

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

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## Black and White, then “Red” All Over: Chicago’s American Negro Music Festival

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*W.C. Handy at the  
American Negro Music Festival  
Courtesy of St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

The functions of public musical spectacle in 1940s Chicago were bound up with a polyphony of stark and sometimes contradictory changes. Chicago’s predominantly African American South Side had become more settled as participants in the first waves of the Great Migration established firm roots, even as the city’s “Black Belt” was newly transformed by fresh arrivals that ballooned Chicago’s black population by 77% between 1940 and 1950. Meanwhile, over the course of the decade, African Americans remained attentive to a dramatic narrowing of the political spectrum, from accommodation of a populist, patriotic progressivism to one dominated by virulent Cold War anticommunism. Sponsored by the *Chicago Defender*, arguably the country’s flagship black newspaper, and for a brief time the premiere black-organized event in the country, the American Negro Music Festival (ANMF) was through its ten years of existence responsive to many of the communal, civic, and national developments during this transitional decade. In seeking to showcase both racial achievement and interracial harmony, festival organizers registered ambivalently embraced shifts in black cultural identity during and in the years following World War II, as well as the possibilities and limits of coalition politics.

The ANMF was made possible through an earnestly committed, if circumstantially bonded, cohort of bedfellows. The event was created in 1940 by *Defender* executive and writer W. Louis Davis, a forty-year-old business and public relations guru with an appreciation for the “wonderful art of selling.”<sup>1</sup> Through an array of endeavors, ranging from life insurance to his own music booking agency, Davis built a reputation as one of Chicago’s most visionary and well-connected black residents. Davis was a fierce advocate for black quality of life issues, which he and *Defender* colleagues believed could be furthered through more fluid dialogue between cultural production, public service, and black capitalism. The ANMF was empowered by an impressive interracial Board of Directors and amicable relations with influential local business leaders and black churches. Instrumental in festival programming was Davis’s sister-in-law Marva Louis, the glamorous and socially conscious wife of revered heavyweight champion Joe Louis.

As a *Defender* initiative, the festival drew strength from an

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activist black press flush with confidence from its expanded reach and unprecedented political access. The 1940 death of *Defender* founder and Booker T. Washington protégé Robert Abbott and the assumption of the paper’s editorship by his nephew John Sengstacke signaled a passing of the mantle to “a younger, post-Washingtonian generation of black and white Chicago intellectuals, journalists, entrepreneurs, activists, and cultural workers”<sup>2</sup>

for whom the *Defender* represented the increasingly militant face of an ambitious civil rights program. By the end of WWII, national circulation for black newspapers had risen to an all-time high of nearly two million, and as Bill Mullen has argued, well after the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact shook the convictions of many progressives, the *Defender*’s pages reflected the street cred that communists maintained among many black Chicagoans for their anti-racist commitments.<sup>3</sup> The war in Europe was another omnipresent backdrop. The ANMF was launched as a benefit for the American Red Cross’s War Relief Fund. When the U.S. military entered combat, and even after the war ended, the event continued to raise funds for various causes under the auspices of *Defender* Charities while remaining a vehicle for the expression of black patriotism and bolstering home front morale.

Insofar as it foregrounded Americanism, interracialism, and the spiritual as an emblem of the country’s racial and Judeo-Christian past, the ANMF can also be understood as a spin-off. *The Chicago Tribune*’s annual Chicagoland Music Festival, held from 1930 to 1964 at Soldier Field, regularly drew

massive crowds from throughout the Midwest region. Promising to cater to all musical tastes and social classes and bringing together top professionals and amateurs identified through regional competitions, the Chicagoland Festival sought to mitigate racial strife with an event intending “to create kindly feeling between Caucasians and Negroes” through its racially mixed audiences.<sup>4</sup> Patriotic performances and audience sing-alongs were prominently featured,

though the annual highlight of the Chicagoland festival were the Negro spirituals sung by a 1,000-voice African American chorus led by the dean of Chicago’s black choir directors J. Wesley Jones. In a powerful annual climax redolent with visual and sonic symbolism, 2,000 white choristers joined Jones’s ensemble for the singing of Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus.

Davis seemed

intent to rearticulate the model and message of the Chicagoland Music Festival but from a black perspective informed by uplift ideology. In its first three years, the ANMF was held at Soldier Field but in 1943 it was relocated—perhaps emblematically—deeper into the South Side to Comiskey Park, home of the Chicago White Sox. The Chicagoland festival’s populist message was echoed in the ANMF promise to present artists who “have reached farmers, housewives and laborers through the radio, performing music as varied and beautiful as the groups that make up America.” Yet despite declaring offerings “ranging from opera to jive,” the first years of the ANMF were dominated by concert music. The wedding of classical music and the spiritual was clear in the festival’s programming of such popular religious vocal ensembles as the Souther-



*American Negro Music Festival: America's Outstanding Cultural Event*  
Chicago Times, 7 July 1944  
National Personnel Records Center  
Archival Programs Division

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naires, the Wings Over Jordan choir, and Jones’s mass chorus alongside classically trained African American soloists. Among early headliners were the two preeminent black male recitalists, tenor Roland Hayes and bass-baritone Paul Robeson. Marian Anderson, perhaps America’s best-known concert artist by virtue of her European triumphs and her landmark 1939 Easter Day recital on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, never appeared, though she was an honorary chairperson.

In the 1920s, Hayes, Robeson, and Anderson had pioneered the performance of arranged spirituals alongside European art songs at recitals. Because of its steady commitment to programming classical music, the ANMF presented an historically significant array of black concert and opera singers beyond the “big three,” many them younger artists, including sopranos Anne Brown, La Julia Rhea, and Muriel Rahn; Canadian contralto Portia White; tenor Pruth McFarlin; and baritones Todd Duncan, Kenneth Spencer, and Robert McFerrin, who in 1955 became the first African American man to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. In another borrowing from the Chicagoland festival, the fifth ANMF added a regional “Search for Talent” contest for aspiring black classical vocalists from Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Missouri, Kentucky, and Illinois, who competed to be among three finalists given the opportunity to perform at the festival, broadcast nationally on CBS radio. Third place at the 1947 festival talent search went to nineteen-year-old Wilberforce College student Leontyne Price. The festival’s aesthetic orientation could be discerned even in several of the jazz artists who appeared: violinist Eddie South, boogie-woogie pianist Dorothy Donegan, bandleader Marl Young, and swing harpist Olivette Miller were all classically trained musicians.

In 1945, the sixth ANMF made a notable shift. Concert music was still prominently featured—Julliard-trained Brown, who created the role of George Gershwin’s Bess opposite Duncan as Porgy, was enthusiastically received singing “Summertime” and a Debussy aria—and the Deep River Boys and Jones’s chorus crooned spirituals. A general air of

solemnity held sway during a memorial to black America’s beloved president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who died in office just three months prior. Highlighting the tribute was the “Going Home” theme from the slow movement of Dvořák’s “New World Symphony” played by one of FDR’s favorite musicians, African American accordionist Graham Jackson. Restoring the air of festivity and stealing the show, however, was the band of vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, starring “5 feet, 3 inches, 210 pound boogie-woogie wizard of the ivories” Milt Buckner. Hampton’s set in front of a reported crowd of 25,000 spectators marked a popular turn at the ANMF, a signature moment documented by Albert Barnett’s glorious blow-by-blow description in the *Defender*:

But it was when the band played “Caledonia,” that caution was thrown to the wind, with a number of youths jitterbugging up and down the broad aisles to the applause and encouragement of the fans.

A near-sensation hit the grandstand opposite right field, when a popcorn vendor, thrilled from fingertips to toes by the rocking Caledonia strain, suddenly threw his popcorn and container away and started gyrating and jitterbugging up and down the wide steps of the grand-stand.

The youth’s performance was almost professional and before long, everybody in the park, in all tiers of seats, even those on and near the bandstand, were enjoying the spectacle, and howling encouragement to the dancing pop-corn vendor, who was finally led away by insistent police.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the Hampton-inspired rite of passage from spirituals to swing, the festival also built its brand through appearances by such prominent black figures as Joe Louis, Mary McLeod Bethune, Langston Hughes, Pearl Bailey, Earl “Fatha” Hines, Ella Fitzgerald, and perennial favorite W. C. Handy, and



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by white Hollywood actors including Paul Muni and Don Ameche.

The mid-forties marked the apex for *Defender* circulation and the festival’s success appears to have grown along with the paper’s fortunes as in these years the ANMF reached its own zenith in visibility and prestige. This was evident in the festival’s expansion—beginning in 1944, the ANMF was “franchised,” repeating its program at Briggs Stadium in Detroit and Sportsman’s Ball Park in St. Louis—and in the remarkable degree of high level support. Letters of endorsement came from the mayors of Chicago, Detroit, and St. Louis, from the governors of Illinois, Michigan, and Missouri, and from President Roosevelt hailing the festival for recognizing the “universal” appeal of black cultural achievement. Coming on the heels of deadly race riots in Detroit and Harlem during the summer of 1943, the timing of this aggressively mobilized affirmation was surely not coincidental. All messages of support for the ANMF heavily underscored its important role in furthering black and white solidarity. Chicago Mayor Edward Kelly, who appeared annually in person to congratulate the festival for having become a “national institution,” designated the week leading up the 1945 event “American Negro Music Festival Inter-Racial Good Will Week.” Martin Kennelly took up these duties when he was elected mayor in 1947. The festival and the black musical heritage it celebrated, Roosevelt wrote to Davis, “contributed much to interracial morale on the home front” and deepened “appreciation of democracy and each other.”<sup>6</sup>

The music of black Christianity, particularly spirituals and gospel, neatly encapsulated the symbiotic virtues of ethnic difference and national cohesion. Jones, the venerable and musically conservative director of the esteemed Metropolitan Community Church choir and president of the National Association of Negro Musicians, was assisted in the direction of the mass choir by pioneering gospel songwriter Thomas A. Dorsey and singer Magnolia Lewis Butts. In 1933, Butts, Jones’s longtime associate as a soloist with his choirs and as director of the youth choir at Metropolitan, partnered with Dorsey and Theodore Frye in co-founding of the

National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, which laid the institutional foundations for the modern black gospel movement. We can only speculate about whether recognition of Dorsey and Butts as co-directors of Jones’s mass chorus came with stylistic modifications or whether it simply acknowledged their standing within the South Side church music community. Regardless, the contribution of core members of Chicago’s gospel scene to the ANMF indicates the increasingly secure place of black gospel alongside the concert spiritual in the 1940s. Despite the conspicuous and curious absence of Chicago’s numerous gospel luminaries at the ANMF—for instance, the Roberta Martin Singers, the Soul Stirrers, or Mahalia Jackson, whose 1947 recording “Move On Up A Little Higher” made her a national sensation—audiences at the ninth festival heard gospel music in the popular format of a multi-city “gospel song battle.”

Yet it is difficult to know if the inclusion of gospel in festival programming in 1948 was a triumphant breakthrough or an early sign of difficulty drawing stars that resulted in the radically scaled-down community event presented a year later. In 1949, the ANMF, in its tenth and final year, was moved from the summer to the fall and from Comiskey to the Chicago Coliseum. More significantly, the suddenly and unmistakably withered lineup was a likely product of the Red Scare. Casting aspersions on civil rights activists by linking them with communism was a familiar script. As A. Phillip Randolph, National President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, observed in a 1936 editorial: “It’s gotten to be a regular indoor sport now to damn most movements and individuals who resolutely and aggressively fight for human and race rights and the rights of the workers and minority groups by branding them as ‘red.’”<sup>7</sup> The stakes were raised, however, when on 22 March 1947 President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9835 to purge Communist influence from the federal government. Commentators quickly noted close-to-home implications for African American sociopolitical aspirations. In enforcing Truman’s so-called “Loyalty Order,” the black press observed, “FBI agents and loyalty board personnel are including reports of interracial association in the category

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of ‘derogatory’ information against federal workers in loyalty proceedings,” and U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark identified an array “interracial groups active in the fight for Negro civil rights” as subversives. “Communism and integration have apparently come to mean the same thing to the average white southerner,” a resigned Al Smith wrote in his *Defender* column.<sup>8</sup>

In such a climate, the ANMF would have been an easy target for reactionary anti-communists both within and outside of government. Particularly suspect were the festival’s motto of “interracial goodwill” and its open associations with Robeson, black actor and progressive activist Canada Lee, and American Youth for Democracy, the renamed Youth Communist League, whose chorus sang at the 1946 event and

which soon landed on the Attorney General’s blacklist. Already a financial loss even during its heyday due to Davis’s expensive taste for talent and costly investment in advertising, the ANMF began to run up unpayable debts as some loyal supporters withdrew their support. When board member Whipple Jacobs’s tenure as President of the Chicago Association of Commerce ended in 1946, the Association’s endorsement was discontinued and Jacobs informed Sengstacke and Davis “I cannot authorize the use of my name on your Board of Directors in connection with further promotional activities for the festival.”<sup>9</sup> These budgetary and political realities help explain the festival’s jarring swerve from booking “stars

from the concert stage, radio, theater and music worlds” to presenting talent drawn from “south and southwest sidlers.” Instead of Hollywood, Broadway, and concert artists, the tenth and final ANMF in October 1949, held less than a month after the Peekskill riots mortally wounded Robeson’s career and undercut the American Left, featured community theater actors, high school bands, and a “gospel fete,” with unidentified singers, directed by Dorsey.<sup>10</sup>

The American Negro Music Festival was ushered in confidently on a wave of Popular Front-era interracialism, was sustained by a spirit of national unity during the “good war,” and abruptly evaporated under the gathering clouds of Cold War anticommunism. Such a summary is undoubtedly true, though it only tells part of the story. Mul- len observes



*American Negro Music Festival: 1944 Program  
National Personnel Records Center  
Archival Programs Division*

how Popular Front-style political coalitionism in 1940s Chicago helped buttress local civil rights activism through “the creation of an imaginary black political space” constructed by a “fantastic recombining of ideological possibilities.”<sup>11</sup> The American Negro Music Festival was one such heterogeneous political space, bringing the goals of the black freedom struggle into close proximity with nationalist fervor, religious belief, liberal faith in the free market system, promotion of the city of Chicago, and celebrity buzz. The fate of the ANMF is a reminder of the doors to progressive collaboration that were permanently slammed shut by McCarthyism, though it is also a cautionary tale about how the necessary

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compromises of coalitions and the “expediency of culture” can neutralize the more radically critical edges of political activism.<sup>12</sup> At Comiskey Park, the ante for publicly recognizing black musical achievement was a lusty celebration of American militarism.

Moreover, the feel-good ethos of interracial harmony and the safe space of culture—“through music and song the barriers of race are forgotten,” touted *Defender* promotion<sup>13</sup>—always harbored a risk of becoming non-threatening side streets that bypassed troubling questions that continued to face black Americans in the 1940s: anti-lynching legislation, adequate employment opportunities, equitable housing practices, and voting rights. Lastly, at a time when for some African Americans “swinging the spirituals” à la Sister Rosetta Tharpe was considered shameful cultural sacrilege, the ANMF became a form of discourse on black cultural politics, as the eventual programming of swing and gospel indicated ongoing negotiation of the place of the popular and the black vernacular within a politics of respectability. With an eye on possibilities envisioned and limitations faced, the American Negro Music Festival becomes recognizable as an episode within the history of Chicago’s festival culture that encompassed both the expansion and the constriction of black musical and political desires during a period of profound national change.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> William Occomy, “Business and Commerce,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1 August 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 44-74.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Monica Reed, “Music Festivals and the Formation of Chicago Culture,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 103 (Spring 2010): 736

<sup>5</sup> Albert Barnett, “25,000 Honor FDR at Negro Music Festival,” *Chicago Defender*, 28 July 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to W. Louis Davis, 23 March 1945.

<sup>7</sup> A Phillip Randolph, “Randolph Says Race Congress Not Communist,” *Chicago Defender*, February 1936.

<sup>8</sup> “Clark Lists ‘Red’ Groups,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 December 1947; Lem Graves, Jr., “Flimsy Charges Used in FBI, Loyalty Board ‘Purges,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 December 1948; Al Smith, “Adventures in Race Relations,” *Chicago Defender*, 6 August 1949.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Whipple Jacobs to W. Louis Davis, 6 March 1946; Letter from Jesse Jacobs to John Sengstacke, 8 March 1946, John Sengstacke Papers, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Chicago Public Library.

<sup>10</sup> “Plan American Music Festival Oct. 1 in Stadium; Name Aids,” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 August 1949.

<sup>11</sup> Mullen, *Popular Fronts*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> George Yudice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> “Overflow Crowd Expected Friday,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 July 1947.



## Institute News

Jeffrey Taylor, Director

This term, the Institute's Music in Polycultural America series continued with talks that explored diverse locations and time periods. **Evan Rapport** of The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music presented material related to his new book

*Greeted With Smiles: Bukharian Jewish Music and Musicians in New York*

(Oxford, 2014). **Jacob Cohen** introduced a packed house of Brooklyn College students, most of whom had never heard of the Talking Heads, to the seminal group in "Performing Race, Place, and Hybridity in the Music of the Talking Heads." And moving back to American music of the 19th century, **Jennifer CHJ Wilson** presented on the New Orleans French Opera Company's tours to New York from 1827 to 1833. Once again, a highlight of our spring was a jazz concert with a global theme, with our colleague **Arturo**

**O'Farrill** and alto saxophonist and composer **Rudresh Mahanthappa** performing with the Brooklyn College Big Band to a large and enthusiastic crowd. As in past years, the concert was filmed by members of Brooklyn College's TV and Radio department, and will be shown on CUNY's cable station. In addition, excerpts will be available on our website.

Speaking of HISAM Research Associate **Arturo O'Farrill**, he began this year by winning a GRAMMY for *The Offense of the Drum* as Best Latin Jazz Album. Felix Contreras of NPR described the album as "one of those moments when the course of music with a long tradition is altered slightly — when music moves forward in a subtle and graceful way that's likely to have a lasting impact" (First Listen, 27 April 2014). During the term he headlined at several clubs in the US and abroad, gave master classes, premiered a commissioned ballet at the Joyce with

Malpaso, a Cuban dance company, and participated in a panel discussion at the Smithsonian entitled "What Does It Mean To Be American?" O'Farrill has been awarded a Doris Duke "Explorations in Jazz" grant, and is currently performing and collaborating with artists in the Bronx. He also recently received an Outstanding Achievement in the Arts award from The City College Center for the Arts. Graduate Assistant **Whitney George** was chosen as a composer-in-residence for The Black House Collective in Kansas City, Missouri in March. She has been selected as a composer fellow for the 2015 Atlantic Music Festival and was a finalist for the Morton Gould Young Composers Award (for "Night, like velvet: in twelve letters"). Among her many musical activities she has been directing her ensemble The Curiosity Cabinet in a concert

series examining the idea of correspondence through music, with support from the Baisley Powell Elebash Fund at the CUNY Graduate Center; she continues to be a prominent guest conductor of contemporary music in New York.

Finally, it is now possible to subscribe to HISAM online, at [hisam.org](http://hisam.org). Just follow the link on our homepage, and sign up to receive materials regularly sent out to our mailing list. If you haven't yet given us your email address, you may do so there. Always note that, although PDFs of our Newsletter articles can be downloaded from our site, and hard copies may be requested from our office, the full *AMR* experience is only available online!



Arturo O'Farrill at the Grammys

## The Performer as Historian: *Black Messiah*, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, and the Matter of Albums

Will Fulton, LaGuardia Community College and the CUNY Graduate Center

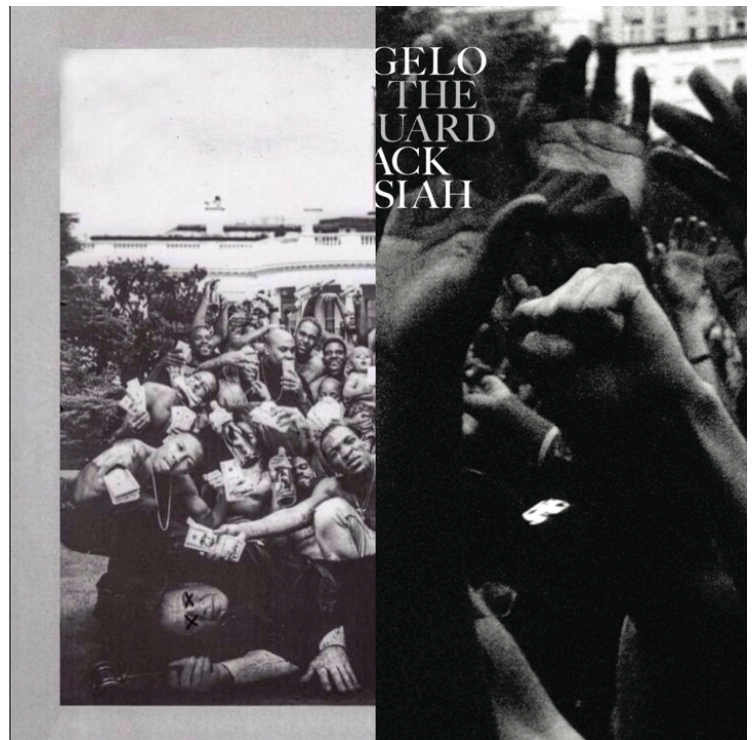
When asked in a 2012 interview how he would classify his sound, D'Angelo responded: "I make black music."<sup>1</sup> While this may seem a flippant remark about genre categorization, this statement reveals the crux of D'Angelo's creative process: the conscious synthesis, celebration, and continuation of African American musical traditions. Although D'Angelo (b. Michael Archer 1974) and Kendrick Lamar (b. 1987) differ artistically, Lamar's album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Interscope, 2015) demonstrates a similar compounding of black music genres, reclaiming and reconciling styles and eras toward evoking a historically unified African American music.

Both D'Angelo's and Lamar's recent albums are challenges to the respective genre taxonomies of soul and rap. *To Pimp a Butterfly* co-producer Terrace Martin comments: "I don't know what to call this album. Some people call it jazz ... but it's heavily black in general!"<sup>2</sup> As in the recent work of Prince, Erkyah Badu, and Kanye West, D'Angelo and Lamar index African American musical styles of the past in a dynamic relationship of nostalgic revivalism and vanguardism. On *Black Messiah* (Sony Music, 2014), D'Angelo and his band The Vanguard weave a self-reflexive musical tapestry that juxtaposes hip hop, boogie woogie, R&B balladry, Afropunk, and gospel quartet singing into a fluid continuum: black music. In a different context, but with a like historical focus, Lamar and his *To Pimp a Butterfly* collaborators merge diverse genres within a conceptual narrative that addresses racial politics and black celebrity, musically reconciling fissures between styles and generations of African American music.

Few albums in recent years have garnered such fervent critical interest as *Black Messiah* and *To Pimp a Butterfly*. However, while many commentators have focused on these albums for their originality within the marketplace, and often on D'Angelo and Lamar as creative auteurs, the performers' relationships to larger networks of musicians, and the historiographic interests evident in these works demand further inquiry. This article will address how these performers exemplify the recent, politically

charged wave of cultural historicism in African American popular music.

The ability of recording technology to preserve the vibrant history of African American music has long been recognized. In 1963, poet Langston Hughes considered the value of sound recordings in preserving musical voices for future generations, awed that "[p]osterity, a 100 years hence, can listen to Lena Horne, Ralph Bunche, Harry Belafonte, and Chubby Checker."<sup>3</sup> Given the central influence of black cultural production on the history of American popular music, beginning with minstrelsy, and the importance of orality and timbre in performance of African American music, the potential of sound recording to preserve the humanity and subjectivity of the performing voice is particularly significant. As Alexander G. Weheliye states, "[s]ound recording and reproduction technologies have afforded black cultural producers and consumers different means of staging time, space, and community in relation to their shifting subjectivity in the modern world."<sup>4</sup>



*Juxtaposed album cover images of Kendrick Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly and D'Angelo and the Vanguard, Black Messiah*



## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums* (cont.)**

As self-reflexive, conscious musical statements about the present informed by the “spirit” of past performers, *Black Messiah* and *To Pimp a Butterfly* provide D’Angelo, Lamar, and their collaborators strategies to stage current black musical culture within a continuum of African American cultural production and experience. The historical present offered on these recordings celebrates vibrant but often overlooked musical networks of African American church band, jazz, and rock musicians—communities of working musicians that are often invisible in mainstream pop culture. While for Lamar, this indexing of black music history is connected to the conceptual narrative of *To Pimp a Butterfly*, for D’Angelo it has been an evident—if not central—aspect of his creative process since his debut album *Brown Sugar* (EMI, 1995).

When entertainment manager Kedar Massenburg was seeking a marketing term for the music of his artists D’Angelo and Erykah Badu in 1997, he chose “neo-soul”: music that carried the spirit of 1960s and 1970s soul but reimagined for the hip-hop generation. D’Angelo came to reject the term, because he felt the genre distinction was too restrictive, preferring the wider, more inclusive categorization of “black music.”<sup>5</sup> Although I had not heard the label when I first saw D’Angelo perform live, at the Supper Club in New York City in August 1995, the reasoning behind “neo-soul” seemed appropriate, if restrictive. Leading a large band complete with a brass section and backing vocalists, D’Angelo held court, seated at the Fender Rhodes electric piano, seamlessly incorporating covers of Al Green’s “I’m So Glad You’re Mine” (Hi, 1972), Smokey Robinson’s “Cruisin’” (Tamla, 1979), and quotations of the Ohio Players and Mandrill into his own hip-hop influenced sound.

For D’Angelo, affectionately termed a “scholar” by Vanguard singer and *Black Messiah* collaborator Kendra Foster,<sup>6</sup> how performers carry on traditions in African American music is important. D’Angelo states of R&B singing:

After the Gap Band, Aaron Hall represented someone who was carrying on that tradition from Charlie Wilson. As far as that style of funk singer goes, we

call them “squallers.” All of them were emulating Sly Stone ... Who was emulating Ray Charles, of course ... [Stevie Wonder] brought these vocal mechanics into the squall that other motherfuckers just couldn’t do. The only other motherfucker after Stevie Wonder, to me, that did it like that, was Charlie Wilson from The Gap Band. Aaron Hall represented the next generation of that. He was the next Charlie Wilson.<sup>7</sup>

D’Angelo’s perception of a clear historical trajectory – spanning from the 1950s and 1960s (recorded) performances of Ray Charles to Aaron Hall’s vocal technique in the late 1980s and early 1990s – is significant, and he consistently judges his own musical output against this continuum of black musical performance. Unlike his R&B influences, however, D’Angelo started his recording career as a rapper, in the Virginia-based group I.D.U. Productions. A product of the hip-hop generation, D’Angelo made music that merged the sensibilities of hip hop (such as thick “boom-bap” kick and snare patterns of the drum machine) with the earthy vibrations of musicians from an earlier era whose music was often *sampled* by hip hop. Like many musicians of his generation, D’Angelo learned about the breadth of black musical genres from an older relative who had a record collection, an uncle who was a DJ and introduced him to “jazz, soul, rock, and gospel history, from Mahalia Jackson to Band of Gypsys, from the Meters to Miles Davis to Donald Byrd,” a process that D’Angelo describes as “going to school.”<sup>8</sup>

D’Angelo recalls perceived similarities in the 1980s drum machine programming style of pioneering hip-hop producer Marley Marl to the late 1960s playing of Band of Gypsys drummer Buddy Miles.

[W]e went over to [I.D.U. deejay] Baby Fro’s house, he would always have some new record up, looking for breaks [to sample]. That’s the first time I heard Band of Gypsys. When I heard it, I thought I was listening to something new. Buddy Miles’ pocket sounded like Marley Marl to me... It was an “Ah ha!”

## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums* (cont.)**

moment for me because all of this music was made way back in the '60s. It felt so fresh... It was a real revelation for me.<sup>9</sup>

Here he recounts the “revelation” in the similar thinking behind Miles’s 1969 rhythmic “pocket” and Marley Marl’s 1980s programming: a perceived connection between the rhythmic aesthetics of generations of black musicians working in different genres. While this relationship with records is far from unique, D’Angelo’s infatuation with infusing layers of historical influence into his work would become an important aspect of his creative focus, if not a career obsession. He has described dreams of talking to the late Marvin Gaye, and how the spirit of Jimi Hendrix at Electric Lady (the studio Hendrix built in the late 1960s, where D’Angelo recorded *Voodoo* in the late 1990s) was a major influence in his adding guitar to his music.

D’Angelo’s second album, *Voodoo* (Virgin, 2000), is further evidence that historical connection of black music genres was an important facet of D’Angelo’s process. On the single “Devil’s Pie,” D’Angelo imagines a slavery-era field holler set to a hip-hop backing track produced by DJ Premier. He states of “Devil’s Pie,” “I would say the spirit of the vocals was more like a chain gang, or like the feel of the slaves, the field slaves in the field picking whatever the fuck master had us picking, and that’s what we’d be singing.”<sup>10</sup> *Voodoo* was lauded by critics and fellow musicians alike, with Beyoncé recently describing it as the “DNA of black music.”<sup>11</sup>

Following *Voodoo*, D’Angelo had an extended absence from public performance. While the dramatic story of his personal struggles during this decade-long period has been well documented, D’Angelo’s musi-

cal journey during these years and how it impacted the creative process for *Black Messiah* is less discussed. Whereas he had worked in a social collective to create *Voodoo*, he began a follow-up album soon after on which he considered performing every musical and vocal part. As co-manager Alan Leeds recalls, his goal “was to record like Prince: complete creative control.”<sup>12</sup> While products of this isolated period of recording formed some of the early versions of *Black Messiah* tracks, D’Angelo began incorporating other musicians and collaborators in his process, many of whom had connections to black music’s

past and present. These included Jesse Johnson, former guitarist of The Time (and performer in *Purple Rain*), rapper Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest (as album lyricist), Leeds, a former road manager for James Brown and Prince, and singer/songwriter Kendra Foster, who at the time was touring as a backing vocalist with George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars.



Left to right: Jesse Johnson (guitar), Cleo “Pookie” Sample (keyboards), and Kendra Foster (vocals) performing at the Best Buy Theatre, 11 March 2015  
Photo by author

Early descriptions of the music being recorded for *Black Messiah*

stressed the influence of Hendrix and Funkadelic. In a 2014 interview, D’Angelo credited the importance of “crate digging” (slang for looking through record crates for grooves and samples) in his shift toward rock:

It’s a natural progression for me [toward rock], but honestly, I just feel like that’s where it’s going. The thing with me is, about rock and all that, years and years of crate digging, listening to old music, you kind of start to connect the dots. And I was seeing the thread that was connecting everything together, which is pretty much the blues, and everything, soul or funk, starts with that. That’s kind of like

## *Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums* (cont.)

the nucleus of everything, the thread that holds everything together.<sup>13</sup>

It is unclear whether “where it’s going” here should be interpreted as the creative direction of his own sound, or how he perceives a general historical flow in black music. Obviously, however, D’Angelo sought to reconcile Hendrix’s style of rock, funk, and R&B in a way that spans fissures in the reception history and marketing of black music. Hendrix’s music, notably rejected by influential R&B DJ Frankie Crocker in the late 1960s, was not played on black-centered radio programming, or widely appreciated by black audiences during his lifetime. As James Brown and Parliament-Funkadelic bassist Bootsy Collins comments, “when Jimi [Hendrix] came on the scene, black people as a whole was not ready for that!”<sup>14</sup> While in the 1970s, Hendrix’s heavy guitar style provided an indelible inspiration to a wide range of R&B artists, including the Temptations, the Isley Brothers, and progressive psychedelic groups like Funkadelic, it remained on the margins of R&B radio.<sup>15</sup>

D’Angelo clearly considered the *Black Messiah* album a turn towards rock and funk, a distinct shift from his previous album *Voodoo*. Given his acute historical awareness, his attitude suggests a politicized reclaiming of the legacy of black rock guitarists in the face of taxonomic genre constraints put on soul/R&B and rock as respectively racially stratified “black” and “white” genres. In the album’s opening track, “Ain’t That Easy,” D’Angelo layers swelling guitar feedback that evokes the style of Hendrix and Funkadelic’s Eddie Hazel, before giving way to a push-and-pull syncopation in the introductory groove. The verse for “Ain’t That Easy” merges the quartet singing of groups like the

Gospel Hummingbirds, a groove and chord progression reminiscent of Otis Redding’s “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay” (Stax/Volt, 1968), and heavy overdriven guitar timbres of Hazel and Hendrix. Meanwhile, the drum machine programming features bright, synthetic claps common in the music of Prince, as well as the loose rhythmic pocket of hip-hop.

D’Angelo’s opening *Black Messiah* track is an aural statement—a tapestry of genres of African American music. The layering of multiple, harmonizing, slightly heterophonic vocals with different levels of textual coherence, if in part a nod to the loose singing style of groups like the Gospel Hummingbirds, accentuates the problem of clarity. Many reviewers and fans have commented on (or complained about) the “mumble” of D’Angelo’s *Black Messiah* vocal performance. For D’Angelo, the less comprehensible vocal tracks represent a spiritually guided *pre-verbalization*, his initial “pure” vocal reaction to the recorded instrumental track.



Left to right: Charlie “Red” Middleton (vocals), Isaiah Sharkey (guitar), D’Angelo, Jesse Johnson (guitar) performing at the Best Buy Theatre, 11 March 2015

Photo by author

You know, you’re putting your voice down on tape ... it’s all about capturing the spirit. It’s all about capturing the vibe. I’m kinda a first take dude. The first time, cut that mic on and the spirit is there and what comes on the mic, even if I’m mumbling, I like to keep a lot of that initial thing that comes out. Cause that’s the spirit.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of being a vessel for “the Spirit” to speak, be it the Holy Spirit, or spirits of the dead, is a recurring concern for many African American musicians. As I will examine below, Kendrick Lamar also stresses the importance of the performer as vessel, and the role of the spirit in black musical production. The quest



## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums* (cont.)**

to be a spiritual conduit impacted several aspects of D'Angelo's creative process, including the hiring of church musicians. He states:

The thing about the church is, what I learned early—they used to say this when I was going to church ... “Don't go up there for no form or fashion.” So I guess what that means is, “Listen, we're up here singing for the lord. So don't try to be cute,” you know. “Cause we don't care about that. We just want to feel ... what the spirit is moving through you.” And that's the best place to learn that. So you shut yourself down and let whatever's coming, come through you.<sup>17</sup>

D'Angelo enlisted a number of Virginia-based church musicians, including singer Lewis Lumzy. In recruiting younger, previously unknown performers from church bands to perform on tour and on *Black Messiah* recordings, D'Angelo brings mainstream attention to a vast well of active church musicians in communities across the U.S., widening further the scope of his celebration and continuation of African American musical traditions past and present.

D'Angelo's celebration of the spirit of past performers plays an important, even theatrical, role in his live performances. At the Apollo Theater performance on 7 February 2015, D'Angelo and the Vanguard incorporated a quotation of Hendrix during a performance of “One Mo' Gin.” Transitioning from the slow, soulful groove into a heavy rock riff lead by Jesse Johnson's guitar, the Vanguard broke into a climactic moment from Hendrix's epic “1983 (A Merman I should Turn to Be)” (Reprise, 1968) as D'Angelo pointed

upward. Although the origin of the quotation and the meaning of his gesture—pointing up to, and saluting Hendrix in heaven—may have been largely lost on the audience, D'Angelo wasn't necessarily making the reference to play to the crowd's interest or prior knowledge, as much to “dig in the crates” to share with them connections between African American musical genres.

This celebration and synthesis of past styles on *Black Messiah* is further exemplified on the track “Sugah Daddy.” The rhythm is built around a “hambone,” also called a “body pat” or “pattin' juba” rhythm, performed by veteran R&B drummer (and septuagenarian) James Gadson. Samuel Floyd locates the origin of this term in early African American musical life:

When folk-made or makeshift instruments were not available, individuals and groups patted juba. “Patting juba” was an extension and elaboration of simple hand clapping that constituted a complete and self-contained accompaniment to dance.<sup>18</sup>

Merging the syncopation of the hambone “body pat” with the “boom bap” kick and snare pattern, and a



*D'Angelo and the Vanguard perform at the Apollo Theatre, 7 February 2015.  
Photo by author*

sparse three-chord chromatic riff reminiscent of Lou Donaldson's soul jazz recording of “It's Your Thing” (Blue Note, 1969), D'Angelo unites hip hop, a relatively recent genre, with one of the earliest African American musical traditions. In live performance, this song takes on additional layers of historical significance, as D'Angelo extends it into a funk jam session, referencing the bandleading techniques made famous by James Brown by calling for a specific number of synchronized “hits,” and incorporating microphone stand

## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums*** (cont.)

choreography and Brown-influenced screams.

At the February 2015 Apollo performance, D'Angelo and the Vanguard strengthened the James Brown connection by transitioning from "Sugah Daddy" into a performance of Fred Wesley and the J.B.'s "You Can Have Watergate But Gimme Some Bucks and I'll Be Straight" (People, 1973), a track that was both produced by and featured Brown.

A frequent collaborator, Questlove jokes that D'Angelo's "sound" stems from his "utter disregard of time ... be it release dates, be it prompt[ness] for shows, be it quantized meter or be it musical references; it's his sound."<sup>19</sup> Whereas the fluidity of connection of genres and historical periods in some ways disregards time, in other ways it stages the history of black music, bringing new attention and valuation to past traditions, pioneering performers, and the networks of church musicians in African American communities.

If *Black Messiah* brings exposure to working church musicians, *To Pimp a Butterfly* celebrates a community of Los Angeles-based jazz musicians who have had a recurring role in Lamar's music. Just as D'Angelo seamlessly juxtaposes historical influences across periods, Lamar and his collaborators were influenced by a wide range of genres and African American performers. As saxophonist and album co-producer Terrace Martin states:

We didn't listen to the Beatles to do this record. No disrespect. We didn't listen to the Who ... We listened to Parliament. We listened to John Coltrane. We

listened to Biggie ... Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King, Guitar Shorty, Bobby Blue Bland, Little Walter, Little Richard—all the Littles!<sup>20</sup>



*Left to right: Pino Palladino (bass), D'Angelo, Jesse Johnson (guitar), Cleo "Pookie" Sample (keyboards), and Kendra Foster performing at the Best Buy Theatre, 11 March 2015*  
Photo by author

The album concept illustrates Lamar's personal journey through African American life and celebrity in the shadow of the trials and tribulations faced by many mainstream black cultural producers. Hip-hop recordings have historically had an intertextual relationship with the past through references, via digital sampling, interpolation, and lyrical quotation. At various points, such as in the music of Public Enemy, these references have taken on increased

political significance as markers of black music history and cultural production, both evoking and critiquing previous eras of African American cultural history. Evidencing the recent wave of cultural historicism in African American music, Lamar and his creative partners weave textual and musical references throughout *To Pimp a Butterfly*.

This is exemplified on the album's third single, "King Kunta." With a lyrical narrative that references Kunta Kinte, a latter-18th century slave character from Alex Haley's 1976 novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. "King Kunta" pays tribute to Compton rapper Mouskipee, who was killed in 2000, while juxtaposing quotations of Michael Jackson, Jay-Z, and James Brown. The drum programming and bass line for the single are loosely interpolated from Mouskipee's single "Get Nekkid" (Shepherd Lane, 2000), a track produced by influential L.A.-based producer DJ Quik, while the cadence and elements of the lyrics in the first verse are derived from James Brown's "The Payback" (Polydor, 1973).

## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums*** (cont.)

Lamar furthers the intertextuality of “King Kunta” on the third verse, incorporating a lyric from Jay-Z’s song “Thank You” (Roc Nation, 2007) at 2:07, and the line “Annie are you O.K.?” at 2:34, from the chorus of Michael Jackson’s single “Smooth Criminal” (Sony, 1987). Connecting Brown’s 1970s bravado to the story of Kinte’s 1760s passage to America and slavery, while referencing Compton rap history, Jay-Z, and Michael Jackson, Lamar unifies generations of African American musicians and cultural history.

According to Terrace Martin, co-producer of “King Kunta,” there wasn’t a conscious discussion of incorporating different genres while making the album, but an ongoing mediation of racial politics and black cultural experience influenced the music:

Everybody on the record really understands what it’s like to be black in this day and age in America. Way before we did the music, it was important that everybody [understood] what being black was really about ... It wasn’t, “We’re gonna do jazz, we’re gonna do funk,” we just wanted to be the soundtrack to [Kendrick’s] experience. What other music to do behind that but black music.<sup>21</sup>

Martin’s presence on the album is significant, as Lamar’s lyrics on several songs interweave with Martin’s contemplative alto sax improvisation, a duet-like integration of rap performance and jazz instrumentality that is rare, certainly for a mainstream, major label hip-hop release.

Martin, who has also produced beats for Snoop Dogg and Warren G., and contributed to a range of jazz projects, had previously performed with pianist Robert Glasper and bassist Thundercat (*b* Stephen Bruner) as 3ChordFold Live in 2014, and as the Terrace Martin Band in 2012. Martin states: “the jazz community is very small ... I’ve been playing with these guys and writing music forever. They’re a very strong supporting musical cast.”<sup>22</sup> Lamar has worked with Martin since his independent release *Section 80* (Top Dawg Entertainment, 2011), which featured Martin’s band performing a live jazz instrumental backing to Lamar’s blend of spoken word

poetry and rap on the Martin-produced track “Absouls Outro.”

Lamar and Martin build a similar type of jazz-rap hybrid on *To Pimp a Butterfly*’s “For Free?,” merging the fluidity of live jazz performance with Lamar’s stream-of-conscious lyrics, recalling both slam poetry and the past performance practice of Saul Williams, Gil Scott Heron, and others. Pianist Robert Glasper describes the “For Free?” session:

I walk into this hip-hop session and I’m doing straight ahead jazz ... I did like one take or two takes, but [Martin] was like, “Nah bud, dig in. Don’t worry about a thing, don’t think of it like a hip-hop thing, anything like that. Really dig in, like you’re hitting at the [Village] Vanguard or some shit ... I was thinking of it like [Lamar] was a saxophone player, you know what I mean. Not like a singer or an MC, but literally like a saxophone player, it was like some jazz shit.”<sup>23</sup>

Incorporating the ethos of collective improvisation into hip hop, Lamar provides fresh mainstream exposure to the communities of jazz artists who have played a significant role in producing and performing hip-hop and R&B, but rarely have an opportunity for individual recognition. Lamar formed a loose collective of musicians for the studio sessions that included Martin, Thundercat, and singers Bilal and Anna Wise, all of whom worked on a number of songs on *To Pimp a Butterfly* over a two-year period.

This group of musicians was featured with Lamar on Stephen Colbert’s show *The Colbert Report* on 16 December 2014, performing an untitled song that was not recorded or released. During the performance, Lamar introduced Thundercat, Bilal, Wise, and Martin by name, bringing awareness to the networks of musical contributors to mainstream albums and live performances that are often unrecognized.

Martin, Thundercat, and Glasper all contributed to the jazz suite at the end of *To Pimp a Butterfly* on the track “Mortal Man,” to accompany an “interview” by Lamar of Tupac Shakur, created by interspersing



## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums*** (cont.)

soundbites drawn from an unreleased 1994 interview recording of Shakur with Lamar's questions. The seventy-three minutes of *To Pimp a Butterfly* that precede Shakur's appearance feature newly recorded contributions from Ronald Isley, Snoop Dogg, and George Clinton juxtaposed with a web of lyrical and musical allusions of past African American musicians. The first appearance of Shakur's voice (at 6:49 of "Mortal Man") strikingly evokes another spirit in the tapestry of black music history. The importance of the spirits speaking through musicians is exemplified by an "exchange" between Lamar and the samples of Shakur that begins at 9:59:

**Lamar:** In my opinion, the only hope that we kinda have left is music and vibrations. A lot of people don't even understand how important it is, you know. Sometimes I can get behind a mic, and I don't know what type of energy I'm gonna push out, or where it comes from ...

**Shakur:** That's the spirit. We're not even really rapping, we're just letting our dead homies tell stories for us.

**Lamar:** Damn ...

Using the technology of digital recording, Lamar stages a conversation that merges the intertextuality of hip-hop sampling with the evocation of a "speaking spirit" of Shakur in order to create a discussion that considers the importance of past voices in African American music.

Lamar's use of live instrumentation and the celebration of black music history on *To Pimp a Butterfly* were initially met with some resistance from hip-hop radio and press, who expected the hard-core, minimal aesthetic of drum machine "boom-bap" patterns common in hip-hop, and much of Lamar's earlier work. Preceding the March 2015 release of the album, the first single "i" was released in October of 2014, prominently featuring the combination of live instrumentation and a sample of the Isley Brothers' "That Lady" (T-Neck, 1973). The song includes a replayed sample of a psychedelic, phased and distorted guitar riff that was originally

performed by Ernie Isley, a nod to Hendrix's timbre and performance style (Hendrix had served as a guitarist for the Isley Brothers for a short time in the mid-1960s). Lamar intimates knowledge of the Hendrix connection in the song's lyric "the wind can cry now," a likely reference to the Jimi Hendrix Experience's single "The Wind Cries Mary" (Track, 1967).



*Left to right: Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner, Anna Wise, Kendrick Lamar, Bilal, Terrace Martin.  
Courtesy of Sonnymoon*

In a November 2014 interview with Hot 97 hip-hop radio personality DJ Ebro, Lamar was questioned about the evident change in style of "i." Ebro noted, with evident disappointment, that "this record ["i"] feels acoustic, it feels live instruments, [whereas your previous album] *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, a lot of it felt like some real sampled, 808 Production elements, using drum machines."<sup>24</sup> Lamar defended incorporating instruments, arguing that it would sound even "rawer" (a coveted aesthetic in hip hop): "If anything ... It probably feel even more raw, because it's a little bit more dirty with the live dirty drums on it, it's not something that's contemporary with the MPC [drum machine] and you're pressing, different [drum] patterns." When questioned about the "pop" qualities on "i," Lamar responded tellingly about the importance of reclaiming the sound as "black" music:

I think the classifications of music is totally twisted, because now you have a generation where you take an Isley Brothers sample which is soul, and now you're in a world where people consider it pop ... I want to revamp that whole thing, and put it back to its original origins ... and not be scared to say: "This is

## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums* (cont.)**

not that, this is black! Young kids gotta know this!”<sup>25</sup>

As D’Angelo reclaims rock on *Black Messiah* tracks and in live performances, Lamar here stresses the political importance of teaching younger African Americans about their musical heritage through connecting the diverse styles in the history of black music.

*Black Messiah* and *To Pimp a Butterfly* are albums released in an era when racial politics, both in popular music and in U.S. culture in general, have made avoidance of the discussion of race difficult. Clover Hope writes that due to recent events, “I never felt my blackness more than I have in the past three years” and that *To Pimp a Butterfly* “is music that makes you hyper-aware of this blackness.”<sup>26</sup> As a white music historian who previously worked in the music business marketing black music genres, writing about these albums has made me acutely aware of ongoing tensions in the racial politics of popular music. In the shadow of a recent wave of appropriations of black cultural idioms by white performers, the identification of music as “black” rather than “hip hop” or “soul” takes on increased significance.

Historical distance will show the extent to which recent trends will influence perception of music and its history. What is clear is that black music as a concept will continue to be relevant as long as a climate of racial politics exists. As long as white performer Miley Cyrus asks for music that “feels black,” as her producers stated in 2013, her performance of that music can never be regarded as “post-racial.”<sup>27</sup> At a time when white singer Sam Smith is deemed “The New Face of Soul” by one critic<sup>28</sup> while veteran rapper Scarface opines that African American rappers will one day be marginalized historically as Chuck Berry was in rock history, the celebration of black music and historical consciousness in *Black Messiah* and *To Pimp a Butterfly* is both political and timely. Prince stated at the 2015 Grammy Awards that “albums still matter.”<sup>29</sup> The fervent interest from fans and critics in D’Angelo’s and Lamar’s albums corroborates Prince’s statement, but it also highlights the “matter” that those albums continually bring into focus: the vibrant history of black music, and the often unrecognized

communities of working musicians who continue to preserve and develop musical traditions.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> D’Angelo quoted in interview with Nelson George, “D’Angelo 2014 RBMA Lecture,” *Red Bull Music Academy* online, <http://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/magazine/dangelo-lecture>, accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Charity, “Interview: Terrace Martin Talks the Traumas and Close-Knit Collaborations that Inspired Kendrick Lamar’s New Album,” *Complex* online, <http://www.complex.com/music/2015/03/interview-terrace-martin-producer-to-pimp-a-butterfly>, accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes, “Long Gone, Still Hear Voices,” quoted in Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1999), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke, 2005), 20.

<sup>5</sup> D’Angelo, quoted in George interview.

<sup>6</sup> Kendra Foster, Facebook post, 11 February 2015.

<sup>7</sup> D’Angelo quoted in Chairman Mao, “Interview: D’Angelo on the Inspirations Behind *Black Messiah*,” *Red Bull Music Academy* online, <http://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/magazine/dangelo-black-messiah-inspirations-interview>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Wallace, “Amen! (D’Angelo’s Back)” *GQ* online, June 2012. <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/music/201206/dangelo-gq-june-2012-interview?currentPage=1>, accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Chairman Mao interview.

<sup>10</sup> D’Angelo, quoted in George interview.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Heron, “Solange, Janelle Monae, Thundercat, Beyoncé and More Celebrate 15 Years of D’Angelo’s ‘Voodoo’ album,” *Saint Heron* online, 4 February 2015, <http://saintheron.com/featured/saint-heron-and-friends-celebrate-15-years-of-dangelos-voodoo/>, accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Leeds quoted in Ibid.

## ***Black Messiah, To Pimp a Butterfly, and the Matter of Albums* (cont.)**

<sup>13</sup>D'Angelo, quoted in George interview.

<sup>14</sup>“Bootsy Collins, Legendary Funk Bassist, Interviewed on the Sound of Young America.” <http://maximumfun.org/sound-young-america/bootsy-collins-legendary-funk-bassist-interview-sound-young-america>, accessed 15 March 2015.

<sup>15</sup>Which is not to say black rock musicians were dormant during this period. Rather, a range of African American bands, including hardcore band Bad Brains, the punk band Death, ska-rock fusionists Fishbone, and the hard-rock outfit Living Colour (led by guitarist Vernon Reid) exemplify a wide range of engagements of black bands in rock performance from the 1970s onward that were later supported by organizations like the Black Rock Coalition (founded 1985) and the Afropunk Music Festival (founded 2002). However, it was still common for black rock bands to be denied recording contracts on the basis that they “didn’t sound black enough” in the early 1990s. Quote from an unnamed A&R executive at Atlantic Records in 1991 to Mark Brooks, then of the RGB Band. Mark Brooks, personal communication, 10 April 2015.

<sup>16</sup>George interview.

<sup>17</sup>George interview.

<sup>18</sup>Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 53.

<sup>19</sup>Questlove quoted in “D’Angelo’s Black Messiah, The DVD Extras: Behind The Scenes Info From Questlove, Russell Elevado, Ben Kane + More.” *Okayplayer* online, <http://www.okayplayer.com/news/dangelo-black-messiah-dvd-extras-behind-the-scenes-questlove-russell-elevado-ben-kane-alan-leeds.html>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>20</sup>Justin Charity, “Interview: Terrace Martin Talks.”

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Jay Deshpande, “Jazz Pianist Robert Glasper on His Role in Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*,” *Slate* online, 27 March 2015. <http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/03/27/kendrick-lamar-s-to-pimp-a-butterfly-robert-glasper-on-what-it-was-like.html>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>24</sup>DJ Ebro, quoted in “Kendrick says Macklemore went too far + who ‘i’ is for & the state of HipHop,” *Hot 97* interview, 3 Nov. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItZsMcLSRM>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>25</sup>Lamar quoted in Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Clover Hope, “The Overwhelming Blackness of Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*,” *The Muse / Jezebel* online, 17 March 2015. <http://themuse.jezebel.com/the-overwhelming-blackness-of-kendrick-lamars-butterfly-1691770606>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>27</sup>Adelle Platon, “Miley Cyrus Asked For a ‘Black’ Sound for Single, Says Songwriters Rock City,” *Vibe* online, 12 June 2013 <http://www.vibe.com/article/miley-cyrus-asked-black-sound-single-says-songwriters-rock-city>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>28</sup>Amy Wallace, “Sam Smith: The New Face of Soul,” *GQ* online February 2015, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/music/201502/sam-smith-new-rat-pack>, accessed 1 April 2015.

<sup>29</sup>Brittney Cooper, “America’s ‘Prince’ problem: How Black people – and art – became ‘devalued,’” *Salon* online, 11 February 2015, [http://www.salon.com/2015/02/11/americas\\_prince\\_problem\\_how\\_black\\_people\\_and\\_art\\_became\\_devalued/](http://www.salon.com/2015/02/11/americas_prince_problem_how_black_people_and_art_became_devalued/), accessed 1 April 2015.



# Shape-Note Hymns as Living History: Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen*

Joanna Smolko, University of Georgia

As a composer, conductor, teacher, and singer, Alice Parker (b. 1925) has promoted and arranged American folk and vernacular materials throughout her long career, with particular attention to traditions of sacred music. In her opera *Singers Glen* (1978), she recreates the musical life of a nineteenth-century Mennonite community in Singers Glen, a small town within the Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, using shape-note hymns as the foundation of the opera. The opera centers around Joseph Funk (1778-1862)—composer and compiler of multiple hymnals during the nineteenth century, including *A Collection of Genuine Church Music*

(1832) and several editions of *The Harmonia Sacra*. The hymns function as historical artifacts within the opera, woven together with other historical documents, such as personal letters, to tell the story of Funk's life and role in the community. In addition to acting as sonic history, the music and text of the hymns unfold the central conflicts of the drama—song versus dance, voice versus instrument, sacred versus secular, young versus old, progress versus tradition, assimilation versus preservation. The reenactment of two singing schools, one reflecting traditional music practices and the other with a progressive approach, unfold these core tensions of the opera.

As an educator and a composer, Parker consistently emphasizes the importance of preserving musical traditions. Much of her work consists of arrangements of preexisting songs, and she has frequently adapted shape-note hymns and incorporated them into large-scale works such as *Singers Glen* and her cantata *Melodious Accord* (1974). These arrangements give her the opportunity to interact with the past, yet she is conscious of the limits of historical reenactment, writing, "If I have a chance to arrange tunes from a certain time and place I learn about them from working with them—but my impulse is

never to create a 'historical setting'. The tune ends up being filtered through my 20th/21st-century musical ideas."<sup>1</sup>

Parker values the ways in which these hymnals record community traditions of music. She writes, "Love songs, ballads, fast and slow dances all found their way

into the shape-note hymnals, and were a vital part of the musical life in rural communities."<sup>2</sup> These diverse traditions are highlighted in *Singers Glen*, and through the narrative, the characters themselves rediscover the roots of their music. In this opera Parker uses the dramatic possibili-

ties inherent in the genre to imaginatively recreate the community life of the town.

*Singers Glen* is constructed around twenty-five hymns taken from the first three editions of Joseph Funk's hymnal *A Compilation of Genuine Church Music*.<sup>3</sup> Some of these, such as "Sweet Affliction," "Resignation," and "Idumea" are commonly found in other nineteenth-century shape-note hymnals. Hymns such as "Limehouse," "St. Olaves," and "Confidence" have their first known source within Funk's editions of *Harmonia Sacra*. The hymns alternate with and sometimes accompany aria- and recitative-like sections, as well as sections of spoken dialogue. They also function as leitmotifs, representing particular characters as well as creating links between themes within the story line.

The narrative of *Singers Glen* focuses on simple moments of life, more in line with the ideals of *verismo* than operatic melodrama. Household chores, routine conversations, (on the weather or the price of hymnals, for example), community events, and strong yet understated emotions create the drama in the work. Even Parker's stage directions place an emphasis on the ordinary. For example, her instruction for the set-up of the first sing-



*Singers Glen Music & Heritage Festival, 2007*  
*Joseph Funk explains shape notes in his singing school*  
Photo courtesy of Gayle Davis

## Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen* (cont.)

ing school calls for young people in lively conversation, sedate elderly, rowdy children, and “a baby or two.”<sup>4</sup>

Parker conveys this community as being in a state of flux, pulled both towards the past and the future. In the discussion of the genesis of the work, Parker writes, “Fact and fiction are mingled to illustrate the basic conflict of the work, that between the artist as visionary, and the restraints of the traditional church.”<sup>5</sup> The conflict is especially evident in the contrast between the use of instruments by Joseph and his family and the dominant view of the Mennonite church at the time—that instrumental music should not be used in worship, and further, that musical instruments reflect a worldliness that should not be present within the religious community.<sup>6</sup>

In *Singers Glen*, there is no simple either/or answer to the tensions between preservation and transformation. Instead, Parker portrays almost a dialectical relationship between the two. Both the community (the Mennonite Church) and the creative individual (Joseph Funk) are portrayed as necessary parts of a whole: without growth, the community and its music would wither; without roots, the new would have no meaning. Parker writes that one of the purposes of this work is to explore the fact that “Joseph’s path led in one direction—ecumenicism, a preoccupation with the art which unites people, rather than the words which divide them; and the Church’s led in another—the wish to preserve the way of life which was and is of such value.”<sup>7</sup> The prologue of the opera sets up the dynamics that are explored more fully in the two singing schools.

The prologue opens with the funeral of Joseph Funk’s wife, in 1833, the year after the first publication of *A Collection of Genuine Church Music*. The first hymn “Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt” is sung in its original German.<sup>8</sup> This sets up one of the central tensions specifically within this community of whether to preserve the German language within worship, or to assimilate to English. *Singers Glen* was one of the first Mennonite communities to adopt English language worship services in the United States, and this was in a great part spearheaded by the work of Joseph Funk. This prologue also introduces “Brother Peter,” a respected elder who advocates preserving the old ways.

Brother Peter represents a community commitment to tradition, a foil for the creativity and innovation of Joseph Funk. Joseph is shown as a mediator of progress and change, especially through the publication of hymnals and the use of musical instruments in his family. His son Timothy likewise values progress and innovation.

As Act 1, Scene 2 begins, the hymn “Invocation” is played by the orchestra as the community readies itself for the singing school. Snippets of everyday conversation—weather, politics, bookselling, even dialogue in German—sound over a series of hymns played by the off-stage orchestra. Again, this scene emphasizes everyday life, the commonplace realities too frequently ignored in veins of historical narrative prior to the new social history. Joseph calls the singing school together by inviting the community to sing “Invocation.” After the hymn, Joseph instructs the newcomers in the art of singing using *solfège* and shape-notes. Parker instructs that a large chart be used to show the symbols.<sup>9</sup> While Joseph teaches the community a detailed singing school lesson within the narrative, Parker teaches the audience and the performers by proxy. This direct involvement of the audience in the tradition, history and music of the community situates the opera firmly in the context of other public history presentations. As visitors become participants in public displays of history when they meander through reenactments at places like Colonial Williamsburg, so the audience—even though they do not actually sing—become participants in this opera.

Following Joseph’s lesson, “Wesley” is sung on *solfège* syllables, in unison, notated in the score with the original shape-notes.<sup>10</sup> Again, Parker creates a teaching moment: even though the audience never sees the score, the use of shape-notes in the performance score informs the performers as they learn the parts (Figure 1).

All singers are taught the melody before the harmony and text are added. This embodies Parker’s melody-centered approach to composition and music education: all parts should be taught the melody in order for all the participants to understand its structure and its relationship to other voices. Joseph then teaches the minor mode, using the hymn

## Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen* (cont.)

“Hiding Place.”

The hymn begins with unison voices, but quickly transforms, using fugal textures as well as paired imitation between voices. It evokes the fugal tunes found in many shape-note hymnals (including Joseph Funk's publications), but the imitation is freer. Again, Parker develops these hymns, exploring their melodic, harmonic and polyphonic possibilities, rather than treating them as objects to be preserved intact.

After Joseph teaches a round, Brother Peter suggests singing one of the old hymns. One of the elders chooses “Idumea,” its heavy text and minor mode creating a reflective mood. The group sings it first on syllables (emphasizing the traditional mode of performance), again with shape-notes presented in the score. The first verse is sung with slight modifications of the original harmony, followed by an imitative development of the melody in the next verse. The men and women double the treble and tenor, reflecting the performance practices of the hymns, and creating a dense, interwoven texture.

The singing continues with “Social Band,” followed by “Christian Farewell” suggested for the closing hymn. As the group sings “Christian Farewell,” most of the people exit, leaving only a handful behind. At this point, Timothy Funk's fiancée Susan proposes that they sing another song. Hannah Funk's fiancé Jacob asks Timothy to play the flute, but Timothy declines. This moment foreshadows the incorporation of instruments into the second singing school, a crucial moment in the narrative of the opera. For the moment, however, the traditional mode of performance wins out over more innovative additions.

Timothy instead suggests that Susan and he sing a duet for them, “Transport,” a hymn, as Parker notes in

The image shows a musical score for a hymn titled "WESLEY". The score is written for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo is marked "Allegro". The lyrics are: "faw law sol faw law sol faw law sol law sol law sol law sol law sol law sol law mi faw." The score is arranged in four staves, with the Soprano staff at the top and the Bass staff at the bottom. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Figure 1. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 1, Scene 3, Wesley  
Used by permission of Hinshaw Music, Inc.

the score, transformed into a love song. Again, Parker evokes the secular/sacred tension present in the history of the hymns. The text is florid, expressive, and full of vivid metaphors, opening with, “One spark, O God, of heavenly fire awakes my

soul with warm desire to reach the realms above.” She transforms this hymn into an operatic love duet through its scoring—a duet between the affianced couple, accompanied by the soaring off-stage orchestra. In this arrangement, Parker successfully re-creates two levels of history: the previous existence of many tunes like this as secular music, and the presence of the hymn as a sacred work in the community of *Singers Glen* during Funk's lifetime.

Following the duet, a reprise of “Christian Farewell” concludes the singing school. Though this is the more traditional singing school, deep tensions have been introduced: new songs versus old songs, a suggestion to use a musical instrument, and a hymn transformed into a love duet. Parker probes deeper into these tensions in the second scene of the final act.

In Act 2, Scene 2, Parker brings the sense of living history to a new level, as we see progress and creativity come into increasing tension with tradition, heightening the sense of history and hymnody as dynamic processes. In this scene, she focuses on moments in which the performance of hymns symbolizes and enacts the transformation of a tradition through the actions of a creative individual. The school is led this time not by Joseph, but by his son Timothy, and includes the young people of the community, several of whom bring their instruments. Parker calls for the string quartet that has previously performed off-stage to join the school onstage, and allows for a variety of other instruments, according to the performers' abilities.<sup>11</sup> In this scene, Parker showcases vigorous tunes,



## Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen* (cont.)

especially emphasizing the dance-like qualities of the hymns.

With Timothy encouraging the instrumentalists to join in, the young people begin to sing “Mt. Ephraim.” The text of the hymn itself advocates the use of instruments, as well as underscoring the nervousness of the musicians, beginning with the lines “Your harps, ye trembling saints, Down from the willows take” (Figure 2).

With joyful dignity  $\text{♩} = 112$

*mf*

Soprano  
Your harps, ye trem - - - bling saints...

Alto  
Your harps, ye trem - - - bling saints...

Tenor  
Your harps, ye trem - - - bling saints...

Bass  
Your harps, ye trem - - - bling saints...

Violin I  
Timothy (to the strings): Well? Come on, don't be frightened. Let's hear the beginning.

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Figure 2. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 2, Scene 2, Mount Ephraim, mm. 1-3  
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The instrumentalists hesitantly (perhaps even guiltily?) follow the voices before joining together with them. They quietly echo the melody just sung (Figure 3).

*p*

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Figure 3. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 2, Scene 2, Mount Ephraim, mm. 4-7  
Used by permission of Hinshaw Music, Inc.

After echoing the vocal line a couple of times, the instruments join with the voices. For the most part the instruments simply reinforce the vocal lines, or intertwine with them polyphonically. However, as the scene progresses, the instrumental music becomes increasingly independent from the vocal lines.

The tension in the act increases with the next hymn, “Greenwood,” during which the children start moving to the music. Not only is it a singing and playing school, it now begins to transform itself into a barn dance as well. Hannah chides the children for their levity. Someone calls for a cheerful hymn, and as “Greenfields” begins, more and more people begin dancing. Parker highlights the dance qualities of this hymn through accents on the strong beats and light *staccato* notes on the weak beats in the instrumental parts (Figure 4).

Firmly, not too fast  $\text{♩} = 84$

*mf*

Flute

Cello

Chorus  
How te - dious and taste-less the hours When Je - sus no long - er I see: Sweet

Vln. I  
*mf*

Vln. II  
*mf*

Vla.  
*mf*

Vc.  
*mf*

Figure 4. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 2, Scene 2, Greenwood, mm. 1-11  
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The hymn’s “secular” sound is commented on in the following discussion:

**Girl:** I visited my cousins in Ohio. They sang like this—but game songs. And they called it a play-party.

**Solomon:** We can’t do game songs. Just hymns.

## Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen* (cont.)

**Girl:** I don't see the difference, if we're moving about.

**Hannah** (virtuously): I call it dancing, and it comes from the devil.

**Timothy:** Oh, Hannah—if we're singing God's words, and praising him with instruments, it can't come from the devil. Let's sing "Christian Hope."<sup>12</sup>

As noted earlier Timothy's view of the music reflects Parker's own. For her the use of a secular tune as the basis of a hymn is in no way sacrilegious or even contrary to the text. She writes, "A folk dance with a hymn text must still dance, and a love song speak with passion. The words to a hymn are no more an end to themselves than the pitches and rhythms: both seek to define the Indefinable, know the Unknowable, and celebrate the central mystery of life."<sup>13</sup>

In her arrangement of "Christian Hope," Parker fully realizes the transformation from sacred *back to*

#32b Hymn: Christian Hope  
**Cheerfully** ♩ = 104

Figure 5. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 2, Scene 2, Christian Hope, mm. 1-6  
 Used by permission of Hinshaw Music, Inc.

secular music. Its lively tempo and 6/8 meter attest to its roots in Anglo-American dance music, specifically its qualities as a jig. The rhythm patterns of the strings in the opening measures (mm. 1-5) emphasize the bouncy quality of the meter (Figure 5).

The sacred-secular connection reaches its pinnacle in this scene as the folk tune "Irish Washerwoman" (noted in the score as not being found in the hymnal) is interpolated into "Christian Hope." During this interpolation, Parker instructs that "the dance takes shape." The visual dance reflects a crucial moment in the opera: the sacred and the secular have clearly merged (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 2, Scene 2, Irish Washerwoman, mm. 41-49  
 Used by permission of Hinshaw Music, Inc.

Sacred song becomes dance, vocal music becomes instrumental music. Sharing the same meter and some of the same rhythmic patterns, the similarity between the tunes is remarkable. Through this transformation, Parker makes the roots of the hymn transparent. Again, Parker plays with layers of history: the earlier presence of many shape-note hymns as jigs and secular folksongs, and their presence in this community as sacred songs.

The jig continues, until interrupted by Brother Peter and the Old Couple. The music comes to a "ragged halt" as the musicians become aware of Brother Peter's presence. Timothy goes to bring his father Joseph from the house, who is strongly reprimanded by Brother Peter for "following the world's pattern." He then introduces "Mount Carmel," its text, slow tempo and E-minor tonality reinforcing this poetic caution of judgment. Its opening verse encapsulates this message (Figure 7).

Joseph responds saying, "Your text is a strong one Brother Peter. I can answer you best with another hymn, from the New Testament." The following

## Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen* (cont.)

hymn, “Waverly,” strongly contrasts with the previous hymn, instead focusing on peace and brotherly love. Note the contrast between its opening verse and that of the previous hymn:

And is the gospel peace and love!  
Such let our conversation be;  
The serpent blended with the dove,  
Wisdom and sweet humility.<sup>14</sup>

In the final conversation of the opera, Joseph states his philosophy, that for him, music is in no way contrary to his beliefs, “My Church, *or* my Music? Surely the Lord of Love, who gave us the gift of song, cannot require that I cease to sing!” But rather than setting out a new course through a complete break with tradition and his community, he tells his son Timothy, “We must learn to live at peace with our neighbors and friends. Let us pray for guidance in the days to come.” The opera concludes with the community joining in the hymn “Divine Goodness.” Peace and reconciliation prevail, even in the midst of very real conflict and tensions.

In *Singers Glen* Parker reenacts an American musical tradition. History is not treated as a static point, but as a dynamic process even within this short period of time in a small town. Change is present, yet it takes place within an established tradition. The tensions are explored within the vastly different singing schools, but there is no simplistic resolution to the seemingly contradictory pull between tradition and progress. Brother Peter and Joseph Funk represent the two ends of the spectrum, and both are treated thoughtfully throughout the opera. Though Brother Peter is stern,

he is well-respected and loved by the community. Though Joseph is innovative, he respects the members of his town. The key to bridging these binaries—as presented in the opera and within Parker’s musical philosophy—is through working within communities. She writes, “The twentieth century seems to have brought vast separations. As scientific knowledge advances, and the world shrinks, we know less and less about relating to our neighbors and preserving communal activities.”<sup>15</sup> Community music-making forges the connections that have been lost.

Parker complicates the issue of a sacred-secular dichotomization of music through exploring the hymns’ histories. In the first singing school, a hymn is treated as and demonstrated to be a love song. In the second singing school, a hymn historically sung *a cappella* has words that extol the use of instruments in worship, and a hymn is treated as a jig. The ambiguities and contradictions abound, and Parker revels in these moments. To understand these tensions, Parker argues that one must pay attention to the history and style of both tunes and text, as well as their relationship to each other. She suggests several questions that can be used to probe the relationship of the “voice” of the music with the “voice” of the text: “Do these two voices reinforce or contrast? Is attention paid to the matching of accents and loaded syllables?” What is created, she continues, when an old tune is paired with a new text or “a prayerful text” is set to “a jiggish tune?”<sup>16</sup> Only through knowing the history of these hymns can the dialectical pulls between the sacred and secular, between preservation and change, be understood.

The musical score for Figure 7 consists of six staves. The top staff is for Trombone, marked 'Sternly' with a tempo of quarter note = 60 and 'marc.'. The second staff is for Brother Peter, marked 'mp' and 'legato', with lyrics: "I am the Sa-voir, I th'Al-might-y God;". The third staff is for Tbn., with lyrics: "I am the Judge, ye heav'ns pro-claim a-broad My just e-ter-nal sen-tence, and de-". The fourth staff is for Br. Pet., with lyrics: "clare those aw-ful truths that sin-ners dread to hear." The fifth staff is for Tbn., marked 'cresc.'. The sixth staff is for Br. Pet., with lyrics: "clare those aw-ful truths that sin-ners dread to hear." The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics, articulation, and phrasing.

Figure 7. Parker, *Singers Glen*, Act 2, Scene 2, Mount Carmel, mm. 1-18  
Used by permission of Hinshaw Music, Inc.



## Music and Community in Alice Parker's *Singers Glen* (cont.)

The 1970s were years of extreme tension within American culture, a time of critique and celebration, patriotism and protest. Alice Parker does not provide an answer to the problems in America at the time, either explicitly or implicitly in this opera. However, she does give an example of a process in which change and progress come about peacefully, on the whole, without destroying the people involved or the musical tradition. Preservation and progress are oppositional forces clearly at work in the opera and in the events on which the opera was based, but *Singers Glen* ends with a call for changes to be initiated with both respect for the past and love for the community.

Significantly, since its premiere, *Singers Glen* has been performed as part of ongoing community celebrations in the city of Singers Glen. The Music and Heritage Festival of Singers Glen, taking place approximately every five years, still incorporates the opera as a crowning point in its festival. Recent festivals included performances of Singers Glen on 15-16 September 2007,<sup>17</sup> and on 22-23 September 2012.<sup>18</sup> Thus the opera has been incorporated into the very traditions that it celebrates, demonstrating that through respect for tradition and community, at least one of the “vast separations” of the twentieth-century can indeed be bridged.<sup>19</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alice Parker, interview by author, e-mail, 26 April 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Parker, *Creative Hymn-Singing: A Collection of Hymn Tunes and Texts with Notes on Their Origin, Idiom, and Performance, and Suggestions for Their Use in the Service*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1976), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Parker conducted much of her research at the Historical Library at Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, VA (interview with author, 26 April 2006). Except where noted, all hymns are from the first three editions of *A Compilation of Genuine Church Music* (1832, 1835, 1842).

<sup>4</sup> Alice Parker, *Singers Glen: An Opera in a Prologue and Two Acts*, piano and vocal score (Chapel Hill, NC: Hinshaw Music, 1978), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished program notes quoted in John Yarrington, “A

Performance Analysis of ‘Martyrs’ Mirror,’ ‘Family Reunion’ and ‘Singers Glen,’ Three Operas by Alice Parker” (DMA diss., University of Oklahoma, 1985), 121-122.

<sup>6</sup> Even to this day, some of the most conservative Mennonite denominations and communities discourage or forbid the use of musical instruments—in worship or the home—because of their “worldly” qualities. See Cornelius Krahn and Orlando Schmidt, “Musical Instruments,” in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M876ME.html/> (accessed 10 March 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Unpublished program notes, quoted in Yarrington, “A Performance Analysis,” 121-122.

<sup>8</sup> It is taken from Joseph Funk’s earliest and only German-language hymnal, *Ein Allgemein nützliche Choral-Music* (Harrisonburg, VA.: Gedruckt bei Lorentz Wartmann, 1816).

<sup>9</sup> Parker, *Singers Glen*, piano and vocal score, 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Parker, *Singers Glen*, piano and vocal score, 124. She directs, “Other casual instruments are brought by chorus members who play when they wish: recorders, dulcimers, zithers—all very informal.”

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>13</sup> Parker, *Creative Hymn-Singing*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Parker, *Singers Glen*, piano and vocal score, 176.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, *Melodious Accord*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://gleneco.blogspot.com/2007/09/music-like-sublime-scriptural-poetry-is.html> (accessed 16 August 2013).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.donovanumc.org/MusicandHeritageFestival2012> (accessed 16 August 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Parker, *Melodious Accord*, 14.

## Rhiannon Giddens, *American Angel: Tomorrow is My Turn*

Susan Davis, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Rhiannon Giddens' solo debut, *Tomorrow is My Turn*, is not only a brilliant expression of musicianship and a Billboard chart-topping album, but it is also an incisive folk narrative and survey of influential women in American music. With *Tomorrow is My Turn*, Giddens continues the important work she began with The Carolina Chocolate Drops<sup>1</sup>, re-envisioning gems of the past in a new context and for a new audience. The Chocolate Drops, an African American string band dedicated to rediscovering, reinterpreting, and reinvigorating string band music for a new generation, were initially inspired by visiting with and learning from the style of old-time North Carolina fiddler, Joe Thompson. Their 2010 album, *Genuine Negro Jig*, earned a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Album.



Tomorrow is My Turn  
Album by Rhiannon Giddens

Although Giddens' solo album encompasses a wider purview musically, featuring blues, gospel, soul, jazz and country, what drives this album is her evocative reinterpretation of vocal music from another time. Each song is its own rich story and reminder of the lineage and progression of American music. Mellifluous, commanding, and vulnerable all at once, Giddens' vocals mesmerize through this tapestry of interwoven stories, voices, genres and expression that combine unabashedly into a woman's point of view. With this album we hear, not only from Giddens, who displays extraordinary range, but also from the women who inspired her and paved her way. Nina Simone, Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten, Geeshie Wiley, Dolly Parton, Odetta,

and Sister Rosetta Tharpe are among the "angels," as Giddens calls them, who contribute their voices and verses to this transcendent album.<sup>2</sup>

The raw simplicity of the opening track, "Last Kind Words," sets the tone for the narrative that unfolds. Although Giddens' version is atmospherically laced with mandolin and bass, the effect feels rather faithful to Geeshie Wiley's 1930 recording (<https://archive.org/details/Words>), letting the heart of the guitar and vocals speak this simple yet haunting minor blues melody. Giddens explains her choice for opening with this tune:

I thought it would be really cool to open up with "Last Kind Words" because most people have no idea who Geeshie was or what she did; it kind of represents every woman from her time, every unknown black woman toiling away. I really liked that idea. Who knows how many more were making incredible music, and writing incredible songs like that, living these lives?<sup>3</sup>

Giddens' decision to open her album singing the words of an essentially anonymous woman, validates not only Wiley's voice, and Giddens' voice, but every woman's voice.<sup>4</sup> It announces the album as a telling of every woman's story through the language of love, loss, relationships, regret, ambition, spirituality, vulnerability, and, ultimately, strength.

Although Giddens tackles a remarkable range of styles on the album, all equally compelling, the showstopping number is clearly Giddens' rendition of "Waterboy," the traditional work song popularized by Odetta in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in 2013, Giddens brought the house down with this song during a Town Hall concert for the live performance of the music from *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Excerpts from that performance can be seen in the Showtime movie *Another Day Another Time: Celebrating the Music of Inside Llewyn Davis*. Giddens' command of the music, her fellow performers and the audience is palpable in the silence surrounding her last phrase, "If you don't come right here, gonna tell

## American Angel: *Tomorrow is My Turn* (cont.)

your pa on you.” “Round About the Mountain,” the spiritual as arranged by Roland Hayes, is another intriguing vocal performance tackled by Giddens. Inspired by Florence Quivar’s classical performance and then reinterpreted through a folk lens, the version on Giddens’ album is a slightly slower groove and is accentuated by ethereal tremolos and glissandi creating a meditative effect. Giddens’ upbeat, hip-hop-flavored interpretation of “Black is the Color” is probably the most playful and surprising track on the album. She has taken the traditional folk tune, often performed in a melancholy and reflective manner, to new heights as a giddy dance reminiscent of blossoming love.<sup>6</sup> Giddens has rewritten the lyrics into a hybrid of new and old sentiment. All of these features coalesce into a light-hearted, yet addictive take on love.

Musically Giddens is backed by some of the most impressive folk and bluegrass musicians playing today. T-Bone Burnett (*O Brother, Where Art Thou; Walk the Line*), the album’s producer, has brought together an all-star lineup including Jay Bellerose (drummer); Gabe Witcher (fiddle), Noam Pikelnny (banjo) and Paul Kowert (bass) from the Punch Brothers; Hubby Jenkins (bones and guitar) of the Carolina Chocolate Drops; Keefus Ciancia (keyboard) and Dennis Crouch (bass). Even Jack Ashford of Funk Brothers fame can be heard on multiple tracks. The resulting sound is rich, layered and diverse as the musicians embody decades of experience and perspectives on the American music scene.

In reviews of this album and her current tour, Giddens’ voice has been described as “a revelation,” “soulful,” “sumptuous,” “phenomenal,” “so powerful it could scorch the rafters,” and “mobile, intelligent, ready to talk back to anyone’s presumptions.”<sup>7</sup> It is no wonder that she appears on the album exclusively as a vocalist. However, it is also slightly disappointing that Giddens’ instrumental talents are not featured in this context. One of the powerful things about her as a force on the American roots music scene is the fact that she is more than a singer; she is a talented banjo player, fiddler and songwriter. In most all of the videos found of Giddens prior to this debut album, we see her with an instrument as an accompaniment and extension of her voice. Fortunately, Giddens is show-

ing her multi-instrumentalist talents on the tour associated with *Tomorrow is My Turn*, utilizing fiddle and banjo to accompany herself and lead the band.<sup>8</sup> Hopefully that will continue. As I’m sure Giddens is aware, women in folk and bluegrass have been fighting perception issues for years. Murphy Hicks Henry’s 2013 book, *Pretty Good for a Girl*, highlights the fact that women are still often underestimated or marginalized as bluegrass and roots instrumentalists, while they have achieved some acclaim and acceptance as vocalists.<sup>9</sup> As a fiddler myself, I am thrilled to see women musicians (both singers and instrumentalists) like Rhiannon Giddens, Sarah Jarosz, Sara Watkins and Brittany Haas gaining in prominence and appreciation on the American roots music scene, fiercely paving the way for further transformation!

While some may see *Tomorrow is My Turn* as a disparate collection of tunes, Giddens likens it to the early tradition of singers:

... there were no ‘blues singers’ or ‘country singers’—there was no such thing, there were just singers. You had Jimmie Rodgers doing blues hollers and you had black string bands doing what we now call hillbilly tunes. It was a much more fluid thing. So to me this record is just in that tradition. It’s just American music.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the album is like Giddens herself—the embodiment of a new American voice and a new American musician. Giddens walks multiple paths and inhabits multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory perspectives. She is both gritty folksinger and classically-trained opera artist (Oberlin Music School); mixed race (African-American, European, and Native American); vocalist and multi-instrumentalist. Giddens speaks of her own soul-searching for identity, “I always felt culturally adrift as a child,” she says, “because I’m mixed race. I’ve had to deal with that since I was little. Who am I? What makeup do I have? What are the black and the white?”<sup>11</sup> And in another interview, Giddens recounts, “Where I found my identity was when I realized that I’m from North Carolina. It’s not so much that I’m black or I’m white or I’m Indian or whatever. I’m Southern. And furthermore I’m a



## American Angel: *Tomorrow is My Turn* (cont.)

North Carolinian. That was a really important part of this music—finding the identity.”<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, the identity seems embedded in the narrative—the voices of women who came before Giddens and all of us, the stories that resonate with our shared humanity. Giddens’ only original composition on the album, “Angel City,” caps off the narrative as tribute to the pioneering women who paved her way. Written as an inspired response to her experience working on the Bob Dylan tribute project, *Lost on the River: The New Basement Tapes*, Giddens, includes the song here acknowledging the rich lineage of women who paved a way in stories, songs and suffering.

Time and time at hand  
You helped me over the sand  
Gently rising to be  
You walked a mile with me

Giddens explains, “I’m standing on their shoulders,” and acknowledges her angels, “You were all so good to me.”<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt she will be an angel of inspiration to generations of musicians to come.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Carolina Chocolate Drops were originally comprised of Rhiannon Giddens, Dom Flemons and Justin Robinson. The 2014–15 lineup of the band includes Rhiannon Giddens, Hubby Jenkins, Rowan Corbett and Malcolm Parson, [www.carolinachocolatedrops.com](http://www.carolinachocolatedrops.com).

<sup>2</sup> Rhiannon Giddens, liner notes to CD *Tomorrow is My Turn*, Rhiannon Giddens (Nonesuch Records, Inc., 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hill, “Rhiannon Giddens,” Concert Lineup, 13 June 2015, <http://lineup.bonnaroo.com/band/rhiannon-giddens>.

<sup>4</sup> John Jeremiah Sullivan, “The Ballad of Geeshie and Elvie: On the Trail of the Phantom Women who Changed American Music and then Vanished without a Trace,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 April 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/13/magazine/blues.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/13/magazine/blues.html?_r=0). Geeshie Wiley and fellow musician Elvie Thomas are the subject of this controversial *NY Times Magazine* article that explores what little is known

about these artists and where they fit in a blues history, however many believe the research material was obtained through dishonest means.

<sup>5</sup> Odetta performed the song *Waterboy* on Harry Belafonte’s television show, “Tonight with Belafonte” and it can be seen in the Bob Dylan documentary, *No Direction Home*. Garth Cartwright, “Odetta,” *The Guardian*, 3 December 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/dec/04/odetta-film-folk-music-obituary>.

<sup>6</sup> Well-known versions of this folk-tune include that of Joan Baez (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic7vQGrtOjc>) and Nina Simone (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJRh7PSaOzI>). Both of these stand in sharp contrast to Giddens’ recording.

<sup>7</sup> James Reed, “Rhiannon Giddens: Tomorrow is My Turn,” *Boston Globe*, 2 February 2015, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/music/2015/02/10/rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-turn/uqIC-qeh9f05Lj3fEvQdIHO/story.html>; Jonathon Burnstein, “Tomorrow is My Turn,” *Rolling Stone*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn-20150210>; Martin Chilton, “Rhiannon Giddens, Tomorrow is My Turn, Album Review,” *Telegraph*, 13 February 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkand-jazz/11411074/Rhiannon-Giddens-Tomorrow-is-My-Turn-album-review.html>; Neil Spencer, “Rhiannon Giddens, Tomorrow is My Turn, Review,” *The Guardian*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/feb/01/rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn-review>; Chrissie Dickinson, “Rhiannon Giddens Brought Humility, Magic to the Vic,” *Chicago Tribune*, 24 April 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-rhiannon-giddens-review-carolina-chocolate-drops-20150424-story.html>; Ann Powers, “First Listen: Rhiannon Giddens, ‘Tomorrow is My Turn,’” *NPR Music*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/02/01/382372052/first-listen-rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn>, accessed 2 May 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Chrissie Dickinson, “Rhiannon Giddens Brought Humility, Magic to the Vic.”

<sup>9</sup> Murphy Hicks Henry, *Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Reflecting on the International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) Awards, Henry notes that very few women have ever won in the Instrumental Performer category and “never has a woman received the award for guitar, fiddle, mandolin or dobro.”

## American Angel: *Tomorrow is My Turn* (cont.)

<sup>10</sup>Jones, "Patsy Cline, Alison Krauss, and Now... Rhiannon Giddens," *The Daily Beast*, 8 March 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/08/patsy-kline-allison-krauss-and-now-rhiannon-giddens.html>.

<sup>11</sup>George de Stefano, "Rhiannon Giddens Tomorrow is My Turn," *Pop Matters*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.popmatters.com/review/190347-rhiannon-giddens-tomorrow-is-my-turn/>.

<sup>12</sup>Malcolm Jones, "Patsy Cline, Alison Krauss, and Now... Rhiannon Giddens."

<sup>13</sup>Lyrics from the song "Angel City," as heard on the CD *Tomorrow is My Turn*.

<sup>14</sup>David Fricke, "Rhiannon Giddens' Old Time Religion," *Rolling Stone*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/rhiannon-giddens-old-time-religion-20150305>.

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