

Musical Style and Experience in a Brooklyn Pentecostal Church: An "Insider's" Perspective¹

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Introduction: "What Kind of Church is This?"

When my wife, Lori, speaks of her move from Charlotte, North Carolina, to attend college in Boston, Massachusetts, she inevitably highlights the "culture shock" she felt upon first arriving. "I don't like it. It's different," she tearfully tried to explain to her parents late one Sunday afternoon. Her voice had an air of despair that seemed to belie the faith-bred optimism she usually portrayed even when things didn't go her way. Lori was raised Pentecostal "from the womb," as the saying goes, and her church background is steeped in the African American Pentecostal tradition. A couple of hours before, she had returned from church, thrown herself on her dorm room bed, and burst into tears. This was not a matter of simply adjusting to the climatic or culinary foreignness of New England, nor was it a temporary bout of homesickness one might expect from a pastor's youngest daughter. Rather, what had made life in Boston suddenly seem so unbearable was the fact that, for her, West Indian-style musical worship had hindered the spiritual fulfillment she expected to receive in a Pentecostal setting. Church, she thought, was supposed to be something familiar—something enjoyable. Her parents had recommended that she attend this church; but perhaps even *they* were unaware it would be so "different." Weren't all black Pentecostal churches in the United States more or less the same?

Certainly, it is not only musical style, *per se*, that led to Lori's disappointment with the church service. Had the heavily accented sermon been more aurally comprehensible to her, she may have been able to endure West Indian styles of singing and clapping. In fact, many Pentecostals consider it tolerable, though highly undesirable, to have very little music in church, provided the biblical teaching is comprehensive and inspired by God. Nevertheless, no Pentecostal service is complete without music. Even "spoken" parts of the worship service, such as the sermon and saints' testimonies, are often surrounded by musical elements, if not themselves sung (Davis 1985). Music in the Pentecostal church is a vehicle for praising and worshiping God and in return receiving the spiritual strength to persevere through life's hardships. In the words of a well-known gospel chorus, "when praises go up, blessings come down." Thus, Lori's inability to "get into the service" and participate comfortably in congregational singing led

to a painful shock that was more than merely "cultural" for her; it affected her spiritually.

In this essay, I examine musical styles and conceptions embraced by African Americans² and the West Indian transmigrants with whom they worship at Emmanuel Temple, an Apostolic Pentecostal church in Brooklyn, New York. My larger project is to critique essentialist notions of the "black church," which deny both intra-group and inter-group diversity that exists among "black" people in America. By "intra-group" diversity, I mean the multiple styles of musical worship employed by U.S.-born blacks. "Inter-group diversity" here refers to the multiple styles that are found among the various groups of black people who, although they see themselves as culturally distinct from each other, all self-identify as "black" in the context of a white American majority. This essay attempts to answer the following questions: How is it that African American and West Indian styles of musical worship are negotiated in Emmanuel Temple's worship services? How is coherence in the worship service maintained despite the presence of seemingly incompatible styles of singing and clapping? And finally, what is the most effective way for a so-called "insider" ethnomusicologist to tackle such questions?

Paying special attention to how my "insider" status impacts my research at Emmanuel Temple, I begin by examining the subject positions from which some writers discuss "black" church music. I use hermeneutic phenomenology as a means of incorporating a dialogic approach to ethnography, while highlighting the personal experiences of African Americans and West Indians in musical worship. Finally, I look historically at Emmanuel Temple's musical development, and call for a re-examination of transnational flows relating to the Caribbeanization of "black" churches in the United States.

Perspectives on the "Black" Church

African American church music has been the subject of a number of ethnomusicological studies since the 1970s.³ Some scholars have referred to a kind of "black aesthetic" that undergirds the gospel tradition (Williams-Jones 1975; Burnim 1985). Melonee Burnim, who, in the late 1970s, conducted research in Pentecostal churches in Indiana, states that "a well-defined Black aesthetic frames the boundaries of gospel music performance" (Burnim 1985:159-60). She discusses several musical elements that characterize the "black gospel music aesthetic," including distinct vocal textures, body movements, clapping patterns, and rhythmic concepts. While the elements mentioned by Burnim do indeed characterize many black Pentecostal churches in the U.S., an examination of Emmanuel Temple reveals that the story is more complex than the positing of an overarching black aesthetic would seem to suggest. This is particularly the

case in cities like New York, Boston, and Miami, where the category "black" subsumes multiple nationalities, and where congregations exhibit wide-ranging styles of musical worship.⁴

Of the existing research on black church music in the United States, very little is written by scholars who claim membership in the religious community being studied. To my knowledge, William Dargan's dissertation (1983) represents the first musicological study of Pentecostal church music written by a Pentecostal. His goal is

to illustrate the relative frequency of usage of certain musical forms in gospels [i.e. congregational songs], especially as they appear in connection with various categories of belief. . . . "Categories of belief" are inferred from the language of song texts, definitions and terminology used by informants, and from my own experience of Christian beliefs as I find them operative in . . . holiness churches. (1983:38)

Cheryl Sanders's book, *Saints in Exile*, though not focused on music, provides a thorough insider's perspective on the black Pentecostal church tradition in the United States, arguing convincingly that the Pentecostal experience is "based upon a dialectical, exilic identity of being 'in the world, but not of it.'" Pentecostals, she argues, "are fully aware of their marginalized status, based upon racial and religious differences, within the dominant culture; thus, exile has been offered as an appropriate paradigm for interpreting their experience" (Sanders 1996:123). I think Sanders's notion of "exile" might also be applied to African American churches containing West Indian minorities—not to mention West Indian churches in the U.S.—where it seems her notion of an "exilic existence" would be further enriched. That is, in addition to the racial and religious differences between saints⁵ and the larger society, West Indian members of predominantly African American churches are, in a sense, "doubly-exiled" because they are further differentiated by their status as transnational migrants.

Some studies of black church music, while not written by "insiders," attempt to portray black Pentecostal churches in ways that are faithful to the beliefs of those being studied. Rather than treating belief as an analytically irrelevant aspect of the ethnographic context, or using belief solely to frame presentation, Glenn Hinson⁶ highlights the importance of Pentecostal belief as a way of deriving meaning:

Belief provides what church members term the "invisible manuscript," a guide for unfolding the mysteries of the world and unveiling the meaning of feeling. More than just lending coherence to expression and emotion, belief infuses them with a significance that

transcends the quotidian; in so doing, it offers an alternate model for understanding communicative process and assessing performative responsibility. To step into this interpretive realm, the ethnographer must accept belief on its own terms, adopting a stance of radical objectivity while reframing analysis in the ontological terms of the faithful. (1989:12)

Ray Allen (1987, 1991) explores gospel performance as sacred ritual in his "experience-centered" (1987:240) ethnography of community-based and professional gospel groups. In his detailed study of an Apostolic Pentecostal church in Champaign-Urbana, Larry Ward examines the relationship between Pentecostal music and doctrine, seeking to describe both the congregation's musical activity and the saints' conceptions of musical worship (1997:3).⁷

The studies of Ward (1997) and Burnim (1980, 1985) merit comparison with the present work, not only because they are all ethnomusicological treatments of Pentecostal church music, but also because each of the authors stands in a distinct relation to his or her topic. Ward, a white non-believer, is seen as a cultural and religious outsider; Burnim, an African American Methodist, is viewed by her informants as a cultural "insider" and a religious outsider. By contrast, as both a black American⁸ and a Pentecostal, I am accepted, despite my academic training, as a cultural *and* religious "insider." To Ward's credit, he devotes a full chapter to a discussion of the awkwardness and tension caused by his outsider status during fieldwork, even describing his own "ethnographic naivete" in presuming he could "quietly observe worship without being actively drawn into the event" (1997:375). While Ward's role as "the unsaved professor" amidst Pentecostal saints presented certain research limitations, the honesty and explicitness with which he makes his subjectivities known lend his ethnography a healthy transparency. This transparency, which I hope to achieve in the present essay, elucidates the complex relation between researcher and study object,⁹ and is, I believe, facilitated by a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Toward a Phenomenology of Pentecostal Church Music

Since the mid-1980s, particularly with the emergence of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), there has been a renewed interest in issues of representation in ethnographies. Rather than falling prey to strict Self/Other dichotomies, which often portrayed "natives" in an exoticized fashion, only to be distinguished from the rational-minded observer, writers in the late 1980s and 1990s began to rethink the ways in which ethnographies have

portrayed their "objects of study." Ethnomusicologists have also thought about fresh ways of studying, documenting, and representing the world's music-cultures. This "crisis in representation," the discussion of which continued in *After Writing Culture* (James, Hockey, and Dawson 1997), and in the works of writers such as Renato Rosaldo (1993) and Barbara Tedlock (1991), has greatly impacted the ways in which fieldwork is conducted and conceptualized. Tedlock (1991:78) embraces a shift, which actually began in the 1970s, away from "participant observation" toward the "observation of participation" in an effort to dispel the myth that the ethnographer must both become experientially involved in the activities of those being studied, and also keep his or her "cool" in order to remain dispassionately observant. What is more desirable, Tedlock asserts, is that "instead of a choice between writing an ethnographic memoir centering on the Self or a standard monograph centering on the Other, both the Self and Other are presented together within a single narrative ethnography, focused on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue." Ethnographers, then, "both experience and observe their own and others' coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter" (1991:69).

Some ethnomusicologists (Rice 1994, 1997; Titon 1988, 1997; Friedson 1996)¹⁰ have turned to the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as a means of moving further away from the philosophical idealism of Alfred Schutz and Thomas Clifton¹¹ and toward the more concrete aspects of embodied social reality. The work of these ethnomusicologists tends to be more anthropological in methodology, and they seek both to experience and portray the musical and social realms in more holistic terms. "Being-in-the-world," as this compound term is used by Heidegger ([1926] 1962), describes the "equiprimordiality" of humans and the "world" in which we find ourselves. The ethnomusicological application of "being-in-the-world" thus mandates that musical sound be considered inextricably linked to the social and cultural milieu in which it is produced and consumed.

The value of hermeneutic phenomenology to ethnomusicology lies primarily in the former's ability to promote intercultural dialogue in lieu of the ethnocentrism of research that claims to speak authoritatively for some Other group of people.¹² Yet, while I am influenced theoretically by the authors I have cited above, I feel that my status as a cultural and religious "insider" necessitates significant, though perhaps subtle, differences between my use of phenomenology and theirs. Unlike the ethnomusicological studies by Titon, Friedson, and Rice, this essay describes a world of which I have been a part long before I decided to do formal academic research on it. Naturally, this means that the "intersubjective reality," or "interworld," that typically emerges between the emic and the etic, the

West and the non-West, or the religious and the non-religious, is of a different sort. Although "being-in-the-world" is often applied to a particular social or cultural context, the "world" I describe in this essay is, in some aspects, trans-social and transcultural. Because I share the religious beliefs of those whom I am studying, I must necessarily hold, for example, that the Holy Spirit is indeed real and is manifested through music. Furthermore, this manifestation is not subject to an individual's "belief" in it, nor is it limited to the "worldview" of a particular group of people (see Hinson 2000:327–34). In making this assertion, I hope to show that my use of phenomenology is theologically informed, and that my dialogic approach is, therefore, distinct from those which have preceded it.

In discussing her fieldwork in African American religious communities, Judi Moore Latta (2000) notes that one may experience oneself in complex ways. Likewise, my own sense of "being-in-the-world"—the way in which I understand the nature of my existence—is multifaceted. Despite my own church upbringing, Pentecostalism and the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit were largely unknown to me until 1991. It was through my wife Lori's witnessing that I gradually came to embrace the Pentecostal experience. More specifically, I experience myself both as an academic and a spiritual being. Yet since 1991, my "primary discourse"¹³ has been that of a practicing Pentecostal. The discourse of academia too often employs what Hinson (1989, 2000) labels "strategies of disbelief,"¹⁴ describing spirit-filled or "anointed" musical worship in Pentecostal churches as "trance" (Conway 1978; McIntyre 1976; Marks 1982; Rouget 1985), "magical possession" (Austin-Broos 1997), or even the result of "psychological frenzy" (Barrett 1997:117). Such facile "explanations" deny the specificity of the Pentecostal experience, substitute a kind of universal stigma, and fly in the face of experiences that I consider no less real than the paper on which this is printed. Many ethnographies resort to a kind of "ontological colonialism," whereby

supernatural experience is . . . consigned to a reality apart, a realm where the "real" is defined only within the narrow parameters of belief. "That's what they believe," most ethnographers seem to say, "and thus it's real *for them*." What remains unsaid—but certainly not misunderstood—is the concluding codicil "but not for us, for we can see *beyond* the boundaries of their belief." Thus slips away any guise of ethnographic objectivity, only to be replaced by implicit claims to a fuller knowledge and a more real reality. Accounts of supernatural experience, in turn, get treated as artifacts of belief, interesting for the light they shed on culture, but meaningless as testaments to authentic encounter. (Hinson 2000:330)

Emmanuel Temple (part of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Inc.) is a church in which creative musical dialogue regularly takes place between African Americans and West Indians. While I engage in a kind of productive distancing in order to stand at some critical distance from the musical practices of my church, I feel this study is also best understood as a dialogue, not so much between a foreign Self and a native Other, but rather as one between an ethnomusicologist and the Pentecostal church of which he is a member. Yet instead of involving a compromise of my "primary discourse," such a dialectic disrupts the notion of fixed emic or etic perspectives as they relate to my research on Pentecostal musical worship. The hermeneutic phenomenological method is, in some respects, applicable to both "insider" and "outsider" ethnomusicologists. As Rice explains,

Even so-called "insider" ethnomusicologists, those born into the cultures they study, undergo a productive distancing necessary to the explanation and critical understanding of their own cultures. . . . [P]roductive distancing is not only characteristic of outsiders and scholars; individuals operating within tradition continually appropriate their cultural practices, give them new meanings, and create their own sense of "being in the world." (1994:6)

I agree with Peter Reinholdsson, who employs an "interactionist approach to acquiring meaningful knowledge of the world of jazz performance." He cautions that

Abiding by the insider-outsider dichotomy still present in the emic-etics debate would render an impervious split between subject and object that I cannot approve of in view of my theoretical perspective and epistemological point of departure. Rather, a dialectical and dialogical relationship between the emic and etic perspectives is striven for. . . . And I feel this is necessary in order to construct a meaningful whole in relation to the conceptual models and different parts of my fieldwork material. (1998:78)

My use of the term "insider" (placed in quotation marks) to describe my position vis-à-vis my object of study underscores the irony of doing phenomenological ethnomusicology from "within." Such a theoretical exercise creates a fascinating tension that I choose to exploit by making this study dialogical on several levels simultaneously: it represents a dialogue between me and my church, it *re-presents* the dialogue unfolding between African Americans and West Indians through musical worship, and in yet another sense, the dialogue occurs between me, as a Pentecostal, and the academic community of which I strangely find myself a member.