Music of the Common Tongue

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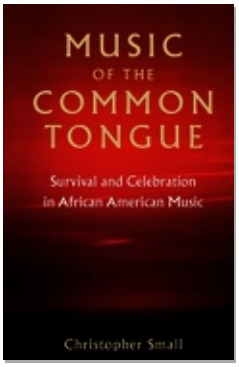

Chapter 3

RITUALS FOR SURVIVAL I: AN EXTATIC DELIGHT IN PSALMODY

A musical performance, then, can be seen as a ritual in which the identity and the values of the members of a social group are explored, affirmed and celebrated. I shall now look at the way in which the musicking of black Americans developed in its religious dimension, keeping in mind that the division of identity into 'sacred' and 'secular' is far from absolute, whether in everyday living or in musicking. Given the centrality of religion as a way of making sense of what was being done to them, it is not surprising that it is in the religious music of the slaves that the encounter with white culture bore its first recorded fruit. Musical interactions do not occur at random, but are indicators always of an empathy, even across a social or cultural barrier, which is not necessarily or even usually conscious. That such empathy exists, at levels deeper than those feelings of fear and guilt which lie at the root of racism, is borne out by the history of the musical interaction that occurred in the United States — and, indeed, wherever such encounters occurred.

We have seen how the slaves constructed communities and a feeling of identity even within the narrow limits allowed by their condition. Such communities were fragile; families and even whole plantations were liable to be brutally disrupted, at the whim of a master or under the pressure of economic circumstance. It was to a large extent the flexibility and the decentralization of the African cultural background that enabled the slaves to create rituals for the celebration of their identity; their musicking, poetry and dancing depended neither on written sources nor on the presence of specialists,

and were thus open to endless re-creation not just by a few but by all.

In the early days of slavery in North America, few white people gave much thought to the souls of the slaves; certainly none of the organized churches made any serious attempt at evangelization until early in the eighteenth century. There was for a time even a debate as to whether black people were human at all, and thus whether they had souls to save; it would clearly have been more convenient and less productive of guilt if the answer could have been given in the negative. The attitudes of masters varied; in some households instruction was given in Christian doctrine and church attendance enjoined on the slaves, often in the hope that they would come to believe that their situation was divinely ordained (a catechism to that effect was even taught), while others, generally on the larger plantations, left them to their own devices in this matter. It is doubtful whether any large proportion of slaves was even nominally Christian before 1750. The religious revival of the second half of the eighteenth century that was known as the Great Awakening, which affected whites no less than blacks, was probably the occasion for the baptism of most of the slaves. Their worship was supervised and controlled carefully by white clergymen, at least in the south, although independent black churches did establish themselves in the north in the later years of the century, especially among the Baptists and Methodists. It took a long time before all the planters overcame their resistance to the teaching of Christian doctrine to, and the baptism of, slaves; it was based largely on their fear that the slaves might start applying the doctrine to their own condition — which indeed they did. Even after this resistance was overcome there was further objection to the idea of black preachers, even sometimes as subordinates to white clergy. The blacks usually attended the same churches as the whites, in segregated sections, with the observances carefully supervised to prevent any outbreak of African practices.

The good clergymen who instructed the slaves in Christian doctrine, in snatches of Old and New Testament history and in the psalms (in verse translations, of course) must have been at times amazed at the vehemence of their charges' response to

their teachings, and at the same time they must have been more than a little alarmed at the changes they wrought in those doctrines and at the forms their worship took. Two famous letters to friends in London from the Rev Samuel Davies of Virginia in 1755 include the following:

> 'The books were all very acceptable, but none more so than the Psalms and Hymns, which enable them [ie the slaves] to gratify their peculiar taste for psalmody. Sundry of them have lodged all night in my kitchen, and sometimes when I have awaked about two or three o'clock in the morning, a torrent of sacred harmony has poured into my chamber and carried my mind away to heaven. In this seraphic exercise some of them spend almost the whole night. I wish, Sir, you and other benefactors could hear some of these sacred concerts. I am persuaded it would please you more than an Oratorio or a St Cecilia's day . . . I cannot but observe that the Negroes, above all the Human Species that I ever knew, have an Ear for Musick, and a kind of extatic Delight in Psalmody; and there are no Books they learn so soon or take so much pleasure in, as those used in that heavenly Part of divine Worship.'[1]

So, by that date, some at least of the slaves were singing psalms, and it is strongly to be inferred that they were singing them in their own way. These comments are at least consistent with practices described later, and still, in fact, to be heard today — that of vocal improvisation around each single note in turn of a melody, over a beat slowed down almost to immobility, in what has been described as 'a volume of florid sound which ebbs and flows slowly, powerfully and at times majestically in successive surges.'[2]

It is characteristic that, in taking over a repertory of songs, the metrical psalms and their assorted melodies, the slaves should have brought to bear their own ways of singing, transforming the staid and plain hymns, the rhymed expressions of Protestant theology, into expressive fantasies of sound. One can imagine, *pace* the soul of the Rev Davies, that what the slaves seized upon was not so much the repertory of songs in itself, still less the details of the doctrines contained in the verses, as the opportunity it gave them to practise upon both words and music that group vocal improvisation, that

affirmation through song of unity in variety that we have seen is the essence of the African sense of community, which transcended the confines of that condition into which they had been thrust, and of the power to structure their community in ways which were otherwise denied to them.

In introducing Christian doctrine into the lives of the slaves, the missionaries were in fact releasing forces which they could not have fully comprehended. For, as has been said, it was not so much a matter of the slaves' conversion *to* Christianity as of a conversion *of* Christianity in accordance with African ways of perceiving the world and with the needs of a ruthlessly oppressed people for a vision that would transcend the hopelessness of the present situation and give them a reason for wanting to survive. The clergymen's assurances that rewards for their suffering (the more passive the acceptance the greater the reward) awaited them in the world to come was, not surprisingly given the African way of thinking, not so much rejected as subsumed into a worldview that saw the past and the future as all of a piece with the present, and the spiritual as part of the natural. Ultimate justice, they believed, may lie in heaven, but it was to be sought also on earth, and the heroes of the Old Testament — Moses, Joshua, Daniel, Ezekiel — were alive and all around them, liberators of the captive Jews with whom the captive blacks could readily identify. Texts like

> Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
> So why not every man?

and

> Go down, Moses,
> Down into Egypt's land,
> Tell ol' Pharaoh,
> Let my people go.

were not just apostrophes to historical personages, not just references to some heavenly liberation (they *were* that, but also more) but direct pleas to those whom they knew personally, as their African forebears had known their ancestors — and we must remember that right up to the time of Emancipation in

1865 there were first-generation Africans who would have kept the ancestral feelings alive. The identification worked in the other direction also, in that elements from the ancestral religions, such as spirit possession, dance, trance and chanted sermons, became incorporated into the Christian observances, again to the dismay of the white divines and other religious-minded people; even the vengeful god of the Old Testament became transmuted by the grafting-on of characteristics of the African gods, notably the Yoruba creator-god, Obatala, while Christ often became identified with the Yoruba storm-god Shango. In the Yoruba creation myth the all-too-obvious imperfection of human beings was explained by the story that Obatala got drunk when he was creating us, and his hand slipped — a more forgiving notion, it seems to me, than Christian original sin.

The Christianity of the slaves was in fact very different in its moral direction from that of the whites; it was pieced together from those fragments of orthodox belief that were passed to them, very selectively, by the masters and their church functionaries and from those fragments of African religion that remained functional to their needs — needs for the affirmation of present humanity and community and of the hope for future freedom and justice. The masters might cobble together for them from questionable bits of Christian theology a moral code (God made you in order to serve your masters; obey your master, work hard for him, do not steal from him, and so on) and, with some notable exceptions among whom we may number the Rev Samuel Davies, the clergy might allow themselves, to their eternal shame, to be co-opted into propagating such a farrago, but according to all the evidence the vast majority of the slaves never for a moment accepted it. They remained, over the generations of slavery, aware of who they were and of the grievous offence that was being committed against them, and there was no way the masters' religion of sin and guilt could be foisted upon them. As James Cone points out, the slaves' problem was not sin — that was a luxury only white folk could afford — but the suffering that was being inflicted upon them through what they knew was a monstrous injustice and absurdity. Their problem was to keep from submitting to existential despair,

and they solved it, not once and for all, but over and over again every day of their lives, with a faith in a god who was not, could not be, the god of their masters, and in his promise of ultimate justice and freedom, not just in the next world but in this.

It is worth noting that Africans were not the only people who had been enslaved by the new masters of the American continents; in fact, they were imported into America only after attempts to enslave the indigenous 'Indian' populations by the Spanish conquistadores had been frustrated by the fact that the enslaved population simply gave up and died in their chains by the million. Today, the old American civilizations are a memory only, their ruined cities standing as testimony to what was destroyed, their reduced descendants eking out lives as serfs to the great landowners and to mining and drug interests. The factor that enabled the Africans and their descendants in those same circumstances not only to survive as an ethnic and cultural group, not only to retain a proud identity within the societies of North and South America and the Caribbean, but to create a culture which, through its music and dance, has gone out across the world, was not Christianity (the Indians were Christianized too) but the African ability to adapt and to tolerate contradiction, and, above all, the African assurance that the supreme value lies in the preservation of the community; without a community for support the individual is helpless, while with it he or she is invincible. 'Suffering,' says James Cone, 'is not too much to bear if there are brothers and sisters to go down into the valley to pray with you . . . The actual brutalities of slavery were minor in comparison with the loss of community.'[3] In the moral code of the slaves, what was right was what tended to preserve the community, what was wrong that which undermined it. 'The point here' says Thomas Webber, 'is not that quarter members never betrayed each other, or stole from each other, or even killed each other, but rather that most members understood that it was to their mutual advantage to protect each other, and that solidarity was a good which they believed to have moral force.'[4] Thus, it was no offence to steal the masters' property (how could that be theft, the slave asked, not unreasonably, since he was himself the master's property?) but it was to steal from a fellow slave.

And if it was belief in the ultimate justice of God that held the community together, it was musicking and dancing, those twin rituals of affirmation, of exploration and celebration of relationships, with their unique power to weld together into a higher unity the contradictory experiences of sorrow, pain, joy, hope and despair, that was at the centre of their religious expression. It is possible to say it in two ways, both equally true: on the one hand, the African cultural inheritance which located musicking and dancing at the centre of a ritual for the strengthening of community placed in the slaves' hands a tool for survival, while, on the other hand, the survival needs of the enslaved blacks ensured the continuance of African attitudes to and uses for music long after actual African styles had become absorbed into that Creole music which, as we have seen, probably developed in the first generations of slavery.

Unlike the New England colonies, those colonies which became the southern states of the United States were not founded on religious conviction, and for the white settlers life was predominantly secular in tone, with religious observance playing no more than the most conventional of roles. On the other hand, class distinctions were pronounced from the earliest days; apart from the black slaves, there was a despised and repressed class of whites, many of them servants or labourers, even working alongside the slaves on the plantations, or subsistence farmers on poor land for which the great landowners had no use. The upper classes preserved the conventional religious observances, and we have seen that Christianity gradually permeated through the slave population during the eighteenth century, but the established churches left the poor whites very much to their own resources. The transformation of the poor white population of the rural south into a heartland of Christian fundamentalism came about largely through the efforts of the Dissenting sects, notably Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists, who from the mid-eighteenth century onwards sent itinerant preachers, known as circuit riders, through the countryside to effect conversions. Their preaching fell on fertile ground, since the promise of a good life in the next world was appealing to those who lived such a harsh life and whose background lacked the rich sense

of community which the African background furnished for the slaves.

The labours of the circuit riders were part of the wave of religious revivalism known as the Great Awakening. It seems to have come about to a great extent as a result of the tensions between the austere ideals of the early Puritans and the growing materialism and commercialism of the developing colonies, as Christian merchants reaped the profits of the slave trade and connived at the wholesale killing of Native Americans and the destruction of their society and culture. A further wave of revivalism began in the early 1800s, starting in Kentucky and sweeping through into Tennessee, Georgia and the Carolinas. It was this 'Second Awakening' that gave rise to the massive outdoor camp meetings where for the first time black and white met on anything like equal terms, and during which, in all probability, the evangelization of the slaves was more or less completed. There are many accounts of these remarkable events which testify to their highly-charged emotional atmosphere and to their communality, of blacks and whites together testifying, singing, preaching, often right through the nights. That even there, however, communality and equality were not quite all they might have been is suggested from the following modern description:

> 'In both slaveholding and nonslaveholding areas the Negroes were allowed to set up their camp behind the preacher's rostrum. Because of the close proximity, their services often merged with those of the whites, adding no little to the general confusion and excitement. The Negro housing area, with its crazy-quilt tents after the fashion of Joseph's coat, was a picturesque affair. As the camp meeting matured, the Negro camp section was sometimes separated from that of the whites by a plank partition. The barrier was torn down on the final days of the meeting when the two peoples joined together in a song festival and "marching ceremony".'[5]

The atmosphere of those occasions may be judged from the following description of a meeting in 1802:

> 'A speaker arose to give a short parting exhortation, and, wonderful to tell, as if by electric shock, a large number in

> every direction, men, women and children, white and black, fell and cried for mercy . . . a poor black man with his hands raised over the heads of the crowd, shouting "Glory, glory, glory!" and another prostrate on the ground, his aged mother on her knees at his feet'.[6]

The singing of the blacks attracted much comment; one writer spoke of the 'deep, melodious, organ-like music welling from a thousand African throats',[7] while another wrote: 'At every service the negroes were present in large numbers in a special section reserved for them, and made many professions of religion. Their singing was inspiring and was encouraged and enjoyed by the white congregation, who would sometimes remain silent to listen.'[8]

A complaint published in 1819 by one John F. Watson, entitled *Methodist Error, or Friendly Christian Advice to Those Methodists Who Indulge in Extravagant Religious Emotions and Bodily Exercises*, tells us something of the musicking of black people, as well as of the alarm felt by some white clergy at discovering that their way of singing was finding its way into white religious practices also. His description of black song is interesting:

> 'Here ought to be considered, too, a most exceptional error, which has the tolerance, at least, of the rulers of our camp meetings. In the *blacks'* quarter, the colored people get together, and sing for hours together, short songs of disjointed affirmations, pledges or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition *choruses*. These are all sung in the merry chorus-manner of the southern harvest field . . . From this cause I have known in some camp meetings, from 50 to 60 people crowd into one tent, after the public devotions had closed, and there continue the whole night, singing tune after tune (though with occasional episodes of prayer) scarce one of which were in our hymn books. Some of this from their nature (having very long repetition choruses and short scraps of matter) are actually composed as sung, and are indeed almost endless'.[9]

Printed material was not much used in the camp meetings; many if not most, both black and white, were unable to read, and the outdoor conditions in any case did not favour its use.

Such few copies of printed hymns as did circulate consisted of words only; tunes were presumably either well known or catchy enough to be learnt on the spot. There was a considerable amount of improvised hymnody, often with a couplet sung by a leader with a responsorial chorus, which might be a simple 'Glory, Hallelujah!' or 'Roll, Jordan, roll', or an answer to the leader's question: 'O brethren, will you meet me/In Canaan's happy land?' — 'By the grace of God we'll meet you/In Canaan's happy land'. Other hymns of this type were adaptations of Methodist or Presbyterian hymns with the insertion of refrains after each couplet — a procedure which the whites had probably picked up from the call-and-response-singing blacks. There is much argument among scholars about the provenance of spiritual singing, both black and white, in the period that followed these explosive encounters. Some maintain that the dominant influence came from the blacks while others deny that they had any part to play beyond the giving of a particular colouring to what were essentially white melodies and harmonies. None of this controversy would matter were it not for its obvious political implications, for the truth is probably that each group brought to the camp meetings its own characteristic way of singing — and we should recall that the actual notes of the hymns were less important than the hymns *as they were sung* — musicking as opposed to music. No doubt the whites brought their repertory of hymns, which were modified by the conditions of the camp meetings and by the contact with black ways of singing, while the blacks brought that ability to compose on the spot which was so deplored by John F. Watson (after all, he did say of their hymns that 'scarce one . . . were in our hymn books') as well as their heightened rhythmic sense and their penchant for call and response. It was a situation of great creative potential, and no doubt both groups went away the richer for it. The rhythms and responsorial practices entered white hymnody, where they can be found in many collections printed from about 1840 onwards, while the blacks took away many of the white hymns, transforming the melodies and rhythms after their own taste.

The other characteristic manner of hymn-singing that I have mentioned, the slowing-down of the beat and the

interpolation of elaborate ornaments in the spaces thus created, is also of disputed provenance. It was certainly to be heard among white congregations in early New England, for there are publications from the early eighteenth century, by cultivated musicians and divines, deploring the practice, and it is even today to be heard among Scottish congregations in the Highlands and Islands, but it has certainly also been a favourite technique of black singers for a long time. The highly decorated and soaring 'surge' style of modern black gospel singers such as Mahalia Jackson and Marion Williams, not to mention that of their soul-singing successors such as Ray Charles and Bobby Womack, bears a strong resemblance to it, and the style has been remarkably tenacious on both sides of the colour line, no doubt partly, at least, because it is extremely enjoyable to do. It is no mere aberration caused by conditions of non-literacy, although that and the lack of schooled musicians may have begun it; singers have obviously enjoyed its intensity and stirring quality and have resisted attempts by schooled musicians to impose 'regular singing' on them. Its survival in white religious folk singing at least into the 1880s is attested by Charles Ives's account of the camp meetings whose singing his father used to lead around that time in rural Connecticut,[10] while many nineteenth-century publications show its popularity among black congregations. William Francis Allen, in his preface to the first published collection of Negro songs, *Slave Songs of the United States* of 1867, says,

> 'There is no singing in *parts*, as we understand it, and yet no two appear to be singing the same thing — the leading singer starts the words of each verse, often improvising, and the others, who "base" him, as it is called, strike in with the refrain, or even join in the solo, when the words are familiar. When the "base" begins, the leader often stops, leaving the rest of his words to be guessed at, or it may be that they are taken up by one of the other singers. And the "basers" themselves seem to follow their own whims, beginning where they please and leaving off when they please, striking an octave above or below (in case they have pitched the tune too low or too high) or hitting some other note that chords, so as to produce the effect of marvellous complication and

> variety. And what makes it all the harder to unravel a thread of melody out of this strange network is that, like birds, they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented by the gamut [ie notation] and abound in slides from one note to another, and turns and cadences not in articulated notes.'[11]

Unlike the song of birds, however, these sounds were not the result of a 'natural' or 'instinctive' way of performance but represent as cultured an approach to choral singing as that of any cathedral choir.

It does seem as if those camp meetings, especially during the early years of the nineteenth century, when blacks and whites worshipped, if not quite together, at least in sight and hearing of one another and in something like a spirit of unity and amity, were the medium through which white and black hymnody passed into each other and back again, possibly many times, with changes which added to the intensity and emotional fervour of the singing. And not only music, but also the black usages, of speaking with tongues, of trance and of dancing, probably passed into white worship at this time; all are to be found, with their own characteristic accent and style, in white fundamentalist sects of the American south today. We should recall, of course, that for many blacks the camp meetings were by no means their first acquaintance with Christian hymnody, nor is it true, as is sometimes claimed, that all black spirituals were adaptations of white hymns. Apart from a dubious tracing of a few songs back to comparable Ghanaian or Dahomeyan songs, we have to keep in mind the nature of black musicking, which favoured, and still favours, improvisation and the constant development of a song according to the creative powers of each individual performer, in contrast to the white tendency to think in terms of fixed entities. As Odum and Johnson, writing in 1925, put it: 'The Negro is going to sing whether he has a formal song or not'.[12] It is these authors who, although writing with that mixture of admiration and condescension that characterizes so much comment of the time by whites on black culture, capture in a vivid passage, clearly based on observation, much of the essence of black musicking. It is in the way here

described, one feels, that the spirituals themselves must have come into existence in slavery days:

> 'The Negro's musical nature easily turns these expressions [of emotion] into melody, and a word, phrase or exclamation becomes a song in itself. The song is completed by the imaginative mind, and the sense of fitness is sound. Worshippers often follow the preacher through his sermon in a mental state of song, and when he is finished they burst into song, singing no other than an elaborate sentence which the preacher has used in his sermon. When this is joined to a familiar chorus and tune, a song has originated. Sometimes the song is remembered and sung again; sometimes, like the words of the preacher, it simply becomes a part of the satisfaction of the hour and is forgotten . . . Even more than preaching and praying, shouting gives rise to song among the Negroes; during the exciting times in worship the Negroes sing unheard-of songs which they never recall again. It is indeed a mixed scene of song and action, each contributing largely to the other, while the spectator looks on in wonderment at the astonishing inventiveness of the worshippers. The general motions, the expressions of the face, words and harmonies, rests and rhythms, sense of fitness and even of humor, repetition — these make an occasion that defies limitation to its expression'.[13]

And again: 'Many songs owe their origins to the Negro's keenness at improvisation. Undoubtedly many Negroes have a consciousness of power or ability to create new songs when they wish to . . . From his unlimited store of songs, sayings, stories and experiences he takes a theme and begins his songs. If he does not immediately think of rhyming lines that would be appropriate, he continues to sing the original lines until the song takes further shape in his mind'.[14]

In those passages we see brought together two complementary aspects of Afro-American musicking that are clearly part of the African inheritance, since on the one hand they do not, as we have seen, form an element of the European vernacular, and since on the other they have proved functional in the creation of a ritual for survival and resistance both during and after slavery: the delight in making on the

spot a song that is specific to the occasion (what European musicians call improvisation) and the assumption that the ability to create songs is as universal as the ability to create utterances in words. These two assumptions have been central to Afro-American musicking, and for very good reasons: they allow the individual not only to celebrate his or her own individuality, as does the western tradition, but also to affirm and celebrate that vital reciprocal relationship between individual and community that lay at the heart of survival under slavery and in the period of brutal repression that followed. We can understand why scholars have disagreed so profoundly on the source of the slave spirituals, since the essence of Afro-American music lies not so much in created objects, not so much in a repertory of songs or pieces, as in a way of musicking which values the creative power that lies in every person more than it values those objects which, in so far as they exist at all apart from performance, do so only for as long as they continue to serve the communal function, after which they are likely to be abandoned without a second thought. Thus the slaves placed little value on the antiquity of a song and paid little attention to preserving its integrity, while on the other they took, from whatever source came to hand, fragments and even whole songs, welding them into whatever shape suited their purposes at the time. Even the spirituals, which today we regard as the chief glory of the slaves' music, and which must have played an important part in survival, would not have come down to us at all had it not been for the almost fortuitous circumstance of their passing into the consciousness of white audiences and into the literate tradition through the medium of the Fisk Jubilee Singers after the Civil War. For the newly emancipated slaves of that time they were too powerful a reminder of the pains of slavery and they were prepared to let them go.

I dwell on these matters because we can see established in the slave spirituals themes which run through the history of Afro-American music, which constitute its unity, its integrity and its inner consistency; the spirituals are the first music-objects that have come down to us to which we can point as a genuine fusion of African and European traditions, born from nowhere else but the creativity and life-lovingness of the

blacks themselves. Often obscured by commercialism and by what sociologists call the hegemony of European high-cultural values, the blacks' delight in improvisation, their insistence on the creative power of every human being and on the functionality of musicking (the responsibility of the musician not only for the sounds he makes but for the progress of the whole social occasion to which he contributes is felt no less by the modern jazz musician than by the West African master drummer) continue to carry their life-giving and subversive message through the increasingly centralized and authoritarian texture of modern industrial society.

In adapting Christianity to their intellectual heritage and present needs, thus laying the foundation for a style of Christianity that is still very much present in the black churches today, the slaves also took its musical styles, introducing into the Protestant hymnody of that time and place forms which left room for the expression at the same time of both individual and communal feeling. Neither their faith nor their music was in any way a retreat from reality, however intolerable; they were means by which the slaves succeeded in preserving a sense of personal worth, of community and hope for the future in the face of a society that denied to them all three.

One of the most remarkable features of the slave spirituals is their affirmative tone; sorrow there may be (it was not for nothing that W.E.B. DuBois called them the 'Sorrow Songs') but of despair there is no sign, nor is there any significant expression of that self-abnegation, sense of sin and worthlessness which is a recurrent feature of European Protestant hymnody; rather, they assert with joy and confidence a faith in ultimate justice and freedom, in this world no less than in the next. And, further, they can in many cases be interpreted as relating to liberty, not just in some unspecified future, but soon; there was built into many of them references to escape, to the north, where some kind of freedom was possible. The meanings are, however, many-layered; when they sang 'Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home' (even as I type that line its power and beauty hits me afresh) '. . . If you get there before I do, just tell those others I'm coming too,' there were intertwined into the song meanings of salvation, of reaching heaven, of ultimate freedom and of escape; there was

no reason why any of those meanings should have excluded the others, since the meaning of the song was in its performance, not just in its 'text'. So it was with *Steal Away to Jesus*, which was probably composed by the preacher-insurrectionist Nat Turner, while Frederick Douglass, who himself escaped from slavery in his teens to become a leader in the movement for abolition, wrote in his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* of his excitement as he and his comrades prepared for escape:

> 'We were, at times, remarkably buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had reached a land of freedom and safety. A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of
>
> O Canaan, sweet Canaan,
> I am bound for the land of Canaan
>
> something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the *north* — and the north was our Canaan.'[15]

And the spiritual *Follow the Drinking Gourd* seems meaningless until one learns that the Gourd was the constellation of the Big Dipper, the Plough, the northwards guide for the nonliterate runaway. Harold Courlander tells how legend has attributed the song to a 'peg-legged ex-sailor who wandered around the countryside telling them how to escape to the North.'[16]

The slave spirituals are best known to us today in harmonically 'cleaned-up' and polished versions which we owe primarily to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a group of black students who between 1871 and 1878 raised money for their newly-founded and desperately under-funded Fisk University in Nashville by singing, among other choral music, spirituals in arrangements that would render them acceptable to the mainly white audiences before whom they appeared. They toured extensively and successfully in the United States and Europe; a Glasgow critic wrote that they 'make us feel how strange it is that these unpretending singers should come over here and teach us the true refinement of music, make us feel its moral and religious power.' It is ironic that the wider

fame of these magnificent songs should have come only after they had lost their immediate appeal for the people who had created them. For with the coming of Emancipation in 1865, the close slave communities broke up as mobility became at least legally possible and the agony of slavery became a thing of the past, its memories still, however, too raw to be willingly aroused. The songs had value for the people who created them only so long as they served a social function; when that vanished so did the urge to sing them, and they would no doubt long since have disappeared along with countless other, to us, unknown creations of the slaves had it not been for these 'unpretending singers' and their audiences who took to them much as present-day white audiences have taken to the blues.

There were other kinds of musicking in the slave quarters, but these are poorly documented: work songs, songs of praise, of ridicule and satire (of both white folks and fellow-slaves) songs of longing and of distress at parting, songs of complaint and of flattery. Narrative songs and ballads are few; as we have seen, these go against the grain of black creativity. Where ballads are sung by black singers, such as those of John Henry or Staggerlee, they tend not to be complete narratives but rather commentaries on the story, or an aspect of it, which is presumed known to all. In discussing the role of music in spiritual survival we must not overlook the part played by the cognate art of dance. The habit of dancing never died among black people in America; even after a day of backbreaking labour, field slaves would be observed singing and dancing vigorously, giving rise to a good deal of puzzlement among observers who subscribed to the European idea that to dance is a sign of carefree happiness. Those who opposed slavery could not imagine that such dancing could take place at all and dismissed accounts of it as slaveowners' propaganda, while the slaveowners themselves adduced it as evidence that their slaves were contented and free from care. But the impulse to dance is the same as that which prompts musical performance; dancing, like musicking, was a ritual for survival in those terrible times, and the slaves could for the duration of the dance feel themselves fully realized as individuals and as members of a community. The slaves danced their sorrows

no less than their joys; the sorrows would probably have laid on them, even more than did the joys, the impulse to dance.

Descriptions of early dances are almost as vague as those of the music, but mostly they tell us that the dancers moved in a circle with a shuffling step, while two or three couples moved into the centre in a more energetic improvised dance while the rest kept time, to be replaced by others when the first couples tired. The manner of acculturation that took place over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is unknown to us, but the slaves would undoubtedly have found the masters' dances easy to imitate; there are many accounts of their fondness for — and their skill in — burlesquing the white dancers. Masters on the whole seemed prepared to allow their slaves to take part in often quite large assemblies, and some of these became almost institutions, what we might today call tourist attractions. The most famous of these was the dance in Place Congo, in New Orleans, where every Sunday afternoon and on feast and saints' days hundreds of slaves would dance before the shocked but fascinated gaze of white citizens and visitors. It was banned by the civic authorities around 1840.

In general the evangelical Christian sects into which most of the slaves were baptized disapproved of dancing, and many slaves resolutely refused to dance at all after being received into the church (it was common also to find converts refusing to take part in secular singing, even in such apparently harmless activities as worksongs). They did, however, engage in a form of religious dance known as the shout, or ring-shout, in which they moved in a circle accompanying themselves with song, handclapping and 'patting juba' (clapping themselves on the thighs), lifting their feet hardly at all from the floor and never crossing them; by one of those sophistries of which the Peculiar Institution was full, the churches apparently conceded that dancing without crossing the feet was not really dancing at all, and so was permissible to the saved. The shout was disapproved by those concerned with black 'improvement' (that is, assimilation into the ways of the whites) after Emancipation, and in time disappeared.

The passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution in the last weeks of the Civil War, which finally

outlawed slavery, created for the blacks a new situation which, in comparison with slavery, was not pure gain. Forced to make their way in the mainstream of American society, for which no previous experience or education had prepared them, they learnt fast, as they always had — but they found that, no matter how well they learnt the rules, those rules were constantly changed and conditions stacked against them. Even the mere possibility of movement for its own sake must have been responsible for the breakup of the old slave communities, a process which was hastened by the parcelling-out of land under the system of tenant farming and sharecropping which left the black farmer perpetually in debt. In the initial euphoria the horizons opened up must have seemed limitless, especially with the passing in rapid succession of two further constitutional amendments, the Fourteenth, which affirmed that all people born in the United States or naturalized were to have the rights of full citizens, and the Fifteenth, which stated that no-one was to be deprived of the right to vote by reason of race, colour or previous condition of servitude.

The promise of Emancipation quickly proved false. After a brief period, lasting no more than ten years, of increasing black confidence and participation in civic affairs, and even in state and federal politics, under the umbrella of the Union army which had been stationed in the south to see the provisions of Emancipation carried out, the forces of reaction were released. In 1877 the troops were withdrawn as part of a bargain made by presidential candidate Rutherford B. Hayes in order to secure the support of southern Democrats to his election, and terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan were quick to seize the opportunity that was offered. Then in 1883 the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional; under one pretext or another the voting rights of blacks were withdrawn, so that by 1900 their disenfranchisement was to all intents and purposes complete. One history of the United States, not otherwise notably partisan, goes so far as to speak of an 'anti-Negro crusade, comparable in many ways to Adolf Hitler's war against the Jews of Germany in the 1930s,' in which 'whites from different classes were asked to forget their economic differences and

unite to preserve their racial purity' and which 'produced rigid forms of social segregation between 1890 and 1910;'[17] this did not begin to relent until the dawning of the modern civil rights movement in the 1940s. Black Americans were consigned, it must have seemed permanently, and with a brutality which seems beyond belief today, to the bottom of the social heap; in the years between 1890 and 1917, for example, over five thousand black men and women were lynched, often after prolonged torture and mutilation — an average of about one every two days. It was a matter, then, of survival, not much less desperate than under slavery. In that situation the black churches, whose number had increased dramatically after Emancipation, continued to form centres of resistance, of education and of community, and, just as important, centres where music and the other arts of performance could be practised, and where men and women could attain to positions of authority, responsibility and respect that were denied to them in the wider world.

No social group, of course, even under such conditions of repression, is monolithic, and any general statement about it can be shown to have notable exceptions. The number of different kinds of accommodation to the situation, and to the values of the majority white society, was endless, varying from complete acceptance, often associated with formal education in one of the black colleges and universities established by the American Missionary Society for the advancement of the ex-slaves (which often proved as much divisive as progressive by creating a small and separate elite) with membership of a profession and a kind of middle-class status, to total rejection of white values, with any number of shades and human idiosyncrasies in between. The varieties of accommodation, as one might expect, were reflected in the churches, and in the kinds of religious observance that were practised. In some middle-class black churches the same formal rituals were carried out as in the white churches, the same hymns, anthems and oratorios sung by the choirs and congregations. Such churches have been a source of bitterness to many; Ben Sidran, for example, says: 'Thus the church, once the bastion for blacks seeking freedom of expression and escape from white man's control, became the stronghold of the very

mentality it was established to circumvent. And in focusing too strongly on the notion of life-after-death, the church little by little became the purveyor of conservatism in this life.'[18] It is not for the white outsider to comment on these charges, except to remark that they do not seem true of all the black churches; nonetheless, it is true that from the later years of the nineteenth century not only have a large number of black Americans rejected the churches and Christianity in all its forms, but also they have experienced in their lives, if to a lesser extent than have whites, the splitting-off of life into compartments that has been a feature of industrial society since at least the eighteenth century, and has indeed been essential for the development of the scientific world view which marks the society of our own time — a split between 'work' and 'leisure', between 'home' and 'the world', and, in particular, between 'sacred' and 'secular'. 'To a lesser extent', both because, on the one hand, the majority of black Americans have been only too aware that the affluence of America is not for them even if they do submit to its premises, and so have been less susceptible to its blandishments, and on the other because, possessing a heritage which has always emphasised the unity of human life, they have tended to resist the fragmentation that industrial society demands as the price of that affluence. As Lawrence Levine says:

> 'Having on the one hand been denied full participation in American society and on the other resisted complete acculturation, Negroes had not succumbed to many of society's central projections and dreams. This pattern of denial and resistance increased black separateness and autonomy . . . This truth is important, but care must be taken not to put it too starkly. Social and economic background and aspiration have shaped the attitudes of Negroes as well as of other groups in the society. These intra-group differences produced a kaleidoscope of black behavioral patterns, many of them in agreement with the larger society . . . But for large numbers of Negroes, the bulk of them at the lower end of the social and economic scale, it was possible and necessary to speak openly about a number of realities that American popular culture needed to repress.'[19]

If, then, for black people after Emancipation there opened up at least the theoretical possibility of a completely secular life comparable to that of white Americans, in practice the possibility could not be realized owing not only to their social and economic circumstances but also to their ineradicably religious turn of mind. It would seem as if a completely secular existence is not an option when Africa is in the cultural inheritance. This shows itself in explicit form in the debt acknowledged by what seems like a majority of present-day black American writers, artists, musicians and thinkers to the church, as a formative influence if not as a present resource; it shows itself also implicitly in the real unity of black American music, which at a deep level is *all* religious in content if not in form. It is, to put it crudely, a tool for survival; whether we call it 'sacred' or 'secular' its function is fundamentally the same: to preserve the community and to enable the individual to affirm, to explore and to celebrate his or her place in that community. Between sacred and secular there is in fact not opposition at all, but continuity. 'The affirmation of self in the blues,' writes James Cone, 'is the emphasis that connects them theologically to the spirituals. Like the spirituals, the blues affirms the somebodiness of black people, and they preserve the worth of humanity through ritual and drama'.[20] That being so, it need not surprise us that, as we shall see in a later chapter, a blues performance should take on a religious aspect, or, conversely, that a quite secular enjoyment should be an essential element of music in worship — or, indeed, that sacred and secular musicking should interpenetrate and should feed back and forth, one to the other.

It is tempting to suggest that there is no specific church 'style', but that is an illusion produced by the ubiquity of the church style throughout Afro-American musicking; that musical gestures which developed in the churches should today be a part of the common musical language is an indicator of the latter's pre-eminent role in the creation and transmission of black American culture. The idioms of the churches continue to permeate the culture and consciousness of black Americans, not only their musical idioms but even the individual's style of self-presentation. Tony Heilbut puts it neatly: 'The ghetto mother at a City Council meeting speaks a

church rap. Her manner — gutsy, rhetorical, emphatic — takes tone and idiom for granted. This is the only style she knows, and she employs it without selfconsciousness . . . Not that anything about her behaviour is unique to the gospel church; it is simply that the church alone has allowed such free use of common habits of discourse.'[21]

Not all churches, of course. It is principally in the 'Sanctified', 'Holiness' or 'Pentecostal' churches that the older ways of worship have continued; the fact that these ways are to be found not just in remote rural areas but also in city churches where the congregation may well include professional and industrial workers confirms that they are not just antique survivals from a vanished past (a community under pressure has no time for such frivolities) but an autonomous living tradition of worship which satisfies in the present the deep and enduring human need for community and involvement. These churches have as a rule no set order of service, but rely on the inspiration of the moment (that is to say, improvisation) and the interaction of congregation and preacher to bring about a condition of religious ecstasy, the coming of the 'Holy Ghost fire' which, even more than the mere preaching of scripture, is the object of the ceremony. And, when the Holy Ghost descends, sometimes immediately after the ceremony begins, sometimes only after prolonged searching, the intensity of emotion has to be felt to be believed, most especially in the feeling of unity and common purpose between all present. Speech, music and dance are the tools by means of which the Holy Ghost is invoked and brought into the midst of the congregation — not as separate arts but as aspects of the one great performance art of celebration. A gifted black preacher may cover, in his speaking voice, a range of two octaves or more; what he has to say may contain much that is wise and sensible, or, alas, at times, much that is bigoted and intolerant, but the sheer prosaic sense of what he has to say is subsumed into his performance which, starting from plain speech, will grow through stages of excitement in which the sense of his words gives way to more ecstatic musicality, his often reiterated words and phrases being taken up by the congregation and thrown back to him with cries of affirmation and with Amens. Finally, by an all but imperceptible

tible process, the whole congregation are singing, clapping their hands, often in marvellously complex interlocking rhythmic patterns, and moving their bodies each in his or her own idiomatic way. The level of ecstasy thus attained is a matter for each individual, who is free to find God in his or her own way, and there is always space for the talented or confident individual to take up in song the burden of the occasion, but the overwhelming feeling is of a singing, dancing, praying *community*.

What is sung by the congregations may derive in part from Euro-American protestant hymnody back as far as the seventeenth century (the hymns of John Wesley, and especially of Isaac Watts, remain popular) including nineteenth-century revivalist hymns, but there is much also that is the creation of the black churches themselves, such as the hymnal compiled in 1801, probably mainly the work of himself and his congregation, by the Rev Richard Allen, founder of the first independent black Methodist church, or the interdenominational collection called *Gospel Pearls*, which was first published in 1921. Even the old slave spirituals today find an honoured place, not as antiquarian survivals but as living expressions, important elements in the self-definition of a people who, more than a century after the end of slavery in the United States, still do not see themselves as fully liberated from bondage.

No matter what the provenance of the songs, they are seldom if ever sung 'as written', either words or music, even when printed texts are used. Those practices which we saw noted by the editor of *Slave Songs of the United States* are still in evidence today: rhythmic elaboration, pitch bending, handclapping on the off beats, stamping and swaying, call and response and dense improvised harmonic and heterophonic textures, and above all an emotional intensity without parallel in European or Euro-American musicking (to my ears and mind, the excitement generated by a virtuoso performance in the classical concert hall seems shallow and self-absorbed by comparison). It is from this kind of worship that the modern style of singing we know as gospel emerged in the early years of the present century.

The singers who began singing solo or in small groups in the churches were not generally formally trained, nor did they

think of their singing as 'art'; it began as a spontaneous outpouring of religious emotion from the individuals within that community which was the congregation, interacting with it, the spontaneity mediated always through the idiom which came most naturally to the singers — that of the folksongs, hymns and hollers which were at around the same time giving rise to that other great Afro-American form, the blues. Their purpose was to testify, in song, to the power of their religious experience, to their very close and personal knowledge of their Jesus and to his ability to carry them through the worst that the society and the conditions of the time could do to them. Thus from the start the key to the singer's power in the church was not the possession of a beautiful voice, though many have in fact been endowed with remarkable vocal qualities, but authority, the authority of one who has lived what he or she sings about, and the ability to communicate the sense of the experience. If you haven't lived it, they say, you can't sing it — though it is acknowledged also that 'out of the mouths of babes and sucklings . . .' and the voices of children are often prized as much as those of their elders.

The authority comes not from the song, but from the singer; a fine song is prized to the extent that it can provide the singer with the material for a fine performance, and the singer is free, indeed expected, to make whatever changes in the song as seem appropriate, either premeditated or on the spur of the moment's inspiration. Aretha Franklin, in one of the greatest of gospel performances on record, took the two verses of the old hymn *Amazing Grace* and extended them over a breath-taking ten-minute span by means of elaborate ornaments and graces, interpolated lines and exclamations, while the congregation to whom — or rather, *with* whom — she was singing, was scarcely less ecstatic, encouraging her with cries, shouts, handclapping, even peals of delighted laughter. That authority needs to be maintained, of course, and cannot be taken for granted; the churches can be very unforgiving towards those who they feel are not practising what they sing. The model for the gospel singer, whether or not he or she lives up to it, is not that of the performing artist so much as of the preacher and religious leader. There is no necessary antithesis between the two roles, as we have seen when considering African ways of

musicking; any tension between them arises only when secular considerations of money and fame, extrinsic to the authentic purposes of the musicking, intrude.

What has made gospel music one of the noblest forms of music-making in western society during this century is not mere musical ingenuity, but moral force, and the intensity of the emotions which that force has engendered. Musical ingenuity, not to say brilliance, is there in abundance (as always in Afro-American musicking, it lies more in performance than in composition, although the apparent textual simplicity of many gospel songs may often conceal complex intellectual and emotional cross-references which will be lost on the outsider) but, when the spirit moves the singer, his or her performance exists not for its own sake but, quite simply, in order to save souls and to lead them a fuller, truer life. That this religious and moral power can even be felt by those who cannot share the singers' Christian faith suggests that there is more to those songs and their performance than their overt, consciously intended content, and it behoves us, in considering their meaning, to look at both the overt and the hidden content of a gospel performance.

There is no doubt that modern gospel song differs considerably from the older spirituals, not only in the nature of the texts but also in the style of performance. The history of black America since Emancipation, with the projection of blacks into the mainstream of American life, the growth of education and of literacy, have all brought about major changes in the outlook of black Americans that could not help being reflected in religious belief and observance, bringing them closer to the individualism of the majority white culture. This means that, while gospel singing shares with the older spirituals an affirmation of the immediate and intimate presence of God and the assurance of salvation, the emphasis is different, more on the ways in which the individual can find his or her way through this life and realize the hope of a heaven which remains firmly in the future. As Lawrence Levine puts it: 'The religion of the gospel songs . . . recognized and discussed the troubles, sorrows and burdens of everyday existence but its immediate solutions tended to be a mixture of Christian faith and one variety or another of positive

thinking. Touches of American popular culture were increasingly evident: "The best things in life are free", "Just look around and take what God is giving you", "Life can be beautiful".[22] The captive Children of Israel and the Old Testament heroes play an insignificant part of the imagery, while overt moralizing, individual to individual, is much in evidence.

The manner of performance would seem more in accordance with European ways, the soloists, often virtuosi of their art, and small groups performing to, rather than with, their audience. This impression is given especially by studio records of gospel singers; the recording studio leaves the singer bereft of the response and the support of a congregation, leaving him or her to perform into a void in the manner of European concert artists. It is only when encountering gospel song in church, in fact, that the enduring force of the community can be sensed, interacting with and supporting — and on occasion criticizing — the singers through the various accommodations that have to be made with white individualism. A gospel performance is never just a concert, even when it takes place in a concert hall, but a transaction between individual and community.

To the uninitiated eye and ear, there appears to be in gospel performance, even in church, a greater element of showbiz, of effect for effect's sake, than would seem appropriate for music that is a part of divine worship, but this is to misunderstand the nature of the performance and of the relation that exists between performer and congregation. The apparently secular elements of the performance may include the use of gorgeous and sometimes extravagant costumes, hairdos and wigs, elaborate choreographies that appear to owe more to the theatre and TV than to the church, a system of stardom and superstardom that parallels that in the world of pop and rock music, and the use of pop-style techniques for winning the audience and of lifting them to the edge of frenzy by means that appear to have little to do with actual musical content, as understood in the classical concert or conventional religious observance. Even on record the poetic and musical means employed are frequently disconcerting to those accustomed to conventional religious music making.

But, apart from the fact that in many cases the traffic has been in the opposite direction, that pop performers have used many of the techniques first developed by gospel singers, there is a natural and obvious answer to these doubts; any or all means become holy when used in the service of God and of bringing people to him.

Those whom the style of performance does disturb may take comfort from the fact that modern gospel singers took some time to be accepted in the black churches themselves. The preachers and the elders of the Baptist and Methodist churches in the early 1930s found it hard to accept the bluesy sounds made by gospel artists of the time. The great singer-preacher Willie Mae Ford Smith, in a film made in 1982 about her life and work, recalled that not only did the elders refuse to accept a woman as a preacher in her own right, as she insisted she was, but also refused to hear the way she sang the gospel as anything but blasphemous. 'They said I was bringing the blues into the church . . . "We don't want that coonshine stuff around here, we don't want that ragtime singing in here." "Well," I said, "that's all the stuff I know."'[23] And Thomas A. Dorsey, singer, composer and publisher of gospel songs, perhaps the first major figure of gospel singing, found himself frequently ejected from churches where he and his associate artists tried to perform. Both lived to see their work accepted and themselves revered and loved in the churches that had once rejected them.

It is interesting to consider two or three recorded gospel performances by great singers in order to examine the nature of their art; what we hear on record is, of course, only a part of their performance, and we need to use our minds and imagination to recreate the whole. While this is true of all Afro-American performance on record, it is perhaps more true of gospel than of any other style. My examples are all to be found on the CBS Records double album *The Gospel Sound*, compiled by Tony Heilbut.[24] Let us consider first Marion Williams's performance of the old hymn *The Day Is Past and Gone*, a perennial favorite with gospel singers and congregations alike. The poem is in a tradition which goes back to Isaac Watts, the seventeenth-century English hymnologist, whose religious poetry remains so popular with black congregations

that the 'surge' style of singing such as this performance shows is named after him. These verses were in fact written in 1853 by one John Leland, and they find a place also in hymnals such as *The Original Sacred Harp*, which is much used by southern white congregations. The verse consists of two four-line stanzas:

> The day is past and gone / The ev'ning shades appear,
> O may we all remember well / The night of death is near.
>
> We lay our garments by / Upon our beds to rest,
> So death will soon disrobe us all / Of what we here possess.

It is a disturbing image, that of death disrobing us — the word suggests something gentle, even loving, no less than frightening, and the singer delivers the line with a full sense of its strangeness, almost screaming the word 'death' but quietening down to caress the word 'disrobe'. She is accompanied, as is a common practice with gospel singers, by a duo of Hammond organ and piano, her regular accompanists, who follow and even anticipate every nuance of her singing — for this is an improvised performance, in 'surge', or 'Doctor Watts' style, with each syllable drawn out over several improvised, blues-inflected notes, the original outline of the melody being only barely perceptible beneath the elaboration. The Hammond organ, especially when paired with piano, has itself a dubious reputation with classical musicians, who associate it with religious music of the most vulgar and sentimental kind (it has been dubbed by irreverent musicians the 'god box'), and the organist here makes no attempt to conceal its glutinous quality; indeed, she seems almost to revel in it, with sustained chords and whines in the most soupy registers, while the pianist explores a box of old-fashioned virtuoso tricks, with extended arpeggios, trills, double-octave passages and dramatic staccatos — hand-me-downs, as it were, from the nineteenth-century virtuoso tradition.

The singer herself, possessed of a soprano voice that could surely have encompassed anything from Wagner to blues, also exploits without shame every dramatic trick in the book — changes of volume from a whisper to a shout, distortions of the speech rhythms of the verse, abrupt changes of register

from falsetto to growl with no attempt to smooth the transition, now crooning and humming as if to herself, now belting out a phrase, and bursting out at the climax, making obvious the strain she and her voice are undergoing, dying away, apparently about to end softly but then, on the final word, spiralling upwards in pentatonic patterns and into falsetto. It is a performance of eerie imaginative power, saved from excess by absolute conviction and subtle musical intelligence as well as a virtuoso vocal technique which, while it owes much to European classical techniques, with extensive use of light, and very beautiful, head tone and vibrato, is not confined to them, but uses also harshly beautiful chest tones without vibrato, as well as growls and falsetto. Nor does she feel obliged to conceal the breaks between vocal registers, or the sense of strain involved in producing her climactic notes. Indeed, she makes a powerful expressive means of both these vocal 'solecisms' (from the classical point of view), the former to bring about sudden dramatic changes of atmosphere, almost from bar to bar, and the latter to express her total commitment and her involvement without reservation in the song and the singing of it — thus issuing an invitation that her church-congregation listeners would have had no hesitation in accepting.

There is another dimension to this performance, as to many other kinds of Afro-American performance, although it reveals itself most clearly in the gospel style. It would be a mistake to think of any of the performances on this record as commonplace or sentimental because they make extensive use of outworn clichés of European classical music. The history of Afro-American music has shown the perpetual ability of black performers to take from European music what they have wanted for their own expressive and ritual purposes and to weld them into something new, to make new meanings that were of use to them in their struggle for spiritual survival. It did not matter at all if those elements were, as far as Europeans were concerned, mere scraps and castoffs, clichés rendered vulgar or meaningless through over-use; black musicians have revealed, over and over again, their ability to revitalize them in a new context — a symbolic act upon whose significance I do not need to enlarge. The emotional power and integrity of this

performance by all three participants is testimony enough.

The recycling of castoffs from the dominant culture into powerful new meanings is demonstrated in another performance on the album: *Strange Man*, written and sung by Dorothy Love Coates. She does not possess the majestic voice of Marion Williams, but makes up for it by the fierce integrity and conviction that blazes through her singing. She is accompanied on this record by her own vigorous stride-style piano, with 'god-box' and a rather heavy-handed drummer. Her song tells of two incidents in the ministry of Christ, both taken from St John's Gospel, that of the Samarian woman at the well and that of the woman taken in adultery, and retells them in a clipped journalistic style in commonplace American vernacular speech:

> The stranger was next seen in a city (oh yes he was!)
> Standing off an angry mob,
> Defending a woman that had been caught in the very *act* of adultery,
> For pity and mercy she sought.

(Readers might find it interesting to try and make these words, taken down exactly as the singer sings them, scan, before hearing the natural and effortless way in which she fits them into the musical rhythms.) Again, we have a literary style best described as journalese, and thus despised by the literary establishment, turned into an instrument of power and, above all, immediacy; the author-singer is concerned to bring home the force in her own life of the incidents described, and she adds a final, clinching stanza:

> I met that same man, I met that (Lord!) same man,
> When I turned away from sin,
> He opened up his arms and took me in.
> I felt that same power, Lord! my soul caught on fire,
> I'm just glad he stopped by — in Alabama,
> The Lord stopped by — one Tuesday evening.
> I'm just glad he stopped by, blessed my soul and gone.

The idea that her Lord stopped by one Tuesday evening in Alabama brings one up short, and would no doubt, when sung in its proper church setting, evoke from the congregation a vociferous recognition of the immediacy of the experience.

The matter-of-fact simplicity of the words is matched by the musical performance, in strict time, unlike Marion Williams's performance, and for the most part one note to a syllable, except for a few pentatonic flourishes at the end. Melody and harmonies are those of a blues song, and she sings in a gritty contralto with the words perfectly articulated; the tune in this case is the vehicle for the words, which are a miniature sermon, bringing the familiar gospel stories into striking relation with modern everyday life — in Alabama, one Tuesday evening.

Of all the performances on this album, that which most clearly evokes the atmosphere of the church is that by the Abyssinian Baptist Gospel Choir, conducted by Alex Bradford, himself a fine gospel singer. It is a meditation on the story in St Mark's Gospel of Christ healing the leper, enjoining him to tell nobody — but the leper was so excited that he told everyone he saw. The song takes this idea and applies it to the salvation of the individual; it is called *I Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody But I Couldn't Keep It To Myself*. In the song the healing of the leper is taken as a metaphor for the healing of the soul by Christian conversion:

> You should have been there / When he saved my soul,
> That Sunday morning / When he put my name on the roll.

A mood that can only be described as ecstatic is established right at the start, by cries from the choir, quickly joined by organ and piano in an up tempo; rhythmically precise hand-clapping on the offbeats provides the only percussion. The style is call and response, with the tenor lead singer (the magnificent Calvin White, clearly revelling in the physical and emotional effort his performance is costing him) taken up by the choir, mostly harmonizing in thirds, joining in with precise timing, even when the lead singer overruns or cuts short his phrases, with that intensity and brilliance of tone that only black choirs seem to be able to achieve. A moment near the end of the recording, when the performance is apparently supposed to come to an end, but cannot because choir and soloist alike are too fired with the music, reminds us that a performance of this kind is not confined by any limits which a

composer might intend but depends on the social interplay of the occasion.

The actual song consists of repetitions of a quite small number of verbal and musical phrases; as it is not 'going anywhere' and has no preset limits, the repetitions can be continued as long as everyone present agrees (there are social signals to indicate this) that they should. It is impossible to say on hearing the record whether the ecstasy is real or staged for the recording, nor can we know whether the 'Africanism' of the call-and-response form is traditional or a conscious recreation by people who are aware of their own history; neither of these questions is of much significance, since the fact that the performers wish to record this performance in this way shows what it is that they consider important. In this chorus (and we can only imagine the energetic physical movement, the rocking, the hip rotation and the swaying that is an essential part of it) we have surely a modern version of that 'extatic delight in psalmody' described by the Rev Samuel Davies over two hundred years ago; the sound may be different (how different? one wonders) but the emotional atmosphere is unmistakable, as is the social function of the performance, which is the affirmation and celebration of identity and of community, no less essential now than it was then. It is also, we should remember, the sound of black Americans singing *to themselves*; despite the impact of recordings and of concert circuits, it is essentially a form of musicking that belongs in the black churches, and is at its best and most characteristic there. In contrast to nearly every other form of Afro-American music, white artists have made no significant impact upon it — white gospel singing is a very different affair.

One cannot, of course, pretend that the fame of many artists on record and on the concert circuits (and sometimes even in nightclubs — the Clara Ward Singers appeared for a while in Las Vegas clubs, while a gospel nightclub called the Sweet Chariot had a brief life in New York in the 1960s) has not had its effect on either singers or their singing. Every gospel artist who is offered a recording contract has to make his or her own accommodation to the system of starmaking and to the pressures of secular audience expectations. While these

pressures are felt to some extent by every musician who hopes to make a living from his or her art, they are felt in particularly acute form by gospel singers, poised as they are between church and showbiz. Gospel singers are notoriously underpaid, and the temptation to seek wider fame and greater rewards is severe. A recent book on gospel music gives us a melancholy catalogue of gospel singers who have succumbed and gone on to the commercial soul-music circuit: Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Dinah Washington, Ray Charles, The Staple Singers. The implication is that each of these has in some way betrayed his or her origins and in doing so has become smaller in stature, or even a kind of lost soul in the commercial jungle.

This is surely a partial view. In the first place, as I have suggested, it would be dangerous to project an absolute or clear-cut boundary between sacred and secular in black American culture. It is true that the division has widened since Emancipation, and with every move that black people have made towards the main stream of American society (a movement that is in fact more like a zigzag than a consistent evolution, so that it is at least arguable that blacks are little closer now than they were before the civil rights movement got under way), but it remains blurred. It is not just that the ideas of the sacred and of the community interpenetrate, but also that the role of music in defining that community and one's identity within it is very much wider than those accustomed to European concepts of music or of religious observance find it easy to perceive. Even the most 'secular' of blues or soul singers has a sacred function, which I shall discuss in a later chapter.

In any case, it is undeniable that the forms and techniques of gospel musicking have proved a treasure house of musical ideas and materials. They have been raided over and over again, not only by commercial musicians looking for a new gimmick but also by musicians of integrity and skill whose musical origins are in the churches and who feel the intensity and the emotional power of the church in everything they do, even if they may have ceased to be active churchgoers. Thus, not only is the intense melismatic style of Nina Simone, James Brown or Bobby Womack full of echoes of church singing, not

only does the whole history of vocal groups, from the doo-wop groups of the 1950s to modern soul and disco, stem from the improvised harmonies of the vocal quartets of the churches, but it is possible to hear even in the intense solos of Charlie Parker an echo of the Sanctified churches of his Kansas City childhood, while it was often said of Bessie Smith that her style and authority had about them much of the preacher. The influences are not one-way, of course; one can hear blues and jazz, and even rock sounds, in modern gospel music, and it is sometimes hard to know who has been listening to whom. But that is the way of the musician in the Afro-American tradition and the ever-renewed source of his or her strength, which as with all living forms of musicking, is not merely musical but also intensely social in nature.

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