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Healing for the Soul: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination

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Braxton D. Shelley

Healing for the Soul: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination

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The musical, spiritual, and experiential aspects of gospel music do not neatly align with modes of reception or interpretive/analytical practices associated with the traditions from which most conventional musical analyses derive. Thus, Braxton D. Shelley's multilayered approach in *Healing for the Soul* is both necessary and refreshing. Indeed, gospel music benefits from the close readings of a scholar who is uniquely nestled in the crevasses of musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory, theology, and performance practice. His approaches to interpretation, contextualization, and analysis are as dynamic as the music itself: topics related to history, Black musical culture, and sonic manifestations of the spiritual are woven into a tapestry of theoretical concepts and constructs. *Healing for the Soul* places sounds, songs, sites, and souls under Shelley's interpretive frame, the "gospel imagination," and invites readers to walk with him through detailed analyses that move from the conceptual underpinning of "tuning up" to insights into the intricacies of the vamp.

A notable strength of *Healing for the Soul* rests in Shelley's deft handling of multiple disciplinary perspectives, as well as the wide range of songwriters and performers he covers. Gleaning from music theory, music history, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, theology, and popular music studies, he builds upon foundational scholarship by scholars such as Horace Boyer while finding convincing pathways through the works of Guthrie Ramsey, Janet Schmalfeldt, Travis Jackson, Ingrid Monson, Mark Butler, and

others. The inclusion of transcriptions of music by prominent songwriters and singers such as Richard Smallwood ("Healing," among other songs), Andre Crouch ("The Blood"), Margaret Pleasant Doroux ("He Decided to Die"), V. Michael McKay ("The Potter's House"), and Elbernita "Twinkie" Clark ("I Can Do All Things through Christ") in gospel scholarship, let alone music scholarship, is groundbreaking and long overdue.

Shelley's examinations of musical texture and repetition, as related to current scholarship and his analytical agenda, are solid and sound. His versatility and dexterity are on full display when tuning up is posited as the "logic" behind the gospel imagination. Calling on his experiences as an ordained minister steeped in the Black prophetic tradition, Shelley uses the musicality within certain Black preaching styles as a point of entry and connection to multilayered interpretations and analyses that invoke "Baptist close" musings by Richard Smallwood (chapter 2) and the sermonic utterances of Bishop G. E. Patterson (chapter 3). His thoughtful approach to the temporal domain of gospel music and, by extension, the gospel imagination offers much to contemplate. His terraced concept of an "incarnational approach to time" tests both the rigidities and elasticities of musical temporality, as the song proper occasionally gives way to the "shout"—by way of the vamp—manifesting potent realizations of the gospel imagination in real time. Under the overarching theme of *kairos*, Shelley

uses examples of and commentaries on praise breaks to illustrate these dynamic moments, which both interrupt and shape incarnations of the gospel imagination.

Whereas there are ample helpings of harmonic and formal analyses throughout *Healing*, chapter 3 offers a closer look at treatments of text. This is not to suggest that musical parameters such as melody and harmony are given less attention, but rather that the author prioritizes textual manipulations and their timing as essential shaping agents of selected vamps. Shelley espouses his interviewees' claims about the coactive correlations between music and lyrics that are tied to or lifted directly from the Word of God. His analyses strengthen his argument that the believer's "belief is housed in and expressed through these words" and position these texts and their treatments in gospel as part and parcel of the "evidence" of power generated within the vamp.

Particularly compelling and promising is Shelley's proposed theory for analyzing gospel vamps, as presented in the fourth chapter of *Healing for the Soul*. Building on his concepts of the gospel imagination and the "gospel stance" as means of clarifying the relationship between musical syntax and musical experience, Shelley grapples with previous scholarship on vamps in Black music and finds common ground with scholars that addresses musical repetition, modularity, and texture. His theoretical model of modules and analyses not only addresses technical aspects of form and the challenges of realizing these aspects in experiential terms, but also compels us to reconsider the vamp as both place and process. This, in conjunction with the theological crosscurrents that

propel us through *Healing*, presents an interpretive frame that allows issues related to spirituality, meaning, and performance practice to intersect with gospel music's intertextual and dynamic properties.

Healing for the Soul convincingly covers much ground. There are many points of emphasis and analytical reemphasis, with songs of differing styles covered in each of the four chapters. Such connections service the notion of a bona fide musical tradition fueled by the gospel imagination and yield fodder for further exploration. For example, Shelley's incarnational approach to time suggests the imagination's power to reflect on a past, breathe in the present, and actively embody expectations. As thoughts rest on the solid foundation provided in *Healing for the Soul*, this reviewer is moved to consider the possibilities of Shelley's move (in chapter 4) toward a theoretical model for analyzing gospel vamps: Are there levels of harmonic variation or spontaneous invention on the part of instrumentalists that may constitute "tuning up"? If so, how would they function within vamp modules? Or could such variations and inventions support an extension of intensification techniques (such as modulation, "inversion," or textural accumulation), especially in real-time exhibitions of the imagination? Such thoughts speak to the groundbreaking work of Shelley's project, as it prompts us to examine the rich complexities of the gospel tradition and to explore the promising viabilities of interdisciplinary inquiry.

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