

2007 Butler, Melvin L. Review Essay: The Holy Profane by Teresa L. Reed, *Singing in My Soul* by Jerma A. Jackson, "Let the Church Sing," by Therese Smith, and *Lining Out the Word* by William T. Dargan.

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The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music. Teresa L. Reed. 2003. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. xii, 183 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$40; paper, \$25.

Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age. Jerma A. Jackson. 2004. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. xii, 193 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$55; paper, \$18.95.

"Let the Church Sing!": Music and Worship in a Black Mississippi Community. Thérèse Smith. 2004. Rochester: University of Rochester

Press. xxi, 293 pp., illustrations, photographs, musical examples, appendices, compact disc, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45; paper, \$24.95.

Lining Out the Word: Dr. Watts Hymn Singing in the Music of Black Americans. William T. Dargan. 2006. Berkeley: University of California Press. xvi, 320 pp., illustrations, musical transcriptions, appendices, bibliography, discography, index. Cloth, \$45.

One of the most exciting aspects of black music research is that, at its best, it reveals a multiplicity of approaches to making music and inspires creative ways of ethnographically representing those whose musical practices are studied. These four monographs encompass a variety of sacred musical genres, including “lined out” hymn singing, blues-inflected commercial gospel, chanted sermons and prayers, and sanctified “shout” music intended for lively holy dancing. The authors differ in their respective approaches to studying and representing black sacred music, but they agree on the importance of addressing some crucial questions: To what extent does the music of black church folk serve to articulate a racial and spiritual identity? How does a dialectic of tradition and change shape sacred music making? And in what ways do the everyday discourses of holy and profane reinscribe musical and social boundaries that are creatively traversed despite, or perhaps because of, their apparent fixity? Such questions weave a fascinating thread through these works and demonstrate the salience of these issues both historically and also in contemporary black life.

In *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music*, Teresa Reed opens with a warm account of her upbringing in Open Door Refuge Church of God in Christ, in Gary, Indiana. Her conservative church background is what first exposed her to experiential distinctions between music of Christian churches and “the Devil’s music,” and it also inspires the thematic focus of her book. In addition to discussing the tremendous impact of the Holiness/Pentecostal movement on rhythm-and-blues artists, Reed reminds us that developments in black secular spheres have often paralleled significant changes in black church music. The co-occurrence of the Pentecostal Revival and the emergence of the blues around the turn of the twentieth century is but one example. Described as “a probe for the holy within the profane” (12), *The Holy Profane* focuses less on gospel music, per se, than on the dynamic interplay between sacred and secular forms of black expressive culture. In this regard, Reed owes much to the musicology of Jon Michael Spencer, whose writings, such as *Blues and Evil* (1993), stress the religiosity of supposedly “secular” black musics. What sets Reed’s work apart is its basis not on theoretical suppositions, but, rather, on an array of blues lyrics, and historical narratives, along with personal observations deriving from her own experiences in black Pentecostal churches. Countering the notion that blues and gospel embrace mutually exclusive worldviews, Reed argues

1 persuasively that an underacknowledged spirituality pervades the composi-
2 tions and performances of “blues poets” throughout the twentieth century.
3 Such poets, she argues, “are far from atheists. Instead, their lyrics suggest
4 the centrality of their belief in God and a deeply religious understanding of
5 themselves and the world around them” (60).

6 Reed maintains that black artists “have always obscured the boundaries
7 between sacred and secular” (95). Therefore, it is the absence of biblical mo-
8 tifs—the apparent avoidance of church themes—in some black commercial
9 hits of the 1950s that is perhaps most remarkable (103). Reed describes the
10 betwixt and between character of “cross-over” black artists such as Rosetta
11 Tharpe and Sam Cooke in order to demonstrate the “convoluted and prob-
12 lematic” (95) character of the sacred/secular dichotomy throughout black
13 music history. Moreover, many black recording artists consciously avoided
14 religious signifiers as they strived to conform their craft to the desires and
15 expectations of diverse audiences. In order to attract mainstream listeners,
16 many secular artists sought to de-racialize their sound by “either diluting the
17 idiosyncrasies of black religion or leaving them in the church where they
18 ‘belonged’” (120). On the other hand, anti-integrationist artists often engaged
19 in a “re-churchification of black secular music” (112), infusing their music
20 with the rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic characteristics of black church
21 worship. Reed thus shows that musical symbols of the sacred have long been
22 appropriated by a variety of artists for racially politicized purposes. As a his-
23 torical, musicological, and theological inquiry, *The Holy Profane* sheds light
24 on the constructed nature of the boundaries between sacred and secular in
25 the United States.

26 Jerma Jackson’s *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular*
27 *Age* also emphasizes the fascinating connections between sacred and secu-
28 lar forms of black music. Jackson stresses the fact that racial politics in the
29 post-Civil War period, which saw the proliferation of social Darwinism, lynch
30 mobs, and widespread discrimination, played a major role in how sacred
31 music would develop in African American communities. As a means of op-
32 posing negative racial stereotypes, black Baptists at the turn of the twentieth
33 century often adopted “strategies of racial pride and uplift” (13), eschewing
34 the spontaneity and emotionalism that were often seen as definitive charac-
35 teristics of black worship. As the Pentecostal movement unfolded and bore
36 fruit throughout the United States, there arose a body of sanctified singers
37 and instrumentalists, many of whom were affiliated with the Church of God
38 in Christ, the country’s largest black Pentecostal organization. Artists such as
39 Bessie Johnson, Arizona Dranes, and Rosetta Tharpe honed their craft among
40 black congregations for whom music making was primarily a religious, rather
41 than an aesthetic, expression. Hence, the fervor and enthusiasm of Pentecostal
42 singing found its way onto gospel recordings that competed with those of
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secular artists during the 1930s and beyond. Historical in approach, *Singing in My Soul* benefits tremendously from the author's carefully articulated focus. Rather than attempting to survey the entire history of black sacred music, much of the book focuses on the first half of the twentieth century, highlighting the musical and social developments that fueled gospel music's entry into the mainstream after the Second World War. The author contends that, partly as a result of the commercialization of black music in the twentieth century, gospel music "became a critical arena in which African Americans contended with questions about the nature of faith, as well as the shape and meaning of racial identity" (4).

What I find most enlightening about *Singing in My Soul* is its discussion of the role of women in their various roles as: innovators who "stretch[ed] gospel in new directions" (46) through studio recordings that helped to popularize the exuberant style of church music; as missionaries whose efforts to inject the gospel message into secular streets and nightclubs greatly facilitated the growth of the Pentecostal organizations such as the Church of God in Christ; and as business-minded professionals who "engage[d] the public arena to make religion meaningful" (32) and, in so doing, "forged a place for [gospel] music at the interstices of church and commerce, lodging it between the secular and the religious" (127).

Studies of music in black church worship are interesting both for what they have to say about the practices in question and also the distinct subject positions of the authors in relation to the faith communities being studied. I thus find intriguing both the topics and methodologies of the texts by William Dargan and Thérèse Smith. Smith's book stands out from those of the other authors in several respects: she writes as both a cultural and religious outsider, consequently asking and answering different sorts of questions than do the other authors; and her book is the only one of the four to include a compact disc. In the 1980s, Smith came to the United States from Ireland to undertake graduate study and conduct fieldwork among black Baptists in Kentucky and Mississippi. Her book, *Let the Church Sing: Music and Worship in a Black Mississippi Community*, provides a tender portrayal of the musical and social life of churchgoers at Clear Creek Missionary Baptist Church in Northern Mississippi. Theoretically rigorous and ethnographically rich, the book devotes significant attention to the constructed boundaries between "good music" and "devil's music" (33), and in this regard, it is similar to the books by Reed and Jackson. *Let the Church Sing* even includes a musical transcription of one church member's rendition of these opposing styles. While musical sound is thus shown to index a range of associations connected to heaven or hell, Smith underscores the fact that "both in theory and in practice. . . the boundary between saints [i.e., Christians] and sinners is not as inflexible as one might expect" (32).

1 Smith also zeroes in on the various ways in which time is structured among
 2 this Baptist congregation. On several musical and social levels, churchgoers
 3 adhere to concepts of time that seem contradictory. For example, services are
 4 typically begun at a precise time of day, and this reflects the fact that church
 5 members take pride in being “timely people” (77). However, an exact ending
 6 time for church services is not desired, particularly because a strict cutoff time
 7 would possibly interfere with the unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit. To
 8 demonstrate how this tension between fixed and fluid conceptions of time is
 9 also sustained in music making, Smith examines the differences between gospel
 10 songs and lined hymn singing. In the latter, a song leader sings a line of text that
 11 is slowly and ornately repeated by members of the congregation, who rely not
 12 on a definite pulse, but rather, on mutual attunement to the ebb and flow of the
 13 congregation as a whole in order to sing together. By contrast, gospel pieces are
 14 “generally upbeat and rely heavily upon clear metric organization” (69). Both
 15 singing styles are deemed essential to church worship; and in fact, Smith sees
 16 the tension between control (metered) and non-control (unmetered) as vital
 17 to the efficacy of Clear Creek’s services. Viewed holistically, Smith argues, “lined
 18 hymns and gospel pieces. . . can be interpreted as a symbol for the members’
 19 lives. The resultant whole is a composite. . . of ancient and modern, of fluidity
 20 and sharp definition, of control and letting go” (84).

21 Privileging the stated beliefs of church members, Smith adopts a phenom-
 22 enological methodology. She explains, “I have included a considerable amount
 23 of recorded speech. . . to firmly ground my interpretation and analysis in the
 24 community and bring them as close as possible to that of the community”
 25 (3). Given Smith’s concern with faithfully representing church members’
 26 experiences, I find it interesting and a bit ironic that she also includes several
 27 musical transcriptions. These will be helpful to some readers for the insight
 28 they provide into the sung and spoken portions of church ritual. However, I
 29 find some of the transcriptions a bit too limiting, paradoxically locking Spirit-
 30 inspired musicking—especially emotional cries and “shouts” (135–137)—into
 31 printed notation in a way that feels too much like an imposition. These no-
 32 tated examples will be appreciated by some musicologically-minded readers,
 33 but are very likely less relevant to the perceptions and conceptions of the
 34 spiritually-minded believers she ethnographically represents.

35 Smith’s concern with creative polarities such as control and non-control
 36 resonates with William Dargan’s thoughts on African American creativity
 37 in sacred and secular contexts. But while Smith’s book centers on a single
 38 community, William Dargan’s *Lining Out the Word* mostly concerns a single
 39 genre—the musical tradition referred to as “Dr. Watts” hymn singing. The
 40 name is taken from Isaac Watts, the English clergyman and composer whose
 41 hymns were sung in the lined out style. Dargan argues that the Dr. Watts
 42 lined hymn tradition “has served as a powerful ‘gatekeeper,’ sustaining both
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continuity *and* transformations, through which new forms have emerged from the recombination of existing elements” (15). William Dargan’s musical notations serve to uncover the musical intricacies of the lined hymn tradition in African American Missionary and Primitive Baptist churches. Musical transcriptions also shed light on regional differences and similarities in hymn singing.

One of the most ambitious discussions in Dargan’s book takes place in Chapter 9, entitled “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” Here, the author examines Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” Charlie Parker’s “Parker’s Mood,” and Ornette Coleman’s “Free Jazz” to make a compelling case that the influence of the lined hymn tradition can be discerned in secular genres of African American music that were popular during the bebop era and beyond. Dargan posits the existence of a structuring aesthetic continuum stretching from lining-out (characterized by slow and resonant tempos) to ring-shout (faster paced), upon which many black musical expressions can be placed. With the 1940s came “a new rhythmic synthesis [that] was achieved between these poles of abandon and regularity—or artistic freedom and the discipline from which it stems” (222). More simply put, “African American music’s distinctive character has developed,” Dargan argues, “from the tension between freely measured and strictly measured rhythms” (233–234).

Noticeably absent from *Lining Out the Word* is a compact disc, which, despite making the book more expensive, would undoubtedly assist readers, particularly those who do not read musical notation, in comprehending the discussions of musical style and expression in Dr. Watts hymns singing. Dargan provides fine-tuned descriptions of musical traits, drawing mainly upon three recordings: *Benjamin Lloyd’s Hymn Book: A Primitive Baptist Song Tradition*; *Wade in the Water. Vol. 2.; African American Congregational Singing: Nineteenth-Century Roots*; and *Dr. Watts Hymn Singing Among African Americans*. Thankfully, all but the latter of these, which is the author’s unpublished compilation housed at the Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, are commercially available.

In closing, I should also point out that each of these monographs responds to a distinct void or misperception in the scholarly literature. Teresa Reed reminds us that, notwithstanding deeply ingrained social constructions of musical identity, the secular and the sacred are most accurately understood not as mutually incompatible but as deeply intertwined in African American culture. Jerma Jackson clarifies the often neglected importance of religion in black life, in contradistinction to scholars who may have overemphasized blues and jazz as the “quintessential symbols of the modern age” (3). Thérèse Smith situates her work among a minority of recent ethnomusicological studies focused on thick description of a single community. William Dargan is the first scholar to write a book exploring in great musicological detail the

1 Dr. Watts hymn tradition. He inspires us to think more seriously and more
 2 passionately about the role of the sacred in shaping aesthetic norms in black
 3 music. Taken together, these fine works paint a highly nuanced portrait of
 4 black sacred music making in the United States. They also add fresh perspec-
 5 tives to ongoing conversations regarding the symbiotic nature of sacred and
 6 secular elements in African American music making.

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 10 **Reference**

11 Spencer, Jon Michael. 1993. *Blues and Evil*. Knoxville: University of Tennes-
 12 see Press.

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 16 **Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture.** Aaron
 17 A. Fox. 2004. Durham: Duke University Press. xv; 364 pp., photo essay,
 18 notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$84.95; paper, \$23.95.

19 **Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942.** Tony Russell with
 20 Bob Pinson. 2004. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xi, 1183 pp., users
 21 guide, discography, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$99.00.

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 23 As an interpretation of country-music-as-working-class-culture, Aaron
 24 Fox's *Real Country* displays a deep sensitivity to and empathy for the people
 25 who fill the beer joints of rural Texas and Illinois. The author—an ethno-
 26 musicologist who has worked regularly as a lead guitarist in country bands
 27 in Texas, Illinois, and New York—employs a reflexive narrative voice that is
 28 astutely self-aware and honest, reminding the reader of the human agency of
 29 fieldwork and book-authoring without ever being narcissistic. Fox sets out
 30 to prove that “country music is an authentic working-class art of enormous
 31 value to its blue-collar constituency” albeit in a medium (a book) that limits
 32 his ability to document what he calls the “cultural life of *sound*” (ix). This
 33 documentation is achieved through examinations of the function of language
 34 in working-class stories and country songs in rural Texas beer-joints.

35 Fox uses an impromptu pickin' party at the home/garage of an auto
 36 mechanic to set the ethnographic scene for *Real Country* and as a herme-
 37 neutic key to understanding working-class expressive (verbal) culture. The
 38 ethnographic Prelude encompasses each aspect of country music culture
 39 the author wishes to address: mediation of country music through voice and
 40 language, enacted gender roles, the objective/subjective dialectic framed in
 41 the “fool in the mirror” motif of country music, voicing of feelings and emo-
 42 tions, the poetics of working-class language, and the cultural lathe of the
 43 post-industrial “country” landscape. The chapters are in turn framed by these