

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EDIFYING BLACK  
SACRED MUSIC

by

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I dedicate this research project to my wonderful family. You all have loved, supported and encouraged me my entire life, and I have especially felt this over the past two years. I could not have reached this milestone without you.

I am also grateful for my parents, who instilled in us the importance of receiving an education and pursuing excellence. I know you would be proud.

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the role Black sacred music has in Black culture and its historical influence on cultural identity. As a theoretical basis, this study uses cultural identity to examine how African Americans' connection to Black sacred music informs utilization by African Americans. Generational and lifestyle differences have contributed to young people's limited exposure to this music, and some who have a strong relationship with the sacred songs feel its continuance is threatened. Some African American churches seek to limit the inclusion of Black sacred music and opt for more contemporary or progressive styles of worship music. Without exposure, it becomes difficult to know or understand the practices and historical meanings associated with this genre. Diminished performances of Black sacred music also weaken the connection older African Americans may have with the music from religious or cultural experiences that occurred earlier in their lives. This research examines the relationship between African American culture and Black sacred music and how different generations of African Americans interpret its usefulness and historical relevance.

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## INTRODUCTION

Experiences in our lives, and the memories formed from these encounters, are components that make up the emotional framework in our lives. How we engage with elements that represent our culture like art, literature, language, food, and music help shape our lives. The relationships we establish with them can have lasting impressions and they give us an awareness of the practices and traditions that connect us to a particular culture. My exposure to Black sacred music came very early in life. Long before I had any understanding of the lyrics or history, this type of music was very much a part of my world. At church every Sunday were the infectious, rhythmic songs, often led by older members of the congregation. In grade school, we were taught Negro spirituals, and anthems, including folk and children's songs. Radio broadcasts featuring spirituals and gospel music were also heard regularly in my home. The opportunity to produce a film honoring this genre connected me with those elements that contributed to my culture, particularly as an African American who grew up in an environment that made an effort to remember and embrace its cultural past. The music was familiar and it impressed upon me the lasting power and reach of these songs, and their relevance in my life as an adult. This research allows me to further explore the role Black sacred music has in Black culture and its historical influence on cultural identity. As a theoretical basis, this study uses cultural identity to examine how African Americans' connection to Black sacred music may inform utilization by African Americans. Generational and lifestyle differences have contributed to young people's limited exposure to this music, and some who have a strong relationship with the sacred songs feel its continuance is

threatened. Some African American churches seek to limit or eliminate the inclusion of Black sacred music for more contemporary or progressive styles of worship music. Without exposure, it becomes difficult to know or understand the practices and historical meanings associated with this genre. Diminished performances of Black sacred music also weaken the connection older African Americans may have with the music from religious or cultural experiences that occurred earlier in their lives. This research examines the relationship between African American culture and Black sacred music and how different generations of African Americans interpret its usefulness and historical relevance.

Born out of a horrific period in America's history 400 years ago, Black sacred music tells the story of a people's faith and fortitude while enslaved. Negro spirituals and hymns have deep roots within African American culture and have been passed down through generations as treasured pieces of this ethnic group's heritage. Each generation's culture is defined by distinguishable elements such as music, fashion, art, and social and political expressions. Through exposure and education, the group referred to as African American Millennials—those individuals born between 1981 and 1997, according to the Pew Research Center—will hopefully experience and seek to embrace Black sacred music, solidifying its place in African American culture and worship. The U.S. Census defines Baby Boomers as persons born between 1946 and 1964 (Colby & Ortman, 2014). Many African American Baby Boomers have social, political, and historical connections to Black sacred music through religious and community movement affiliations. However, cultural shifts have occurred within this demographic, and the existence of

some practices linked with Black heritage is threatened. With exposure to and appreciation of this music being points of concern for music scholars and parishioners, I outline how cultural identity may encourage young African Americans to adopt Negro spirituals and historic hymns for inclusion in their cultural realm. Using a documentary I produced that explores the history and utilization of Black sacred music as a basis, I present the views of African American Millennials to determine this music's relevance to their generation and include the perspectives of older African Americans who strongly identify with Black sacred music's cultural significance.

In Chapter One, I will present a historical framework of Black sacred music and outline the different types of songs created by enslaved Africans in America. The customs and traditions brought from Africa formed the basis of chants, call-and-response type songs, spirituals, and hymns. I show comparisons of historic sacred music and contemporary genres, since African American Millennials are looked upon as the demographic most likely to carry this music forth. Language, customs, and music are part of a community's cultural identity and help give meaning to the group's existence. I also focus on strategies that global cultures have enacted to save and utilize elements of their cultures that were in jeopardy of being lost. Since I use a film on Black sacred music as an educational tool in this research, I show the effectiveness of the documentary format in preserving historical and cultural events and connecting viewers with them.

A facet of self-identification is the relationship one has with his or her culture. In Chapter Two, I present critical analysis of cultural identity discourse and explore how Black sacred music shaped the identity of enslaved Blacks. The negotiation of non-



dominant cultures in maintaining and preserving elements of their heritage is also examined.

*Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice: Preserving the Gift of Black Sacred Music* was produced as a resource for the United Methodist Church. Chapter Three provides a historical look at African Americans in the denomination and the move to uplift African American worship practices. This chapter also outlines the film's development and purpose for preserving Black sacred music.

Chapter Four outlines the methodology used for examining Black sacred music's relevance among African Americans in various age groups. I collected information from African American Millennials and Baby Boomers to determine the relationship these two groups have with Black sacred music. Chapter Five presents viewpoints expressed during focus groups that relate to knowledge and viability of the music.

The edification of Black sacred music does not rest solely on Millennials; it is the responsibility of a culture interested in embracing and continuing the practices that define who and what it is. This group's utilization is vital, as is the recognition and reclamation by older African Americans. Chapter Six offers strategies for bringing this historic music into contemporary settings to ensure its survival.

## CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarded as some of the earliest examples of American music, dating back to 1619, chants, hymns, and spirituals became the result of enslaved Blacks appropriating church music sung by slaveholders and infusing African culture and rhythms to create a music form that was distinctly theirs. After surviving the Atlantic voyage as human cargo, Africans transplanted in America were subjects in a system of slavery and subjected to the systems of White slaveholders, including their religious practices. Music and historical accounts note the eventual conversion to Christianity by enslaved Africans. Despite the conditions, “they used the few words of broken English they had learned, the stories of the Bible, and the music in their souls to communicate hope and courage, and even to send messages among themselves as their forefathers used the ancient tom-toms in Africa” (Dennison, 1963, p. 14). Music takes on the characteristics of its creator and becomes part of one’s identity. Simon Frith compares music and identity in a collective manner. “Music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics” (Frith, 1996, p. 109). The spirituals not only aided in surviving slave conditions but the music was a foundational element of enslaved individuals attempting to make sense of oppressive principles of an emerging America. The lyrics and rhythms functioned as a salve, and “while the spirituals conveyed poignantly the developing social values of the enslaved community, the songs also mirrored and advanced the ideals of Christian love and respect, in the context of a developing American democracy” (Jones A. C., 2004).

While Black sacred music is regarded as an authentic musical expression of faith by enslaved persons, which also tells of their strength, there is a history of disassociation with songs depicting sorrow, hardship, and bondage. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, many former slaves did not want to sing the songs of their captivity (Jones R. , 2007). This association with “slave songs” was counterproductive while attempting to carve out lives as free men and women. After emancipation, the songs were a reminder of a harsh life and former slaves wanted to distance themselves from the music. Additionally, White audiences were not accustomed to seeing Blacks perform in formal settings and the press categorized performances of Negro spirituals as minstrel shows (Brooks, 2000). John Work II, a composer and musician, is credited with reviving the spirituals in the late 1890s when he joined the staff at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. (Brooks, 2000). While the Fisk Jubilee Singers had performed the spirituals to international audiences two decades earlier, the music, once again, was largely abandoned. Work’s contributions to Black sacred music at Fisk were primarily responsible for the group’s first recording contract and enacting preservation measures for African American spirituals and folk songs (Brooks, 2000). The cultural identity of African Americans is shaped, in part, by music and how it affects life experiences. The music’s shared heritage with African Americans is recognizable, but its connection to slavery and how that fact is negotiated by African Americans is complex.

Dr. Paul Kwami is the current musical director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the renowned ensemble that has performed Black sacred music around the world since 1871 (Fisk Jubilee Singers, 2014). Dr. Kwami was also a member of the ensemble when he

was a student at Fisk University from 1983 to 1985 (Kwami, 2015). As a native of Ghana, he understands the cultural relationship between Africans and music, and comprehends how African musical arrangements survived centuries of slavery in America and became part of Black Americans' cultural identity:

The slaves that came to the United States were taken from West Africa. Keeping that in mind, we also know that the African is surrounded by music... We talk about the fact that from the time that a child is born within the African community to the time the person dies there are all kinds of celebrations, and every celebration has its music to go with it... Those who were brought here as slaves, it is said that they left behind everything except their music and their religion... They created music during the times they had to work because within the African society the African used music while working... They used music simply as a survival tool. Not only did they perform on the plantations, they performed while they were on their own, either as individuals, in small groups, or when they gathered for celebrations whenever they had the opportunity. So we can always link the roots of Black sacred music to Africa and African music (Kwami, 2015).

In order to cope with the horrors of slavery and exist within this oppressive system, many enslaved persons adopted Western Christian religious practices to coexist with native African beliefs. Attending worship services while under the watchful eyes of slave masters meant interpreting scriptures and songs in a way that gave some hope to slaves through their newfound faith. They were able to draw upon their African rhythms and worship traditions and fashion a sound that was familiar. This was the birth of the Negro spirituals—spontaneous and original songs mainly heard in the fields, slave quarters, and prayer meetings (Faithful, 2007). The spirituals served multiple purposes for enslaved men and women. This music was an expression of democratic values, community solidarity, and protest; a source of inspiration and motivation; and an instrument for coded communication (Jones A. C., 2004). The songs' musical styles contained African elements that brought together practices like the call-and-response

arrangement, syncopation, multiple rhythms, hand clapping, and rhythmic body movement. Not only were spirituals the primary religious expression by enslaved persons living on plantations, this music also possessed covert political messaging (Faithful, 2007). As much as spirituals bolstered the faith and the survival capabilities of those enslaved, the songs—with their lyrical threads of freedom, equality, and redemption—also contained symbolism that served as clues for navigating actual roads to freedom. Embedded in some of the songs were directions helping to guide freedom seekers making their way to the North; or instructions for secret prayer meetings in a particular location on the plantation. The spirituals were a multi-purpose tool and they signified the creation of an innovative new paradigm for Africans living in bondage in America. The belief of many enslaved persons was that if they could endure the sufferings of slavery, they would eventually encounter peace and freedom in Heaven (Faithful, 2007). This gives way to the communal nature of the spirituals, replete with diverse African religious beliefs and cultural practices, transmitted through oral tradition in an environment that did not recognize the humanity of Africans. The spirituals were the central characters in the worship experiences of slaves—religious gatherings that were oftentimes forbidden by slaveholders. The theological framework of the music was supported by the common theme of suffering endured by Christ and enslaved Blacks. They were not alone in their struggle and their bondage was not unknown by God. The basic form of the songs included spontaneity and improvisation which permitted those enslaved to inject their personalities into the spirituals. The physical and emotional trials that resulted from human bondage found their way into the worship experiences of

enslaved women and men. This communal spirit that was evident in the music sprang forth as a survival mechanism for those who were oppressed. The simplistic yet complex symbolism woven into the spirituals illustrated that “worship should flow from the heart and must be relevant to the moment in which the worshipper finds himself” (Faithful, 2007, p. 9).

In those situations where group worship was permitted on slave plantations, the loose and spontaneous nature of Negro spirituals represented a rare and free expression in a controlled and restricted society. For a few moments, the mixture of praise and pain created melodies that belonged solely to the enslaved—songs, shouts, and humming that offered brief connections to hope. The call-and-response arrangement allowed the worshippers to experience and share each other’s joys and sorrows collectively. It was a way for one to *speak* about a particular feeling or experience in song and have another person *respond* to that emotion or situation during a prayer service. The song structure of call-and-response was a cultural foundation where “enslaved Africans affirmed the traditional African emphasis on the importance of family and (tribal) community identity, a value reinforced by the common experience of enslavement” (Jones A. C., 2004). These songs rely on a communal force, bringing about a “spiritual regeneration” that is “reinforced by the visitation of the Spirit, and the efforts of all are needed to bring this about” (Daniel & Smitherman, 2004, p. 9).

Called the ring shout, worshippers freely and loudly shouted praises and gathered in a circle, alternating between singing and shouting (Faithful, 2007). This context of worship encompassed African tradition and “the values of ancestor worship and contact,

communication and teaching through storytelling” (Floyd, 1991, p. 266). The ring shout was considered a “holy dance,” with its basis consisting of a formation that encouraged spirited worship in a communal setting. One description of this historic form of Black sacred music gives an indication of the physicality involved in the ring shout:

“Participants stood in a ring and began to walk around it in a shuffle, with the feet keeping in contact with or close proximity to the floor, and that there were ‘jerking,’ ‘hitching’ motions, particularly in the shoulders” (Floyd, 1991, p. 266). At its foundation, the ring shout brought together both sacred and secular components, while acknowledging ancestral rituals and Christian practices. Some scholars believe the ring dance, which was common among many ethnically diverse African tribes, was the foundation of the ring shout, which later evolved into the spirituals (Jones A. C., 2004).

Singing and praying bands are geographically identified with the Maryland and Delaware region, signifying music’s migratory nature. As enslaved individuals moved from Southern states that were entrenched in the slave trade to Northern states that promised freedom, cultural traditions made their way to different regions in the country. Singing and praying bands emerged from secretive slave institutions known as bush harbors, brush arbors, or hush harbors (Faithful, 2007). Since most slaves could not freely worship without the supervision of slaveholders, they surreptitiously gathered amid secluded thick bushes and small trees to sing, worship, and exchange information. These open-air sanctuaries are considered the foundation of many modern day African American churches that were established during the antebellum period. In Northeastern bush harbors during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, singing and praying

bands in the Chesapeake Tidewater region continued the worship traditions of earlier generations (Murphy, 2014). Although the group was known as a band, the term referred to the unified gathering of worshippers rather than the inclusion of musical instruments. Singing and praying bands infused lined hymns with West African sacred music and were a part of prayer and camp meetings (Murphy, 2014).

Collectively, Black sacred music helped enslaved Africans in America make sense of an oppressive reality through an expression that they understood. They chronicled their experience with music and found moments of beauty in a horrific setting. In some ways, comparisons can be made between the creativity, spontaneity, and linguistic manipulations associated with rap music and Black sacred music, which should elicit interest from African American Millennials that embrace hip-hop culture. Some of the characteristics of the call-and-response style of singing are present in rap music. The syncopated delivery, multiple rhythms, body movement, communal engagement, and themes that reveal social conditions are common to both genres. Similar artistic elements show the “creative process in both African and African American traditions places value on improvisation, where performers bring their own interpretation to songs by producing unique and varying timbres and by manipulating time, text, and pitch in ways uncommon in European musical practices” (Burnim & Maultsby, 2015, p. 18).

The metaphorical lyrics of some rap music are in direct relation to the hidden messaging woven into the spirituals created during slavery. A spiritual referencing Heaven could have meant freedom awaiting them in northern states. Just as the spirituals were an expression of the circumstances of enslaved persons, rap and hip-hop music tell



the stories of younger generations of African Americans and their negotiation of racial, social, and economic conditions. A study examining the relationship between hip-hop music and political power outlined how African American youth “capitalized on an important cultural medium to raise consciousness, connect with others, and strengthen their understandings about oppression and their everyday lives” (Clay, 2006, p. 118).

The edification of Black sacred music involves having an appreciation for the culture and traditions and connecting them to elements that help inform one’s cultural identity. In the spirit of African oral tradition practices, songs, arrangements, and information about the historical contexts in which they existed need to be shared among the generations. One account of musicians transferring sacred, blues, and jazz music to younger musicians describes the process of preservation through exposure and education. “The practice of an older generation of musicians passing on their skills and songs to a younger one certainly outlived the last slave musicianer. Rural black musicians continued to teach their children, grandchildren, and friends, serving as a repository for the community’s musical tradition well into the twentieth century” (Cimbala, 1995, p. 22).

For those coming after the creators of this body of sacred music, the meaning becomes greater when a personal connection can be established. Internationally renowned music arranger and conductor Francis Hall Johnson had a love for the spirituals and could essentially *feel* the connection. His grandmother was born into the system of slavery and “it impressed him deeply that she had sung these songs in slavery, having

been thirty when she finally realized freedom” (Weisenfeld, 2011, p. 40). A connection such as this is the impetus for preserving elements of one’s culture.

Other cultures hold music in high esteem and recognize that a particular group’s identity is embedded in the art form. Continuing these traditions ensures a group’s identity will be present for future generations. Francisca Norales’ research of the Garífuna language in Central America gives insight into a 500-year-old language with African origins. Worship services that incorporate songs in Garífuna help sustain the language’s cultural relevance. According to Norales, “inclusiveness and active participation through hymns and songs written in Garífuna decades ago were then and continue to be incorporated into the worship services. While church attendance increased, this was viewed as another means of preserving the Garífuna language and culture” (Norales, 2011, p. 81).

Africans have witnessed Nigerian folk music diminish as younger generations distance themselves from this genre that is associated with the continent’s history. “Oral tradition is the basis for the composition, documentation, dissemination, and retrieval of music in Africa. As such, many folk songs of Nigeria have been lost as a result of a breakdown in oral tradition and the inability of an unreceptive new generation to follow these traditions” (Onyeji, 2005, p. 23). Intensive preservation measures that include documentation and field recordings seek to revive this segment of music culture. Another study outlines a preservation challenge with Latino migrant workers who expressed concern about not being able to pass on Spanish songs to their children, and youngsters not having a full sense of their music identity. Educational music programs

are intended to assist with “the loss of songs due to long hours parents remain in the fields apart from their children” (O'Hagin & Harnish, 2001, p. 22).

In Irish culture, language and music are closely connected to its national identity. Preserving the music that defines Gaelic civilization is associated with cultural relevance and modifying any of its original arrangements for changing audience tastes is discouraged. The belief is that “to detach part of the repertory in an effort to make it hospitable to the norms of art music (to arrange an Irish melody, or to score a song for orchestra) would only be to display the shibboleths of a remote culture. Or a ruined one” (White, 1996, p. 130). Music is an identifying agent of a culture and holds one of the keys to understanding how a group operates in social, artistic, and spiritual settings.

It is an ongoing quest as communities grapple with losing parts of their cultural identity, particularly as family and community leaders grow older and pass away, ultimately taking with them stories and traditions that can never be regained. Many researchers lean heavily on technology to record and document cultural practices and, simultaneously, work to engage young persons in the preservation process. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, initiatives are underway by native residents and researchers to reclaim its history—including periods of feudalism, mercantilism, enslavement, and industrial imperialism—which has primarily been told from a Eurocentric perspective (Kahina, 2013). Processes are in place to update lectures and seminars and present them in a way that encourages interactivity using new media technologies. These presentations will become part of the historical archives that will help broaden the collective story of the Virgin Islands. By also documenting the accounts of regional crafts persons, novelists,

filmmakers, and historians, it ensures “the indigenous and ancestral voices of these regions” will be heard (Kahina, 2013, p. 48). In fact, these contributors are considered stakeholders in preserving the island’s history because they have “crafted, studied, and published a series of narratives, folklore, stories, and research documentations in an attempt to interpret the historic preservation and heritage restoration experiences of the Virgin Islands and the Caribbean” (Kahina, 2013, p. 48). Project researchers recognize the value of partnering with local young persons, not only for this generation’s purported ease of use with technology, but for the collection process to serve as a catalyst for understanding and embracing Caribbean history and culture.

Presenting historical accounts of cultural traditions through the documentary film format provides a perspective that can be expressed in contemporary settings and accessed later by future observers. Music, art, language, dance, lifestyles, and other components of culture can be recorded and exist indefinitely utilizing this form of media. As humans, the narrative process is connected to how we make sense of the world formulated by audio and visual interpretations (Bondebjerg, 2014). The ability to connect emotionally with a narrative and draw upon past memories reinforces the effectiveness of the documentary. Family stories, photographs, memorabilia, including images and videos captured with mobile phones and uploaded to the Internet, are considered more personal narratives, but they are also part of a broader narrative sphere (Bondebjerg, 2014). These examples, along with historical documentary narratives, help define who we are, while making “connections between the personal and the social, between the individual and the collective and between the factual and emotional”

(Bondebjerg, 2014, p. 17). John Corner's assessment of the documentary's complexities centers on political and cultural modernism that are the result of public and private experiences (Corner, 2013). Elements that characterize documentaries "have shown an expositional and analytic dynamic together with a real ethnographic zeal in the portrayal of different forms of living" (Corner, 2013, p. 113).

In the same manner as documentaries promote memories of subjects related to our cultural identity, it stands to reason that motion pictures with historic storylines would bring about similar emotional connections. For some older African Americans, these films set the stage for experiencing the story with firsthand knowledge or relating to them in a cultural or racial context. African American Millennials would likely connect with a Black-themed historical film because of cultural interest, not a direct experience related to a particular event. Films with storylines highlighting African American historical events are most certain to have film scores or soundtracks with gospel or sacred music. Some recent films with Black themes that have followed in this tradition are *The Help*, *The Butler*, *Django Unchained*, *12 Years A Slave*, and *Selma*. Old hymns, spirituals, and anthems generally have a supporting role musically and can effectively set the tone for scenes or events that reflect Black culture. In an article on the Musiqology website, the music supervisor for the film *Selma* spoke about how the spirituals informed the strategies of the Civil Rights Movement and the emotional effect this music has today (Hadley, 2015). Morgan Rhodes, born after this era, connected with the music and its significance to social and political change, and what these songs must have meant to Dr.

Martin Luther King. Researching music for the film included her discovery of a rare recording of “Walk With Me” by Martha Bass, a song prominently featured in the movie.

It’s from an album of Negro Spirituals covered by different artists. So I heard it on YouTube, but it wasn’t available anywhere. I was like, “I’ve got to have this song.” I was able to find a record collector who had one copy and it was pristine... But as I said before, you can’t separate Dr. King from his faith, nor can you separate the Civil Rights Movement from the faith that undergirded that Movement. So it’s very important to have gospel music and hymns in there, and certainly Negro Spirituals too. But that was the record, that, when I heard it, made me cry. Then I knew I’d arrived at the right place. I kept praying and I kept crying and I said, “This is the one” (Hadley, 2015).

Assuming young African Americans do not have an interest in Black sacred music may be inaccurate. Basing this on their popular music preferences, such as rap and hip-hop, supports the viewpoint of Millennials’ inability to have well developed musical tastes. Music is so heavily conjoined with human emotions, so exposure to the music and a historical context of the songs, would likely cultivate a willingness to explore Black sacred music.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order for one to value a trait or belief, a personal or cultural connection would need to be present. Earlier research describes cultural identity as being “the enactment and negotiation of social identifications by group members in particular settings,” adding that the relationship is “understood as socially constructed, structurally enabled or constrained, discursively constituted locations of being, speaking, and acting that are enduring as well as constantly changing” (Chen & Collier, 2012, p. 45). Additional research in cultural identity theory explores ethnic and self-identification components, including the social negotiations of emerging adults (ages 18–30) (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007).

The study by Schwartz et al. examines the relationships between acculturation strategies, ethnic identity, cultural individualism, and familial connectedness among this age group. Cultural identity has both internal and external attributes, whereas it is “one of the many identities that constitute the core of the individual, the essence of what makes one who one is” and it requires an outlet “to be expressed or communicated, be known, and be recognized, or accepted” (Chen & Pan, 2002, p. 160). In a comparative study of African American cultural works by esteemed playwright August Wilson, Sandra Shannon describes cultural identity as “an identity culled out of the concept of re-memory whereby one questions the past and *chooses* what to do with it” (Shannon, 2009, p. 29). The myths, music, oral traditions, practices, and belief systems are all part of a distinct embodiment that she says Wilson associated with Africa, which was “easily considered by Wilson to be the very salt of African American cultural identity.”

Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* illustrates the importance of valuing cultural traditions and sentimental family items, indicating that "these rituals and behavioral codes, he argues, must be embraced, practiced and passed on to younger generations for the sake of sustaining a cultural legacy" (Shannon, 2009, p. 33).

Africans transported to America constructed new meaning for existing in an environment where they were denied freedom. By reconnecting with their various cultural practices through communal engagement, enslaved individuals found music to be a common factor in maintaining their cultural identity. Although Africans brought to America are not considered migrants, research examining the transformative power of migration applies to the survival of traditional African chants and songs during the slave trade. "Music may be used to recreate the culture of the past, to remind you of the place from which you come, but migration can lead to cultural innovation and enrichment, with the creation of new forms which are indicative or symptomatic of the issues facing the immigrant, and which help one in dealing with a new life in a place of settlement and in the articulation of new identities" (Baily & Collyer, 2006, p. 174). This framework corresponds with the evolution process of the spirituals and the influence Black sacred music had on other African American music genres, including jug band music, the blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, and hip-hop.

Research in cultural socialization highlights the importance of parents introducing their children to symbols of racial heritage and traditions to help instill racial pride (Hughes, et al., 2006). Hughes cites practical examples for parents such as "talking about important historical or cultural figures; exposing children to culturally relevant books,



artifacts, music, and stories; celebrating cultural holidays; eating ethnic foods; and encouraging children to use their family's native language" (Hughes, et al., 2006, p. 749). Additional research also includes familial ethnic socialization and defines it as "the ways in which parents and other family members 'pass down' their ethnic heritage by teaching their children about and exposing them to history traditions, symbols, historical figures, and community members from the family's heritage culture" (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Rodriguez, & Wang, 2007, p. 161). My exposure to Black sacred music as a child was the result of my family and community "passing down" bits of culture. The value these two social structures placed on this genre would later help inform my understanding of African American culture. The music that older members sang in church, the songs my third grade teacher taught her students, and the music I heard on gospel music radio stations was identified as Black music, even though I could not fully articulate its ethnic significance. Developing an awareness of the music from a historical perspective made the cultural relevance more meaningful. I was somehow connected to the creators of these rich songs that touched on a range of human conditions—sorrow, redemption, joy, and peace. If these songs were expressions of emotions from events long ago, it was incumbent upon me to understand the circumstances that brought forth that music. Once the connection was made, it was a natural progression toward appreciating and respecting this cultural art form.

Conversely, if one's cultural identity is not associated with that of a society's dominant culture, there may be difficulty in recognizing the benefits of identifying with the non-dominant culture. In those instances, "individuals who strive for positive social

identities to enhance their self-esteem may intentionally choose to give up the minority identity and language” (Chen & Pan, 2002, p. 161). As non-dominant cultures migrate into dominant cultures, the existence of traditions, customs, and languages is threatened. This concern was shared in the documentary *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice: Preserving the Gift of Black Sacred Music*, in terms of spirituals and hymns not being included in many African American worship services. The primary purpose for producing the film was to develop a resource for African American congregations who were a part of the predominantly White United Methodist denomination. However, during production, it was determined that the film should have a broader, and more ecumenical reach in order to engage more audiences and to address the concern of Black sacred music being lost for future generations.

Culture as identity incorporates a series of symbols that are part of a political exercise that represents how we want to be known by others (Cohen, 1993). Identity is defined initially by culture; then symbols; and, finally, by ethnicity. Black sacred music is characterized by all three elements and derives meaning from utilization. Failing to designate a place of significance within Black culture for these historic songs could diminish their cultural importance and weaken Black Americans’ connection to the music’s social and political distinctiveness. Giving meaning to symbolic icons of a culture—like cuisine, attire, and music—is a complex exercise because their meanings are ascribed by those who use them. These symbols are “intrinsically meaningless, then, but powerfully eloquent, so much so that their loss or proscription may be experienced as an utter silencing of the cultural voice” (Cohen, 1993, p. 201). Furthering the notion that

symbols and practices are foundations for cultural identity, these elements contribute to a perception of “beingness,” which are informed by the experiences and perspectives within our lives (Ramsey, 2008).

The emotions and memories associated with Black sacred music possess different meanings for different persons or groups. It is unreasonable to assign the same meaning that an older African American who grew up listening to these songs to a young African American who is not as familiar with the music. Developing meaning involves “the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code—*encoding*, putting things into the code—and by the same person at the other end interpreting or *decoding* the meaning” (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, p. 45). Hall explains that oral, social, and academic texts facilitate interpretation, and the ethnographic text is a source of background knowledge for each. A “reading” of an ethnographic text is “accomplished by a translation, the transposition of alien concepts or ways of viewing the world, from one language or another or from one conceptual universe to another” (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, p. 132). Anyone listening to Black sacred music, particularly African American Millennials, must find meaning and connect within historical, cultural, religious, musical, or preservation contexts. Encoding requires exposure to a text initially, so younger generations need to hear the music to determine whether the songs resonate with them. How they choose to interpret and integrate the music into their lives is dependent upon the meaning it has for their lives.

Brenten Weeks, a Millennial featured in *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice*, worked at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina, and directed the school’s gospel

choir. He also directs the Charleston Chorale, a group made up exclusively of Millennials that performs sacred and gospel music. The 26-year-old adjunct professor recalled how some students were resistant to singing ring shouts and hymns initially because the songs sounded “old” and did not coalesce with what they considered to be church music.

I always tell my students, you have to have an open mind because our music is not hip-hop. Our music is not just contemporary gospel. There is something that has been built up on a foundation to get us to the point where we are today. Be willing to sing different kinds of songs to challenge yourselves, not only mentally, but also vocally, because it's a different technique that you use to sing these different styles of music... And then over the course of maybe two or three weeks, after they have been singing the songs and dissected what they're singing about, they begin to realize, 'oh, my God, I actually like what I'm singing; I'm beginning to understand' (Weeks, 2013).

The transference of African music and its appropriation by enslaved Africans in America speaks to the communal nature of the music in shaping cultural identity. In Africa, music and religion contributed to overall cultural identity, despite tribal adherences. “These factors, combined with the unity of purpose in confronting a common experience of oppression as slaves, were likely powerful contributors to the slave culture in which spirituals were born” (Jones A. C., 2004, p. 257). Maintaining one's identity and self-worth seem like impossible feats when the conditions of slavery are considered. The Reverend Lisa Allen-McLaurin explains how sacred music contributed to enslaved individuals' survival and was the bedrock for shaping identity even in demoralizing situations. “Anger, hurt, bitterness, and resentment come from within, and can be exacerbated by what somebody does to you. But if there is a feeling of ‘somebody-ness’ within you, nobody can beat that out of you. Nobody can say things about you and call that out of you. If you are God's man, God's woman, God's young

man, God's young woman, then you are that, regardless. And that rises up in you” (Allen-McLaurin, 2013).

For many, sacred songs are considered significant elements that enhance the worship experience. They also serve as modern day reminders and sources of inspiration for overcoming less than favorable circumstances in one's personal life. Over the last few decades, however, some Black congregations have opted for more contemporary music selections in place of the historic hymns and spirituals. Additionally, many young African Americans who gravitate toward forming their own spiritual foundations—apart from their parents—attend non-denominational worship services comprised of multi-ethnic and multicultural congregants. In a 2007 Pew Research Center report that focused on religion among Millennials, research showed that younger people attended church at a lower rate than Baby Boomers (Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life, 2010). Thirty-three percent of Millennials (age 18-29) reported attending a worship service once a week, compared to 41% of persons aged 30 to 65. Data representing age distribution among members of historically Black Protestant churches show that African American Millennials comprise 24% of church membership (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2010). Church membership percentages for African American Millennials were lower than overall attendance percentages for this demographic. While both figures are substantially lower than older groups, there is a distinction between church attendance and church membership.

With fewer young people being exposed to Black sacred music at church, there is the possibility of this art form vanishing from worship services altogether within the next

two generations. For many African American Baby Boomers, this is the music they grew up with, but their children and grandchildren have had little to no exposure to the music created by their ancestors. For those who equate the spirituals with a dark period in American history, it is difficult to connect with how the songs aided in the emotional survival of the enslaved. Some African Americans distance themselves from the music so as not to be linked, however remotely, to an institution that deprived Blacks of any personal, economic, social, or political rights for hundreds of years. Dr. Kwami is fully aware of this position but hopes gaining more knowledge about the music will shift perceptions.

I understand people are ashamed of the music because of its origins and because of slavery. I look at it in a different way. I agree that it was the hardships that created this music, but I look at the music. I look at those Negro spirituals as if they have sacred text. I look at the music as God still speaking to us, and that's how I teach my students. We talk about songs like "Ain't That Good News," when the slaves were expressing their faith. We bring that in to today's life so that we're not singing about what they would have been thinking but we're singing about what these songs mean to us as we live (Kwami, 2015).

African American congregations that regularly include traditional sacred music in the worship experience are in a better position to pass this music on to younger generations than those congregations preferring more contemporary music. This is not an indictment of worship services whose song selections have modern components of popular, R&B, or hip-hop music. However, in the context of preservation, services that include Black sacred music have a greater opportunity to expose this type of music to worshippers representing different age groups, and leaders can encourage participation.

Bishop Joseph Warren Walker, senior pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, literally sees the disconnect some African American Millennials

have with Black sacred music from his vantage point in the pulpit. He witnesses the effect historic hymns and spirituals have on older and younger members. The predominantly African American congregation with 29,000 members regularly attracts young worshippers to its weekly services. The music during worship services is primarily traditional and contemporary gospel, but congregational hymns are included regularly. When older hymns are added to worship services without framing them within a context of historical significance or the circumstances that inspired the lyrics, Bishop Walker believes younger persons have difficulty relating to music that is vastly different from the more contemporary church music to which they are generally exposed (Walker, 2014). According to him, African American churches must take the lead in presenting Black sacred music in a way that honors its history while making it relevant to Millennials.

For the people of God, music has always been a place where stories have been preserved. When you look at the Old Testament, in the stories were songs. Moses and the children of Israel marched to the Red Sea. Afterwards, they stopped and sang a song about how they had been delivered. They were mocked in Babylon when they were on the riverbanks by the Chaldeans, who said, 'Sing us one of those songs.' They said, 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' and they hung up their harps. The song is a very important and vital part of our history. When translated into modern history, the slaves' songs were codes. There were messages of survival in the songs. And so music, through every generation, has told a story. The storytellers of this generation are Jay Z and Beyoncé. They are not the storytellers of the sixties or seventies. Even though there were socially conscious R&B artists then, the gospel music and sacred music is where the stories were told. Now, there's this disconnect. The divide is greater between hip-hop and R&B, and church music. You have hip-hop, R&B, contemporary gospel, gospel, and then you have sacred music. So you're three levels removed from gaining their attention. If it's lost, then the stories of how we got over are lost... We sang those songs, and songs of Dr. Watts, to survive. If they are lost, this generation has no context beyond Tupac and Kirk Franklin. So, the preservation becomes very important because it reminds young people that there was a history (Walker, 2014).

For some African American congregations, the link between Negro spirituals and African Americans represents a connection to a past defined by enslavement and oppression. Singing “sorrow songs” serves as a reminder of a voiceless, powerless people—characteristics reinforced by shame. By not identifying with this music, some African American churches subscribe to a more conservative and structured brand of worship with no association to the music born out of hardship and bondage. Bishop Walker feels that societal changes in recent years may have fostered ideas for distancing African American churches from Black sacred music.

With the emergence of multiculturalism—an attempt to be more diverse in our congregations—there is a move away from identifying ourselves as ‘the Black church,’ even though we are the Black church. As a result, those old hymns and spirituals are seen as relics of the Black church and are viewed negatively by some clergy. They see it as ‘we’re off the plantation now.’ I’m an avid believer that information properly packaged will sell anywhere. In some churches, the presentation is antiquated. The music has to be coming from a place of sincerity for this younger generation. The genre doesn’t really matter. This generation measures everything on authenticity (Walker, 2014).

Black sacred music has been repurposed and reintroduced at various intervals in American history. From its creation after the arrival of African captives in America, the music served as a respite for those subjected to the horrors of slavery. In antebellum America, emancipated Blacks paid homage to the music’s power of deliverance, and during times of civil and social injustice, Black sacred music became a motivator for overcoming oppressive systems that targeted marginalized citizens. As cycles of unrest and demonstrations occur, there are practices that define the moment. Music is as important an element in a movement as its leaders, speeches, and protests. The use of the spirituals during times of struggle was a remnant from slavery and the songs “left a deep imprint in the cultural memory of African Americans and their allies. It is therefore not



surprising that during the 1960s and 70s, many of the freedom songs sung by the multi-racial cadre of Civil Rights workers were essentially new versions of old slave spirituals with updated lyrics that expressed the specific needs of the Civil Rights Movement” (Jones A. C., 2004). Lyrics from an old spiritual sung by those enslaved would have been: “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on *Jesus*.” Marchers during the Civil Rights Movement would have sung: “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on *freedom*,” reassigning the power of the song to accommodate a different experience (Jones A. C., 2004). The Reverend Joseph E. Lowery, a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, recalled the impact spirituals had on the movement and the marchers. Knowing that they were going into territories that could lead to arrest, violence, or death, organizers relied on cultural and ancestral ideals which included sacred songs.

We couldn't have gone through the movement. The movement couldn't have survived without music. It wasn't only the movement, it was life itself. My mother, aunties, and grandmothers, they sang through the heat of the day. Sometimes we didn't know what they were saying, but they knew. They hummed and sang those songs. It was a part of the faith. And I don't know if the faith produced them or they produced the faith, but they belonged to each other (Giles, 2014).

The sacred songs were familiar to the leaders and helped facilitate the movement's social agenda. The spirituals motivated the participants and supporters and communicated the campaign's message in a non-confrontational manner. Rev. Lowery described the music as providing emotional stability during the long marches:

Spirituals were part of the movement in that they were a rock in a weary land. They were a place that we could find good footing when all other ground was sinking sand... And the movement borrowed them, and the movement added to them. The movement shifted them and changed them. The movement used the tunes from the spirituals with other lyrics that didn't always match. We would sing about these ol' rocks hurt my feet, which we would sing to the tune of some

old spiritual. But the words were fitting for the ground we had to travel (Lowery, 2013).

Protesters continue to invigorate demonstrations with music that defined the Civil Rights Movement. Other than church worship services, protest settings provide a unique, communal setting of multicultural and multigenerational groups. Because of recent incidents of police brutality and killings of Black men, African American Millennials who participate in protests are being exposed to the music, tactics, and experiences reminiscent of the Civil Rights Movement.

### CHAPTER THREE: FILM DEVELOPMENT BACKGROUND

In an effort to assist in the preservation of Black sacred music and to bring awareness to cultural gifts of African American United Methodists, the General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) of the United Methodist Church proposed to create a video that would reflect the theological needs and cultural preferences of African Americans (General Board of Discipleship, 2012). It would include historical references and musical examples of the different forms of sacred music. The intention of the video was that it would serve as a training tool for worship leaders to help introduce this form of music to musicians and choir members who were not familiar with it as a way to incorporate the songs into weekly services and special church-related events. There was concern that some of the suggested music and theological rituals proposed by the United Methodist Church did not fully reflect the heritage of African Americans or align with preferred worship styles (General Board of Discipleship, 2012). The racial majority of the denomination's more than 7,300,000 members in the United States is Caucasian, according to the church's General Council on Finance and Administration (Data Services: The United Methodist Church). Members of African descent account for roughly 450,000 of the total membership, with most of them worshipping in small churches that are predominantly Black (General Board of Discipleship, 2012). Committee members believed that by not providing resources for learning or understanding the spirituals and hymns, the historic music form could potentially be lost for future generations. Measures by GBOD to preserve and celebrate the music were intended to benefit all Christian-based faith groups, not only United Methodists.

Maintaining cultural identity is at the forefront for many African American members of the United Methodist Church, particularly since African Americans account for approximately 6% of the denomination. Even though African Americans make up a relatively small segment of the denomination, there is a level of importance for maintaining cultural and spiritual elements. This sentiment of having one's culture and worship practices remain relevant within a mostly White church environment is rooted in the worship rituals of enslaved Blacks; and more recently connected with the formation of the United Methodist Church in 1968 and its acceptance of African American members. One of the concerns then was whether African American traditions and worship styles would be diminished or lost when joining a predominantly White denomination. Prior to the late 1960s, Black Methodists were affiliated with the Central Jurisdiction of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the segregated assembly for Black members within the denomination (Black Methodists for Church Renewal, 2014). As a religious institution, the statutes of the United Methodist Church have historically represented the traditions of the denomination's dominant culture, and worship practices of other ethnic groups do not have as great of a presence. Most congregations are multi-generational and the desire to craft musical selections in a way that appeals to younger persons practically eliminates Black sacred music from the order of service. African American congregations within the United Methodist Church are challenged by issues that relate to church culture and youth culture. One of the observations of the committee was that Black congregations are losing music styles that have cultural and historical significance to the corporate identity of the Black church (General Board of Discipleship,

2012). It was recommended that songs representing Black sacred music be taught to the next generation and that demonstrations of how selections are to be sung be archived as a historical record.

In January 2013, I was commissioned by the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church to produce a video that would provide some historical background to traditional songs heard during worship services in many African American churches. After meeting with committee members to discuss music elements and the purpose of the video, we developed a list of potential performers based on the music type and the production locations. The four styles of sacred music that were to be included were the ring shout, singing and praying bands, spirituals, and long-meter songs (also referred to as Dr. Watts songs). Long-meter songs are characterized by a song leader speaking and singing the lyrics and then being joined by the congregation singing the spoken lyrics, usually in a slow, drawn out manner. This technique by the leader is also known as “lining out” the lyrics. Dr. Isaac Watts was an eighteenth century English minister and hymn composer whose songs were often taught to enslaved persons in America (Negrospirituals.com). The “Dr. Watts” style songs were more easily adaptable in a preliterate society. Three general locations were determined to represent examples of the four styles of music. Charleston, South Carolina, was selected because of its central role in the slave trade; Dames Quarter, Maryland, represented the music’s performance and preservation with slaves’ transitory life patterns; and Atlanta, Georgia, referenced the music’s influence during the Civil Rights Movement. The documentary, narrated by Academy Award-nominated actor Alfre Woodard, includes performances of different

types of Black sacred music and interviews. Additional footage was incorporated into the DVD to show performances in their entirety so viewers would have a better understanding of song arrangements. *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice* is a component of the Africana Hymnal Project, which is a comprehensive resource, designed to help promote the history, integrity, and preservation of Black sacred music. The project is packaged on a USB drive, and contains sheet music, lyrics, and accompaniment tracks for 150 Negro spirituals and hymns (The Africana Hymnal, 2015).

In January 2015, the Mid-South Regional Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awarded *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice: Preserving the Gift of Black Sacred Music* the Emmy in the documentary/cultural category. The following month, the film aired on Maryland Public Television as part of its Black History Month programming. To aid in the project's educational purpose, *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice* can be viewed online (<https://vimeo.com/113635267>).

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

In order to assess what some young African Americans know and feel about Black sacred music, I conducted two focus groups. This method offered a suitable setting for dialogue among participants and provided me with the ability to observe physical reactions to texts related to the genre and gather comments. The documentary *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice: Preserving the Gift of Black Sacred Music*, serves as the primary text for this research. The focus group discussions included screening the film and discussing participants' relationship with the music. The film is a project of the United Methodist Church and is intended to be used as a resource to introduce the music to unfamiliar audiences and to preserve the songs and arrangements for years to come. The documentary was filmed in and near Charleston, SC; Atlanta, GA; and Dames Quarter, MD, with choirs, choral groups, and individuals presenting examples of Black sacred music. The performers range from college students to a 98-year-old woman. The locations essentially represented the music's path as it made its way from the South to the North, just as thousands of enslaved persons had done in search of freedom.

Seeing how the focus group participants responded to the music provided some indication of previous interactions with the music. The two groups were made up of randomly selected African American college students and older adults. My reason for selecting persons from these two generations was based on their likelihood of being in a position to embrace and share Black sacred music. Millennials should be considered as an essential part of any discussion regarding music preservation and any prescribed efforts should include them. Their opinions of Black sacred music and its worthiness to

the lifestyles of younger generations will impact the cultural survival of this body of work. Carrying the music forth rests with persons of this generation and it is important that their voices are included in this research. Millennials have unprecedented exposure to technology and its members are key players in the digital revolution. They are equipped with personal electronic devices that provide entry into accelerated lifestyles and have an increased appetite for topics that are trending at the present moment. Combine this dynamic with the fact that they are two generations removed from the Civil Rights Movement and it becomes essential to bring their perspective into a discussion about preserving and edifying a music tradition that may not be widely recognized among them.

One focus group was made up of five students and the other consisted of fourteen students and older adults. I hoped to ascertain how persons in these different groups related to the music and I documented their opinions on Black sacred music and cultural preservation.

Questions that guided the focus groups:

How many of you are familiar with the music featured in the film?

How are you familiar with it?

How would you describe this type of music?

Do you have friends who like or listen to this kind of music?

Does this music bring up memories for you? If so, describe the memories.



Have you heard family members sing this music? If so, where were they?

What can you tell me about the origins of Black sacred music?

How important is this type of music to you personally?

What are your thoughts about preserving an element related to your history or culture (music, art, language, etc.)?

For those who attend church or sing in a choir at church or at school, how would you suggest performing historic music in a service or program?

What did you think about the group of young singers in the film?

How relevant is this type of historic music in your current way of life?

What are your thoughts about this music disappearing and not being around for the next generation?

Every ethnic group has select cultural symbols that define its unique characteristics and traditions. Whether they are understood or valued by those not part of the group is irrelevant. These collective elements are considered worthy enough to bestow upon the next generation with the hope of these symbols being appreciated and perpetuated. Music, even its performance, “depends on rhetorical truth, on the musicians' ability to convince and persuade the listener that what they are saying matters” (Frith, 1996, p. 117). Black sacred music may very well be considered a valuable part of African American history and culture, but its preservation is dependent upon how important, useful, and relevant it is to current and future generations.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

To assess levels of familiarity and preservation interests, I conducted an ethnographic focus group with five Middle Tennessee State University students after a screening of the documentary. Four of the students were recommended by a staff person in the Electronic Media department; I invited the fifth student. I did not let the staff person or the students know the topic of the film or focus group, as I did not want the students researching the subject beforehand. Students ranged in age from 18 years to 29 years; three were female and two were male. My objectives were to gauge the students' basic knowledge about Black sacred music, identify connections to the music, and to understand their sense of importance for preserving the music. I also sought to understand if Black sacred music was relevant in the lives of young people and to obtain their personal perspectives about the responsibility of embracing this music form.

I arranged to conduct the focus group in a presentation room in the James Walker Library on the MTSU campus on March 28, 2014. The room accommodated seven persons and was equipped with a large television monitor, computers, and video/audio recording equipment. The audio recording equipment was not functioning properly so I used an audio recording application on my mobile phone. I welcomed the group, introduced myself, and asked each of the students to introduce themselves. I showed the film to the group, which ran approximately 35 minutes.

In the film, music historians and church music directors helped frame the project in terms of history and utility as they relate to African Americans. One of the interview subjects in the documentary, Christal Brown-Gibson, explained how the cultural shift

toward contemporary gospel music aided in diminishing the presence of traditional hymns and spirituals in many African American churches:

I'm of the opinion that when traditional music kind of eased its way out of the church, perhaps membership among youth and young adult started to decline. And so the church had to do something to get young people back involved in the church. So, the most nonthreatening tool that the church has for the community is its music. So, if we get some popular music that sounds like what they want to hear or what they're used to, and it can line up with that style, more youth and young people will come to church (Giles, 2014).

Over the years, Black sacred music has adapted to the personal and social needs of African Americans without losing its foundational purpose. Older forms of this music are still a part of many African American worship services. The songs have served as a spiritual bridge to transport sorrow and despair to an emotional place where these experiences can be tolerated or transcended. Lyrics to the spiritual "Drift Away" are an indication of music's social and spiritual significance in the lives of Black Americans.

*There's a storm out over the ocean  
And it's movin' this ol' way.  
If your soul's not anchored in Jesus  
It will surely drift away.*

As the participants were reviewing the film, I could hear some of them singing and humming along in low voices, which was an indication of their familiarity with this music. During one section of the documentary that included patterns of prayer that are commonly said in African American worship, one student recited parts of the prayer in unison with the on-screen subject. When the documentary ended, all of the respondents responded affirmatively when asked if they were familiar with Black sacred music. C. H. recounted a personal connection with the music:

I grew up in a small Baptist church and we still sing at least two to three hymns every Sunday. Like, this is what we're used to doing. I'm used to my great-

grandmother being in the kitchen cooking and humming hymns while she's cooking Sunday dinner.

J. S., who is 29 years old, referenced the genre featured in the film and its significance to him:

This was me all day long! I was raised by my grandmother. My grandmother is from Louisiana and when I was a kid I used to listen to all of her records. I would go and play her records and I just fell in love with that kind of music. When I was 10, people would ask, "Who's your favorite singer?" Mahalia Jackson. And I would tape and record all her songs. I made a folder where I would write down all the lyrics and I would listen.

An initial introduction to one's cultural heritage is a precursor to developing a personal connection to the various elements and deciding whether to embrace them. If Millennials, particularly African Americans in that demographic, are to carry Black sacred music forth, there must be, at the basic level, exposure to the music form. I asked about this music's connection to African Americans' heritage. C. P. stated that reverence to this genre's cultural origins should also be recognized:

I feel like that music is familiar to me as well... My parents and my grandmother grew up on that. I grew up in the '90s so there was this huge shift in terms of culture and becoming assimilated. And you have to essentially be less black to really progress forward. Those songs, when you hear them, on one hand they do sound foreign because for me, I'm used to hearing it at the church. You have this massive choir and you have all this audio equipment and you have keyboards and drummers, somebody on the saxophone, because to me that's normal. And then when you hear this, it's not that it's not normal, it's just, this is almost like old school. This is almost something you'd expect older people in their 60s, 70s, 80s to know. I feel it's best in that group. Not because it's not for everybody but because you can't just sing a song like that just to sing it. It's similar to the blues. You can't just know what to say, you need to know why it's being played.

J. S. added:

I so agree with it because that music brought us over as a people. I mean, I can't tell you how many times, with me being in my 20s, how many times those songs have carried me over. I know gospel music, like any other music, is multifaceted

but if you know something has been proven, to have brought us over as a people, to have encouraged, to have sent secrets. It's such a special part of us.

Among this group of students, there appeared to be a genuine interest in Black sacred music and a concern that it could potentially be lost if their generation did not actively embrace it. The music served as a connector to church worship services, family members and traditions, and to African American heritage and culture for the participants. I asked the group members about practical methods they would employ to preserve the music. There was an overall boldness among the students about informing others about the music and encouraging its use, particularly through digitally sharing traditional sacred songs. Since 24% of Millennials believe technology is the most defining characteristic of its group, sharing songs from this genre is a practical way to introduce the music to culturally and musically diverse audiences (Pew Research Center, 2010). There were also more grassroots suggestions for preserving Black sacred music.

R. F.: I probably would not be afraid to go to the pastor or choir director to suggest singing Negro spirituals. I grew up singing Dr. Watts and Negro spirituals in my church.

J. S.: I'm not afraid to speak out to people younger than me and tell them this is why this is important. I'm from the old school, y'all, and I'm not ashamed of that... I would love to be standing out there in the quad with three or four other young people harmonizing our butts off, singing to the glory of God like those young people were singing... We have to preserve that. We have to know who we are.

J. S. also suggested that I visit other college campuses and screen the film with students. He said it would initiate dialogue about preservation and give students some historical reference to the music. All of the students in the focus group agreed that they would be willing to share digital versions of the songs featured in the documentary with

their friends. Strong media use among Millennials is an added benefit and should be seriously considered when developing preservation and distribution strategies.

All of the participants in this focus group, coincidentally, were familiar with Black sacred music because of attending church services. I do not expect this to be the case in future group discussions. Even for persons who attend church regularly, there is no guarantee they will relate to the music due to the different types of songs that are likely a part of their church's worship service.

At another screening of *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice* at Middle Tennessee State University on February 3, 2015, I obtained written comments from African American Millennials, including one White Millennial, and persons in older age groups. The screening was one of the university's Black History Month events and was open to the public. Attendees were informed of my research prior to watching the film and agreed to participate. Survey results from the two groups, with seven persons each, were labeled Millennials (M) and Baby Boomers (B). They were asked to complete surveys about Black sacred music and its relevance to African American culture. I was able to ascertain the age group of the attendees by including general age categories on the survey. Of the 14 respondents, 13 stated they were familiar with the music and had heard it in church. Many described the experiences that connected them to the music.

- M-1: The music from the documentary reminds me of my grandparents and the music played in the kitchen during breakfast, especially on Sunday mornings.
- M-4: I can remember singing "Jesus Is My Doctor" growing up in my church, led by the Mother of our church.
- M-7: My grandfather sang these types of songs.

- M-3: I went to a Christmas singing gathering three years ago.
- B-3: I heard this music growing up in a “sanctified church” with my older relatives singing the songs. They had experienced life’s journey. You could feel their struggle, but also their soul.
- B-5: I do have memories of singing and hearing the music in the church as I grew up. Also, my mother sang some of these songs.
- B-6: I heard it in my grandmother’s church in New York and in South Carolina. I also heard it growing up in Nashville and being exposed to the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

The respondents’ connection to Black sacred music was through observance and participation. Even though there were generational differences, the comments were very similar. They had heard the music in church or remember family members singing it. Some of the Millennials said they had accessed performances of this genre on YouTube before. When asked whether it was important to expose young African Americans to Black sacred music, most respondents’ comments centered on cultural heritage.

- M-4: Yes, because it represents who we are and our roots.
- M-5: Yes, because it’s a part of who we are.
- M-7: It shows and exemplifies the life of our ancestors and where we came from.
- M-1: It is very important because during slavery, music, faith, and God were the only things that primarily kept their spirits up. “A person that doesn’t know their past will not have a future.”
- M-2: I believe that it is important to understand all Americans’ history and cultures to coexist properly.
- M-3: It depends. Not everyone is religious, but it is their heritage.
- B-1: Yes, because it helps to teach our own history and keep traditions alive.
- B-2: Yes, it gives honor to our ancestors who paved the way. This music soothed and lifted their souls and it can do the same for us today.
- B-3: Yes, if it is not used it will be lost. It is such a treasure.

B-5: I think it is important for young people to be exposed to the music of our ancestors and feel the strength and power of the music.

One of the African American students recounted hearing Black sacred music regularly in the small church where he grew up in Savannah, Georgia. His grandmother played the tambourine while the church members sang and clapped their hands. As a young child, he and his cousins complained about the music and feigned boredom whenever one of the elderly women would stand to sing. He also disliked singing the congregational songs from the hymn book. At the time, he had no knowledge or understanding of the music, but said the film helped him appreciate it more. He was able to connect the music to the struggle his ancestors endured and now feels he has a responsibility to keep Black sacred music alive.

All of the respondents agreed that this genre is important to African American culture and more examples, like the documentary, should be made available to all audiences. Older participants also commented on some African Americans' lack of commitment to talking with their children about what their ancestors experienced while enslaved, and in later time periods while seeking to establish more equitable and inclusive social structures. They felt the music symbolized strength, survival, and pride; and it should be preserved out of respect for the hardship their ancestors endured. Millennials in the group recognized the historical significance of the music and will likely continue embracing it. One of the participants, M-1, explained the music's relevance to a younger generation: "Black sacred music is very spiritually uplifting. It allows younger generations to connect with their ancestors, in a sense."



Providing a forum for reviewing and discussing the film furthers the efforts to encourage African American Millennials to incorporate Black sacred music into their cultural realm. It also allows older African Americans to access past experiences with the music and share accounts of the music's historical and cultural influences. Bringing generations together in similar settings will help advance utilization and potentially encourage cross-generational collaboration in performing sacred music.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

For African American Millennials, initial introductions to Black sacred music will likely be in church settings. Beyond worship services or special programs featuring this type of music, technology will drive their accessing performances or recordings of older songs. Content-sharing websites like YouTube and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are hubs leading the way in exchange of entertainment and lifestyle information. The online archives of the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)) yield remarkable examples of sound and video recordings of Black sacred music. Universities, long known as repositories for music collections, now are expanding access to preserved recordings by making some of their archives available online. A resource by the University of Denver, The Spirituals Project, includes a multimedia online component with performance samples (<http://www.spiritualsproject.org/sweetchariot/>). Baylor University's Black Gospel Music Restoration Project includes recordings of older gospel songs deemed "at risk" and can be downloaded from the university's iTunes account (<http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/fa-gospel>). Certainly for Millennials, digital options increase opportunities for exposure. In addition to African American churches, there are academic institutions, museums, cultural centers, and community organizations across the country that present music performances and have resources for different levels of study of Black sacred music.

If music is a significant element of one's cultural identity, its preservation would also extend heightened relevance and pride toward an individual. According to Frith, "music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the

body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (Frith, 1996, p. 124). Norales asserts that music has the ability to concretely shape basic human ideas and make these symbols memorable with melody and rhythm (Norales, 2011).

Perhaps the most celebrated performers of Black sacred music are the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Their legacy of bringing these historic songs to worldwide audiences has immeasurably assisted in exposing persons of varying social, religious, ethnic, and generational groups to songs created by enslaved Africans in America. For the first time, Northerners and Europeans would hear Negro spirituals and see Blacks in a capacity other than servitude (Epstein, 1990). The Fisk Jubilee Singers were exceptional examples of the transformative power of education of former slaves. Their performances also transformed some public perception, revealing that audiences “that had seen very few former slaves had no difficulty in accepting them as both fresh from the cotton fields and as models of Christian piety, benevolence, and culture” (Epstein, 1990, p. 60). The overwhelming interest in seeing performances by Blacks could be a carryover from slavery, when slaveholders were regularly entertained by those enslaved. As free men and women, their talent is redefined by themselves and carries with it a “sense of specialness,” as characterized by bell hooks (Durham & Kellner, 2012). The interest in the “primitive” is supported by “specialness;” of which “histories and experience once seen as worthy only of disdain can be looked upon with awe” (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 310).

The original ensemble's ingenuity and devotion to tour and perform the music to help fund the education of recently emancipated Black men and women at Fisk University do not go unnoticed by its current musical director. Dr. Kwami believes he has a responsibility to preserve the art form:

I always give credit to the members who completed that first tour because I believe that had it not been for them making the decision to arrange these songs and perform them, we probably would not be hearing about the Negro spirituals today. For me, as an African, a former Jubilee Singer, now director of the ensemble, I consider it a great honor to be part of a legacy that Fisk University still supports and helps to preserve. One of the ways the music can be preserved is for it to be performed. People have to hear it. People have to know that the music still exists. People then have to be taught to understand, not just the history behind the songs, but what the songs mean to us today. It is one of the things I enjoy the most, talking about the songs, actually discussing the songs, when I teach my students. I do believe very strongly that this is a form of music that has to be preserved (Kwami, 2015).

One of the current Fisk Jubilee Singers has performed with the ensemble since 2010. He characterizes his involvement as "relaying the legacy" to persons who are not familiar with Black sacred music, and to audiences that have always appreciated their repertoire. Preserving this music's cultural heritage is a priority and he believes outlets other than churches should be explored. The student recognizes African American membership within the different denominations and respects the style of music each chooses to perform. However, he does not place the responsibility of presenting Black sacred music exclusively on Black churches.

Recently, we've been working with the fine arts departments at different high schools in various areas, giving the students a chance to sing with us. They're learning about Black sacred music, the spirituals, and what they mean. Then they get to perform on stage with us singing these same songs. I have been loving that, because when we do the concerts in those cities, it builds the interests of other students and parents. It also builds up the fine arts communities within the cities so people can get more support for the arts and music (Fisk Jubilee Singer, 2015).

In February 2015, a recording of the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” by the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1909 was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2015). The ensemble also received the National Medal of Arts in 2008. The national and international recognition garnered by the Fisk Jubilee Singers is reassurance that some African American Millennials are building on a cultural legacy to help preserve Black sacred music. Their exposure to and performance of this music will continue as long as educational institutions support music programs that uplift this genre. Choral groups from historically Black colleges and universities are valuable resources for presenting Negro spirituals and hymns to school groups, community and civic groups, and congregations.

As it relates to African American churches, there is an element of education that should be considered. Not only is there the history of the songs, but the arrangements can be more complex than modern musical selections and require some study. According to Bishop Walker, it is important for church musical directors to be committed to preserving historical music (Walker, 2014). They should be encouraged to attend workshops and conferences to become properly educated on the structural composition of Black sacred music. He feels pastors also have a role in promoting the music for inclusion in worship services, as well as communicating with other pastors about its historical and cultural relevance. His suggestions for African American churches include adhering to a commitment to educating clergy and diffusing negative and inaccurate notions about Negro spirituals; helping ministers of music become more diverse in their selections of worship music; embracing technology for the “sight and sound generation,” i.e.

documentary/film materials and short video clips that illustrate the origins and evolution of Black sacred music; and creating a balance of hymnal and contemporary selections during worship (Walker, 2014).

There are numerous examples of Negro spirituals, African chants, and hymns that can connect different African American generations to a culture rich with history. This cultural heritage that includes traits of survival, progress, and achievement can be appropriated in contemporary settings only if it is identified as a cultural element worth preserving and passing down to younger generations. *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice: Preserving the Gift of Black Sacred Music* offers a perspective that presents historical and cultural contexts of the genre. Persons representing multiple generations offer insight into their relationship with the music and the songs' relevance to Black Americans' heritage. The film is a resource that can add to the discourse surrounding the education and edification of Black sacred music and its introduction to younger generations. Just as the documentary was presented as a text in this research, my hope is the research will add to the educational outreach and assist others who wish to know more about sacred music's role in Black cultural heritage. The researcher recognizes there is, among some, a sentiment of resistance to this genre because of its connection to a period some would prefer not to remember. The music represents the emotions of an oppressed people during a particular era, and efforts to preserve the art form are sometimes challenged by other conventions that seek disassociation. My relationship with this music was formed early in life and strengthened by the exposure the production of the film afforded me. Witnessing the performances and the effect the songs have on geographically diverse

audiences gave me a keener awareness of its indigenous qualities and the music's longevity. My hope is that interests will be rekindled and that introductions to the music will yield favorable results. The spirituals that were created by enslaved Africans are cultural heirlooms that have been passed down and repurposed for 400 years. African Americans are the beneficiaries of this gift; how it is kept, preserved and advanced is the responsibility of the recipient.

While it is understood that Black sacred music was birthed during a period that has long passed, African American Millennials can craft meaning by contrasting past injustices with current examples of inequality for marginalized individuals. "Times may have changed, but it is important for students to realize that many still live in a form of those conditions every day, although the term slavery may have evolved into names such as *debt bondage*, *bonded labor*, *indentured servitude*, and *human trafficking*" (Small, 2009, p. 49). Older African Americans and church leaders can take proactive steps in including historic music in worship services which could influence several generations and cultures. I saw firsthand how this music affected persons of different age groups during the production of the film. There was active participation from school age children to elderly folk. Because Millennials' exposure to Black sacred music is limited, it is possibly a misnomer that there is limited interest. My observations on shoot locations, and in the focus groups, told a different story. Young people appeared engaged and they readily connected with the songs' historical context. Although students in both focus groups grew up listening to and singing Black sacred music, further research is needed to assess its usefulness and importance to young African Americans who are

unfamiliar with it, along with the inclusion of racially diverse perspectives regarding the music's historical and artistic attributes. As *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice* is presented to church groups, community organizations, and other media outlets, additional research could help ascertain the film's educational role in promoting the utilization of Black sacred music.



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