



"Let The Church Sing!": Music And Worship In A Black Mississippi Community, By Thérèse Smith (Review)

By: **Ericka Patillo**

Abstract

As a black American born and raised in the Southeast and brought up in a Pentecostal church, I was immediately interested in *Let the Church Sing!*, an ethnographic study of a rural black Mississippi community, their styles of worship and music, and how their worldview influenced these styles. More than an academic interest, I wanted to know the similarities between that experience and mine. Just as Thérèse Smith, an Irish ethnomusicologist with a Brown University pedigree, acknowledges that this study is "inevitably coloured by [her] interpretations" (p. 207), so too are my impressions and judgments of her work informed by my experiences growing up in a black church in the South.

Patillo, Ericka (2005). Book Review -- "*Let the Church Sing!*": *Music and Worship in a Black Mississippi Community*. By Thérèse Smith. *Notes*, Volume 62, Number 1, September 2005, pp. 142-145 (Review). Project Muse, Published by Music Library Association. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.2005.0113>. Publisher version of record available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/186381/pdf>

redolent of Susan McClary's powerful salvo of three years before, "The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year," (*Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 13–62), that the failure to grant McClary so much as a footnote here seems a somewhat misleading invitation to hear Steinberg's as the sole voice crying in the wilderness (McClary appears for the first and last time in the body of Steinberg's text on page 128). Similarly, as heavily as Steinberg relies, at several critical junctures, on distinguishing between "third-person" musical narration and a "first-person" voice, the absence of Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996] from the conversation is perplexing. And while Steinberg's book will likely find a home on many shelves in close proximity to Lawrence Kramer's *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; with which, for better or worse, comparison is inevitable), neither this nor any of Kramer's work is mentioned in the present volume.

Factual errors, generally few and trifling, can be found by those who care to seek them. The description of *Don Giovanni*'s designation, "dramma giocoso," as a "neolo-

gism" (p. 21) fell out of fashion—or should have—a quarter-century ago, when Daniel Heartz demonstrated that Carlo Goldoni had put the term into regular use from around 1748 onward ("Goldoni, Don Giovanni, and the drama giocoso," *Musical Times* 120, no. 1642 [December 1979]: 993–98). Many who share Steinberg's enthusiasm for German Romantic opera will be surprised to find the epoch-making 1821 premiere of Weber's *Der Freischütz* pushed back to 1822 (p. 80). And Jeffrey Sposato's recent work has deeply problematized the familiar claim that Mendelssohn flatly defied his father by retaining that name (see Jeffrey S. Sposato, "Creative Writing: The [Self-]Identification of Mendelssohn as Jew," *Musical Quarterly* 82, no. 1 [Spring 1998]: 190–209).

But if we in the musicological community cannot help but feel, at many points in this remarkable book, like eavesdroppers on a conversation among citizens of another disciplinary realm, Steinberg here confirms his position as a leading figure in the ongoing project of collapsing the distance between his realm and ours. And it is, in any case, a conversation well worth overhearing.

PETER MERCER-TAYLOR
University of Minnesota

ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

"Let the Church Sing!": Music and Worship in a Black Mississippi Community. By Thérèse Smith. Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2004. [xxi, 293 p. ISBN 1-58046-157-3. \$45.00.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, index.

As a black American born and raised in the Southeast and brought up in a Pentecostal church, I was immediately interested in *Let the Church Sing!*, an ethnographic study of a rural black Mississippi community, their styles of worship and music, and how their worldview influenced these styles. More than an academic interest, I wanted to know the similarities between that experience and mine. Just as Thérèse Smith, an Irish ethnomusicologist with a Brown University pedigree, acknowl-

edges that this study is "inevitably coloured by [her] interpretations" (p. 207), so too are my impressions and judgments of her work informed by my experiences growing up in a black church in the South.

Smith has more than an academic interest too—she developed an admiration and intimacy with the congregation that shines through in her writing. Despite this intimacy, Smith's research and methodology are unimpeachable, and she has maintained her external objectivity, while at the

same time she perfectly describes some of the internal cultural structures that at times defy explanation.

Updating and expanding her Ph.D. dissertation, "Moving in the Spirit: Music of Worship in Clear Creek, Mississippi, as an Expression of Worldview," (Brown University, 1998), *Let the Church Sing!* is a well-written, readable, and engaging piece about the "intersection of belief system, expressive culture, and worldview of a single, more-or-less self-contained African American Baptist community in the Deep South," (p. 1), and this is part of what makes it unique. Other studies have contributed greatly to the literature, but none take the approach she does, nor do they examine these three aspects as they affect one small community. Several studies have historical perspective (Ingrid Overacker, *The African American Church Community in Rochester, New York, 1900–1940* [Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998]; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993]), or focus on a specific genre (Ray Allen, *Singing in the Spirit: African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991]). Most do not include extended musical transcriptions and/or recordings (Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* [Berkeley: University of California Press and Center for Black Music Research, 2003]; Gerald Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985]). Smith deliberately excludes African retention in this study.

The phrase "Let the church sing!" is taken from benedictory remarks of the pastor of the Clear Creek Missionary Baptist Church (M.B.C.), located in rural northern Mississippi. The fieldwork, which includes interviews with church members and recordings of songs, sermons, and prayers, was done in the early-to-mid-1980s. Smith also did fieldwork at black churches in Kentucky and Rhode Island, and often uses her experiences there to compare and contrast to those at Clear Creek.

Smith presents the components of her main thesis—the articulation of facets of

Clear Creek's worldview—in chapters that explore identity, time, belief-system, and tradition, and the inherent oppositions and ambiguities within these four areas. The rest of the book is dedicated to explications and melodic and rhythmic transcriptions of prayers and sermons. The community's story unfolds via the words and meanings of the church members, extensive prescriptive and descriptive transcriptions of several songs, sermons and prayers, analysis of the same, and recorded excerpts.

There are two separate books here. The author presents and develops a cohesive thesis and argument about worldview and opposing poles, but about halfway through the book the reader gets to the "good stuff"—the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and how it influences the singing, the praying, and the preaching. Once Smith gets to the prayers and sermons, and describes the melodic structure (pentatonic and minor, in most cases), the rhythm (not metrical, but regular), and the responses of the congregation, I forgot all about her main intellectual points. Add the song, prayer, and sermon excerpts on the compact disc and the textual, melodic, and rhythmic transcriptions, and I felt like I was having church! Based on the author's obvious admiration of the beauty of these idioms, I did not think she would mind if I got a little sidetracked.

Smith expresses the beauty of the prayers and sermons and also why and how they are so undeniably powerful. She describes typical settings that prepare the contexts for spirit-filled and harmonious prayer, explains how trance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit contributes to the chanted sermon and responses, and she outlines the tonal consistency of the entire service: songs, prayers, and sermons are "performed" in related keys.

Smith does all this in a self-effacing manner; she acknowledges that her white Irishness may have been an impediment to her fieldwork, but she also allows that her participation and intimacy with the Clear Creek community may have created some biases in her interpretations. I submit that she has presented the community and the music and their worship styles with great balance and sensitivity. In most cases, she lets the members speak for themselves, and on occasion, they contradict each other

and sometimes, later, themselves (e.g., on the merits of shouting and/or emotional sermons). These situations perfectly illustrate her point about opposing poles and how the community accepts ambiguity.

What story about a rural black church would be complete without consideration of the shout? Smith employs Gilbert Rouget's categories from *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possessions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) to categorize the shout as a type of trance, specifically, inspiration, characterized by movement, noise, sensory overstimulation, amnesia, etc. During inspiration, the shouter is under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Several pages are devoted to the shout (many references to which are not indexed), to church members' and scholars' descriptions of the shout as emotional and violent physical behavior, and to the meaning and context of the shout. Late in chapter 5, "Moving in the Spirit," Smith attempts to represent the shout as a vocal phenomenon, and transcribes the sounds of women vocalizing a yell as characteristic of shouting. I found this extremely confusing, as representing the shout as a sound not only seems implausible, Smith's translation of the shout into a sound would be easier to understand if she used another word to describe it (i.e. yell, scream, vocalization, etc.). Still, her observations about the sounds are quite compelling: during a chanted sermon, in which the melodic shape outlines a pentatonic scale, the shouted pitches are "directly related to the musical scale of the chant. . . . At no stage during the fairly lengthy section transcribed do the shouters vocalise anything that violates the pentatonic scale of the chant" (p. 134). Smith's further assertion is that there is a consistency of tonality in the entire service.

Chapter 4, "Tradition," is the weakest chapter. Smith attempts to show how "the past is retained in the present and propelled into the future through reinterpretation in religion" (p. 86). Via copious quotes, the author explores the members' agricultural past, drawing the conclusion that farming is no longer the primary livelihood, and revealing the tension that exists between the old and young, the rural and urban, particularly when the church cele-

brates a Harvest Day that has lost some meaning to the community. It is a logical argument, but too much ink is used to paint this picture. What is not logical is what follows: Smith analyzes Clear Creek choir's rendition of "Sinner please don't let this harvest pass" as illustrative of the church's accommodation of past/future, spiritual/gospel dichotomies, but it falls flat because, as the author indicates, this rendition is atypical, not representative. The explication of "Up where we belong/Love lift us up" in chapter 2, "Identity," provides a much more satisfactory analysis, leading to a similar conclusion.

Despite this incongruity, "Tradition" contains a wealth of ethnographic detail, namely the community's perceptions of white-black relations, emotion as a characteristic of blackness and its place in worship, and the sometimes uneasy coexistence of tradition and progression at Clear Creek M.B.C.

Notable errors include inconsistencies among the text-only transcriptions and the text underlay in the "musical" transcriptions of prayer or sermon (e.g., "Ye that" in the text [p. 133, line 23] becomes "All ye" [p. 136, example 5.1, last staff]). There are a few distracting punctuation and grammatical errors. Lastly, I found it bothersome that Smith incorrectly explained away an interviewee's comment about shouting and a biblical scripture reference: "Some folks thought that when folks got to shouting going on, why they was drunk! But one Scripture says they are not drunk. They are filled with the Holy Spirit" (p. 118). Smith's response is to quote a passage about Stephen and blasphemy (Acts 6:8-15), and to suggest that "Mr. Campbell" must have picked this story up via oral tradition. Well, apparently I did, too, but I also found it in Acts 2:13-18.

Smith has superlative descriptive skills, and she is aware that a picture tells a thousand words. She illuminates important descriptions of place and music with visuals ("Entering through the front doors of the church one arrives in a small porch. A second pair of doors leads into the sanctuary, paneled in dark wood, with red carpeting, curtains and seat covers" [p. 21]). However, a map of the region of Mississippi would have been a welcome addition. Also, a recording of an entire sermon, rather than

just excerpts, would have been appropriate, especially in illustrating the concept of climax and the point of inspiration.

Anyone with an interest in Southern culture, African American studies, religious studies, gospel music, or any related fields should find a place on their shelves for this study. It is a multifaceted portrait of a small community in Mississippi, told through their words, worship, and music, and interpreted by a highly-skilled ethnographer who has satisfied my curiosity yet left me wanting more.

ERICKA PATILLO
Radford University

Performing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Representation in World Music Ensembles. Edited by Ted Solís. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. [vii, 322 p. ISBN 0-520-23831-1. \$24.95.] Index, bibliography.

World music ensembles can be found in any number of colleges and universities throughout North America. One would thus assume that, given the recent decades of reflexivity in ethnomusicology, that a significant amount of literature would be devoted to the pedagogical and philosophical issues that surround the creation and perpetuation of world music ensembles, especially since much is written on the process of musical transmission. However, the authors of *Performing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Representation in World Music Ensembles* make clear that there is, in fact, a curious absence in ethnomusicological literature concerning the relationships among world music ensemble directors, ethnomusicologists, and students. This work is an extraordinary amalgamation of essays that deal with the processes of forming, teaching, and analyzing world music ensembles in various academic settings. One of the true assets of the book is its treatment of the ethnomusicologist as “ensemble leader.” Also, for those interested in the progression and history of the field of ethnomusicology, this book provides insight into how world music ensembles have helped to make a place for the ethnomusicologist in academia. Along these lines, the work also reveals how ethnomusicology sometimes conflicts with traditional academic frameworks.

World music ensembles generally comprise many different people with diverse cultural heritages. How do these different orientations create a mode for change within the ensemble, yet also provide continuity for the ensemble to continue year to year? How does the ensemble perpetuate itself? Drawing from various cultures, including Caribbean steelband, Indian, Balinese, Javanese, Philippine, Mexican, Central and West African, Japanese, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Jewish klezmer ensembles, and others, this work examines these and other questions that deal with the creative and pedagogical issues involved in the academic world music ensemble.

The volume’s general organization is divided into four sections with sixteen essays. The overarching issues include the “intercultural and intergenerational transmission” and the “interlocking pedagogical relationships” within the ensemble. Part 1, “Sounding the Other: Academic World Music Ensembles in Historical Perspective,” comprises an overview and introduction to the next three sections, which all deal with the principle challenges in teaching and transmitting knowledge about world music cultures through world music ensembles.

Ricardo D. Trimillos, Scott Marcus, Ted Solís, David Harnish, J. Lawrence Witzleben, Sumarsam, and Gage Averill provide the foundation for the book. Using contemporary perspectives and philosophies, their essays discourse on the general history of world music ensembles in the academic setting. Richard D. Trimillos’s essay “Subject, Object, and the Ethnomusicology Ensemble: The Ethnomusicology ‘We’ and ‘Them’ ” reflects on his more than four decades of personal involvement with world music ensembles through both “subjective-personal and objective-general” perspectives. Reflecting on the history of world music ensembles—from Mantle Hood’s initial “study group” at UCLA to current-day issues of the “other,” cultural heritage, ensemble credibility, mediation, and cultural advocacy, he presents “questions intended both to challenge the present perceptions of the study group and to advance arguments for its value within the academy” (p. 47). Chapter 2, “A Bridge to Java,” is reflexive and consists of an interview with Hardja Susilo, conducted by David Harnish, Ted Solís, and J. Lawrence