they allude to particular sonic effects that New Bethel's first sopranos achieved "when Prof. Shelby was here [as a choral director]... and you hear these six, seven women and [they] hit that note!" In drawing a connection between the past and the singers in New Bethel, who still uphold this tradition, they assert that "you don't hear and you don't see five, six, seven first sopranos ring it out together like you hear in Detroit." In their discussion, New Bethel's musicians also ground their views in instrumental terms and describe in detail a "rich and dry" organ sound, pioneered by musicians like Charles Nicks of St. James Baptist Church and others, which has influenced the way many organists play gospel music in Detroit. Well informed outsiders can probably pick out specific features of Detroit-based gospel music, but beyond technical details it is important to recognize the primacy of the music's collectivizing

⁴³⁶ The gospel music scene in Detroit grew from early interactions between Detroit and Chicago based musicians. For example, in the early 1930s Detroit singers such as Artelia Hutchkins and Ruth Hutchkins had been high ranking officials in Thomas Dorsey's National Convention of Gospel Singers and Choruses, and in 1936 the city had hosted the Convention's meeting. "Gospel Choirs in Detroit to National Meet: 1500 Singers Through the Ebenezer Chapel for Opening Session," *The Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1936, 3.

⁴³⁷ Ryan Johnson, Deontaye Clay, and Jenaire L. Garrett, Interview with Author, July 21, 2011, Detroit, MI

reverberations as evidenced by musicians' emphasis (as cultural insiders) on "hearing" and feeling the sound features which for them constitute a collective experience associated with New Bethel Baptist Church in its Detroit context.

On the whole, I believe that New Bethel in the 1950s provided Aretha Franklin with a musical learning environment like no other. Importantly, it was one that did not teach her to go it alone but formed her skills as a virtuosic vocalist intrinsically connected to the spiritual and sonic fabric of her family and her "church home." In the 1930s when gospel music pioneers such as Mahalia Jackson had fought for gospel music's acceptance in established northern denominations, it was almost unimaginable that one day the church would be a "training ground" or a "safe haven for creativity" for gospel musicians before they went on to pursue success in the American entertainment world.⁴³⁸ In two decades, the times changed, and in New Bethel Aretha Franklin could study the music of the most talented artists while she developed her own vocal craft through singing as part of her father's music ministry.

The Music (and) Business of Ministry as a Family Affair

It was within the New Bethel community and the familial relationships at its center that Aretha Franklin's distinct vocal style took shape. In a documentary depicting Aretha Franklin singing with her brother in New Bethel she says, "I come from a singing

⁴³⁸ Portia Maultsby, "The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry," in *We'll Understand It Better By and By*, ed. Reagon.

family, my brother Cecil is an assistant minister and we sing together in church.”⁴³⁹ Of course this applies to her sisters as well with whom she sang in the church choir.⁴⁴⁰ Of all the people around her, Franklin reserves the greatest credit to her father as an influence and an instructor from whom she learned by listening to his use of vocal tone, inflection, and timing.⁴⁴¹ Confirming that she was carefully attuned to his voice and delivery style, she remembers staying on the piano after prefacing his sermon with a song, and then “providing the right accents to underscore his message,” ad libbing behind him, and sometimes accompanying his song after the message.⁴⁴² With these aural learning experiences, Aretha Franklin says, “He coached me a lot in singing, taking my time, and working with a song, different things like that. And after traveling with him, I gained a lot of experience on the road with him.”⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ Aretha Franklin ABC News Close Up (1968), *ABC News Collection*, <http://teachrock.org/resources/video/aretha-franklin-abc-news-closeup-1968/>. The film includes footage of Franklin singing with her brother Cecil in the church. Additional note, in this documentary, made at the height of Aretha Franklin’s career in secular music, C.L. Franklin affirms to his congregation that “Aretha is still a gospel singer.”

⁴⁴⁰ Jeff Todd Titon, “Transcript of interview with C.L. Franklin,” February 27, 1976 and October 5, 1977. Available in C. L. Franklin Papers: 1957-1991 (bulk 1963-1984) in the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

⁴⁴¹ Garland, ““Sister Soul,” 205.

⁴⁴² Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 65.

⁴⁴³ Aretha Franklin ABC News Close Up (1968), *ABC News Collection*, <http://teachrock.org/resources/video/aretha-franklin-abc-news-closeup-1968/>.

It is from these beginnings that C.L. Franklin claims that “I launched, in every detail, Aretha’s career.”⁴⁴⁴ Joining his Gospel Caravan tours as a highly talented teenager was an important part of her grooming process, and her participation certainly helped build the tour’s popularity. On the whole, his ministry operated as a family business. For example, in a tribute to Aretha Franklin, her brother Cecil remembers, “Aretha and I started together, on the road with my father. Aretha was singing, and I was driving, working the door and taking tickets.”⁴⁴⁵ On one of these tours at a stop at the Oakland Auditorium in Oakland California she performed a now classic version of Thomas Dorsey’s best known song “Precious Lord” (Parts I and II) circa 1956-58, which Joe Von Battle, an African American music entrepreneur captured on record. Since 1953, Von Battle, who had a record shop not far from New Bethel on Hastings Street, had recorded and sold C.L. Franklin’s sermons. Given their ongoing business relationship, recording C.L. Franklin’s daughter was an opportunity to expand their business partnership.”⁴⁴⁶

This recording and other Aretha Franklin’s other early releases on Von Battle’s label failed to make an immediate commercial impact but over time, they became

⁴⁴⁴Jeff Todd Titon, “Transcript of interview with C.L. Franklin,” February 27, 1976 and October 5, 1977. Available in C. L. Franklin Papers: 1957-1991 (bulk 1963-1984) in the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

⁴⁴⁵ Cecil Franklin “We’ve Come a Long Way” *Record World*, May 29, 1976, Section 11, 19.

⁴⁴⁶ Erma Franklin also made a recording for Von Battle recordings in 1953 as part of a group The Cleo-patrettes. (Catalog # VB23) Interestingly, however, on the top of the side for the group’s secular song “Say Would You Babe,” the song writing credit is given to Erma Jarrett. The song “Precious Lord” (Catalog # JVB 75) was released after Aretha Franklin’s first single “Never Grow Old/You Grow Closer” (Catalog # JVB 47).

recognized as among her best recordings.⁴⁴⁷ At first “Precious Lord” was released in two versions on both sides of a 78 rpm record following a release of another 78 rpm record “Never Grow Old/There’s A Fountain Filled with Blood.” They were eventually included on an album *I Will Trust in the Lord* also featuring C.L. Franklin and Sammie Bryant. Franklin’s first recordings reached a broader audience after Von Battle licensed them to the Chess and Checker record labels. From time to time, these early recordings continue to be reissued on albums and compilations.

Oakland Auditorium, where Joe Van Battle recorded Franklin’s “Precious Lord” performance hosted a wide range of events from sports to the circus, but on that day Aretha Franklin’s gospel music performance, as part of her father’s tour, brought the experience of “New Bethel” into that space.⁴⁴⁸ Consequently, the church atmosphere on the recording presented Franklin in her musical “church home” in spiritual if not in actual terms. The commercial intent nonetheless, was to market New Bethel using this recording. When her songs were first issued on the album *I Will Trust in the Lord*, the

⁴⁴⁷ Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 130.

⁴⁴⁸ On gospel music’s transformative impacts see, Burnim, “The Performance of Black Gospel Music as Transformation,” in *Music and the Experience of God*, ed. Power, Collins, and Burnim, 54-55.

album cover included a large text “Spirituals recorded during service at New Bethel Baptist Church, Detroit, Mich. Rev. C.L. Franklin, Pastor.”⁴⁴⁹

Around the time Franklin recorded “Precious Lord,” the song was already in commercial circulation by some of the brightest stars in music, for example Clara Ward (1952), Mahalia Jackson (1956), and Elvis Presley (1957). Unlike the aforementioned high quality studio recordings, Franklin’s low-budget version made with Joe Von Battle’s portable recording equipment sounded crude, but by sounding like a live worship service aesthetic, it was a sort of a “spin-off” based on C.L. Franklin’s recorded sermons and live radio broadcasts. As Tyrone Cooper points out, since commercial live recordings of gospel music emerged in the 1940s, they were modeled after religious radio broadcasts that brought the sacred into the secular space of home. In addition, as Cooper says, “The live recording aesthetic offered a way to capitalize off of a performer’s ability to appeal to an audience base with an affinity for the spontaneous and transcendent moments characteristic of traditional African American worship.”⁴⁵⁰ Thus, while the recording presents Aretha Franklin’s great gift of song in a milieu that foregrounds her ability to express emotional intensity, it also serves as an instrument to expand the “sonically

⁴⁴⁹ Several popular and academic published accounts refer to the recording year 1956 and some mistakenly place it at her father’s church. Franklin’s autobiography names the Oakland Arena as the location of this particular recording. Her autobiography also appears to date the beginning of her recording career after the birth of her second son in 1958. Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 74. Rev. C.L. Franklin, Aretha Franklin, and Sammie Bryant, *I Will Trust in the Lord*, BLP-6109, 1962.

⁴⁵⁰ Tyrone Cooper, “Holding to My Faith: Performing Belief in Contemporary Black Gospel Music "Live" Recording Productions” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2013), 8.

imagined community” of C.L. Franklin’s music ministry and New Bethel Baptist Church.⁴⁵¹

To be sure, however, although Franklin’s recording was clearly a commercial undertaking, its purpose was to spiritually and culturally uplift the listeners. The live performance aesthetic of Aretha Franklin’s gospel song, similar to her father’s recorded sermons, indicate that it was aimed for the same African American consumers of religious music to which C.L. Franklin’s recordings were pitched. Released in the mid- to late 1950s when live gospel music was entering the white mainstream consciousness through the Newport Jazz Festival and TV variety shows, the church worship-style gospel music performance offered a proudly self-defined and self-produced African American product for the music marketplace. Furthermore, as this was an independently made recording of Franklin’s performance on the road with her father (and not under the control of a major label), the performance reflects the freedom of expression that characterizes gospel singing in the church in contrast to a controlled studio environment.

It is worth mentioning that the enthusiastic audience response heard on “Precious Lord Parts I and II” not only affirms the young Aretha Franklin’s artistic prowess but also reflects the congregation’s active role in musical community making. Several women and men in the audience can be heard hand clapping and using their voices to exhort the Divine while responding out loud to Franklin’s vocals saying “aah!,” “ooh!” and exclaiming “yes!” In a dialogue between a gospel singer and her audience, these gestures communicate the efficacy of musical transactions. Although at the time, gospel programs

⁴⁵¹ Rommen, *Mek Some Noise*, 167.

like Franklin's Gospel Caravan, drew a "scattering of whites", cultural outsiders listening in on this musical exchange, individuals only familiar with gospel songs recorded in a studio and canned versions sung on TV probably knew very little about the aesthetics of the African American church worship style.⁴⁵² This was confirmed after Van Battle licensed Franklin's "Precious Lord" to the Checkers label, which was able to get a music critic from the *Billboard* to give the following, strange review: "A performance full of emotion and vocal assurance. Side seems to be marred by extraneous noises in the background, otherwise a gas."⁴⁵³ By pointing out "extraneous noises in the background" the reviewer seemed displeased with not so much Franklin's performance but the sounds made by the audience. In part, the reviewer's reaction can help explain why the song did not generate mainstream sales at the time it was first released.⁴⁵⁴

Emotional Intensity as a Defining Feature of Aretha Franklin's Vocal Craft

⁴⁵² Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land*, 183.

⁴⁵³ "Precious Lord Part I and II" (record review) Checker 941, *Billboard*, February 1, 1960, 67.

⁴⁵⁴ Her next live gospel album two decades later proved to be a very different story. The world certainly took notice when Aretha Franklin returned to the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles in 1972 to record her next live gospel album *Amazing Grace* for the Atlantic Records. The top-notch production consisted of a choir led by James Cleveland and other top musicians, including the rhythm section chosen by the Atlantic Records executive Jerry Wexler. The two-night recording event, in which ordinary ticket holders attended alongside C.L. Franklin, Clara Ward, and celebrities like Mick Jagger and Charlie Watts of the Rolling Stones, resulted in one of the all time best selling gospel albums. See Cohen, *Amazing Grace*.

By the late 1950s, the song “Precious Lord” had become one of the most popular songs to emerge from the Baptist Church circles. According to a well-known narrative, Thomas Dorsey wrote “Precious Lord” in 1932 after the tragic loss of his wife and newborn child. Dorsey’s biographer Michael Harris notes that this song, which Dorsey wrote in a state of despair, transformed his approach to composition; Dorsey found a new, profound voice that utilized not just the blues idiom but articulated the sorrow and emotional depth of lowdown blues.⁴⁵⁵ It is worth noting that the song was important for increasing denominational acceptance of his gospel blues style, for instance at the National Baptist Convention of 1935 in New York, “Precious Lord” was sung four times, more than any other song.⁴⁵⁶ When Aretha Franklin set out to provide a spiritually uplifting version of this staple song in gospel music for the audience at the Oakland arena and for the recording that Joe Von Battle prepared to make, her challenge was to create a uniquely compelling interpretation that could represent her own vocal persona and C.L. Franklin’s ministry.

Franklin’s performance on the two sides that Joe Von Battle recorded on that occasion, “Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part One” and “Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part Two,” essentially stands out because of the remarkable emotional intensity of

⁴⁵⁵ Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 225-240.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 270.

her expression.⁴⁵⁷ From these early recordings, one can gain valuable insights on the creative processes through which she formulated the vocal quality that became a defining feature of her artistry. She basically restructures the song in a way that takes the feeling of spiritual passion a step farther than that projected by the emotive progression Thomas Dorsey built in his original composition. Harris argues that Dorsey composed his song based on the old hymn “Maitland” as a “melodic sermon” in line with the rhetorical structure of African American preaching that builds on a development toward an ending that “bursts forth with oratorical flourish.”⁴⁵⁸ To this end, Harris points out that textually, the song’s narrative tone gradually builds up from the salutation “Precious Lord” to imperatives “take my hand” and “hear my cry” to the commands “lead me on to the light,” and “lead me home.” Keeping in mind this original dramatic progression, in the structure “Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part One,” which I will analyze next, Aretha

⁴⁵⁷ My analysis here is based on the recordings *Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part One* and *Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part Two*, which are available on Aretha Franklin, *Aretha Gospel*, MCA Records, CHMD-91521, 1991. It is important to note that between different issues of the record, the pace of the song varies to the extent that the key is different by a half-step between Ab major and G major. Also, on the cover of the Chess 9008 issue, the song’s arrangement is credited to record producer Ralph Bass and Chess records session musician Sonny Thompson. It is unclear how much they contributed to the song’s presentation if at all.

⁴⁵⁸ In his detailed exploration of Dorsey’s compositional process of “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” Michael Harris views the song as a turning point in Dorsey’s approach to gospel blues both musically and textually. Dorsey, who had composed evangelical songs, now reworked the musical structure of an old hymn Maitland to a declarative song beginning with a refrain that assured trust in the Lord, and a verse that “prick the listener’s hearts” with a somber mood complete with ornamentations and stylings. With this composition, Dorsey was thus able to project the blues sensibility in a newly found way. Interestingly, his musical materials were also adopted from the hymn tradition that brought a human element to the Christian repertoire in response to psalm singing based on scriptures. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 225-240.

Franklin effectively starts where Dorsey leaves off. To that end, her version which opens with the part “lead me on,” relies on the audience’s familiarity with the song. By forgoing the opening lines and starting the song development from the line “lead me on,” which represents the commanding tone in Dorsey’s composition, Franklin’s version promises to intensify the original dramatic progression.

Take My Hand, Precious Lord (Thomas Dorsey orig.) **Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part One** (Aretha Franklin)

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night
lead me on, to the light.
Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.

(A) Lead, lead, lead me on, to the light
And ooh, take my hand, precious Lord, and lead your child home.

When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, linger near
When my life is almost gone,
Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand, lest I fall,
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

(B) When my, when my way grows drear,
Pre-precious Lord! please, linger near
And, ooh, When my, when my life is al-most, almost gone,
(C) Father! Father! Father hear my prayer! Lord. and ooh, hear my call
And hold, hold my, hold my hand —(?) of Jesus, lest I fall
(A') Ooh, Take my hand, precious Lord, and lead, lead me home.

Take My Hand, Precious Lord (Thomas Dorsey orig.) **Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part Two** (Aretha Franklin)

When the darkness appears and the night draws near
And the day is past and gone,
At the river I stand,
Guide my feet, hold my hand;
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

Mmm...ain't no harm to moan (spoken)
Mmm...
At, at, ooh-ooh, at the river, oh Lord! ooh ooh here I stand
Guide my, guide my feet, ooh, hold my hand
Ooh, precious Lord, take my hand, hand, and lead your child home

Figure 4.1. “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” original lyrics by Thomas Dorsey and textual interpretation by Aretha Franklin in comparative perspective (Lyrics used with permission)

To begin, as Figure 4.1. demonstrates, Franklin’s textual treatment departs significantly from Dorsey’s lyrics. By leaving out some of the core parts of the original text and by restructuring the remaining lines with additive words, Franklin transforms the plaintive tone of Dorsey’s song into a desperate cry. Franklin’s alterations to the song progression contribute to a sense of escalating drama throughout the emotional journey conveyed by the composition. (Significant changes to the lyrics might have also been beneficial in the

copyright terms.) Notably, according to Harris one of Dorsey's inventions was to place the song's refrain at the beginning and to make affection for his "precious Lord" the first impression and the "certainty of being led home as its dominant theme."⁴⁵⁹ Thus, when Franklin forgoes nearly all of the refrain Dorsey placed at the beginning and starts "Part I" with the command "lead me on," she prioritizes the urgency of the need for the Lord's direction and then reframes the song with what seems like a plea: "Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home" as the text that bookends the song. Another unexpected textual feature of "Part One" is the cadenza "Father, Father, Father hear my prayer!" that Franklin creates as the new song climax. Throughout his composition, Dorsey talks to "the Lord" as a way to address Jesus. Franklin's textual interpolation, however, introduces the figure of "Father" and the concept of Divine Fatherhood in relation to both Jesus and herself as a child of God. However, "father" can also be a reference to her natural father. Ultimately, it remains unclear to which Father/father she requests to "lead your child home" in the last line of the song.⁴⁶⁰

This highly original textual framework became a rhetorical masterpiece through Franklin's inventive treatment of musical materials, which she imbues with stylizations that draw upon her African American heritage. Importantly, Franklin creates the pleading tone and the song's "the first impression" with a three note motif, which she will continue to use throughout her performance. Following a piano introduction that locates the song

⁴⁵⁹ Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, 237-238.

⁴⁶⁰ Franklin's ambiguous use of song references to "Father" that could be interpreted to address her own father has been noted by Matt Dobkin in *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You*, 10.

in key G, Franklin uses a scoop through a blue note near B4 on the word “Lead” and slides down the first three notes of the blues scale to the tonic G4 while approximating the pitches of Dorsey’s original score. The use of bluesy tonality projects a sense of despair in the lyrics instead of a sense of assurance that one can imagine if the song was sung squarely within the original major key. Next, by what in blues tradition is called a “worrying the line,” Franklin effectively parses the original text “Lead me on to the light,” into three lines “Lead,” ”lead,” “lead me on to the light,” which she gradually builds up by adding complexity through ornamentation, vocal inflections, and rhythmic alterations. Moreover, she places dynamic emphasis on the shrill resonance of the first “e” vowel of the word with a pleading tone that is sure to grab the listener. Pearl Williams-Jones has used another recording that Franklin made as a teenager “Never Grow Old,” as “a classic example of worrying the line with the added device of word repetition to build dramatic impact.”⁴⁶¹ Additionally, by repeatedly using this three note motif she creates a sonic sign for the act of pleading. She then infuses this specific affect throughout the song to highlight words such as “please,” ”Father,” ”Lord,” and “oh.” In this way, Franklin also uses the motif to organize the song throughout, not unlike a preacher who uses a motif to unify a sermon and to stress its message. (See figure 4.2.)

⁴⁶¹ Williams-Jones, “Gospel Music,” 383.



Figure 4.2. Aretha Franklin’s opening line of “Precious Lord, Part 1,” the three note motif and the “worrying the line” technique.

Gospel music audiences expect performers to create emotional peaks in the course of a song. Following this basic rule, Franklin constructs a musical narrative of escalating drama. To this end Franklin directs the melody with embellishments and inflections that function as her “storytelling” devices through the four part song structure which I call Parts A, B, C, and A’. Most observably she uses ornamentation, a typical gospel music marker, to add variability and contrast as a way to project a sense of movement through different emotional states and to facilitate narrative flow between them. Part A introduces the song and its thematic focus on a feeling of desperation in the midst of which one needs the Lord’s presence and direction. As I mentioned, Franklin creates this relatively static mood in Part A by establishing the basic three note motif using blues-based stylings that move through mostly neighboring tones and thirds in fluid arpeggiated patterns. The clarity of successive notes is noticeable, but she avoids sounding formal by sliding between them, applying dynamic changes, and altering their duration.

Part B portrays an intensified emotional landscape that Franklin paints by slowing down the tempo in the line “when my, when my way grows dreary.” This line progresses like the slow moving suspense that she emphasizes with a piano ostinato on G2 pitch

(tonic) and a melodic contour built on an embellishment that draws out the expansion indicated by the word “grows.” This suspense leads directly to a near shout “Pre-Precious Lord! please, linger near” on pitch D5 as the highest point of the song so far. This sudden burst of emotion works to stun the listener because it is sung straight and on the dominant scale degree rather than the median noted in Dorsey’s original score. Moreover, Franklin sings it with a full voice that seems to push her volume to its limits as signaled by an audible vocal crack. Yet, a closer examination suggests that the slight screech in fact might be a pitched device, like a grace note, on note E5. Although the first two lines of the verse yielded an obvious climax, they merely serve as a set up for a more gripping narration that will unfold in the Part C. (See figure 4.3.)

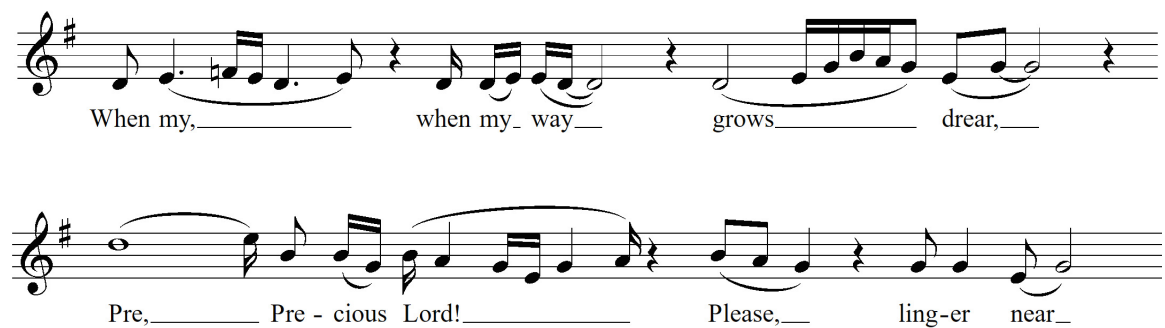


Figure 4.3. Development of dramatic tension in part B.

In reference to Part B it is worth noting how young Franklin casts a feeling of anguish so convincingly into the statement “and oh, when my, when my life is almost gone.” She leaps an octave from “and” to “oh” and extends a tortuous melody over the rest of the line using elaborate ornamentation in a faster and more chromatic manner than before, thereby exploring the unsettling effects of poignantly dissonant notes and lengthy

passages that delay the relief of a resolution. In extending the melody, here like elsewhere, Franklin uses word repetition and maneuvering on seemingly non-important words such as “and” and “oh” and deploying them as a way of creating a *rubato* feel in the expression. This manner of delivery imparts the message of the song in a personal manner and stresses the dialogic mode of gospel music performance. While all of these devices are at work, Franklin heightens the drama once more by directing the melody toward the end of the verse in two runs that move through the pitch range of the statement “is almost, almost gone” first a sixth and then an octave between notes D4 and D5. By concluding the line with a half-cadence, she further creates anticipation for the final song climax with piano fill-ins. All together, this open-ended feel appears to indicate that she has arrived to the depths of despair, an emotional stage that, for adequate expression, necessitates using material outside of the original composition.

Franklin dramatizes the beginning of Part C by playing a piano ostinato on D2 (in stark contrast to the high note of the previous part) underneath a cadenza passage “Father, Father, Father hear my prayer!” Following the same approach (“worrying the line”) as in the beginning of the song, she parses the original text in three parts. First when singing “Father!” she approximates the three pitches of the three note motif I mentioned earlier. The second time, she reiterates the word using embellishments that extend to E5. By setting this passage in a higher register than the rest of the song she elevates its level of intensity. Additionally she infuses the word “Father” with a shrill timbre and a forceful onset. Finally, she declares, “Father hear my prayer!” by attacking the first note directly and highlighting its effects with a growl. Again, the note D5 on “prayer” is marked by a

slight vocal crack that sounds an E5, which might be a pitched device to enforce the plaintive tone of the song. Next, she returns to the original song lyrics (“hear my call...”) using descending runs that return the melody back to its original level and resolves the intensity of the song. (See figure 4.4.) Finally, in Part A’ Franklin sings the original last line of the song “Precious Lord, lead me home” and concludes the song using the three note motif as the last notes of the song.



Figure 4. 4. The cadenza, which forms the emotional peak of the song.

In addition to Franklin’s masterful use of vocal devices, her voluminous sonic presence stands out on this recording. As a teenager her voice is astonishingly powerful and mature. But although she is capable of singing loudly, she still manages dynamic control and pleasing timbre that has a youthful tinge. Historically gospel audiences and singers have favored the strained, full-throated vocal quality which develops over time from “filling the church” without amplification.⁴⁶² In keeping with this ideal, Franklin’s voice is robust, yet capable of moving fluidly between registers. In belting out the song, her

⁴⁶² Boyer, “Contemporary Gospel Music,” 23.

voice projects great emotion with a full tone throughout octaves. She is able to maintain both volume and vocal quality in especially gripping high notes. Although this recording does not yet demonstrate the spectrum of sonorities and tones that Franklin later projects, among the most striking features of the song and a demonstration of the singularity of her voice are the soaring melodic peaks on the words “Lord,” “precious,” and “prayer.” She already possesses her great breath support and vocal control, and these plateaus sung in a high register would later become a signature style of her vocal craft.

Together with Franklin’s use of melodic devices and vocal timbre, her elastic and variable treatment of rhythm places Franklin’s “Precious Lord” at the heart of gospel singing tradition. In general she sings the song in a way that is called “without rhythm,” which is a term indicating that the performance has no regular pulse, and the rhythm follows the agogic accents of the text.⁴⁶³ Indeed, the complexity of Franklin’s time management poses a great challenge to anybody attempting to transcribe it. As the enthusiastic audience responses on the recording demonstrate, Franklin moves through the melody carefully attuned to her listeners and paces each vocal gesture and word with a precision that is nothing short of the rhetorical mastery of an eloquent preacher. In Part A, for instance, she first draws the audience in with a tension created by alternate rests and emphasis on the syllables of the words “Lead, lead, lead me on, to the light.” Next she heightens the emotional charge of the central phrase “ooh, take my hand, precious Lord” by singing casually “Ooh, take my hand” as a preface to a progression of strong beats on “precious” and “Lord.” She then further intensifies the word “Lord” by

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

meditatively extending the B4 over bar lines up to an embellishment that marks the completion of the phrase. Finally she sings the words “and lead, lead me on” by alternating the emphasis on the syllables as she did in the first lines. Like an eloquent orator, Franklin uses well placed rests and accentuated notes not only as expressive devices but also as opportunities for audience engagement. Creating a sense of unhurried pacing, she embraces sustained notes and long breath intakes, which give her listeners time to both reflect and respond to her musical gestures.

Through these various creative uses of musical materials in “Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part One,” Franklin constructs the quality of emotional intensity through her vocal craft. Spiritually and musically compelling, her expression represents the aesthetic ideals of the gospel music tradition in many ways. In parallel, the recording shows how Franklin’s commercial career emerged from within the networks formed by her familial relationships and church background.

Aretha Franklin’s “Precious Lord” Recording as a Family Business Product

When “Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Parts 1 and 2” was first sold as a 78 rpm record by Joe Van Battle, the label on it read “Precious Lord, Aretha Franklin, Daughter of Rev. C.L. Franklin, Pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church, Detroit, Mich.”⁴⁶⁴ Labeling of this kind carried the idea of what could be identified as a distinctive “aura” of the original performance in reference to Franklin’s familial and church affiliations. In his

⁴⁶⁴ Aretha Franklin, *Precious Lord, Parts 1 and 2*, J-V-B Recordings 75 A, flat disc record.

classic essay, Walter Benjamin uses the term “aura” to argue that a technological reproduction negates the “authentic” presence of a work of art. Since then, several writers in music have shown that instead of making the aura disappear, artists and the music industry members have managed to create copies of the original artwork that re-create an experience of aura, whether it is through novel technologies or the record itself becoming a rare collectable.⁴⁶⁵ In the case of Franklin’s recording, the familial relationship and the church reference partly influence the recreation in listeners ears of what Benjamin called the “here and now” of the original, which “underlies its concept of authenticity.”⁴⁶⁶ Benjamin also argued that whether contemporary art is in secular or sacred uses, the ritualized contexts that birthed the first art objects serve as a significant source of reference for art’s “auratic mode of existence.”⁴⁶⁷ In this case, the religious ritual context captured on the recording becomes a part of the listener’s experience of the “aura” of the performance.

⁴⁶⁵ Andrew Goodwin, “Sample and Hold: Pop Music in the Digital Age of Reproduction,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 220-236; Richard Osborne, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Thomas Schumacher, “‘This is a Sampling Sport,’ Digital Sampling, Rap Music, and the Law in Cultural Production,” in *Popular Music, Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol II The Rock Era, ed. Simon Frith (London: Routledge, 2004), 169-190.

⁴⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008 [1936]), 21.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

Anybody who read the label of the “Precious Lord (Take My Hand), Parts 1 and 2” record prior to playing it was prepared to hear not just the voice of Aretha Franklin but to understand her performance through her familial and church associations. Put simply, the reference on the record label to C.L. Franklin, and his church encouraged a listener to associate Aretha Franklin’s song with the familial resonances between father and daughter, for example timbral similarities and shared vocal mannerisms. Even if the potential listener was not familiar with C.L. Franklin the record marketed as one by a preacher’s daughter was intended to stimulate interest in the record and religious expectations for it.

In the context of gospel music an experience of the “aura” (including the word’s spiritual connotations) of a performance through a recording or a live performance becomes a central quality to listen for. A potential listener expects to hear not only the original musical presentation, but also the sound of it as a vehicle bearing a spiritual message. In the voice of Aretha Franklin, the daughter of a renowned preacher, listeners can imagine what Erma Franklin explains about her father in the following manner: “The timbre of his voice was hypnotic. I always thought of it as not unlike the “siren song” in Greek methodology. He was awesome! It was impossible not to heed the call and follow it wherever it led. I knew that I had been touched by God through my father and I would be a Christian for the rest of my life. I am positive he had the same effect on everyone who heard him speak.”⁴⁶⁸ Furthermore, one can hear similarities in the vocals of Franklin

⁴⁶⁸ Jeff Todd Titon, “Transcript of interview with Erma Franklin, Memories of Franklin Family, (pg.3)” Available in C. L. Franklin Papers: 1957-1991 (bulk 1963-1984) at the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

and her father. For example, at the end of his recorded sermon *Except I Shall See in His Hand the Print of the Nails*, C.L. Franklin sings a version of “Precious Lord” which incorporates details suggesting that he has shared notes about the song with his daughter.⁴⁶⁹ Set in a Db key, he follows Dorsey’s compositional structure. When phrasing the line “when my life grows drear,” C.L. Franklin, like his daughter, emphasizes the verb “grow” with an extended melisma, rather than the strong adjective “drear” that arguably presents more expressive possibilities. He also intensifies the drama of the song by following this part with a leap to a “Precious-precious Lord” sung with a growl. In addition, he uses similar word repetition on “when my, when my life,” yet most similar to

⁴⁶⁹ Reverend C.L. Franklin, *Except I Shall See in His Hand the Print of the Nails*, Battle 6102. Reissued as Chess LP-54, and currently available on *Reverend C.L. Franklin – Presents Sermons And Hymns*, MCAD-21146, 1999. In the book *Give Me This Mountain* Franklin / Titon (ed.) notes that this sermon was recorded ca. late 1950s. Reverend C.L. Franklin, *Give Me This Mountain*, 138. Here I refer to a version available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCnjAzG9be0>

Aretha Franklin's version of "Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part 2," C.L. Franklin hums though the beginning of the third verse up to the part "At the river, hear my cry..."⁴⁷⁰

The "aura" of C.L. Franklin's ministry was used to market Franklin's first recordings and as I mentioned earlier, her church background served later as an important reference in press releases to market her records. In music performances, Franklin continues to evoke the memory of her father and pays homage to him in music and in interviews. In the concerts that I attended, a slide show presented prior to her arrival to the stage had an image of Franklin with her father. In October 2011, she sang "Precious Lord" at the Memorial Dedication for Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington, D.C. At the climax of the song, she included a cadenza "Father, hear my cry! yeah! hear my, hear my, hear my call! 'oh! Jesus hold my hand..." reminiscent of the one on her first recording of

⁴⁷⁰ In analyzing Aretha Franklin's recording, one must regard the possible influence of Clara Ward, the singer she credits as a role model. Anthony Heilbut has claimed that Aretha Franklin's "Precious Lord" was "a precise echo-virtually a tribute record" of Clara Ward's version. Although Franklin has insisted that her father and Ward were simply friends, other accounts point to their romantic relationship. Because Heilbut does not provide a reference to Ward's version in question, it is difficult to assess to what extent "Precious Lord" demonstrates Franklin's musical creativity or contains intertextual references to Ward's style, or if Franklin was simply a prodigy who could already sing like one of gospel music's brightest stars as a teenager. Nevertheless, Franklin herself seems to view "Precious Lord" as somewhat apart from Ward's influence. When speaking about her first recordings in her autobiography, Franklin associates three of the songs "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood," "The Day is Past and Gone," and "While the Blood Runs Warm" with her mentor Clara Ward. However, on a different account she colloquially describes "Precious Lord" as a particularly effective performance: "As singers say today, I was not singing that Sunday; I was "saang-ing." It is true that Clara Ward's influence can be clearly heard in Franklin's vocal stylings, for instance, in Ward's descending bluesy embellishments throughout the song on her 1952 recording. Nevertheless, Franklin's higher range and extraordinary timbre distinguish her from her mentor, and her soaring plateaus are significantly lengthier and more intense than those sung by Ward. Heilbut, *The Fan Who Knew Too Much*, 118; Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 74.; Ward-Royster, as told to Rose, *How I Got Over*, 100.

the same song. Throughout her career, she has also maintained that she “never left the church,” which can be taken both in figurative and literal meanings. Aretha Franklin demonstrates a continued commitment to the church her father pastored by maintaining a relationship to the church community and organizing gospel music revivals and other events in New Bethel.⁴⁷¹

In conclusion, I believe that a defining feature of Franklin’s vocal craft is the expression of emotional intensity. Rooted in her church background, this feature carries what could be called the “aura” of her father’s ministry which, as a “sonically imagined community,” was formed by the New Bethel Baptist Church, his gospel tours, radio broadcasts, and recorded sermons. Among her unparalleled ability to express various elements of song, emotional intensity stands out as one of the most effective and influential qualities to engage her listeners’ imaginations. In speaking about rock music fans, which I believe to apply to Franklin’s fans as well, Simon Frith argues that from Romanticism they inherited

the belief that listening to someone’s music means getting to know them, getting access to their souls and sensibilities. From the folk tradition they’ve adopted the argument that musicians can represent them, articulating the immediate needs and experiences of a group or cult or community. It follows that of good music is, by either set of criteria, honest and sincere, bad music is false— and technological changes increase the opportunity for fakery.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ Pastor Robert Smith, Jr., Interview with Author, July 14, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁴⁷² Simon Frith, “Art vs. Technology: The Strange Case of Popular Music,” in *Popular Music, Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies, Vol II The Rock Era*, ed. Simon Frith (London: Routledge, 2004 [1986]), 107.

Frith's views return us to the meanings of representational works that I discussed in the beginning of this chapter. As much as Franklin's guarding of her brand seems to constitute an effort to protect how her musical and spiritual inheritances are understood in the marketplace, paradoxically the emotional intensity of her expression fascinates the listeners who eagerly read her biographies to find evidence to understand the stunning "honesty" that they hear in her songs about love and heart break. As misleading or as true that "evidence" may be, it will not be able to completely explain the musical narratives which she creates using what I called earlier in this dissertation "currency of emotional excess" that guards the music's true impactful essence.

CHAPTER 5: Riffs, Runs, and Echoes: The Vocal Virtuosity of Karen Clark Sheard and the Transmission of Tradition from a Mother to a Daughter

A Concert Snapshot: “Hallelujah!”

Karen Clark Sheard, a renowned gospel vocalist and a member of the legendary Clark Sisters has just finished her 30 minute concert at a community block party in downtown Pontiac, Michigan sponsored by the non-profit organization Elam Family & Friends.⁴⁷³ In this concert she performed popular songs spanning her over four decade singing career and concluded the set with her recent percussion heavy go-go style hit single “Prayed Up.” The excited audience members want to hear more, so they remain near the stage. After a few moments of waiting, a man starts to call “Karen! Karen! Karen!” Others in the crowd join him. Yet without a sign of her return, their voices fade away. Determined to hear Clark Sheard sing once more the same man starts to call, loud and clear: “Karen!, Karen!, Karen!” Soon his voice becomes one of many. The crowd’s enthusiasm is finally rewarded; Clark Sheard returns for an encore. Her final number is a fast-paced praise song “Hallelujah!” written by her famous sister Elbernita “Twinkie” Clark.

One of the Clark Sisters’ classics, “Hallelujah!” first appeared on the group’s sophomore album *Mattie Moss Presents the Clark Sisters* (1974).⁴⁷⁴ Since then, the group members have recorded several versions of the song, and they frequently perform it as an

⁴⁷³ Karen Clark Sheard Concert at “Elam Family and Friends Block Party,” July 23, 2011, Pontiac, MI.

⁴⁷⁴ The Clark Sisters, *Mattie Moss Presents the Clark Sisters*, BM 356, 1974.

audience favorite “praise break” in concerts. Part of the reason for the song’s long-lasting popularity relates to its open ended sectional form, which is well suited for extemporaneous musical expression. On this occasion, Clark Sheard can freely improvise on the song structure because she is accompanied by a local band and background singers who know her music very well. Several of the musicians on the two keyboards, drums, bass, and the three background singers either play at worship services in the Greater Emmanuel Institutional COGIC, where she serves as the First Lady and/or are her family members.



Figure 5.1. Karen Clark Sheard performing in concert. July 23, 2011, Pontiac, MI.

Dressed in jeans and a silky floral print top that matches her auburn red curls, Clark Sheard exudes bold feminine beauty. Likewise, impeccably pitched notes aside, there is nothing flat about her performance. A lazy listener might dismiss Clark Sheard’s ensuing encore number for its excessive use of repetition and limited vocal range. However, a keen ear of anyone familiar with her multitextured riffs and runs can hear that

her “Hallelujah!” is a virtuosic display of stunning power. To begin, her stage re-entry is followed by a sustained Bb note and a faint bluesy figure establishing Bb as the key of this gospel song. As the keyboardist deploys the speaker system to infuse the ambiance with haunting sounds, he creates a seemingly otherworldly sonic space where tradition meets technology. Gesturing toward the coalescence of sacred and secular evoked by the opening notes, Clark Sheard playfully remarks, “I’ll take you all to church right here, some of you all may not be going tomorrow [Sunday].” This statement actually serves as a segue that sets the stage for her short sermon-like prelude to the song, which she composes from exhortations and familiar stock phrases from church services and her recordings:

Are y’all ready?...How many of y’all got a reason to praise Him?...knowing that you’ve been through something...and if it had not been for **God!** Bringing you through that stuff!” “...”I need you to look at somebody real good and tell them: you don’t know what I’ve been through...I gotta a **right** to praise Him!”

Her declarative delivery, like preaching, is anchored around pitch Bb4 and infused with timbral variations of which a growl on “God” highlights the importance of the word. She eventually moves from a preaching tone to singing: “If it had not been for the Lord, who was on my side!” She grabs the listeners’ attention by rising through multihued inflections up to pitch Eb5 on the word “Lord” before finishing the line with a descending melisma and returning to Bb4. The emotional drama created by her expansive movements along the scale easily overshadows the superb vocal technique that it actually takes to contrast understated tone color on “been for the” with a high pitched growl on

the central word “Lord.” This gripping show of musical skill and spiritual insight electrifies the audience and serves as a cue for the band to start the song.

Clark Sheard launches the first verse with an instruction that she sings to the crowd, “Clap your hands.” She then leads them with short exhortations pitched mostly on Bb4 while the musicians play a steady chord cycle: “C’mon Praise Him,” “C’mon clap your hands,” “He’s been real good,” and “Lord, we praise you!” After the 16th time around, Clark Sheard uses the word “Hallelujah” to interrupt the ongoing rhythmic structure and move on to the next part, which develops from just the shout “Hallelujah!” which becomes a new more percussive structural configuration. As catchy as her “Hallelujah” shouts are, they could constitute the song’s chorus, but after getting the crowd going with this intensified rhythm she pushes the level of energy one step farther and moves onto a third section, which is a double time call and response pattern between Clark Sheard and her background singers. It is worth noting that although her exhortations might simply seem repetitive, they actually require great breath control and vocal stamina not only to vocalize on the beat and on pitch but also to drive the song forward. In this way, the call and response is also a nod to “the art of repetition” that the Clark Sisters are known for. Throughout this third section, Clark Sheard and her background singers project a sense of perfectly repeated notes on top of fast drumming, or they sing like a singing machine.⁴⁷⁵ Finally, Clark Sheard develops a bridge by giving the most guttural but resounding expression so far. Accompanied by a slowly descending

⁴⁷⁵ I will return to this theme in the ensuing chapter.

bass line, she roars, “You gotta right, you gotta right, whoa!” with the power and authority that would leave any heavy rocker in ear shot wishing for stronger chops.

Soon Clark Sheard picks up the song again. When Clark Sheard commands “Clap your hands” to start the song a second time her timbre alone speaks volumes. Fusing bright resonances together with a growl she projects a gipping vocal quality that impels the audience for more intense musical praise. Soaring above the heavy drumming and bass, she is loud, dramatic, and even aggressive. Again, she exhorts the audience through stock phrases that she colors with a wide range of tones from nasal to guttural: “I gotta right to praise” and “I got a reason”⁴⁷⁶ At this stage Clark Sheard has led her audience into a highly energetic and physical praise expression. As part of it she engages them in a holy dance by interpolating the (secular) song “Land of 1000 Dances” into the song structure. Here, she simply changes the original words to “na-na-na...I gotta praise.” At this spiritual and emotional peak, she stops singing and moves away from the audience to dance using rapid shuffle steps.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁶ These words allude to her song “Gotta Right” that was released on her solo debut album *Finally Karen*. Karen Clark Sheard, *Finally Karen*, ILD 0850, 1997.

⁴⁷⁷ At a peak point of “Hallelujah!,” Clark Sheard is sometimes known to simply sing “we don’t need no music” during which all other instrumentation other than the drums drop out. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, drawing on the work of William T. Dargan, discuss this practice in their analysis of music and the black church. According to them, the halting of music can be used to determine the “authenticity” of a sacred music performance. “If the dancing continues without the music, it is assumed that it is genuine and induced by the Holy Spirit.” William T. Dargan, “Congregational Gospel Songs in a Black Holiness Church: A Musical and Textual Analysis,” (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 1982), 63. quoted in Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, 365.

In any other performance the spirited dance could have easily operated as the song's culmination but Clark Sheard has one even more thundering praise expression to bring on. At the final section, she leads the audience and the background singers into the call and response chant "praise Him." Once the crowd gets going, she starts altering the words using phrases like "praise is my weapon." Heard together with the underlying marching rhythm there is no doubt that the sonic space has been transformed into a battleground of spiritual warfare. She bombards the soundscape with an arsenal of vocal gestures until the air is completely saturated with her singing and the crowd's exuberant shouts, hand claps, and foot stomps. To finally announce the triumph of good over evil, she growls her special piercing "power note" F5, which effectually brings the song to its cathartic conclusion.

It is worth mentioning that Clark Sheard's concert in Pontiac, MI, took place in the midst of an intense day when she also served in the role of the First Lady for her church Greater Emmanuel Institutional COGIC, which was hosting a week-long regional holy convocation. I knew this because I had participated in the convocation program, which like other holy convocations, went on from early morning to late night. When I interviewed Clark Sheard few days after the performance, I told her that I was amazed that she had managed to give a tremendously dynamic musical performance on a day when she also conducted official duties for the convocation at her home church 30 miles away in Detroit. She responded candidly that in fact she was very tired at the time of the performance. To this she added, however, "sometimes that's when God uses me the most,

when I'm burned out. I have to push more, past my tiredness," because "that may be the very moment somebody's life gotta be touched."⁴⁷⁸

Short Bio and Chapter Outline

Karen Valencia Clark Sheard was born on November 15, 1960 in Detroit, Michigan. Her mother Mattie Moss Clark was a prolific composer, a high-ranking minister of music in the Church of God in Christ denomination (COGIC), and one of the most influential choir directors in gospel music history.⁴⁷⁹ Clark Sheard's father, Rev. Elbert Clark, the second husband of Moss Clark, was a preacher and the founder of the Berea Church of God in Christ in the Martin Park neighborhood of Detroit. Clark Sheard is the youngest of the family's six children and the soprano member of the now legendary Clark Sisters who originally included her sisters Elbernita ("Twinkie"), Jackie, Denise, and Dorinda. Today, Clark Sheard has several successful pursuits. She is a famous gospel recording artist and the psalmist of choice in many mega churches, a member of the

⁴⁷⁸ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit MI.

⁴⁷⁹ Moss Clark and her first husband Rodman Cullum had two children, Jacqueline ("Jacky") and Leo. Her second husband was Elbert Clark and they had four children Denise, Elbernita ("Twinkie"), Dorinda, and Karen. In interviews, Jacky Clark Chisholm calls Elbert Clark "my father," and she uses the last name "Clark." All the five daughters were members of the original Clark Sisters group. In the early 1980s Denise Clark Bradford left the group reportedly because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Elbernita "Twinkie" Clark left the group in 1989 to pursue a solo career, although she continues to collaborate with her sisters on her own solo albums and on their solo albums. After their highly acclaimed reunion album *Live...One Last Time*, the four Clark Sisters continue to tour together. The Clark Sisters, *Live...One Last Time*, EGD 81094, 2007.

legendary Clark Sisters, an evangelist, the owner of a record label, a fashion icon, and a reality TV star. At the same time, she is “Sister Sheard” for the congregation of the Greater Emmanuel Institutional COGIC in Detroit where she serves as the beloved “First Lady” together with her husband Bishop J. Drew Sheard, who is a member of the General Board of the Church of God in Christ. They have two children Kierra Sheard, an award winning gospel singer and entrepreneur, and J. Drew Sheard II, a recording artist and music producer.

Many influential women in gospel music have made pioneering contributions to the genre in tandem with their economic activities. In this chapter, I will explore the music and life of Karen Clark Sheard with a focus on the intergenerational transmission of musical, spiritual, and commercial practices among the women in her family. I will first discuss the significance of religion and music in her familial lineage over four generations. I will then discuss how she developed her vocal craft under her mother’s instruction and as a member of the Clark Sisters. Next, I will provide a musical analysis of a gospel music performance in which Clark Sheard and her daughter Kierra Sheard demonstrate the transmission of musical knowledge from a mother to a daughter. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion on how they both engage in the commercial dimensions of gospel music performance and distribution.

Mattie Moss Clark (1925-1994)

Mattie Moss Clark, the mother of Clark Sheard, was born in 1925 in Selma, Alabama. As a daughter of Fred J. Moss and Mattie J. Moss (nee Walker), she grew up as

one of eight children in a religious family in which all the six boys and two girls sang or played an instrument.⁴⁸⁰ Amid difficult economic conditions in the segregated South, Mattie J. Moss forged a path as a dynamic religious leader. She was first licensed in the Methodist church ministry, but left the denomination and became a Pentecostal church founder and a preacher.⁴⁸¹ Dorinda Clark Cole (Moss's granddaughter) confirms that she was a determined and self-reliant woman, and her daughter Moss Clark demonstrated similar qualities. In Clark Cole's words, "My grandmother was a pastor and a type of a person, where she's gonna get it done, if she doesn't get help from any male, she's gonna get it done, and my mother was kind of the same way."⁴⁸²

A pianist and a guitarist, Moss encouraged her daughter Mattie to develop musical skills, as did Mattie's brother Edwin who taught her to play piano. At an early age, she started accompanying worship services in her mother's church, played in support of her missionary work, and travelled with her.⁴⁸³ In that respect, Moss Clark and her mother were like many African American women of the Holiness movement since its early 19th

⁴⁸⁰ I am here using information provided by a biography published in honor of Moss Clark's 25th anniversary with the Music Department of COGIC. Eugene B. McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark, Climbing Up the Mountain, the Life and Times of a Musical Legend* (Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1994), 7-9.

⁴⁸¹ Moss Clark's mother was originally licensed as a minister in the Methodist church. She left the denomination to start the House of Prayer movement and "became a strict adherent of Pentecostalism." McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 9.

⁴⁸² Dorinda Clark Cole, "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>.

⁴⁸³ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 9; "Dr. Mattie Moss-Clark," *Dorinda Clark Cole*, last accessed January 24, 2014, <http://www.dorindaclarkcole.net/mattie.html>.

century beginnings; these women followed a religious calling to spread the gospel by preaching in churches and on the streets, planting storefront churches in new cities, and using music for evangelical purposes.⁴⁸⁴ While attending Selma University and taking classes in classical music and choral singing, Moss Clark continued to play music in her mother's church and on her missionary travels up until 1947, when she migrated to Detroit to join her sister who lived there.⁴⁸⁵ She initially felt alone and isolated in her new urban environment, but "her musical gifts gave her a sense of identity and a place to belong, as she started playing piano for churches."⁴⁸⁶ Sacred music would eventually provide her with more than solace and a sense of social belonging. In the coming years,

⁴⁸⁴ Some of the writings that discuss the evangelical and music related work of African American women in Holiness denominations include: Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 55-74; Gayle Wald, "From Spirituals to Swing: Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Gospel Crossover," *American Quarterly* 55 (2003): 387-416; W.K. McNeil ed. *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 81. Jerma Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 2004; Teresa L. Reed, *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 92-85; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes "Sanctified Church(es)" in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Redford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 433; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Together and in Harness': Women's Traditions in the Sanctified Church," *Signs* 10, no. 4, (Summer, 1985): 680.

⁴⁸⁵ "Dr. Mattie Moss-Clark," *Dorinda Clark Cole*, last accessed January 24, 2014, <http://www.dorindaclarkcole.net/mattie.html>.

⁴⁸⁶ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 11.

she became one of the brave and pathbreaking African American migrant women who transformed the sacred worlds of the North.⁴⁸⁷

Moss Clark arrived in Detroit toward the end of an era when automotive plants prospered as did different industrial enterprises including chemical plants, aircraft parts suppliers, and garment manufacturers, among many others.⁴⁸⁸ The 1940s boom years attracted a high influx of migrants from the South, and many African Americans found industrial jobs that had previously been available to mostly whites.⁴⁸⁹ However, the changing demographics in the city also brought on social unrest which culminated in the race riot of 1943. The decline of the industrial economy started at the end of the decade and eventually turned Detroit into “the epitome of Rust Belt.”⁴⁹⁰ The economic downturn affecting the city was particularly challenging for African Americans because of the labor market discrimination and limited occupational opportunities.⁴⁹¹ Fortunately, Moss

⁴⁸⁷ For a discussion on women, migration, and religion, see Clarence E. Hardy III, “Church Mothers and Pentecostals in the Modern Age,” in *Afro-Pentecostalism, Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in history and Culture*, ed. Amos Yong and Estrela Y. Alexander (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 24; Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, 150. Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land, African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 195.

⁴⁸⁸ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 18.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹⁰ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 143; Elaine Lutzman Moon, Detroit Urban League, Inc., *Untold Tales, Unsung Heroes: An Oral History of Detroit's African American Community 1918-1967* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 49-50.

⁴⁹¹ Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis*, 91-124; Karen Tucker Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers During World War II,” *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 1 (Jun., 1982): 82-97.

Clark's musical skills equipped her for a career niche outside of the mainstream job market. A uniquely satisfying form of work in an otherwise stark employment landscape, the music ministry was a religious vocation that (if one was successful) could provide for upward social mobility and autonomy, earnings to support a large family, and a way to fulfill one's sense of purpose. Since Moss Clark had some college education, she could have pursued occupations that were open to educated African American women, including teaching jobs mainly in elementary schools and a small number of clerical jobs, but she chose to focus on the music ministry in which she made her mark in choral direction.⁴⁹² Sacred music remained a small but promising field during the 1950s economic decline in Detroit when some churches in the city were still thriving organizations serving the needs of many. For any church interested in growth, a skilled choir director was a key figure who could establish a good choir that was able to enhance worship proceedings, be a source of pride for the congregation, and attract new members.⁴⁹³

After Moss Clark married Elder Elbert Clark, she became "the First Lady" of his church while she continued the work to expand her own music ministry. Moss Clark seems to have shown unusual independence by serving as a helpmate to her husband in his church at the same time, she held membership and operated as a minister of music, a musician, and a choir director in more established area churches. At first, she was a choir director in the Greater Love Tabernacle Church of God in Christ and a staff musician in a

⁴⁹² Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis*, 111-112.

⁴⁹³ Abbingon, *Let Mt. Zion Rejoice*, 31-32.

few other establishments, but then she became a musician and choir trainer for the Bailey Temple Church of God in Christ pastored by Bishop John Seth Bailey, who was an important church organizer and leader in the state of Michigan.⁴⁹⁴ Her tenure in the Bailey Temple lasted over three decades until the Bishop Bailey passed away in 1984.⁴⁹⁵

Moss Clark's affiliation with other churches was also important for creating networks and resources that enabled her to build her music ministry. For instance, with Bishop Bailey's backing, Moss Clark became the state president of the music department in which capacity she formed and directed various choirs including the famous Southwest Michigan State Choir of the COGIC.⁴⁹⁶ Her choral work helped inspire the mass choir movement throughout the denomination's jurisdictions and in other Christian churches as well.⁴⁹⁷ As part of this pathbreaking work Moss Clark was among the first artists (if not

⁴⁹⁴ Tammy L. Kernodle, "Detroit," in *Encyclopedia of African American Music*, ed. Emmett G. Price, III, Tammy Kernodle, and Horace Maxille (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 280. "Dr. Mattie Moss-Clark" Dorinda Clark Cole, last accessed January 24, 2014, <http://www.dorindaclarkcole.net/mattie.html>.; McCoy, 17.

⁴⁹⁵ "Dr. Mattie Moss Clark," Church of God in Christ International Music Department, last accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.cogic.org/imd/2016/11/26/dr-mattie-moss-clark/>

⁴⁹⁶ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 17-18; Phil W. Petrie, "Making a Joyful Noise," *Crisis*, September/October 2000, 52.

⁴⁹⁷ Robert Marovick, "Mattie Moss Clark and the Southwest Michigan State Choir," *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music* 3rd, ed., W.K. McNeil (New York: Routledge, 2013), 246.

the first) to record a mass gospel choir circa the late 1950s/early60s.⁴⁹⁸ After her choral debut recording, she went on to make over 35 recordings throughout her career.⁴⁹⁹ She also influenced the choral performance of gospel music by creating over one hundred compositions.⁵⁰⁰ Through her hard work within the COGIC organization, she eventually became the national President of Music for the denomination. Bishop Bailey was Moss Clark's important ally; his status and influence facilitated her efforts within the church hierarchy in which a number of preachers withheld support because she had "too much anointing" and she was "too big."⁵⁰¹ Moss Clark extended the musical platform she achieved within the denomination to her daughters. It has been said that at two years old, Karen Clark Sheard was already standing on the Bailey Temple offering table and singing

⁴⁹⁸ The exact dates of the recording and its release are not available. This information is compiled from various sources. Tammy L. Kernodle, "Detroit, Michigan," 280.; Marovick, "Mattie Moss Clark and the Southwest Michigan State Choir," 246. Marovick writes that Moss Clark's first choral recording "Going to Heaven to Meet the King" was released on Kapp Records around 1961 as the issue K436. Instead, McCoy calls the first single "Lord Do Something for Me," and says that it was made in 1959 on the Kapp Records. McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 50. Curiously, around the beginning of the 1960s an album titled "Lord Do Something for Me" by the State Choir of Southwestern Michigan COGIC directed by Eugene L. Potts was released on Kapp Records (KL1258). One of the selections was "Going to Heaven to Meet the King." "Spirituals," *Billboard*, November 13, 1961, 44. The relationship between this recording and the recording by Moss Clark is unclear.

⁴⁹⁹ "Mattie Moss Clark," *Church of God in Christ*, accessed March 23, 2017, <http://www.cogic.org/imd/2016/11/26/dr-mattie-moss-clark/>; Marovick, "Mattie Moss Clark and the Southwest Michigan State Choir," 246.

⁵⁰⁰ Marovick, "Mattie Moss Clark and the Southwest Michigan State Choir," 246.; Robert Marovich and Horace J. Maxile Jr., "Black Hymnists and Psalmists," in *Encyclopedia of African American Music*, ed. Emmett G. Price, III, Tammy Kernodle, and Horace Maxille (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 86.

⁵⁰¹ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 68.

for the congregation.⁵⁰² Whether the parishioners then encouraged her to develop her talents with a “special offering” is unknown, but the event represents one of many that Moss Clark used to expose her daughters to gospel music as a vehicle for empowerment and an economic opportunity within the patriarchal structures of the church.

After Moss Clark became the minister of music of the Bailey Temple, she built it into a major gospel music arena in the nation. As the church of Bishop John Seth Bailey, the leader of the Southwestern Michigan Jurisdiction, the Bailey Temple was a locus of activities that drew attendants from around the state of Michigan. The church’s centrality in the COGIC network helped Moss Clark create and organize one of her most famous initiatives, “Midnight Musicals,” which were talent showcase concerts held at the Bailey Temple and at the COGIC Annual Convocation. Jeffrey G. Cross, the president of the Clark Sisters’ fan club and their photographer, remembers that these highly competitive and popular concerts became the “proving ground” for anybody aspiring to become a top gospel artist.⁵⁰³ Moss Clark’s immensely talented daughter Twinkie Clark was the official organist of the Midnight Musicals, and on any given night the audience could enjoy a stellar performance by future gospel stars such as Vanessa Bell Armstrong, the Commissioned, the Winans, Shirley Murdock, Yolanda Adams, and the Clark Sisters.⁵⁰⁴ Because of the high level of talent and the competitive spirit of the showcase, Bailey

⁵⁰² Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰³ Jeffrey G. Cross, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵⁰⁴ Jeffrey G. Cross remembers that he saw several of these artists perform at the Midnight Musicals. Jeffrey Cross, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

Temple became the “Apollo Theatre” of gospel music.⁵⁰⁵ As much as the Midnight Musicals launched the careers of top gospel music talents, the music inspired others who gathered to learn from them and to hear the latest musical innovations. One of them is John J. F. Thorne, a Detroit based minister of music who recalls, “I would go to Midnight Musicals and record things and [then] sit at a piano and try to work it out.”⁵⁰⁶

The enormity of Moss Clark’s contributions to gospel music should be recognized in light of her ability to overcome the challenges she faced as a woman in the church as well as at home. According to Moss Clark’s biography, her increasing prominence within the denomination caused resistance among those “who felt that she had stepped into territory reserved for the ‘brethren’.”⁵⁰⁷ Simultaneously, her ambition and success caused tension with her pastor husband, who was struggling to grow his flock. Jacky Clark Chisholm openly mentions that their father was jealous of Moss Clark’s success.⁵⁰⁸ His resistance to her ambitions led to increasingly heated arguments between the two. According to Karen Clark Sheard, her mother was so distraught from seeing the effects of

⁵⁰⁵ Jeffrey G. Cross, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵⁰⁶ John J.F. Thorne, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit MI.

⁵⁰⁷ Eugene B. McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 66.

⁵⁰⁸ Jacky Clark Chisholm, “Unsung, The Clark Sisters,” TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>; Also available: “Unsung The Clark Sisters Part 2 of 7,” accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfhDIg3aGes> (approx. at 0:17.)

their tense relationship on the children that she eventually divorced her husband and never remarried in order to ensure a peaceful atmosphere in their home.⁵⁰⁹

While still married, Moss Clark also managed childcare responsibilities that her husband, like society in general, viewed as a female domain. Clark Chisholm recalls,

We were always in church, she had to take us. We were five girls and one boy, one brother. She wouldn't go anywhere without us. And my father had a real thing about leaving us, he was very protective. He would tell her, you can't leave these girls home so you mind as well take them with you. That's how we started singing. She would make sure that we were with her all the time.⁵¹⁰

Because Moss Clark had six young children, she initially felt that her responsibilities towards her children might hold her back from building a music ministry.⁵¹¹ Nevertheless, instead of allowing domestic duties or her husband's resistance to circumscribe her ambitions, Moss Clark made her musical pursuits a training ground for her children. Consequently, the Clark children followed their mother to church services several times a week, choir rehearsals that sometimes lasted past midnight, recordings, conventions, and other events in Detroit and away. As Moss Clark built her music ministry, she groomed her daughters for sacred music as a profession.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁹ Karen Clark Sheard, "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>. Also available: "Unsung The Clark Sisters Part 2 of 7," accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfhDlG3aGes> (approx. 0:25-2:10.)

⁵¹⁰ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit MI.

⁵¹¹ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 11.

⁵¹² Unfortunately not much information is available about Leo, the one brother of the Clark Sisters who seems to have chosen to pursue a life and career out of the public eye.

A devout Christian woman and a stern disciplinarian, Moss Clark's demands upon her daughters were perfection and a total commitment to developing their God given talents. Clark Sheard remembers that play time with friends was often cut short by her mother's call for a rehearsal.⁵¹³ Moss Clark would sometimes wake up the children in the middle of the night to practice a song she had received in a dream.⁵¹⁴ Today, Clark Sheard admits that in part her childhood was curtailed by the intensity of their musical training, but she quickly adds that she now understands that it was so because their mother had a vision of excellence for her daughters.⁵¹⁵ Moss Clark provided her daughters with a strict upbringing, but it was also a way for her to empower them with discipline, self-reliance, and musical knowledge.

Musical Training

When Karen Clark Sheard and her siblings were children, they prepared for gospel music careers both at home and in the church. In the deeply religious Clark family, the application of biblical scriptures in accordance with the tenets of the Church of God in Christ were central to everyday life. For instance, among them were the emphasis on prayer, a weekly schedule of fasting, and a dress code that discouraged women from

⁵¹³ Karen Clark Sheard Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵¹⁴ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit MI; Jacky Clark Chisholm, "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>; Also available: "Unsung The Clark Sisters Part 1 of 7," accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qvlf6yR18ZM> (around 8:16-8:50)

⁵¹⁵ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011

wearing pants.⁵¹⁶ Church attendance was mandatory for all of the children and consequently, Clark Sheard and her siblings spent a lot of time in Rev. Clark's church where Moss Clark served as the minister of music in support of her husband.⁵¹⁷ Far from just filling pews in each worship service, the Clark children compensated for the small membership by performing the functions of the church choir, the praise team, and the testimonies.⁵¹⁸ Furthermore, under their mother's leadership, the Clark children developed the skills of musicianship needed by the church at the time. For example, Clark Sheard learned to play drums and the organ. In this way, Moss Clark's expectations for her children to learn instruments helped them to develop musical abilities and thereby

⁵¹⁶ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with the Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit MI.; Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011 Detroit, MI; "A Conversation with The Clark Sisters," accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3VexAQZQyc>. (0:10-0:45), also available on *The Clark Sisters, Live... One Last Time* (Limited Gift Edition), EMI Gospel, 2007. Anthea Butler provides a valuable historical perspective on many of these practices in COGIC. See, Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*, 67-71.

⁵¹⁷ Jacky Clark Chisholm, "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>. Also available "Unsung The Clark Sisters Part 1 of 7," accessed March 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qvlf6yR18ZM>. (6:60-7:04).

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.; Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit MI.

acquire the self-reliance that would be useful later on in their careers in music and the ministry.⁵¹⁹

Moss Clark believed that a musical interest should be instilled at an early age so she started formally training her daughters when they were 3-5 years old. Later, her daughter Twinkie Clark became an assistant teacher who also trained her siblings.⁵²⁰

Jacky Clark Chisholm remembers having taken some piano lessons, which was just one of the various forms of training Moss Clark arranged for her children.⁵²¹ One of the important teaching methods Moss Clark used was instrumental and vocal imitation.

Placed in the broader context of African American music history, this oral transmission of musical knowledge was a tradition that can be traced to the call and response-style lining

⁵¹⁹ Versatile musical skills helped ensure that the Clark Sisters' performance would not suffer in the case of an absentee or an inadequately prepared musician. In a meeting of women at a COGIC convocation held at the Greater Emmanuel Institutional COGIC in July 2011, I witnessed Dorinda Clark Cole, who is an evangelist in the church spontaneously take on an organist role for a hymn. As a mark of her shift from an evangelist to an organist, she kicked off her high heel shoes prior to taking a seat at the organ, presumably to better play the pedals. Her impromptu musical leadership instantly elevated the atmosphere in the meeting.

⁵²⁰ "Dr. Mattie Moss Clark interview in Gospel Tribute," *American Black Journal*, Detroit Public Television, December, 1981, (accessed May 8, 2014,), http://abj.matrix.msu.edu/browse_2.php?type=guest&search=Clark,%20Mattie%20Moss. The feedback mechanism between gospel singers, musicians, and audiences is central to learning performance techniques, but Moss Clark appears to have also deployed instructional methods in the development of her daughters' performance skills. In the above interview, Moss Clark says that beginning training as a child is important and that she personally began "training them [her daughters] at three to five years old." Furthermore, for example, in my interviews with Karen Clark Sheard and Jacky Clark Chisholm, both told me that Moss Clark taught them how to build a song presentation in performance; Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI; Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, Detroit, MI.

⁵²¹ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

out singing (also called Dr. Watts) used in antebellum churches, where a preacher or deacon would lead the singing of a European hymn by presenting a line to a congregation, which it repeated, usually with added variations.⁵²² Clark Chisholm describes the beginnings of this practice in her family as follows:

She [Moss Clark] saw Twinkie had a real gift to play, she would encourage Twinkie and she would get on piano and she noticed Twinkie would come behind and play the same thing. That's how Twinkie and my mom worked with Karen and Dorinda.⁵²³

The siblings also developed their vocal abilities through trading verses in competitive fashion. This practice is a form of African derived musical interaction that Samuel Floyd calls the “game rivalry,” which was preserved through time in the ring shout ritual practiced by slaves.⁵²⁴ Basically, after one singer presents an embellished line, the next signer is expected to repeat the line and “improve” it with creative alterations. The musical dexterity that the Clark Sisters achieved using this learning method is reflected in an observation provided by John J.F. Thorne: “I’ve seen Twinkie playing on organ, her sisters would be able to sing it back, no matter how long or intricate, Karen could mimic.”⁵²⁵ Since then, the Clark Sisters have taken this friendly musical competition to the stage. Anyone who has seen their concert has witnessed the crowd’s favorite part during which the sisters engage in a battle for musical superiority

⁵²² Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 8.; William T. Dargan offers an in-depth exploration of this practice in his book *Lining Out the Word*.

⁵²³ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵²⁴ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 6.

⁵²⁵ John F.T. Thorne, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

between each other or with their band members. They not only match melodic lines with melismas and timbral inflections, but also comment upon each other's parts by adding slurs, blue notes and other black music tropes identified by Samuel Floyd.⁵²⁶ Certainly, when the Clark Sisters perform these contests, they thrill and surprise the audience members who become active spectators in a ritualized space, in which the performers provide a visual enactment of the ways in which creativity and musical knowledge are transmitted in the gospel music tradition.

Having received training in Western classical music at Selma University, Moss Clark also believed that it was important to develop her daughters' sense of harmony. When singing as a group in which each sister was responsible for a role in a multi-part harmony, she encouraged them to "learn how to listen, hear your part."⁵²⁷ Moss Clark's emphasis on an individual's "part," seems to stress the importance of hearing pitch relations so that each singer in the group can form an aural understanding of the vocal-self within a musical collective. Karen Clark Sheard remembers that her mother would provide this kind of training also in the larger context of choir rehearsals:

I can remember we were always in her rehearsals. She [Moss Clark] would give us the vocal training while in her rehearsals with choirs. I can remember mom making us to go to different sections, tell me a lot of times

⁵²⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 6.

⁵²⁷ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI. A demanding perfectionist, Moss Clark saw harmonic sensibility as a pillar of her choral work. Her daughter Twinkie Clark explains that Moss Clark's perfectionism was driven by her strong faith because "anything that one does for God should be excellent." Twinkie Clark Interview with CeCe Winans (TBN 2011) Trinity Broadcast Network, May 2, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhO1FYIPqoA>.

to sing alto, so I would go over to alto, she would train us from the choir's perspective.⁵²⁸

Recognizing that Clark Sheard has a bright (lyrical) soprano voice, the fact that her mother assigned her to sing alto suggests that choral training offered multiple benefits. It possibly served to strengthen her vocal abilities on pitch ranges outside her vocal "comfort zone." Furthermore, since Moss Clark was known for a minimal reliance on written music, this might have been a way to train her daughter's musical memory and sharpen her ear to hear musical texture.⁵²⁹ In great part, Twinkie Clark's use of innovative and complicated chord changes when accompanying Moss Clark's choirs and her sisters, contributed to their rigorous musical training and primed their exceptional sense of harmony that eventually produced "the Clark Sisters' sound." Jeff G. Cross says that this sound is based on the sisters' harmonies, which are "really, really, tight and close knit," and "flawless" so that "in unison they can sound like one voice."⁵³⁰ John J.F. Thorne explains the Clark Sisters' harmonic sensibility in this way:

They have an ear that in a C-chord they not only hear the major notes in that chord but they can hear every note in between. What it really allows them to do is: [sings a line] And it's still in key. Then you [I] sit there like "well hey I like it, you don't sing what I thought you would sing." They know how to sing in the midst of the major structure of the chord, so that they can sing all the minor

⁵²⁸ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵²⁹ Sheila Nichols, a former choir member notes that Moss Clark did not use sheet music to teach new repertoire. Clark Sheard also remembers that her mother would teach the Clark Sisters in the studio by taking notes away by the 5th time around singing a new song and then expected them to remember it. Sheila Nichols, Interview with Author, July 30, 2011, Detroit, MI; Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵³⁰ Jeffrey G. Cross, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

notes, they can fall in there and still be within the chord, they can sing all those in between notes that we would call diminished chords. That's why I think people are so amazed by the Clark Sisters.⁵³¹

Today many fans and other musicians are fascinated by the “the Clark Sisters’ sound,” which Jeff G. Cross mentioned. Indeed this unique sound quality is a mellifluously unified but multihued harmonic expression, which the sisters create by matching timbres, tones, phrasing, and rhythms for a blend that at times obscures boundaries between vocal identities. The resemblance between the siblings’ voices can be beneficial, but surely it took much more than natural talent to develop this distinct aesthetic. Clark Sheard credits her mother with the sisters’ abilities to tune into each other; as a result they can even change vocal identities fluidly within the group:

Mom would always say, sound like one person when you're singing in harmony. For instance, if you go in studio, people today are trying to duplicate that same sound by stacking vocals. Whereas we could sing it ourselves, and we could sound like stacked vocal with one voice. It's a group, but we can come together and sound like harmony as one person. I hear people saying, “who is singing the middle part?” They can pick out Dorinda or Twinkie. We get that a lot. [They say] “We thought that was Twinkie singing.” We would trick them. Sometimes Twinkie would sing the high part and Dorinda would sing the low part. We would give it away, when singing live, they would notice that “Oh that was Twinkie!”⁵³²

To properly understand Moss Clark's drive for excellence it is necessary to discuss her deep religious convictions. According to the beliefs of the Church of God in Christ, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a musical performance, commonly referred to as “anointing” is essential for the spiritual power of music. Thus in making sure that her

⁵³¹ John F.T. Thorne, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵³² Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

singers maintained a true religious focus, Moss Clark commonly conducted a singing, prayer and testimony service prior to rehearsing a choir.⁵³³ Her aim was to foster a spiritually saturated musical performance that ushered in the transformative experience of the Divine, rather than one simply of aesthetic pleasure. For this to take place, a choir was to have the power of the Holy Ghost as it executed close harmonies and crisp rhythms in contrast to the loud and aggressive singing of choirs that “stomped, screamed, and made much noise as a substitute for the anointing.”⁵³⁴ Then, what could be described as anointed singing, which was valued by Moss Clark was grounded in the musicians’ personal discipline, constant training, and most importantly commitment to God.⁵³⁵ In practical terms, it is true that musical precision and unity in sound can help audience members hear the biblical lyrics in gospel songs better and clearer. It needs to be said, however, that the aesthetic ideal sought by Moss Clark should not be confused with Western classical ideas about a “clear” or “pure” sound. The purity of tone that she expected her choirs to produce should rather be viewed in relation to the spiritual purity that a singer acquired through the sanctification that resulted from dedication to Christian life. Her daughters commonly refer to their mother’s teachings about the importance of

⁵³³ McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 41.

⁵³⁴ Boyer and Yearwood, *The Golden Age of Gospel*, 126; McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 19.

⁵³⁵ According to McCoy’s biography, Moss Clark’s approach to music and choral direction was based on Scripture. He writes, “When asked will any sound do when ‘making a joyful noise?’” (Psalm 98:4), Moss Clark responded: “no, sing ye praises with understanding.” Psalm 47:7 (KJV).” McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 82.

living a holy life, which in the COGIC is thought of as a precondition for being able to operate under the anointing of God.

Performance Craft

When Moss Clark gave vocal training to her daughters, she also coached them in gospel music performance practices. As a way to offer an evocative and creative song expression, she taught the Clark Sisters as well as the students in her Clark Conservatory of Music an approach that was based on a three-stage progression. Jackie Clark Chisholm explains Moss Clark's method in this way:

When she [Moss Clark] would train people, she would start out with the first song "Amazing Grace." From that song she would show you how to dress the song up. She would say, "First you want to get the message across to people. Sing plain song, nothing added. Second time, you add color to it and give it significance. Third time the song has to become you, you make the song you." That's how she taught us to sing.⁵³⁶

By and large, this approach could be applied successfully in other contexts as well including jazz, blues, and popular music. Interestingly, when used in the gospel music context, this method, which is not directly connected to any religious idea or practice (for ex. style of preaching), still serves as a strategy for delivering a spiritual message.

One can also get insights on how Moss Clark conceptualized gospel music performance as a form of spiritual communication from the way she instructed Clark Sheard as a soloist. Although Clark Sheard was the Clark Sisters' youngest member, when the sisters sang together, Moss Clark assigned the concluding and thus the most

⁵³⁶ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

demanding vocal parts to “the baby” of the group. This singing order certainly added to the excitement generated by their presentation. Clark Sheard recalls that audiences that were accustomed to seeing the oldest sister perform a song finale were astounded to see the youngest member bringing the song into its spiritual and emotional peak. Clark Sheard recalls that since she was about 4-5 years old, her mother would start assigning her the last solo in a song. This meant that she had to demonstrate unparalleled excellence time and again at each performance. It was a great responsibility for which Moss Clark coached Clark Sheard by referring to the Scripture: “You’re supposed to take it like you are Moses; take us to the Promised Land!”⁵³⁷ In this manner Moss Clark presented Moses, a towering male figure in the Old Testament, as a leadership model whose qualities Clark Sheard could imaginatively channel in a gospel music performance. Historically the Exodus narrative has provided an important scriptural reference through which many African American communities have projected their aspirations to freedom.⁵³⁸ Taking into account the religious and social gravitas of the Exodus narrative, it seems that Moss Clark expected her youngest daughter to become nothing less than a virtuosic gospel vocalist able to lead her listeners through a spiritually edifying musical experience or even one that provides temporary relief from the fetters of the world.

When Moss Clark assigned the song finale to Clark Sheard, she also provoked her competitive spirit. The task of the last singer in a song is to “out-sing” the singers before her. This sense of the positive rivalry her mother instilled in her has driven Clark Sheard

⁵³⁷ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵³⁸ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 37-38, 50-51

to continually evolve as an artist and expand her vocal arsenal and imagination. In doing so, Moss Clark also passed on the understanding of gospel music as a competitive tradition. Perhaps most overtly, this idea has been best displayed by artist and quartet battles, which have been part of gospel music concerts from early on. In essence, Moss Clark used competition as a strategy to motivate her daughters to become singers par excellence. To ensure that her daughters were not simply content to rest on their laurels but to continue with the best performers she prodded them: “What makes you think your music is so good; listen to them!”⁵³⁹ bell hooks argues compellingly that negative competition between women can be viewed as a construct of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchal rule that is designed to deter sisterhood or female solidarity from becoming a force to alter existing power structures.”⁵⁴⁰ While I firmly believe hooks’s arguments to be true, I contend that the example of Moss Clark, who set up her daughters to compete with each other and with other gospel singers, offers a different way to view positive competition as a feminist practice. Moss Clark used competition to encourage her daughters to acquire the best possible professional skills to empower them within the patriarchal structures of the church and in the marketplace.

To maintain a “competitive edge” in the evolving soundscape of gospel music Clark Sheard still continues to develop her vocal craft. One can get a good perspective on her progress from the song “Praise Him!/Hallelujah!,” which I describe in the beginning

⁵³⁹ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵⁴⁰ bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody, Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 14.

of this chapter. When she first sang the song as a teenager on the Clark Sisters sophomore album (1974), she mostly sings her solo parts straight through although one can detect early versions of her now famous melismatic stylings in phrase endings. Then, her voice was already easily distinguishable because of its strong resonance and naturally very high tessitura. However, the airy and youthful expressive qualities notwithstanding, her singing is not as nuanced as it later became. Today, when she performs the song, she ignites this high-energy number with a melange of melismas, glissandos, growls, and ad libs, all in a rapid succession.

In ensuring that her daughters could serve as spiritually effective leaders at the gospel music vanguard, Moss Clark instilled one very important capacity in them: the attitude of fearless risk-taking that is inherently connected to musical innovation. Clark Sheard ties this attitude to the group's evangelical goal of delivering a gospel message through a captivatingly unique sound that is capable of touching the listeners' souls. She views it as a sound that results from the musical invention inspired by the Holy Spirit. She explains that frequently, the Clark Sisters' unrehearsed but startling stylings evolve spontaneously in a performance according to the spiritual needs of audience members. In her words, their positive response might be, "I didn't hear that on the record; wow, that's blessing me right now!"⁵⁴¹ When viewed in this way, music's power to "bless" the listener draws upon the creativity of the skilled singer who serves as a conduit for a Divine influence.

⁵⁴¹ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

Musical innovation was not simply about randomly choosing to sing risky spectacular notes and interpolating unexpected impromptu passages in the course of a performance, but it became an ability for which Clark Sheard and her sisters prepared. In working on their performance craft, the sisters discovered that some of the most potent source materials were available in secular music and commercial culture. In the deeply religious Clark home, sacred music was the only acceptable music. Even so, Clark Chisholm confesses that when their mother was not around, the children listened to secular recordings on which they heard different styles and techniques than those in religious music.⁵⁴² One of them was scat singing, which Clark Sheard says was introduced to the group by her sister Twinkie Clark. Although this improvisatory style adopted from jazz eventually became one the groups' signature stylings, Clark Sheard says that they infused it gradually into their songs:

Because we sang gospel music and because my mother was so strict, we were very, very hesitant about scattin'. Now my sister Twinkie, she loved Stevie Wonder; now in my years, I loved Aretha Franklin. I was fascinated over the scattin' that she did...I was so taken away with Aretha and we would go to church and we would be so hesitant because my mother was so strict, in bringing secular music or secular ways of doing things into gospel music. She [Moss Clark] was very, very careful about that and wanted my sister to be careful about that as well. So we would be very hesitant about scattin'. So my sister started doing that scattin'. So she was the first one. I would be like "that is so sweet! That was so cool what you did!"... When we realized mom is letting us do this, we were like, oh we can kind of get away with it. So when mom seen us doing it and the audience went crazy over it because they've never heard of it in these churches. You know she would say, it's ok, as long as you don't bring too much of it. Be very, very easy. So the scattin' came along. I guess with us scattin', it depended on the music...I think I was just always one to take a risk. Because mom instilled that in us: do something that you don't hear.

⁵⁴² Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

And I'm like, it's your fault mom, it's your fault, that we're like this. And I was always willing to take a risk...So in my mind, what's going on is, I'ma take a risk. Mom wants us to get out there and give it our best...that was in the back of my mind, ok, let me take this risk, if I get out here and do this jazz thing out here, I'ma take a risk, and when I do it, the very first time I did it, it was like overwhelming to the people's ears. So I said ok, I'ma keep doing it and keep doing it ever since then.⁵⁴³

As demonstrated by their dazzling and sometimes even “machine-like” scat singing, the Clark Sisters have developed novel ways in which secular source materials can be used for spiritual ends in contemporary gospel music.⁵⁴⁴ In parallel, it is important to note that their musical creativity represents the continuity of a tradition established by Thomas Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson among other pioneers who used blues-based sounds and techniques to move their listeners and reach new audiences for gospel music. Nonetheless, the Clark Sisters’ open and perhaps even celebratory engagement with commercial youth culture in the early 1970s was an indication of an emergent new market consciousness in the field of gospel music. They became trendsetters in an era when gospel music started to gradually move from being a niche product into a

⁵⁴³ Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author July 29, 2011, Detroit, MI.

⁵⁴⁴ As I mention in the introduction to this dissertation, in an interview the Clark Sisters’ famous peer CeCe Winans pointed out their machine-like precision of repeat vocables in scat singing.”Twinkie Clark Interview with CeCe Winans (TBN 2011)” *Trinity Broadcast Network*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhO1FYIPqoA>

commodity in the mass market.⁵⁴⁵ The mainstream hit “Oh Happy Day” (1968) by the Edwin Hawkins Singers marks a watershed moment in this era.⁵⁴⁶ Unbeknown to the members of the COGIC Northern California State Youth Choir at the time they recorded “Oh’ Happy Day,” their youthful voices would pave the way for contemporary gospel music, which would increasingly explore synergies with American commercial culture, and for the youth orientation that would later become an essential feature of the hip hop generation’s transformative take on gospel music.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁵ Daniel Goldberg, “1969 Gospel Makes Great Industry Strides,” *Billboard*, August 16, 1969, S-16; The author of this article refers to year 1969 as a year of great strides for gospel music and argues that “until recently it [gospel] has been a relatively obscure musical cult, spawning many but in itself appealing to a faithful and widespread but small audience while gospel “stars” like James Cleveland or the Statesmen quartet remained largely unknown to the mass market”; Ed Harrison, “Secular Penetration Blunted by Stormy Economy, Shedding Light Along the Way,” *Billboard*, October 2, 1982, G-3. The author of this article notes that in part, because of the major label participation in the marketing and distribution of gospel products, the music is gradually making inroads toward its potential of becoming “a mass audience music form.” The author also notes the importance of dispelling outdated public stereotypes of the music.

⁵⁴⁶ For a short overview of the “O’ Happy Day” success story see Mellonee Burnim, “The Gospel Music Industry” in *African American Music, an Introduction*, ed. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby (New York: Routledge, 2005), 417-419.

⁵⁴⁷ According Christina Maria Zanfagna, holy hip hop emerged in the mid-1980s and 90s as music representing many of those who belong in the “hip hop generation.” Christina Maria Zanfagna, “Holy Hip Hop in the City of Angels Music, Urban Space, and the Politics of Conversion,” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), 3; The following article also offers generational perspectives on the gospel hip hop style: Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., “Gospel With Its Eye on the Hip-Hop Generation: Gospel for the Hip-Hop Era,” *New York Times*, July 11, 1999, AR 31, 33.; Another milestone early on in the contemporary gospel music era was Aretha Franklin’s chart topping *Amazing Grace* album (1972), which among its secular music influences included a full rhythm section organized by the Atlantic executive Jerry Wexler and a few songs already familiar in the mainstream including Carol King’s “You’ve Got a Friend” and Rodgers and Hammerstein show tune “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” Aretha Franklin, *Amazing Grace*, SD 2-906, 1972.

The Clark Sisters and Commercialism

The Clark Sisters released their debut album *Jesus Has a Lot to Give* in 1973.⁵⁴⁸ Twinkie Clark, who composed the title song of the album openly says that it was inspired by a Pepsi Cola jingle.⁵⁴⁹ (“You’ve got a lot to live, and Pepsi’s got a lot to give.” 1969) At first, the title song’s overt musical references to a cola commercial seem to present a precarious strategy to establish a young gospel group’s career, but a closer examination of Christian youth culture at the time reveals that the Clark Sisters’ music reflected a commercial mode in broader Christian youth culture at the time. The same slogan from the Pepsi Cola commercial was used in 1972 at the Explo ’72, an evangelical mega-conference attended by approximately 80,000 mostly white high school and college students. At this major event, the statement “You Have a Lot to Live, Jesus Has a Lot to Give“ was set on the stage backdrop within a round graphic similar to the red, white, and blue Pepsi Cola logo. It was certainly seen by all who came to hear preaching by evangelists like Billy Graham and music that became known as “Jesus rock” by artists such as Andrae Crouch and the Disciples and Johnny Cash; it was also seen by those who

⁵⁴⁸ The Clark Sisters, *Jesus Has a Lot to Give*, BM 354, 1973.

⁵⁴⁹ Bob Marovich, “Twinkie Clark Looks Back with Humility” *The Bluegrass Special*, April 2011, accessed April 22, 2016, <http://www.thebluegrassspecial.com/archive/2011/april2011/gospel-twinkie-clark.html>.

viewed this event on network TV broadcasts.⁵⁵⁰ In the corporate world, this particular Pepsi Cola slogan was associated with a revolutionary “Pepsi Generation” advertisement campaign that changed the marketing perspective from youth as a natural demographic group to youthfulness as “a consuming position to which all could aspire.”⁵⁵¹ Consciously or not, the Clark Sisters’ “Jesus Has a Lot to Give” tapped into this marketing strategy and helped expand gospel music from a youth genre championed by Sam Cooke in the 60s to the music of the youthful.⁵⁵² The Clark Sisters are still associated with youthfulness; for example under pictures that the sisters who are now in their 50s and 60s post on social media, I have seen fans observe that they “look younger” than before. At the end of concerts, they often invite “young people” (meaning whoever feels “young”) to join them at the front of the stage when they perform their final hit song.

This association most likely also stems from the Clark Sisters highly energetic performance style which can best be conceptualized within the cultural thought among African American gospel music audiences that to be convincing, a performance should

⁵⁵⁰ One can see the logo in a photo on the cover of the LP compilation from the event. Various Artists, *Jesus Sound Explosion*, EXPLO 72A, 1972. Mark Curtis Anderson, *Jesus Sound Explosion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 7, 48-49; “Rallying for Jesus,” *Life*, June 30, 1972, 40-45.

⁵⁵¹ Stanley C. Hollander and Richard Germain, *Was There a Pepsi Generation Before Pepsi Discovered It?: Youth based Segmentation in Marketing* (Chicago: NTC Business Books, 1993) 101, 109 quoted in Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24-25.

⁵⁵² Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light, A History of Gospel and Christian Music* (Milwaukee: Hal, Leonard, 2002), 212.

symbolize “aliveness” and “vitality.”⁵⁵³ Clark Sheard is presently one of the most powerful performers in American music, but as a teenager she already demonstrated the zest of a true show(wo)man.⁵⁵⁴ In the liner notes of their debut album Twinkie Clark introduces her little sister to the world as “Karen Clark (the baby), who has the most unique and powerful voice I’ve ever heard and the showmanship and class during live performance to equal the same.”⁵⁵⁵ Fast forward to the group’s first hit album *Is My Living in Vain* (1980) on which they are labeled (and marketed) as “the *dynamic* Clark Sisters” (emphasis mine).⁵⁵⁶ By then, each sister had a specific “energizing” role in the group: Twinkie, musical director and sensational organist; Dorinda, a fervent vocalist-preacher; Denise, a soprano who also provided fiery rhythmic emphasis on tambourine; Jacky, an animated performer whose lower register harmonies were foundational for their sound; and Karen, a soprano vocal powerhouse and charismatic show leader.

Twinkie Clark revealed in an interview with her sister Dorinda Clark Cole that the sister’s individual roles were the product of Moss Clark’s musical vision because “Mama saw something in each of us.”⁵⁵⁷ In discussing what unique skills their mother saw in her

⁵⁵³ Burnim, “The Black Gospel Music Tradition,” 149.

⁵⁵⁴ Here I am being purposely provocative, but who else can similarly excite an audience and provide them with a sense of spiritual exhilaration through a full concert set without the help of special effects and backup dancers?

⁵⁵⁵ The Clark Sisters, *Jesus Has a Lot to Give*, BM 354, 1972.

⁵⁵⁶ The Dynamic Clark Sisters with Mattie Moss Clark, *Is My Living in Vain?*, A 22145, 1980.

⁵⁵⁷ Elbernita “Twinkie” Clark Terrell, The Dorinda Show, 2013, last accessed April 8, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBxpmrmJCng>,

daughters, they refer to the now classic documentary concert film *Gospel* (1981) in which the Clark Sisters represent the new gospel music generation in an all-star lineup including Shirley Caesar and James Cleveland among others.⁵⁵⁸ In their set in this film, Clark Sheard plays a key role in shaping the intensity of the performance through her vocals and embodied gestures. When singing, she plays with contrasts between low and high notes along with sweet tones and gruff growls and squalls. At the same time, her stage presence projects confidence, power, and total involvement in the performance; She sometimes aims a direct wide-eyed stare at the audience, or alternatively she squints and crouches in concentration. At an emotional high point she leans back and lets out a viscerally affective squall. She seems to relish the bright frequencies of her high tessitura, which gives her vocal sound a natural edge and resonance over other voices and instrumentation. Occasionally, she sings an impressive C#6 for a dramatic effect. At one point which seems like a dangerous leap from the vocal technique perspective, she astounds the audience by rising from low guttural depths to a D#6 when she sings “it’s yours” in the song “Name It, Claim It.” Just when one might think that the atmosphere could not get any more fervent, during the last song “Hallelujah!,” she steps into the audience and leads them into impassioned shouting and dancing. In this film, her delivery already features an abundance of ornamentation and repetition, although she would continue to increase the complexity and rapidness of her runs in the ensuing years.

⁵⁵⁸ The film was later released as *Legends of Gospel in Concert*, directed by David Leivick and Frederick Ritzenberg (Westlake Village, CA: Monterey Video, 2006 [1983]).

The film *Gospel*, which sought to provide an “experience based” viewing for its audiences, captures the Clark Sisters’ skilled management of both the aural and visual dimensions of gospel music performance.⁵⁵⁹ Made using special Dolby surround sound and several cameras, the film offered a high-tech aural experience of their music to cinema audiences. It also presented a visually fascinating group. They wore slightly translucent yet stylish chiffon robes which created an angelic impression of each singer. Adding to the celestial portrayal, the airy fabric of their robes gently accentuated their movements, while in keeping their presentation within the dress code of the church.⁵⁶⁰ Here, it is apropos to point out that the emphasis on the visual aspects of gospel music presentation was yet another lesson that Moss Clark passed to her daughters. In a broader context of a discussion I had with Jacky Clark Chisholm about how the Clark Sisters have always managed to renew themselves through different turning points in their careers she mentioned that their mother taught them the importance of visual appearance:

It’s because my mother’s thing was “looking good.” Looking good was important. So every time we do a new album, we’d get a different look. So the image is not the same. And you wanna be commercialized on top of being anointed. That’s how I see it. [at this point I say that I’ve noticed that the Clark Sister’s fans pay close attention to the sisters’ hairdos and outfits, and Jacky answers:] My mom taught us to do that: she would always say, you gotta look good, you can’t step out and not looking good. You can’t do that. You gotta come correct. So that was the thing she kind of instilled in us at an early age. And so that’s why you see Karen and Dorinda dress so flamboyant; they don’t like it I

⁵⁵⁹ Jack McDonough, “Golden Door Sets Film Release,” *Billboard*, September 11, 1982, 32.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Their spectacular stage presentation was particularly suited for the film that sought to stimulate viewer involvement through the use Dolby surround sound technology about which the film’s co-director Ritzenberg said, “Hopefully the viewer won’t know if the person next to him is yelling ‘Thank you Jesus’ or if it’s coming out of the speaker.”

say that, but it's true. So we got that from her [Moss Clark]. Because whenever she stepped out she was always looking good, always. She never stepped out and didn't look good. And she taught us to do that.⁵⁶¹

Over the years, the Clark Sisters' dress evolved gradually from varied choir robes to eye-catching two-piece suits, evening gowns and other glamorous outfits. Because of their unique but church-appropriate flair, they have become trend setters whom many today consider gospel music style icons. Jeffrey G. Cross who takes official images of the Clark Sisters, says that when taking pictures at their concerts, his visual objective is to portray the emotional intensity that characterizes their performances. Cross is also a fashion photographer, and he confirms that the Clark Sisters are very fashionable artists, and for that reason, when taking pictures he tries to capture the details of their clothing. He says that the "camera likes" their bold colors; the pictures come out well and sometimes he does not even have to adjust the settings.⁵⁶²

On the whole, Clark Sisters' growing commercial success in the 1980s was fueled by their creative blending of gospel and popular music styles. Nonetheless, it important to pause here and recognize that their innovative approach to music-making received a major backlash from some members and authorities in the COGIC. The denomination's traditionalists were upset when the Clark Sisters' catchy hit song "You Brought the Sunshine" (1981) crossed over to secular radio, discotheques, and gay clubs. As a result of this hit song, the Clark Sisters, who had performed mainly in religious contexts including churches and religious TV programming, started to receive invitations to

⁵⁶¹ Jacky Clark Chisholm, Interview with Author, July 29, 2011. Detroit, MI.

⁵⁶² Jeffrey G. Cross, Interview with Author, July 20, 2011, Detroit, MI.

secular venues. Still they refused to perform at the world famous nightclub Studio 54 despite the large sum of money that was offered.⁵⁶³ Of all their pathbreaking efforts so far, their most widely viewed performance was also a turning point with long lasting ramifications on the sisters' public work with their mother: the gospel music medley at the Grammy Awards telecast in 1985 with a viewership of approximately 140 million people.⁵⁶⁴ The lineup included gospel music superstars Andrae Crouch, James Cleveland, Pops Staples, and Deniece Williams, but there is no doubt that the Clark Sisters and Moss Clark gave the most electric performance of them all. As Twinkie Clark opened their part of the medley with suspenseful chords on organ, the rest of the Clark Sisters and Moss Clark added to the church feel by running through the middle aisle to the stage and singing "Hallelujah!" repeatedly. The very fast version of the song "Hallelujah!" that ensued and was led by Clark Sheard as the soloist was as high in spirit as it was glamorous. Their black evening gowns with a dropped hem were well below the knees, but in the minds of some conservative observers their ostrich feathered sleeves and feathered flapper headbands might have evoked more ideas about cabaret than church. Authorities in the COGIC disapproved of their performance and saw their presentation

⁵⁶³ Dorinda Clark Cole, "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>.

⁵⁶⁴ Don Cusic, "Gospel Grammy Awards," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music: Pop, Rock, and Worship*, ed. Don Cusic (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 214; Video available at "Gospel Medley - Hosted by Andrae Crouch - 27th Grammy Awards 2/26/1985," accessed March 26, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8dYWo_0y4.

unfit for Moss Clark's high position in the denomination.⁵⁶⁵ Consequently, Moss Clark was reprimanded and prohibited from performing with her daughters again. Despite the controversy, the Clark Sisters continued to take pride in their accomplishment as it was signaled by the cover of their 1986 album *Heart and Soul*, on which they unapologetically wore the same dresses (sans the headbands).⁵⁶⁶ It is not often that mainstream TV audiences are treated to the beauty of a mother-daughter musical performance; among a few others, gospel music veteran Cissy Houston and her superstar daughter Whitney Houston come to mind. Regrettably, by disapproving of the Clark Sisters' Grammy performance church authorities played a part in interrupting a family-based performance tradition that the Clark Sisters had embraced for years. It would take more than a decade before Clark Sheard restored this practice in front of a national audience by performing together with her daughter Kierra Sheard on her solo debut record. The Grammy controversy heralded changing times for the group. Although Denise Clark sang at the Grammy Awards, she would not be on the group's album *Heart and Soul*. After recording two more albums, Twinkie Clark left the Clark Sisters to pursue a solo career in 1989. The three remaining sisters recorded one more album together which was released in 1994. It was also the year when their mother passed away.

The Next Generation

⁵⁶⁵ Dorinda Clark Cole, "Unsung, The Clark Sisters," TV One, December 1, 2008, <http://tvone.tv/5720/clark-sisters/>.

⁵⁶⁶ The Clark Sisters, *The Heart and Soul*, WR 8346, 1986.

For the Clark Sisters, the 1980s was an era when they started to balance career demands with their own family responsibilities. In an interview published in the Detroit Free Press in 1988, the sisters discuss their “other jobs” which at the time included being a music teacher (Dorinda) and a nurse (Jacky). Only Twinkie was a full time musician/composer living in New York and Clark Sheard was a “homemaker.”⁵⁶⁷ At the time, her daughter Kierra Sheard was one year old and her son J. Drew Sheard II would be born a year later. Clearly, however, she was not a traditional “homemaker” whose role was conscripted to childbearing and household work because she was still recording and performing gospel music around the country.

In 1988 her husband J.Drew Sheard (whom she had married in 1984) was appointed as pastor of the Greater Emmanuel Institutional (GEI) Church of God in Christ in Detroit. Consequently Clark Sheard became the “First Lady” of his church. As the pastor’s wife, like her own mother had been, Clark Sheard assumed a leadership role in his church and made it a musical training ground for their children. Clark Sheard’s son, J. Drew Sheard II, started playing drums as a small child, and today, he is a musical director in the GEI who leads the band and accompanies worship services every Sunday. When interviewed, Kierra Sheard has said that she was not initially interested in a music career. Clark Sheard recalls that she actually had to make her daughter join the church choir and reasoned it as a familial responsibility: “You’re the pastor’s daughter, you gonna have to be in the choir.” Clark Sheard also remembers that when the choir director gave Kierra

⁵⁶⁷ Robin D. Givhan, “Clark Sisters’ Music Keeps Faith with Message,” *Detroit Free Press*, November 4, 1988. 1C, 5C. Available in the Clark Sisters file in The Burton Historical Collection at the Detroit Historical Library.

Sheard a solo and she consequently mesmerized the audience with her singing, Clark Sheard and her husband had tears in their eyes for “this was what we [they] wanted.”⁵⁶⁸ Kierra Sheard still sings in the GEI church choir and she directs a group of young singers in the church as well.

The 1990s ushered in the hip hop era in gospel music which provided the context for Karen Clark Sheard’s solo debut recording on which she performed a song with Kierra Sheard who was still a child. In that recording Kierra Sheard became a representative of the next generation in gospel music. Clark Sheard’s first solo album *Finally Karen* (1997) includes studio recordings and selections from a live performance at the Bailey Temple including some Clark Sisters’s classics. In this way, it merged her own familial history in gospel music with the latest cultural currents of its time.⁵⁶⁹ On this album, Clark Sheard shows that she is able to creatively develop a set of songs through several dramatic peaks without the sisterly support she had as a member of the Clark Sisters. The album as a whole features R&B influenced songs together with remakes of the group’s classics; in both instances, her performance seamlessly blends materials from the past and present. This includes making a novel use of common gospel music techniques, for instance, modulation from one key to another in order to build up the intensity of a song. As a stunning display of virtuosity, Clark Sheard’s finale to the Clark Sisters’ hit “Balm in Gilead” comprises two vamps which both progress through four half-step modulations

⁵⁶⁸ Karen Clark Sheard and Kierra Sheard Interview, *Essence* online, (last accessed April 10, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPWa-K-sJV8>,

⁵⁶⁹ Karen Clark Sheard, *Finally Karen*, ILD 0850, 1997; *Finally Karen*, (55123), VHS, 1997.

from key G to key B. Some professional singers might have a set of favorite pitches and vocal gestures to impress the audience, but remarkably, the seemingly endless creativity and skill Clark Sheard demonstrates on these vamps shows that she can perform a myriad of runs on five different scales.

The last song on Clark Sheard's debut album is "The Will of God" which she sings as a duet with her then eight-year-old daughter Kierra Sheard. Donald Lawrence, the producer of the live recording part of the album, remembers that Clark Sheard herself brought up the idea of including a song with her daughter who had started to "sing a little bit."⁵⁷⁰ Until then, Sheard had been performing in her father's church, but this was her first commercial recording. What needs to be emphasized here is that in actuality, their performance represented multi-generational continuity in this song's performance; nearly two decades prior, when Clark Sheard was a teenager in 1978, she recorded "The Will of God" with the Southwest Michigan State Choir directed by her mother at the same site, the Bailey Temple.⁵⁷¹

Several commonalities between the 1978 and 1997 records confirm that as much as Clark Sheard's performance with her daughter expresses their gifts of gospel music, it is also an homage to Mattie Moss Clark. The two versions rely on different forms, namely ABCABC (1978) and ABABB (1997), but they both give prominence to a call and response musical interaction between mother and daughter which is obvious in the

⁵⁷⁰ Donald Lawrence mentioned this in his opening remarks to Kierra Sheard's live recording at the Harold Washington Cultural Center, January 31, 2011, Chicago, IL.

⁵⁷¹ Mattie Moss Clark, United National Auxiliaries Convention, *Southwest Michigan State Choir Sings Again under the Direction of Mattie Moss Clark*, SOG-083, 1978.

latter case but observable in the former case, especially in the C-part in which Clark Sheard trades verses with the choir, “the voice” of Moss Clark as its director. Both versions are set in Ab key (common in gospel music) and are accompanied by Twinkie Clark on organ. Cymbal accents and drums contribute to the intensifying drama on both versions, but in particular, the sparse use of accompaniment as a mark of its “organic” quality sets “Will of God” apart from other instrumentally saturated tracks on the *Finally Karen* album. Significantly, the version performed by Clark Sheard and her daughter reflects some of Clark Sheard’s vocals on the 1978 version, as I will point out in the following musical analysis.

Because both versions were recorded in front of a live audience at the Bailey Temple, they underscore this church’s centrality as the context for Moss Clark’s music ministry and its place in gospel music history. The memories of the “Apollo Theater of gospel music” were further evoked by the organ playing of Twinkie Clark, who had been the official accompanist of Moss Clark’s Midnight Musicals. Staging Kierra Sheard’s first major performance at the Bailey Temple, where so many rising gospel music stars showed their talents in Midnight Musicals, set high expectations for her musical future.

The gospel song “Will of God” is written by Reverend Richard White who is a high ranking official in the COGIC and a long-time collaborator with the Clark family. This sermon-like song builds on a fairly small number of lines that thematically center around the Christian belief in the need to follow God’s calling for one’s life. To this end, the song’s lyrics speak to the blessings as well as the responsibilities that might be required for the fulfillment of one’s calling. In the 1977 version, Clark Sheard seems to

allude to her own total commitment to God's work when she interpolates a line "use my mind, use my heart, use me Lord." The musical context of the performance easily leads one to think that she refers, at least in part, to her gift of gospel music. If any personal meaning can be attributed to the recordings, both Moss Clark and Clark Sheard have referred to visions confirming that their musical careers have been divinely ordained. Mattie Moss Clark's biography asserts that more than once, her own mother had a vision that she was "leading a choir that could not be numbered." Clark Sheard has also stated in an interview that her mother (Moss Clark) prophesied that Clark Sheard will have a daughter and God will pass the gift of music to her.⁵⁷² In thinking about the challenges that Moss Clark faced as a woman building a music ministry, not least because of the resistance by male clergy, one can only speculate on how these versions might advocate for women's spiritual leadership.

The basic melody of "Will of God" is uncomplicated and can be sung within an octave. It is characterized by a step-wise motion with an exception of a few leaps between pitches. Because the song builds on short statements that form non-rhyming couplets in a call and response pattern, it is particularly suitable for the lining out singing style which was originally a method used by worship leaders to teach a song to a congregation. To this end, the embellishments and deliberate pace expected in the lining out style, together with song lyrics that are rich with metaphorical imagery, offer a singer endless interpretative possibilities. Richard White has stated that "all my songs are

⁵⁷² McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 9. Karen Clark Sheard and Kierra Sheard interview, [essence.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPWa-K-sJV8), 2012, (accessed April 14, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPWa-K-sJV8>.

sermons with music,” which nonetheless suggests that the expository preaching-like lyrics of this song seem most suitable for a performance rather than for congregational singing.⁵⁷³ Thus, in combining the ministerial aims of the song with the educational aims of the lining out tradition, the performance of Clark Sheard and her daughter is not just a lesson in gospel music techniques but one in music ministry.

“The Will of God.”

Broadly speaking, Clark Sheard and Kierra Sheard’s performance of “Will of God” can be viewed in light of many of Moss Clark’s teachings. At the first verse-chorus, Clark Sheard sings the melody through with some innovative alterations that reflect her consciousness of the fact that her audiences always expect the unexpected from her. Clark Sheard sings through the first line “The safest place in the whole wide world is in the will of God” in a sweet but firm tone, moving straight through the melody, altering its shape only slightly with timing, vibrato, and melismas. At the start of the second line, “The trials be great and the way seems hard, it’s in the will of God,” she casts a shadow over the reassuring mood of the opening line by moving onto F minor key (the relative minor of Ab) through the embellishment she creates on the word “The.” As a show of her impeccable harmonic sense, she sings a descending run spanning an octave over notes of the harmonic F minor scale. Any other singer might have simply let the accompanist lead the transition to a different mood and sing “The trials be great,” from its basic F pitch on

⁵⁷³ GIC Public Relations PR, “Bishop Richard ‘Mr. Clean’ White Say’s ‘I’m Glad’ Is the Best Music He’s Ever Done,” *Breathecast*, November 8, 2012, <http://www.breathecast.com/articles/bishop-richard-white-gospel-music-news-christian-5227/>

which Clark Sheard then places the word “trials.” Recognizing the need for a resolution back to the Ab key at the end of the line “and the way seems hard” she adopts a goal-oriented approach and sings an ascending embellished line with an emphasis of the word “it’s” on Ab that stretches the melody so that all three words “will of God” are placed on F5 as a dramatic peak at the cadence. At the same time, she intensifies the song’s emotional effect by amplifying the bright resonances of her voice on the pitch F5, a note which she commonly uses for dramatic effect. What these two lines show is that Clark Sheard does not embellish melody arbitrarily or simply for decoration, but she uses her harmonic sense as a resource to move through the melody using embellishments that shape both the harmonic feel and the melodic contour of the song.⁵⁷⁴

When Clark Sheard arrives at the line “But wherever, wherever, wherever it may be, if God says Go!,” she paints a vivid sonic expression from repetition, instrumental referencing, and a deft use of technology. In contrast to the earlier circuitous melismatic singing, she repeats each word “wherever” in a relatively straight line at the same time she ascends stepwise using a distinctive blend of nasal, guttural, and muted tones. They seem to be produced with a slightly closed throat in a way that produces sound like a brass instrument played with a mute, perhaps a trumpet. Furthermore, at each “wherever,” she softens the bright resonances of the tone by turning her head slightly away from the microphone, rather than singing directly to it. Next, in the long straight tones on the ensuing “be” and “Go!,” one can hear a loud announcement-quality enforced

⁵⁷⁴ Another part in which she uses melismatic singing to shift the mode is the stanza “or in a valley low” in which she uses circuitous melisma on the words “or in” that leads to the words “the valley low” darkened with a growl.

by dominant cadences from the tonic Ab to F pitch. To conclude, she sings a descending flourished line on “Go!” Taking all this together, an instrumental reference to a trumpet would not be far fetched given the frequent use of the trumpet in the Bible as an instrument of praise and one that announces God’s appointed times.⁵⁷⁵ Instrumental reference is possible recognizing that Moss Clark trained her daughters to imitate voices and instruments which likely tuned their ears to instrumental properties that could be utilized in singing. Whether one hears the last part as a trumpet-like fanfare or simply as a technically well-executed musical statement with varied tones and styles, it undeniably demonstrates Clark Sheard’s versatility and range as a gospel music singer.

The second part shows what Kierra Sheard has learned from her mother in terms of gospel music as a vocal style and performance practice. Although she is a child, the audience expects her to individualize and creatively “out-perform” the first verse sung by her mother. Holding the microphone in her right hand, like her mother, Kierra Sheard has a serious look that signals concentration. Her mother’s instructional role is affirmed by Sheard’s frequent glances toward her through which she receives assurance and guidance in words and gestures. For an eight-year-old child Sheard has a large vocal range and a strong voice. She also has the confidence necessary for an effective delivery which is apparent when she sings through her first line “The Devil’s loose, in all the world, there’s danger in the land” phrasing the words together in even units while sustaining a firm and

⁵⁷⁵ Psalm 150:3 “Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.” (KJV); 1 Cor. 15:52 “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” (KJV)

resonant tone that she colors with seemingly exaggerated vibrato in a typical gospel manner. Kierra Sheard has a fearless and bold approach to singing, like her mother, which shows in the next line “The safest place in the whole wide world is in the Master’s hand.” She opens the line by holding an Eb as the first pitch of the melody that is set more than half an octave higher than her mother’s in the first part. The obvious highlight of the line is the F5, which she sustains very long on the word “Master” deploying remarkable breath control and coloring it again with heavy gospel vibrato. She holds this note, the same one Clark Sheard likes to use for dramatic effect, noticeably longer than her mother. The audience responds to the young singer’s ability to hold a high note and to create an intensified melodic expression with excited cheers and applause. Next, the most observable feature of the line “it may be on the battlefield” is her ascending stepwise an octave through the notes of the Ab scale starting from Eb on the word “be.” In the following line “or in a prison ward,” she creates a circular embellishment by repeating descending Eb-Db-C three times on words “or-in” before returning “a prison ward” to Ab. A keen ear will recognize that both the scale and the circular melismas replicate the same part in Clark Sheard’s 1978 recording when she was a teenager, except that Clark Sheard managed to repeat the notes four times. This is a historical and musical moment shared between a mother and a daughter. In technical terms, it shows that they both have internalized the Ab scale. Broadly speaking, they thus reflect Moss Clark’s teachings that emphasize the knowledge of scalar structures as a valuable resource for making tuneful musical choices and shaping the melody.

Sheard uses the chorus to individualize her expression by transitioning from singing to sermonizing. She first builds momentum by ascending stepwise through the words “But wherever, wherever, wherever it may be!” When she comes to the command “When God says go!,” she forsakes the melody and adopts a declarative approach centered around two pitches, Bb4 and Eb5. When repeating the same statement the second time, she builds tension by sustaining the word “God” for several seconds on Bb4 during which some of the listeners rise up. Their reaction resembles the way members of a congregation respond to an effective part in a sermon. When Kierra Sheard starts to preach, she breaks from serious concentration and from making eye contact with her mother. She moves to a fiery delivery that incorporates a seemingly unscripted exhortation “You put your trust in Him!” to which her mother reacts with a surprised look. Like a seasoned preacher, Sheard’s eyes are intensely focused on the audience and her left hand is held up in a fist as she continues to declare “Go! if He says Go!, if He says Go! If He says Go!” “You do what the Christ tells you to do!” Noticeably, she frequently anchors the word “Go” on Eb5 as her mother sang in her 1977 version as a teenager. Finally, at the last “Go!,” Clark Sheard shows her with an angular head gesture to conclude the line spiritedly, and Sheard sings a run that descends to a C4 which becomes the lowest note sung so far.

The final chorus, which Clark Sheard and her daughter sing in lining out style, demonstrates the oral transmission of gospel singing aesthetics as a process of imitation that Moss Clark used to train her daughters. This is the ultimate musical treat for the audience. At the beginning of the final chorus, Clark Sheard wraps her right arm around

her daughter in a loving embrace, but to emphasize the importance of training the musical ear, they no longer have eye contact. Instead, they stand side by side so that Kierra Sheard's ear is directly toward her mother in a way that could be seen as "ear and voice" contact. In other words, when singing Clark Sheard is turned toward her daughter's left side while she looks in the distance in concentration. Clark Sheard starts the final verse by giving her daughter an easy line "It may be" all on pitch Bb4, which Sheard then is expected to match in tone, pitch, and phrasing. Similarly, they sing the next line "on the battle front," except with an added challenge of moving stepwise up to Eb5. Then Clark Sheard sings a descending line on the words "or in" that not only starts a step higher on F5 but also teaches Kierra Sheard how to sing effectively through distinct pitches on the vowel shaped "o" and the transition to the "i" vowel shape that follows. Next, Clark Sheard sings "the prison ward" in a way that shows how a melody can be colored by using timbral changes and blue notes on the word "prison" and adding a diphtong-like take on the repeated word "ward" (that sounds more like "walls"). That also creates a vocal "wah-wah" effect. Sheard's expression is not as nuanced and fluid as her mother's demonstration but considering her age, her expression is an excellent approximation of it especially in terms of melody and deployment of vibrato. Next, Clark Sheard uses the word "wherever" to give a lesson in the use of blue notes and timbral coloring. Specifically, the last two times her "wherever" finishes on slightly altered pitches, and most observably, she utilizes a peculiar tone that sounds like nasalization of the otherwise wide "e" vowel in shaping the word "wherever." Together with the gradual elevation of melody through each "wherever" toward "it may be" that lands on Eb5, this segment

serves as a training tool for awareness of pitch relations within and around a scalar structure. Kierra Sheard follows her mother's lead very well with a steady and confident voice, notwithstanding that her blue notes are slightly sharper than her mother's and she adds vibrato to the last Eb5, which her mother sings straight. Then as the last part of their singing together, Clark Sheard shows how to conclude a phrase in two ways, by placing a vivid flourish at the end of "If God says go!" and by singing a solid straight line only colored by heavy vibrato at the end of "Go, go, go, go!" Telling of her vocal skills and consciousness of these devices as part of gospel singing aesthetic, Kierra Sheard executes her part with precision.

As the grand finale of the song, Clark Sheard saves the advanced lesson in gospel singing to the end. The word she uses for it might be the short and simple "go!," but her interpretation is nothing short of brilliant. She extends the word over an elaborate angular run that extends two octaves through seemingly countless pitches that touch on both the highest (Ab5) and the lowest note (Ab3) of the song using several timbral variances and rhythmic inflections. Like writing a signature on this song, she uses dazzling agility and intricacy to sing the run as a mark of her virtuosity. Kierra Sheard drops her hand that holds the microphone, and it is clear that she is not expected to, or able to follow this run for it is Clark Sheard's assertion of authority as a mother, singer, and a source of cultural knowledge.

This last part best demonstrates the competitive spirit which Moss Clark instilled in her daughters. In gospel music, the idea of competition as part of music making has been an effective for those many women who were not allowed on the pulpit, but who

developed their musical artistry for the purposes of evangelization to win souls outside the church and exert power within its male dominated hierarchy.⁵⁷⁶ The goal of the competition demonstrated here is not simply for personal recognition. It illustrates how a teacher pushes her student to develop effective vocal tools for the work as a gospel singer whose higher calling is to move her listeners and to usher in the presence of God. It is a form of a mother's love, as in this example. The teacher is a woman who transmits skills to her daughter; these skills can help advance her daughter's position in society and in the church. It can be argued that Clark Sheard is a demanding parent who values positive competition in the same way as did her own mother. Like Moss Clark, who early on challenged her youngest daughter to sing the most difficult part of a song in front of the Clark Sisters' audiences, on "The Will of God" (1997), Clark Sheard expects her young child to sing with her on the live recording of her highly anticipated solo debut on a major label as an initiation to a recording career in gospel music. Since this milestone performance together, Clark Sheard and Kierra Sheard have continued to perform songs in duet fashion as a way to celebrate their mother-daughter bond in honor of the gospel music tradition and to entertain their audiences.

Today, over several decades of performing and six solo albums later, Clark Sheard thrives at the height of her career not only as a gospel singer but also as a spiritual leader and a businesswoman. She has continued to cultivate her skills while diligently caring for her voice, which is still as powerful as ever. Furthermore, as she has embraced

⁵⁷⁶ Jerma Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*, 40.

commercialism, she has been able to seize economic and artistic opportunities in the American entertainment industry. Thereby she has expanded her relationships to audiences of different generations while still maintaining vital connections to church communities. Most importantly, in her role as the First Lady of the Greater Institutional COGIC and as the wife of Bishop Sheard who is a COGIC General Board Member, Clark Sheard is highly involved in the denomination while being an accessible and committed “spiritual motherly figure” to the GEI congregation.⁵⁷⁷ Although the roles of a national gospel star and the First Lady are different, in Clark Sheard’s work, her musical pursuits and the sphere of church frequently overlap. Most observably, Clark Sheard has recorded two live albums in the GEI, and when she recorded the latest album *Destined to Win* in 2013 in Chicago her family members and several members from her congregation travelled together to support her.⁵⁷⁸ Some individuals associated with her church were even featured in a music video for the song “He Knows,” which she sings with Dorinda Clark Cole. In 2009 she founded Karew Records with her husband. Their record label recently issued an album *GEI Live!* (2016), which presents a musical perspective on their church.⁵⁷⁹ Probably the most forward looking and the most controversial of her pursuits has been a reality TV show/“docu-series” *The Sheards* (2013), which featured Clark

⁵⁷⁷ “Karen Clark Sheard, “(What is a First Lady?),” Interview with Rob Kohn, 2012. (accessed March 17, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnVUW9Pm7AA>

⁵⁷⁸ Karen Clark Sheard, *Destined to Win*, EOM-CD-9376, 2015.

⁵⁷⁹ GEI, Bishop J. Drew Sheard Presents, *GEI Live!*, EOM-CD-5283, 2016.

Sheard, her husband and their children as a family invested both in the church and the music business dealing with various themes in their careers and personal lives.

A gospel artist and talk show host Donnie McLurkin addressed Clark Sheard in a 2016 interview as “the quintessential voice in gospel music” from whom leading female secular artists take their “imprint.” At the same session, McLurkin brought Kierra Sheard into the discussion by describing her as a very powerful figure in the music industry who has set the pace for the new generation.⁵⁸⁰ In continuing the family legacy, two important elements of Sheard’s success have been vocal excellence and commercialism. In her 20s, Sheard is already an award winning gospel artist who has released several albums, leads a youth organization “Bold Right Life” and conducts auxiliary businesses including a line of stocking “Sheers by Sheard” and a clothing line Eleven60 named after the birth month and year of her mother. Significantly, Sheard’s brand of music speaks to individuals coming of age in the contemporary reality TV/social media influenced moment in gospel music. Sheard has a very open and strong presence on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, and she writes a blog on her website iamkierrasheard.com/. Through these various mediums she reaches out to consumers of her music and young Christians in general to whom she offers a trendy but faith-based lifestyle. The community of believers who are drawn by her public ministerial role in the blogosphere and social media suggest a new meaning to the idea “invisible church.” She recently stopped using a smartphone application on which she released an inclusive set of secular

⁵⁸⁰ Donnie McClurkin interviews Karen Clark Sheard, Kierra Sheard, Bishop J. Drew Sheard, Praise the Lord, TBN, Jul 25, 2016, (accessed March 17, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQ56TRBZr1o>

songs and moved her visual communications with her supporters onto a YouTube video streaming service. In speculating about gospel music's future direction based on these developments, it seems that the music and the methods of its distribution will continue toward an increasing fluidity between the sacred, secular, and commercial.

CHAPTER 6: Gospel Music Mastery as Cultural Work

All three great gospel women whose music and lives I explore in this dissertation share the mastery of gospel music expression. My research shows that Jackson, Franklin and Clark Sheard have contributed to the development of vocal stylings and the performative aspects of this African American sacred music tradition, while they have also embraced commercialism as part and parcel of their spiritual and cultural work. Recognizing the complexities that emerge at the intersection of music, religion, and profit-seeking engagement with capitalism, in this final chapter I will draw conclusions from my research toward a better understanding of what meanings these three virtuosic female singers and their audiences make of the gospel music tradition.

The evidence from the three singers' music and lives essentially shows that Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard should be viewed as cultural workers within the contexts of their African American core support communities and also for the significant impact that they have had on American culture and popular music around the world. While it seems true that their work has brought them pleasure, privileges, and financial rewards, their popular recognition as torchbearers of a tradition indicates that to truly understand how gospel music mastery produces a cultural impact, it is necessary to explore the communal and societal meanings of their music. To this end I turn to Patricia Hill Collins' views of the two interdependent dimensions of Black women's political activism as discussed in her landmark book *Black Feminist Thought*, the confrontations

with institutional power and the struggles for group survival.⁵⁸¹ In terms of the former, it is well known that the singers in this study have made major contributions to a musical tradition that has historically been used as an instrument of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the Women's Movement. Some of Mahalia Jackson's and Aretha Franklin's iconic performances are prime examples of gospel music's direct role in stimulating confrontations with institutional power, for example, Jackson's performance at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Evidence from my research also demonstrates that the women discussed in this study have confronted gendered and racial injustices in their churches and in music industry environments. Equally importantly and in parallel to the confrontations with institutional power as a public form of cultural work, the musical lives of the singers demonstrate that they engage in less visible forms of resistance to intersecting oppressions and activism in which Collins calls struggle for group survival. According to Collins, measures in this form of activism consist of individually and communally empowering actions that often involve the cultivation of women's spheres of influence (such as gospel music) which operate in this way:

Women craft Black female spheres of influence that resist oppressive structures by undermining them. Struggles for group survival require institutions that equip Blacks to struggle. Recognizing that the path to individual and collective empowerment lies in the power of a free mind, these spheres of influence often rely on crafting independent and oppositional identities for African American women. As such, they embrace a form of identity politics, a worldview that sees

⁵⁸¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 216-241.

lived Black experiences as important to creating a critical Black consciousness and crafting political strategies.⁵⁸²

Contemporary scholarship recognizes African American women as major actors in various realms of gospel music throughout its history, which I believe indicates that artists together with their audiences have created gospel music-making as what can be seen a “Black female sphere of influence” for individual and collective empowerment.⁵⁸³ This is more apparent in the ways in which many women who have contributed to building a gospel music culture have fostered networks with each other as artists, composers, and organizers, served as role models and leaders in their communities, and supported the music and musicians as patrons, parishioners, and in other non-financial

⁵⁸² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 219.

⁵⁸³ At the time when African American music sought legitimacy as a field of scholarly study and because of controversies in the study of African American sacred music early on (origins controversy), pioneering gospel music scholars were more concerned with establishing the music as a legitimate field of study through defining its stylistic features than exploring its gendered dimensions. It was not until the 1990s that scholars brought attention to the gendered dimensions of gospel music history. It is important to mention, however, that the often quoted, first history of gospel music *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (1971) written by Anthony Heilbut recognizes the large presence of women in the genre. Setting a precedent for the several other works on gospel music, many of which have been written outside of the discipline of music Heilbut’s work was published as a trade book for general readership. For a summary of the “origins controversy” see Portia K. Maulsby and Mellonee V. Burnim, “Intellectual History,” in *African American Music*, ed., Burnim and Maulsby, 11-13.

ways.⁵⁸⁴ This perspective is further buttressed by writings in the fields of history and religion in which evidence is presented that in Holiness denominations and Baptists women have made contributions to the African American church culture in general.⁵⁸⁵

Being mindful of women's influential presence in gospel music, in the three chapters of this dissertation about the musical lives of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard, I explore their roles within their respective African American church cultures and the ways in which their gospel roots have shaped their paths in the music industry and in American society. Through the course of my research it became clear that they all are musical authorities who have paved the way for new performance practices and their dissemination. Significantly, however, they have all acquired the respect and recognition of their audiences through creative and spiritual labors, musical and non-musical, which

⁵⁸⁴ Among studies which explore these themes in gospel music scholarship are, Jerma Jackson's dissertation "Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Politics of African-American and Secular Music" (1995); Roxanne Reed wrote the first musicological dissertation that applied feminist methodologies to the study of gospel music titled "Preaching and Piety: The Politics of Women's Voice in African-American Gospel Music with Special Attention to Gospel Music Pioneer Lucie E. Campbell" (2003). Reed's study takes a bold step forward by positing gospel music as a "female-centered genre" in which female participants historically outnumber their male counterparts. In this vein, Reed's use of interdisciplinary black feminist works influential in cultural studies, religion, and literary studies is helpful in elucidating the ways in which gospel music has offered an arena of political voice for women through its use as an alternative to the traditional pulpit ministry (285). During the first part of the 1990s two dissertations exploring the work of major female gospel singers were published outside of the field of music, specifically, in the fields of linguistics and theater education. Brooksie Eugene Harrington, "Shirley Caesar: A Woman of Words" (PhD. diss., The Ohio State University, 1992); "The Musical Legacy of Dorothy Love Coates: African American Gospel Singer With Implications for Education and Theatre Education" (PhD diss., Kansas State University, 1995).

⁵⁸⁵ Some important writings include: Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Gilkes, "Together and in Harness".

are intricately connected to their experiences as women making music and in the society at large. On that account, it is necessary to emphasize that as the three singers forged their paths to prominence they have all negotiated gender through a myriad of actions and activities that correspond to the multidimensionality of their lives. This has represented the challenge and certainly the beauty of understanding how gender consciousness takes form in gospel music practices. A pioneer of the “genderist” approach to the study of music, ethnomusicologist Pirkko Moisala describes the fluidity of gender processes in this way: “...the process of gender negotiation does not take place in a linear progression but is rather more like light refracted by a crystal: gender is performed differently depending on the context and situation.”⁵⁸⁶

To show how this fluidity manifests in the realm of gospel music, it is worth revisiting my research. For instance, Mattie Moss Clark was a traditional “helpmate” to her husband in his church and the primary caretaker of her six children. In parallel, however, she pursued a career and ambitions as a demanding choir director within the patriarchal structures of the church. She was able to manage these different roles by taking her children with her to church (her workplace) where other women probably helped to look after them so that she could focus on her commitment to creating outstanding sacred music. While Moss Clark formidably extended herself for her family, she resourcefully created the conditions for the passing on of musical knowledge.

⁵⁸⁶ Pirkko Moisala, “Gender Negotiation of the Composer Kaija Saariaho in Finland: The Woman Composer as Nomadic Subject,” in *Music and Gender*, ed., Moisala and Diamond, 168.

Aretha Franklin has professed that initially she “just wanted to be a housewife.”⁵⁸⁷ However, she found a different model which she could follow in fashioning an identity as a professional woman in music; Franklin credits her role model Clara Ward’s dramatic vocals and glamorous expression for her decision to become a gospel singer.⁵⁸⁸ Admiration and solidarity between women in gospel sometimes manifests in less articulated forms. For example, Mahalia Jackson recorded numerous songs by female composers and publishers. To this end, evidence confirms that Jackson was a savvy businesswoman who kept a careful account of her copyrights. Thus, it can be speculated that she consciously chose to record songs that could provide copyright profits to other women in the gospel field. The sustenance that women in gospel music provided to each other was not merely financial. Jackson’s biography tells the readers that after her tough negotiation with the irascible record executive Mitch Miller in a recording studio, Jackson found solace and relief in recording the song “God Is So Good to Me.”⁵⁸⁹ Although she is not mentioned in the text, an informed reader recognizes that this particular song was written by a well-regarded composer and Jackson’s friend Doris Akers.

⁵⁸⁷ Garland, “Aretha Franklin ‘Sister Soul’” in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader*, ed. Brackett, 205.

⁵⁸⁸ Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 16-17.

⁵⁸⁹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 216-217.

Great Women of Gospel as “Cultural Workers”

I posit, based on the musical merits of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard and on their cultural impact, that all three should be recognized as “cultural workers” whose contributions to gospel music result from musical creativity, courage, and the espousal of traditions that reflect the rich and remarkable heritage of African descendants in America who share a history of slavery and racial oppression. In the context of discussing the both/and conceptual orientation of Black feminist epistemology, Collins adopts the term “cultural worker” from Bernice Johnson Reagon who uses it in reference to women whose work has sought to build African American communities by thwarting “European and White American efforts to eliminate African-derived frameworks.”⁵⁹⁰ Collins further notes that women in particular have been responsible, as a form of “continual resistance,” for conserving African-influenced ideas and practices.⁵⁹¹ She argues that the efforts of women activists have been aimed toward preserving “Blackness” within U.S. institutionalized racism that has historically sought to “destroy not just actions that resist, but the very ideas that might stimulate such resistance.”⁵⁹² Collins explains that the both/and conceptual orientation of Black feminist epistemology manifests in Black women’s efforts to sustain and uplift their communities through actions which are “simultaneously

⁵⁹⁰ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “African Diaspora Women: The Making of Cultural Workers,” in *Women in Africa and African Diaspora*, ed. Terborg-Penn, Harley, and Rushing, 167-80, quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

⁵⁹¹ Awa Thiam, *Black Sisters, Speak Out. Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), 123, quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

⁵⁹² Thiam, *Black Sisters*, 123 quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

conservative and radical.”⁵⁹³ Her theoretical view resonates clearly in the cultural work of the three singers in this study who creatively craft their performance aesthetics as both cultural custodians and innovators. When taken together, they have made artistic contributions by restyling African-influenced musical practices into contemporary sacred songs that stand out in a tradition that through time has produced the meanings of gospel music as a “symbol of Black ethnicity.”⁵⁹⁴

As cultural workers within the gospel music tradition, the three gospel singers in this study have played distinct leadership roles in their communities of support. They are exceptional individuals whose talents and circumstances coupled with hard work have enabled them to build successful careers in music. While being uniquely situated to represent the collective and to advance its interests, their activities can be viewed as African American women’s political activism. To this end, as I mentioned earlier, Collins sees the struggles for group survival as a form of activism embraced by African American women through a range of activities that they have historically conducted either privately within homes or in organized groups in churches and other more public settings. While women’s centrality in family networks has often allowed them to exercise vital influence within the sphere of home, Collins notes that

⁵⁹³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221; Jualyne E. Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Something Within: Social Change and Collective Endurance in the Sacred World of Black Christian Women” in *Women and Religion in America*, Volume 3: 1900-1968, ed. Rosemary Reuther and R. Keller (New York: Harper and Row, 1987, 80-130, quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

⁵⁹⁴Burnim, “The Black Gospel Music Tradition.”

Traditionally women's activism within Black families meshed smoothly with activism as community othermothers in the wider Black community as "family." In both meanings of "family", African-American women worked to create Black female spheres of influence, authority, and power that produced a worldview markedly different from that advanced by the dominant group. Within African-American communities Black women's activities as cultural workers are empowering. (Reagon 1987). *'The power of black women was the power to make culture, to transmit folkways, norms, and customs, as well as to build shared ways of seeing the world that insured our survival,'* [emphasis mine] observes Sheila Radford-Hill. 'This power...was neither economic nor political; nor did it translate into female dominance' (1986, 168.) This culture was essential to the struggle for group survival.⁵⁹⁵

In focusing on the ways in which these singers have exercised power as cultural workers in line with the thoughts that Collins advances in drawing from the work of Reagon and Radford-Hill, I will next discuss how the singers' music and lives have contributed to the following three areas I highlight above: making culture, transmission of folkways, norms, and customs, and building a shared way of seeing the world. To this end, I will examine these singers' contributions in concert with the goal of demonstrating the ways in which their cultural work has become accomplished through the commercialization of musical knowledge as a counter-hegemonic practice.

On Making Culture

Before I further explore the contributions of these singers, I will clarify my use of the term "gospel music" as not only a musical style but as a *tradition* within which

⁵⁹⁵ Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," in *Home Girls-A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Smith, 356-68; Radford-Hill, "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. de Laurentis, 168. quoted in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 225.

Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have performed their cultural work. This is worthwhile here because the scholarly study of gospel music has established the term “gospel music” in various ways and for various ends. Although the academic study of gospel music first started in the mid-1950s, and in the 1960s African American music gained visibility in the academy through early books on blues and jazz, it wasn’t until the publication of Eileen Southern’s monumental *The Music of Black Americans, A History* (1971) that gospel as a musical style was officially mapped onto the rich African American musical landscape for academic study.⁵⁹⁶ Together with a collection of primary sources, *Readings in Black American Music* (1971), Southern’s work paved the way for

⁵⁹⁶ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans, A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997 [1971]). During the same years, as ethnomusicology in the United States became professionally organized and defined as a discipline through the major pioneering efforts of anthropologist Alan P. Merriam among others, his student George Robinson Ricks embarked on an ethnographic study of gospel music in 1955 which culminated in his dissertation titled *Some Aspects of the Religious Music of the United States Negro: An Ethnomusicological Study with Special Emphasis on the Gospel Tradition* which was published in 1960; On professional organizing of the SEM: An organizational meeting for the purpose of forming an ethnomusicological society, November 18th, 1955, at the Copley Plaza Hotel, Boston, http://www.ethnomusicology.org/?page=History_Founding; Alan P. Merriam, “Ethnomusicology Discussion and Definition of the Field,” *Ethnomusicology* 4, no.3 (Sept., 1960): 107-114; Early literature includes Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People, Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial/Harper Collins, 2002 [1963]); Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [1966]); Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz, It’s Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986 [1968]); Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970 [1956])

gospel music research that appeared in print during the latter part of the century.⁵⁹⁷ This early literature confirmed the multidimensional nature of gospel music as a term of many meanings that can refer to a repertoire, a type of song and style of playing, and the idea set forth by Pearl Williams-Jones, which serves as a premise for my study: “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”⁵⁹⁸ While recognizing the significance of the aforementioned perspectives on gospel music as a *style*, I believe that for my purposes, it is important to define gospel music as a *tradition* in a way that captures the centrality of the spiritual and commercial dimensions in its creation and performance. Therefore, when I refer to gospel music, I follow a description offered by Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., whose analysis of Karen Clark Sheard’s vocal performance locates her within a “tradition of

⁵⁹⁷ A small note about gender is worth including here. When the 3rd (and the latest) 1997 edition of *The Music of Black Americans, A History* was published, the study of gender in African American music had advanced so that in the 3rd ed. Southern adds as a theme the “treatment of black women musicians, not only as professional associates of their male counterparts, but also as composers and performers in their own rights.” Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, xix-xx.

⁵⁹⁸ Pearl Williams Jones, “Gospel Music,” 380; Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Pioneering African American Gospel Music Composers,” in *We’ll Understand It Better By and By*, ed. Reagon, 4-7; Boyer, “Contemporary Gospel Music,” 22. Two years later, Williams-Jones’s essay based on the afore described article titled “Performance Style in Black Gospel Music,” was included in a collection of essays *Black People and Their Culture: Selected Writings from the African Diaspora* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977). Recognizing the objectives of the Smithsonian Institution to represent and share American and world cultural knowledge to not only scholars but also to policymakers and the general public, Williams-Jones’ essay exemplifies public engagement and advocacy which has emerged as an important dimension of gospel music scholarship.

singing that serves as a showcase of the vocalist's spiritual conviction as expressed through musical technique and mastery."⁵⁹⁹ In doing so, this dissertation contributes to a growing body of literature which both confirms the central role of gospel singing style and women's important work in advancing the many aspects of the music's performance and distribution.

Even though melismatic singing has become a hallmark of vocal virtuosity in gospel music, and by extension a way to construct "a particular brand of authenticity" in the popular music realm as Katherine Meizel observes, the creativity of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard is evidence that extraordinary vocal craft forms from much more than the skillful use of melisma.⁶⁰⁰ Rather, it forms from a performer's ability to tastefully execute a vast range of vocal and other expressive conventions over the course of a performance. To this end, Ramsey explains how Clark Sheard creates a song from timbral variations, melismatic runs, asymmetrical phrasing, bodily gestures, and textual invention, which together demonstrate her deft deployment of stylistic elements that represent her African American heritage.⁶⁰¹ Ramsey's observations, which are grounded in a gospel vocal performance framework identified by Williams-Jones, also help to observe the vocal crafts(wo)manship of Jackson and Franklin as similar, but they have individualized approaches to the deployment of stylistic elements from African American

⁵⁹⁹ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 203.

⁶⁰⁰ Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 74.

⁶⁰¹ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 203.; Ramsey, "When Master is a Woman."

heritage. Additionally, what must be emphasized is that their performance expression as a whole also incorporates gestures and dress.

The power of these singers' cultural work to advocate for the collective through "conserving African-derived ideas and practices as a form of resistance" is grounded in technical mastery.⁶⁰² This technical mastery includes their individual abilities to deploy a wealth of musical resources to create what Michael G. Kenny calls a "place for memory."⁶⁰³ In exploring memory as a social phenomenon, Kenny identifies the interface between individual and collective histories, particularly when produced through the narrations of traumatic events, as a politically meaningful site for individual identity formation as for community building. Using several examples, such as the "cultural genocide" exercised by Indian residential schools in Canada, he shows the social processes through which personal recollections emerge into collective consciousness that in turn have an impact on an individual in-group identities. To this end, Kenny examines actual stories about the past and the political and cathartic potential of recovering traumatic events from historical silence and from survivors' subconsciousness to the public discourse. The place of memory in Kenny's view, when it outlasts a generation, is in these stories, which I believe are not unlike gospel songs. Set in sound and lyrics, they give a voice to narratives that encode generational experiences and site specific musical

⁶⁰² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 221.

⁶⁰³ Michael G. Kenny, "A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 3 (Jul., 1999): 420-437.

worlds that stand for a rich culture that has endured and evolved through the trauma from slavery to the present day.⁶⁰⁴

In this way, the carefully crafted songs of these three singers, that fuse traditional musical materials with those adopted from their contemporary environments, provide a medium through which their listeners can, in Kenny's words, "make meaning of the past in the present."⁶⁰⁵ Over several decades of gospel music history Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard have authored collectively meaningful "narratives" in gospel music to which the generations of their audiences hold different relationships. Through the continuous processes of social negotiation their music has come to occupy a celebrated place in the collective memory of many African American communities. Scholars including Kenny and Jeffrey K. Olick warn against a reductionist use of the term collective memory, reminding us that "it is only individuals who remember, even if they do much of this remembering together."⁶⁰⁶ To this end, it is worth highlighting that the gendered dimensions of gospel music necessitate conceptualizing "collective memory" as something shaped by "her-stories" that have come forth from a musical sphere in which women artists and their supporters have participated in shaping the performance aesthetics of the music and its commercial appeal.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 420-437.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 437.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 421; Jeffrey K. Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures," *Sociological Theory*, 17, no. 3 (Nov., 1999), 335.

⁶⁰⁷ See for example, Tammy L. Kernodle, "Work the Works," 89-109.

Gospel musicians and their audiences have created a term “sangin’”/“to sang” as a way of recognizing a singer’s effective ability to make meaning from the past in the present. The cultural consciousness in its use is configured in the word’s grammatical structure that combines both the past tense and present progressive form of the word “sing.” In church services and concerts, it is common to hear audience members use this term to laud a particularly moving performance. Aretha Franklin used the term in her autobiography to describe her recorded performance of the song “Precious Lord,” and Karen Clark Sheard gave a nod to Faith Evans as her self-described “twin” and one the R&B vocalists most influenced by Clark Sheard in a “tweet” that proclaimed “...It takes a sangin’ girl to know a sangin’ girl.”⁶⁰⁸ In her dissertation on the pedagogy of gospel music performance, Triniece Martin relates a singer’s perceived ability to “sing” versus “sang” to her or his mastery of the art of storytelling. According to Martin,

When a singer is regarded as being able to "sing," he or she typically has a nice timbral quality to their voice, can sing in tune, and demonstrates technical and harmonic skills with the use of "runs," "vocal ornamentations," or other soulful elements. However, the singer who can just "sing" typically lacks the ability to display a personal connection to the music in a way he or she would by "sangin'." When someone is "sangin'," the performance is passionate and heartfelt and the audience becomes captured by the emotions that the performer exudes. "Sangin'" is not about technique; it is having the ability to relate to the audience in such a way that the audience feels as if the singer is telling their story.⁶⁰⁹

In this light, it is possible to conclude that the variability and the novel use of sound materials that characterize the vocal craft of these three singers alone does not define

⁶⁰⁸ Franklin and Ritz, *Aretha, From These Roots*, 74; Karen Clark Sheard’s Twitter feed, accessed September 13, 2010, <https://twitter.com/officialkcs>.

⁶⁰⁹ Robinson-Martin, “Developing a Pedagogy for Gospel Singing,” 18-19.

their mastery, but rather the ways in which they are able to use musical resources and techniques, even when improvised, to construct the dramatic structure of a song's historically informed narrative in a course of a performance in the present.

On the Transmission of Folkways, Norms, and Customs

Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard are torchbearers whose creative approaches to performance aesthetics represent pivotal developments in gospel music history. As both conservers of cultural knowledge and innovators, their engagement in the transmission of tradition takes a twofold form: first, the cultivation of musical performance practices within familial and church networks in their own communities of support, and second, the conveyance of the musical style and its spiritual message to the world at large in the contexts provided by the American music and entertainment industries. For each, a career as a gospel singer can be seen as a lifelong process shaped by significant familial and communal relationships through which they all have both learned from and imparted “folkways, norms, and customs” to their kin as to others around them.⁶¹⁰ Four generations of women in Clark Sheard's family exemplify the ways in which spiritually inspired music making is passed on from mothers to daughters and how these processes produce a cultural impact in their communities.

To put the cultural work of these singers into proper perspective, it is important to recall that commercialism has played a key role in their involvement in the transmission of the gospel music tradition, whether as an element of learning processes or a driving

⁶¹⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 225.

force in the music's dissemination. While a number of writings confirm that the development of gospel music has benefitted from various forms of commercial practices, thus far, Jerma A. Jackson has written the only book length study on the topic *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age*.⁶¹¹ Partly based on her dissertation research, Jerma Jackson's study highlights the work of women musicians inspired by evangelical objectives who made gospel music a commercial phenomenon.⁶¹² Similar to the ideas expressed in evidence from the lives of Rosetta Tharpe and Arizona Dranes (among others), which Jerma Jackson presents, many of today's gospel musicians say that they aspire to spread a Christian message to the broader public through profit-oriented mechanisms and platforms offered by the media and the music industry. At the same time as I agree with their perspectives, I believe that the commercialism tied to gospel music's transmission presents complexities that become more evident if gospel musicians' engagements with capitalism are set in the historical light of African American participation in business.

Gospel music is a distinctly American music, like the blues which Hettie Jones observes, is "a contribution, ironically, from the only people who became Americans against their will."⁶¹³ These ancestors were dehumanized in the society as a labor supply for the rise of modern capitalism, and yet their cultural practices provided the original

⁶¹¹ Jerma A. Jackson, *Singing in My Soul*.

⁶¹² Ibid, 4, 27-49.; Jerma Jackson "Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Politics of African-American and Secular Music."

⁶¹³ Hettie Jones, *Big Star Fallin' Mama, Five Women in Black Music*, rev.ed. New York: the Viking Press, [1974] 1995), 2.

source materials for gospel and blues, and some were entrepreneurs who sought to use the economic system of their hostile environment for profit-making activities of their own. Juliet Walker's research shows that while there were some free black business owners, slaves and their descendants who were able to capitalize on the few opportunities in their economic environment, often did so as they engaged in the struggle for freedom from bondage that money could buy. One such avenue was the trade in spiritual services, which emerged from the nation's first occult-oriented enterprises established by Africans in colonial America to pursuits of postbellum practitioners in supernatural arts; these practitioners could "make a fortune" from conjuring activities to the extent that at least in one account "trick" doctors were perceived to pose an economic threat to white landowners.⁶¹⁴ In African American culture the generational passing of ideas about the supernatural powers and the accessibility to these powers extends from early days of slavery to the present day; thus, it has offered an enduring site for commercial interaction between practitioners whose material profits have enabled their societal advancement and agency, and their clients who have benefitted from the perceived impact of the spiritual services and a sense of empowerment.⁶¹⁵ In light of the above, Yvonne Chireau points out that historically in African American communities, women have had important uses for supernatural practices as they also are the inheritors of a legacy of powerful spiritual roles

⁶¹⁴ Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 57; Chireau, *Black Magic*, 24.

⁶¹⁵ Yvonne Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices," in *A Mighty Baptism Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 172.

instituted by their foremothers.⁶¹⁶ Interestingly, although music was recognized as a valuable asset in colonial America, based on available writings, the music as an African American trade seems to have emerged later than that of spiritual services.⁶¹⁷ According to Eileen Southern, “Early in the nineteenth century, some free black folk began to establish themselves as professional musicians. It was no easy thing to do.”⁶¹⁸ (Southern mentions that slaves who could play music provided entertainment to their owners, but she does not mention that they provided musical services to anyone else for pay.) The present examples of the first African American music professionals appear to include more men than women among the bandsmen, music teachers, and concert artists.⁶¹⁹ Given the limited availability of information on African American engagement in the business of music during colonial times, I believe it has the potential to provide a fruitful field for future scholarly inquiry.

As a tradition deeply rooted in the cultural and commercial practices of earlier times, the relationship between the inter-generational passing of gospel music and economic interests is tied to the broader liberatory aims of music making. As the examples of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard show, on a personal level, their material gains from singing gospel music have benefitted them in various ways. Mahalia Jackson’s gospel music career helped her achieve freedom from servitude. Mattie Moss

⁶¹⁶ Cireau, *Black Magic*, 22; Cireau, “The Uses of the Supernatural,” 182-188.

⁶¹⁷ Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 58-59.

⁶¹⁸ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 98.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

Clark's example suggests that even as a mother of a large family, she could make a living from the music ministry to the extent that she was not dependent on a husband to provide for the family. Even as Franklin and Clark Sheard have benefitted from the paths paved by their parents, because they have successfully capitalized on their musical talents, they have been able to avoid and even transcend some forms of societal oppression, such as those related to housing and employment. At the same time, support from their church audiences has provided some autonomy from the industry's marketing and distribution channels to the extent that all of them planned to launch or actually established a record label. When dealing with powerful music industry executives, their alternative revenue sources, most evidently in the case of Mahalia Jackson, have helped them to have creative freedom in terms of repertoire and representation. It should be mentioned that despite the many advantages that commercialism has generated, it has also been a competitive and male-dominated sphere where survival has resulted not only from their musical talents, but from their sophisticated business strategies and negotiation tactics. In an intergenerational view, their embrace of commercialism as an integral element of the gospel music tradition presents a practical economic means to overcome racial and gendered barriers in the marketplace as in the society as a whole.

The advantages of commercialism in the cultural work advanced by the three singers have not only materially benefitted them and their immediate family members but also shaped the way that they serve as leaders and advocates in their communities in which members continue to face institutionalized racism and limited occupational options. To this end, the ways in which they use the opportunities offered by their

economic environment can be viewed as what Michel Foucault calls “practices of freedom.” In discussing his views on the practices of freedom as continuous practical actions to effect a democratic change in the society beyond formally affirmed liberation, Foucault provides an example of a person’s efforts to control relations of power through the concept “care of the self.” He describes this wider field of liberation(s) in the following manner:

When a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from its colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense. But we know very well, and moreover in this specific case, that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. This is why I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation; again, the latter indeed have their place, but they do not seem to me to be capable by themselves of defining all the practical forms of freedom.⁶²⁰

Foucault explains the concept “care of the self” as a manner of ethically managing one’s own behavior, which in turn translates into proper (non oppressive) relationships with others in the community. When handled correctly, this “care of the self” manifests in a person’s manner of “being and behavior” visible to others in one’s interpersonal encounters, as in dress, gait, and so forth. Foucault’s thinking is grounded in ideas of the ancient Greeks, to whom freedom actually meant nonslavery but who brought these

⁶²⁰ Michael Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1997) 284-285. In *Music and Capitalism* (2016) Timothy Taylor mentions “care of the self” as a feature of neoliberal capitalism, but does not mention Foucault’s ideas on care for self. In this way, Taylor seems to refer to the ideology of individualism in modern societies. Nonetheless, in a seemingly related manner I believe that Foucault’s view on care of self helps us understand how care for oneself can provide a precondition for being able to uplift one’s community. (4)

ethical considerations to bear on an individual's management of relationships with others as he offers a way to conceptualize practices of freedom as liberatory acts of oneself in the present day. It needs to be said that Foucault views the Christian idea of self-renunciation in contradictory terms to his view of the ethical care of self as a precondition for the care for others. However, I do not believe that prevents a view of commercialism in gospel music as a "practice of freedom" as it refers to the practical means which an individual deploys to renegotiate spaces of power and privileges within an oppressive society beyond the formal act of liberation. If one is to look for a parallel to Foucault's idea of "care for self," these singers' music and careers show that the (Christian) ethical conduct of oneself is one of the principal qualities expected of a successful gospel singer and the way through which she or he builds communal relationships as cultural workers.

On the whole, the music and lives of the three singers in this study demonstrate that commercialism has played a key role in their involvement in the transmission of the gospel music tradition because of the broader liberatory aims of the music making activities. Interestingly, the embrace of commercialism has provided for the cultural advocacy that has fostered the music's popularity in the singers' own communities as well as around the world. Their impact can be viewed not only in light of the vast popularity of their own recordings but also in the great number of musical "daughters" and "sons" that their music has generated around the world.⁶²¹

⁶²¹ Heilbut, *The Fan Who knew Too Much*, 19, 144-148; Alisha Lola Jones writes about a performer Joshua Nelson who sang Mahalia Jackson's "How I Got Over" in a way that he "embodied her iconic delivery, through gesture, inflection, and mannerism." She also refers to Heilbut's aforementioned book in which Heilbut argues that Jackson was an icon and a role model for gay performers. Jones, "We Are a Peculiar People", 53-54.

On Building a Shared Sacred Worldview

Before taking a closer look at the shared sacred worldview that is advanced by the cultural work of these women, I explain why I believe that religion should serve as the basis for the ensuing discussion. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage conclude in *Women and Religion in African Diaspora, Knowledge, Power, and Performance* that embodied historical knowledge is important for the religious labors of women of the African diaspora. Recognition of this knowledge then, as they argue, offers a view on how religion “works to link the prophetic with the political and the practical in the lives of women.”⁶²² In like manner, I believe that the historical knowledge embodied in the gospel music performance of the three women in this study provides a lens through which the merging of “prophetic” and “political” in the cultural work of the three singers in this study can be viewed. To that end, my dissertation contributes to the growing study of faith as a driving force in African American women’s activism; sacred music research has shown that for several generations, religiously motivated female musicians have creatively deployed music in response to the social issues affecting their communities.⁶²³

⁶²² R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, eds., introduction to *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora, Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), xix.

⁶²³ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Exploring the Religious Connection, Black Women Community Workers, Religious Agency, and the Force of Faith,” in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, ed. Griffith and Savage, 179-196; Judith Weisenfield, “Truths that Liberate the Soul’: Eva Jessye and the Politics of Religious Performance” in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, ed. Griffith and Savage, 222-244; Burnim, “Gospel” in *African American Music*, ed. Burnim and Maulsby, 493-508; Reagon, *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me, The African American Sacred Song Tradition*.

Broadly speaking, over the course of postbellum history, the religious beliefs of female activists, educators, organizers, and artists among others have often inspired their pursuits toward improving the lives of those around them.⁶²⁴ As inheritors of their legacy, Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard represent a form of cultural work in which spirituality is an essential part of musical practices. As highly respected gospel vocalists, they can be regarded as cultural leaders and advocates whose audiences have bestowed them with iconic status. In other words, though their contributions to music, they have acquired power to represent the culture in symbolic terms that have the potential to shape societal narratives or even impel action.⁶²⁵ What sets them apart from other popular figures (celebrities, athletes etc.) is that their mastery of gospel music overtly reclaims the idea of sacred into their iconicity, and thus, in a way, reminds us that the original intent of Christian iconography was to inspire sacred imaginings.⁶²⁶ However, from the faith-based vocals of each, community involvement, and personal views it is possible to conclude that in their cultural work, religious thought and social consciousness are not two separate fields but mutually constitutive spheres of action.

⁶²⁴ For example, this theme is discussed in the following texts: Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*; Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

⁶²⁵ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons, Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 4-9.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid*, 7-9.

Gospel music originated as a musical practice in various African American denominations, and since the genre's beginnings the most influential figures in the field, like the three vocalists in this study, have emerged into prominence from the realm of the church.⁶²⁷ Accordingly, because gospel music was born within the ritual context of African American Christianity, its "unique and creative synthesis of African and Christian elements" provides the religious outlook for its expression.⁶²⁸ Thus, to better explain how religion operates in the music of these three vocalists, I will start by exploring the empowering and collectivizing forms of musical interactions that can be located within cultural practices related to the Bible as the Christian sacred text and, essentially, the music style's *raison d'être*.

There is one authoritative source which most church-based audiences believe to provide spiritual grounding for gospel music expression, and that is the Bible. All three singers in this study grew up in church environments which immersed them in the teachings and practices of African American Christianity. Their formative religious experiences prepared them to know and interpret the Bible and, consequently, to translate its language and symbolism into spiritually edifying and empowering experiences for their listeners. This is significant because the belief in the power of God's word contained in the Bible binds gospel artists and their audiences. For example, this was the unspoken

⁶²⁷ Portia K. Maulsby. "The Impact of Gospel Music on the Secular Music Industry," in *We'll Understand it Better by and By* ed. Reagon.

⁶²⁸ Charles Joyner, "'Believer I Know,' The Emergence of African American Christianity," in *Religion and American Culture Reader* 2nd edition, ed. David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003), 195.

“truth” when Mahalia Jackson early on quoted Psalm 47:1 to defend her evocative performance style to those who doubted her piety.⁶²⁹ This common agreement is still evidenced by congregants and musicians who carry the Bible (or read it from a tablet) and show knowledge of Scriptures by reciting them. Furthermore, as central as the Bible is in African American Christianity, it has inspired a long-established body of music that is traceable from the first collection of Negro spirituals in 1867 to the present day gospel hip hop/rap through both text and performance aesthetics.”⁶³⁰ On the whole, it is necessary to point out that for generations of African American believers, the Bible has offered support and hope for the reason that they adopted and interpreted Christianity as *their* religion (not that of their oppressors) in a way that resonated with their experiences in America.⁶³¹ As a product of this religious worldview, gospel music is a rich repository of culturally meaningful biblical metaphors and allusions that the most captivating performers are able to present with great acuity.

⁶²⁹ Goreau, *Just Mahalia*, 57. Jackson recites the Psalm 47:1. “O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.”(KJV). It is worth mentioning that she recited the psalm from the King James version which some churchgoers consider to be the authoritative English language version of the Bible.

⁶³⁰ Mellonee Burnim, “Biblical Inspiration, Cultural Affirmation, The African American Gift of Song,” in *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* ed. Vincent L. Wimbush with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman (New York: Continuum, 2000), 603.

⁶³¹ For example this theme is explored in the following texts: Charles Joyner, “‘Believer I Know,’ : the Emergence of African-American Christianity” in *Religion and American Culture* 2nd ed. edited by David G. Hackett (New York: Routledge, 2003); Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)

On that account, gospel music can be seen as a medium through which artists and their audiences relate to the Scriptures and to each other. Earlier in this dissertation I discussed Mahalia Jackson performance of “Move On Up a Little Higher” at the Pilgrim Baptist Church.⁶³² This is an example of a popular song which is built on biblical imagery. Jackson’s personal testimony as an introduction of the song and its musical expression touched the women in the audience according to William Russell, who was present at the concert. Jackson’s song was not simply a source of aesthetic pleasure, but she presented the song through music and words so that her listeners could reflect upon their own lives through its narrative. Russell who recorded this observation in his journal entry, did not provide further details on the reactions of Jackson’s audience members, but often gospel music’s positive impact on listeners (like that of a good sermon) often registers in expressions and gestures of biblical origin. Although any evocative gospel performance would show this, take for instance Clark Sheard’s concerts in which I have observed that audience members commonly affirm out loud “Amen!,” “Hallelujah!,” and “Thank you, Jesus!”

Insofar as the Bible is central to gospel music as it is in African American Christianity, there is a need to take a closer look at its role in gospel music as a women’s sphere of influence. According to Anthea Butler, over the course of history many African American women have embraced the Bible and organized communities around it wherein

⁶³² William Russell (journal entry), October 10, 1954.

they could wield the power and authority that they believed the sacred texts carried.⁶³³ Furthermore, women who have also historically constituted a large percentage of churchgoers have built gender conscious traditions around Bible reading and the guidance that it can provide for everyday life. In exploring why many present day African American women read the Bible, Butler describes it as a practice that grew from communal Bible study groups (i.e., Bible Bands) in which participants not only bettered their biblical knowledge but their ability to interpret its meanings. Based on examples of how women organized learning and other supplementary (sometimes profitable) activities around Scripture reading, Butler argues that the Bible became a source of information and an instrument that enabled them to overcome struggles and negotiate a place in the world as women of color. Similarly, it seems likely that many women in particular have helped uphold and apply the use of the Bible for and within gospel music.

The overall impact of vocal expression in the performances of Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard, as it is grounded in the biblical basis of gospel music, emerges from their capacity to bring forth an experiential presence of the Divine for listeners. Some gospel music audiences identify this quality as “anointing,” which is a term they use to describe the act of the Holy Spirit being bestowed upon the music. Trineice Martin explains anointing as “the power of the Holy Spirit to do God's work” which audience members glean from specific gestures that they believe mark the conviction of the

⁶³³ Anthea D. Butler, “Only a Woman Would Do, Bible Reading and African American Women;s Organizing Work,” in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, ed. Griffith and Savage, 158.

performers' religious beliefs.⁶³⁴ These can include intense emotional involvement, a high level of energy, and spiritual "signs" such as a holy dance and the flow of tears.⁶³⁵ Additionally, my study underscores the popular notion that performer's stylistic choices generate ideology-laden discourses about their religious convictions so much so that their uses of sacred and secular music materials have been used by listeners to gauge the spiritual potential of the music. Because of this, all three vocalists have publicly used ethical reflection and explained how their artistry aligns with Christian beliefs. On that account, their success in negotiating the elusive site of conviction demonstrates how each has perceptively managed the "ethics of style" as a way to fashion a musical disposition. I am here referring to an analytical device developed by Timothy Rommen which offers a lens to see how ethical concerns of individuals in relation to collective religious beliefs form a primary governing system for musical production, reception and meanings among some communities of believers.⁶³⁶ Although Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard all recount times when they were critiqued for worldly influences, their continued wide acclaim confirms that for numerous listeners, their music effectively projects a faithful

⁶³⁴ Robinson-Martin, "Developing a Pedagogy for Gospel Singing," 18-19.

⁶³⁵ Ibid; Ray Allen, *Singing in the Spirit, African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City* (Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 101; Glenn Hinson, *Fire in My Bones, Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel* (Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 239-241.

⁶³⁶ Rommen, *Mek Some Noise*.

intent and musical creativity inspired by the soul, whether that means the Holy Spirit or the secular "spirit" of African American culture.⁶³⁷

To this point, I have described how the biblical foundations and ritual dimensions of the gospel music performances of the three singers contribute to a construction of a shared sacred worldview as an impactful area of their cultural work. Yet what remains to be explored is the most pertinent area of their art: the sounds and organization of the music. While integral to the emphatic expression of the two aforementioned facets, musical sound constitutes the most important material from which the vocalists in this study produce culture. Furthermore, the musical sound is primarily what each singer deploys, and trades in, to make a meaningful artistic intervention in the world. Therefore, I believe it is worthwhile to further inquire how the sonic features of their music might constitute an integral part of cultural work toward building shared ways of seeing the world.

Some of the most powerful and spiritually charged moments in a song created by the three singers build on African American stylistic features of the music in ways that seem to serve as a means of empowerment and community building. At the same time, curiously, some of those gestures that mark dramatic peaks of a performance also offer specific insights on gendered experiences within the sphere of gospel music. All three singers in this study are particularly adept at using calls, hollers, wails, and growls which often mark dramatic peaks in a song. The sonic qualities of vocal gestures like these

⁶³⁷ Jennifer Ryan, “‘Can I Get a Witness?’ Soul and Salvation in Memphis Music,” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 45.

depart drastically from the aesthetic ideals of Western classical music, which is a reason why early gospel music audiences in Northern urban cities rejected the music's spiritual and artistic value. Loud and intense, these musical articulations were heard as spontaneous utterances of uninhibited emotion rather than devout religiosity. At the core, it was the force and volume of these sounds that defied conventional ideas about the limited sonic space reserved for women who were expected to demonstrate a quiet and "pleasant" demeanor in the church as in the general society.⁶³⁸ It was likely from this standpoint that Mahalia Jackson's classically trained vocal instructor Prof. Du Bois/Kendricks/Gullat saw it fitting to interrupt her in the middle of a song and tell her that she "got to learn to stop hollering." As my research shows, the quality of "loudness" was valued by Jackson herself. When related to Jackson's role model Bessie Smith's similar vocals, this quality can be viewed to represent her capacity to "escape reduction to, and containment within, her body."⁶³⁹ Today, the power and intensity projected by these vocal expressions are essential for a successful gospel music performance. While they serve to uplift the listener community, they gesture toward social proscriptions for women. This was verbalized by Twinkie Clark in a live concert recording with the Florida A&M choir. As part of a sermonette, she deployed the growl as a spiritual weapon and a cathartic

⁶³⁸ 1 Corinthians 14:34 "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law." (KJV)

⁶³⁹ Peter Antelyes, "Red, Hot Mamas: Bessie Smith, Sophie Tucker, and the Ethnic Maternal Voice in American Popular Song," in *Embodied Voices, Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed., Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 217.

means of communicating with God in the following manner: [use of growl in bold italics font]

Put a little *growl* in it just make the devil mad for a minute, and say *‘I’m determined!,’* (audience response: ‘I’m determined!’)... Somebody said that a woman ain’t supposed to do that. A woman ain’t supposed to holler and put all that growl in there. But if you’ve been through some frustration and some pain! and you’re crying out to God, you’re laying before Him. *You ain’t going to be cute with it!* [emphasis mine] You gonna say **LORD! HELP ME!**⁶⁴⁰

In this way, Clark’s sermonette claims the “uncontainability” I mention above in reference to Jackson, and her sermonette claims a right to religious expressivity in one’s own terms rather than those dictated by the church or society. Additionally, the contorted facial expressions that Clark and other singers often display when singing the growl (and other similar devices) serve as an outward demonstration of religiosity that rejects the man-made standard of being “cute” (or “pretty”) for acceptable womanhood.

Another interesting intersection between the influences of religion and gender also comes into view when a gospel song is seen as a “story” told through sound organization by the singer whose mastery is largely demonstrated by how well her narration moves individual audience members as an extension of how effectively it resonates among communities of believers. Each of the three singers discussed in this study are exceptionally skilled at using musical resources to construct a dramatic structure of a song that progresses through several gradually intensifying high points before a resolution. Hence, their artistry satisfies the Western listener’s basic expectations of a teleological song structure at the same time as they treat it malleably by infusing the

⁶⁴⁰ Elbernita “Twinkie” Clark, *Twinkie Clark Terrell Presents Florida A&M University Gospel Choir*; Crystal Rose (20127), 1996.

song with African American stylistic devices. In this way, the three singers effectively bring a listener through an emotional journey destined to end with a sense of religious fulfillment and relief. Aretha Franklin's build up of a clear narrative structure in "Precious Lord (Take My Hand) Part 1," which I analyze in this study, is a case in point. I also posit in this study that on the classic recording "Move on Up a Little Higher," (a song about a journey from earth to heaven), Mahalia Jackson takes her listeners through the emotional terrain between desire and destination. When thinking about a journey as a ubiquitous theme and a metaphor in gospel music tradition I am intrigued by Deborah McDowell's early observations about how the motif of the journey is used by black women writers. In her view, the journey is often not physical but personal; the female character "is in a state of becoming, 'part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness.'" ⁶⁴¹ Similarly, some of the best gospel music performances often succeed in creating a transformative sense of a personal journey through an approach which relies on historical sources but in which musical innovation is a key factor in the narrative development.

⁶⁴¹ Deborah McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," in *African American Literary Theory, A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: 2000), 174. In one of the first texts to break the path for black feminist criticism Deborah McDowell recognizes the difference between the ways in which male and female writers use this motif. Whereas for example, male writers' texts portray the protagonist going underground for political and social ends (i.e., works of Baraka, Ellison, Wright), heroines in female writers' texts are first on a personal and psychological journey that can have political and social implications (i.e., works of Hurston, Walker, Bambara). McDowell draws influence from the work of Mary Helen Washington, *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers* (Garden City, N.Y.: 1980), 4.

The extraordinarily creative musical imagination evidenced by the artistry of all three singers does not only serve as a source of their power but also enables them to envision and interpret multifarious inner depths of human experience. Further, the musical narratives they construct, as resonant as they are the world over, bespeak an African American diasporic orientation. When describing her own creative process to me in an interview, Karen Clark Sheard offered insights that can elucidate how the impacts of musical invention can be conceptualized on both personal and communal levels. Since she was a child, Mattie Moss Clark trained her youngest daughter for seemingly endless creativity so that she could be able to elevate a gospel song to an awe-inspiring conclusion. Moss Clark instructed her daughter: “You’re supposed to take it like you are Moses, take us to the Promised Land!”⁶⁴² In this way, when Moss Clark placed her daughter in the book of Exodus, the biblical story through which generations of African Americans have used to recount their own diasporic experience in America, she could envision a role for herself as a Moses-like religious leader who metaphorically leads her people through the wilderness to Canaan. In this way, Moss Clark charged her with using her God given musical creativity to move listeners from their present in the here and now, to the presence of God. Practically, Clark Sheard was charged with spiritually and musically inducing a sense of transformation that could be ushered in with a creative use of spontaneous and improvised elements of performance.

When viewed in this light, the three vocalists can be seen as musical inventors who envision and imagine various ways of divining intervention in human lives and

⁶⁴² Karen Clark Sheard, Interview with Author, July 31, 2011, Detroit, MI.

present those ideas in vocal performance. In turn, their audiences respond by projecting personal and collective experiences through their music. Karen Clark Sheard's famous "echo-effect" is a relatively recent original vocal invention which captures the spiritually engaged personal and communal dimensions of gospel music performance particularly well. This vocal gesture is basically comprised of repeating words or stylings that seem to fade as a result of her managing the distance between her voice and the microphone. Clark Sheard says that the idea occurred to her at one time when she experimented with singing her own echo. Some of the best illustrations of the echo-effect are on the recordings "You Loved Me featuring Kierra Sheard," (2003),⁶⁴³ "Favor"(2006),⁶⁴⁴ and "It's Your Time"(2007)⁶⁴⁵ On these recordings she uses the echo-effect to present the voice of God to the listeners, as for example announcing before using the device: "God may come in a little still voice like this and say:..."⁶⁴⁶ She uses the echo-effect not only on words but also on vocal fragments, melismas, grunts, and other stylistic elements from African American traditional sources. It seems that to those who hear her echo-effect, God speaks through a female voice in culturally specific terms. Furthermore, by manipulating the science of sound, she creates an acoustic space where her vocals project a sense of distance between heaven and earth at the same time that the sounds serve as

⁶⁴³ Karen Clark Sheard, *Heavens Are Telling*, 62894-2, 2003

⁶⁴⁴ Karen Clark Sheard, *It's Not Over*, WD2-886379, 2006.

⁶⁴⁵ Donald Lawrence Presents the Tri-City Singers, *The Grand Finale, Encourage Yourself*, EGD84547, 2007.

⁶⁴⁶ This is a reference to 1 Kings 19:11-13 in which God communicates to Elijah in a still small voice when he is in the wilderness. I will return to this subject in the following text.

bearers of a Divine message. In this way, the echo effect articulates a diasporic sensibility that is embedded in the sound and that indicates the sonic terrain that leads to God.

My thinking about Clark Sheard's echo-effect as a way to express a diasporic sense of place derives from the ideas set forth by Carol Muller and the late Sathima Bea Benjamin in their book *Musical Echoes, South African Women Thinking in Jazz*.⁶⁴⁷ As a central idea in their book, echo is a metaphor that Benjamin, a South African jazz vocalist in-exile in New York, uses to locate herself as a contemporary African diasporic subject in the narrative of jazz music. To this end, Muller defines echo "as sound that travels through space rather than as a culturally situated performance." Thus, when used as a metaphor, echo offers a way to understand Benjamin's life and music from a perspective of jazz history, within which, as Muller adds, the practice of echolocation "allows for temporal and spatial displacement" and "for the possibility of a response to the original sound."⁶⁴⁸ Through descriptions of echo as a scientific phenomenon with enduring cultural significance captured by the tragic story of Echo and Narcissus of Greek mythology, Muller explains how the call and response process that produces the echo-effect can be understood as a relationship between an origin and displacement that is often discursively associated with violence and trauma. Benjamin, whose music was influenced by the sounds of American jazz which traveled overseas, adopted its musical idiom into her own vocal expression and thereby joined the growing jazz diaspora

⁶⁴⁷ Muller and Benjamin, *Musical Echoes, South African Women Thinking in Jazz* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

worldwide. Muller concludes her analysis by elucidating the meaning of jazz music for Benjamin and other South African musicians during the apartheid era. In using the work of Elaine Scarry on the transformative power of beauty through aesthetic pleasure that can affect an alternative experiential vision of social justice, Muller explains that South African jazz emerged as a response to American jazz by musicians for whom jazz became a liberative medium.⁶⁴⁹

Clark Sheard's echo-effect portrays a call and response relationship between the divine and the believers which is enacted through gospel music. As a basis for this relationship, religion provides a means to conceptualize a dynamic model of diaspora that transcends spatial and temporal distance, not unlike the sense of displacement Benjamin articulates through the metaphor of a musical echo. Whereas for Benjamin, the call of jazz offers a sonic destination for experiencing the astounding power of beauty, the call of gospel music, as embodied in Clark Sheard's echo-effect, ascribes a spiritual origin to a transformative aesthetic pleasure that allows believers to experience God's presence and to encounter the ultimate place of comfort and belonging that awaits in the thereafter. Hence, this single vocal gesture effectively reflects a sacred worldview expressed in countless gospel songs (for ex., "How I Got Over") which serves to emphasize that although African Americans can be considered a paradigmatic diaspora, many believers who have not been able to, or desired to, return to African origins have chosen to focus

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 281.

on the journey's ultimate end and envision a homeland in the kingdom of God.⁶⁵⁰ On that account, Clark Sheard's echo effect presents the diasporic condition from a perspective of a personal journey. Her preface, "God may come in a little still voice like this and say..." is a scriptural reference to 1 Kings 19:12 in which God quietly communicates to Elijah in the wilderness, possibly through an internal voice. In connecting her vocal gesture with this biblical passage Clark Sheard conveys that through echoes of words, vocal fragments, and her other stylings, or through sounds heard in the mind's ear of the listener, an act of God can take place as a liberating process within oneself. In this way, gospel music, and its masterful performance in particular, can be seen to have the capacity to shape diasporic consciousness, as in the case of Benjamin and others in postwar South Africa, to whom jazz in Muller's words, "became a means of imagining a path to freedom."⁶⁵¹ Echo thus can be seen as a metaphor, materialized in Clark Sheard's vocal device, for the ways in which the three gospel singers draw upon diasporic consciousness to musically articulate a religion-based shared worldview for their core audiences.

⁶⁵⁰ Ingrid Monson, Introduction to *African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1; In a related manner, Mattie Moss Clark describes the sense of belonging that the "anointing" provides. In speaking about the lack of support she sometimes felt, she says: "It was like standing in a lonely place all these years without the authority behind me...the anointing was the only thing that made me feel I belonged. I had a job to do and that kept me pushing." McCoy, *Dr. Mattie Moss Clark*, 68.

⁶⁵¹ Muller and Benjamin, *Musical Echoes*, 281.

Intergenerational Gospel Music Echoes

For the purposes of this study, echo as a metaphor can also be used in a broader manner to elucidate the musical relationships between Jackson, Franklin, and Clark Sheard. In referring to Muller's conceptualizations of echo as a metaphor, which I discuss earlier, I believe it can be used to trace the sounds of gospel music through the musical lives of the three women in this study. Furthermore, it can be used as an apt metaphor for understanding gospel music transmission through time and space as an intergenerational process between women vocalists. Most audibly, their intergenerational musical relationships can be heard in their vocal styles. From Jackson to Franklin and Clark Sheard, the three singers' performance aesthetic reflects a shared approach that is based on the preservation of African derived elements as well as musical innovations. These two dimensions constitute the central elements of gospel music vocal performance, which is predominantly learned as an oral tradition. The transmission of these elements can be observed in the "singing contests" performed by Clark Sheard with her sisters and her daughter Kierra Sheard. However, more than the lineage of audible resonances, the idea of echo encompasses the different facets of gospel music as cultural work which is passed down as part of the tradition. These facets are intricately tied to their gendered experiences in the church and in the world. Certainly, some male figures have played crucial roles in their lives; in the case of Benjamin he was Duke Ellington, and in the case of Aretha Franklin he was her father C.L. Franklin. However, like Benjamin, who formed her musical personality in jazz expression based on her experiences as a woman and placed herself in a lineage of jazz women (and Ellington), the three women in this study

have asserted a musical self through creativity that reflects a consciousness of their gender identities; take for example, the use of “the growl” as a sonic marker of vocal identity that challenges conventional ideas about femininity. Furthermore, similar to Benjamin’s example, these vocalists’ musical activities have taken place with other duties and chores, which have shaped, in practice and intellectually, the ways in which they engage in music. Take for example Mattie Moss Clark, who raised six children (as a single parent for several years) while she built her distinguished career.

When applied to examine gospel music from an intergenerational perspective, echo operates not only as a valid metaphor for the sound and performance aesthetic that women learn from each other, but more broadly for the tradition of cultural work which they represent. Specifically, they perform cultural work through the mastery of gospel music, which takes shape within feminist music culture which prioritizes spiritual authenticity and commercialism. In this way, echo provides a metaphor for continuities in these three gospel vocalists’ creative and spiritual labors toward cultural preservation, the transmission of tradition and customs, and the creation of a shared worldview which all together should be understood as a form of black women’s activism for community furtherance.

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