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# BLACK SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND CHURCH MUSIC

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## Introduction

Black Seventh-day Adventists are fragmented in their perceptions of music that is appropriate for the worship of God. Cultural differences within families, dissimilar opportunities for musical training and exposure, varying musical traditions within local churches, and wide diversity in the degree to which our clergy, musicians, and members have dedicated themselves to the study of church music all contribute to the fragmentation that we are now experiencing.

## African Musical Heritage

During the civil rights struggle, when Black Americans rediscovered an interest in reaching back to Africa, the history and grandeur of that land, once obscured from us, became apparent to us. The establishment of Black studies in the curricula of schools, colleges, and universities across the country inspired many to embrace almost everything that was Black.

In Seventh-day Adventist churches the Negro spiritual has always had a place, but when Black Adventists began to look for something new that reflected Black heritage, many looked to the rhythmic gospel music that disc jockeys were beginning to play on the radio. This in many churches was viewed as performing the music of the Pentecostal Church, but Black Adventists were determined to reflect in their music the culture of their people.

The 1941 *Church Hymnal* contained music of various nations of the world, and even hymns sourced from other denominations,<sup>1</sup> but there was no inclusion of the Negro spiritual. In fact, at certain Adventist institutions of higher learning White elitist professors of music were commenting on the inferiority of the Negro spiritual as a musical form. In this setting Black gospel music, which was very new to most Adventists, seemed a fulfillment of the African nature. In this chapter I will discuss this direction in Black music and outline problems inherent in the gospel rock scene.

## Biblical Instruction

In our church music we are worshiping God, no matter what color we are, and we have definite instruction about the music that is to be rendered in this exercise. Ellen White, in commenting upon music in worship, states:

“Singing is as much an act of worship as is prayer.”<sup>2</sup> Just as we pray to Him, we sing to Him. In both of these activities God is the primary audience. Therefore, our attitude in singing should be as reverent as it is in prayer. Alas, that is not always so.

In Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 God imparts to us the kinds of music we should render to Him: psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Psalms are passages of Scripture, especially from the book of Psalms, that are set to simple melodies. Examples are “God So Loved the World,” “I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes Unto the Hills,” “The Lord Is My Light,” etc.

Hymns are praises to God in which we extol His character, love, greatness, majesty, might, power, and glory. They are definitely God-centered. Consider as examples “Holy, Holy, Holy,” “Come, Thou Almighty King,” and “Jesus Shall Reign.”

Spiritual songs are musical testimonies of the interaction of the Deity upon the heart and life of the believer. “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Saviour,” “In the Garden,” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” are examples. Because these songs describe a relationship between a person and Christ, they are correctly referred to as gospel songs. However, we Blacks do not tend to regard them as gospel songs, because rhythm is not their chief characteristic. Here we err, because it is the poem, the message of the song, and not the music that qualifies a song as “experience music.” And for us there is certainly no greater body of experience music than the heritage we have received from our slave forebears, the Negro spiritual.

For years Black Adventists worshiped this way. There was no obvious attempt to make the church service Black except for the inclusion of Negro spirituals.

## Eurocentrism—A Point of Controversy

Perhaps as a backlash to the prejudice we have experienced in this country and in this church, and perhaps also because of the pride we feel in our reconnection with Africa, there has arisen a great resentment of Eurocentric music and a desire to experience Black gospel music only. We willingly sing hymns and spiritual songs, but an increasing number of us refuse to perform anthems because of

their Eurocentric roots. Hence much of the historical singing of the Word of God is eliminated from our services.

In defense of Eurocentrism in music and worship, it should be remembered that the history of Protestantism—the Seventh-day Adventist Church is, of course, a Protestant denomination—must begin with the Reformation. We cite the work of Martin Luther in Germany, John Wycliffe in England, John Huss in Bohemia, John Calvin in Switzerland and France, John Knox in Scotland, and others in developing the bedrock on which we worship today. And since these persons were Europeans, Protestantism has within itself Eurocentric roots.

Martin Luther not only differed with the Catholic Church on his 95 theses; he was the first Protestant hymn writer. Prior to the German Reformation, the priests and choirs sang all of the music. Luther, who felt that the congregation should participate and not be mere listeners, gave the people the first hymnbook in their own language. In his lifetime he wrote 37 fine hymns, but the most famous and enduring of all, composed in 1529, was “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” The hymn, therefore, as a musical form, is Eurocentric.

Just as Martin Luther developed the hymn for the people, it was necessary to develop independent anthems for the choirs to sing as the newly established Protestant denominations forsook the Mass as celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church and began to develop their own worship forms. Since Protestant Christianity experienced a splintering into numerous denominations with varying subtleties in dogma, composers chose to select biblical texts to write great anthems. Surely there could be no disagreement between denominations if the words of an anthem came directly from the Scriptures! Thus the anthem is indeed Eurocentric and should be held in esteem by Black congregations and clergy. It is the Word of God being sung, so how can we say that it is not relevant to us as a people?

In the current Black Adventist renaissance I do not hear Black clergy reading from Black Bibles written in dialect, nor do I hear their sermons preached in Black “ghettoese.” The King James Version of the Scriptures remains in wide use among us, and it is Eurocentric as well. Although there is an increasing trend among our Black pastors to preach in the mold of the most popular Black preachers in non-SDA circles, music seems to be the main determinant that defines a worship service as Black, and that is unfortunate.

### The African Connection

Many consider the Black gospel music that has arisen to prominence within the Black Seventh-day Adventist Church today to be based upon our reconnection with Africa. Does the style of this music and the nontraditional use of musical instruments bear this out?

Jeffrey K. Lauritzen, director of choirs at Collegedale

Academy, Collegedale, Tennessee, has said: “Drum sets, electric guitars, synthesizers, and elaborate amplification systems, which greatly intensify the rhythmic effect and loudness of the music, are making dramatic inroads into Christian worship, as are commercially produced accompaniment tapes, many of which are in the rock idiom.”

These are not instruments used traditionally by church musicians for the worship of God. Rather they are part of the trappings of rock and roll performers, and while we do not endorse rock and roll, we risk, by our use of these instruments, the danger of following their example instead of moving in the pathway of musicians whose sole purpose has always been to honor God with their talents.

Angi Cooper, of Memphis, Tennessee, took issue with Tipper Gore’s efforts to clean up the rock music scene, which is bombarding our youth today with questionable lyrics, in a letter to the editor of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, dated January 12, 1986: “From the very beginning rock and roll was meant to be a form of rebellion—rebellion against society, government, and parents, who were shocked at Elvis Presley’s rocking pelvis. Rock and roll is more than just a concert or a pop song on the Top 40 countdown. It is sexual, spiritual, and controversial.”

Michael Ventura, a music researcher, conducted studies based on the hypothesis that all American music (that is to say, the music of Black and White classical and pop composers) has its roots in Africa. To do so, he traced the development of African music as it came from the land of our ancestors during slavery to Haiti and then to New Orleans, where many Black pop forms originated.

To cite some examples, “funk” comes from the African word *lu-fuki*, of the Kikongo language. It means “positive sweat,” something that has been done well and is, therefore, good, or funky. “Soul” has a reference in the Kikongo language as well, in the word *mojo*, which means to be invested with a spirit power that has the ability to control. It is a voodoo practice to carry a mojo stone. “Boogie” comes from the Kikongo word *mbugi*, which means “devilishly good.” *Juke* is the Mande word for “bad,” and in the juke joints of New Orleans the word meant “bad music played by bad people in bad places,” according to Michael Ventura.<sup>3</sup>

The September 1982 issue of *Ebony* magazine, in a feature on the career of gospel singer Andrae Crouch, stated: “Crouch certainly didn’t stick to the traditional format of presenting religious music. He has carved for himself a niche in the music world that is usually reserved for nonreligious artists, because he has cleverly combined elements of disco, progressive jazz, rhythm and blues, pop, and even rock, while at the same time walking a fine line between his traditional grassroots gospel background and cut-right Top 40 funk.”

Certainly, despite the African connection, it is clear that

these musical styles have no part in Christian music. In her book *Readings in Black American Music*, music historian Eileen Southern describes primitive African worship as imbued with voodoo practices in which the spirits of gods whom the participants invoke with their drumming “ride” the bodies of the worshipers in such a manner that the onlookers can look at the movements of the dancers and identify precisely which god has come into their midst.<sup>4</sup>

How can we take the purity of Jesus Christ and the story of salvation and present them in such a format? If there is an African connection between rock, jazz, soul, and our gospel music, it is a connection that we should not make.

Even though we are African-Americans and proud of that fact, we are also Seventh-day Adventist Christians, and it is incumbent upon us to select those parts of our heritage that we can safely incorporate into our faith and lifestyle. We cannot accept the whole thing, because our ethnicity is not going to save us in God’s kingdom. It is, rather, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that has made salvation possible for us, and we must not offend Him.

In a conversation with Calvin B. Rock, General Conference vice president, concerning the current musical trend in Black Adventist churches, I explained that we were making attempts to reach back to Africa and to bring that African rhythmic heritage into our music. Rock’s response was that he has been all over Africa and has never seen or heard anything like the music that is going on in our churches today. Of course he has not seen or heard its like; what we are doing is not African. The musical phenomenon that is going on in our churches is an American Pentecostal hybrid!

Because we do not know the culture of consecrated Seventh-day Adventist Africans, we grope in the dark, blindly assessing to them characteristics that we think they possess and that we would like to emulate. Yet African Seventh-day Adventists do not perform the music that we espouse. From time to time I receive requests for music from African conductors whom I have met in my work for the church. They always ask for specific choral anthems and Negro spirituals. We should be careful not to emulate music in our worship that reaches back to pagan practices. We have ample reason to value our Negro spirituals and our great anthems, and to value our heritage as African-American Seventh-day Adventists.

### The Pentecostal Connection

As was suggested before, Pentecostalism seems to be a major influence in Black Christian gospel music. According to *Grove’s Dictionary of Music*, “gospel music is a religious type of folk or popular music. It is principally American and is performed by both Blacks and Whites. Among Blacks, gospel music has largely replaced spirituals. Black gospel is related to the development of the Pentecostal and Holiness

churches. Since the 1940s gospel music has been assimilated into the church services of many denominations. It has also become closely associated with certain styles of popular music: Black gospel with soul and White gospel with country music” (p. 554). Over several pages the article explains how the rise of gospel music coincided with the rise of blues and jazz, and how they all got together in the early part of the twentieth century.

At this point it should be acknowledged that gospel music is a legitimate and necessary type of church music. Gospel songs testify of the goodness of God to the individual believer and the believer’s response to Him. Where would we be without songs like “He Touched Me,” “Give Me a Clean Heart,” and “His Eye Is on the Sparrow”? The gospel song is a wonderful form of musical expression.

The danger is in the way we style the gospel song and the instruments we use. As mentioned before, synthesizers, guitars, and drums are used extensively in the field of rock music. Powerful amplification systems guarantee that the music will be loud, causing the singers to force their tone quality from their throats. Furthermore, an undue emphasis on rhythm is highlighted not only in the drumming but also in the bodies of the singers as whole choirs rock back and forth to the music. The organ of preference is the Hammond organ, which can achieve strident sound effects. If we would take the time to visit a Pentecostal church, this is exactly what we would find, proving that we are not imitating Africa. We are embracing Pentecostalism!

### A Last-Day Prophecy Fulfilled

In 1900 at a camp meeting in Muncie, Indiana, S. N. Haskell, who had spoken at the Sabbath morning service, was distressed by the music that was rendered there that day by a fanatical “holy flesh” group. Using musical instruments, they had sung sacred words to dance tunes, and the people had danced, shouted, and jerked themselves about until they had become hysterical. And these were White Adventists!

Six months earlier our prophet, Ellen White, had seen the situation in vision, and when letters of concern began to reach her, she replied with these words: “The things you have described as taking place in Indiana, the Lord has shown me would take place just before the close of probation. Every uncouth thing will be demonstrated. There will be shouting, with drums, music, and dancing. The senses of rational beings will become so confused that they cannot be trusted to make right decisions. And this is called the moving of the Holy Spirit.”

She continued: “The Holy Spirit never reveals Himself in such methods, in such a bedlam of noise. This is an invention of Satan to cover up his ingenious methods for making of none effect the pure, sincere, elevating, ennobling, sanctifying truth for this time. Better never to have the wor-

ship of God blended with music than to use musical instruments to do the work which last January was represented to me would be brought into our camp meetings. The truth for this time needs nothing of this kind in its work of converting souls. . . . The powers of satanic agencies blend with the din and noise, to have a carnival, and this is termed the Holy Spirit's working. . . . Satan works amid the din and confusion of such music, which, if properly conducted, would be a praise and glory to God. He makes its effect like the poison sting of the serpent."<sup>5</sup>

The close of probation is upon us. The prophecy has come true. The music is here in Black Seventh-day Adventist churches, and according to His prophet, God is not pleased. When today's music is performed, it affects the decorum of the congregations, which, together with the music, contributes to the din and noise about which Ellen White wrote. We must be aware that Satan is the author of confusion. Recognition of this fact and the stern warning of Ellen White encourage us to be cautious in our choice of worship music.

Charles D. Brooks, director/speaker of the *Breath of Life* telecast, recently said: "I go all over, as you know, and I hear what is happening to the music of our church. One can see how we are shaping up for the final crisis. I fear that it is music that is going to divide our church. There will be a remnant who will remain steadfast, and those are the ones who will be persecuted, not only by the world, but by their former brethren."

Eric C. Ward, former pastor of the Oakwood College church, shared two approaches Satan has used to divide God's church. First was an effort to cast seeds of doubt on the veracity of the Spirit of Prophecy, which seems not to have worked with Black Seventh-day Adventists. The second approach involved music of questionable style and content tied supposedly to our African heritage. Certainly we would want to take steps to ensure that this plan won't work either.

Eugene F. Durand, in an article published in the *Adventist Review* (Dec. 6, 1990) entitled "Contemporary Christian Music," expressed his concerns about current music in the Adventist Church: "When I was growing up, Adventists were taught that popular music was unfit for Christian ears, not only because of the lovesick, sentimental words, but because of the sensual music. Imagine our discomfort, then, when Adventists moved from rejecting dance music to performing it (with sacred words) in church on Sabbath! That which we conscientiously abstain from during the week . . . we are now forced to listen to during sacred services on God's holy day! . . ."

"Isn't it strange that we Adventists know how to distinguish between the holy and the unholy when it comes to the day of worship, between the clean and the unclean in our

eating, and between the right and wrong in tithing, dress, and recreation, yet seem not to have the foggiest notion of how to tell the sacred from the profane in our music?"

The prophet Ezekiel speaks against mixing the sacred and the profane, for to do so is to create a musical Babylon. In Ezekiel 22:26 he warns: "Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and the profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean."

The future status of devotional music in Black Adventism is cause for concern. In our search for "the lost chord," our African connection, we must not lose sight of our spiritual heritage as Protestant Seventh-day Adventist Christians. Our slave forebears brought with them elements of their music that were authentic in terms of African culture, embracing the juxtaposition of one rhythm upon another and modal scales in which the melodies were interwoven. These modes are not American, but African. We as their children should not abandon that authentic heritage.

### The Sacrifice of Praise

God is saying to us, "Worship Me in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." He is looking for expressions of worship in music that extol Him just because of who He is, that acknowledge His power, His love, and the many wonderful attributes that constitute His great character. Would He not be delighted to hear choirs raise their voices in anthems whose words come from the Scriptures themselves? The goal of worship is not to see how Black we can be; it is rather to show reverence and love to our God.

The second coming of Jesus looms upon us. Our worship through music must conform with God's will. In our prayers and in our music, God is the audience. He has never asked us to entertain Him—He has asked us to worship Him. Let us prayerfully consider the direction of our music, giving heed to the instructions and warnings of God, and take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that Black devotional music in the Seventh-day Adventist Church will continue to be a vehicle for the highest blessings of God!

<sup>1</sup> For example: "Sometimes a Light Surprises," No. 254; "Sun of My Soul," No. 321; "My God, How Endless Is Thy Love!" No. 414; "O Golden Day," No. 434; and "The God of Abraham Praise," No. 76, from *The Church Hymnal* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1941).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1903), p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ventura, *Shadow Dancing in the U.S.A.* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1985), pp. 104, 106, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Eileen Southern, *Readings in Black American Music* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), pp. 36, 37.