

The Spirit of David: Negotiating Faith and Masculinity in Black Gospel Performance

Writers in a variety of academic disciplines have long explored the cross-cultural dimensions of masculinity and expressions of queer identity. However, research on performances of gender and sexuality in gospel music remains sorely underrepresented in scholarly literature. In 2006, at the annual conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology, I presented a paper exploring this issue. I grappled, in my usual reflexive fashion, with a number of concerns, not the least of which was how my identity as a heterosexual African American Pentecostal scholar and musician would shape the research questions I asked and chose not to ask. The paper was received well enough, but I have not, until now, returned to it. My apprehension stemmed, I think, from a sense that the topic was simply too complicated and that my own theological understandings were too fragile for me to tackle with confidence a critical discussion of the gender ambiguities and contradictions I have been noticing in black churches I have attended since the late 1980s.

A number of questions sparked my initial broaching of the subject: 1) How might I understand the tension between homophobic church discourses about sexuality and bodily performances of queerness in gospel music making? This question still strikes me as fundamental, perhaps because gospel artists and audiences seem more attuned than in previous decades to the ways in which certain sounds and gestures index (for churchgoers and the wider public) orientations that threaten the perceived stability of a strict gender binary. 2) How does the implicit acceptance of "effeminate" male gospel artists relate to church demographics, namely, the high percentage of women in black congregations? 3)

What sociomusical factors account for churchgoers' apparent appreciation for male gospel singers who are thought to be secretly gay—despite these singers' supposed sexual "shortcomings"?

Over four years have passed since my conference presentation. I have since relocated from Charlottesville, Virginia to Chicago, Illinois, where the "black church" in all of its inescapable complexity shouts even more enthusiastically for ethnomusicological attention. I cannot pretend to be any surer of myself than in previous years, and I will not succeed in addressing all of my aforementioned questions in this short piece. However, I do sense—perhaps also because of current events drawing attention to gender and sexuality in African American churches—that the time has come for me to revisit this topic.

Major media outlets have certainly not been shy about publicizing any news of same-sex "improprieties" among those who profess to preach the gospel.¹ More importantly, I note the recent emergence of some highly relevant work in religious and performance studies (e.g., Griffin 2006, Finley 2007, and Johnson 2008), which delves boldly and critically into issues of queer performance and theology. This fascinating body of scholarship has no doubt jump-started my interest while bringing into stronger relief the nagging scarcity of ethnomusicological writing in this vital area. And so having outlined the context of my concerns, I offer this brief work-in-progress, starting with an ethnographic vignette describing an event that took place near the end of my decade

¹ An obvious case in point is the well-publicized scandal involving Atlanta-based televangelist Bishop Eddie Long and his alleged same-sex relations with teens under his pastoral care. Also, the cover of a recent *Newsweek* declares, "Man Up! The Traditional Male Is an Endangered Species. It's Time to Rethink Masculinity" (September 27, 2010).

(1994-2004) in New York City—an event like many others that prompts me to re-ponder negotiations of faith and musical masculinity in black gospel performance.

It's mid-April 2004, and my wife and I have just left our apartment on the Upper West Side in Manhattan to begin a ten-minute walk to the closest subway station, located on 125th Street in Harlem. As usual, we don't have much time to spare, because in order to be on time to Friday night service at our Pentecostal church, we can't afford to miss the A Train, which runs express all the way into the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Having set out a couple of minutes behind schedule, we walk briskly and with a sense of purpose. But we start to slow our pace when we notice an unusually large number of Harlemites assembled in front of an outdoor stage just down the street. Curiosity gets the best of us, and we decide to investigate. It turns out that there's a live concert that evening: Gospel songwriter/producer/bassist/and vocalist Fred Hammond, sometimes referred to as the "architect" of urban praise and worship,² is promoting his latest CD and treating a growing crowd of men and women to an energetic sampling of some of his new recording's most promising pieces. Heading back toward the subway, we discuss how one of the consistent attributes of Fred Hammond's performance style is that he embodies what many African American Pentecostals perceive to be definitive "masculine" characteristics.

Masculinity is, as Jason King asserts, "deeply encoded into the way we understand the aesthetics of the voice" (445, n. 21). Likewise, I contend that the voice, along with the ways in which we perceive the body itself, informs our understanding of

² See, for example, http://www.cbn.com/cbnmusic/artists/Hammond_Fred.aspx.

gender identity. This is certainly the case with Fred Hammond. I have had numerous conversations with black churchgoers who insist that "Fred," as he is affectionately called, exemplifies a "manly" gospel singer—one who stands in contradistinction to any number of other(ed) artists whose sexual orientations instill less confidence in those who prefer their gospel music "straight, not gay." It seems as though Hammond's thick vocal timbre and controlled delivery, together with his heavy-set body type, fuel a stereotypical perception of him as a quintessential male gospel performer—able to sing uncompromisingly about his love for Jesus Christ while employing performative codes that register as unambiguously masculine.

It is interesting—and particularly germane to the goals of this essay—that lyrical allusions to biblical narratives about King David abound in Fred Hammond's compositions. In fact, one of his most successful albums of the 1990s is entitled *The Spirit of David*, in reference to David's character, his commitment to praise and worship, and repentant heart. This recording, the title of which has inspired the title of this essay, features the song, "When the Spirit of the Lord."

*When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon my heart
I will dance like David danced.*

...

*When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon my heart
I will pray like David prayed.*

...

*When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon my heart
I will sing like David sang.*

The lyrics "I will sing like David sang" are perhaps an obvious point of departure for an article by a music scholar. I note, however, that they are preceded by references to prayer and to an even more demonstrative form of praise—namely, dance—which

David, like Fred Hammond, feels compelled to do. Highlighting the embodied nature of black Christian worship is one way to reveal the irony of church discourses that privilege highly demonstrative forms of expression while also carefully demarcating the boundaries of how the body is adorned, presented, and pleased in public and private spaces. Dancing, in particular, could create something of a dilemma for those men who understand it to be most characteristic of an "open" body—a vulnerable body that is penetrable by a Holy Spirit typically referred to as a "he," albeit one without flesh and bones (Gordon 2000: 118-119). Stephen Finley elaborates on this point, going so far as to argue that "the impervious, fully armored, Black male body is an impediment to finding meaning in the Black Church in that worship of God is a homoerotic entry into the body" (2007:18). Fred Hammond's recorded performance (or perhaps his performed recording) can be read as a means of reasserting a heteronormative style of praise and worship, recouping a musical "posture of masculinity," and rising up to meet the challenge and to solve the existential crisis posited Lewis Gordon, who rhetorically asks, "Can one worship God and remain masculine too?" (2000:119).

The words "When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon my heart, I will dance like David danced" are sung against the boisterous background voices of Hammond's group, Radical for Christ. The group's members repeatedly chant, "Let's celebrate, let's celebrate," sonically suggesting both a battle cry and a party-like atmosphere of joyous resistance to pretension and sanctimony. The track begins with Hammond *commanding* listeners to "put those hands to together all over this place," and then he grunts an exclamation as if to underscore the physicality of his praise. Verbal punctuations of "Come on! Come on!" intersperse with Hammond's smooth singing delivery. His

performance suggests that we dare not mistake his Christian expression for the half-hearted hummings of one who is weak in body and mind. Rather, this is to be understood as the musical praise of a muscular man—a fully *masculine* man, trained and equipped, as it were, for musical battle—a man, who like King David, is not the least bit ashamed to praise God with everything he has.

I mention Fred Hammond's evocation of David because I believe an understanding of this biblical figure is critical to grasping how black masculinities are constructed and contested in church services and gospel concerts. An important aspect of what we might refer to as "Davidian masculinity" is revealed in Hammond's response to the question of why he chose *The Spirit of David* as the title of his album. He explains: "Well I think we understand that David was a worshiper. He was a *true* worshiper. He had the heart of God. And that is what this kinda displays. Plus, you know, it kinda goes through things that believers have to go through—the same thing David had to go through. You know, praise and thanksgiving, adversity and triumph, and restoration and justification, and I think that's what we gon' talk about and get into with all of these songs right here" (*The Spirit of David*, Track 1). The notion that David was a "true worshiper" who "danced before the Lord with all his might" so much so that his clothing fell off (2 Sam. 6:14) is often articulated in Pentecostal churches. King David's unabashed celebratory praise embarrasses his wife, who scolds him for his lack of restraint and is subsequently shown to be punished through her inability to bear children. David's enthusiasm, manifested in bodily danced praise and worship, often serves as a biblical call for *true* men in the church to do likewise.

One minister I spoke to, a man in his mid-40s, told me, "It's backwards today. Instead of standing back all serious and reserved, we are really the ones who are supposed to set the example—we should out-praise the women in the church... Oh yes! We should be showing *them* how to praise God!" I've attended more services than I can remember in which a praise and worship leader put forth a call for men in the congregation to break free of their social restraints, to "let go and let God" animate their bodies. During one service I attended, where many of the women were quite obviously feeling the move of the Holy Spirit, a male minister took the microphone and exclaimed, "The presence of the Lord is in this place! I need a *man* who isn't afraid to worship God. Come on! Are there any *worshippers* in the house? Where are the men who aren't ashamed to worship?" This semi-rhetorical question challenged each man in the congregation to prove his openness to the Spirit's touch, to show that no matter what his "neighbor"—that is, the person standing next to him—thinks of him, he is willing to let his love for God manifest itself physically in a way that has been socially constructed as feminine (cf. Finley 2007: 17). Holy dancing, dancing in the Spirit, "shouting": These are all terms used to describe the kinds of bodily movement many congregants—both men and women—engage in during praise and worship services. It is understood that the Holy Spirit touches the minds, bodies, and souls of believers who may earnestly seek to be touched, or in some cases, may be caught off guard by a bit of Spiritually-inspired music making, preaching, testifying, or praying such that their bodies become animated by what anthropologist Glenn Hinson refers to simply as "the holy touch" of transcendence (3).

Given that women outnumber men so dramatically in many churches, it is not surprising that praise and worship activities are often experienced as the specialty of

women and girls. Yet scholars have pointed out that black church worship may also provide a safe haven of sorts for expressions of queer sexuality among black men and boys. In *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, E. Patrick Johnson devotes an entire chapter to discussion of black gay Christians and their relation to practices and discourses of the churches in which they have held membership. His interviewees' narratives are eye-opening. They are also significantly varied in terms of the degree to which the narrators reconcile their faith and their sexuality. Nevertheless, many of their stories resonate strongly with Johnson's personal account of growing up in the church and participating in the choir:

Grown folks marveled at, and some of my peers envied my soaring melismas and general vocal theatrics. What I realize now, but didn't back then, was that I was a budding diva who was using the medium of gospel music to express not only my spirituality, but also my sexual and gender identity. I would catch the spirit at times, especially during my solos, and step down out of the choir stand and twirl down the aisle while my robe ballooned around [my] pudgy body—all the while holding a note and making sure that no one took the microphone out of my hand. The little queen in me was begging to show out, and I had a captive audience. (2008: 185)

Johnson's childhood experiences thus shed light on an experiential overlap between Spirit-influenced musical praise and expressive performances of queer identity. The choir, he notes, was his "saving grace" because it allowed him to express himself freely—to "flame as bright as [he] wanted" (185). Along with several other "budding queens in the church," he took advantage of "the theatricality already built into the church service" and "learned very quickly...how express and affirm [his] queerness without ever naming [his] sexuality" (184). At the same time, Johnson's account reminds me of the tension many heterosexual men feel when observing and participating in gospel choirs and demonstrative forms of bodily worship. Does "catching the spirit," as Johnson

describes it, require losing one's masculinity, or at least a portion of it? Is it possible to go too far in one's worship—to "let oneself go" or "open oneself up" to the point of crossing over into a less "masculine" form of expression? Indeed, these are questions I have often found myself pondering, not only in the cool contexts of academia, but also in the heated spaces of charismatic worship.

I have often heard Pentecostal preachers present David as ideal man of God: He catches the spirit and keeps his masculinity. He is a worshipping warrior who, despite his position of authority, possesses a heart that is malleable and attuned to divine will. As a musician and composer of many psalms, David stands out as one who "blesses" or gives praise "at all times" to a Jehovah whom he describes as abundantly merciful and able to deliver or save from the hand of the enemy. Yet David is also not perfect—and this is *also* stressed among Pentecostals in sermonic recitations of David's character traits. He commits the biblical sin of fornication by sleeping with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of David's soldiers. Then, in an attempt to cover up his dishonorable deed, he positions the noble Uriah to be killed in battle and thus becomes guilty (indirectly) of murder as well.

The fact that David succumbed to this temptation, along with the fact that his "natural" attraction to the opposite sex is what *led* to his transgression, serves as an often-repeated reminder that men—even, or especially, Spirit-filled Pentecostal men—can be lured down the wrong path if they yield to their carnal desires. A key point in this narrative is that David, being the *man* who he was, eventually seeks God's forgiveness, thus securing his bibliohistorical legacy as a prime exemplar of Godly reconciliation. It is understood that this worshipping warrior David is a man to whom "good" Christian

men—which is to say *heterosexual* Christian men—should be able to relate. His character flaws and (hetero)sexual sins—damnable as they may be—are of the *understandable* sort, and he ultimately succeeds in spite of them. One *Newsweek* writer makes precisely this point in a recent article entitled "The Black Church, Homophobia, and Pastor Eddie Long":

If Long's accuser were a woman, even if her allegations were found to be true, I think he could weather the storm—everyone loves a story of a man's redemption after a moment of relaxed vigilance allows Satan to find a toehold. (Alston 2010)

It hardly seems accidental that in his much anticipated speech to his Baptist congregation—his first public remarks since being accused of using his pastoral influence to coerce young male church members into sexual acts—Long compared himself to David: "I feel like David against Goliath," he declared, "but I got five rocks, and I haven't thrown one yet."

It is easy to recognize that Johnson is on to something when he asserts, in an earlier piece, that "a certain amount of heterosexual loose play is accepted as a normal part of the church community—even or especially among its anointed" (1998: 401). The "black church," he claims, "tolerates the obvious paradox of [ministers'] behavior in a way that ... makes heterosexuality [and heterosexual offenses] normal" (402) and much less problematic than same-sex relationships, even when the latter consist of monogamous unions. Although I am a bit uncomfortable with the generalization implied by Johnson's critique, a considerable amount of my own experience would seem to corroborate his assertions.

Many of the instrumentalists I have encountered in black churches do present particular challenges for pastors and laity. Instrumentalists have a tendency to appear

almost apathetic during church meetings, having grown accustomed to the ritualized aspects of Sunday morning services: prayer, scripture readings, testimonies, slow songs, fast songs, the sermon with its high points, low points, offertories, the altar call, and so on and forth... The "musicians," as they are called, appear to have seen and heard it all, and not unlike instrumentalists in a variety of African and African diasporic ritual traditions (Marks 1982), they have come to accept emotional-spiritual detachment as a requisite quality of effective church musicianship. To be sure, there are lots of exceptions, yet the fact that most black church instrumentalists are men seems to reinforce the stereotype of the male musician who remains staid and steady—unfazed even amidst the most "heated" segments of praise and worship. As a church musician myself, I have found myself striving not to embody the character of the stereotypical instrumentalist.

Church members sometimes complain about organists and keyboardists who act as though by playing in church they are doing members of the congregation, if not the Lord Almighty himself, a favor. But more often, these instrumentalists appear to get a pass. Because of the musical service they render, it seems they are allowed to be slothful and slack in their obligation to walk the Christian walk. My sense is that many church musicians feel exempt and immune from pastoral calls to spiritual devotion. These feelings are often reinforced, in my view, by the extreme gratification they receive as a result of congregational responses to their musical talents. Certainly, a significant amount of bodily movement that is portrayed as "holy dancing" might simply be a willed response to a musically induced emotional high. But if not careful, musicians can start to feel that they are somehow indispensable to the move of the Spirit, and this feeling leads, in turn, to a decrease in the amount of effort they put forth toward sincere praise and

worship on a personal level. And there is no shortage of rumors about ministers of music who engage in sexual behavior that is "outside the bounds" of accepted Christian practice.

Historically speaking, a view of music as a potential source of moral decay is nothing new. As Philip Brett reminds us in a chapter from the influential edited volume, *Queering the Pitch*, "[M]usic has often been considered a dangerous substance, an agent of moral ambiguity always in danger of bestowing deviant status upon its practitioners" (1994: 11). He continues, "Nonverbal even when linked to words, physically arousing in its function as initiator of dance, and resisting attempts to endow it with, or discern in it precise meaning, it represents that part of our culture which is constructed as feminine and therefore dangerous" (12).

I think issues of gender and sexual identity are still underdiscussed in most African American Pentecostal churches, particularly the apostolic Pentecostal churches I know best. But thanks to the work done by prominent ministers such as T.D. Jakes and others, these issues have started to come up much more frequently in men's retreats. Retreats are occasions in which the men of a particular congregation or church district spend a weekend—generally out of town—by themselves to fellowship with one another, share testimonies of "deliverance," hear sermons and Bible classes geared towards the emotional challenges men face, and engage in friendly competitive events, such as basketball and chess. During praise and worship services, King David, the worshipping warrior, is often mentioned. However, there is a tender side to David that is less frequently emphasized among Pentecostal men. As a very young man, David develops an intimate bond with King Saul's son Jonathan. The hearts of David and Jonathan are

said to have been "knit together" and my sense is that the obvious love that existed between them is a perennial source of discomfort for some Pentecostal men, many of whom preach defensively against any speculation that their relationship was predicated on feelings of romantic attraction. As one preacher I know explained during a Sunday morning sermon, "David and Jonathan were very close friends. And yes, they had an intimate relationship. *But wadn't no funny stuff goin' on!*" Funny stuff, in this context, refers of course to the homoerotic tension that many scholars of religion such as John Boswell (1980) have long detected in some biblical pairs—including also Ruth and Naomi, and Jesus and his "beloved disciple" John.

Over the past fifteen years, I have heard countless references to male gospel artists, church singers and instrumentalists that include the words, "He just has feminine ways." Such words have most often been spoken by women who are responding to a not-so-subtle suggestion that some gospel musician whose music they admire might be involved in queer sexual behavior of some sort. The list of male gospel artists who have been the subject of such rumors is quite long and includes such generally beloved figures as Richard Smallwood, Daryl Coley, Hezekiah Walker, and James Cleveland to name just a few. According to Michael Eric Dyson (2003), the black church has yet to deal openly with Cleveland's sexual identity or the rumors that he died from AIDS. I must state, as does Jason King in his 2000 article on Luther Vandross, that I can claim no insider knowledge of the sexual identities and orientations of various gospel artists. What I do claim to know is that the *discourses* surrounding these artists are informed by their visual and aural performances. And these musical performances have a profound impact

on the ongoing constructions of gender that are negotiated among African American Pentecostals.

So what does it mean, exactly, when Pentecostal churchgoers insist that a male gospel artist has "feminine ways"? There are several ways in which musical performances often register as feminine or perhaps "queer" to church audiences. Video footage from a live concert in Los Angeles commercially released in 1991 by Keith Pringle and the Pentecostal Community Choir provides a case in point. It features soloist Brother Marshall Petty leading the song "Jesus Saves." Almost two decades have passed since this concert took place, and the perceptions of queerness have not remained static over the past two decades, but Petty's performance is indicative of the kind that many African American Pentecostals would now find problematic. Most disturbing for some is that Petty epitomizes what Johnson refers to as "one of the most enduring stereotypes in the black church...that of the flamboyant choir director, musician, or soloist" (2008: 184).

Petty's physical appearance adds to this perception. His eyebrows are thinly arched, his hair is "permed" (i.e., chemically straightened) and flattened against his head with what appear to be finger waves, and his extra-long fingernails are flawlessly manicured. After a couple of bars, the soloist begins—not by singing the lyrics, but, rather, with a bluesy close-lipped moan of pitches acclimating the listener to the minor tonality of the piece. Petty deliberately teases his audience, using a vocal style that is much different from the full-throated delivery of Fred Hammond. As Petty descends the minor scale, his mouth opens and he reveals the breathy timbre he will employ, sometimes with a sensuous growl, throughout the song. He begins, "We have heard the

joyful sound. Spread the tidings all around," placing just such a growl on the phrase "all around" and on nonreferential vowel sounds he intones between the first and second verses.

By the song's halfway point, Petty has deployed an arsenal of melismatic runs, diving up to the upper extremities of a vocal range, that seems to match his arched eyebrows, long fingernails, and processed hair. At times, he parachutes downward in virtuosic fashion to reintroduce the husky baritone timbre with which he began. His vocal stylings register for me as sexually ambiguous on a sonic level; they contrast quite remarkably with Fred Hammond's rendition of "When the Spirit of the Lord," in which sensuality and theatricality take a beat seat to an aesthetic of musical muscularity. It is when the sonic aspects of Petty's presentation are combined with the visual appearance of his performance that an interpretation of it as something other than "straight" becomes seemingly unavoidable. The soloist's use of flowing hands and arms are what some heterosexual male and female viewers referred to as a "dead giveaway," as is a moment in the song when Petty twirls his index finger high above his head to dramatize the lyrics, "He'll pick you up and turn you around."

When I played the video of Petty's rendition for my 24-year-old niece, a recent convert to Pentecostal Christianity, she exclaimed, "You'd have to be crazy not to know that that person is gay!" She clearly saw his gayness as a negative attribute, especially for a *gospel* singer; and her reaction is similar to others I have received from Pentecostal women: "He can sing, but I don't *know*... Something ain't right..." An interesting variation on this sometimes comes from women who make halting comments such as, "I don't know... I think he might be...you know... But he sure can sing!" The verbs "play"

or "direct" (as in direct choirs) are often substituted for sing, but the point remains the same: There is a certain tolerance of male musicians perceived to be effeminate or gay within many Pentecostal congregations.

Michael Eric Dyson laments what he sees as the exploitation of gay musicians in African American churches: "One of the most painful scenarios of black church life is repeated Sunday after Sunday with little notice or collective outrage. A black minister will preach a sermon railing against sexual ills, especially homosexuality. At the close of the sermon, a soloist, who everybody knows is gay, will rise to perform a moving number, as the preacher extends an invitation to visitors to join the church. The soloist is, in effect, being asked to sing, and to sign, his theological death sentence" (2009: 244).³ Dyson's notion that "*everybody knows*" the soloist is gay is remarkable to me. It reminds me of Philip Brett's discussion of the "open secret": "We know perfectly well that the secret is known, but nonetheless we must persist however ineptly in guarding it" (12).

Perhaps certain gospel artists remain popular due to an ethic of empathy that allows or even encourages the expression of queer identities that disrupt a strict masculine-feminine binary. However, this ethic stands to lose its sociopolitical efficacy if or when audiences and congregants are confronted with undesired and unequivocal proof that what has been suspected is indeed the truth. Indeed, that "certain tolerance" to which I referred has strings attached. As Horace Griffin reminds us, "While black church leaders and congregants tolerate a gay presence in choirs, congregations, and even the pulpit as long as gays cooperate and stay 'in their closeted place,' gays quickly experience

³ E. Patrick Johnson also comments on this contradictory attitude toward gay musicians, noting that the black church "exploits the creative talents of its gay members even as it condemns their gayness, while also providing a nurturing space to hone those same talents" (2008: 183).

the limits of this tolerance if they request the same recognition as their heterosexual counterparts" (2006: 20-21).

African American churchgoers often retain a sense of togetherness because their unity as brothers and sisters in Christ so often depends on a refusal to pass judgment. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." In this context, of course, "nice" is almost always taken to mean "unambiguously heterosexual." Indeed, what is understood is that "accusing" one's brother in the Lord of being gay would most certainly *not* be a nice thing to do. Instead of *affirming* the contributory presence of queer individuals in the church, and instead of risking the need to wrestle with the theological chaos that might result should such affirmation become contagious, Pentecostal men and women most often opt to be silent. I wonder, though, whether there is any silver lining to this silence—whether silence in these contexts may even be powerful. Rather than creating emotional or spiritual distance among black churchgoers, perhaps it creates what Jason King calls a "space of inclusion rather than exclusion in between contradictory interpretations of cultural texts" (430).

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