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GOSPEL PIANO IMPROVISATION:

FROM RAGTIME ROOTS TO CONTEMPORARY CHURCH PIANO

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Music and Dance

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Janice Mae Armstrong Carlton

May 2004

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APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

GOSPEL PIANO IMPROVISATION

FROM RAGTIME ROOTS TO CONTEMPORARY CHURCH PIANO

By Janice Mae Armstrong Carlton

This thesis chronicles the roots and evolution of gospel piano improvisation, notes secular influences in the past hundred years, and highlights prominent pianists from specific eras such as ragtime, stride and novelty piano, blues, African-American gospel blues, and white gospel music. These pianists include mostly African-American artists such as Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, W.C. Handy, Thomas A. Dorsey, Arizona Dranes, and Roberta Martin, with a brief glimpse of white gospel artists such as Robert Harkness and Ira Sankey.

The thesis also includes a brief history of the above pianists' careers, an analysis of their individual improvisation styles, and a look at their influence on contemporary church pianists. The final chapter examines the styles and techniques of thirteen current Assemblies of God church pianists, and compares them to secular influences that were predominant when they started improvising.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my thesis committee members, Dr. William Meredith, Dr. Charlene Archibeque, and Dr. Don Adkins, for their immensely helpful instruction and advice. I would especially like to thank Bill Meredith, my advisor and principal teacher, who painstakingly taught me the rules of writing and unfolded the joy and power of the written word.

For the thirteen Assemblies of God church pianists who so graciously participated in my study, I would also like to give my heartfelt appreciation. Although their names in the thesis are fictitious, I would like to thank each one by their given name as follows: Van Clements, Connie Colbert, Sarah Cupery, Candace Edwards, Jenna Kuykendall, Linda Murray, JoAnne Shelton, Deanna Smith, David Warren, Kathryn Wilson, Lois Wilson, David Woodbridge, and Kristyne York.

To Ron, my husband of thirty-two years, I would like to give my deep thanks and devotion for helping me realize this longtime personal goal. You have patiently supported me through the whole process and provided invaluable technical assistance.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Kathryn Wilson and Darrel Johnson, my undergraduate professors at Bethany College, Scotts Valley, California, whose musical artistry inspired me to pursue a master's degree, albeit twenty-eight years later.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Who influenced Scott Joplin (1868-1917), the originator of classic ragtime piano music? What influence did his music ultimately have on twentieth-century gospel and contemporary church piano music? This study attempts to follow the chronological progression of selected pianists, highlighting those who played critical roles in the development of contemporary gospel music.

The common theme that surfaces throughout this research is that all composers are influenced by the popular music of their day. This study points out the similarities between the folk dances of Frederick Chopin (1810-1849) and some of Scott Joplin's ragtime dances. It is natural to assume that Joplin was directly influenced by Chopin, just as later European composers such as Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Debussy were in turn influenced by Joplin and American ragtime music in general.

This study will also point out the effect Joplin's classic ragtime had on Jelly Roll Morton, who helped further embellish ragtime music with more sophisticated rhythms that featured both hands leaping to the far extremes of the piano. Later known as "stride piano," this style is not a separate category of ragtime, but a type of piano execution that is exemplified within ragtime and other genres of piano music. It works especially well with ragtime because its characteristics are a steady left hand drumbeat, the use of "walking" notes to connect the roots of chords, and bouncing back and forth between singular chordal degrees and the whole chord. The right hand literally dances around the left in fast and syncopated rhythms stressing the offbeat, or plays a skipping pattern of dotted rhythms that was popular in the mid-twentieth century. Stride style was also

common among church songs written in the same era. For instance, the lyrics "Years I Spent in Vanity and Pride," "When the Trumpet of the Lord Shall Sound and Time Shall Be No More," "Down at the Cross Where My Savior Died," or "Standing on the Promises of Christ my King" have a series of dotted eighth-sixteenth note patterns that give these church songs their characteristic lilt. It also makes them fun to sing and easy to memorize because the lyrics and music are fused together rhythmically.

During the same time period, but on the secular side, Zez Confrey's "Kitten on the Keys" was a huge success in novelty piano in 1921.[1] Novelty piano was much more complicated than a simple Joplin rag, because both hands sped along independently of one another. Novelty piano was, and is still today, fun entertainment, but only a few pianists have become proficient at it. Instead, more musicians have gravitated to the blues because of its soulful sound and predictable harmonies.

W. C. Handy was a student of Joplin's ragtime and was gifted on the keyboard and trumpet. He is sometimes referred to as the "Father of the Blues" because he was the first to identify and introduce blue notes into the major scale. Handy observed the country musicians deep down in Mississippi and was one of the first to notate their soulful style of singing. He developed a type of fusion between blues and ragtime. Handy observed that the third, fifth, and seventh notes of the major scale were not hit "head-on," but began below the pitch and gradually eased upward by these musicians. He tried to duplicate the effect by starting a full half-step below these certain major scale

[1] Judy Carmichael, *You Can Play Stride Piano*, ed. Stuart Isacoff and Michele Baumann (New York: Ekay Music, 1997), 6.

"blue" notes, often sliding back up or interchanging the two notes. This practice of sliding was reflected in old spirituals and other African-influenced music.[2]

Following Handy in the blues scene was Thomas A. Dorsey, a pianist and guitarist who wrote over 300 blues tunes before changing genres to gospel music. Actually, all he did was clean up his lyrics, making them wholesome and worshipful but still highly rhythmic and appealing to the public. The term "gospel music" had already been used by his white counterparts, Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey, but it is Dorsey's African-American gospel music that is considered today's true gospel, at least on the popular charts.[3] White gospel music was usually upbeat with a bouncy dotted note lilt and was sung to an uplifting text in a simple meter. In white gospel style, the piano used the typical left hand ragtime drumbeat alternating between a single bass note and a chord in various inversions, while the right hand used octave runs connecting melody notes and "tinkly" embellishments. Such was the style of Robert Harkness, a teacher of improvisation and a hymn arranger. This study will contrast the white style of gospel improvisation with the African-American gospel blues styles of Thomas A. Dorsey, Arizona Dranes, and Roberta Martin.

African-American gospel blues artists often took a traditional hymn or church song and reduced the lyrics to make them more repetitive and contemplative. Gospel blues writers typically slowed the tempo of a standard hymn so each beat was stressed with a triplet subdivision and added blue notes, a shuffling boogie bass, and plenty of free

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[2] David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around 1880-1930* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 225-26.
[3] Jerma Jackson, "Testifying at the Cross" (Ph.D diss., Rutgers University of New Jersey, 1995), 123.

response time for the choir. The singer was free to alter the given melody and embellish the music with interjections of moans and exclamations. These practices created an unhurried "soul-reaching" experience that added depth to the text and a freedom in worship.

Roberta Martin was Dorsey's piano accompanist during his choir directing days in Chicago. Martin was greatly influenced by an early (1920s) gospel pianist named Arizona Dranes, a blind woman from Texas who had a bouncy blues style. Dranes was asked to go to Chicago, both in early and late 1926, to make recordings for Okeh Recording Company. There she met Dorsey and Martin, who were greatly impressed with her lively piano playing.[4] Dranes' career was short-lived, however, while Dorsey's and Martin's careers continued to gain momentum. Unlike Dranes' technique, Martin's was more refined, and her group helped define the popular African-American gospel style of the 1950s and 60s. On each of their recordings, however, certain similarities were evident. Both women featured singing groups that included at least one soulful male vocalist and one high-pitched female wailer. However, Dranes' recordings were raw and spirited while Martin's were smooth and polished, perhaps because Martin's were recorded thirty years later.

Martin's gospel piano style was widespread throughout the mid-twentieth century in both African American and white evangelical churches, but something happened around the early 1970s that made a lasting change on gospel music. The term "gospel music" had been replaced in most churches by either "traditional" or "contemporary"

[4] Ken Romanowski, liner notes for *Arizona Dranes, Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order 1926-1929*, compact disc, Document Records DOCD-5186, ©1993.

Christian music, separating the old music from the new. The problem with these labels is that they can be ambiguous, depending on the parishioner's age and exposure to church music. What is contemporary to some may be traditional to others and vice versa.

In the Christian church, the use of secular or popular tunes has prevailed for centuries in creating our best-loved hymns. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther set popular melodies of his day to theological verses. Many of the English hymns of the eighteenth century were descended from folk tunes commonly sung in the pubs. Did John Newton, in his "Amazing Grace," actually compose the melody? No, it is scholarly opinion that Newton borrowed this melody from the slaves of his slaveship after his conversion. The tune is characteristic of an African spiritual, which uses mainly the notes of the pentatonic scale. Borrowing from secular tunes did not seem to be a problem in the church in the 1700s, but bringing the blues into the church in the 1920s was a big controversy then and remains so today. This study will focus on the evolution of gospel music, the drastic change in worship style during the 1960s and 1970s, and the forces that instigated these changes.

Noteworthy authors who have written on the history of gospel music are: Horace Boyer, who wrote helpful articles such as "Chicago Gospel" in the *Black Music Research Bulletin* and "Contemporary Gospel" in *The Black Perspective in Music* and Michael W. Harris, author of *We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers* and *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church.* In her thesis from the University of Washington, "The Origin of Gospel Piano: People, Events, and Circumstances that Contributed to the Development of

the Style, and Documentation of Graduate Piano Recitals," Cynthia Steeves paralleled the similarities between popular and gospel pianists.[5] Certain gospel pianists, such as Ira Sankey and Charles Alexander, attended the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition—the same one Joplin, Sousa, and Handy also attended, confirming their exposure to each other's music.[6] Others studies on gospel piano music include Rebecca L. Folsom's dissertation from the University of Missouri, "A Brief History of White Southern Gospel Music as Seen Through the Career of Dwight Moody Brock,"[7] Irene Jackson's dissertation from Wesleyan University, "Afro-American Gospel Music and its Social Setting with Special Attention to Roberta Martin,"[8] Jerma Jackson's dissertation from Rutgers University, "Testifying at the Cross: Thomas Andrew Dorsey, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and the Politics of African-American Sacred and Secular Music"[9] and Timothy M. Kalil's "Thomas A. Dorsey and the Development and Diffusion of Traditional Black Gospel Piano."[10]

One important study in piano improvisation is a dissertation from the University of Texas, Austin, "The Influence of Ragtime on Twentieth Century Solo Piano Music," in which author Charles Vinson compares Scott Joplin to contemporary European composers. Vinson provided a pre-ragtime account of African-American history in

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[5] Cynthia Dawn Steeves, "The Origin of Gospel Piano: People, Events, and Circumstances that Contributed to the Development of the Style; and Documentation of Graduate Piano Recitals" (DMA diss., University of Washington, 1987), 1.
[6] Ibid., 30.
[7] Rebecca L. Folsom, "A Brief History of White Southern Gospel Music as Seen Through the Career of Dwight Moody Brock" (DMA diss., University of Missouri, 1997), 1.
[8] Irene V. Jackson, "Afro-American Gospel Music and its Social Setting with Special Attention to Roberta Martin," (Ph.D. diss., Wesleyan University, 1974), 1.
[9] Jerma Jackson, "Testifying at the Cross" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University of New Jersey, 1995), 1.
[10] Timothy M. Kalil, "Thomas A. Dorsey and the Development and Diffusion of Traditional Black Gospel Piano" *Perspectives on American Music, 1900-1950*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 171.

America from the 1840s and 1850s in the context of minstrel shows, which were a remnant of English ballad operas and a forerunner of later musical comedies. Minstrel shows featured African-American music from plantation days, such as spirituals and field hollers, that were performed to a mixture of English, Scottish, and Irish jigs and reels.[11]

Certain famous authors, such as the teams of David Jasen and Gene Jones *(Spreadin' Rhythm Around)* and David Jasen and Trebor Tichenor (*Rags and Ragtime)* have written at length on the history of ragtime and blues.[12][13] Since ragtime piano was a forerunner of African-American gospel piano music and had similar improvisational techniques, much attention is given to this special genre.

This study is meant to skim the highest peaks of noteworthy change in church music and show how secular music has contributed to that change. There have been many historical contributing factors to the popular styles of gospel piano improvisation today. While it is true that each individual pianist has been influenced by his or her own musical experiences and exposures and has made choices driven by personal taste and preference, the case studies in Chapter 7 show there are even more similarities in style between people of a common age. Church music parallels secular music, sometimes a few years behind and cleaned up a bit; nonetheless, it draws from the same well because the church is made up of ordinary secular people.

[11] Charles Vinson, Jr., "Influence of Ragtime on Twentieth-Century Solo Piano Music" (DMA diss., University of Texas, 1996), iv.
[12] Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*, 225-26.
[13] David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 86.

Chapter 2. Origins of Secular Music in the Church

Why do parishioners sing in church? In the sixteenth century Martin Luther introduced congregational singing in the German Lutheran church. Singing in the church had already existed in some form, but, like his other reforms, Luther did not initiate a new principle, just modified the ones already extant. In his letter to Spalatinus, secretary to Frederick the Wise, Luther wrote,

> Our plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people in the vernacular, that is, spiritual songs, so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music.[14]

Luther saw the importance of using the vernacular rather than the traditional Latin text that uneducated people did not understand. He also saw the need for the people to be involved in the liturgy rather than being merely observers. Luther, therefore, not only translated the Bible into the vernacular German language but also involved the whole congregation in the service through congregational singing. Sixteenth-century hymnodists like Luther took their role as hymn-writers soberly and sought out a Biblically-based text to further preach the Biblical word through the art of music. Luther was amazed that in secular art there were "so many beautiful songs, while in the religious field we have such rotten, lifeless stuff ... The devil has no need of all the good tunes for himself."[15] He then set forth to free these tunes from the snares of the enemy. Luther created a daily worship service for adults and youth that would appeal to their appreciation of German folk tunes. He entered into this mission with much enthusiasm,

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[14] P.J. Janson, "A Reason to Sing," *Reformation &Revival Journal* 4, no. 4 (1995),. http://www.the-highway.com/Music_Janson.html (accessed October 19, 2003).

[15] Steve Miller, *The Contemporary Christian Music Debate* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 113-14.

striving to set afire the hearts of all the people. Luther understood the power of music to communicate biblical truth, writing thirty-six hymns, including "A Mighty Fortress is our God." Since most of his hymns were expanded or revised from already existing folk and popular tunes, such as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," the union of popular styles with an understandable evangelistic message proved to be a perfect match. These hymns were memorized and distributed far and wide, proving to be a paving ground for the Reformation.[16]

P.J. Janson, in his article "A Reason to Sing," wrote, "Music and theology share a common root in the Word: both come from God, both employ the sense of hearing. Luther often referred to music as a gift of God and accorded it the highest place and greatest honor after theology."[17] Luther regarded the origins of his melodies like his texts; he used whatever tools were at his disposal to dispense a meaningful and authentic presentation to please God and his creation alike. He did not insist that all texts used in the church service had to be taken literally from the Bible as long as they had a theologically sound basis. Likewise, he did not insist that all melodies be derived from a sacred or church source but were manageable and pleasant to the untrained ear. Luther took old melodies that pleased him and "improved"[18] them to fit the desired text.

Along with folksongs, Luther also chose from a variety of Gregorian chants and nonliturgical hymns. Sometimes he adapted them in their entirety; at other times he took segments from different sources and combined them. However, whatever he sought to

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[16] Ibid.
[17] P.J. Janson, "A Reason to Sing," 3.
[18] Ibid.

do, whether in the spoken or the sung word, Luther always brought a new and improved approach to the status quo.[19]

Two hundred years later in London, Charles Wesley, an itinerate Methodist preacher and hymn writer followed Luther's example of making use of singing in conjunction with his preaching. Charles Wesley and his brother, John, were called to preach and sing the gospel as they traveled around the countryside.[20] Charles is said to have written over 8,000 hymns, hundreds of which are still in use today. These hymns brought about a Christian revival, and a great spiritual movement called Methodism began. Like Luther, Wesley adapted many songs of art and folk music to sacred words. He not only borrowed melodies from folk music: even his lyrics were patterned after poetry of the time. His well-loved "Love Divine, all Loves Excelling" was designed after Purcell's poem "Fairest Isle, all Isles Excelling."[21] His use of Handel's melodies caused Wesley to be charged with worldliness, but Wesley had no problem joining the sacred with the secular if it carried the biblical message effectively. The Methodist hymns were hugely instrumental in launching the Methodist denomination, still a vital church today.

Folk music in Luther's or Wesley's time is not to be confused with popular music today. According to Calvin M. Johansson, there are several major differences. In his book, *Music & Ministry*, Johansson wrote "pop music is concerned with quantity (mass production), material profit, novelty, immediate gratification, ease of consumption, entertainment, the lowest common denominator, success first of all, romanticism,

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Miller, *Contemporary Christian Music Debate*, 124-25.
[21] Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians, s.v ."Charles Wesley."

mediocrity, sensationalism, and transience." The gospel message, in Johansson's view, "is concerned with individuality, non-materialism, creativity, sacrifice, discipleship, joy, high standards, principles above success, reality, encouragement of the best, meekness and permanence."[22] Johansson states that the gospel message and pop music are "diametrically opposed" and that "there is no possibility whatsoever of successfully matching the two in a pop song … It seems absolutely imperative to conclude that to use pop music as a medium for the gospel message is wrong."[23]

Johansson presents a strong argument against incorporating popular music into the gospel message; however, to speak of all popular music as being unfit is as oversimplified as speaking of all of any musical genre, such as classical music, as being always appropriate for the gospel. People should not be afraid of the word "popular." Popular simply means people enjoy something. In Johansson's book, he refers to certain composers of contemporary Christian (pop) music who often realize the worth of great music in the church but continue to use pop music because they are "doing what works." It is true that church leaders are attracted to the ease of pop music; it is "apprehensible, light, attractively packaged, and entertaining. Sheet music, anthem arrangements, tape accompaniments, and publisher-sponsored reading sessions with powerfully merchandised advertising techniques, increase this music's influence on the entire church."[24] Johansson regards these tools in a negative context, as a detriment to the quality of music. Instead, why not look at them pragmatically? These tools simply exist

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[22] Calvin M. Johansson, *Music & Ministry* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 59-60.
[23] Ibid., 55.
[24] Ibid., 57.

to meet the demands of the scores of church musicians who love music and wish to share their music with a congregation.

In *Music & Ministry*, Johansson was entirely opposed to pop music in the church but totally accepting of folk music in the development of church music such as hymns. Folk music was and always has been a part of the human culture. Johansson stated that folk music has "influenced art music of all ages, sometimes as a moderating influence, sometimes as raw material for musical composition, and sometimes as the genesis of virile and independent musical systems or part of systems."[25] Composers, then and now, must utilize the raw materials at their disposal, and folk music has always survived the test of time. It is passed along from generation to generation aurally and relates to the people on a down to earth, daily-living level. Folk songs are sung by all ages. They have beautiful melodies set to wistful lyrics, light melodies set to humorous texts, march-like anthems set to proud nationalistic statements. Most of the time, their composers are obscure or anonymous, if indeed one composer could take credit for any particular song.

Unlike popular music of our time, folk music has no professional composers attempting to sell their music or publishing company demanding permission rights to have its music performed. People are not usually concerned about how folk music is performed, or whether it is performed at all. Folk music is simply a cultural evolutionary process. Johansson described folk songs as,

> … usually strophic, sometimes modal, rhythmically free, and predominantly monophonic. Many of them resemble plainsong, the music of the church historically being heavily influenced by folk music. Their greatness is in their utter simplicity. Artlessness is their strength. This

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[25] Ibid., 59.

> type of music is never pretentious, sensational, or maudlin; it is earthy and wholesome. Folk music seems to be an ideal form of religious music ... because it is a music of the people and not a sophisticated music, does not have class bias; it appeals to the cultured music lover as well as to the uncultured.[26]

All of Johansson's points are well taken, but it still seems oversimplified to think that all pop music is inappropriate for the gospel message. Sometimes the repetitive phrases of church pop music set to simplified lyrics can be monotonous and unfulfilling, but is it possible to put every single church pop song in the same category of worthlessness? Isn't it possible that one, just one, might hit the mark and gain longevity? Perhaps in time a particular church pop song will become a folk song that everyone knows, but no one knows the origin. Although the commercialism of contemporary church pop is distasteful, the practical side of selling music is that at least there is something to buy. Most people do have some money to buy music but not necessarily the know-how to compose and notate music for themselves, especially on a large scale.

Secular folk music of the day in Martin Luther's time (1500s) or in Charles Wesley's time (1700s) closely resembled sacred melodies because they were patterned after church music. Twentieth-century American music changed that premise, and today the opposite is true. Change is an inevitable part of improvisation, and the 1960s brought to America change in every way imaginable. A new form of folk-style church song emerged in which popular guitar music took a prominent role. By the 1970s, church worship was dominated by guitars and drums, displacing the big bands and keyboard instruments that had shaped most of twentieth-century popular music. Teenagers from all

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[26] Ibid., 59-60.

parts of the United States and Britain were tinkering with guitars. Guitars were easily obtained, didn't require much formal training to strum, and were very portable.

Charismatic churches, following suit to the popular culture both in the 1970s and in the early 1920s, embraced popular music into their worship. In the early storefront Pentecostal churches of Thomas A. Dorsey's and Arizona Dranes' era, the blues were welcomed into worship. Likewise, later charismatic churches embraced a form of rock and roll, called contemporary Christian music. The Pentecostal and Holiness churches have historically utilized all sorts of musical instruments, some of them highly rhythmic, for worshipping God; however, most mainstream denominations preferred the traditional sounds of the organ and piano. They considered other instruments primitive or worldly. However, even gaining public acceptance for the organ in worship came slowly. Horace Boyer, in his article, "Traditional and Contemporary Gospel," states that "Ironically, the public is generally unaware of the difficulty musicians had in introducing the organ into religious services in the United States."[27] As the church grew in the beginning settlements of this country, there were painful adjustments, just like changes today. Up until recently, secular music was influenced by church music, adopting its singing and piano styles. But now the reverse is true. Boyer states, "Contemporary gospel is incorporating the harmony, instrumentation, background sound and style, and dress of secular music ... Just how far the influence of secular music extends in the future will be determined by gospel music lovers who make their desires known."[28]

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[27] Horace Boyer, "A Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Contemporary Gospel," in *More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene V. Jackson (London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 144.
[28] Ibid.

The reasons for grafting popular music into church music by Pentecostal and Holiness churches remained the same: primarily, popular music gave the parishioners freedom and fun in their emotionally charged worship, and, secondly, their church musicians sometimes had to double as secular musicians on Saturday night and only knew one style of playing. This doubling of sacred and secular musicians is sometimes true today. Even if the guitarists and drummer are not going back and forth from Saturday night to Sunday morning, most of them got their start by playing secular music. Because guitars became electronic in the 1970s church, the former church pianist was relegated to a backseat role, often required to play an electronic keyboard instrument. Electronic keyboards are not as satisfying to play and do not have the same potential for sound and creativity as the traditional piano. The piano is one of the most ingenious instruments ever invented, and it is a tragedy that church musicians have taken the easy way out and have used only a miniscule fraction of its capabilities. Just as the piano outpaced the organ decades earlier, now the guitar has relegated the piano to a less dominant position in many churches. This is typical of changes that have occurred throughout the history of the Christian church, however. Once particular instruments or styles of music have gained acceptance in society as a whole, inevitably they find their way into the church. That is how the piano and its versatile percussive gospel style swept into churches one hundred years ago and will likely remain in some form for centuries to come.

Chapter 3. Origins of Ragtime Music

One important influence on ragtime piano music was nineteenth-century Slavonic folk-dance music, which was popular in countries like Russia and Poland. The Polish people adored Frederic Chopin, the "Poet of the Piano"[29] and a native of Poland whose mazurkas and polonaises epitomized the folk dances of his countrymen that he knew as a child.[30] Even after moving to Paris, Chopin had a "deep and abiding" love for Poland. One characteristic of his mazurkas is that they frequently stress either the second or third beat of a three-beat measure, and at times the slower mazurkas require an increased speed in their middle sections.[31]

Ragtime music shares this characteristic of stressing weak beats or hiding a strong beat by use of a tie. This technique, syncopation, is commonly used in all forms of old and new dance music. The word "ragtime" is probably of African-American descent and comes from the term "ragged," which, when applied to music, means to splice the beat, surprising the listener with accents on weak beats or the second half of beats.[32] During the 1880s and early 1890s, the term ragtime generally referred to any syncopated music, whether performed by piano, banjo, or band instruments. Today, ragtime refers mainly to performances on the piano because of the hugely successful performers of piano ragtime and the tremendous sales of ragtime sheet music and piano rolls.[33] Several authors,

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[29] Janis Cortese's official Web site, "Joplin and Chopin—Twins of Technique," http://www.io.com/~cortese/joplin/technique.html (accessed October 26, 2002).
[30] J. Barrie Jones, "Nationalism," in *Cambridge Companion to the Piano*, ed. David Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Vinson, "Influence of Ragtime," 3-4.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Cortese, "Joplin and Chopin–Twins of Technique," 2.

including Janis Cortese, have drawn correlations between Chopin's settings of folk dances and Scott Joplin's ragtime because of the shared similarities of a "strong left hand keeping a drumbeat rhythm and requiring great strength and precision" and "a right hand that considered the bass rhythm as a structure upon which treble embroidery was to be hung, dancing over and around it."[34]

Octave eighth notes were also common in both genres. Both jazz and popular music have a close relationship to European compositional structures, but the European influence on ragtime was very strong, especially one hundred years ago when Scott Joplin's music was in its heyday.[35] Scott Joplin's best-known and most popular piece was "Maple Leaf Rag." It remained Joplin's most popular piece until the 1970s. (At that time Joplin's "The Entertainer," written in 1902, overtook "Maple Leaf" in popularity due to the its exposure in the movie *The Sting*).[36] Written in 1899, "Maple Leaf Rag" was the first piece of sheet music that sold over a million copies. It may have initiated the nationwide rage over ragtime, but the genre had actually been introduced years earlier at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893. Scott Joplin himself performed at this large exposition, along with John Philip Sousa and many other American composers.

Most ragtime music was written in a march or a steady duple time. Joplin knew John Philip Sousa personally and often warmed up on the piano with his own rendition of a Sousa march. In general, ragtime is to be played at a moderate tempo suitable for dancing (originally cakewalks, marches, and two-steps). Its form consists of sixteen

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[35] Vinson, "Influence of Ragtime," 8.
[36] Brian Priestley, "Ragtime, Blues, Jazz and Popular Music," in *Cambridge Companion to the Piano*, ed. David Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 210.

measure sections that are subdivided into four measure phrases. The final of these four phrases typically culminates in a full cadence. The harmonies are conventional, based largely on tonic, dominant, and subdominant chords in a major key. The left hand part usually alternates bass notes and a mid-range piano chord, has a clear harmonic progression, and a strong beat. The right hand weaves a syncopated melody into the left hand drumbeat.[37]

Unlike later ragtime composers, Scott Joplin was a trained musician. As a young man, he studied with a German musician who exposed him to the European classics.[38] Shortly afterwards Joplin attended Smith College in Missouri, studying music theory and composition. Joplin was very concerned about the correct interpretation of his music, which prompted him to reclassify his music as "Classic Ragtime." This term, coined by his publisher John Stark, was meant to distinguish his music from the ingenuous newcomers who emphasized "speed over accuracy." The "Classic" or "Missouri" ragtime style is noted for its folk-like, danceable character, its lovely melodies, and relatively slow tempos.[39] In fact, Joplin objected to fast performances of his rags and usually printed a warning on his music: "NOTE: Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast."[40]

In 1908 Joplin issued a booklet called *School of Ragtime Exercises* that contained six piano exercises in the "correct" way to play ragtime. He remarked in the preface of the booklet that "real ragtime," of which he meant a higher class of ragtime, is more

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[37] Joel Snyder and Carol Krumhonsi, "Tapping to Ragtime: Cues to Pulse Finding," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18, no. 4 (summer 2001): 459.
[38] Vinson, "Influence of Ragtime," 8.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

difficult to play. He called it a "painful truth" that most pianists have difficulty deciphering his rhythms because they don't read syncopated notations well. They may be quick and clever, but they were unskilled at reading music. Joplin said syncopations do not indicate "light or trashy music," and it is time for the public to stop hurling "bricks" at that "hateful ragtime" and to understand the cultural value of its artform. He said his main objective in compiling these exercises was to assist amateur players in giving Joplin rags that "weird and intoxicating effect intended by the composer."[41]

Joplin tried to reassure a leery public that his ragtime was respectable music and comparable to any piece of European classical music. For twenty years, until his death in 1927, Joplin promoted the publication of his music as "real" music, penning it exactly as classical music would be written. As ragtime grew in popularity, many people felt ragtime music was degrading, even sinful, because the lyrics were often offensive, vulgar, and racially bigoted. According to Edward A. Berlin, ragtime was derived from a more primitive form of African-American music called "Coon Songs," a derogatory term commonly applied to African-Americans in the early years of this country. These songs had oftentimes crude and rough lyrics about violence (especially involving a razor), cheating, greediness, gambling, shiftlessness, cowardliness, and sexual promiscuity.[42] These same lyrics were later carried over to ragtime music. Scott Joplin was appalled, stating:

> I have often sat in theatres and listened to beautiful ragtime melodies set to almost vulgar words as a song, and I have wondered why some composers

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[41] James Haskins and Kathleen Benson, *Scott Joplin* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1978), 159.
[42] Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime – Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 33.

> will continue to make the public hate ragtime melodies because the melodies are set to such bad words … If someone were to put vulgar words to a strain of Beethoven's beautiful Symphonies, people would begin saying: "I don't like Beethoven Symphonies." So it is the unwholesome words and not the ragtime melodies that many people hate.[43]

Another reason ragtime was shunned by much of the public was that most ragtime artists performed in parlors of bordellos and, later, saloons and barrelhouses that also served as brothels. Scott Joplin himself played on the second floor of a bar called the Maple Leaf Club, from whence he named his million dollar seller. In an article on ragtime in the *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, William Bolcom states,

> It is surprising that music springing from such a 'disreputable' source (and composed mainly by blacks) should have achieved print at all in those times, but it did, owing to the immense popular demand.[44]

According to ragtime scholar David Jasen, Joplin was a "terrible piano player. He wasn't good enough to play downstairs in the main saloon."[45] Joplin sometimes was "egged on" by younger ragtime artists to partake in "cutting contests" in which they took great delight in playing circles around him. Jasen said Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" was widely imitated by ragtime amateurs who improvised the piece until it sounded "monstrous." Conversely, he said Scott Joplin's music was a "conscious composition, rather than just a bunch of improvisations in syncopations."[46] It includes all the articulations, metronome markings, and dynamics of European music, and each note and rest is notated exactly as it is to be played with nothing more and nothing less. Joplin's compositions also mirror

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[43] Ibid., 36.
[44] Vinson, "Influence of Ragtime," 7-8.
[45] David Jasen, "Jasen Talks About Joplin: 'Great – but a Terrible Piano Player,'" *The Ragtimer* (March-April 1981): 12.
[46] Ibid., 13.

European styles because of his use of minor tonalities and chromaticism. He produced musical compositions in several movements, each expressing its own unique and deep emotion. It is true that Scott Joplin was not a great performer, and he eventually gave it up, deciding to concentrate on his *School of Ragtime* booklet. Will Vodery, a composer and conductor who was a contemporary of Joplin, said Joplin felt he was "above entertainment type of music … trying to be academic, strictly his own style."[47]

Two immensely popular Joplin compositions do not belong to the classification of ragtime: "Bethena," a syncopated waltz reminiscent of Chopin, and "Solace, a Mexican Serenade," a "tango-rag." "Solace" does not have a steady duple rhythm but is to be played rubato, a typical Romantic era technique.[48] Joplin explained that "Solace" was meant to be played in "very slow march time," and it was "filled with warmth and with the unmistakable Joplin style, mellowed perhaps by his happy relationship with his second wife" (Lottie Stokes).[49] The tango rhythm had recently been introduced to America in 1860 by Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Haskins and Benson noted, "Since the tango form probably originated in Argentina, Joplin likely used the term "Mexican" because he was seeking a new market for his sheet music and piano rolls. Ragtime had already gained popularity in Europe, both in England and on the Continent, and was now picking up momentum south of the U.S. border."[50]

Toward the end of his career and ultimately his life, Joplin became depressed over his unsuccessful opera *Treemonisha.* He was also suffering from the physical and mental

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[47] Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 86.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Haskins and Benson, *Scott Joplin*, 167.
[50] Ibid.

torment of syphilis, a disease he contracted in his earlier bordello days. His mind and muscle control were deteriorating rapidly. He would sit down at the parlor piano and forget his own compositions. When he tried to compose, no ideas came to mind. For a long time, his playing had been "inconsistent." Eubie Blake heard him play "Maple Leaf Rag" in 1911 and "thought he was terrible."[51] Conversely, ragtime musician Dai Vernon had an entirely different impression in 1913 when he heard Joplin in one of the composing rooms privately playing "Maple Leaf Rag." He said Joplin played very well but not fast, to a strict time with no added notes—just a "tacked on" introduction and ending. He called Joplin "a nice, quiet fellow, obviously engrossed in his music."[52] By 1916 Joplin's inconsistencies were more pronounced.

That same year Joplin recorded several piano rolls, which were becoming the rage for home entertainment. Since ragtime piano sheet music was still too difficult for the average pianist, and recorded music was barely invented, many people bought player pianos and all the piano rolls they could get their hands on. Ragtime piano music offered the perfect genre for piano rolls because it utilized the entire keyboard, filling in chords and using extreme bounces from bass to treble registers. Joplin's piano rolls were programmed by the Cannonized Music Company and, upon comparison to his printed music, are precisely identical. According to John McCall, the player piano was the first invention in music technology that led to modern recordings today.[53] In his article "Rags and Rolls," McCall wrote:

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[51] Ibid., 193-94.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

> It was central in the formation of popular attitudes towards the relationship of technology to the arts. In addition, the introduction of player technology was embedded in a social contexture which brought Afro-American music into a new relationship with Euro-American culture. The florescence of ragtime and early jazz, and the enthusiasm with which the player technology was embraced, produced a singularly American art form resonant with the unique mix of exuberance and uncertainty which characterized America at the dawning of this century.[54]

The decline of ragtime can be traced back to the moment piano rolls were replaced by early recordings. By 1915 black musicians were turning to jazz, a largely improvisational genre, unlike ragtime. Nonetheless, by 1915 ragtime had left its mark on European composers such as Satie, Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Hindemith.[55] The European composers' influence on ragtime music came around full circle as Europe became infatuated with the "new exotic" ragtime music before 1900 and remained infatuated for over twenty-five years.[56]

John Philip Sousa, the composer and conductor of marching band music, was largely responsible for ragtime's introduction to Europe. At the Paris Fair Concerts of 1900 and a subsequent tour through Europe, Sousa was an ambassador of ragtime, spreading it to Germany, England, Holland, and Belgium. Debussy's "Golliwog's Cakewalk" is modeled after minstrel cakewalks with classic ragtime rhythms. Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du Soldat," "Ragtime for 11 Instruments," and "Piano-Rag Music" were all influenced by American ragtime. In "Piano-Rag Music" Stravinsky

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[54] John McCall, "Rags and Rolls: The Piano Roll Collection at the Archives of Traditional Music," *Resound* 7, no. 3 (1988): 3.
[55] Paul Oliver, Max Harrison, and William Bolcom, *Gospel, Blues and Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 30.
[56] Vinson, "Influence of Ragtime," 28.

surprises the listener with sudden accents and dynamic and meter changes. He commented,

> What fascinated me most of all in the work was that the different rhythmic episodes were dictated by the fingers themselves. My own fingers seemed to enjoy it so much that I began to practice the piece simply for my personal satisfaction.[57]

Stravinsky dedicated "Piano-Rag Music" to Arthur Rubenstein, whom he had been encouraging to play contemporary music. Rubenstein didn't appreciate the piece, however, and responded in writing,

> It sounded like an exercise for percussion and had nothing to do with any rag music, or with any other music in my sense. I must admit I was bitterly, bitterly, disappointed. Good musicians to whom I showed it share my opinion.[58]

In the 1922 "Suite of Piano" by Hindemith, the last movement is called "Ragtime." The composer offered his direction on its interpretation:

> Take no notice of what you learned in Piano School. Do not consider long whether you must strike the d-sharp with the fourth or the sixth finger. Play the piece very wildly, but always very strictly in rhythm, like a machine. Consider the piano here as an interesting kind of percussion instrument and handle it accordingly.[59]

Meanwhile, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the American controversy over the merits of ragtime dragged on. Opponents continued to warn of unwholesome degeneracy and offense to intellectual and civilized moral values. Proponents argued that it was the only unique music our country had, and that it was enjoyed by European royalty and musicians alike. Igor Stravinsky said American music was a "veritable art"

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[57] Ibid., 32.
[58] Ibid., 33.
[59] Ibid., 35.

of which he couldn't get enough to satisfy him. He stated, "God forbid that you Americans should compose symphonies and fugues."[60]

The world-famous Stravinsky's encouraging words helped Joplin promote respectability for his music. With Stravinsky's endorsement, members of a highly cultured society were freed to explore these new "American" sounds. Scott Joplin's "Classic Ragtime" was influenced by music of which he had been exposed, both of African and European descent. Joplin was able to successfully fuse the two. He bridged the gap between rich and poor and opened up a new genre for all people of the world. Joplin, a trained composer, fought hard to keep high standards in his music. Eventually he won respect from his contemporaries, both at home and abroad.

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[60] Berlin, *Ragtime*, 45.

Chapter 4. Origins of Stride Piano

The ragtime rage spread through all the major cities, including Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, and especially New York City. New York City was swarming with new and untrained artists playing at clubs in close proximity on 28th Street, causing a cacophony of sound. Nicknamed "Tin Pan Alley," this downtown neighborhood of New York City produced an impure, improvisational form of ragtime. In a famous ragtime book, *They All Played Ragtime*, Blesh and Janis blame Tin Pan Alley for cheapening ragtime, calling it an "inferior product, a poor counterfeit of the authentic midwestern strain, which is Classic Ragtime."[61]

New developments were also happening in uptown Harlem in the form of stride piano. "Harlem Stride" featured a fast, showy, exhibitionistic piano style. All the top players would enter competitions called cutting contests to demonstrate their quick licks and tricks, which were used as a means of gaining exposure and building their reputations. Due to the competitiveness among these self-proclaimed New York ragtime professors, the Harlem Stride pianists attained a distinctive sound and, by virtue of their talent and virtuosity, became recognized nationwide.[62]

In stride piano, the syncopation alternates between both hands, unlike classic ragtime, in which the syncopation mainly happens in the right hand. The left hand stride is very active, creating countermelodies while moving the bass line. Stride pianists also would swing the eighth notes rather than playing them in straight time. Faster tempos and changes in tempo gave the artists freedom to improvise, which in turn gave rise to

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[61] Ibid., 186.
[62] Vinson, "Influence of Ragtime," 11.

more aerobic dance steps such as the fox trot, turkey trot, chicken scratch, possum trot, monkey glide, and the itch, sometimes referred to as the heebie-jeebies. These replaced the slower ragtime dances such as the slow drag, two-step, and cakewalk.[63]

Stride rags were too complicated to notate exactly as the artist performed them, so these publications contain simplified forms which performers were expected to embellish. These embellishments, or "tricks," were often stolen from other performers. Eubie Blake stated,

> I don't play any better than any real pianist, but it's the tricks I know. I know tricks the average guy don't know.[64]

James P. Johnson pointed out the importance of "tricks":

> I was getting around town and hearing everybody. If they had anything I didn't have, I listened and stole it ... I was born with absolute pitch and could catch a key that a player was using and copy it – even Lucky's [Roberts].[65]

One noteworthy stride pianist was Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941). His style reflected his upbringing in New Orleans, a city featuring a mixed bouquet of cultures stemming from Africa and the West Indies to France and Europe. Blending the syncopated sounds of ragtime and the harmonic blues with his cultural background, Morton lent an unusual and very agreeable slant to stride piano. Two characteristics typified his style: the use of sixths in the left hand (an old midwestern device) and his endeavor to incorporate the whole jazz band into his piano performance. He even used a drumstick stuck on the

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[63] Ibid., 12.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 11.

inside of his left shoe to tap the beat against the wood while he was playing. He must have figured there was no sense in having one limb sitting idly by.[66]

Jelly Roll Morton was one of many stride pianists who were successful in the 1920s but whose careers were devastated by the Depression in the early 1930s. Like the style of the Harlem players, his style was a progeny of ragtime, but he also bridged the gap between ragtime and jazz, two separate genres rising up about the same time in history.[67] Jelly Roll Morton was a big fan of Scott Joplin. After the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893, Chicago became the hot spot for ragtime and blues, and both Morton and Joplin visited Chicago regularly. They, along with Porter King, even collaborated on a stride piece called "King Porter Stomp," which was named in honor of Porter King after his death. Dempsey J. Travis wrote in the Black Music Research Newsletter from Columbia College in Chicago: "Scott Joplin was the undisputed king of ragtime composers and piano players. However, the bridge between ragtime and jazz was built by one of his young admirers, Ferdinand 'Jelly Roll' Morton."[68]

Another style of popular music of the 1920s that was an offshoot of ragtime and stride was novelty piano. Stylistically, novelty piano combined several sources: ragtime, blues, and the music of the French Impressionists. Jasen and Tichenor wrote, "The French Impressionists were more likely to use chromaticism and the whole-tone scale."[69] In her dissertation, Rebecca Folsom writes,

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[66] Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 251-52.
[67] Priestley, "Ragtime, Blues, Jazz, and Popular Music," 213.
[68] Dempsey J. Travis, "Chicago's Jazz Trail: 1893-1950," *Black Music Research Newsletter* 9, no. 2 (fall, 1987): 1-2.
[69] Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 214.

> Novelty piano was for the trained pianist – a kind of show-off piano. It featured an exhibitionist kind of virtuosity, and a particular species of syncopation known as secondary rag, in which the regular quadruple subdivisions of the basic pulse are grouped in three instead of two.[70]

A famous piece in this style is Zez Confrey's "Kitten on the Keys," written in 1921. The sheet music for this piece actually outsold "Maple Leaf Rag." In "Kitten on the Keys," the left hand starts in the treble clef in octaves with middle C on the bottom, then goes down the C scale chromatically, drops an octave more, and walks up to the F chord diatonically in octaves. This is only the introduction! In the next two measures, Confrey uses left hand roll chords starting with the root, fifth, and octave. The top note moves upwards to the ninth, minor tenth (blues note), then back to the ninth and octave in a boogie walk. The third measure begins with a stride octave on the fifth scalar degree (D) followed by a G^7 chord, then dropped down two chromatic steps below the third (B) and walked up to the third in chromatic octaves. The stride bass has a combination of the bouncy style of alternating octaves with chords and straight walk-ups, diatonic and chromatic. The right hand of "Kitten on the Keys" features unusual harmonies that had been played previously in classic ragtime. In her preface to her songbook "You Can Play Stride Piano," Judy Carmichael comments,

> Zez's special contribution was in the different harmonies he used, and in his humor. In "Kitten on the Keys" you can hear the cat; there was another piece of his where you could literally picture skeletons coming out of the closet and dancing. I never thought of ragtime as a rip-roaring honky-tonk kind of music; with Zez, the music goes running by, and it's just a riot.[71]

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[70] Folsom, "Brief History of White Southern Gospel Music," 37.
[71] Carmichael, *You Can Play Stride Piano*, 6.

Carmichael goes on to say that Zez Confrey helped her stride technique because his left hand bounced back and forth continuously. Confrey's style helped her develop her own style of stride that she liberally applied to such classics as "Ain't She Sweet" by Milton Ager, "Oh, Lady Be Good" by the Gershwins, and "Lazy River" by Hoagie Carmichael. Judy Carmichael was able to give tips and exercises for a stride technique that was beneficial to the learner. She said she observed professional classical pianists and adopted their approach into her own technique. She noticed they kept their hands near the keys, not wasting motion by high hand bouncing.[72]

The Harlem stride ragtime artists routinely bounced off the keys in a showy display, but as a general rule for standard piano playing, high-handed bouncing should be be avoided. There are several obvious reasons for this: 1) high handed bouncing is not an efficient use of energy, 2) it slows down the performance, and 3) it causes unnecessary risks to the accuracy of note playing. High handed bouncing was (and still is) wasteful and dangerous to the overall performance, but back in the cutting contest days of Harlem ragtime, it may have been a desired and intended aspect of their piano skills demonstration.

In addition to the importance of keeping hands low, Judy Carmichael offered another helpful hint in performing. She observed that classical pianists sit on the front half of the bench with the bench pushed back away from the piano.[73] Sitting on the front of the bench and leaning slightly forward helps with mobility and reaching the entire keyboard. The pianist can lean further forward and to the left or right without having to

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[72] Ibid., 7.
[73] Ibid.

scoot the body back and forth. By definition, stride piano uses the bulk of the keyboard, even the very top and bottom registers, so it is crucial that the bench is pushed back and the body is leaning forward.

A third technical skill that Judy Carmichael shared about stride piano is the importance of breathing and relaxation. At the beginning of her stride development, she would practice the back and forth bounce of her left hand until her forearm ached. This repetitive motion can lead to all sorts of physical problems, but she learned to take breathing breaks where she lowered and relaxed her shoulders while breathing deeply. This is a mandate for any career pianist. Carmichael played at Disneyland, sometimes seven hours a day, five days a week. She found that breathing and lowering her shoulders actually gave her more stamina and soon used these techniques even during a performance. Sometimes she played the chorus of "The Entertainer" twenty times in a row, which is acceptable if people are just walking by eating a hot dog. For Carmichael, the music became monotonous, so she concentrated on relaxation and breathing while she was playing, sometimes forgetting an occasional note, but no one seemed to notice. The experience of her grueling piano-playing job at Disneyland helped her realize just how crucial these practical techniques were: keeping the fingers on the keys, sitting forward on the bench, leaning forward from side to side, taking a deep breath, and relaxing the shoulders.[74]

To help her students get the feel of playing stride piano, Judy Carmichael said she always tried to picture a big band in her mind. When she felt the left hand rhythm needed

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[74] Ibid., 6.

to be emphasized, she would punch it out; when the right hand had an interesting riff, she would pretend it was the horn section and really let it blare out above the rest. In helping her students visualize a big band, Carmichael was encouraging them to have only one focal point at a time so as to highlight, not hide, the exciting parts. She said, "Even Art Tatum would do less in his right hand when he wanted the stride bass to come out; when he played a lot of fast runs, he would stop striding. It was seamless, but he would make certain that the focus moved back and forth from left to right."[75]

Carmichael had more good tips for her students. Since stride piano works best with a strong beat, the tendency is to try to play it up to tempo immediately. She admonished students to practice the left hand alone with a metronome to keep it slow. She said she had to slow herself down before a performance because the music naturally tended to speed up as the excitement increased. When she had moving bass notes in her left hand, she used a single note rather than octaves or tenths. This kept the bass-line lighter and more maneuverable. In concluding her helpful tips on playing stride, she listed them in a nutshell, as follows:

> Go over the following examples with a slow, metronomic beat. Stay relaxed, and never twist your body. Don't elevate your elbow to the side. Allow your shoulders to fall. Take a breath -- often! Remember, don't play too fast. When you really have command of this music it will sound fast because of all the movement, and it will swing better because it will be less frenetic. Like any other music, you want it to sing as much as possible.[76]

The technical aspects of novelty piano had a marked influence on the music of George Gershwin in the 1920s and 30s. In Gershwin's "Three Preludes," his blend of blues and

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[75] Ibid., 7.
[76] Ibid.

ragtime is clearly portrayed with his varied uses of third note accentuation and blue notes, which came naturally to him. In his early years, Gershwin had developed an excellent ragtime playing style that can still be heard today in his early piano rolls and recordings.[77]

Ragtime piano in the 1940s and 50s was stylistically referred to as "honky-tonk." This term can also apply to the type of establishment where honky-tonk music could be heard. The music was often performed on a tinny or "rinky-tink" sounding piano, using methods similar to ragtime such as a heavy alternating bass pattern and a syncopated right hand melody. The desired effect was achieved by an out-of-tune piano with glue or thumbtacks stuck to the hammers giving the music a brittle quality. For the full effect, the male pianist donned a derby hat, garter on his sleeve, and dangled a cigarette from his mouth, which was reminiscent of the "Wild West" days of the 1800s. Honky-tonk ragtime piano has cleaned up considerably since then and still can be heard today in such places as Branson, Missouri by JoAnn Castle at the Lawrence Welk Theater or by Judy Carmichael, who performed at Disneyland and now publishes her stride piano arrangements of big band songs that offer helpful tips on stride techniques.[78]

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[77] Priestley, "Ragtime, Blues, Jazz, and Popular Music," 216.
[78] Carmichael, *You Can Play Stride Piano*, 7.

Chapter 5. Origins of the Blues

Just as pure ragtime piano music became more showy and exhibitionist in the forms of stride and novelty piano (also known as barrelhouse and later honky-tonk), another branch of American jazz was evolving called the Blues. The blues style was popular in nightclubs of St. Louis and Chicago in the 1920s and has not only retained its popularity but has grown into the most well-loved and understood form of jazz today.

The main person who has been credited with establishing and disseminating the blues sound is William Christopher Handy (1873-1958). Born and raised in Florence, Alabama, he is called the "Father of the Blues" because he was the first to notate the blue notes that were so characteristic of African-American music. He was very nearly the first to have published the blues but missed the mark by just two weeks because of his problems finding a publisher. Handy finally published "Memphis Blues" himself, and thought he was the was the first to publish the blues. He didn't find out he was not the first until he was over seventy years old in the 1940s.[79] As ragtime historians have discovered, there were several more obscure composers, such as Hart A. Wand, H. Franklin "Baby" Seals, Robert Hoffman, and Antonio Maggio, who published some sort of a blues strain before Handy.[80] But Handy was proven exactly correct by historians when he said the blues were:

> patterned on black song, of Southern origin, a personal expression rooted in folk music but adaptable to theatrical performance, not necessarily melancholy and not constricted to twelve-bar patterns ... He believed in the blues, and he stuck with them. (Each of his four predecessors

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[79] Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*, 225-26.
[80] Ibid.

published only one blues composition.) Handy may not have been "The Father of the Blues," but he was indisputably their emancipator.[81]

In 1903, Handy, already a bandleader and composer, carefully listened to the blues being played on stringed instruments in the Mississippi Delta. In David Evans' article, "Goin' up the Country," Evans notes, "He [Handy] was so impressed with the power of this music and the favorable audience reaction that he arranged these tunes for his group of trained musicians."[82]

Along with Joplin and Sousa, W. C. Handy was in attendance at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1893. While at the Haitian Pavilion, Scott Joplin and others discovered that many of their fellow African-American musicians had been separately developing their own brand of art form, all with origins in African-American culture. In an article entitled "Chicago's Jazz Trail," Dempsey J. Travis writes, "Scott Joplin was overwhelmed when he first heard the W.C. Handy Orchestra, at the Haitian Pavilion, play arrangements that incorporated elements of both Memphis and Mississippi ragtime."[83]

It was Handy's "Memphis Blues" that was the first of his many published blues compositions. "Memphis Blues" actually originated from a campaign tune Handy had written for a Mr. E. H. Crump, who was running for mayor of Memphis. Handy was commissioned to write a catchy tune without lyrics to play throughout the campaign, but African-Americans didn't think much of Crump's campaign platform, which was that of the reform party. Comments from the crowd and even the band gave Handy the impression that they didn't have much confidence in Crump's law and order reform

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[81] Ibid.

[82] David Evans, "Goin' Up the Country: Blues in Texas and the Deep South," *Nothing But the Blues*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 35.

[83] Travis, "Chicago's Jazz Trail," 1.

ideas, so Handy captured their sentiments by privately writing out lyrics that had already begun to be sung to his Mr. Crump campaign theme or jingle:

> Mr. Crump won't 'low no easy riders here
> Mr. Crump won't 'low no easy riders here
> We don't care what Mr. Crump don't 'low
> We gon' to bar'l-house anyhow—
> Mr. Crump can go and catch hisself some air![84]

These lyrics typify the blues culture; a cynical attitude toward the advantages of hard work and clean living and a skepticism of politicians and their promises. Instead they favored the recreation of barrelhouse music, liquor, illicit sex, and drugs. This culture was, and is, understandably frowned on by many Americans. But the music itself (aside from the lyrics) is innocent, even wholesome, and should not be thrown out with the blues lifestyle.

All three pages of the published sheet music to "Memphis Blues" are printed for piano. (see example 1) The second page strain seems the only likely theme conducive to singing the Mr. Crump song. The first page is largely introductory material for the second page, which is the main theme of the piece. Both pages are written in the key of F. The third page, however, modulates to the subdominant key of B-flat and has a new theme. This rhythm and shape of this theme sound very reminiscent of Scott Joplin's "Pineapple Rag," which was published in 1908. That was four years prior to Handy's "Memphis Blues." The purpose of pointing out these dates is not to insinuate that Handy didn't originate the theme of "Memphis Blues," but to show that all composers are hugely influenced by popular music of the day to which they are repeatedly exposed.

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[84] William Christopher Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: DaCapo, 1991), 93.

Indeed, it would not be surprising if Handy and his band members had not been big fans of Joplin.[85]

Handy explained that the first and third sections of "Memphis Blues" (Mr. Crump's song) used the three-line stanza of twelve measures, while the second page had the usual sixteen measures to which he placed the questionable and yet humorous lyrics regarding poor Mr. Crump. The three line stanza was already a standard in the blues style. His contribution to the blues form was to add "blue notes" or the lowered third, fifth, and seventh degrees of the major scale to try to "suggest the typical slurs of the Negro voice."[86]

[85] Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 103-05.
[86] Ibid., 99.

Example 1

The Memphis Blues
or
(Mister Crump)

The sequence of this composition introduced something new, for there is no finality in the endings of the separate strains until the last two measures of the final strain.

By W. C. HANDY

Tempo di Blues

1.

2.

Copyright, 1912, by W. C. Handy
Copyright renewed, 1940, by W. C. Handy
Published by Handy Brothers Music Co., Inc., New York

ff

ff

8va

loco

1.

2.

mp

legato

f

ff

legato

Luckily, Mr. Crump never went with the band when they performed his campaign jingle and didn't hear the unflattering lyrics using his name. Handy felt that even if the poor people were skeptical about Mr. Crump bringing reform to Memphis, that at least they would enjoy a catchy tune and humorous line while getting Crump's name noticed. Handy is quoted in his bibliography as saying,

> Beale Street was expected to cast a lot of votes, and it was squarely up to us to get them. I began to rack my brain. A song like Moody and Sankey's *Pull for the Shore*, while it might have expressed the mood and temper of Mr. Crump's platform, would certainly not have pulled any votes for him in my opinion. I closed my eyes and tried to dream it. Let me see now—yes, that's it. I could hear what I wanted. It was a weird melody in much the same mood as the one that had been strummed on the guitar at Tutwiler. It did the business, too. Folks went wild about it. No doubt Mr. Crump would have gone wild too, in quite a different way, had he been permitted to hear the words. But he didn't go with the band, so he never heard the song that many like to think whisked him into office on a reform ticket ... We were hired to beat the drum and blow the horn for Mr. Crump, and that we did—in our own way.[87]

Now that Mr. Crump was elected mayor, Handy felt embarrassed by the lyrics and really didn't want to tell Mr. Crump to "catch hisself some air." The tune itself was so well-known and popular in the Memphis area, though, that Handy decided he would have it published for all to enjoy. He added a beginning and an ending strain, and he decided to christen it "Memphis Blues" in warm sentiment for the city where it all happened.[88]

W.C. Handy told an unfortunate story about what happened when he tried to publish this piece, however. First, he had trouble finding a publisher in New York or Chicago that wanted it. They all complained that it was not complete because the first

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[87] Ibid., 98-99.
[88] Ibid., 101.

and last strains only had twelve measures instead of the customary sixteen.[89] Handy was just writing in the traditional oral blues structure and could not understand why that would be a problem. His audiences never seemed to tire of "Memphis Blues." Handy finally published it himself, like so many later composers who followed suit. He knew he needed help in distribution, so he turned to L.Z. Phillips at the local department store named Bry's. Phillips was well aware of the piece's popularity, so he offered to help with the printing for the price of $32.50 and copyrighting for $1.00. Phillips told Handy he had ordered 1,000 copies of "Memphis Blues" from a printer. While he and Handy were waiting, a Denver music publisher named Theron C. Bennett dropped by the department store. He offered to act as Handy's sales agent, promoting this piece along with his other songs all over the country. This proposal pleased Handy greatly, so he entrusted the local store manager and the traveling salesman with his prized work. One week after the 1,000 copies had been delivered to the department store, Handy went in to check on sales. Both Phillips and Bennett said there had been almost no sales as evidenced by the tall stack of copies on the counter. Handy couldn't understand why all of Memphis seemed to like the piece and yet no one bought it, so when Bennett offered to take the copyright and printing plates off his hands for $50 in cash, Handy agreed, and Bennett became the sole owner of "Memphis Blues." Actually, Phillips and Bennett knew it would be such a huge success that they ordered 2,000 copies instead of 1,000, and it was the remainder of that stack through which they fooled poor Handy. On October 7, 1912, Bennett ordered another 10,000 copies with his own name as publisher

[89] Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around*, 233-35.

and Phillips became wholesale manager for Bennett's publishing company. The song continued gaining strength over the whole country. Lyrics were even written for it about Handy and his Memphis band by someone who had never even heard the band. The lyricist falsely claimed that the band had a "big bassoon" just to rhyme with "the trombone's croon." Handy didn't immediately find out about Phillips and Bennett's trickery, but eventually he learned his lesson about song thievery and went into a publishing partnership with his friend Harry Pace, vowing to never let a copyright escape him again.[90]

Bolstered by the popularity of his "Memphis Blues," Handy knew he was destined for greater things. After writing a relatively unsuccessful instrumental "Jogo Blues" (in which he later reused the tune for "St. Louis Blues"),[91] he was compelled by his inner voices to encapsulate a theme floating through his head. He wanted meaningful lyrics that portrayed the down-and-out miseries inflicting so many people he met. Handy was influenced by the hardships around him. In his autobiography, Handy told the story of a lady who crossed his path in a drunken stagger as she mumbled about her demise. As she walked by, she slurred, "Ma man's got a heart like a rock cast in de sea." Asking another woman what she meant, the second woman replied, "Lawd, man, it's hard and gone so far from her she can't reach it."[92]

The call to create was so commanding that Handy rented a room for one night on Beale Street, an African-American neighborhood in Memphis, where Handy said "you

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 119.
[92] Ibid.

could find the best and worst of the Negro life."[93] But Handy was oblivious to the night sounds of honky-tonk piano thumpers, loud church meetings, pimps, and poolhouses getting wound up for the evening. He felt a song coming on, something to escalate him beyond his ragtime roots. He wanted to emulate the "down-home ditty fit to go with twanging banjos and yellow shoes" he had heard in St. Louis, but he wanted it to be "cut to the native blues pattern."[94] By morning the next day, Handy emerged from the hotel with "St. Louis Blues" largely completed. His aim was to combine ragtime syncopation with a soulful melody like a spiritual, so he used plagal chords to create a spiritual effect. He also allowed breaks or gaps, a time to interject "O lawdy" or "O baby," which allowed the performers a fertile field for improvisation. Lyrically. he altered the old repetitive three-line stanza to a statement on the first line, a restatement on the second, and an explanation of the statement on the third line.[95]

Just as Handy had added two strains to the Mr. Crump campaign song to create "Memphis Blues," he also added two strains to his unsuccessful "Jogo Blues" to create "St. Louis Blues," which was and is still a huge success. The movie *St. Louis Blues* was screened in 1958 and starred Nat King Cole, Mahalia Jackson, Pearl Bailey, and Billy Preston. It is still occasionally broadcast on public television stations. The movie is a biography of W. C. Handy's life, the struggles in his life between his inner musical calling, and all the hindrances he had to overcome to meet this call. "St. Louis Blues," the composition, had a major influence on American popular music as a whole. It was

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[93] Thomas L. Morgan and William Barlow, *From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African-American Popular Music from 1895 to 1930*: (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark, 1992), 120.
[94] Handy, *Father of the Blues*, 118-19.
[95] Ibid., 120-21, 143.

the most recorded American song between 1890 and 1954. George Gershwin loved it so much that he incorporated the first phrase of the second strain, a tango, into the theme of his masterpiece "Summertime." The harmony of "St. Louis Blues" came to define the blues pattern: I-IV-I-I^7 followed by IV-IV-I-I, and concluding with V^7-V^7-I-I. Giving his audience a taste of the three most popular musical genres of the day (blues, tango, and ragtime), Handy managed to create quite a fervor among music-lovers of the world.[96]

Handy continued to use the lowered third, fifth, and seventh degrees of the major scale to flavor his music with the emulation of black vocalizations. According to David Jasen, "The tones of black singers were true, but not hit head-on nor were they held steady."[97] Handy also used upward sliding grace notes to capture the slurred effect in black singing. It was the first time Handy bravely burst into the opening verse using a dominant seventh chord, but it was very satisfying to his audience. Blue notes had occurred in popular music before Handy, but he is credited with being the first to use the blue-note scale as a foundation for his entire structure. His harmonies caused a new type of musical scale to evolve and gain momentum through the force of American popular music.[98]

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[96] Samuel Charters, "Workin' on the Building," *Nothing but the Blues*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 18-20.
[97] Jasen and Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around,* 237-38
[98] Ibid.

Chapter 6. Origins of African-American Gospel Piano

Hailing from Villa Rica, Georgia, Thomas A. "Georgia Tom" Dorsey (1899-1993) joined the Chicago blues scene in 1916 during the great northern African-American migration after World War I. Like Handy, Dorsey was the son of a preacher yet felt a strong desire to create this moving soulful sound. He learned to improvise on an old organ at home and boasted that he could play very well by the time he was twelve. He actually was not reading notes but had been shown how to play by various pianists who mainly played for parties and at clubs. Unlike churches, these places didn't require written music. Sometimes the piano players would perform three hours in one stretch. To make it more interesting for their audiences and to stretch their repertoires, the piano players would try new things, "changing around" or "slow dragging."[99] In Dorsey's own words, he describes slow dragging as,

> Sometimes you, the fella, who has got knowledge enough, can make up as he goes. The little unexpected things get (the people); it comes with you while you're playing. The slow drag, that's just one of them things you know; it was something you dragged.[100]

In his "Dance Blues," Dorsey played it fast one time and slow drag the next; either way, he recollects, the folks would scream when he started the introduction. He used a variation of this introduction, a standard descending blues scale, in many of his pieces. Dorsey really laid into the blue notes themselves, the lowered sevenths, fifths, and thirds, often on the downbeat of each triple beat measure.[101]

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[99] Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 32-33.

One common characteristic of the blues (and later gospel music) is the use of compound meter instead of simple meter. The sheet music for any song may have been notated with two, three, or four beats to a measure, but the music was always performed with three subdivisions to each beat, creating a six, nine, or twelve beat feel that always stressed the first note of each subdivision.

In the first volume of Dorsey's recorded works from 1928 to 1930, he performed with either his guitarist partner Tampa Red or the Hokum Boys. The combination of Tampa Red (whose actual name was Hudson Whitaker) on guitar and Dorsey on piano started a new and welcomed trend in blues accompaniment. Prior to the guitar and piano combo, blues were typically accompanied by only a piano or a small wind ensemble. Georgia Tom and Tampa Red set a precedent in the recording industry for using both instruments together.[102] The earliest four pieces in Dorsey's recordings used precisely the same chordal progression. The progression consisted of four measures on the tonic chord, two measures on the subdominant chord, back to the tonic for two measures, then one measure on the dominant chord, one measure of the subdominant, and finally ending with two measures back on the tonic chord. On the recording, Dorsey's piano style is very similar to that used by the rhythm guitarist in his band. He duplicated the guitar's swing in a gently rocking shuffle (long-short-long-short). Dorsey oftentimes oscillated between the fifth and sixth intervals, slow drag style. For the recordings, at least, he had a lead guitarist who exhibited his licks in a higher register while the rest of the band kept

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[102] Ibid., 149.

a strong, steady pulse in the warm mid-range of their instruments. Dorsey said his style "was popular at house rent parties because it didn't disturb the neighbors so much!"[103]

Dorsey was primarily a lead singer, so his objective as a pianist was to enhance and accompany his own singing. He maintained his nonoffensive singing style by "talking out" the melody, using indirect accentuation on syncopated notes, and almost never beginning or ending a phrase directly on the beat. He also broke up the monotony by dropping out all instruments at two spots in the piece, an effective device to drive home a point in the text.[104]

In the early decades of the twentieth century, multitudes of African-Americans moved north to cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia. It is estimated that 50,000 southern African-Americans took up residence in Chicago, creating the "Black Belt."[105] One migrant to Philadelphia from Mississippi was the composer and preacher Rev. Charles A. Tindley (1856-1933). His music encouraged improvisation (vital to all black musicians), which left ample time between melody notes for embellishment. Dorsey claimed that Tindley was his chief inspiration to write his style of gospel music.[106]

In the documentary film *Say Amen, Somebody*, Dorsey said he wrote over three hundred blues songs: "I'm not ashamed of my blues ... Blues is a part of me, the way I play piano, the way I write."[107] He agreed that there was a "cross-pollination" of secular and sacred blues in his music. "There are moaning blues that are used in spirituals," he

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[103] Howard Rye, liner notes for *Georgia Tom (Thomas A. Dorsey) Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order*, vol. 1, Document Records BDCD-6021, ©1992.
[104] Harris, *Rise of Gospel Blues*, 54.
[105] Horace Boyer, "Chicago Gospel," *Black Music Research Bulletin* 12, no. 2 (fall 1990): 4.
[106] Mark A. Humphrey, "Holy Blues the Gospel Tradition," *Nothing But the Blues*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (New York: Abbeville, 1993), 134.
[107] Ibid.

said, “and there are moaning spirituals that are used in blues.”[108] Dorsey may not have seen much difference between his secular and sacred blues, but the contrast of his lyrics between the two is certainly noticeable. Dorsey was “gifted” in making up clever stories in his secular songs that had a cute and innocent facade but always concealed a double entendre of a sexual nature below the surface. Usually these lyrics had a reference to food, such as bread or meat. In Jerma Jackson’s dissertation, she interviewed Dorsey and questioned him about the sexual references in his tune “Pat that Bread.” He replied it didn’t have any significance other than “a deliberate marketing strategy.” Dorsey continued, “Well, you had to have something suggestive or they wouldn’t hit.”[109] In Harris’ book, “The Rise of Gospel Blues,” he quotes “two collectors of negro songs” who wrote about the genre of the blues and its double entendre:

> It is to be regretted that a great mass of material cannot be published because of its vulgar and indecent content … they (these songs) represent the superlative of the repulsive. The prevailing theme is that of sexual relations, and there is not restraint in expression. In comparison with the indecency that has come to light in the vulgar songs of other people, those of the Negro stand out undoubtedly in a class of their own.[110]

In the late 1920s, Dorsey decided to renounce his secular blues writing, and in 1930 he finally succeeded, concentrating solely on gospel music. This was after at least one slip-up two years earlier when he wrote music to some bawdy lyrics that Tampa Red, his old guitar-playing partner, had persuaded him to compose. The check for royalties on that

[108] Ibid., 135.
[109] Jackson, “Testifying at the Cross,” 123.
[110] Harris, *Rise of Gospel Blues*, 149.

hit, "It's Tight Like That," amounted to $2,400.19, a windfall in those days. Dorsey justified writing the song in order to help provide more adequately for his wife.[111]

Dorsey did not take credit for originating the term gospel music. It was already widely used by white evangelists such as the Moody-Sankey team. They described gospel music as "to sing the gospel" at a crusade in Sunderland, England, in 1873. Dorsey did take credit for embellishing gospel music with beautiful runs, trills, and moans.[112] In essence, he brought the blues to gospel music, and it is the blues that has made gospel music so wildly popular to this day. Instead of dwelling on enduring the trials of life, this new form was more upbeat and focused on the gospel (meaning "good news") theme of Christ's love and redemption.

Dorsey's earliest songs did not have the swing and open-ended statements found in his later songs that encouraged a response. One of his best loved early songs was "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," written after his wife and baby passed away. It is remarkably similar to the hymn "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone" but was written in a slow and soulful manner. He also wrote "Peace in the Valley," "I Will Put My Trust in the Lord," and "The Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me." His sprinkling of blues and jazz chords in his songs added to their appeal. Famous recording artists such as Elvis Presley have helped popularize "Precious Lord" and "Peace in the Valley." These two inspirational Dorsey jewels portrayed deep spiritual need and trust in God, flawlessly meshed with a slow moaning melody.

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[111] Ibid., 148.
[112] Ibid., 151.

The traditional African-American gospel piano style developed by Thomas A. Dorsey was improvisational and accompanimental, usually adding texture and color to his singing ensembles and church congregations. According to Timothy M. Kalil, a master in the study of the 1930s gospel movement,

> In traditional gospel piano playing, the structure of the piece remains intact; melody notes are played by the right hand but not as such; instead, they are presented embedded in chords or displaced rhythmically against chords. Accompanimental notes are played by the left hand, mostly in the form of octaves, boogie-woogie (hereafter, boogie) basses, modified stride, or a combination of all three. There are two general categories of playing: metered or isometric, and nonmetered (parlando-rubato); the latter is more ornamented than the former. Most gospel renditions feature "meter modification" where, for example, a piece in three-four and four-four time respectively is compounded into nine-eight and twelve-eight.[113]

Dorsey took improvisation a step further by mixing 1920s Chicago blues elements with standard Baptist hymns, thereby creating a clearly identifiable genre. He may not have been the first to blend genres, but he was the first to publish and promote them on a large scale. For this reason, music scholars gave Dorsey the deserved title of "The Father of Traditional Black Gospel Music."[114] As the twentieth century commenced, African-American gospel piano joined the ranks of ragtime, blues, and jazz piano as one of America's most important musical contributions.[115]

Piano accompaniment, as opposed to guitar accompaniment, became a regular trait of gospel music in the 1930s, although Sister Sallie Sanders and Arizona Dranes, two prominent gospel singers of that era, had already been using piano accompaniment

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[113]Ibid.
[114]Ibid., 188-89.
[115]Ibid.

earlier than that. Dranes' gospel piano technique was usually set to a chorus and verse (AB) form in a brisk tempo to a 4/4 time signature. She typically would not play the melody but used eighth-note chords in the right hand, while the left hand played octaves that alternated between the root of the chord and its fifth. Dranes started with an introduction to the song that used two statements of the chorus played in mid-range chords by the right hand. This practice is reminiscent of ragtime piano, but there are several differences: she played in a definite four-pulse measure instead of a two-pulse measure, did not use runs in the right hand, and did not use chords in the left hand on alternating beats. Instead, Dranes' left hand assumed the role of the bass guitar, playing single notes or octaves on and between the beats. She also articulated the notes in a rather percussive attack, rather than using a legato touch. Horace Boyer notes that:

> This style of playing gospel music becomes all the more significant when it is realized that the piano was chosen as the gospel music instrument because of its equally percussive and legato capabilities.[116]

According to her birth certificate, Arizona Dranes was born in Dallas in 1894, and was probably of Mexican and African-American heritage. Blind from birth, she gained popularity as a teenager playing at the local Church of God in Christ. Dranes was born in the south during the birth of ragtime, jazz, and blues. Simultaneously, a new religious movement created by African-American people, called Holiness or Pentecostal, emerged. These small storefront churches encouraged a more personal participation in the worship service and welcomed instruments that other churches considered too worldly. Being blind, Dranes had to depend on her hearing, and what she was hearing was ragtime and

[116] Horace C. Boyer, "Contemporary Gospel," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 1 (spring 1979): 32.

blues. The fact that she was blind was not a problem in playing ragtime and blues music. Because sheet music was scarce and most pianists like Dranes could not read it anyway, all ragtime and blues performers had to rely on their natural abilities to duplicate this style. It is no wonder she used it in her ministry. Rev. Samuel Crouch of Ft. Worth recommended her to the Okey Phonograph Corporation in Chicago, and she was invited there for two recording sessions, the first one early in 1926 and the second in November 1926. Sara Martin, a gospel singer and partner of Dorsey's, went to Dallas to escort Dranes to Chicago, where she was recorded at Okey Studios.[117]

The first song on the Dranes recording is "In That Day," a bouncy barrelhouse tune in a lively 4/4 that has a walking bass on every beat throughout the piece. First the bass-line moves up four steps to the subdominant chord, then back down four steps to the tonic, and then down four more steps to the dominant chord. Sometimes her left hand did not arrive at the exact destination on the downbeat, but Dranes never failed to keep the bass-line moving. When her left hand projected arrival time was ahead of the downbeat she would simply adjust her bass walk by adding a note, either a half step below or above the desired destination, to make it come out right. Sometimes she was late arriving on the downbeat, but she would simply make adjustments so it would come out right the next time. Dranes' right hand has a slap-happy syncopated ragtime swing that duplicates her singing and a marching drum rhythm with which she filled the long spaces. The drum rhythm consists of two eighth notes followed by two quarters. She added the minor seventh to all chords except the tonic. Oftentimes, Dranes used the interval of the sixth in

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[117] Romanowski, liner notes for *Arizona Dranes.*

her right hand, moving both her thumb and fifth finger downward half step and back up in an oscillating fashion. Dranes' uses another improvisational technique that was typical of her era. Certain notes, especially the longer ones, were not hit "head-on," but approached by half step as in an appoggiatura. This could happen either from below or above in a syncopated swing beat. The recording sounds like she was given only one take, because at one point she lost the left hand steady drumbeat and had to keep the song moving just with a right hand blues chord on the off-beat. It was rough and raw, but the spirit of her Pentecostal fire came through.[118]

Also recorded at Dranes' first session was "Bye and Bye We're Going to See the King," in which she liberally used the minor seventh, especially on the tonic chord. In fact, she started the introduction on the tonic chord with minor seventh that quickly becomes the secondary dominant just before she moved to the subdominant. Beginning with the fifth degree of the tonic chord with her right hand fifth finger and the minor seventh with her thumb, Dranes then dropped both notes a minor third interval, giving the effect of a train whistle. To further the effect, her left hand played the tonic chord in an open fifth with a block chord on every beat, which sounds like the train slowly gaining momentum. Then the left hand started walking up and down with single notes in double time as the train speeds along, presumably taking Arizona and her friends to see their precious king.[119]

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[118] *Arizona Dranes Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order (1926-1929),* Arizona Dranes, with the Texas Jubilee Singers, Rev. Joe Lenley, and Southern Sanctified Singers, Document Records DOCD-5186, ©1993.
[119] Ibid.

Curiously, two years later, in Dorsey's very first recording, "Crow Jane Alley," he uses a similar train whistle effect, only with an eighth followed by a double dotted half note pattern. Dorsey reversed the interval, however, so the seventh stayed on top while the left hand had an oscillating fifth and sixth interval in a boogie shuffle style.[120]

Clearly, secular music had an influence on Dranes. Her recording career ended in 1929. Like Jelly Roll Morton, Dranes' career was affected by the Depression. But she continued to play in church and concerts, adding an element of spiritual freedom to her barrelhouse style and spreading joy all over the Midwest. In 1948 Dranes followed her mentor, Samuel Crouch, to Los Angeles where she lived for fifteen years until her death in 1963. Samuel Crouch was the great uncle to Andrae Crouch, the famous pastor and songwriter of the 1960s and 70s. She was sixty-nine years old when she died in obscurity.[121]

Michael Corcoran, of the *American-Statesman*, wrote in his article "Praising Arizona":

> No sacred-singing, female piano player had ever been recorded before Dranes, and "father of gospel" Thomas A. Dorsey didn't record his first "Christian blues" until 1928. Among those who forever changed her approach to church music after hearing Dranes was Roberta Martin, the Arkansas native who would become the most respected pianist and group leader of gospel's golden age (1940s to 1960s).[122]

Roberta Martin was greatly influenced by Arizona Dranes, whom she would have met personally when Dranes made the two recordings sessions in Chicago in 1926. Martin

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[120] *Georgia Tom (Thomas A. Dorsey).*
[121] Michael Corcoran, "Praising Arizona," *American Statesman*, June 19, 2003, http://www.statesman.com/life/content/auto/epaper/editions/today/life_entertainment_e31f06937685b0240043.html (accessed July 20, 2003).
[122] Ibid.

was only nineteen at the time but was already accompanying Dorsey's choir. While Thomas A. Dorsey was occupied as the choir leader at Chicago's Pilgrim Baptist Church, he secured the help of teenager Roberta Martin as accompanist for his choir. Martin's refined piano style differed from Dorsey's. Horace Boyer wrote that Martin stressed three elements in her style:

> richer harmonies (including secondary dominants and seventh-chords) connected by single-note motives in the right hand; a percussive-like "bomb" in octaves assigned to the left hand; and a less-rigid, but at the same time, more complex rhythmic use of chords.[123]

A "bomb" is a term for a strong accent that Martin seem to save for special occasions. It usually happened on the downbeat of a measure. Her left hand in octaves, combined with drums and bass guitar, made an explosive sound at a climactic point in the song. Martin rarely played the melody except occasionally to support the singers. However, she could pick up the melody during breaks and riffs when the singers dropped out momentarily. She made use of short motives, chords, and scalar runs to help fill these gaps. Her most helpful contribution to gospel piano was the practice of inserting the subdominant harmony and quickly returning to the basic harmony, thereby creating an oscillating boogie effect. This technique, still commonly practiced today, adds vitality to the harmony and rhythm alike.[124]

Roberta Martin was born on February 12, 1907, in Helena, Arkansas. By the age of ten, she had learned piano from her sister-in-law and was already playing for Sunday school. While a teenager, she studied under Thomas A. Dorsey and earned herself a

[123] Boyer, "Contemporary Gospel," 33.
[124] Ibid.

respected name as gospel singer, writer, and pianist. She soon wrote many of her own songs and established her own publishing company, the Roberta Martin Studio of Music, to publish not only her own but other budding musicians' compositions. By 1933, Martin had become choir director for the Young People's Choir at another Chicago church called Ebenezer Baptist Church. She devoted her musical talents and ambitions to this church and soon formed the Roberta Martin Singers with two young men. The African American Registry states, "Because she possessed a deep, dark, rich contralto, she set about developing a gospel sound with no bass, but rather a dark treble sound. In the early 1940s Martin added female voices to her group."[125]

Gospel music gained in popularity during WWII. Before the war, gospel sheet music could only be purchased in Chicago proper, but after the war local, gospel sheet music was being distributed in local towns. People were learning to play in gospel style who had only played Bach and Beethoven before. Before the war, African-American music was controlled by large recording companies such as Victor, Columbia, and Okeh; after the war, recording companies were sprouting up all over. By 1945, gospel singers began recording in great numbers.[126]

Roberta Martin's style could be called the new style of the Black gospel pianist, directly influencing such contemporary pianists as James Cleveland and Andrae Crouch.[127] James Cleveland had his own group, the Gospelaires, and two of Martin's singers, Norsalus McKissick and Bessie Folk, even joined up temporarily with the

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[125] The African American Registry®, "Roberta Martin, Gospel's True Voice," http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american-history/1777/Roberta_Martin_gospels-true-voice (accessed December 10, 2003).
[126] Boyer, "Contemporary Gospel," 6.
[127] Ibid., 33.

Gospelaires but soon returned to the Martin Singers.[128] Roberta Martin not only composed and arranged her own music, but helped other popular gospel artists such as Cleveland by arranging their compositions. In her dissertation, Irene Jackson wrote:

> Since the Roberta Martin Singers were the first organized church-based gospel group, the performance practices that this group created and initiated became a real part of the foundation of the gospel music tradition. The network of influences bears this out: Thomas A. Dorsey influenced the piano playing of Roberta Martin who in turn taught Lucy Collier Smith, Willie Webb, James Cleveland (who influenced Aretha Franklin's piano) and others. What Martin created then, was a school—a way of playing, singing and arranging this new music called gospel."[129]

According to Timothy Kalil in his article "Thomas A. Dorsey and the Development and Diffusion of Traditional Black Gospel Piano," Roberta Martin was a "more classical and ensemble-oriented player than Dorsey because she provides vocal support not only chordally but melodically."[130] She incorporated piano "responses" to the singers' "calls." She assisted the vocalists by using "lead-ins," which were scalar runs leading up to the singer's entry note.[131]

On the compact disc, "The Best of The Roberta Martin Singers," there are several great pieces, but two are outstanding. The first, written by James Cleveland, is called "Saved," and the second piece, written by L. Matthews, is called "I'm Glad I'm a Witness for my Lord." "Saved" is in the key of B-flat major and "I'm Glad I'm a Witness for my Lord" is in the key of C minor, the only minor key on the compact disk.[132]

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[128] Jackson, "Afro-American Gospel Music," 126.
[129] Ibid., 140.
[130] Kalil, "Thomas A. Dorsey," 184-85.
[131] Ibid.
[132] *The Best of the Roberta Martin Singers*, Roberta Martin Singers, Savoy Records SCD 7018, ©1990.

The first song, "Saved," is in a slow waltz time with a heavy downbeat sprinkled with blues notes. In fact, like the Dranes "train" example, the introduction starts out on the tonic chord with the fifth scale degree on top and the minor seventh below in an open sixth, with right hand fifth finger and thumb descending stepwise two notes, rather than a skip of a minor third like the Dranes piece. The lowered seventh in the interval of an open sixth has a wistful sound that is reminiscent of a train whistle. Chordally, the Martin piece has more richness than the Dranes piece, however. On the verse, she uses the secondary dominant of the six chord, or a D^7 (second inversion) followed by the subdominant E-flat chord in a deceptive cadence and back to the tonic.[133]

"Saved" has a soulful male lead singer declaring a simple yet profound text with plenty of space for the three women to respond with the words "I'm Saved" or "Yes" or "Thank You, Jesus." In all the recordings on this disc, the songs are accompanied by both piano and organ. The two instruments are careful to take turns during the fill time so that they would support rather than compete with one another. Often they use a chord progression during the empty time that ends with the dominant seventh as a lead-in for the singers. They seem to know the right time to stress a certain note, usually "sol." At one point, the organist and bass guitarist conspire and drop a "bomb" on the downbeat of a particular measure. There is no other way to describe the sound! Author Horace Boyer was correct in labeling this sound a "bomb." It is not very musical, but it explodes on the downbeat of the borrowed dominant chord with a resounding "thud." It effectively accentuates the word "saved," which is the whole message of the song.

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[133] Ibid.

The pianist fills empty time with scalar passages or arpeggios to serve two purposes: to keep a steady rhythmic pulse and to connect melody notes. As the song develops, it becomes more impassioned; the triplet feel is emphasized by pounding out each individual beat in the 9/8 time signature on the upper piano keyboard in a stepward walk with the same blues chord in the open sixth interval, first down, then back up, while the bass guitar does its "glory walk" in contrary motion to the piano.[134]

Martin used a variety of key signatures on her record; out of eighteen songs, one was in the key of C minor, one in C Major, four in F Major, three in G Major, three in B-flat Major, three in E-flat Major, and three in A-flat Major. Since Martin was an accomplished improviser and also used an organist heavily, it is to be expected that she would use predominantly flat keys. For some reason, gospel keyboardists have always learned to play in flat keys and have shied away from sharp keys, with the exception of one sharp, the key of G. What has perpetrated this phenomenon? The obvious answer is that the style was learned by observing former pianists and mimicking their hand placements. But what about the very first improvisational artist who stumbled upon chord progressions, making up his or her own melodies without the benefit of hearing anyone else? Perhaps he or she chose the key that would be a comfortable range for the singer. But, if the singer could sing any given piece in the key of B-flat, why not A or B? A half step either way would not make much difference to the singer. The answer must be tied up in the feel of the hand position while playing the chords. All the flat keys after F have the right hand thumb placed on a black key (except C-flat) in the tonic root

[134] Ibid.

position, and all the flat keys after B-flat also have the five finger on a black key. It is understandable that the keys of E-flat, A-flat, and D-flat are easily interchangeable, because the tonic chord, going to the subdominant chord in second inversion and the dominant seventh chord in first inversion are virtually identical in all three keys. The feel of the chord is largely the reason improvisational pianists have gravitated toward flat keys. With the thumb and fifth fingers raised on black keys and the third finger lowered on a white key, the pianist has a high handed approach, so to speak. It is easier to keep the wrists high and slip the middle finger between black keys about an inch from the wood than it is to keep the wrists low and the middle fingers extended upward. Of course, pianists who have been classically trained are thoroughly familiar with either sharp keys or flat keys and may never have thought about which is more comfortable.

It wasn't until the 1970s guitar invasion started dominating the improvisation scene in churches that gospel pianists have had to learn to improvise in the sharp keys. Like piano improvisationists preferring flat keys, guitarists have an affinity for sharp keys like D, A, and E. Like pianists in flat keys, they feel more comfortable with their left hand placement in sharp keys. Since there are now more guitarists than keyboardists in some churches, the guitarists have won out. It is not uncommon for the church pianist these days to have to improvise to a sheet of "music" that doesn't have a note on it, just words and chord symbols, sometimes in an outrageously uncomfortable key like B Major (five sharps). This inconvenience to the pianists is not to oblige the singer, only to placate the guitarist. Gospel pianists Dorsey and Dranes had the same problem. When

they played on their recordings along with stringed instruments, they used sharp keys religiously.

Comparing the recordings of Dorsey and Dranes, both have their songs listed chronologically: Dranes' between the years of 1926-1929 and Dorsey's between the years 1928-1930. Dranes' recordings are of gospel songs and Dorsey's are of blues songs, but stylistically there is not much difference between the two. The first few songs on both recordings are in a variety of flat keys. Dranes' very first piece she ever recorded is in G-flat (six flats)! She follows that with seven more pieces, two in A-flat, two in E-flat, two in B-flat and one in F. Months later, in the fall of the 1926, she recorded eight more pieces, but this time the first four were in the key of F and the second four were in the key of G. It is noticeable that the first two pieces in the key of G featured a mandolin sounding instrumentalist, who, like the guitarist, quite possibly preferred the key of G to the key of F. Since this was Dranes' first recorded piece in the key of G, she and the stringed player may have had to compromise on a mutually acceptable key.[135]

Like Dranes, Dorsey started out primarily in flat keys. Of his first ten blues recordings, he played two in B-flat, two in A-flat, two in E-flat, one in D-flat, one in G and the last one in the key of E (four sharps). The piece in E is a fast piece and has that same mandolin-sounding instrument that Dranes used in her songs in the key of G. Interestingly, Dorsey's piece in E followed a piece in the key of D-flat, also using the mandolin-sounding instrument. Is it possible that the mandolinist had had enough of flat keys and requested the key of E? This was the first time Dorsey had played in a heavily

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[135] *Arizona Dranes.*

sharp key and he may have done it to placate his featured string player. On the second half of both Dranes' and Dorsey's recordings, the key centers are much more stable. Dranes fell into the rut of the key of F for four straight songs followed by the key of G for four straight songs. She did, however, break out of her mold on one song toward the end of her chronological recording in the key of E (four sharps). On this piece she was joined by the Sanctified Singers and trumpet accompaniment. Quite possibly they had pre-written music and Dranes had to adapt to the key.[136]

On Dorsey's second half he remained in the key of G for five songs in a row, followed by three bouncy tunes in E-flat, then two in the unusual key of E. For Dorsey to play in four sharps, he probably had to adapt to another instrument, and, sure enough, the first piece in E featured a guitarist.

Towards the end of the recordings, on a piece called, "Billie the Grinder," the piano accompaniment is not done by Dorsey himself but by a "forceful boogie pianist with a very different approach."[137] The pianist on this piece is a novelty pianist extraordinaire, who dances around Dorsey's vulgar lyrics in a most exuberant stride style. His identity is uncertain, but it may have been Bob Call. The recording was made in December 1929 in Chicago. Like Arizona Dranes' first recording, Call chose the unusual key of G-flat (six flats). Playing predominantly on black keys was typical of gifted yet untrained improvisational artists. Building on classic ragtime, they took the style to a new level and became virtuosos in their own right. It is quite possible that Bob Call could only play in the key of G-flat, and the rest of the band had to adapt to him. Even

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Rye, liner notes for *Georgia Tom (Thomas A. Dorsey).*

more so than the other flat keys, G-flat probably helped him bounce over the black keys of the piano, rarely hitting a white one and using a high-handed approach.[138]

Years later, in the 1950s, the Roberta Martin Singers had developed the gospel sound of the 1920s to a polished perfection. The raw, unsophisticated bounce and swing of Dranes' and Dorsey's early songs were refined into a smooth, well-oiled and orchestrated music powerhouse for which they became a famous and well-respected group. Part of the respect they earned came from their exemplary Christian lifestyle. The Roberta Martin Singers believed what they sang and lived accordingly. Martin refused to sing at places where tickets were sold, even if the demand was strong. She wanted to keep gospel music separate from the commercialism of the world. In a 1973 personal interview with James Austin, group member, Irene Jackson records Austin saying he remembers Roberta telling her manager Eugene:

> … if he wanted to go to the Apollo Theatre then go ahead, but for as long as she lived the name of Roberta Martin will never hang over no marquee over a theatre. She would say, 'I'm not entertaining the world, I'm singing the gospel, just like they preach the gospel and people don't have to go to the theatre to hear the gospel; I'm not going in and have everything mixed with it, that's going on … so if you all want to go, go ahead on and just change the name The Roberta Martin Singers to something else.'[139]

Roberta Martin died on January 18, 1969, in Chicago, just six years after Arizona Dranes (her influence) died in Los Angeles. While Dranes died in obscurity—the pastor at the church Samuel Crouch had founded in the 1930s didn't even know she lived in Los

[138] *Georgia Tom (Thomas A Dorsey).*

[139] Jackson, "Afro-American Gospel Music," 126.

Angeles—Martin had over 50,000 mourners at her memorial service in Chicago. She was called the "Helen Hayes" of the gospel world.[140]

African-American gospel music is a fusion of the blues and gospel lyrics that began with Thomas A. Dorsey in the 1920s. However, by the 1960s another fusion took place. Many gospel artists found that by secularizing their lyrics while retaining their soulful gospel expression they could appeal to a broader audience. This newer fusion is called "Rhythm & Blues" and became wildly popular in the 1960s. Many church musicians crossed back and forth between church and secular music. Some famous performers today who started out singing strictly gospel music are James Brown, Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, and Ray Charles. Charles could easily be labeled a blues artist, a rhythm and blues artist, or a gospel artist, but his music was and is a combination of all three, appealing to audiences across the board and around the world. By merging blues and pop with gospel, he engineered the whole train of 1960s soul artists.[141]

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[140]Roberta Martin, *Afro-American Heritage and History's First Day Cover Collection,* FleetWood Bios – Unicover.com, http://multirace.org/firstday/stamp44.htm (accessed September 5, 2003).
[141] Priestley, "Ragtime, Blues, Jazz and Popular Music," 220.

Chapter 7. Origins of White Gospel Piano

Using keyboard instruments to accompany sacred songs was popularized by Ira Sankey, who used a reed organ that he transported during his travels with evangelist Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899). For twenty years of Moody's years of ministry to the cities of the world, Sankey traveled along providing the music for crusuades. He was both a song-leader and organist. Moody was the first evangelist to hire a musician to travel with him to help attract people. In their advertisements, they billed themselves as "Moody and Sankey," a team of equal partnership between music and sermon. Sankey used a reed organ in the 1800s partly because it was easily transportable, but by the end of the 1800s people in general began replacing their reed organs with pianos.

The new gospel songs created a need for a more percussive quality than the organ provided, and most written music, both popular and classical, had piano accompaniment. Pianos themselves were becoming more plentiful. In the single year of 1829, only 2,500 pianos were built in America; by the year 1860, 21,000 pianos were built and sold.[142] In her doctoral dissertation on gospel piano, Cynthia Steeves wrote:

> Though the piano was not used to accompany gospel music until 1902, the increased use of piano in popular music laid the groundwork. The music of Stephen Foster and Tin Pan Alley was published with piano accompaniment. Ragtime, although played with a variety of instruments, became increasingly associated with the piano. It is not surprising, then, that since piano was used for the very popular music that influenced gospel music, that it would ultimately be used for the gospel music itself.[143]

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[142] Folsom, "Brief History of White Southern Gospel Music," 20.
[143] Ibid.

The birth of early white gospel music, not surprisingly, coincided with Scott Joplin's ragtime in the late 1800s. Gospel is similar to ragtime because it is also highly accented rhythmically and written in major keys. Gospel music writers commonly felt dance music to be sinful, but it would be hard not to notice a similarity. As Scott Joplin commented, it is simply the vulgar lyrics applied to ragtime music that had offended some people. Just put some lyrics about Christian warfare to a brass band ragtime tune, and it would be enthusiastically embraced. Tunes such as "Hold the Fort" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers" are examples of utilizing Sousa's marching music written to win the war on sin and corruption. It would have been hard for gospel writers such as Ira Sankey and Charles Alexander not to be influenced by ragtime composers such as Joplin and Sousa because of the exposure they received when all four of them performed at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893.[144]

Robert Harkness followed Sankey and Alexander down the evangelistic trail. Harkness is credited with being the first white person to play the piano in gospel style. He was discovered in 1902 by Charles Alexander, the song-leader of the Torrey/Alexander evangelistic crusade in Bendigo, Australia. Normally, Alexander had to settle for whomever was available as accompanist, but this time he was pleasantly surprised. In Robert Harkness, Alexander noticed a natural musical sensitivity. He said Harkness added "a tender note to the verse" and "a dash of triumph in the chorus."[145] Harkness was a teenager at the time and not pleased with his duty of playing gospel songs. He wasn't even a believer at first and certainly wasn't sympathetic to the

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[144] Steeves, "Origin of Gospel Piano," 28-30.
[145] Ibid., 47.

evangelistic cause. In his recollections, Harkness recounted that he was sorry he had committed himself to playing for this meeting and said it would be the last time. He did not appreciate a comment from Alexander during the service and decided to try to annoy him. He decided to introduce a few chords and runs into the music that did not appear in the printed copy. Instead of being disgusted with him, Alexander cried out, "That's fine; keep it up." Determined to test him further, Harkness delivered more lavish improvisations, which only served to please him more. Alexander explained afterwards that those lavish improvisations were just what he wanted.[146]

Robert Harkness wrote a helpful manual titled *Learn to Play Gospel Piano*, which systematically teaches beginning improvisation students the graduated steps toward a full use of the keyboard. Harkness began by taking a simple hymn or gospel song written in a four-part block harmony for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices. These hymns were intended for choirs and vocalists—even so, many pianists followed the printed notes religiously. This doubled the strength of the vocals but did not use the instrument to its full capacity. Unlike the multiple stops on an organ, the piano has no added overtones or voluminous sustaining power. This necessitates utilizing more registers of the piano keyboard and many more notes. When played in conjunction with the organ, the piano is effectively used as a percussion instrument to articulate the background unit of the beat and to provide filler material and lead-ins. Harkness presented a simple four part hymn followed by three grades of improvisations, each one more involved than the last. The soprano and alto lines were typically played by the right hand while the tenor and bass

[146] Ibid., 48.

were played by the left hand. In the first improvisation, Harkness required the right hand to play the soprano, alto, and tenor lines. He always kept the soprano line on top of the chord or to the far right on the piano. The left hand simply played the bassline in octaves. The second improvisation had the right hand spreading to the octave on the soprano line and filling in the chord with harmony notes while the left hand remained playing the bass lines in octaves. His third and final improvisation had the right hand still outstretched to the octave and filled with chordal degrees while the left hand dropped its stretched open octave down to the next register to use the rich bass tones on the piano. The improvisation student would not want to fill in all the chordal degrees within the left hand octave, especially in the lower registers of the piano, because of the strings' slower vibrations and muddy quality. It seems a natural progression as the piano student advances, however, to keep adding a note to the right hand, starting with only two notes, then three, then the extended four note position filled in by chordal degrees.

After the student mastered the third improvisation, he or she was encouraged to add chords to the weaker beats with his left hand following the octave stretch on the downbeat. When this was accomplished, octave passing tones and countermelodies could be added in either or both hands. The left hand, after the customary downbeat, could play a chord in any register sometimes alternating chord and octave, sometimes following the original bass pattern. On measures where filler was required, the two hands often did scalar runs, sometimes in parallel, other times opposite directions, but always using octave stretches in both hands. The parallel octaves were not in unison but in thirds

or sixths in different registers. Harmonic rules were rigidly observed so that parallel octaves and fifths were avoided. According to Steeves,

> Harkness, for his part, brought brilliant technique and extensive knowledge of the piano as well as a background in both classical and music hall performing into the creation of the new style. Possessing abundant creativity as well as a methodical and highly structured thought process, he was able to formulate a style that involved spontaneity and improvisation as well as a fairly rigid set of rules.[147]

Robert Harkness had a natural flair for using the fullness of the piano, but he also stuck fairly close to the written notes of hymns or gospel songs. Unlike African-American gospel artists, he didn't take the liberties of altering the whole rhythmic structure with compound time, grossly slowing the tempo, or inserting a measure here and there to give the choir time to respond. He didn't add blue slip-note finger licks in his right hand or rocking boogie bass moves in his left; he did, however, enhance the straight-laced traditional hymn with a classical beauty that lifted the spirits of his audiences.

[147] Ibid., 65-66.

Chapter 8. Origins of Style: Study and Comparison

This chapter is a study and comparison of actual church pianists within the Assemblies of God denomination mostly based in northern California and one in Oregon. They are either currently active in churches as the primary worship team base or are semi-retired and only play occasionally. It is rare that a seasoned and accomplished church pianist can retire completely because of the high demand for pianists, but some have learned how to reduce their workload without ceasing altogether.

Each of the participants were given two very sparse lead sheets of a gospel song from the early twentieth century called "I've Been Redeemed" and the verse of a contemporary chorus called "Shout to the Lord," which they recorded on cassette and returned by mail. "I've Been Redeemed" was recorded by Arizona Dranes in 1926 and remained popular in churches well into the 1960s. Several of the participants ages forty and above were already familiar with the tune and had an expectation of the style in which it used to be played. The contemporary song, "Shout to the Lord," was chosen because it is slow and leaves ample room for creativity. The song can be played in a straight quarter note rhythm or in a syncopated underlying rhythm. Additionally, it has a pleasing melody and a downward bass walk.

The lead sheets included eight measures from each song with a minimum of chord symbols above the melody notes and the words below. As indicated on the following letter, the participants were given an instruction page encouraging them to add notes, insert chords, change keys, and play in different registers. They were allowed to sing the melody, a common practice of contemporary pianists who often need to lead worship

while singing from the piano. They were also allowed to add embellishments of any kind that would typify their style of playing. These embellishments might include a quick alternating chord change, syncopated or otherwise altered melody, diatonic or chromatic scalar passages connecting chord degrees, bass leaps or repeated patterns, slip notes, octave oscillations, or any other number of possibilities.

All thirteen pianists were specially selected because of the author's admiration of their improvisation skills and style. After agreeing verbally to participate, they were mailed the lead sheet, instruction and questionnaire page, and a blank cassette tape. When the participants finished their recordings, they mailed back their completed questionnaires and cassettes. All the participants eagerly cooperated in this study and promptly returned all required information. They are highly esteemed pianists and a vital part of the worship services at their respective churches. Their enthusiasm for this study was encouraging and appreciated.

Letter to a select group of Assembly of God piano improvisationists:

Christian greetings, dear friends! Thank you so much for agreeing to partake in this study which I will include in my final thesis for a master's degree from San Jose State. You were chosen because I have either admired your piano technique at one time or another☺ or you came highly recommended by another secret admirer. I have been teaching piano at Bethany College for four years and I need this degree to stay one step ahead of the students. **My purpose in doing this study is to analyze your individual styles, compare them with popular influences of the day, and show how gospel piano improvisation has changed in the last fifty years.**

Below is a brief questionnaire and two 8-measure melodies from different gospel eras for you to interpret as you would play for church. You may sing or play the melodies. Feel free to change keys, add notes to the given chords, insert additional chords, play in a range of registers to utilize the bulk of the keyboard, and add your favorite embellishments. All you need to do is be true to your own style of playing. You can't go wrong! This will be a published document on file at SJSU so please make up a fictitious first name below which I can use in the thesis.

When you have improvised the two songs to your own satisfaction, simply record them on the enclosed tape and mail the tape back to me in the envelope provided along with this questionnaire as soon as comfortably possible.

1. Full name____
2. Fictitious first name (i.e. Dixie or Roxanne)____________________
3. App. what year did you start improvising?__________________
4. Who or what influenced your creative skills?________________
5. Do you read music as well as you improvise?________________
6. How many years of piano lessons, if any?__________________
7. How many years have you played in church?________________
8. Do you still play in church?______________________________

Thanks so much for helping me with this study. I'll try to give you some feedback on the outcome. I owe you big time! Love and appreciation,

Jan Carlton

I've Been Redeemed

arr. J. Carlton

Voice

Eb Bb7 Eb Ab Eb Bb7 Eb

I've been re deemed by the blood of the Lamb. I've been re - deemed by the blood of the Lamb. I've been re - deemed by the blood of the Lamb, saved from sin I know I am. All my sins are washed a - way, I've been re - deemed.

Shout to the Lord

D. Zschech

Voice

A E F#m E D A/C# D A/E F#m G D/F# Esus E

My Je-sus, my Sav-ior, Lord, there is none like You. All of my days I want to praise the won-ders of Your might - y love.

Case Study 1: "Lucy" (recording excerpts tracks 1-2)

Lucy started improvising as a teenager in 1967. According to the survey, her influences were her piano teacher and other musicians. She has had over thirteen years of piano lessons and can read music as well as she improvises. Lucy began playing in church in her junior high years and is still playing today, approximately forty years later.

On the first sample, "I've Been Redeemed," Lucy interprets the song very much like Arizona Dranes' rendition of the same. Drawing on her Pentecostal roots, Lucy used a slow, rhythmic, toe-tapping beat with rich harmonies on each note, regardless how brief the note. Her right hand played the melody throughout, positioning her three-part chords so the melody remained on top. On the eighth-note pick-ups, she used no pedal at all, separating them as Dranes would do. Also, like Dranes, she would embellish long notes with a brief change to the subdominant in her right hand but also included a bounce down to the dominant root in her left hand, a popular technique for fillers and lead-ins today. Because of her formal piano training, Lucy has accumulated a wealth of embellishments in her resource bank. She started and finished the song with a downbeat of a single bass note on the tonic. She flavored the piece with a variety of swing notes, sometimes arriving at the melody slightly before the beat, sometimes syncopating the chords, sometimes rolling the chord on the downbeat using root, fifth, and tenth degrees. When approaching the subdominant chord, Lucy gracefully moved the tonic bass up to the first inversion, becoming the leading tone to the subdominant. This practice is also a standard movement in four-part hymn writing.

On the second half of the song, after the A-flat chord, she inserted a chord progression starting with a D-flat seven on the word "Lamb," followed by E-flat, G^7 in second inversion (borrowed dominant of the six chord), and C minor on the words "sin I know I am." This created a nice descending chromatic bassline and a leading tone to the sixth degree. Lucy played the song through twice. The second time she added an echo to each phrase, the way it was sung in the 1960s and prior. It is clear that she was familiar with this old chorus. As an ending she chose a simple plagal chord change with the inner notes moving upward, a brief touch downward to the supertonic and resolving to the tonic chord. To complete this rendition, Lucy dropped a single tonic note two octaves below to finalize the song.

On the contemporary chorus "Shout to the Lord," Lucy moved the tempo along at a brisk pace, unlike the slow swing of the gospel chorus. Her interpretation of this piece was big and majestic, her right hand starting in the middle range on the first two measures, then taking a surprising leap up an octave in an extended position in which she doubled the melody notes in octaves. She also altered the melody notes at the third measure, smoothing out the written leaps and syncopation into two even sets of quarter note triplets. In the first set she retained the three notes on A, but in the second set of triplets she used G-sharp, F-sharp, and E, then back up to F-sharp. Very smooth!

In her left hand, Lucy used a variety of styles, starting with the elegance of arpeggios and broken extended chords, then integrating the chords and arpeggios with rhythmic alternating hand syncopation. As a strengthening build-up to the chorus, she added right hand oscillations of thumb and five finger octaves on the dominant, also with

a syncopated rhythm, causing a dramatic anticipation to the words "shout to the Lord." No doubt her energetic and beautiful rendition of this piece has raised many congregations to their feet in worship. Lucy is a gifted and sensitive musician and her natural ear for music has made her ripe for gleaning the fruit of other improvisational artists.

Case Study 2: "Sierra" (recording excerpts tracks 3-4)

Sierra, a young spirited musician, is also a gifted violinist, but more often uses guitar and piano in leading worship for church. She has a strong and pleasingly operatic voice, which she used to sing the melody for "I've Been Redeemed." Sierra began improvising on the piano around 1997 through the influence of her mother, who is also a church pianist. She has taken twelve years of piano lessons and reads music as well as, if not better than, improvising. Even at her young age, she already has six years of church playing to her credit and is presently the primary worship leader at a local church.

On "I've Been Redeemed," Sierra sang the melody line, leaving her right hand free to give the piece a heavy three-part chord on each and every beat, especially the downbeat. This is a typical characteristic of young church pianists who are influenced by the hard strumming of the guitar in popular music. Since Sierra also plays guitar for worship, it probably follows that she plays both instruments in a similar style—a solid chord attack on every beat. On the second beat of each measure, Sierra consistently used a syncopated sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note in both hands as a break to the monotony of straight quarter notes. Her left hand had some pleasing and interesting

moves also. When the syncopation occurred on the second beat, the left hand moved either by steps or skips. On the tonic chord, the left hand dropped to C, B-flat, and back to E-flat. Prior to the subdominant chord, her left hand moved to the first inversion while the right hand added the seventh. Like Lucy, Sierra followed a nice bassline and good voice-leading, but the short syncopated motives seemed a bit jerky and the right hand was overpowering, pounding out the beat. For an ending, she used a straight plagal cadence that continued the same second beat syncopated motive.

The contemporary piece, "Shout to the Lord," was more conducive to Sierra's solid style. In each of the first two measures, she played one full chord and held it while she sang the melody. Sometimes she gave the left hand chord a slight roll and once dropped it an octave, but primarily Sierra relied on her right hand, with which she tastefully filled the empty spots with a broken chord on eighth notes that connected the intervals of thirds stepwise. She chose chords in the middle to deep registers of the piano, which gave warmth to her high soprano voice. Sierra has tremendous natural talent and great potential on the piano that time and experience will nurture.

Case Study 3: "Darcy" (recording excerpts tracks 5-6)

Darcy, a professional in the music field, is an experienced piano teacher in both reading and improvising. She has taught theory, wrote a series of theory books at the college level, and has played in churches for fifty-six years. Darcy started improvising at the age of ten and was influenced by her mother, her college instructor, and popular music. She is equally at home with classical concert music as well as church

improvisation and understands the relationship of music theory to both genres. On the information sheet, Darcy wished to point out that there are many means of interpreting any piece, even the two samples given her. For instance, in congregational singing (depending on the song leader) she may or may not duplicate the melody line. She would probably use register changes and more elaborate fills. If this were a church solo, she would probably bring out the melody in octaves, possibly switching hands and fill time with scalar runs, etc. On the gospel song "I've Been Redeemed," Darcy chose a simple one note melody as if a soloist was singing, then used a four-part hymn-like chord as if to answer the soloist. During the extended notes, she moved to the subdominant chord and back to the tonic. The most interesting part of her interpretation of this old chorus was the chord progression. After the first two measures of the I-IV-I series, she moved to the B-flat seventh chord but changed to the dominant of B-flat (F^7) and back to B-flat right away. Darcy used chord changes to fill empty spaces. When she got to the E-flat, she moved to the seventh on the third beat, descending chromatically with her left thumb in preparation for the subdominant A-flat chord. On the third beat of the A-flat measure, she descended to the F minor chord on the word "Lamb." Likewise, on the next measure she only held the E-flat chord two beats before descending to the C minor chord. On both measures it was a descent of a minor third, which would be the relative minor. Darcy is very consistent in her use of chord progressions. In the next measure, instead of going directly to the B-flat seventh chord, she inserts the borrowed dominant F^7, then B-flat seventh, before finishing on E-flat with a plagal cadence.

On the contemporary piece "Shout to the Lord," Darcy played cautiously at the beginning, following the sketchy lead sheet exactly, playing the melody on a single note with an occasional alto note thrown in. Her left hand mainly played the single note bass just on the downbeat of each measure with a mid-range chord on the third beat. At the fourth and fifth measures, however, Darcy added fluidity to the melody by inserting right hand chordal arpeggios, while the melody held out the dotted quarters. She seemed to loosen up as the song developed, and by the last two measures she was hitting solid right hand chords on every beat with the bass in octaves doing a rhythmic dotted quarter followed by an eighth note pattern. By the end, Darcy was getting into the rock groove that is so conducive to most contemporary songs. Overall, it was a clear and balanced interpretation.

Case Study 4: "Sam" (recording excerpts tracks 7-8)

Sam's interpretation of the gospel song "I've Been Redeemed," was as complicated as Darcy's was clear. He is a seasoned worship leader and serves at a large congregation in Oregon with the synthesizer as his main instrument. Sam started improvising in 1980 and was largely influenced by jazz artists such as Harlon Rogers and the Tri-Tone Subs. He reads music about seventy percent as well as he improvises and has played in churches for twenty years. Of all the participants, Sam had the right idea of interpreting an old gospel song of this nature, jazzing it up in a most thrilling way. His style is reminiscent of Thomas A. Dorsey's words about his "Dance Blues" introduction, that whether performed fast or slow, folks always screamed with excitement. Sam started

off by creating a fascinating rhythm, comparable to any of Stevie Wonder's. He designed a pattern of two-handed harmonies that teased the listener. The alto line slipped chromatically upward and back down again. It would be nearly impossible for someone else to replicate all the intricate textures of this interpretation. Naturally, he sang the melody in order to free his hands for this most complicated, jumpy rhythm. This pianistic creation had very little similarity to the lead sheet provided. Sam did not follow the melody line at all, and he oscillated between chords and blue notes so frequently it was hard to catch them all. In his right hand he started off developing the rhythmic pattern that he maintained all the way through. On the E-flat chord, Sam used a slip note from G-flat to G (minor third to major third) two times, then from G to A-flat (subdominant chord) two times while his left hand played a type of boogie in the tenor line (B-flat, C, D-flat and back again.) The I-IV-I oscillation was characteristic of the Roberta Martin style of the 1950s-60s but disguised with slipped blue notes. There were so many blue notes and jazz chords in this piece that it would have impressed the best of jazz musicians.

On "Shout to the Lord," Sam started on the dominant chord of E and did a downward roll chord that was followed by another downward roll on the A chord in the first measure. He neither played nor sang the melody in this piece but rather made up tasteful harmonic motives as filler in his right hand that could be considered counter melodies. At measure four, his left hand started playing rich arpeggios, adding the second scalar degree to the chord. He lingered on the suspended chord at the end. The alto line moved upward in a final statement before resolving downward. In both songs,

Sam displayed his mastery and sensitivity to the demands of each style, going from a jumpy funk rock to an elegant, flowing artpiece.

Case Study 5: "William" (recording excerpts tracks 9-10)

William is the most senior participant in this study. He began improvising in 1943 and has played in church for fifty-eight years. As a youngster, he studied piano for ten years and was largely influenced by his local church pianist. He still plays in church, mostly on the organ. William has a natural ear for harmonies. He began "I've Been Redeemed" with the melody in three octaves, using his left thumb to double the right hand on the initial pick-up. To fill in the first measure, he did a church plagal chord change, only moving the middle voices. By the third measure, William started a progression of chords that postponed the B-flat seventh chord, choosing instead the F^7 minor (ii) chord. At the A-flat chord on the word, "Lamb," William lowered the third to an A-flat minor chord before returning to the E-flat, on which he stayed for only one beat before going to a G^7 and a C minor. Then he postponed the B-flat seventh chord again in favor of the F minor seventh (B-flat to E-flat.) In a nutshell, the chords he used from measure three to the end were: ii^7, V^7, I, IV, iv, I, V/vi, vi, ii, V^7, I. This is a classic chord progression and demonstrates William's good ear for harmony. He further beautified the harmony by following through chromatically in the alto line, either descending or ascending to form a short motive.

On the contemporary piece "Shout to the Lord," William wasn't quite as comfortable but did well, nonetheless. He chose to change the key from A to A-flat, a

standard procedure in gospel piano, dating back to Dranes and Dorsey. Starting off with the soprano and alto in thirds, he abruptly jumped to right hand octaves in the second measure. The third measure had some challenging syncopation, and William opted to ignore the last one and played the word "You" on the downbeat of measure four. On eighth-note lead-ins, William used his left thumb to double the melody just as he had in the previous piece. When the chordal progressions became more active toward the end, he sounded more confident.

Case Study 6: "Nicole" (recording excerpts tracks 11-12)

Nicole is a young woman who has already accumulated twelve years of church playing and had eight years of formal training. She began improvising in 1992 and was heavily influenced by friends from church and college. Although Nicole has probably never heard the old gospel song "I've Been Redeemed," she attacked it with delightful energy, playing the chords exactly as given in the lead sheet, no more and no less. Her left hand played the root in octaves, followed by the fifth in octaves on beats one and three of every measure. Her right hand was able to play a three note chord in the middle C range on the offbeats. It was a boisterous oom-pah style in simple form. Nicole has a strong and lovely voice with which she sang the melody in an effectively inspiring way. As an ending, she spiced up the rhythm by dropping out the piano on beat one, then playing a quick syncopation on beat two and three while her right hand played in downward steps from dominant to mediant. Nicole made this piece upbeat and fun.

On "Shout to the Lord," Nicole played the first two measures as an introduction, then began singing the melody at the beginning. Her left hand started with a busy rhythm of quarter note, two eighths, quarter, two eighths, using the root, fifth, and octave in various order. For the main body of the piece, Nicole struck a chord on every beat with her right hand and hit a heavy bass note in octaves on the downbeat, a standard trait of young players. Towards the end of the piece, though, she mixed it up with arpeggios and syncopation for a swelling push toward the refrain. Very convincing!

Case Study 7: "Candy" (recording excerpts tracks 13-14)

Candy is a well trained pianist and piano teacher who has played in Assemblies of God churches for thirty years. She began improvising in 1975 and was influenced by her high school and college piano teachers who knew improvisation as well as reading music. She studied piano for a total of nineteen years and taught piano lessons herself for at least that long. Learning to improvise in the early 1970s, Candy was already grown and playing in church. She states that she was largely self-taught out of necessity. Growing up in the decades of the 1950s and 60s, however, exposed her to the barrelhouse style of church pianists influenced by Dranes and Martin. On her tonic chords, she added the sixth scale degree, changed the overall key to F from E-flat on the lead sheet, she took the tempo at the lively jaunt, and jumped between octaves with both hands. All of these techniques are characteristic of the early evangelistic style of piano, which was virtually unchanged until the mid-70s when churches experienced a type of musical reformation from a revival of young people. Candy faithfully added the dominant seventh before

moving the chord up a fourth, usually approaching the seventh degree by half steps. On the last line, she also moved the bassline downward from E-flat to D to C on the words "sin I know I am." She finished the phrase on a C^7 minor chord and then postponed the B-flat seventh until after the F^7 minor was played to keep the circle of 5ths going clockwise. For filler on the first two measures during the half notes, she used the rhythm of an eighth rest followed by dotted eighth note, sixteenth note, eighth note, and half note in both hands. This gave it a bouncy rather than a syncopated feel. Candy's style had more of a flourish than regular barrelhouse and bordered on novelty piano.

On "Shout to the Lord," Candy dramatically changed styles. She went from the previous piece with its bounce and runs to this simple meditative accompaniment. She did not sound nearly as confident on this contemporary piece, and the few embellishments she used were all in her right hand. Her left hand played a single note on each beat while the right hand played melody and harmony, sometimes with an extended roll chord. Surprisingly, the last two measures were slow and sparse and she played only half notes with no background rhythm. Usually, pianists are starting to build toward the coming refrain at that point with growing arpeggios and full chords up an octave, but apparently Candy was trying to fade out gracefully on the dominant since that is where the lead sheet ended. This contemporary style is not something Candy learned in her music lessons or church while growing up, but she has adapted well out of necessity.

Case Study 8: "Celeste" (recording excerpts tracks 15-16)

Celeste is a highly trained pianist, having as many as twenty years of lessons and playing in church for twenty-three years. She must have gotten an early start, because she doesn't seem much older than that now. Celeste reads music better than she improvises and started improvising in 1980. She says that church music, as well as the classical and jazz genres, influenced her style. Like Sam (case 4), she seems heavily influenced by African-American gospel blues artists. She took the tempo of "I've Been Redeemed" at a rather relaxed speed, playing the melody in three-part chords with her right hand while her left hand did a highly syncopated dance in the bass-line sounding like an actual bass guitar. Her coordination between hands was remarkable! Her left hand was most interesting because it set the mood of the piece. She accentuated the offbeats, always arriving at the beat before the right hand in the most swinging interpretation. Her right hand provided the melody and harmony. As a filler on the first two measures, Celeste simply repeated the melody an octave higher like an echo. Her chord progressions always took her to the supertonic (F minor) chord prior to the dominant (B-flat), like so many other participants. She oscillated once or twice during filler to the subdominant chord and back to the tonic as Roberta Martin would have done.

On the contemporary piece "Shout to the Lord," Celeste toned down the jumpy rhythm from the previous gospel song but still maintained an underlying rhythm going throughout. While her right hand top finger played the melody, she was still able to coordinate a light rhythm with her right thumb alternating with the left thumb in a marchlike pattern of quarter note, two eighths, quarter, two eighths pattern outlining the

root, fifth, and octave of the chord. This is a device for decorating the long half notes while keeping the beat going. True to her contemporary style, Celeste sprinkled the supertonic degree on her tonic triads and kept a strong steady beat without becoming overbearing. She played the verse through twice, moving up an octave the second time in extended position and adding more embellishments. For her final build-up she increased intensity with a crescendo, fuller chords, strong downward bassline, and a beautiful right hand run starting with a triplet of eighth rest and two strong eighth notes changing into an upward scale of sixteenth notes. As in the previous piece, Celeste's strength and individuality in style is in her left hand fluidity, either with beautiful arpeggios or fancy dancing rhythms. Interestingly enough, the lead sheet was in the key of A with a given set of chords that are sometimes inverted. It also had a borrowed subdominant of the subdominant chord and a suspended chord—not an easy thing to transpose. Celeste, for whatever reason, decided to transpose the piece down a whole step to the key of G, which has one sharp instead of three. It seemed cumbersome to transpose all those chords just to avoid playing a couple sharps, but apparently Celeste is more comfortable in the key of G. Certainly Arizona Dranes was!

Case Study 9: "June" (recording excerpts tracks 17-18)

June started improvising in 1947 and was heavily influenced by her local church pianist. She has played off and on in churches for the past forty to fifty years and still plays occasionally. Having taken formal lessons for twelve years, she said her reading skills in music exceed her improvisational skills. On the gospel song "I've Been

Redeemed," June is true to the evangelistic style of playing. Using octaves in the right hand on the eighth note pickups, she played them straight and quite detached in an almost staccato manner. To fill the first measure half note, she made up a one note harmonic eighth note motive in the alto line from subtonic, submediant, subtonic to dominant. Meanwhile her left hand played the bass root in octaves, followed by a chord on the third beat. In the second measure she varied the filler using a single note descending walk from tonic to dominant in the rhythm of double dotted quarter rest, sixteenth note, and two quarter notes. On the subdominant chord, middle system, June played a nice scalar run in the right hand up one octave, which perfectly filled the first three beats in time to resume the melody on "saved from sin." She followed a straight rhythm with a lilted bounce that was similar to Candy's barrelhouse style, but she surprised the listener with a classical ending. With her right hand, June played an arpeggio on the tonic, supertonic, mediant, dominant, and upper tonic while creating an alto line below on the mediant, dominant, tonic, supertonic, and upper mediant. This two-part harmony is often used in Classical and Romantic written music and makes an elegant finale for church music as well.

On the contemporary piece "Shout to the Lord," June had the most exotic long slow roll chord as an introduction. From bottom to top the notes are as follows: low E, up a minor seventh to D, up an augmented fourth to G-sharp, up a perfect fourth to C-sharp, and up a major third to E-sharp (F). On a lead sheet, this chord would be called an $E^{13\ (-9)}$. Three notes of this chord have a strong pull toward the resolution of the A chord in measure 1: D wants to resolve a half step downward to C-sharp, G-sharp is the leading

tone of the A scale, and F has a strong pull downward to the mediant E. What an amazing appetizer! The main course wasn't quite as exciting, however. June started out playing the melody on the first two measures, but from measure 3 to the end she altered both the pitch and the rhythm. She has admitted to avoiding syncopation at all costs, and sure enough, she cleverly created a complimentary substitute melody in measure 3. June straightened out the melody line, dropping from A down a minor third to F-sharp and back up to A before going to G-sharp, then dropping a major third to E and ending with F-sharp. She still managed to make a pleasing sequential phrase, just touching on the chordal degrees in a non-threatening rhythm of quarter, two eighths, quarter, two eighths notes. No syncopation allowed here! On the second line, June gave up attempting any sort of melody, just chording on the quarter beat with her right hand, sometimes changing inversions. The finish was almost as exotic as the beginning with a right hand arpeggio outlining the E^9 chord in its entirety.

Case Study 10: "D" (recording excerpts tracks 19-20)

"D" is a rare modern jazz improviser who claims to have started improvising at the age of one. That is probably true because he has the most unusual style of playing. Hearing superimposed jazz chords in his head, "D" applies them to everything he plays, whether they really fit or not. Because "D" has not been formally trained on the piano, he barely reads music but has managed to lead a church congregation for the last twelve years, beginning when he was eight! On the gospel song "I've Been Redeemed, "D" started out the first two measures playing the melody (more or less) and ended the last

two measures playing the melody in his right hand. The measures in between were a series of wild chords, some very satisfying resolutions, some a little questionable, but all very intriguing. Being a modern jazz player, he used exotic chords, some nearly impossible to analyze in a traditional way. The previous participant, June, had a flair for adding the ninth degree to a standard chord, but "D" used this wild sound on all his chords, changing chords on every beat, oftentimes chromatically, and hardly bearing a resemblance to the given chord on the lead sheet. Since the body of the piece did not have the melody, it was nearly impossible to follow which measure he was on, but he did complete the piece with the correct number of beats so he must have been following the lead sheet measure by measure. He had a beautiful two handed tertian arpeggio at the end, which included the major seventh, a contemporary sound. The origin of "D's" improvisational style is somewhat a mystery. It is hard to imagine how a little child could hear those chords and pick them by ear with no guidance. He must have been heavily influenced by jazz music, especially modern jazz, yet he doesn't specify any influences in particular other than to say Jesus influenced him.

On "Shout to the Lord," "D" started with an introduction that provided the tempo and key but very little recognizable material. When the actual tune began, "D" played the melody and generally chose chords that could be compatible to the melody, depending on the listener's taste and preference. He relishes fancy embellishments and fast two handed arpeggios but flavors his music with so many spices that they tend to spoil the broth. "D" is determined to learn to read music and has registered to study with an accomplished concert pianist. With his keen ear for replicating music, "D" will be

able to start incorporating the written music he learns into his improvisational repertory, which will give him even more resources on which to draw.

Case Study 11: "Courtney" (recording excerpts tracks 21-22)

Courtney started improvising in 1952 and has played piano in Assemblies of God churches for forty-four years as the pastor's wife. She has had three years of piano training but says she does not read music as well as she improvises. Her influences came from various artists she heard on Christian radio programs. She must have listened well because she has a natural ability not only to find the chords but to arrive in style. On the gospel song "I've Been Redeemed," Courtney starts by playing the melody with her right hand's fifth finger while her thumb is playing a sixth below. She fills the down time with a swinging sixteenth, dotted eighth, sixteenth, and two quarter note rhythm. The alto line is on the dominant, moving down a half step, back up to the dominant, then skipping down to the mediant. Courtney's left hand alternates faithfully between tonic and dominant. After she introduces this little rhythmic motive in the alto, she starts the next phrase melody line using the same rhythm. On the pickup before the third measure, she does two quick eighth note chord changes from G minor to F-sharp diminished, before starting the third measure on F minor seventh chord (supertonic), then B-flat seventh. Jumping to the last system, Courtney starts with the tonic in second inversion, or B-flat in the bass, moving upward chromatically to B natural and C minor. This makes a nice bassline in contrary motion to the descending line of the melody. From C minor, she follows the circle of fifths home to the tonic. As an ending, Courtney chooses the right

hand final chord with the tonic (E-flat) on top, descending to D-flat on top of a B-flat minor chord, C on top of an A-flat chord, C-flat on top of an A-flat minor chord to G, the mediant of the tonic chord. This makes a nice chromatic descending line, and sounds a bit "bluesy," too.

On "Shout to the Lord," Courtney was not quite as comfortable but still succeeded in applying her elegant style. Two attributes stood out from the other participants with Courtney: she always straightened out a line wherever possible, and she used a preceding sixteenth note of the same pitch before certain long notes that is similar to a "ta-da" in singing. Her first straightening of the bassline was in measure 2 where she played the E chord with G-sharp in the bass to make a six note descending scale. It is rare and exciting circumstances that facilitate such a lengthy scalar descent, and Courtney ran with it. Another noteworthy straightening of lines was in the second measure of the right hand melody line. Courtney deliberately decided not to dip down to low G-sharp because it is a bit awkward to play. She continued the E from the first measure into the second measure starting an upward line from E, F-sharp, G-sharp, to A, the downbeat of the third measure. Another participant, Celeste, also straightened out the melody line here, but the trick is to play the melody with the right thumb a sixth below. Both women did that successfully.

Case Study 12: "Dina" (recording excerpts tracks 23-24)

Like several other participants, Dina is a pastor's wife who has played in church for thirty-two years. She started improvising in 1972 and was influenced by the pastor's

wife of her home church in San José, California. Like Candy, she learned to improvise out of necessity. Dina also reads music, having studied the piano for fourteen years. She said she hadn't played "I've Been Redeemed" for at least twenty years and seemed pleased to do it again. Dina, like Celeste and Sam, who are all artists in their 30s and 40s, took the tempo quite slow, leaving room for lots of rhythm and blues. She swung the beat with a slight syncopated note preceding the main beats throughout the piece in one hand or both. Like Sam, she tapped her foot to the beat, reminiscent of Jelly Roll Morton's drumstick that tapped on the piano leg. To fill the first two measures, she used a typical I-IV-I, again arriving at the note slightly before the beat. She played the pick-up notes in right hand octaves. On the second set of pick-up notes, she changed the chords on the last two eighth notes to G minor, F-sharp diminished, and F minor on the downbeat of the fourth measure. On the pick-up to the fifth measure, she used the chord D-flat with E-flat in the bass, which is subdominant of the dominant in the coming key of the A-flat chord. This popular chord often substitutes for the E-flat seventh (dominant seventh of the subdominant) in modern gospel music, which is the more traditional lead-in to the subdominant A-flat chord. When she arrived at the A-flat chord, Dina used the second scalar degree (B-flat) in a most prominent way, which is typical of contemporary playing. On the last system, Dina used the E-flat chord (second inversion) to the B diminished to the C minor chord. She used the second inversion because experience had taught her this would make a pleasing chromatic ascent from B-flat to B to C in contrary motion to the descending melodic line. This technique might have been adopted from her (or her influence's) classical training. Like so many others, Dina ended the piece with a

tonic chord, second inversion subdominant, and back to tonic, but she syncopated each one, following the pattern she initially established.

On "Shout to the Lord," Dina played a single note prominent right hand melody with an interval of a perfect fifth in her left hand oscillating between tonic and dominant notes. The dominant note of E sounds on each off-beat, which is an effective technique for left hand fluidity. She used this technique during the half notes of the second and third measures, and it was sufficient to keep the pulse moving along in a sweet simple manner. On the third and fourth measures, Dina started each measure with a moderately slow right hand roll of the extended position F-sharp minor and E major chords. The fourth and fifth measures brought a beautiful sixteenth-note three octave arpeggio starting on the second half of beat one and ending with a slip note from second degree to third and fifth of the D chord on the word "all" in both measures. It was spectacular! Dina has a delicate sense of when to use the second degree of a chord, separating the second from the third slightly as in an arpeggio or slip chord instead of crushing the two together in a block chord. These two measures had a distinct country music flavor reminiscent of Floyd Cramer. However, she ended the piece with a smooth and elegant two octave E suspended arpeggio resolving to an extended high E major chord that is quite unlike Cramer's style. From this short excerpt, it was obvious Dina had several different styles on which to draw. She blended them into her mixture tastefully.

Case Study 13: "Grace" (recording excerpts tracks 25-26)

Grace is one of the senior participants whose style is especially interesting to analyze because of the time period in which she started improvising church music. She was eighteen years old, so it was sometime around 1940, and she was heavily influenced by her piano teacher with whom she had studied for four years. Grace reads music as well as improvises. She is a seasoned Assembly of God pastor's wife and has played in church for fifty years. On the oldie "I've Been Redeemed," Grace played the melody up an octave with her right hand in three part harmony, faithfully adding the sixth degree to each chord. On the E-flat chord the sixth degree is C, so its presence really made the listener perk up. Grace seemed a little nervous and cautious on the recording, so she took the tempo somewhat slowly, which is uncharacteristic for her. With the high detached chords and the sixth degree ringing out, however, it still sounded bright and cheerful. In her left hand, she played a single bass note scalar walk from the low dominant up to the tonic on both measures 1 and 2, during the half note fill time. On the fourth and eighth measures respectively, when the cadence ended on the E-flat tonic half note chord, she played a descending left hand broken chord in extended position and again included the sixth degree. The combination of the sixth degree on all tonic chords, the detached style, and the swinging of certain beats are all traits of early piano improvisation that are similar to those of barrelhouse pianists in the 1920s and 30s. On the recording, her piano even had a "tinny quality" that added to the effect of old-time piano music.

On the contemporary piece "Shout to the Lord,' Grace played the melody in single notes with her right hand while the left hand always hit the root of the given chord,

never an inversion, followed by another chord. She transposed to the key of C, and every C chord had the customary sixth degree added. Grace altered the melody on the second measure to the subtonic, tonic, and supertonic, which is a lowered major second interval sequential pattern to the first statement. On the third measure she left out the middle chord, going directly from A minor to F major. As filler material in the fourth and fifth measures, Grace gave a long left hand arpeggio that did not follow a strict rhythmic structure. The beat was detained each time as if by a fermata. She also altered the melody in the fourth and fifth measures, not even trying to count those difficult syncopations, but always landing on the downbeat of the next measure and not a moment sooner. In the last two measures, the chord structure was completely changed. Since she was transposing, Grace opted for the borrowed dominant of the dominant chord (D major) followed by the augmented dominant of the dominant (D augmented), and finally to the dominant itself (G major) with a half step alto walk from G to F-sharp to F ending on the G^7 chord. Early church improvisational artists often substituted the augmented fifth of the dominant chord for the lowered seventh. The given chords in the last two measures were modulatory and Grace probably didn't know how to transpose them in the key of C. She also may never have been exposed to the suspended chord, which is so prevalent today, and opted for something familiar sounding to her such as the augmented fifth on the dominant.

Summary of Chapter 8:

These thirteen participants are representative of a broad range of ages. "D" is the youngest at twenty and William is the oldest at seventy-five. They are categorized into three general groups: ages twenties and thirties, ages forties and fifties, and ages sixties and seventies. "D," Sierra, Nicole, and Celeste are in the twenties and thirties age group. Sam, Dina, Candy, and Lucy are in the forties and fifties age group. Courtney, June, Darcy, Grace and William are in the sixties and seventies age group.

In analyzing their styles of playing, certain traits have become evident between age groups. Although no two peoples' styles are identical and some traits cross over between age groups, there are still some similarities in style that are characteristic of a common age. On the first example, "I've Been Redeemed," the participants aged forty and above seem to grasp the traditional historical style of interpretation better than the younger participants. Conversely, on the second example, "Shout to the Lord," the younger participants are more adept at the contemporary style traits.

What are these specific traits? A general summary is listed below of older players' traits:

1. Transposing to flat keys.
2. Using bouncy lilted rhythms (dotted quarter followed by eighth note, for example).
3. Using detached eighth note pick-ups.
4. Rolling chords, including the 10th degree.
5. Using arpeggios and scalar runs.
6. Using chromatic and diatonic scalar connecting lines.
7. Playing melody and chords in right hand (melody in upper fingers).
8. Smoothing out rhythm and pitch by altering melodic notes.
9. Playing melody in single note or doubled octave.
10. Adding the sixth degree to tonic chord.
11. Using lowered sevenths on every dominant chord.

12. Avoiding syncopation at all costs, always arriving on the downbeat.
13. Postponing the dominant chord by inserting supertonic chord.
14. Using chordal oscillations during fill time, either subdominant or dominant.

A general summary of younger players' improvisational traits would be:

1. Singing the melody rather than playing it.
2. Being comfortable in sharp keys.
3. Using right hand chords heavily.
4. Playing chord steadily on each beat.
5. Using left hand syncopated rhythms.
6. Using left hand octaves primarily on tonic and dominant degrees.
7. Sprinkling unresolved scalar degrees, such as the seconds, fourths, and major sevenths into the traditional triad.
8. Using nontraditional forms of chord structure.
9. Using single chord syncopated rhythms for fill time.
10. Using nontraditional chord progressions.

It is most interesting that pianists remain true to the form they learned in their early years even if it was many years ago. Departing from that form is very difficult, if not impossible, for them. The reason for this could be a matter of choice and preference for some pianists, but for many of the older pianists it is a matter of not having been exposed to the more complicated rhythms of contemporary Christian music.

During the late 1970s, there was an abrupt change in the style of church music of the Assemblies of God. If the pianists didn't stay active during those transitional years, they were left behind. Or perhaps they chose to drop out because they didn't have a feel or appreciation for contemporary Christian music … Or, maybe they didn't like it because they couldn't play it … or maybe they didn't play it because they couldn't like it. The speculations are countless! At any rate, this study may be a broad generalization of early pianists, but it has shown there is a certain relationship between participants of an age and the similarities of stylistic characteristics within that age group.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

Who influenced Scott Joplin, the king of ragtime music, and what influences did his music ultimately have on gospel piano improvisation? This thesis is meant to scan the surface of the question of influences in music and how every composer or improviser of music is influenced, either by a peer or predecessor. Scott Joplin was one of the few nineteenth-century African-Americans who formally studied music. Coming on the heels of Frederic Chopin and other European composers, there is no doubt Joplin was influenced by them. Some of his waltzes can be directly paralleled to Chopin's: key signatures, time signatures, and left hand patterns. Only the melodies are substantially different since both composers were masters of the melody. Around the time of the Paris Fair Concerts of 1900, modern classical composers such as Debussy, Stravinsky, and Hindemith tried their own hand at a type of sophisticated ragtime, incorporating their own direction of methods and style. They were directly influenced by the "ragged" music of Joplin and Sousa yet added their own flavor to the broth, sometimes more successfully than others but always adding something different. The creative influence had crossed the Atlantic and back again in a few short years.

Though Joplin tried his best to preserve the dignity of Classic Ragtime and the exact interpretation thereof, it was impossible to contain the spread of this dance music to all parts of the country. From Chicago to New York to New Orleans and beyond, this rage for ragtime gained momentum. As ragtime grew in popularity, the style of music also developed. Tempos became more lively (almost frenetic), and the music itself became more embellished and free—the freedom of improvised music.

In the late 1800s, during the Great African-American Migration north to cities such as Chicago, African-American musicians often had the talent but were short on the training, so they honed their listening skills and learned from other musicians. Both Joplin and Morton visited Chicago regularly from Missouri and Louisiana respectively. Stride piano, an improvised and free type of ragtime music, quickly spread to evangelical churches, especially in the south or northern cities with southern transplants. For most of the twentieth century, church pianists used stride techniques to improvise hymns or gospel songs—using techniques such as the octave root on the downbeat, followed by a mid-range chord, the right hand melody in octaves, the embellished filler material, and connecting chordal degrees.

Stride piano alone is not an adequate explanation of the influences that led to gospel improvisation, however. About the time of the African-American migration, the blues began to take a serious hold on popular music. A few years post-ragtime, the blues also spread quickly, especially in nightclubs and bordellos. The man who earned the title "Father of the Blues" was W. C. Handy, a church organist and trumpet playing son of an Alabama preacher. Young Handy was strongly influenced by groups of itinerant musicians who introduced the beginnings of the blues. He went on to have a band of his own and was responsible for studying African-American folk music in the deep south, notating the blue notes and weaving them into his own brand of ragtime music.

It is necessary to include the blues in this evolution of the influences on church gospel songs, because the "Father of Black Gospel" music was actually a reformed blues writer and performer named Thomas A. Dorsey. Nicknamed "Georgia Tom" in his

secular days, he teamed up with blues artists "Ma" Rainey and Hudson "Tampa Red" Whittaker, writing hundreds of blues compositions. His style did not change when he decided to give up his double-entendre lyrics and concentrate on writing more spiritual music for the church. The church he wrote for was an African-American Chicago Baptist church, but his gospel songs quickly surpassed racial and denominational lines, spreading to all Southern evangelical congregations, whether black or white, Baptist, Pentecostal or anything in between. Dorsey wrote over 500 gospel songs. Within certain black congregations in the 1940s and 1950s, whenever a new gospel song came out, it was automatically called a "Dorsey" because his association with gospel music was so great. Horace C. Boyer stated,

> The body of work created by Dorsey stands out because it synthesized all of the elements of the newest of African American sacred music into a twentieth-century whole and because Dorsey composed in such a captivating and inclusive style that all those who were to come after him automatically, consciously or unconsciously, borrowed from and added to the concept and practice he had established. If we, as we move toward the close of this century, listen carefully to the work of the composers of contemporary gospel, such as Edwin Hawkins, Elbernita Clark, and Andrae Crouch, we will also hear Thomas A. Dorsey.[148]

Dorsey's captivating and inclusive style may be hard to describe, but it was clearly the beginning of "soul music," a blend of genres such as spirituals, folksongs, and blues. By slowing an ordinary hymn such as "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?" and changing the lyrics to "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," Dorsey created a personal heartfelt prayer. Additionally, by altering the meter to include a triplet feel on each beat, by sprinkling lowered blue notes to the established melody, allowing time for vocal embellishment, and

[148] Boyer, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," 142.

by oscillating chords to a syncopated shuffle, Dorsey added a new dimension to gospel songs. Soul music gives the singer time to meditate on the words and the opportunity for spontaneous interjections. This also challenges the pianist to fill this time with appropriate and sensitive material to enhance the worship experience and not detract from it or compete with it. Arizona Dranes and Roberta Martin were two such gospel pianists who had styles that were of great influence to their generations and beyond. Dranes was virtually unknown in most of the country during her lifetime, but she had an important contribution to the styles of Dorsey and his protégé Roberta Martin. The fact that there was such a huge attendance at Martin's memorial service is testimony to the fact that her music was well-loved and her character well-respected. Martin was directly instrumental in influencing James Cleveland and Andrae Crouch, two of the most popular gospel artists of the 1960s and 70s. Most of the participants in this study were directly or indirectly influenced by these two recording artists.

For most of the twentieth century, the gospel piano style of improvisational artists such as Robert Harkness has prevailed in predominantly white traditional churches. His style has the desirable traits for the great majority of church songs and early hymns still commonly sung today. Harkness was successful in improvising a four-part hymn by adding notes within the chord, using octaves, connecting melody notes with passing tones, but keeping the basic straight rhythm. The Harkness style refers to the elaboration of notated sacred music. He added elegance to the notated music score. The need for improvising a hymn was realized by all churches since hymns are written for four-part voices and the piano has the potential of adding so much more. The difference between

Harkness and Martin, for example, is that the black gospel style of Martin greatly altered the written music to suit the needs of the congregation. That includes meter, tempo, altered chords, inserted chords, chord substitutions, altered melody, harmony, and spaces for spontaneity. Harkness, on the other hand, used the meter, tempo, melody, and chords provided but tried to utilize more of the piano. He played in hand octaves, filled the empty spaces with scalar runs, and smoothed out the left hand with broken chords and arpeggios. This elaboration of the written note is labeled "White Gospel" in this study because it is a desirable quality in most of the traditional denominations in the country. This style of accompaniment was set into motion by the great revivalists of the early 1900s such as Moody and Sankey. The contrast between "African-American Gospel" and "White Gospel" is as different as night and day.

In the study and comparison of Assemblies of God piano improvisers, the influence of African-American gospel pianists such as Dranes and Martin are evident, especially on the over forty age group. The preference for flat keys, the oscillating tonic-subdominant fills, the dominant seventh chords, and bouncy rhythms are all typical of early blues music. But the opposite is true, too. White gospel music in traditional churches was also influential in some of the participants over forty. The octave melodies, scalar runs, and rolled chords of Robert Harkness must also share in the credit. Younger piano improvisers are also influenced by a variety of sources. Contemporary Christian music largely parallels contemporary popular music of both black and white ethnicities. Much of pop music has a heavy quadruple pulse, usually driven by guitars and drums, and contemporary piano styles also reflect this strong pulse in their execution.

In conclusion, the study and comparison of actual church musicians today of various ages, experimenting with an old gospel song and a new contemporary song, helps to demonstrate the point that improvisational pianists, as well as musicians, in general, are products of what they hear and adopt as their own. James P. Johnson admitted he stole his licks from other ragtime exhibitionists such as Lucky Roberts. Everyone "steals" to some degree, but "stealing" is perfectly acceptable when used under the title of "musical influence." Like the formulation of a great piecemeal skyscraper, musicians take whatever current structure is handed down to them and add another story to it, layer by layer, generation after generation, with the only objective being to meet their creative needs and fancies.

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