

## Thoughts on the Intersection of Race and Faith in the Study of Popular Music

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It is not surprising that diversity is among the more complicated issues faced by scholarly organizations dedicated to the study of music. Although cultural barriers are continually traversed by those living in the U.S., contemporary discussions of diversity sit atop painful historical legacies of exclusion. Broaching the thorny topic of diversity thus involves engaging with the nation's unique history along with the modern-day challenges faced by institutions attempting to increase the numbers of underrepresented groups.

My thoughts on the topic of diversity in IASPM-US have been shaped by the following questions: How might contemporary music scholars better understand the intertwining of race and religion for African-American students who are potential future members of IASPM? Are there implicit definitions of "the popular" that discourage certain students from pursuing the academic study of music? To what extent does the underrepresentation of African Americans in scholarly organizations such as IASPM stem from an avoidance of faith-based logics of knowing?

As an African American and a Pentecostal Christian, I often struggle to articulate a perspective on diversity in relation to my identity as both a person of color and a person of faith. These aspects of my identity—one visible, the other invisible—profoundly impact how I relate to the communities in which I conduct ethnomusicological fieldwork. As in my research and writing, I am once again compelled to bring these two facets of my identity to the table as I address the issue of diversity in popular music studies. It is on the busy intersection of race and faith that I will focus my comments for this roundtable discussion.

In *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion*, Michael Eric Dyson refers to himself as a "rhetorical acrobat" continually faced with the challenge of "navigating through varied communities of intellectual interest and pivoting around multiple centers of linguistic engagement" (2003:12). An Ivy League professor and ordained Baptist

minister, Dyson suggests that certain inescapable tensions may be endured when one occupies a place in both the academy and the pulpit. In his words (*ibid.*), there are

some tremendous difficulties in maintaining one's commitment to a religious tradition that says, "We know by faith and not by sight," while maintaining habits of critical inquiry that rest on relentless interrogation of the warrants, grounds, bases, and assertions of truth put forth in all sorts of intellectual communities, including religious ones.

Like Dyson, I have learned to appreciate and embrace these epistemological tensions as useful and edifying. Without them, I would have considerably less insight into the ways that crossing religious, cultural, and national boundaries can be particularly transformative. When I started graduate study in ethnomusicology, had I not known what it meant to live these tensions—to experience them on a deeply personal level—I would most likely have either chosen another dissertation topic or approached the issues of gospel music, Pentecostalism, and African Caribbean identity in a different way altogether.

I did not initially plan to bring my Christian faith into the classroom, probably because the tensions that I now find stimulating seemed at first unbearable. I could identify with Stephen Barrett, whose 1997 dissertation, written for the Department of English at the University of New Hampshire, is entitled *This Is Gonna Hurt Like Hell: A Pentecostal Student Enters the Academy* (1997). In my case, I felt uncomfortable describing and analyzing the role of music in Pentecostal worship while having to confront a tradition of scholarship in which outsiders failed to accurately represent my experiences and those of the African American believers with whom I worshipped.

The issue of faith is all the more complex because one's religious affiliation (or professed lack thereof) often goes hand-in-hand with a particular epistemological stance. The logics of knowing in turn impact the questions we do or do not ask the people we study. Religion also tends to be highly personal—it is something many people deem irrelevant or, for whatever reason, choose not to disclose. We might consider rallying against what I would call an unmarked academic faith in favor of a radically more transparent approach to writing, in which religious subjectivities are regularly made known in the articles and books we produce. Who knows what complicated set of identities lie hidden, or at least, unarticulated, within that tiny collective pronoun, "we"?

Stephen Barrett notes (1997: 24) that

an individual's primary discourse communities—for instance, those of home, neighborhood, and, for some, church, mosque or temple—may be at odds with her or his secondary discourse communities, those of school, workplace, loan office, local government, among innumerable others. And it's not as if these discourse communities stand on equal footing.

Anthropologist Glenn Hinson goes so far as to accuse some ethnographers of resorting to a kind of “ontological colonialism” (2000: 330), 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.

I cite the work of Barrett and Hinson to draw our collective attention to the ways in which viewing and writing about the world may vary according to the position one takes concerning religious experience, and also to suggest that acknowledging discourses of faith could have a tremendous impact on the study of popular music by opening up what we, as music scholars, choose to study, and compelling us to rethink not only the ways in which we write about those we encounter in our fields, but also the nature of the fields we choose to construct. Barrett writes about an “either-or-edness” that he perceived as a devout Christian who felt forced to choose between discourses construed as mutually exclusive. I suspect that a similar either-or-edness is felt by many of my students at the University of Virginia, for whom “popular music” has somehow come to signify an anti-Christian way of life.

I now strive to show my students that one can excel both as a worshipper and an ethnomusicologist. Personal religious experience may serve as a gateway to a fuller understanding of how popular music is phenomenologically meaningful within both the sacred and “secular” contexts. During 2005–2006, most of the 65 students in my gospel music course self-identified

as African American Christians who grew up attending church. At least half of them sang in the University gospel choir, whose name, *Black Voices*, suggests a fascinating conflation of racial and religious identity. My students thus remind me that for many African Americans, religious expression is also an expression of a blackness learned from childhood and often cultivated as an adult (see Gaunt 2006). Like many of my peers, I had only a vague notion of popular music scholarship during my undergraduate years. Thus, it is not surprising to me that I have so rarely encountered African-American students interested in pursuing graduate study in music. As a professor, I accept the call to inspire students to become scholars of faith who will add vital perspectives to our understanding of popular music.

What is at stake in our scholarly constructions of popular music? Are we truly prepared to incorporate Christian perspectives even if they engender politicized discourses that conflict with those now dominant in IASPM and other scholarly organizations? What are the responsibilities of collectives such as IASPM to ensure that popular music scholarship is seen as a viable option for all kinds of scholars?

Certainly, the diversity issue is closely tied to how we, as popular music scholars, define our units of study. Although music scholars now branch out to explore a variety of important issues, I often feel that popular music is assumed to be secular, or at least non-Christian. Some recent publications explore the “spiritual” dimensions of commercial popular genres such as rave (Sylvan 2002, 2005) and rap (Pinn 2003). However, undergraduate textbooks on American popular music generally focus heavily on secular genres and contain only passing references to gospel music (e.g., Starr and Waterman 2003). Notwithstanding Jon Michael Spencer’s writings on theomusicology (1994, 1996) and a handful of work on Christian rock (e.g., Howard and Streck 1999) there seems to be too little discussion of African American Christian musics by contemporary popular music scholars, especially considering the significant role that black churches still play in shaping musical preferences in the United States. I therefore feel a certain ambiguity concerning the status of genres such as African American gospel music, or music occurring in a church setting, with regard to whether these forms of expressive culture are viewed as “popular” in the sense understood by most ethnomusicologists. I fear that we are sending problematic messages to ourselves and to future members of IASPM: Only certain African American musics are “popular,” and the musical experiences closest to the hearts of many undergraduate students are not worthy of serious study. For many African Americans, music is experienced most intensely in contexts

of Christian faith. When we embrace this truth, I believe we will begin to make great strides in our understandings of diversity issues in IASPM and the relation of American popular music to African-American identity constructions in the US.

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