

# Why Southern Gospel Music Matters

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## A Belated Beginning

Scholarly attention has come late and infrequently to southern (which is to say, white) gospel music. Critics of country music and scholars of southern culture have occasionally made incursions into the territory of southern gospel.<sup>1</sup> But, for the most part, these were often conducted impatiently and always on the way to somewhere else. Southern gospel was what Elvis Presley really wanted to sing.<sup>2</sup> Its biggest names have performed at the White House,<sup>3</sup> have sung live on the "Today" show,<sup>4</sup> and regularly appear on American evangelicalism's most influential stages—among them, Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church,<sup>5</sup> Pat Robertson's 700 Club,<sup>6</sup> the Trinity Broadcast Network,<sup>7</sup> and the First Baptist Church of Atlanta.<sup>8</sup> And in 2004, the genre's most successful impresario, Bill Gaither, outranked Elton John, Fleetwood Mac, and Rod Stewart for tickets sales worldwide.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, despite all this, southern gospel remains largely unexamined by scholars and critics of culture.<sup>10</sup> Until relatively recently, the only sustained treatments of the subject were nonacademic and, as historian James Goff says, "sketchy at best and . . . lacked a broad perspective."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it was not until the 2002 publication of Goff's own *Close Harmony* that anything approaching a comprehensive scholarly history of the genre existed. No volume of critical (as opposed to historical) scholarship about southern gospel existed until the 2004 publication of *More than Precious Memories: The Rhetoric of Southern Gospel Music*.<sup>12</sup>

When those few of us who study southern gospel music and culture encounter other scholars with a similar interest, we react not unlike a castaway who discovers that there's life on the other side of the island after all. Thus, the publication of *More than Precious Memories*, a collection of ten essays from a constellation of authors who draw heavily on communication and rhetorical theory in their analyses, was perhaps the most significant moment in the critical

study of southern gospel music to date. The volume's strength is the authors' obvious familiarity with the southern gospel tradition and its (conservative) sociotheological context. Plainly speaking, these writers were fans and, in a few cases, performers of southern gospel music first and scholarly students of it second. This book demonstrates their sincere belief that southern gospel is, as the book's co-editors put it in the introduction, "a significant cultural and religious phenomenon worthy of the best efforts of scholarship."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, in attempting to map the largely unexplored rhetoric of southern gospel for proper academic study, *More than Precious Memories* ultimately exemplifies the very thing it attempts to redress: the newness of southern gospel music as a field of study. As an early reviewer put it, "The book is repeatedly frustrating. The authors, for example, never explain the basic premises upon which they base the volume. What holes in our understanding does studying gospel music fill? Who is the book addressing?"<sup>14</sup> The problem (and the reviewer's larger point) is that the authors presume much of what they have to prove—namely, why southern gospel matters to the people who create, consume, and enjoy it; and, as my title suggests, why southern gospel matters to scholars of religion and culture interested in the cultural function of vernacular arts in shaping religious identities. Consequently, a volume that might have served as a founding document in the study of southern gospel music and its culture instead stands as a noble but intellectually uneven effort in the prehistory of southern gospel studies.

Given southern gospel's rise in the last quarter of the twentieth century, *More than Precious Memories* is the kind of work one would expect to have seen two or three decades—rather than just a few years—ago. How are we to understand this belatedness? This essay attempts to answer that question by proposing a fundamental realignment in the scholarly approach to southern gospel music as a cultural phenomenon. Rather than thinking of southern gospel as emblematic of a single "rhetoric"—one that serves, in David Fillingim's words, to "devalue the earthly lives of believers" and shift their focus to the rewards of the afterlife as compensation for the hardships of suffering in this world<sup>15</sup>—I propose that white gospel music is best understood as a network of interconnected rhetorics and signifying practices. The dynamic interaction of lyrics, music, and religious experience in southern gospel music comprises a cultural discourse evangelicals use, not to diminish experience in this world, but to understand better the Protestant theological doctrines in, and to make useable meaning out of, the vicissitudes of conservative Christian life.

To approach southern gospel music in this way is to do three things. First, it is to go beyond the explanation of what southern gospel insiders intend to say to one another about themselves and their faith through this music (the task to which much of southern gospel studies has limited itself thus far) and begin to disambiguate the internal logic of gospel music. It is to explore why the music says what it does, and in what way—in Clifford Geertz’s words, to offer an intellectual “construction of other people’s construction of what they and their compatriots are up to.”<sup>16</sup> Second, it is to see southern gospel as a distinct set of cultural practices that form one point in a process of triangulation among conservative evangelical religious communities from which southern gospel’s talent and fan-base are drawn and the secular culture at large that southern gospel simultaneously borrows from aesthetically and pushes back against ideologically. And, finally, it is to understand southern gospel music and its culture as not only shaped outwardly (and, in good part, by Protestant evangelicalism’s commitment to convert the unconverted and reinstate the spiritually backslidden) but also functioning more deeply, if less obviously, as the primary means by which a great many Americans consecrate themselves to their theological beliefs. This is a process of alternately making sense of and masking the discontinuities between evangelical doctrine and the modern world.

### The Popular Music of American Christianity

In September of 2000, *New York Times* writer R. W. Apple, Jr., went to Nashville and reported back on his experience in a travel piece for the newspaper. For the scholar of culture, the report is perhaps most interesting for a moment of (self-)realization Apple has while attending a performance at the Grand Ole Opry. He and his travel companion, he wrote, “realized what aliens we were in this culture when the crowd lustily cheered an explicitly sexist, rabidly homophobic, stunningly anti-government ditty called ‘We Want America Back.’”<sup>17</sup> Apple was hearing what was, at the time, a chart-topping song from a family of southern gospel singers and quasi-sociopolitical activists, the Steeles. In his inimitably arch way, Apple’s is a mistake common to many American intellectuals and academics: treating conservative evangelical values and culture as a curious artifact from some socially recalcitrant land that America’s otherwise culturally progressive time forgot.<sup>18</sup>

White gospel is arguably “the music of much of America,”<sup>19</sup> but it is a part of America—evangelical, fiercely fundamentalist, intensely pietistic, intellectually literal-minded—in which many

academics are at best visiting scholars, at worst intellectual tourists of the R. W. Apple variety. The discourse of each group has historically been mutually unintelligible, except perhaps in each language's toxic translation into the distorted and distorting *lingua franca* of the culture wars. This unintelligibility, as it occurs in southern gospel music, poses a unique set of interpretive challenges for the scholar of religious culture, challenges that go well beyond generic or stylistic definitions (though these are problematic, too).<sup>20</sup> To an academic outsider, southern gospel may appear just enough of a stylistic hybrid—borrowing from the Reformed church hymnody, country, pop, bluegrass, and even jazz and classical music—to seem musicologically or aesthetically uninteresting, a derivative of more highly regarded and stylistically coherent musical traditions. Culturally, the overt and fervent piety of southern gospel fan culture and performance styles may also give the impression to the uninitiated that southern gospel is a mere musical adjunct to (and is best understood within the context of) more familiar religious practices such as traditional congregational worship experiences.

In short, southern gospel music and culture scramble the conventional scholarly coordinates that academics use to navigate unexplored (sub)cultures and their productions. A novel in the *Left Behind* series or a Jerry Falwell sermon may be a readable text to scholarly outsiders in ways that southern gospel is not because fundamentalist fiction and evangelical sermons make use of rhetorical frameworks and conform to textual conventions that are academically familiar and interpretable to scholars, even if the evangelical worldview is foreign.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, southern gospel is much less rhetorically coherent and accessible. The performance and consumption of southern gospel music fuse the conventional aims of live entertainment (to inspire, uplift, distract, reflect, transform, embolden, or transport—in a word, to *entertain*) with evangelicalism's teleological discourse of conversion and exhortation. This fusion forms a single but polyvalent cultural phenomenon encompassing several rhetorics: the rhetoric of musical lyrics, the rhetoric (or semiotics) of live performance, and the rhetoric of the music's fans and their consumer culture. This means that a gospel song about how "this world is not my home, I'm just passing through"<sup>22</sup> is not just a musical restatement of the basic Protestant evangelical worldview but the lyrical currency of a dense cultural exchange. This exchange relies on an internal logic that, according to Goff, "makes perfect sense to those who are intimately tied to it but very little sense to an outsider."<sup>23</sup>

These outsiders might well be forgiven for dismissing or oversimplifying southern gospel music as culturally backward southern

folk art or—as is more generally the case among academics—for mostly ignoring it. The explosion of southern culture studies in the past two decades has perhaps inadvertently reinforced the impression that the South and its cultural legacies exist in a parallel universe “alien” to outsiders and of little interest to them. Certainly this has been the case with southern gospel, about which the scholarly conclusion seems always already to have been foregone that white gospel music sings primarily a southern tune. Following Fillingim’s 1997 article, “A Flight from Liminality: ‘Home’ in Country and Gospel Music,” scholars of southern gospel music have left unchallenged the assumption that southern gospel is primarily about, in Fillingim’s words, a “message of world-rejection” born of its fans’ “experience of liminality” in the lower-class South, alienated from the mainstream of American culture and social mobility.<sup>24</sup> The appeal of this formulation is its clean causal lines. It indeed simplifies the study of culture to think of it, as Geertz put it in his description of one common confusion among interpreters of culture, as “a self-contained ‘super-organic’ reality with forces and purposes of its own.” But as Geertz notes, to approach the interpretation of culture this way is “to reify it.”<sup>25</sup> While southern gospel music certainly grew out of the south and continues to be inflected with southern influences, it is a historical and critical fallacy to treat southern gospel artistic expression as a creative reflection of a monolithic or univocal culture called “The South”—not only because such a place, thing, or state of mind is at best a useful scholarly fiction but also because southern gospel music obviously appeals to people far beyond the geographical or imaginative borders of the South.

Much of the confusion about southern gospel traces back to the name itself. The use of the term “southern” to describe white gospel music did not really begin until the 1970s—and did not gain widespread acceptance until the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Before then, what is now known as southern gospel had simply been “gospel” music, and it was the mainstream of Christian entertainment, which was more than popular in the South but by no means only a southern phenomenon. When more contemporary forms of Christian music began rivaling gospel’s traditional male quartets and family acts for popularity among Christian-music audiences, traditional gospel musicians promoted the term “southern” as a way to “designate the older styles of music” from the newer forms.<sup>27</sup> Thus was a geographical modifier conscripted in service of a stylistic—and cultural—distinction.<sup>28</sup> The name is unfortunate because, though some of the music’s roots clearly trace back to the South, southern gospel these days is not terribly southern. Practically speaking, Bill Gaither’s Homecoming tour and

video series has popularized southern gospel all over the world. Aesthetically and culturally speaking, southern gospel music, as Goff notes, stylizes a set of religious concerns “about which many Americans”—not just southerners—“feel deeply.”<sup>29</sup>

So much for “southern.” That leaves the vexing term “*gospel*.” Traditionally the word calls to mind black gospel and its emphasis on making religious experience available through explicitly stylized, artfully sophisticated musical theater and soulful pageantry. To the extent that both white and black gospel function as musical forms of religious expression in the lives of performers and audiences, the association is apt. Yet many southern gospel performers and fans understand the term quite differently when applied to them and their music. For them, “gospel” is a musical tool for evangelical conversion and “ministry,” meant to be experienced (all evidence to the contrary) as what might best be described as the musical equivalent of the “plain style” Protestant sermons pioneered by seventeenth-century Puritans: artless and spiritually deductive.

This notion of “gospel” music as a ministerial and evangelizing instrument distinguishes itself from black gospel. The latter tradition, as Craig Werner observes, “embrace[s] a performance tradition that seeks to forge a communal response to assaults on black integrity.”<sup>30</sup> In the performance and reception of black gospel, built around the call-and-response style, “leader and community define one another in relation to the shared historical understandings encoded in the songs and the form of their expression.”<sup>31</sup> Black gospel song lyrics tend to be rhetorically recursive professions of God’s never-failing mercy and salvation that uphold the spiritual journeyer (for instance, “Can’t nobody, can’t nobody. No. No. Nobody. Can’t nobody do me like Jesus”).<sup>32</sup> The content of these lyrics is less important than the way an individual performer sings and interprets them. Performance styles regularly highlight a soloist who emerges from among a choir to improvise vocally while the chorus provides harmonic back-up to the solo. By emphasizing the power of the individual (the soloist) within the community (the collective congregation of audience and singers) to assert the self idiosyncratically (the solo improvisation) and still find a place within the collective identity of the larger group (the chorus), the music and semiotics of the black gospel tradition highlight the historical bonds of social solidarity and the centrality of polyphonic professions of faith and fellowship in resisting what Werner calls “the cultural domination involved in the performance tradition” typical of Euro-American aesthetics.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to black gospel (as well as most other mainstream forms of Christian music), white gospel music’s ministerial and

evangelical focus on “the gospel” gives rise to a performance style that emphasizes ideological and theological consensus and reinforces the value of cultural cohesion, doctrinal unity, and stable hierarchies that are essential to evangelicalism’s mission to win the world for Christ. Choirs and choruses are far less common in white gospel. Instead, small groups of three or four vocalists—often dressed in matching suits or other coordinated costumes—sing in close harmony about the alluring mysteries of the soul’s striving after (and, without God’s help, failing to receive) grace and salvation. And, whereas the artistic intensity and emotional center of black gospel tends to be the improvisational middle of the song, in which soloists spontaneously construct a vocal counterpoint to the chorus’s main melodic theme,<sup>34</sup> white gospel hinges on the achievement of harmonic and symbolic consonance of the song’s ending. It is not, I think, coincidental that the main southern gospel performance style—organized around lyrical didacticism and visual and harmonic symmetry—echoes the didactic and absolutist culture of evangelism out of which the music emerges. It is difficult to overstate how intensely southern gospel audiences identify with the “preaching of the gospel” in song that they see and hear southern gospel music doing in a way that no other form of Christian entertainment can rival for these fans.

Like the musical style itself, the conservative evangelical commitments sung about in southern gospel receive special emphasis in the south but are widespread in American society, geographically and socioeconomically. Who listens to and buys southern gospel is a difficult demographic to identify definitively. According to statistics collected by the *Singing News* magazine, the publication of record for southern gospel (with a monthly circulation of more than 200,000 in 2006), southern gospel fans tend to be middle-aged Christians (average age 52) who identify as Southern Baptists or Pentecostals (46 percent and 24 percent, respectively), the two denominations that have shown the most growth among Protestant denominations in recent years.<sup>35</sup> These statistics suggest that Doyle Horsley is justified in calling southern gospel “the popular music of American Christianity.”<sup>36</sup>

Here, though, another potential misunderstanding arises. The fact that southern gospel resonates with a large segment of contemporary evangelicals may give the impression that southern gospel music is a generic soundtrack for all varieties of evangelical Protestant theology, a cultural or an artistic extension of evangelical church culture and history. But even though evangelical Christians from divergent theological traditions can enjoy and identify with the same southern gospel song, that identification takes hold despite—not primarily because of—evangelical church affiliation. Local



Protestant congregations define the individual primarily as part of a specific theological and denominational history or as part of the self-contained social networks created by nondenominational suburban mega-churches. In each case, religious identity emerges from the individual's willing—and generally public—acceptance of the denominational creed or the officially sanctioned doctrines and practices of the local congregation. The point of church culture is for the individual to adopt the social, liturgical, and theological conventions of the larger body of believers. Southern gospel music, however, encourages its listeners and performers to construct their religious identity as part of their experience of the music. A Southern Baptist and a Pentecostal enjoy the same song not because of its sufficient theological vagueness but because each listener has given the song an individualized meaning.

This individualization is to some extent by design. As Edward Ayers describes it, southern gospel's cross-denominational appeal grew out of the gospel music publishing business, which began to take root in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Publishers strove to please a diverse audience," Ayers notes, meaning "they combined songs with divergent theological emphases."<sup>37</sup> Ecumenicalism sells better than sectarianism. Other influences were less direct. Bill Malone notes that, at the same time, around 1900, "a great stream of religious songs, fed by the big-city revivals of the era, flowed into American popular culture,"<sup>38</sup> seeping southward into the rural religious culture where white gospel music was beginning to crystallize.<sup>39</sup>

All these strands of ordinary self-interest and less-than-sacred influence were woven into gospel music from the first and helped shape its appeal to what William Lynwood Montel describes as "the democratic Christian ideals" of Anglo-Protestantism.<sup>40</sup> Church music—hymns and their contemporary descendants, the praise and worship chorus—has historically served as a vehicle for adoration and praise and is, as one mid-twentieth century southern gospel music executive insightfully put it, "more or less written on God and his attributes, not on man."<sup>41</sup> In contrast, white gospel is the form of Christian music whose songs have historically dealt with what that same executive described as "the human experience of life." Thus "Brethren, We Have Met to Worship," a song that calls the faithful to meet, worship, "and adore the Lord our God,"<sup>42</sup> is considered a hymn, while "Looking for a City," a song about the spiritual pilgrim's life "here among the shadows,"<sup>43</sup> is a southern gospel song—"written in a folksy manner and from that angle."<sup>44</sup> All these factors contribute to southern gospel's broad appeal within but also well beyond the



South. "People of all evangelical Protestant denominations can come together," Montel notes, "and sing or listen to gospel music and not experience the tug of doctrinal divisions."<sup>45</sup> White gospel music cuts across denominational and theological lines within conservative Protestantism by relocating the locus of authority from church hierarchy and tradition to the individual in his or her interaction with the gospel in song.

### Music, Theology, Identity

It is not that southern gospel songs are void of theological content.<sup>46</sup> Rather, the experience of southern gospel music invites (indeed, it requires) personal interpretation and application of a given song's theology, but in a way that does not disrupt southern gospel's ecumenical unity and the appearance of ideological likemindedness. When a southern gospel band (or, more often these days, a digital band track) strikes up the old time classic "I'll Fly Away," a song about the soul's flight to heaven, no single theological or spiritual interpretation is supplied.

Some glad morning when this life is o'er,  
I'll fly away.  
To a home on God's celestial shore,  
I'll fly away.<sup>47</sup>

For someone who has never been rendered speechless by the beauty of a gospel melody or heard—really *felt*—the "sound of light" (as Don Cusic describes gospel music in the title of his 1990 history of Christian music) pouring from a stage,<sup>48</sup> it can be difficult to take these lyrics entirely seriously. If the experience of country music often starts in the car, with the radio, as Cecilia Tichi suggests,<sup>49</sup> then the experience of southern gospel starts in the pew, the auditorium seat, the folding chair of the county fair. Live performance remains the basic ingredient of experience in southern gospel. Separated from their essential context of performance and reception, lyrics about flying away to heaven can seem almost juvenile in their singsong meter and obvious rhyme scheme and their reliance on the predictable Christian imagery of a heavenly flight to celestial shores. Understood, however, as one dimension of southern gospel's polyvalent rhetorics, southern gospel lyrics come into proper focus as the linguistic dimension of a densely layered cultural discourse. The way vocalists interpret songs, the spontaneity of the live performance, and, perhaps most important, a song's tune and arrangement—in this case, the

catchy melody and clappable rhythm of “I’ll Fly Away” organized around ascending chord progressions and high, expansive intervals that combine across the length of chorus to suggest the very experience of spiritual flight—all of these elements interact dynamically to form a musical vessel passed back and forth between audience and artist. Into this vessel, listeners can (and, if they are to take anything relevant away from the experience, must) pour individualized draughts of meaning. In the “I’ll Fly Away” example, this might mean responding to the music with personal associations, memories, feelings, and beliefs that the song’s general description of a heavenly journey elicits. Shaded with personalized psychospiritual responses, southern gospel becomes the music of the individual and the collective body, simultaneously.

This interplay produces by necessity and design a much more unstable, fluid religious identity than the one associated with the comparative passivity of congregational worship. In southern gospel music, the role of both performer and fan constantly shifts and realigns with the individual and collective fluctuations of feeling and rhetoric that music creates. In the live setting, performers’ artistic choices—about song selection and showmanship, about how to bend the emotional curve of a song, about how to encore a song that is well received, or whether or not to slow down the pace of the program with personal testimonies or religious memories—shape and are shaped by the audience’s collective response to the music in a reciprocal process of sentimental exchange. Performers and fans alike frequently become (or appear to be) overtaken by emotion—humor, sadness, grief, humility, thankfulness, inspiration. It is often difficult to distinguish between the authentic and inauthentic. This drives a common assumption (within and beyond southern gospel) that the entire exchange is so much manufactured religious melodrama in which emotionally manipulative performers mesmerize the religiously gullible. Doubtless this critique hits bedrock at times, both in the seats and on the stage, but, as an explanatory framework, it is unhelpfully reductive, not least of all because it fails to recognize that dissembling religious piety expresses an authentic (if displaced) feeling of some kind. More deeply, for most southern gospel fans and performers, gospel music seems to trample the intellect and stampede straight to the heart, the soul, the spirit in ways that often manifest themselves in thick arcs of melodramatic piety. This is not so much proof of the inauthenticity of southern gospel music or, alternatively, evidence of a single, homogenous evangelical attitude or mindset. Rather, it is a point of entry into an inquiry about the cultural function of sentiment and music in evangelicalism.

Since at least the time of the Puritans' arrival in the new world, Christianity in the Calvinist tradition has struggled to balance theoretically absolute doctrines governing Christian living with the human need for some individual agency and freedom. It has been one function of evangelical culture to manage this tension. Seventeenth-century Puritan narratives of melodramatic captivity and lachrymose restoration (usually of women, who were generally abducted by Indians and typically saved by a ransom), the pietistic emotionalism of the Great Awakening that swept New England in the eighteenth century, and the sentimental novels of religious moralism popularized by women writers of the nineteenth century tried to make felt connections between uneven human experience and absolute religious doctrine. These stories and sermons allowed readers and audiences to feel there was some room for self-determination (or at least self-expression) in a world theologically understood to be preordained from the foundations of time.<sup>50</sup> Southern gospel attempts to address this same transcultural paradox by—somewhat paradoxically—enclosing modern devices of identity formation within the pre-determinative framework of evangelical teleology. Relying on the conventions of musical theater (role playing, impersonation, and the use of songs metaphorically to engage deeper questions of identity and personality), the experience of southern gospel music allows artist and fan alike the freedom to express and indulge a range of states of mind, feeling, and expressions of feeling in the “safe” context of Christian musical drama. Some of the more emotionally intense of these responses may well contradict—or come close to contradicting—orthodox evangelical doctrine, which teaches that feelings of forsakenness are sinful and signs of insufficient faith. Certainly the longstanding popularity of a song like “Till the Storm Passes By” seems connected to its evocation of the real threat posed by quiescence and despair in the life of ordinary evangelicals. The song begins, “In the dark of the midnight have I oft hid my face, while the storm howls about me and there’s no hiding place.”<sup>51</sup> But the risk that evoking feelings of darkness and spiritual isolation will lead the individual to apostasy or other unorthodox conclusions is blunted by the context of theological certainty in which southern gospel publicly unfolds. As another old song says, “We’ll understand it better by and by.”<sup>52</sup>

Such orthodox interpretations of suffering and the problem of evil do not prohibit individuals from arriving at their own private and theologically idiosyncratic conclusions, so long as those conclusions do not present a public challenge to official doctrine. Within this discursive formation of southern gospel (a somewhat moldable center

encased in the hard shell of orthodoxy), one can safely confront feelings of doubt, insecurity, fear, isolation, and general spiritual discontent assured of an ultimate resolution of these concerns in a way that neither forces one to disown private feelings nor puts one in public conflict with evangelicalism. Consider the second verse of a song titled “Oh That Wonderful Promise” recorded a few years ago by the popular family foursome, the Perrys.

He [Christ] will defend the poor and needy,  
 And that is me, oh that is me.  
 When I am weak, he giveth power,  
 And just any moment he'll be here with the help I need.<sup>53</sup>

Southern gospel lyrics imagine a variety of situations from Christian life and dramatize a range of topics germane to Protestant faith.<sup>54</sup> But, in general, southern gospel songs operate much like this Perrys lyric: namely, singing about or alluding to some form of separation—be it alienation and disaffiliation from God, longings to go “home” to heaven, or, in this case, destitution (being “poor and needy,” whether physically, materially, or spiritually)—that is ultimately resolved, not only by divine assistance but also by the song’s resolution into harmonic symmetry that is the aesthetic foundation of southern gospel music.

Southern gospel songs typically follow a standard verse-chorus-verse-chorus-chorus structure. But there are a variety of augmentations to this pattern that combine to build harmonic and emotional tension. Chief among these are musical tags and bridges. A bridge is usually a four- or eight-bar interlude between the penultimate chorus and the conclusion of the song. Lyrically, bridges sum up or reflect on what’s come before and prepare for the song’s climax. Musically, bridges are often set in higher registers than the rest of the song (usually a perfect fourth above the main melody) and create a sense of expectation and suspense by using unresolved harmonies or ending in modulations to higher keys. Tags create similar emotional effects but are usually shorter bits of the chorus’ conclusion that are repeated at the end of the song. During the endings of the best southern gospel songs, the ensemble voices reach higher and higher, clashing against each other dissonantly and then returning in a staggered fashion to harmonic consonance prolonged at first in a straight tone—voices without vibrato, a vocal effect that builds intensity with its directness—then ultimately rounded out in a warmer, more expansive vibrato. On the album *Alive: Deep in the Heart of Texas*, the southern

gospel mega-group the Cathedrals recorded a classic example of a white gospel ending during the song "Oh What a Savior." The song tumbles toward its climax, first gently, then more intensely, then fantastically, powerfully—the voices in the three highest registers rising, reaching, the bass guitar line falling, thumping steadily, syncopated against the bass singer's voice as it attacks the descending bass notes until finally the harmonic resolution sets in and the crowd, according to the recorded soundtrack, dissolves into assorted screaming, hand-clapping, and shouting hallelujah.<sup>55</sup>

For southern gospel insiders, this ultimate return of harmonic symmetry is a familiar and deeply satisfying triumph of musical consonance and beauty over dissonance and incongruence. As Robert McManus writes, the emphasis in southern gospel on this dissonance-to-consonance harmonic movement "forms a musical metaphorical parallel with the extreme 'rightness' and 'wrongness'" of evangelical theology.<sup>56</sup> The lyrics and music call into being a contradictory or dissonant situation in one breath (*I am the poor and needy but he will defend me . . . I am weak but he giveth power*) in order to resolve and undo it in another: "any moment he'll be here with the help I need." The song's ending is always consonant, God's sovereignty and faithfulness to his children always (re)affirmed.

In this way, southern gospel music and performances bring orderly meaning to disorderly experience, creating an idealized portrait of redeemed life that regularizes the vicissitudes of the spirit so much a part of ordinary living (and of southern gospel lyrics)—without diminishing the reality of that unevenness. Here is a lyric from a wildly successful song, "God on the Mountain," first performed by the McKameys in the 1980s that remains immensely popular:

Life is easy, when you're up on the mountain.  
You've got faith like you've never known.  
But then things change and you're down in the valley.  
Don't lose faith, you are never alone.

For the God of the mountain is still God in the valley.  
When things go wrong, he'll make them right.  
The God of good time is still God in the bad times.  
The God of the day is still God of the night.<sup>57</sup>

What is striking here is the ceremonial exchange of sentiment formalized in this music—most notably in the parallel structures and imagery.

Each line of the chorus is a self-contained unit of thought that moves between extremes: God of the mountain/God in the valley; things go wrong/he'll make them right; God of the good time/God in the bad times; God of the day/God of the night. The parallelism redefines negative experience as but one point in a continuum of existence over which God presides with all authority and beneficence. In listening to these songs about the believer upheld in trials and tribulation by the hand of God, audiences are implicitly invited to identify with the religious experience and feeling the lyric portrays without actually experiencing the suffering and hardship the lyric describes. At the same time that this invitation is being made to the audience, the artist is able briefly to inhabit—to dramatize musically—the spiritual life imagined in song, a life in which all reversals and suffering, every setback and failure, have meaning within a providential framework. This is more than just so much “rhetoric of assurance,” as Janice Rushing writes of gospel music.<sup>58</sup> The singer becomes both prophet of the spiritual overcoming being sung about and proof of belief’s efficacy. One believes, in the southern gospel vision of the world, because one survives the torpor and despair of ordinary life to sing about God’s faithfulness in giving “his power,” as “Oh That Wonderful Promise” says in the chorus, “to the weak and weary, and today on this promise I will stand.”<sup>59</sup>

In using music to create the affective context in which they affirm their faith, evangelicals are espousing a version of what I. A. Richards discovered in religious poetry and calls “emotional belief,”<sup>60</sup> a way of believing that Robert Milder describes as “aris[ing] from and fulfill[ing] a psychological need without . . . making claims on practical behavior.”<sup>61</sup> One need only recall from one’s past—or simply imagine—a psychospiritual crisis similar to the one described in southern gospel music in order to claim for oneself the personal assurance promised in the song’s resolution: a reconciliation not only of the local crisis but also of the prevailing tension between orthodoxy and experience. Belief emerges from the upwelling of feeling and sentiment in the experience of the music.

In effect, southern gospel songs call into being the psychosocial reality they imagine—God’s faithful remnant subject to daily slings and arrows of adversity and trial—and resolve the attendant tension within the logic of ultimate harmonic consonance. The singer’s performance acts as an occasion for audiences to consider themselves (both individually and collectively) similarly beset and persecuted, similarly believing, similarly triumphing. When audiences respond to the chorus of “Till the Storm Passes By,” which implores God to “Hold me fast, let me stand, in the hollow of thy

hand, keep me safe, till the storm passes by," they are not just rehearsing the formulas of evangelical orthodoxy.<sup>62</sup> They are also fulfilling their own religious identity—with its uneven upswings and downturns—by recognizing it in the performance of the song. Almost every listener can identify with the experience portrayed in song, since people in general tend to be in the midst of, just entering, or triumphing over some form of fear, doubt, or other threats to optimistic living. The southern gospel performance mirrors back to audiences the particular experience elicited by the music and resolves common problems of evangelical life within the song's dramatic arc. The song that says "I want to thank Jesus for the plan of salvation" functions simultaneously as a collective thanksgiving for God's redeeming grace to humanity *and* as an opportunity for private reflection on the individual circumstances out of which one has been delivered by redeeming grace.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the experience of southern gospel music publicly collects disparate lines of private concern and personal experience and sentiment and braids them into a coherent emotional narrative. Though the public narrative might not always perfectly align with the private, they share the same logic by which the one-thing-and-then-another of ordinary life (both interior and exterior) is reorganized into a living, breathing proof text of evangelical teleology.

### **Southern Gospel and Religious Affect**

The narrative logic of southern gospel lyrics and the harmonic logic of southern gospel musical structures transform negative feelings—personal reversals or failure, spiritual insecurity, suffering at the hands of others—from stumbling blocks that threaten to erode one's bases for faith into opportunities for spiritual renewal. "When Satan reminds me of my history" of sin and failure, the chorus of a popular anthem declares, "Calvary answers for me."<sup>64</sup> The negative feelings here being accounted for by Christ's atoning crucifixion are not just God's chosen means of dealing with his elect. Their resolution (in Calvary's answer) can also be interpreted as evidence of the music's ministerial and exhortative efficacy. If artists and fans are to be believed (and I think they are), southern gospel music gives them access to what is experienced as contact with some form of divine grace or other supernatural force. Often southern gospel fans and performers will talk of "glory bumps" or a feeling of the presence of the Lord or of an "anointing" of the Holy Spirit or of redemption pouring down from heaven. But the times when I have seen—and felt—something like this during a southern gospel performance, the moment beggars all attempts at description, vernacular or otherwise. In such instances,



live performance distills experience to a kind of psychospiritual essence, burns away the superfluous and filters out the ancillary, secondary impressions and responses—leaving a wordless sensation that, in its purest form, exists at the ethereal level of feelings sharpened by spiritual intensity and encounters with beauty. When artists perform with real “authority,” as Emerson used the term to indicate a way of communicating that “can pour light as a flood through the soul,” lines of force and feeling running through an audience can be consolidated suddenly and inexplicably into an overwhelming immensity of sentiment.<sup>65</sup> Something as simple as a song’s up-tempo rhythm can create an irresistible enthusiasm that spreads—unbeckoned—through a crowd, giving expression to what I have often thought is best described as a collective urge to run somewhere. Followed by a slower, more meditative song—a ballad, perhaps, that reflects on the struggle for ordinary people of faith to live up to the unattainable ideals of orthodox theology or to remain within the favor of an omnipotent God whose presence comes and goes by a sovereign logic of its own—moments of enthusiasm can morph seamlessly into emotionally intense explorations of spiritual alienation and separation, feelings perhaps not unlike what Dickinson described as a “sumptuous destitution.”<sup>66</sup>

The move in southern gospel music from religious enthusiasm to cultivated despair (and vice versa) exemplifies what Stephen Tucker means when he writes of “two behavioral extremes” emerging from within fundamentalist evangelical religious experience.<sup>67</sup> Such extreme forms of expression reflect and respond to the paradox at the heart of contemporary free-will evangelicalism: God divinely ordains whom he will and will not save *and* holds human beings eternally accountable for “choosing” a predetermined outcome. Southern gospel acknowledges the incommensurability of this proposition not by attempting to explain it (it must simply be accepted) but by emotionally revaluing the extreme feelings it gives rise to. Artists perform, and fans identify with, the role of the persecuted and abject Christian that dispensationalists and (pre)millennialists believe is an essential part of redeemed life on earth, all the while knowing that the suffering and abjection will be swept away by God’s mighty hand in a compensatory flash of divine mercy and justice. They know, that is, how the song will end. Evangelicalism’s conflict with an antagonistic world and the carnal temptations of the soul’s lower self—as they are described in southern gospel lyrics—are occasions for God to renew his covenant with his people. To be on guard against encroachments of worldliness or one’s own deterioration of love for God (and to sing about it) is to be always on the brink of another triumph over the enemy, another victory over sin.

This need to explore the visceral release and resolution of negative feelings suggests that southern gospel music is important not only for the conclusion it reaches about God's omnipotence and mercy—which is always already absolute—but also for what it permits on the way to that conclusion: a stylized and often profoundly evocative exploration of feelings of helplessness, incapacity, fallibility, and despair. In this acclaimed song written and recorded by a Kentucky family of gospel musicians, the Crabbs, there is something quasi-Miltonic in making the experience of sin and evil a prerequisite for knowing God's righteous goodness:

He never promised that the cross would not get heavy  
And the hill would not be hard to climb.  
He never offered our victories without fighting  
But He said help would always come in time.  
Just remember when you're standing in the valley of decision  
And the adversary says give in,  
Just hold on, our Lord will show up.  
And He will take you through the fire again.<sup>68</sup>

Beneath the theological idiom and the religious vernacular of trials by fire, a sophisticated psychodrama is being played out here, one that is centered on feelings of abandonment and internal conflict. The lyrical hook to the song ("He will take you through the fire") depends on a vivid rendering of the "fire" itself, the periodic experience of especially difficult or challenging circumstances that often end in personal failure and that can only be overcome by divine help; notice that six of the chorus' eight lines are devoted to describing the struggle while only two are concerned with divine relief. Fillingim argues that southern gospel music depicts the trials and tribulations of Christian living as part of "a conceptual universe in which, psychologically, suffering does not matter, and therefore, might as well be nonexistent."<sup>69</sup> But the description of suffering in southern gospel music seems at least as important as the conclusion, in this case, that "He will take you through the fire again." Private doubt and uncertainty, fears and depressions about suffering and misfortune are publicly revalued as the Christian's cross to bear, not because "suffering does not matter" in southern gospel music but *because these feelings matter so much*.

The preoccupation in southern gospel music with the pivotal experience of suffering, temptations, trials, and other threats to religious belief recalls the role of humiliation in traditional Calvinist conversion.

Preceded by conviction of sin and compunction for sin, humiliation of the contrite sinner prepares the heart for the arrival of faith through grace by obliterating all the individual's sense of self-sustainability. In its struggle to remain relevant in an increasingly individualistic world, contemporary evangelicalism has made adjustments to this archetypal morphology of conversion—most significantly by emphasizing the role of the individual will in choosing to accept God's free gift of salvation. But the centrality of negative feelings in southern gospel music suggests that the contemporary evangelical model of religious conversion, though it may speak to the need for individual agency in choosing to accept or reject salvation, fails to account adequately for the full range of the modern individual's psychospiritual experience and needs. Contemporary evangelical Protestantism officially looks heavenward, locating the meaning of redemption in God's free gift of grace that one must willingly accept (or not). But the persistent drift in everyday evangelical life toward forms of expression and modes of experience that emphasize the frisson of the imperiled soul point in another direction, inward, to the psychospiritual importance of private conflicts and tensions in defining the contours of conservative Protestant religious living. For the millions of evangelicals today who turn regularly and eagerly to southern gospel, their identity as a covenanted elect emerges from within the ongoing struggle to manage and resolve spiritual disquietude through the experience of white gospel music.

### **Prospects**

This mode of expression, this use of cultural practice to manage the tension between sentiment and faith, the experientially fluctuant and the doctrinally absolute, is more than just a compensation for the psychospiritual paradoxes of evangelicalism, though it is that, too. The individual structures of religious feeling and thought that emerge from within southern gospel cohere into defining—if also always evolving—patterns of psychology characteristic of the evangelical imagination. Southern gospel serves as a private means of religious identity formation, but it also acts as a public discourse in which many evangelicals collectively consecrate the strife of daily living without surrendering cause for optimism. In this, southern gospel music seems to be a contemporary example of what Clifford Geertz calls a cultural "formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate the perceived ambiguities, and paradoxes in human experience."<sup>70</sup>

As this imagining and celebrating plays out in southern gospel, it is too often an uncomfortable and discouragingly self-serving process. Dismissive though he was, R. W. Apple had a point about that song he heard at the Grand Ole Opry, "We Want America Back." It is aggressively crude and uncomfortable to listen to, especially in the song's long polemical monologue that begins:

I love America. But I do not love what she has become. Our children are asked to attend public schools that in many cases resemble war zones, without even the most basic right of any soldier: the right to pray to the God of heaven. Many times a wild-eyed, drug-addicted, gun-carrying teenager is allowed to stay in school, while our Supreme Court decided to expel God from the classroom over thirty years ago. Something is wrong. Television daily bombards the senses of our nation with the idea that wrong is right, that the abnormal is normal, that the abhorrent is acceptable, and that what God calls an abomination is nothing more than an alternate life-style. And it's had an effect. . . . And I for one am ready for a change. I will say to my government, "I'm not raising dogs at my house; I'm raising children, created in the image and likeness of almighty God."<sup>71</sup>

All too eager to perpetuate the myth of the persecuted Christian majority, the song obstinately refuses to acknowledge that contemporary evangelicalism is almost always complicit in the sociopolitical conflicts conservative Christians bemoan. But even in these extreme cases, the rhetorics of southern gospel are ideologically and lyrically driven—as I have tried to suggest with other, more moderate examples—by a unifying concern with the conduct of life in a context of human struggle. Calling forth that struggle in song—even if it has to be manufactured or imagined in some cases—gives it a value, both religious and sociocultural, that is produced in the musical performance and experience of southern gospel. No other form of Christian music—not black gospel, not inspirational songs, and certainly not the praise and worship style that is ascendant in contemporary Christian music right now and focuses exclusively on the goodness and glory of God—speaks as directly and palpably to the psychodynamics of evangelical experience as southern gospel does. Drawing on experiential data from ordinary Christian life, southern gospel music lyrically dramatizes that data and gives the newly improved experience back to listeners, who can then claim the emotional content of the music for use in their own lives. This is the cultural function of southern gospel music. It is a "way of life," as Raymond Williams uses the phrase in his discussion of modern culture, "a

mode of interpreting . . . common experience, and, in this new interpretation, changing it."<sup>72</sup>

We could do with a great deal more understanding of the transformative allure of white gospel music, especially given the evangelical ascendancy in American culture and politics right now. Indeed, perhaps no other topic in southern gospel studies needs more urgently to be treated than white gospel music's sociopolitical dimension—of which Apple glimpsed a bit at the Grand Ole Opry that night in 2000.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, there is yet no clear understanding of how the worldwide popularity of Bill Gaither's Homecoming tour and video series have redefined southern gospel's function as a mediator between religious doctrine and evangelical Protestant experience. These are just two areas that warrant further exploration and study. But critical insights into white gospel music will become available only when southern gospel and other modes of conservative evangelical expression more generally are approached as essential interpretative mechanisms that evangelicals use simultaneously to create and understand their place in contemporary culture. Approaching gospel music this way means thinking about and interpreting it as what Geertz calls "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit."<sup>74</sup> We may well understand all this better by and by, but the possibility of ultimate disclosure is no absolution for continuing to see through a glass darkly in the meantime.

As southern gospel comes into clearer scholarly view, evangelicalism and the function of evangelical artistic culture emerge in their true relation to one another. Music transforms words and ordinary speech into a form of vernacular poetry, a melodic lyricism that makes the experience of insufficiency and powerlessness, of psychospiritual neediness, acceptable to express in an absolutist religious culture that has very few *meaningful* ways of dealing with negative feelings in the lives of the redeemed. Unlike so much of evangelical discourse and artistic culture, which denies the authenticity of negative feelings by describing them as manifestations of sin or evidence of the forces of darkness, southern gospel makes the uneven contours of spiritual life a necessary precondition for the unfolding of divine power. In contrast to the comparative emotional austerity of most traditional conservative evangelical worship experiences, gospel music encourages the free play of religious affect and authenticates the felt reality of spiritual vicissitudes. When a southern gospel fan talks about gospel music going deep into the soul in a way that traditional sermons and preaching cannot,<sup>75</sup> he is acknowledging that southern

gospel allows evangelicals to develop personally meaningful responses to problems of faith and Christian living in the modern world without forcing them to disaffiliate themselves from evangelical orthodoxy. And this is so even—and especially—when unorthodox experience (or responses to it) collides with orthodox doctrine. Bathed in the bright lights of the stage, arrayed in the poetry of musical lyrics, brought to life in the magical moment of live performance, the doctrines of Protestant evangelical theology and the narrow commitments of conservative ideology become psychospiritually accessible; they become experientially real. In a word, they are *felt* through southern gospel music in a way that contemporary evangelical religious discourse and culture cannot otherwise accomplish.

## Notes

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1. See, for instance, David Fillingim, "A Flight from Liminality: 'Home' in Country and Gospel Music," *Studies in Popular Culture* 20, no. 1 (1997): 75–82; and Stephen R. Tucker, "Pentecostalism and Popular Culture in the South: A Study of Four Musicians," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 3 (1982): 68–80.

2. Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995), 77.

3. Gaithernet.com, "Celebrating America's Musical Heritage—A Salute to Gospel Music," <http://gaither.com/news/news.php?uid=340> (accessed October 28, 2006).

4. GeorgeYounce.com, "George Younce Biography," <http://www.georgeyounceonline.com/biography.htm> (accessed October 28, 2006).

5. Otghquartet.com, Schedule, <http://www.otghquartet.com/index.cfm?PID=10933> (accessed October 28, 2006).

6. Cbn.com, "Grammy Nominated Crabb Family 'Driven' to Share Faith," [http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/crabbfamily\\_020305.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/crabbfamily_020305.aspx) (accessed October 28, 2006).

7. Singingnews.com, "Mercy's Mark Scheduled to Appear on TBN," October 4, 2005, [http://www.singingnews.com/news/sg\\_wire/story\\_detail.lasso?id=35023](http://www.singingnews.com/news/sg_wire/story_detail.lasso?id=35023) (accessed October 28, 2006).

8. Singingnews.com, "Greater Vision to Record Live Album," August 9, 2001, [http://www.singingnews.com/news/sg\\_wire/story\\_detail.lasso?id=32775](http://www.singingnews.com/news/sg_wire/story_detail.lasso?id=32775) (accessed October 28, 2006).

9. Mark Allen Powell, "There's Just Something About That Man," *Christianity Today*, April 2004, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/april/1.32.html> (accessed October 28, 2006).

10. One main thrust of my argument here will be that the difficulty secular critics and others from outside the insular world of southern gospel have in understanding this music's cultural function is the product of a culture clash. But this is by no means the only factor contributing to the marginalization of white gospel as an object of scholarly study. To some extent, southern gospel's overlooked status is an effect of the way contemporary southern gospel commercial networks operate, and these operations are in turn a reflection of the way certain unique economic functions structure experience for gospel music consumers.

As large suburban mega-churches have become the center of evangelicalism in the popular American imagination, evangelicalism's much smaller, rural, and less aesthetically sophisticated congregations have receded from mainstream view even as these churches have increasingly become the place where the live concert, the base of southern gospel economy, takes place. These concerts go largely unnoticed outside the subculture of southern gospel not just because they possess a certain untranslatable quality but also because they are economically all but invisible. Instead of charging admission, the majority of southern gospel concerts collect a "free-will love offering," during which audiences are asked to give whatever amount they feel "led by the Lord" to contribute. Free-will love offerings are central to the image of the southern gospel concert as a ministerial—rather than an economic—activity. But because it is not uncommon for free-will offerings barely to cover travel expenses for the artist (to say nothing about the cost of promoting and producing the concert), product sales before and after these concerts are the primary source of revenue for most southern gospel artists. These so-called table sales are one main method by which southern gospel consumers keep current with southern gospel music trends. But few groups report these table sales to the kinds of central accounting systems (such as SoundScan)



whose data are important indicators to the wider world of a musical genre's significance. Thus, table sales and free-will love offerings effectively mask any reliable measure of the southern gospel economy.

Economic invisibility is also true for larger concerts that charge admission. Ticket sales to the kind of event that Goff describes at the beginning of his "Rise of Southern Gospel Music"—a vast outdoor singing in rural North Carolina that attracted more than 6,000 people—rarely if ever are reported to any accounting agency as would be standard practice in secular musical genres and many other genres of Christian entertainment. So even though small-church concerts are the engine driving the southern gospel economy and even though some of the larger southern gospel concerts rival many secular musical events in size and scope, there is no systematic way to register these events' scale or economic impact (the Bill Gaither Homecoming Friends tour and merchandising is an exception to this general rule). Similarly, radio remains an essential segment of the southern gospel economic infrastructure. But stations that play southern gospel tend to transmit on comparatively low-wattage signals and to be owned by individuals, families, or local religious organizations who see these stations not primarily as financial concerns but as a form of ministerial outreach. Except at a small group of stations with corporate affiliation, airplay of southern gospel music is not tracked by any reliable reporting system (such as Broadcast Data Systems). Indeed, save for retail sales of products that pass through recording companies' distribution channels, the southern gospel industry could fairly be described as a loosely affiliated network of small-businesses (event promotion, radio, concert production, artist entrepreneurs) whose links remain minimally articulated and informally maintained.

This tendency for the southern gospel economy to efface and informalize its own economic operations to a great extent reflects the constant tension in the Christian music world between "ministry" and "entertainment." In the case of southern gospel, the evangelical emphasis on Christian separateness from the world at large makes this tension especially intense. And this tension, I would argue, accounts for the development of economic structures—free-will offerings, informal "table sales," self-effacing ticket sales—that seek to minimize the profit motive as secondary or inconsequential while encouraging audiences to see their financial investments in the music as participation in an entertaining form of Christian evangelism.

11. James Goff, "The Rise of Southern Gospel Music," *Church History* 67 (December 1998): 723.

12. Michael P. Graves and David Fillingim, eds., *More than Precious Memories* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004).

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

14. Gavin James Campbell, review of *More than Precious Memories*, ed. Michael Graves and David Fillingim, *Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 1 (February 2006): 217.

15. David Fillingim, "Oft Made to Wonder: Southern Gospel as Musical Theodicy," in *More than Precious Memories*, ed. Graves and Fillingim, 49. Janice L. Rushing suggests a similar approach to gospel music in "Gospel Music Rhetoric," *Religious Communication Today*, 1, no. 1 (1978): 29–35.

16. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10.

17. R. W. Apple, "On the Road: Polishing Nashville's Twang," *New York Times*, July 28, 2000, E27.

18. See, for instance, Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004). The first sentence of the book captures Rossing's dismissive attitude toward the evangelical culture her study addresses: "The rapture is a racket."

19. James Goff, *Close Harmony: A History of Southern Gospel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4.

20. How to define southern gospel music is a longstanding subject of debate within the industry and among historians of the music. Don Cusic's definition is perhaps the most quotable. Southern gospel, he writes, is "music whose sound is akin to country music" and "dominated by groups singing the traditional four part harmonies, and is, in reality, more national than Southern, although it remains strongest in the south where it developed" (Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music* [Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990], 95). Goff prefers to define gospel by its development, stressing the evolutionary stages of the music from nineteenth-century revivalism and shape-note singing, into the increasing professionalization of the music and industry in the early to mid-twentieth century, through its established position in Christian entertainment (Goff, *Close Harmony*). Historically, white gospel music emerged from within early twentieth-century Christian music publishing—quartets of male singers, who traveled a performance circuit primarily in the rural South promoting songbooks of new gospel music, eventually split off from their publisher-patrons and established themselves in their own right as entertainers and ministers (see Charles Wolfe, "'Gospel Boogie': White Southern Gospel

Music in Transition, 1945–55,” *Popular Music* 1 [1981]: 73–82). Traditionalists within southern gospel music point to the centrality of the male quartet as the mark of true southern gospel music to this day (Jerry Kirksey, “Watering Down the Message, It’s Not Gospel,” *Singing News* 26 [1995]: 10), even though male quartets are by no means more common than other nontraditional group formations. According to purists, the defining feature of southern gospel is homogeneity in sound, marked by close male harmony echoing the folk and family singing sensibility of the south; homogeneity in the music’s concern for what Goff has called “theologically correct lyrics”; and homogeneity of character—that is, “for performers,” as Goff also notes, “who maintain some semblance of a Christian [one might add conservative fundamentalist Christian] lifestyle” (Goff, *Close Harmony*, 4).

The trouble with this definition is that it fails to account for the astonishing heterogeneity of southern gospel music in its current form. Today, there are at least as many mixed-gender quartets on the road as all-male foursomes; trios and duos—male, female, and gender-mixed—rival quartets as the dominant group formation. And the stylistic variety within these is just as diverse as their composition. If, as Charles Wolfe argues, gospel music was in the early twentieth century “the fourth great genre of grass roots music” alongside jazz, blues, and country music, today southern gospel has quite consciously adapted, reappropriated, and co-opted different aspects of those forms (and others) (Wolfe, “Gospel Boogie,” 73). Contemporary southern gospel music easily encompasses groups from the Martins, a brother and two sisters who sound like a cross between Manhattan Transfer and Take Six from the south, or the Isaacs Family, which calls itself a bluegrass group but sings a kind of countrified pop with folk-music instrumentation, to the male-trio Greater Vision, a group that represents the solid center of southern gospel and yet regularly inflects its arrangements with elements of country music, contemporary Christian music, praise and worship singing, and choral music. And this says nothing of the numerous soloists and a handful of duos traveling the southern gospel circuit today. Placed alongside the core of traditionalist male quartets, these others groups and individuals create a constellation of hybridized white gospel sounds at times so disparate as to defy all but the most uselessly general or vague stylistic definitions.

Another way to say this is that *paradox* is a defining feature of southern gospel. Take the question of gender. According to readership demographics from the *Singing News* magazine, southern gospel culture is almost evenly divided between men and women: 48 percent men, 52 percent women (“The *Singing News* Media Kit,” *Singing News* [2006], 1). And the popularity of several female performers in southern gospel easily

rivals and in some cases surpasses that of their male counterparts (for example, Libbi Perry Stuffle, Kim Greene Hopper, Sherry Lewis Easter, Peg McKamey Beane, and Connie Hopper are regularly recognized as fan favorites at the *Singing News* Fan Awards show held annually at the National Quartet Convention). These facts can be difficult for outsiders to reconcile with the paternalistic tendencies of the evangelical tradition from which southern gospel emerges and of which it remains a part (there are, for instance, no women on the National Quartet Convention's board of directors).

The insistence on the centrality of the male quartet in an industry replete with mixed-gender groups, trios, duos, and soloists and a paternalistic culture statistically dominated by women—how, one might ask, are we to make sense of these defining paradoxes embedded in southern gospel? Part of the answer has to do with the close link in southern gospel between the music and the fans' and singers' own beliefs and values. One key feature of southern gospel music and culture is the way it publicly seeks socioreligious consensus while allowing—even encouraging—the private cultivation of theologically, psychospiritually, and ideologically idiosyncratic points of view.

For now, it is sufficient to note that what holds southern gospel together, what *defines* it, is not a single identifiable sound but self-selection: people who choose to associate themselves—as fans or performers or other industry professionals—with the music and its culture. In other words, southern gospel is a network of interrelated musical styles connected by performers' (and fans') self-identification with the southern gospel musical and religious tradition. Such a definition acknowledges the practical reality of the music in its current form: while there is a stylistic core to southern gospel, slavishly replicating it is not at all a prerequisite for being part of contemporary southern gospel music.

21. For *Left Behind*, see Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford University Press, 2004); for Falwell, see Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

22. "This World Is Not My Home," *Homecoming Souvenir Songbook* (Alexandria: Gaither Music Co., 1993), 2.

23. Goff, "Rise of Southern Gospel Music," 726.

24. Fillingim, "Flight from Liminality," 80.

25. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 11.

26. Goff, *Close Harmony*, 274.

27. *Ibid.*, 4.

28. For more on white gospel music's retreat from mainstream Christian entertainment in the 1970s and 1980s (as a reaction against the move toward a more theologically progressive and socially liberalized Christianity represented by the rise of contemporary Christian music), see Goff, *Close Harmony*, 273–74.

29. *Ibid.*, 7.

30. Craig Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 165.

31. *Ibid.*, xvii.

32. Andrae Crouch, "Can't Nobody," in *The Best of Andrae Crouch* (Nashville: Hal Leonard), 6–8.

33. Werner, *Playing the Changes*, 165.

34. Werner sees important psychosocial and aesthetic implications in this style: "the continual testing of artistic perception against audience response, immersed in the flow of time" is part of a larger movement toward the cultivation of artistic by-play and polyphonic discourse in Afro-modernism that he has called "the gospel impulse" (Werner, *Playing the Changes*, 165). Werner's analysis relies on a subtle theory of ritual and performance in religious and vernacular arts that suggests related lines of inquiry in southern gospel. Specifically, individual and collective narratives modeled by southern gospel performances seem both to bear out and complicate Werner's notion of a single "gospel" impulse and instead point toward the possibility of a continuum of aesthetic and semiotic systems emerging from within the variegated cultural contexts that support different styles of gospel music.

35. "The Singing News Media Kit," 1; Eileen Linder, ed., *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (New York: National Council of Churches, 2005). I am grateful to Danny Jones, Jerry Kirksey, and Pam Slaney of the *Singing News* for providing southern gospel demographic information.

36. Quoted in William Lynwood Montel, *Singing the Glory Down: Amateur Gospel Music in Southern Central Kentucky, 1900–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 2.

37. Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press), 397–98.

38. Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music, American Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 67.

39. On hymns and gospel music in the nineteenth century, see Sandra Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).

40. Montel, *Singing the Glory Down*, 4.

41. Quoted in David Crawford, "Gospel Songs in Court: From Rural Music to Urban Industry in the 1950s," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (Winter 1977): 555. On hymns, see Mark Noll and Edith Blumhofer, eds., *Sing Them Over Again to Me: Hymns and Hymnbooks in America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

42. "Brethren, We Have Met to Worship," in *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Baptist Press, 1975), 260.

43. "Looking for a City," in *The American Country Hymn Book: 100 Gospel Greats Old and New* (Waco, Tex.: Canaanland Music, 1975), 108–9.

44. Quoted in Crawford, "Gospel Songs in Court," 555.

45. Montel, *Singing the Glory Down*, 4.

46. In some cases, lyrics can be quite theologically specific. For example, a song by the Ruppes, a family trio from Georgia, quite specifically advances a premillennial dispensationalist view of eschatology, making reference to those whom God "did predestinate" for salvation (James Michael Sage, lyricist, "Redemption Complete," The Ruppes, *Seasons*, Spring Hill, 1997). But, in general, this kind of theological specificity is the exception.

47. Albert E. Brumley, lyricist, "I'll Fly Away," in *The American Country Hymn Book: 100 Gospel Greats Old & New*, 9.

48. Cusic, *The Sound of Light*.

49. Cecilia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), ix.

50. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, American literature was the primary medium in which evangelicalism (re)negotiated questions of Christian conduct and reimagined the relevance of Christian theology in response to sociocultural change. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) stands as one of the last great works of American fiction about living evangelical Christianity written by a self-identified evangelical. The Civil War marked a historical divide in the American mind and its artistic world. As Henry James put it in 1879, America had, in the war, "eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Henry James, *Hawthorne* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901], 140). The subject of postwar American literature was thenceforth to be not man (or woman)

and God (Stowe's preferred dramatic dyad) but man and woman in society. Even when the *fin de siècle* realists and naturalists who took up this task with great gusto explored questions of religion, they did so as outsiders, analysts, ironists, satirists, and literary psychologists. None of them spoke with (because none had) the experiential authority of a religious insider that Stowe possessed as a birthright and continued to claim in adulthood. Having successfully challenged the supremacy of Calvinism's rigid, authoritarian, masculinist God and supplanted him with a "new authority," as Susan Harris describes the achievement of *The Minister's Wooing*, one "intuited rather than learned, premised on love rather than logic, achieved through community rather than isolation," Stowe's fiction effectively gave the American literary imagination a license to look elsewhere for material (Susan Harris, "Introduction," *The Minister's Wooing* [New York: Penguin, 1999]: xii).

In its modern flight from engagements with evangelical affect-centric culture, American literature largely surrendered its prerogatives to represent and grapple with post-Calvinist evangelicalism from within, as Stowe had. And in the space created by that surrender, the roots of what would become southern gospel music began to emerge in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rural religious communities that started cultivating new vernacular traditions in which to express and explore the kinds of feelings and experiences previously addressed by sentimental religious fiction. One of those new forms of expression was a folk-gospel tradition of "all-day" recreational "sings." Ted Ownby describes these as they developed in the 1880s: "Small groups met at church or in private homes to sing hymns for two or three hours on selected Sundays, and once a year each church hosted a large event for young people from throughout the area" (Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990], 141). This tradition was important not least of all because it performed the cultural function in much of evangelicalism once fulfilled by more traditional textual modes like the sermon and literary forms such as the sentimental novel Stowe preferred: namely, attempting to reconcile orthodox doctrines with unorthodox experience and its attendant feelings. By the 1920s, when professional southern gospel was developing, this rural singing tradition had crystallized into evangelicalism's most expressively rich vernacular artistic structure.

51. "Till the Storm Passes By," in *Homecoming Souvenir Songbook*, 108.

52. Charles A. Tindley, lyricist, "We'll Understand It Better By and By," in *Homecoming Souvenir Songbook*, vol. 2 (Alexandria, Ind.: Gaither Music Co., 1994), 154–55.



53. Kyla Rowland, lyricist, "Oh That Wonderful Promise," on The Perrys, *This Is the Day*, The Perrys, Daywind, 2003. Reprinted by permission of Christian Taylor Music, a division of Daywind Publishing, Nashville, Tenn.

54. Broadly defined, southern gospel songs fall into three general groups: songs of celebration (including novelty songs like the enormously popular Kingsmen hit from the 1980s, "Excuses," but also more commonplace toe-tappers—upbeat, feel-good songs meant to entertain within the Christian context of praise to God); songs of supplication (any invocation of God's power, help, comfort, or forgiveness); and songs of surrender (lyrical statements of unworthiness, unmerited favor, or resolutions to abandon the self to God's mercy and direction). Needless to say, any given song can easily cross the permeable borders between these categories.

55. Cathedral Quartet, "Oh What a Savior," *Alive: Deep in the Heart of Texas*, Homeland, 2000.

56. Robert McManus, "Southern Gospel Music vs Contemporary Christian Music: Competing for the Soul of Evangelicalism," in *More than Precious Memories*, ed. Graves and Fillingim, 73.

57. Tracy G. Dartt, lyricist, "God on the Mountain," The McKameys, *Gone To Meetin'*, Morning Star, 1989. Reprinted by permission of Gaviota Music Group, a division of Manna Music Company, Pacific City, Oreg. My thanks to Judy Nelson for her assistance in securing this permission. I am also grateful to Greg Bentley at Crossroads Music for his generosity in helping me navigate the internecine world of rights management, licensing, and reprint permissions.

58. Rushing, "Gospel Music Rhetoric," 29.

59. Rowland, "Oh That Wonderful Promise."

60. I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 254–74.

61. Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 83.

62. "Till the Storm Passes By," in *Homecoming Souvenir Songbook*, 108.

63. Ruby Moody, lyricist, "Plan of Salvation," Cathedral Quarter, *Master Builder*, Riversong, 1995.

64. Joel Lindsey, lyricist, "Calvary Answers for Me," The Perrys, *This is the Day*, Daywind, 2003.

65. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Albert J. von Frank, 4 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989–92), 2:194.

66. Emily Dickinson. "In Many and Reportless Places," in *Complete Poems of Emily Dickson*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 593–94.

67. Tucker, "Pentecostalism and Popular Culture," 68.

68. Gerald Crabb, lyricist, "Through the Fire," The Crabb Family, *Driven*, Daywind, 2004. Lyrics reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard Publishing, Milwaukee, Wis.

69. Fillingim, "Oft Made to Wonder," 54.

70. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 31.

71. Jeff Steele, lyricist, "We Want America Back," The Steeles, *We Want America Back*, Daywind, 1996. Reprinted with permission of Christian Taylor Music, a division of Daywind Publishing, Nashville, Tenn.

72. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), xviii.

73. The emotional belief I describe above and its emphasis on consecrating faith by religious affect is particularly vulnerable to the manipulations of artful rhetoric, the seductions of good showmanship, and political self-delusion. In southern gospel, this is especially true of songs that treat political themes. The performance of politically and ideologically right-wing songs relies on emotional belief to perpetuate the myth of a persecuted Christian majority. A song such as the antigovernment ditty Apple heard in Nashville—a song that warns "we must return to the values we left before the country we love is totally lost" works by encouraging audiences to convince themselves emotionally, in the experience of the song's recitation of anti-Christian bias in the world, that evangelicals suffer real pain through purely symbolic actions (The Steeles, "We Want America Back"). Courts banning the display of the Ten Commandments in government buildings or prohibiting formally sanctioned prayer in public schools are two common points of focus in white gospel music of a political nature, as are same-sex marriage and abortion. To point out that conservatives and, in many cases, conservative Christians enjoy a great deal of access and power in government, culture, and society at all levels is both to miss and make the point simultaneously. The song's misrepresentation of sociopolitical reality (gay marriage, for instance, is legal in only one state, while more than two dozen states have laws explicitly forbidding such unions) speaks to the volatility of

evangelical identity and its reliance on narratives of conflict, crisis, and persecution—narratives rhetorically constructed and psychosocially maintained through the kind of cultural exchanges embodied in southern gospel music.

74. Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 10.

75. J. D. Keeler, "Why Do They Love Southern Gospel Music? An Audience Study of the Bill Gaither Nostalgic Concert Video Series," in *More Than Precious Memories*, ed. Graves and Fillingim, 201–34.

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**ABSTRACT** Long overlooked by scholars of culture and religion, southern (white) gospel music occupies a special place within evangelicalism. The dynamic interaction of lyrics, music, and religious experience in southern gospel music comprises a cultural discourse evangelicals use, not to diminish experience in this world as is commonly argued in southern gospel studies, but to understand better Protestant theological doctrines in, and to make useable meaning out of, the vicissitudes of conservative Christian life. This approach treats southern gospel as a network of interconnected rhetorics and signifying practices that serve a multitude of public and private needs among its performers and fans—needs that are not otherwise met in evangelical culture. Particularly, southern gospel music allows those who participate in it to explore a broader and deeper range of psychospiritual feelings and experiences. The study of southern gospel reveals the importance of private conflicts and tensions in defining the contours of conservative Protestant religious living, individually and collectively. For the millions of evangelicals today who turn regularly and eagerly to southern gospel, their identity as a covenanted elect emerges from within the struggle to manage and resolve spiritual disquietude through the experience of white gospel music.